

The most important lesson to learn in Romania is how to bribe an official--made necessary but the complete non-existence of anyone who is capable of printing out train tickets back into Ukraine. All attempts to buy tickets were met with the raised eyebrow inquiry of "Bucharest?" No, I do NOT want to go to Bucharest and no matter how many time you suggest Bucharest I will not agree to go there. I want to go to UKRAINE...sigh...such games we play. I think half the tourists in Bucharest might have just gotten there because they were unable to purchase tickets to any other location. I am not sure if they don't want it on the record that people are getting into or out of Ukraine or if the printer is broken or if it just one mass conspiracy. Here is how the conspiracy works: the kasa women claim not to be able to sell tickets into Ukraine but that they can be purchased from the conductor who in turn claims tickets must be purchased at the kasa thereby forcing travelers to negotiate entry onto the train by slipping twenty US dollars into their passport and handing it over for inspection whereupon it is returned sans money and you are allowed to sit on the train--fully aware that without any ticket you can be re-stopped at any time and more money can be demanded--a system that encourages you to change seat cars every hour or so in a fantastically complicated game of hide and seek.

1. The only consolation being that the train's final destination is Moscow so that there are many Russians aboard and I can't decide how disturbing it is to feel most comfortable among the Russians and Ukrainians versus the Western Europeans who theoretically should be more comprehensible to an American in terms of culture and behavior... I am glad I didn't have to leave Eastern Europe without bribing somebody; it makes my time feel well spent.

Additionally speaking Russian in Romania is apparently also taboo. Now honestly I can sympathize with the whole, "We hate the Russians because they destroyed our country" theme song played in Romania, Slovakia, Western Ukraine, Poland and the Czech Republic HOWEVER if they don't speak English and I don't speak Romanian or whatever the linguistic flavor of the day happens to be it seem REASONABLE to at least attempt to work with me when we BOTH can use Russian. But such theories are flights of idealist fancy. The Russians on the train to Moscow themselves were an affable bunch. Upon announcing the word American they would throw their arms up and half smile and speak what English they knew-- cheerfully complaining about life in a way that is specific to being Slavic. I have never met so many people who I think are secretly amused to be able to discuss problems in a way that indicates they would be thoroughly at a loss if such problems--and therefore perhaps their entire way of life--were to disappear.

In Transylvania there were trees and forests and the general belief that customers are an intrusion into shopkeepers lives and Vlad the Impaler's childhood home which would be nicer in a fairy tale than in reality; the reality being unromantic and a bit shabby---failing to inspire the ideas of how the medieval prince conjured up the idea of sticking law breakers on ten foot poles while they were still alive. Somehow a spookier environment seems to be required for such sadistic creativity to be born.

I have also managed to do many Ukrainian things this past week. I ate real shashlik---well really I was at a garden party. I had already avoided eating the little whole dried fish which looked like they would come back to life if you dropped them in the toilet and they were given a chance to rehydrate by claiming an allergy. It seemed petty to also mention that I am a vegetarian. I instead

attempted to keep my plate loaded with veggies--but to no avail the host hunted me down and happily demanded I try his shashlik--a form of shish kebab that is traditional summer cuisine. So I did and paid for it for two days of feeling like death--self diagnosing stomach cancer--but in reality apparently if you go a year without eating any red meat it becomes indigestible.

I learned doing a sauna involves bringing dried coffee grounds and sugar to rub into your skin that somehow is supposed to make you smell nice and exfoliate; but I think it really just encourages cappuccino cravings.

Furthermore in defiance of the idea of waiting for the bankomat which accepts my card to be fixed I spent Saturday hunting down the main branch of the banking system. First Ivanka had to be found to explain how to find said bank--a phone book was located and address obtained--then waiting for an hour for a bus that went in vaguely the correct direction and getting off at the wrong stop four times; whereupon the correct street was discovered and after a kilometer of walking I found that while the even numbers increase in one direction the odd increase in the opposite direction so the route had to retraced. After four hours a bankomat which does accept my card was revealed and I went home highly satisfied with my errand running abilities--okay sure, maybe it took half the day to go to the bank--but such are errands in a place where the word "plastic" actually translates to a vinyl record rather than a credit card.

Avoid meat--it is bad for you,

Meg