

# Southern Ukraine

## Південна Україна



This southerly region once helped make the Russian empress Catherine great. As part of her territorial acquisitions in the late 18th century, it vastly expanded her dominion and brought Russia huge wealth by opening it up to the Black Sea. Novorossiia, or new Russia, as it was ambitiously christened, had been a Wild West-style no-man's-land between the domain of the Cossacks and that of the Crimean Tatars. Under Catherine it became a melting pot, as Bulgarians, Germans, Greeks, Italians, Moldavians, Russians, Swedes and many others were invited to populate the area and set up business along the coast to trade.

This history, coupled with a temperate climate, has shaped the character of the region today, especially the largest city, Odesa (Odessa in Russian). Entrepreneurial and cosmopolitan, Odesa is also Ukraine's capital of hedonism. Closer than Crimea to Kyiv, with sandy beaches and a wicked nightlife, it's a favourite weekend break from the capital and is, in many ways, cooler.

Southern Ukraine has, however, more to offer than just Odesa's *joie de vivre* and attitude: it's also home to three major river estuaries. The Dnipro empties into the Black Sea 60km east of Odesa; the Dnister, 40km southwest. But the most spectacular estuary – and, sadly, the most threatened – is that of the Danube in the country's far southwest corner. Here, in the small Ukrainian nook of Europe's largest wetlands, you'll find more than 300 different bird species and animals such as mink, freshwater otters and monk seals. Even nature seems to emphasise the multicultural theme – southern Ukraine boasts an African-style safari park created by a German settler. You'll also find the so-called 'Ukrainian Venice' and an isolated city of Swedes.

### HIGHLIGHTS

- Enjoy a movie moment on Odesa's massive **Potemkin Steps** (p173)
- Hit the restaurants in and around Odesa's central **vul Derybasivska** (p173)
- Do a summer club-crawl at **Arkadia Beach** (p178)
- Imbibe culture at the famous **Opera and Ballet Theatre** (p173) or the much-lauded **Odesa Philharmonic Orchestra** (p179)
- Witness market madness at the famous **Pryvoz Market** and **7-Kilometres Bazaar** (p179)
- Charge through remote Bessarabia to the canals and bird-infested Danube waterways around **Vylkovo** (p184)
- Spot zebras, bison and flamingos on safari at the **Askaniya Nova Reserve** (p182)

■ POPULATION: 4.7 MILLION

■ HIGHEST POINT: NOTHING OVER 200M



### ODESA ОДЕСА

☎ 048 (7-digit Nos), 0482 (6-digit Nos) / pop one million

Odesa is a city straight from literature – an energetic, decadent boomtown. Its famous Potemkin Steps sweep down to the Black Sea and Ukraine's biggest commercial port. Behind them, a cosmopolitan cast of characters makes merry among pastel neoclassical buildings lining a geometrical grid of leafy streets.

Immigrants from all over Europe were invited to make their fortune here when Odesa was founded in the late 18th century by Russia's Catherine the Great. These new inhabitants gave Russia's southern window on the world a singular, subversive nature.

As well as becoming a duty-free port and a major Mafia stronghold – it is still the latter – Odesa also attracted ordinary holiday-makers with its sunny climate, self-confidence and sandy beaches. True, the city's appearance grows tatter as you head south past half-empty sanatoriums towards its beachside nightclubs. However, this East-West crossroads makes up for that with sheer panache.

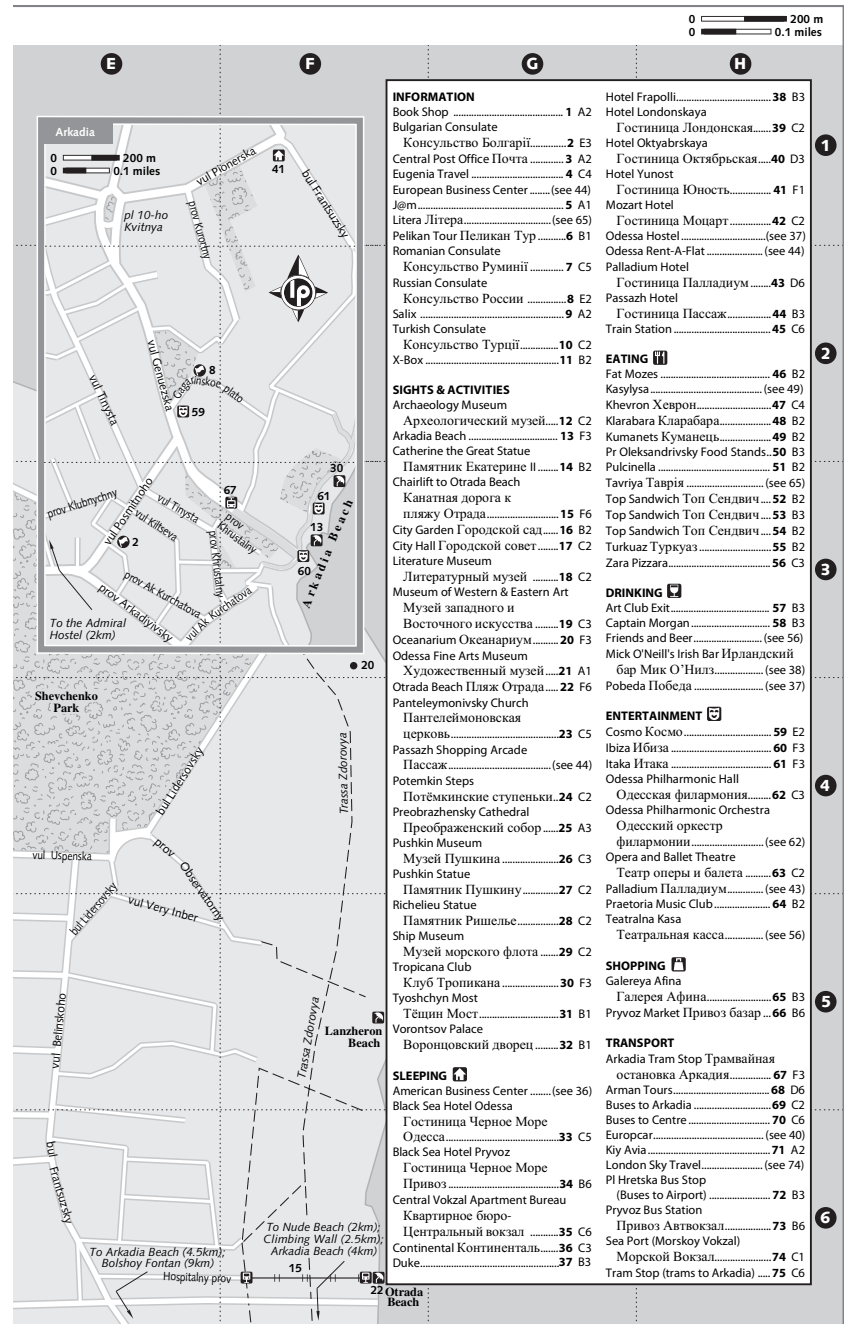
Local writer Issac Babel claimed Odesa had 'more charm than any city in the Russian Empire' and that's probably still true in modern-day Ukraine. The source of this charm is Odessans themselves: a breed apart, they're stylish, cultured, funny, savvy and not easily impressed.

### History

Catherine the Great imagined Odesa as the St Petersburg of the South. Her lover, General Grygory Potemkin, laid the groundwork for her dream in 1789 by capturing the Turkish fortress of Hadjibey, which previously stood here. However, Potemkin died before work began on the city in 1794 and his senior commanders oversaw its construction instead. The Spanish-Neapolitan general José de Ribas, after whom the main street, vul Derybasivska, is named, built the harbour. The Duc de Richelieu (Armand Emmanuel du Plessis), an aristocrat fleeing the French Revolution, became the first governor, governing from 1803 to 1814.

In 1815, when the city became a duty-free port, things really began to boom. Its huge





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## ODESA: A SYMPHONY OF DELIGHTS

American Hobart Earle has been living in Odesa as conductor of the critically acclaimed Odesa Philharmonic Orchestra since 1992 (see p179). He shares with us five of his favourite things about living in Odesa.

- **Colourful people** 'Odesa is a very colourful city, and of course it's the capital of humour in the entire former Soviet Union. The humour can be a bit sarcastic here, but I think the faces on the street are in general brighter than [elsewhere in the former USSR].'
- **The sea** 'Take the cable car from bul Frantsuzsky down to the beach (see p175) and then walk along the Trassa Zdorovya, which means 'road of health'. Down there on a summer weekend you'll see all sorts of people.'
- **Pryvoz market** 'My wife travels with me, and the first thing she wants to do when she returns to Odesa is go and buy fresh fruits, vegetables and cheeses from the Pryvoz (p179).'
- **International flavour** 'There's the French, Italian, and Spanish heritage, an active Greek community, and also Armenian, Georgian and Bulgarian communities. With all of these cultures mixed, that's something that's very special about Odesa... It could be, in some ways, traditionally looked upon as the most cosmopolitan city in the former Soviet Union.'
- **Cultural heritage** 'Odesa gave birth to many of the greatest violinists and pianists of the early 20th century – David Oistrakh and Nathan Milstein, Emil Gilels, Shura Cherkassky and Sviatoslav Richter. Today Odesa is re-emerging as a city and a cultural capital...as it was before the [1917] revolution.'

appetite for more labour meant the city became a refuge – 'Odesa Mama' – for runaway serfs, criminals, renegades and dissidents. By the 1880s it was the second-biggest Russian port, with grain the main export, and an important industrial base.

It was the crucible of the early-1905 workers' revolution, with a local uprising and the mutiny on the battleship *Potemkin Tavrichesky*. Then, between 1941 and 1944, Odesa sealed its reputation as one of Stalin's 'hero' cities, when partisans sheltering in the city's catacombs (see p181) during WWII put up a legendary fight against the occupying Romanian troops (allies of the Nazis).

Odesa was once a very Jewish city, too, from which its famous sense of humour presumably derives. Jews initially came to Odesa to escape persecution, but tragically suffered the same fate here. In the early 20th century, they accounted for one third of the city's population but after horrific pogroms in 1905 and 1941 hundreds of thousands emigrated. Many moved to New York's Brighton Beach, now nicknamed 'Little Odessa'.

## Orientation

Central Odesa is a grid bordered to the north by seaside vul Prymorska, to the south by the train station and to the west by vul

Preobrazhenska. The Sea Port (Morskoy Vokzal) is on vul Prymorska in the middle of a 35km S-bend in the coast that becomes Odesa's eastern border as it curves south. Activity is buzzing on and around vul Derybasivska, part of which is pedestrianised. Although most street signs are in Ukrainian, locals in this predominantly Russian-speaking city still prefer to use Russian street names.

## Information

### BOOKSHOPS

**The Book Shop** (vul Preobrazhenska 17) Has lots of maps, a few guidebooks and a reasonable collection of English-language fiction.

**Litera** (Galereya Afina mall, pl Hretska) Another good bookshop.

### INTERNET ACCESS

**European Business Center** (vul Preobrazhenska 34; per hr 6uah; ☎ 9am-midnight) Modern choice on ground floor of the Passazh Hotel.

**J@m** (vul Torhova 19; per hr 3uah; ☎ 24hr)

**X-Box** (vul Yekaterynynska 4; per hr 6uah; ☎ 24hr) Offers Skype at no extra charge – rare in Ukraine.

### POST

**Central post office** (☎ 266 467; vul Sadova 10)

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## TRAVEL AGENCIES

**Eugenia Travel** (☎ 722 0331; www.eugeniatur.com.ua; vul Rishlevska 23) Runs a variety of tours.

**London Sky Travel** (☎ 729 3196; www.lstravel.com.ua; Boat Passenger Terminal, vul Prymorska 6) Specialises in ferry tickets but also does the standard city and regional tours.

**Salix** (☎ 728 9737; www.salix.od.ua; vul Torhova 14) A rare, authentically 'green' Ukrainian travel agency, with responsible tours to Vylkovo and the Danube delta (see p184), as well as Crimea and other southern destinations.

## Sights & Activities

Odesa may lack the must-see sights of a Kyiv or a Lviv, but it still packs plenty of charm with its splendid architecture, eye-popping panoramas and quirky monuments. The city centre's shaded avenues are tailor-made for strolling, so lace up your best walking shoes. Just avoid staring at them, as most of Odesa's attractions are overhead in the form of intricate turn-of-the-20th-century façade details, onion-domed church spires and towering statues.

## VUL DERYBASIVSKA & AROUND

Odesa's main commercial street, pedestrian vul Derybasivska, is jam-packed with restaurants, bars and, in the summer high season, tourists. At the western end of the street is the pleasant, recently reconstructed **City Garden** (Gorodskoy Sad), surrounded by several restaurants. You'll find various touristy knick-knacks for sale here and you can get your photo taken with a monkey or a snake, but the main draw is people-watching.

## AS SEEN ON SCREEN

Regularly voted one of the most influential films of all time, Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) has guaranteed Odesa cinematic immortality. The B&W classic's most renowned sequence is that of a massacre of innocent civilians on the Potemkin Steps, during which a baby in a pram is accidentally pushed off the top and bounces in agonising slow motion down the 192 stairs.

As with much great art, however, the scene is partly fiction. Sailors aboard the battleship *Potemkin Tavrichesky* did mutiny over maggot-ridden food rations while in Odesa harbour, and that mutiny did spark a revolution in 1905. However, locals running to the shore to support the sailors were never shot by tsarist troops on the steps – although they were killed elsewhere in the city.

None of this detracts from the drama of the legendary Russian director's brilliant edit, which still moves audiences today. In 2004 the Pet Shop Boys wrote a new soundtrack to the movie, and a reconstructed version of *Battleship Potemkin*, including scenes cut by Soviet censors, appeared at the 2005 Berlin Film Festival.

Across the street, **Passazh** (vul Derybasivska 33), a swanky covered shopping arcade, is the best-preserved example of the neo-renaissance architectural style that permeated in Odesa in the late 19th century. Its interior walls are festooned with gods, goblins, lions and nymphs. Shabbier but equally ornate representations of this style are huddled around pl Soborna at vul Derybasivska's western terminus, including the Passazh Hotel (see p176).

Pl Soborna is also the site of the gigantic, newly rebuilt **Preobrazhensky Cathedral** (Transfiguration Cathedral), which was Odesa's most famous and important church until Stalin had it blown up in the 1930s.

One block north of vul Derybasivska, on vul Lanzheronivska, sits the city's architectural jewel, the **Opera and Ballet Theatre**, designed in the 1880s by the architects who also designed the famous Vienna State Opera, namely Ferdinand Fellner and Herman Helmer. After being closed for several years amid botched reconstruction efforts, the theatre reopened to great fanfare in 2007. You can take a tour of the theatre or, better yet, take in a performance (see p179).

## BUL PRYMORSKY & AROUND

Movie buffs will definitely want to head to the **Potemkin Steps**, the site of one of cinema's most famous scenes (see the boxed text, below).

The steps are in the renovated, most beautiful part of town and descend from the tree-lined **vul Prymorsky**, a pedestrian zone to which the whole city gravitates, with replica 19th-century gas lamps. At the boulevard's eastern

## MONUMENTAL CONTROVERSY

Catherine II, otherwise known as Catherine the Great, has always evoked a range of emotions for Ukrainians both inside and outside of Odesa. Ukrainian nationalists hold a longtime grudge against the temperamental Russian empress, who dealt a crippling blow to Ukrainian statehood in 1775 when she ordered the dismantling of the Cossack's Zaporizhska Sich (fort; see p232). She is equally despised by Moldovans, Jews and Crimean Tatars, all of whom faced widespread persecution under her rule.

Thus it was controversial, to say the least, when in 2007 the Odesa city council replaced one of the city's most popular and prominent monuments – a Soviet statue honouring the soldiers who staged the mutiny aboard the battleship *Potemkin Tavrichesky* – with a statue of Catherine II, who remains a hero to Odesa's majority Russian population for bringing Odesa and much of southern Ukraine under Russian rule. Tatars and Ukrainian nationalists protested the move vigorously, but to no avail, and a stone rendition of Catherine II now stands tall on the square that bears her name (pl Yekaterynynska).

As for the *Potemkin* statue, it was temporarily living in the courtyard of the Pushkin Museum when we visited, but ultimately the city plans to move it to pl Tamozhenna near the Sea Port.

end, you'll pass the pink and white colonnaded **City Hall**, originally the stock exchange and later the Regional Soviet Headquarters. The cannon here is a war trophy captured from the British during the Crimean War. In the square in front of the City Hall is Odesa's most photographed monument, the **Pushkin statue**. The plaque reads 'Pushkin – Citizen of Odesa'.

Continuing along the boulevard, you'll reach a **statue** of Odesa's first governor, the Duc de Richelieu, looking like a Roman in a toga, at the top of the Potemkin Steps. The view from here is of the passenger port, the towering Hotel Odesa and the Black Sea. The view, however, is probably better from the bottom of the steps, where the designers' optical illusion takes effect: the stairs seem higher than they are, thanks to a gradual narrowing from bottom (21m wide) to top (13m wide).

At the western end of bul Prymorsky, back up the stairs and to the right, is the derelict **Vorontsov Palace**. This was the residence of the city's third governor, built in 1826 in a classical style with interior Arabic detailing. The Greek-style colonnade behind the palace offers brilliant views over Odesa's bustling port. The footbridge to the left (west) is called **Tyoshchyn Most** or 'Mother-in-Law's Bridge'. It was erected in the 1950s for a communist official who wished to facilitate visits from his wife's mother or – in the story's more popular version – wanted to leave her no excuse to stay overnight.

A block southwest of the Potemkin Steps is pl Yekaterynynska, where the controversial

**Catherine the Great statue** was unveiled in late 2007 (see the boxed text, above).

## SOUTH OF CENTRE

Near the train station you can't help but spy the five silver onion domes of the Russian Orthodox **Panteleymonivsky Church** (vul Panteleymonivska 66), built by Greek monks with stones from Constantinople in the late 19th century. According to legend, every time the Soviets painted over the church's elaborate frescoes, the frescoes would miraculously reappear. While the Soviets eventually succeeded in covering them up, many of the frescoes are once again visible thanks to vigorous restoration efforts.

## ARCHITECTURE

Odesa's underrated architecture can look Kyiv and Lviv square in the eye. However, Odesa emerged from WWII largely unscathed, and the city centre remains awash with beautiful, if often dilapidated, pre-Soviet constructions, many reflecting eclectic neo-renaissance and Art Nouveau styles. While building buffs are liable to find unheralded architectural gems along any street in the centre, the mother lode is on **vul Gogolya**, (west of the Potemkin Steps), where the city's best 19th-century architects were apparently in a contest to create the city's most elaborate buildings. With its odd patterns, bright colours and eccentric balconies, No 14 is probably the most eye-catching, followed by No 6, where a row of gods supports the 2nd-floor balcony. The street's namesake, Nikolai Gogol, lived at No 11 for several months in the

1850s – just one of several prominent names to have had an address here.

Other buildings not to be missed include Passazh (p173) and the Opera and Ballet Theatre (p173). Many of Odesa's buildings were made with limestone taken from the city's catacombs (p181). For a superb guide to these and other Odesa architectural highlights, check out [www.theodessaguide.com](http://www.theodessaguide.com).

## MUSEUMS

The **Museum of Western and Eastern Art** (☎ 246746; [www.oweamuseum.odessa.ua](http://www.oweamuseum.odessa.ua); vul Pushkinska 9; admission 2uah; ☎ 10.30am–5.30pm Thu–Tue) has one of three known versions (most likely not the original) of Caravaggio's brilliant painting *The Taking of Christ*. Housed in a beautiful, if run-down, mid-19th-century palace, the museum's collection also includes canvases by Canaletto, Rubens and Hals.

The **Odesa Fine Arts Museum** (☎ 238272; <http://museum.odessa.net/fineartsmuseum>; vul Sofiyivska 5A; admission 5uah; ☎ 10.30am–5.30pm, closed Tue & last Fri of month), located in the former palace of one Count Pototsky, has an impressive collection of Russian and Ukrainian art, including a few seascapes by master talent Aivazovskiy and some Soviet realist paintings.

Gold jewellery and coins from early Black Sea civilisations (as well as a few Egyptian mummies) are showcased at the **Archaeology Museum** (☎ 226302; vul Lanzheronivska 4; admission 9uah; ☎ 10am–5pm Tue–Sun). The once-glorious building across the street was the **Ship Museum** until, sadly, it was gutted by fire in 2005. Behind the Archaeology Museum in yet another old palace is the **Literature Museum** (☎ 223370; vul Lanzheronivska 2; admission 7uah; ☎ 10am–5pm Tue–Sun). The collection here will mostly interest Russian literature fanatics since nothing is in English.

The **Pushkin Museum** (☎ 251034; vul Pushkinska 13; admission 5uah; ☎ 10am–5pm Mon–Sat) is where Alexander Pushkin spent his first days in Odesa, after being exiled from Moscow by the tsar in 1823 for radical ideas. Governor Vorontsov subsequently humiliated the writer with petty administrative jobs, and it took only 13 months, an affair with Vorontsov's wife, a simultaneous affair with someone else's wife and more radical ideas for Pushkin to be thrown out of Odesa too. Somehow, he still found time while in town to finish the poem 'The Bakhchysaray Fountain' (see p196), write the first chapter of *Eugene Onegin* and scribble

the notes and moaning letters found in this humble museum.

## BEACHES

Lots of people do swim at Odesa's crowded, dirty beaches in summer, but that's not really what going to the beach here is about. Rather, it's about strolling dishevelled promenades with a cold beverage and observing beach life, Ukrainian style. Should you choose to swim, exercise caution: the Black Sea is notoriously polluted around Odesa (although the local government recently declared the water safe in the wake of cleanup efforts).

Closest to the centre is **Lanzheron Beach**, reachable on foot via **Shevchenko Park**. The latter has a few interesting monuments, a soccer stadium and an **Oceanarium** (☎ 7872010; ☎ 10am–8pm Mon–Fri, 10am–10pm Sat & Sun) with entertaining **dolphin shows** (☎ noon, 3pm & 6pm).

A little further south is **Otrada Beach**, which can be reached via a primitive **chairlift** (kanatnaya doroga; one-way 12uah). Like eating *saló* (cured pig fat), riding one of these chairlifts – there's a similar one in Yalta (see p206) – is one of those 'when-in-Ukraine' experiences that probably shouldn't be missed. Between Otrada Beach and Arkadia Beach there's a **nude beach**, and just south of this a **climbing wall**.

Want to show off those rippling pythons and abs, without exposing everything? The best place to see and be seen is **Arkadia Beach**. Here you can play old-school arcade games, dress up like a tsar or tsarina for a photo op, or hang out in a variety of cafés, bars and clubs. If crowds aren't your thing, it might be worth paying 15uah to 30uah to enter the private **Tropicana Club**, where you can order cocktails from your chaise longue and use the pool.

Arkadia is easy to reach: take tram 5 from the tram stop 100m north of the train station, in front of the McDonald's on vul Panteleymonivska, to the end of the line via the lovely tree-lined bul Frantsuzsky, where the *crème de la crème* of Odesa's aristocracy lived in tsarist times. Enjoy the views of the old mansions and sanatoriums along the way. *Marshrutka* 194 also heads out to Arkadia from the corner of vul Rishchevskaya and vul Derybasivska. Public transport to Arkadia gets extremely crowded in the summer, so consider taking a taxi (around 30uah).

The crowds begin to thin out and the water gets cleaner as you head even further south to the area known as **Bolshoy Fontan**; take tram

**WHAT THEY SAID ABOUT ODESA**

'I have not felt so much at home for a long time as I did when I "raised the hill" and stood in Odessa for the first time.'

*Mark Twain, Innocents Abroad, 1869*

'Odessa has more colour, more spunk, more irreverence than any other Soviet city.'

*Maurice Friedberg, How Things Were Done In Odessa, 1972*

'Odessans, from the city's raffish gangsters to its lissom girls, are convinced that they are superior in culture and style to anyone in Moscow or London, let alone the hicks from Kiev... And they are absolutely right.'

*Simon Sebag-Montefiore, the Independent, 2000*

18 from the tram stop near the train station. There's also a popular beach about 6km north of the centre, called **Luzanovka**.

**Festivals & Events**

Odessa's annual **Carnival Humorina**, celebrated on 1 April, is no joke. The festival fills the streets with carnival floats, music and drunks, and is the biggest party of the year for most Odessans. No less frivolous is **Odessa City Day**, which is held annually on 2 September.

**Sleeping**

As in most Ukrainian cities, hotels tend to be poor value and apartments offer better bang-for-the-buck.

**APARTMENTS**

The cheapest apartments are offered by the 'babushka Mafia', as locals call it, whose members hang out around the train station and ask about 40uah to 60uah for a room, or roughly double that for a one-bedroom apartment. Beware: babushkas often falsely claim their apartments are located *v tsentre* (in the centre). Carry a map to check.

**Central Vokzal Apartment Bureau** (☎ 727 4133, 8-097 978 4916; Odessa Train Station; r from 50uah, apt from \$30; ☎ 7am-7pm) If you don't want to deal with finicky babushkas and haven't booked anything in advance, this is your best walk-in bet. It's across from platform 4 near the station's rear exit.

Most apartment-rental agencies in Odessa generally double (somewhat bizarrely) as marriage agencies. Try the following:

**American Business Center** (☎ 777 1400, 8-067 255 6745; www.odessa-apartment-rentals.com; vul Derybasivska 5)

**Odessa Rent-A-Flat** (☎ 787 3444; www.odessarentaflat.com; Passazh Hotel, vul Derybasivska) Huge selection from \$40.

**Odessaapts.com** (☎ 8-067 708 5501; www.odessaapts.com)

**BUDGET**

**Duke** (☎ 252 200; www.blackseahostels.com; vul Yekaterynynska 25; dm \$11-15; ☎ ☎ ☎) The owner adjusts prices here to match the cheapest beds in town. Enter through the ground-floor courtyard and find the entrance immediately on your right, then go up to the 3rd floor. There is free wi-fi but few other perks.

**our pick** **Odessa Hostel** (☎ 252 200; www.blackseahostels.com; vul Yekaterynynska 25; dm \$25, d with shared bathroom \$40; ☎ ☎ ☎) The Odessa shares the same building and the same Aussie owner as the Duke hostel and, together with the Duke, it constitutes Odessa's flashiest and most organised backpacker retreat. Located one floor down from the Duke, the Odessa Hostel is snazzy and pricier, with scads of extras like free internet access and laundry use, bar, massive dorm rooms and two flat-screen satellite TVs. Gripe: two bathrooms are woefully insufficient for a hostel of this size.

**Admiral** (☎ 8-098 263 6506; vul Admiralsky 37; dm from \$11, \$1 discount for HI cardholders) This 'hostel' is basically a small apartment with three bunk beds in a single bedroom and a small kitchen area with no sink (use the bathroom sink). It's south of town in the general vicinity of (but not walking distance from) Arkadia.

**Kovalevsky Hostel** (☎ 8-098 263 6506; vul Kovalevskoho 28; dm from \$15, discount for HI cardholders) The owner of the Admiral, Kristina, also runs this similar, 12-bed hostel, which is a 15-minute walk from vul Derybasivska. Walking into either the Admiral or the Kovalevsky is not the way forward; book in advance by calling Kristina, who will meet you at the hostel with the key.

**Train Station** (☎ 727 1368/69; dm per person \$20, r with private bathroom \$48; ☎ ☎) The rooms at Odessa's *vokzal* (train station) are spacious, newly renovated and great value.

**Passazh Hotel** (☎ 728 5500; vul Preobrazhenska 34; s/d from \$20/26) The Passazh is the epitome of

faded glory, but my how glorious it must have been. Everything here is *big*. A giraffe could preen itself in the enormous mirrors flanking the grand central stairway, and, frankly, you could almost swing a giraffe in the cavernous corridors too. The rooms feature lots of Soviet fixtures, bad wallpaper, saggy beds and shoddy tile-work, but they are large and come with old-world amenities such as full-length claw-footed bathtubs. Expect low-season discounts. Cheaper rooms lack hot water.

**Hotel Yunost** (☎ 738 0405; www.hotel-yunost.com.ua; vul Pionerska 34; s/d with shared bathroom \$20/40, with private bathroom \$45/75; ☎ ☎ ☎) Occupying a hard-to-miss monolith out towards Arkadia, Yunost's 'economy' rooms have appalling décor but are clean and good value. Pricier rooms have air-con and sea views. Breakfast is included. It's a few steps before Arkadia on tram 5.

**MIDRANGE**

Midrange and top-end hotels accept credit cards, have English-speaking staff and breakfast is included in the price, unless otherwise noted.

**Hotel Oktyabrskaya** (☎ 728 8863; vul Kanatna 31; r with shared/private bathroom \$50/75; ☎) The Soviet-style standard rooms in this solid-value hotel out towards Shevchenko Park are shockingly gaudy, but somehow maintain a cosy, retro-Soviet-lodge feel. Many rooms have balconies overlooking the serene courtyard.

**Black Sea Hotel Odessa** (☎ 300 904; www.bs-hotel.com.ua; vul Rishchevska 59; s/d from \$70/90; ☎ ☎ ☎) This ugly 1970s concrete tower shelters generic but surprisingly well appointed and spacious rooms, most of which have been smartly renovated (the exception is the shabby and far-from-chic singles). The once-surly staff is now friendly, helpful and speaks English. Breakfast is extra.

**Hotel Frapolli** (☎ 356 801; www.odessapassage.com/fracolli; vul Derybasivska 13; s/d from \$73/106; ☎ ☎ ☎) Noise wafts in from vul Derybasivska in summer, but don't complain: the location on said street is exactly what you're paying for. Take away that location and you're left with an overpriced hotel. All rooms except the windowless economy doubles have internet-enabled computers (10uah per hour).

**Black Sea Hotel Pryvoz** (☎ 365 411; www.bs-hotel.com.ua; vul Panteleymonivska 25; s/d from \$77/94; ☎ ☎ ☎) This new hotel is in a slightly dodgy area but packs unrivalled bang-for-the-buck at

the midrange level. While the décor is hit or miss, the generous size of the rooms, professional service and overall modernity of this 100-room high-rise make up for it. Breakfast costs extra.

**Palladium Hotel** (☎ 728 6651; www.hotel-palladium.com.ua; bul Italyansky 4; r from \$100; ☎ ☎ ☎) The attractive, pastel-hued rooms here feature minimalist décor and fine-textured carpets. It definitely qualifies as a good deal for Odessa. Admission to the popular downstairs nightclub (closed during summer) is free for hotel guests, as is admission to the summer club Itaka (see p179).

**TOP END**

**Hotel Londonskaya** (☎ 738 0110; www.londred.com; bul Prymorsky 11; s \$115-152, d \$147-184; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Last refurbished in the early 1990s, the rooms of Odessa's oldest luxury hotel are becoming dated, but with iron-lace balustrades, stained-glass windows, parquet flooring and an inner courtyard, the place still oozes Regency charm. It boasts a primo position, an excellent restaurant and even a small museum paying tribute to past guests.

**Mozart Hotel** (☎ 376 900; www.mozart-hotel.com; vul Lanzheronivska 13; s \$122-208, d \$173-260; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) As the name suggests, this top choice epitomises European luxury, with elegant furnishings and a calm, light-filled interior lurking behind its refurbished neoclassical façade. Rooms are individually decorated and the location across from the Opera and Ballet Theatre is perfect.

**Continental** (☎ 786 0399; www.continental-hotel.com.ua; vul Derybasivska 5; s/d from \$126/158; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) The location is pretty much perfect, and the service outstanding, at this smart new business hotel. The stylish rooms have high ceilings, exquisite oak-wood desks, and plenty of unused space. Our one gripe is that there are no couches for guests to sit on whilst enjoying the 24-hour room service and gaggle of cable TV channels.

**Eating BUDGET**

**Tavriya** (Galereya Afina mall, pl Hretska; mains from 7uah; ☎ 8am-10pm) This squeaky clean food mecca in the basement of Odessa's newest, flashiest mall has instantly become the city's most popular eating option. It consists of a Ukrainian-food *stolova* (cafeteria), a pizza and pasta bar, and a large supermarket.

**Pr Oleksandrivsky** (Khachipuri 12uah) The leafy open-air food stands in this park are superb places to relax and eat chicken legs or *kha-chipuri* (Georgian pizzas) washed down with draught beer (3.50uah).

**Top Sandwich** (☎ 777 5331; vul Derybasivska 14; sandwiches 12-24uah) Odesa's best budget eatery assembles a wide selection of sandwiches and shawarmas and also cooks up Ukrainian classics like *borshch* and *varenyky* (dumplings). At 6uah, the beers are the cheapest on vul Derybasivska. There is a new outlet at vul Derybasivska 18 and another at vul Preobrazhenska 42.

## MIDRANGE

**Pulcinella** (☎ 777 3010; vul Lanzheronivska 17; pasta dishes 25-30uah) The bright teal interior gives this place a seaside Mediterranean feel, but it's the scrumptious five-course meals that will really make you feel like you're in southern Italy. The culinary highlights are the lasagne and the brick-oven-fired pizza.

**our pick** **Turkuaz** (☎ 711 7546; vul Derybasivska 12; mains 25-35uah) While many restaurants on vul Derybasivska overcharge tourists for mediocre food, Turkuaz continues to dish up mouth-watering kebabs, Turkish salads and draught beer at extremely sane prices. Punctuate the experience by launching heavenly wisps of melon- or apple-scented vapours skyward from what, at 40uah, must be Odesa's most reasonably priced *kalyan* (hookah pipes).

**Khevron** (☎ 715 0374; vul Rishhelevska 30; mains 25-50uah; ☎ Sun-Fri) This excellent underground kosher eatery is at the back of Odesa's main synagogue.

**Fat Mozes** (☎ 714 4774; vul Yekaterynynska 8/10; sandwiches 20-30uah, mains 35-55uah) Sounds like a New York deli, doesn't it? However, apart from the roast-beef sandwiches, it isn't quite. The atmosphere is more of a cosy, unpretentious bistro, serving an eclectic mix that includes souvlaki, goulash and Jamaican chicken.

**Kasylysa** (☎ 322 377; vul Havanna 7; mains 35-75uah; ☎ 9am-11pm) A brace of bold, themed restaurants grace the corner of vul Havanna and vul Lanzheronivska. This is the Russian rendition. If you're one of those who thinks you haven't travelled until you've eaten something bizarre, their 'warm salad of cut bull's testicles' is for you.

**Kumanets** (☎ 376 946; vul Havanna 7; mains 35-75uah) Next door to Kasylysa is this veritable Ukrainian village, producing afford-

able *holubtsy* (cabbage rolls), *varenyky* and *deruny* (potato pancakes) in addition to pricier mains.

**Zara Pizzara** (☎ 728 8888; vul Rishhelevska 5; calzones under 30uah, mains 40-60uah; ☎ 8am-11pm) This pizzeria has an enviously located summer terrace, real Italian-style thin-crust pizza loaded with toppings, and hefty calzones. What sets it apart is that it actually opens before 9am for breakfast. For that we'll excuse the overpriced beer.

**Klarabara** (☎ 375 108; City Garden; mains 50-75uah) Tucked away in a quiet corner of the City Garden, this classy, cosy, ivy-covered café and restaurant is awash with antique furniture and fine art. It serves European fare with Thai touches, plus brilliant Turkish coffee.

## Drinking

Just about anywhere along vul Derybasivska is a good place for a drink.

**Friends and Beer** (☎ 769 1998; vul Derybasivska 9) This charming re-created USSR-era living room littered with photos of Russian film stars is proof that 'Retro Soviet' doesn't have to mean political posters and Constructivist art. The huge TV screen is possibly not authentic for the period, but it's great for sports.

**Mick O'Neill's Irish Bar** (☎ 268 437; vul Derybasivska 13; ☎ 24hr) This long-standing Irish pub is a great place to start an evening and an even better place to finish it, as it's the only outdoor patio on vul Derybasivska that's open round the clock.

**Captain Morgan** (vul Zhukovskoho 18; ☎ 24hr) Captain Morgan (the name is pirated) is one of those cosy club-bar hybrids where it takes a critical mass of only about 20 people to get the party started. Capable DJs spin all night and there's a downstairs lounge that's as funky as it wants to be.

**Pobeda** (vul Hretska 25; ☎ 11am-last customer) This classy basement bar has a reading room for rainy days and a 20% discount on food if you saddle up to the bar.

**Art Club Exit** (vul Bunina 24; ☎ 5pm-late) For something a lot more local, try this often rowdy basement bar. The entrance is near a hard-to-spot 'Exit' sign.

## Entertainment CLUBS

Odesa's raucous club scene is divided into two seasons: summer (June-August) and the rest of the year. In summer, all the action is at Arkadia Beach, which boasts two huge, Ibiza-

## AUTHOR EXPERIENCE: A STEP BACK IN TIME

Back in the late 1990s, it used to be *de rigueur* for cops to hang out on the pedestrian alley leading to Arkadia Beach and cherry-pick foreigners out of the crowd for a little shakedown. Surely this very Soviet practice had gone the way of the *dezurnaya* (hotel floor attendant) in the post-Orange Revolution, visa-free Ukraine?

Uh, maybe not. My first night in Arkadia with a friend it took all of about eight seconds for a pair of cops to accost us and demand our passports, which neither of us had with us. The routine hadn't changed a bit. We were herded to a courtyard and the phrase 'big problem' was repeated over and over again. The negotiation process begins with a threat of arresting you and ends with a 50uah note (about 20% of the original asking price) being exchanged.

If you speak some Russian, there tends to be a lot of smiles and back-slapping throughout the negotiation process. The ritual concludes with an earnest handshake, as if both parties were perfectly pleased with the deal.

style nightclubs that produce heightened levels of madness seven days a week. At other times of the year, the action is closer to the city centre. Unless otherwise noted the following clubs charge 50uah to 100uah on weekends, and much less on weekdays. Steeply discounted or free admission for women is the norm.

**Ibiza** (☎ 777 0205; Arkadia Beach; ☎ summer) This white, free-form, open, cave like structure is Arkadia's most upmarket and most expensive club. European DJs and big-ticket Russian and Ukrainian pop bands often play here.

**Itaka** (☎ 349 188; Arkadia Beach; ☎ summer) It's slightly more downmarket than Ibiza and consequently often rowdier (in a good way). The Greek columns and statues are a tad much, but you'll hardly care when it's 5am and you are out of your gourd. Like Ibiza, it also draws big regional pop acts.

**Palladium** (☎ 728 6566; bul Italyanskyy 4; ☎ Sep-May) Itaka's sister club takes up the slack downtown when Itaka shuts down in September. There's a nightly show at around 11pm, followed by general debauchery.

**Praetoria Music Club** (☎ 726 6484; vul Lanzheronivska 26) This is one of the few city-centre clubs that has a pulse in the summer.

**Cosmo** (☎ 688 203; Gagariinskoe plato 5; ☎ Fri & Sat Sep-May) This spaceship-shaped club out by Arkadia is Odesa's biggest club in the low season, attracting a relatively young and boisterous crowd.

## CLASSICAL MUSIC & OPERA

The best regional orchestra within the former Soviet Union is the **Odesa Philharmonic Orchestra** (☎ 256 903; www.odessaphilharmonic.org), led by charismatic and energetic American conductor Hobart Earle (see p164), a former student of

Leonard Bernstein. This orchestra accounts for half the symphonies put on at the **Odesa Philharmonic Hall** (vul Bunina 15; admission 10-70uah; ☎ closed most of Jul & Aug).

Odesa's Opera and Ballet Theatre (p173), in addition to being architecturally magnificent, is also known for its marvellous acoustics. Unfortunately, the local opera company does not do justice to the theatre's impressive physical attributes, but performances are eminently affordable (25uah to 100uah) and the Odesa Philharmonic Orchestra performs here from time to time.

Theatre, concert and opera tickets can be purchased at the venues or various **Teatralna Kasa** (Theatre Kiosk; ☎ 9am-5pm). There's one on the corner of vul Derybasivska and vul Rishhelevska.

## Shopping

Odesa is home to two of Ukraine's largest and most famous markets. The centrally located **Privoz Market** (vul Privozna) is the largest open-air farmers market in the former Soviet Union and a must-visit for market lovers.

The sprawling **7-Kilometres Bazaar** on the city's southwest edge is probably the largest market of any kind in the former Soviet Union. Nicknamed the *tolkuchka* or *tolchok* (both meaning 'push' in Russian), its appeal lies in its sheer size, rather than in its shopping selection, which mainly entails row after row of the same old cheap knock-offs and junk. The official name has to do with its location about 7km outside the city. To get there, take a *marshrutka* (fixed-route minibus) marked '7KM' from the Privoz bus station (3uah, 20 minutes).

**Galereya Afina** (pl Hretska) is the city's newest and best mall.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

**Odesa airport** (☎ 393 549; www.airport.od.ua, in Russian) is better linked to Europe than any other Ukrainian airport besides Kyiv's. Austrian Airlines, Air Baltic and Turkish Airlines all have regular flights here (see p252 for contact details), and various regional carriers fly to Georgia, Armenia and Russia.

Domestic airlines Aerosvit, Ukraine International Airlines, and Odesa Airlines all fly between here and Kyiv. **Kiy Avia** (☎ 724 2240; www.kiyavia.com; vul Preobrazhenska 15; ✈ 8am-8pm) can sort you out with tickets and timetables.

### BOAT

From the Sea Port there are regular ferry services to Istanbul, plus some to Varna in summer (see p258). For Crimea, you can hitch a ride on river cruise ships run by Chervona Ruta (p66) out of Kyiv, space permitting. These dock in Odesa before continuing to Sevastopol (€75, 16 hours, one to two per week, summer only). It's pricey but you'll be travelling in style in a private cabin. You can only book tickets for these through Chervona Ruta or Odesa's London Sky Travel (p173).

### BUS

Odesa has two bus stations that are useful for travellers. The conveniently located **Pryvoz bus station** (☎ 777 7481; vul Vodoprovodna), 300m west of the train station, is mainly for shorter trips. *Marshrutky* leave from here to Mykolayiv every 15 minutes throughout the day (20uah, 1½ hours), and to Vylkovo (25uah, about every two hours from 6.25am to 6.30pm, three to four hours).

Most international and long-haul domestic buses leave from the **long-distance bus station** (☎ 721 6354; vul Kolontsevska 58), 3km west of the train station. Frequent **Gunsel** (☎ 326 212) and **Autolux** (☎ 716 4612) buses are the most comfortable and quickest way to travel to Kyiv (90uah, 7½ hours). Other companies serve Izmayil (29uah, four hours, hourly), Donetsk (100uah, 13 hours, one daily), Simferopol (80uah, 12 hours, six daily), Yalta (100uah, 14 hours, three daily), Lviv (100uah, 15 hours, two daily) and Chernivtsi (100uah, 13 hours, two daily) via Kamyanets-Podilsky.

There are at least 10 buses per day to Chişinău via Tiraspol, and two via Palanka (40uah to 50uah, five to seven hours). The latter avoid Transdnistr (see p254).

Call **Arman Tours** (☎ 728 9518; vul Kanatna 81) for bus journeys to Prague, Krakow and other eastern and central European destinations.

### TRAIN

Odesa is well connected by train to all major Ukrainian, Russian and eastern European cities. Despite the addition of 'summer trains' on the most popular routes (eg Kyiv, Moscow, Simferopol and Lviv), seats to/from Odesa fill up fast from June to August, so book ahead.

From **Odesa train station** (☎ 727 4242; pl Pryvokzalna) there are about five (mostly night) trains to Kyiv (110uah, nine to 12 hours), plus trains to Kharkhiv (100uah, 14 hours), Lviv (96uah, 12 hours), Kamyanets-Podilsky (75uah, 18 hours, odd days only) and Simferopol (75uah, 12 hours). Longer-distance services go to Moscow, Minsk, Rostov and (during summer only) to St Petersburg.

Trains to western Ukraine no longer pass through Chişinău. In fact, as of the time of writing, there were no train services to Chişinău.

## Getting Around

Odesa airport is about 12km southwest of the city centre, off Ovidiopilska doroha. Bus 129 goes to/from the train station; buses 117 and 101 run to/from the pl Hretska stop.

To get to the centre from the train station (about a 20-minute walk), go to the stop near the McDonald's and take any bus saying 'Площа Грецька' (plohcha Hretska), such as bus 148. Buses 155 and 109, and trolleybuses 4 and 10, go up vul Pushkinska before curving around to vul Prymorska past the passenger port and the foot of the Potemkin Steps.

Bus 208 and trolleybus 8 go from the train station to the long-distance bus station. From the Pryvoz bus station to pl Hretska take bus 220.

It's still fairly easy to flag down unofficial 'cabs' in Odesa. These charge about 10uah to 15uah to get anywhere in the centre. Official taxis charge double that, while standing taxis at hotels and the train station charge triple that. Always agree on a price beforehand. By phone try **Elit-Taxi** (☎ 371 030).

Rental cars are especially useful for exploring Bessarabia or the Kherson area. Try **Europcar** (☎ 777 4011) in the Hotel Londonskaya.

## AROUND ODESA

The limestone on which Odesa stands is riddled with some 2000km of tunnels, and these

have always played an important part in the city's history. Quarried out for building in the 19th century, they were first used to hide smuggled goods. During WWII they sheltered a group of local partisans, who waged a war of attrition against the occupying Romanians and forced the Nazis to keep more men in the area.

Most of the catacomb network lies well outside the city centre. The only tunnels that can be visited are in the suburb of Nerubayske, about 15km north of the centre of Odesa. Here a resident speleologist offers 45-minute **catacomb tours** (☎ 8-067 729 2485; tours per person 6uah plus 50uah flat fee for guide; ✈ 9am-4pm) that wind through what was the headquarters of Odesa's WWII partisan movement. Tours are in Russian so you may wish to bring a translator along, although you don't necessarily need one to enjoy the catacombs. Tours exit into the musty Partisan Museum.

*Marshrutka* 84 to Nerubayske leaves every 10 minutes from Odesa's Pryvoz bus station (1.50uah, 35 minutes). Ask your driver to let you off at the 'Katakomy' stop, easily identifiable by the hulking Soviet realist statue depicting five defiant partisans. Tour agencies in Odesa run excursions out here for about \$100 per group, or in summer you can look for one of the bullhorn-toting Russian-speaking guides touting tours in front of the train station.

## MYKOLAYIV МИКОЛАЇВ

☎ 0512 / pop 514,100

The juggernaut of the Soviet Union's shipbuilding industry fell upon hard times when Ukraine gained independence, but is beginning to emerge from its malaise on the back of renewed demand for its ships – and its women. Mykolayiv is the centre of Ukraine's marriage industry, and the city's pleasant, pedestrian main drag, **vul Radnyanska** (although just about everybody still uses its Soviet name, Sovetskaya), is eavesdropping central if you're looking for a little insight into this curious subculture.

Mykolayiv is also home to Ukraine's most famous zoo, although, as with any zoo in the former Soviet Union, you should temper your expectations.

Now that Odesa's Ship Museum has burnt down, there is no longer any debate about which city has the best boat museum in Ukraine. Mykolayiv's **Shipbuilding Museum** (vul

Admiralska 4; admission 2.40uah; ✈ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) features loads of exquisitely crafted models, through which you can observe the evolution of Mykolayiv-built warships over the last 300 years: from wooden schooners to Leviathan steel aircraft carriers. There are some stunning antique globes and extensive exhibits on the naval campaigns of the Crimean War, WWI and WWII. There's nothing in English, but it's still interesting for non-Russian speakers.

## Sleeping & Eating

Kristina of the Kovalevsky Hostel in Odesa was planning on opening a hostel in Mykolayiv on vul Naberezhna. See p176 for her contact details.

**Mykolayiv Hotel** (☎ 360 175; meridian@msat.net; pr Lenina 107; s/d \$30/52; P) This is a perfectly adequate, half-renovated Soviet-style hotel within walking distance from vul Radnyanska. It has no character, but no major deal-breakers either. A small breakfast is included in the room price.

**Hotel Kontinent** (☎ 477 520; www.continent.in.ua; vul Admirala Makarova 41; s/d from \$56/64; P) The main entrance is on vul Radnyanska, and the location of this solid midrange offering can't be beat. It's especially popular with the wife-seeking set, so book ahead. The street-side restaurant, Felichita (mains 15uah to 40uah), is prime people-watching territory.

**Kazbek** (☎ 582 171; vul Naberezhna 5/11; mains 50-100uah) Kazbek does scrumptious Georgian food in a sumptuous setting.

## Getting There & Away

Speedy private *marshrutky* to Odesa's Pryvoz bus station leave from behind the bus station; those to Odesa's long-distance bus station leave from the circle next to the bus station (15uah, 1¼ hours). There are half-hourly *marshrutky* to Kherson from the bus station (11uah, 1¼ hours).

Mykolayiv is a convenient jump-off point for the Nuclear Missile Museum in Pervomaysk (see p104); *marshrutky* zip up to Pervomaysk from behind the bus station every half hour or so until midnight (30uah, 2½ hours).

## KHERSON ХЕРСОН

☎ 0552 / pop 328,000

Kherson is pleasantly situated at the mouth of the Dnipro River, but the main reason to come here is, rather, for what lies around the

city. The city is a popular, if not terribly convenient, jump-off point for the Askaniya Nova Reserve (right), and there are also several less-ballyhooed excursions closer at hand.

One such excursion is to the Swedish village of **Zmiyivka**, whose first citizens begged Catherine the Great to move them here to escape serfdom in Russian-governed Sweden in the late 18th century. Zmiyivka remains a quirky enclave of Swedishness in today's Ukraine. To get to Zmiyivka take a *marshrutka* to Nova Kakhovka, which is about a 20-minute taxi ride from Zmiyivka (30uah).

From Kherson it's also a pleasant 50-minute ferry ride south to **Hola Prystan** (4uah, two per day, April to October), the last town of any significance on the Dnipro. A seldom-travelled road leads west from here along the border of the bird-infested **Black Sea Biosphere Reserve** to **Heroyске**, an old Cossack settlement with a famous salt mine. You can do this beautiful drive on your own in a hired vehicle, but to enter the reserve you'll have to take an organised tour – inquire at the Fregat hotel in Kherson or at the **reserve office** (☎ 8-055 392 6471; vul Lermontova 1) in Hola Prystan.

Kherson's former Intourist (Soviet tourism department) hotel, **Fregat** (☎ 496 087; vul Ushakova 2) has a travel agency that organises excursions to various locations in the area, including Zmiyivka, Heroyске and Askaniya Nova. It caters mainly to groups but it can also help individual tourists find English-speaking guides and drivers.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Travnya Hotel** (☎ 495 441; vul Lenina 26; s/d with shared bathroom \$9/14) This once-elegant offering is now grotty, but it's centrally located and dirt-cheap. Entrance is on vul Zhovtnevoi Revolutsiyi.

**Meridian** (☎ 264 156; www.bizcenter.com.ua/page/meridian; Richkovy Vokzal (River Station); s/d from \$23/30; ☎ ☎) Balconies with sublime views of the Dnipro delta make the Meridian the best value in Kherson. The beds are firm and expertly made and the service is friendly. Ask for a room with a view and air-con.

**Fregat** (☎ 280 139, 280 003; www.hotelfregat.com; vul Ushakova 2; s/d from \$52/72; ☎ ☎ ☎) The enthusiastic receptionists are perhaps overly proud of the newly renovated digs here, which just can't quite escape its Soviet roots. Only the spotless bathrooms have been effectively disposed of all traces of the former Soviet Union. There's also a nightclub and casino.

You'll find loads of eating options along the city's pedestrian main drag, vul Suvorova, including **Bashnya** (☎ 454 916; vul Suvorova 32; mains 15-25uah), which has an English menu and grill up a mean *som shashlyk* (catfish kebab).

### Getting There & Around

Private *marshrutky* depart every half hour to Mykolayiv (11uah, 1¼ hours) and every hour or so to Odesa (23uah, 2½ hours) until about 7.30pm. Trains and public buses to Odesa are more sporadic and take about twice as long. Buses also serve all major points in eastern Ukraine and Crimea, including Simferopol (65uah, five hours). Kherson lies on the main train line between Kyiv (12 hours) and Simferopol (7 hours), and there are also five buses per day to Kyiv (90uah, 12 hours).

Various buses and trolleybuses run to the centre from the train station via pr Ushakova. From the bus station take bus 6.

### ASKANIYA NOVA АСКАНІЯ НОВА

☎ 05538  
Just a few kilometres north of the border between Ukraine proper and Crimea lies a vast plain populated by roaming buffaloes, playing deer and antelopes, as well as sturdy, wild Przewalski's horses and other exotic species. The 2300-hectare **Askaniya Nova Reserve** was the brainchild of a 19th-century German settler who acted on his slightly mad idea of importing animals from different continents to this unique natural steppe. In addition to the above-mentioned animals, there are zebras, camels, gnus, rare Central Asian Saiga antelopes and all manner of birds, from pink flamingos to rare steppe eagles.

These animals live in incongruous harmony on what is Europe's largest remaining natural steppe. This is what the Ukraine of the Cossacks looked like – a parched, isolated, sprawling, yellow expanse. It evokes the central plains of Africa and, as in Africa, the best way to see the animals is on a safari.

Alas, that's easier said than done. The reserve does organise safaris in horse-drawn carts at 400uah for groups of four or less. Reserve-organised minivan safaris are also possible for larger groups. However, the reserve limits the number of visitors, and safaris are shut down entirely when there's an elevated risk of fire, which seems to be more often than not, especially during the dry summer months. Booking three days in advance is mandatory for safari

tours, and you should call to confirm the day before you arrive. Book through English-speaking Arina in the **reserve office** (☎ 612 86, 612 32; askania-zap@mail.ru; vul Lenina 16; ☎ ☎ 8am-5pm mid-Apr-mid-Nov) in front of the zoo in Askaniya Nova.

If you can't get on a safari tour, Askaniya Nova is still of interest for its zoo, its botanic garden and its austere beautiful landscape. However, these features alone are probably not worth the hassle of getting out here. A few specimens of each species found in the reserve occupy well-kept open-air pens in the **zoo** (admission 10uah; ☎ ☎ 8am-5pm mid-Apr-mid-Nov).

Lastly, a word of warning: most travel agencies running package tours to Askaniya Nova out of Crimea and Kherson have no intention of taking you on safari. If you are coming on a package tour, confirm that your tour includes a safari rather than the standard three-hour zoo and botanic-garden tour.

### Sleeping

Spending a night in Askaniya Nova is highly recommended to get a proper feel for the place.

**Fortuna** (☎ 8-055 386 1586; d or tr with shared bathroom per person \$9; ☎ ☎) This backpacker's delight, located right next to the bus station, has basic

rooms with perfectly cosy beds and big, clean common bathrooms.

**Kanna** (☎ 613 37, 8-050 393 4744; www.askania-nova-kanna.com.ua; vul Krasnoarmeyska 22; d from \$40; ☎ ☎) The rooms here are squeaky clean and cavernous, but most definitely overpriced considering the location. The café serves as a local watering hole where you may meet some interesting characters.

### Getting There & Away

Getting to Askaniya Nova by public transport is tricky; your best bet is to go to Nova Kakhovka and shell out 175uah for the scenic one-hour taxi ride. There are two early-morning and two early-afternoon *marshrutky* to Nova Kakhovka (12uah, 1½ hours), but these are often sold out. One of those originates in Kherson (20uah, at least three hours).

Nova Kakhovka is well connected by bus to Kyiv (100uah, 13 hours) and Kherson (10uah, 1½ hours).

### SOUTHERN BESSARABIA ПІВДЕННА БЕСАРАБІЯ

Not too many westerners venture into the fertile wedge of Ukraine that lies between

#### MELTING POT ON THE DANUBE

Bessarabia has spent the better part of the past half-millennium getting tossed around like a hot potato by various regional powers. As a result of shifting borders, Moldavians, Romanians, Russians, Turks, Germans and Ukrainians have all called this region home, as have several more obscure groups.

One such group is the **Lipovans**, Russian 'Old Believers', who were exiled from Russia in the 18th century for refusing to comply with Russian Orthodox Church reforms instituted by Peter the Great. Most of them settled near the Danube delta, where they still continue to live and practice Old Believer traditions such as crossing themselves with two fingers, and not shaving. Lipovan churches – one example is the **St Nicholas Church** in Vylkovo – are built in the shape of a boat instead of a cross, and have two spires and separate entrances for men and women. The interior walls are completely devoid of frescoes.

Next up are the **Gagauz**, an Orthodox-Christianised Turkish group, originally from Bulgaria, who ended up in Bessarabia when the Russians annexed the area from the Turks after the Russo-Turkish War of 1806–12. Today most Gagauz live in Moldova (where they have their own autonomous republic, Gagauzia), but you'll find Gagauz communities throughout Southern Bessarabia, including an active one in Vylkovo. The Gagauz language, Gagauzi, is a Turkish dialect influenced by Russian via the Russian Orthodox Church.

From a Ukrainian perspective, the most significant group to settle in this area was the **Zaporizhsky Cossacks**, who founded the Danube Sich just south of the Danube (in present-day Romania) after being driven out of Zaporizhzhya by Catherine the Great in 1775 (see p232). Its loyalties split by the Russo-Turkish Wars, the *sich* collapsed in 1828 and most of its inhabitants migrated back east. A few thousand Cossacks, however, remained in the area, ensuring that a dash of hearty Cossack blood would forever be ingrained in the populations of Southern Bessarabia and northern Romania (where a strong Ukrainian community persists to this day).



the Danube and Dnister rivers. That's too bad because, in addition to being beautiful in spots, it's also one of Ukraine's most culturally peculiar regions (see the boxed text, p183).

Its history is equally peculiar. From the late 15th century until Russia's victory in the Russo-Turkish War of 1806–12, this region was part of the Ottoman Empire. The Turks named it 'Bessarabia' after the Wallachian family – the Basarabs – who controlled the area during the late medieval period. When the Russians took over, they expanded Bessarabia to include most of present-day Moldova (plus a small slice of Carpathian Ukraine). The section of Bessarabia lying east of the Moldovan border in present-day Ukraine was dubbed Southern Bessarabia, or Budzhak. Between the world wars it was part of Romania before the Soviets annexed it in 1940 and made it part of Ukraine.

### Bilhorod-Dnistrovsky

Білгород-дністровський

☎ 04849 / pop 58,400

The 'White City on the Dnister' is an ordinary industrial port, but with an impressive **fortress** (☎ 225 96; vul Pushkina 19; admission 5uah; 🕒 9am–6pm) built by Moldavians, Genoese and Turks in the 13th to 15th centuries. Today the castle is among Ukraine's largest and best preserved. You can walk along most of the walls, which stretch nearly 2km in total.

While Bilhorod-Dnistrovsky makes an easy day trip from Odesa, you may want to stay a night if you are heading deeper into Bessarabia. The **train station** (☎ 361 03; dm/d \$4/24) has decent rooms, albeit with nasty common bathrooms. For something a bit more upmarket, try the **Hotel Fiesta** (☎ 397 77; vul Shevchenko 48; d/tr from \$30/36).

*Marshrutky* departing every 10 minutes or so from Odesa's Pryvoz bus station cover the 55km to Bilhorod-Dnistrovsky in about 1½ hours (10uah), terminating at the train station. Each day, there are also six *elektrychky* (electric trains; 5uah, 2½ hours). To reach the fortress from the train station, walk along vul Vokzalna and, after the park, turn right onto vul Dzerzhinskoho. From here, the fortress is a 1.5km walk.

### Vylkovo Вилково

☎ 04843 / pop 11,000

A network of navigable canals has earned Vylkovo the moniker 'the Venice of Ukraine'.

Frankly, the comparison is preposterous. This sleepy little fishing village feels light years removed from Venice – or any other form of civilisation. And, while the canals along which many villagers live are interesting, you won't spend much time on them unless you take a special tour, unlike in Venice. But Vylkovo does have one thing going for it that Venice lacks: the heavenly Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve.

### TOURS

The lion's share of the marshy, bird-laden **Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve**, Europe's largest wetlands, lies in Romania. Few tourists enter from the Ukrainian side, but those that do are rewarded with extremely affordable half- to full-day boat tours through the delta's unique waterways. You can visit the Danube's terminus – dubbed the '0km mark' – or take a bird-watching tour. When we visited in June, our guide dropped us off on a small island populated by thousands of terns and their just-hatched chicks. On one side of the island roosted flocks of cormorants and white pelicans (the reserve is home to some 70% of the world's white pelican population). The cacophony of squawks and chirps was deafening.

In the centre of Vylkovo you'll find the **Biosphere Reserve office** (☎ 446 19; reserve@it.odessa.ua; vul Povstanniya 132A; 🕒 9am–6pm), with an on-site museum and informational videos (in German and Russian). The staff speaks some English and can set you up with a local tour operator to take you into the reserve by boat.

Vylkovo's **canals**, built by the town's original Lipovan settlers (see p183), are the other main attraction. The villagers who live along the canals still use traditional, narrow fishing boats known as *chaika* (seagull) to fish and get around. Locals say there are 3000 such boats in Vylkovo, compared with only 600 cars. While touring the canals, drop by a local's house and purchase a bottle of the local wine, known as *novak*.

Booking tours in advance isn't a bad idea, especially on weekends. The largest and most organised tour operator is **Pelikan Tour** (www.pelican-danube-tour.com.ua in Russian; Vylkovo ☎ 8-067 483 5207; Primorskoye beach; Odesa Map pp162–3; ☎ 777 1205; vul Gogolya 8). Boat hire costs 150/300uah for a half/full day for up to six people. English-speaking guides cost \$15 per hour (\$100 per hour for a professional ornithologist who speaks English). A half day should be

enough time to visit both the reserve and the canals. A one-hour canal tour costs about 50uah. Another tour operator is **Vylkovo Tour** (☎ 321 59, 8-067 287 9994; Primorskoye beach).

Odesa travel agencies offer Vylkovo as a day trip, but typically charge about \$200 just for round-trip transport. It's far more rewarding to spend a night in Vylkovo and absorb some local flavour. In Odesa, we recommend Salix Tours (p173).

### SLEEPING

In addition to the following options, Salix Tours has a secluded riverside cabin available for \$15 per person per night, exclusive of boat hire (\$60). Bring your own food.

**Venetsiya** (☎ 313 74; vul Lenina 19A; r per person from \$15; 📺) The brand-spanking-new 'Venice' represents exceptional value, with big, bright, comfy rooms and fluffy rugs. Most rooms share squeaky-clean bathrooms and there's a restaurant.

**Pelikan Tour** (☎ 8-067 483 5207; d with shared bathroom, per person \$20). Pelikan Tour runs a homy guesthouse right on the banks of the Danube, just a short walk from the centre. You'll have to resist the urge to take up duck hunting when awakened by the loudly frolicking, nocturnal waterfowl in the small marina. Pelikan Tour can also arrange camping on the banks of the Danube for 25uah per person (bring your own tent).

### EATING & DRINKING

**Yakar** (Belhorodsky canal; dishes 10uah) This friendly little café is the only place in town for a canal-side beer and snack. The food is basic Russian fare and the Obolon draught beer is cheap (3.50uah).

**Venezia** (vul Lenina 22; mains 8–18uah) Located on the main street in the centre of town, Venezia features diversions like billiards and a weekend disco in addition to run-of-the-mill Russian and Ukrainian food.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Fast *marshrutky* to Vylkovo leave every two hours or so until late afternoon from Odesa's Pryvoz bus station (25uah, three to four hours). The occasional buses that depart from Odesa's long-distance bus station are slower and can take up to twice as long.

### Izmayil Ізмаїл

☎ 04841 / pop 84,800

It's probably not worth a special trip, but Izmayil's interesting history and edgy border-town feel make for a fine stopover if you're heading to/from Romania or Moldova. And if you prefer to avoid other tourists, you certainly won't have to worry about bumping into any here.

Izmayil was named after a Turkish khan who sacked the city – then called Smil – in the 15th century. In subsequent centuries the fortress of Izmayil attained legendary status as the Turks gradually made it one of the world's most impregnable bastions. Measuring 7km around, it overlooked the Danube and boasted supposedly impenetrable walls, which were 4m thick and 24m tall. The successful sacking of the fort by General Alexander Suvorov and his men on 22 December 1790 (during the Russo-Turkish War of 1787–92) is regarded as one of the most impressive military feats in Russian history – and one of the most disastrous blows ever dealt to the Ottoman Empire.

This battle is recreated in a brilliant diorama at the **Suvorov Museum** (vul Krepostnaya; admission 5uah; 🕒 9am–5pm). Dioramas of famous battles are a dime a dozen in Ukrainian museums, but this one truly stands out in terms of the quality of both the visual presentation (complete with light show) and the 20-minute audio presentation (in English!). The 16th-century former mosque housing the museum is all that remains of the once-mighty fortress.

If you need a place to crash, the **Hotel Izmayil** (☎ 241 87; pr Suvorova 54; s/d with shared bathroom \$7/10, d with private bathroom \$34; 📺), although decidedly Soviet, is centrally located. Nearby, Shevchenko Park runs along pr Suvorova and has several pleasant outdoor eating and drinking options, including **Dzhulia** (meals 10uah).

There are two slow *marshrutky* a day to/from Vylkovo (15uah, 2¼ hours). The speedier, one-hour taxi ride costs about 150uah. Buses (four hours) and *marshrutky* (three hours) depart every 15 minutes or so to Odesa (about 30uah).

From Izmayil's river port, **Transcruise** (☎ 205 50, 23064) runs ferries to Silistre, Bulgaria, twice weekly in the summer (June to September) and weekly at other times (€60). It takes about six hours upstream and 3½ downstream.