

Destination Ukraine

For those of you who came in late, in 2004 there was a popular revolution in Ukraine. And while that Orange-clad uprising failed to leave the nation basking in a happily-ever-after future, it was a revolution that, contrary to the famous dictum, didn't eat its children.

The map remains the same, with the awe-inspiring, monumental capital of Kyiv at its heart, irrepressible Odesa and striking Crimea on its southern shores, plus cosy central-European Lviv near rolling western hills. Several years down the track, the industrial, pro-Russian east has forgotten its threat to secede.

Nonetheless, the Ukraine you're visiting today is not the country that previously existed. 'Post-Orange Ukraine' might have the political blues as successive parliamentary stalemates drag out, but its press is freer, its attitudes more open and its economy improving. Memories of demonstrating on 'the maydan' (Kyiv's Independence Square) still fuel increased civic awareness. There's fledgling democracy instead of autocracy, fair elections and a tolerance of genuine public debate. At the same time, the unfulfilled promises of a weakened president have injected a sense of realism, if not cynicism.

Ukraine, whose name means 'borderland', is slowly, and sometimes indecisively, shifting. You still frequently encounter the surly, unhelpful bureaucracy that reigned when this was part of the Soviet Union, but now it's tempered by widespread aspirations to eventually join the EU. The younger generation, central to the Orange Revolution, are looking forward and revelling in newfound freedoms. Traditionalists, meanwhile, are concerned about floating too far out of neighbouring Russia's orbit.

A patchwork nation, as contemporary pundits like to call it, Ukraine draws on numerous historical influences, and as a patchwork nation it's searching for unifying 21st-century symbols. The dominant culture is Slavic, but Scythian gold is still hoarded in the history museum at Kyiv's Kievo-Pecherska Lavra (Caves Monastery) and Byzantine mosaics line the capital's St Sophia's Cathedral.

The golden domes of myriad Russian and Ukrainian Orthodox cathedrals gleam out across one of Europe's poorest nations. Yet, among the rocky outcrops of fascinating Crimea, you'll also find Turkic architecture, not to mention ancient cave cities. The country's marauding Cossacks are remembered on the Dnipro River's Khortytysya Island, as well as in musical and dance rituals.

Not all Ukrainians get an equal (duck-) kick out of all these traditions. The Russian-speaking east, centre and south might take pride in Cossack history, but the Ukrainian-speaking west of the country lionises the native Hutsul culture of the Carpathians, while the Crimean Tatars are making a comeback on their homeland peninsula.

So any success that post-Orange Ukraine achieves is a building-block towards a new national identity. By hosting the Eurovision song contest in 2005, abolishing most visas to welcome more overseas tourists, being chosen to co-host the European Football Championships in 2012 and even angling for the 2018 Winter Olympics, this once-overlooked country hopes to show off its increasing capabilities to the world.

Meanwhile, it wants to prove them to all Ukrainians, too.

FAST FACTS

Area: 603,700 sq km, just smaller than Texas

Population: 46.7 million (UN)

GDP per capita: \$7800 (2006)

GDP growth: 6.8% (2007 estimate)

Inflation: 14.5% (2007 estimate)

Official unemployment: 2.7% (but believed to be as high as 6.7%)

Life expectancy: women 72.4 years, men 60.1 years (UNDP)

Cigarettes smoked per day: 5.4 per person

Natural gas consumption: 74 billion cubic metres a year

Railways: 22,473km of track

National anthem: 'Ukraine Has Not Yet Died'

Getting Started

For decades Ukraine welcomed mainly package tourists, particularly those taking cruises down the Dnipro River. However, since the abolition of visa requirements for citizens of the EU, US and several other countries in 2005, it's also been developing a reputation as a frontier nation for adventurous independent travellers.

A small coterie of hostels and private B & Bs has recently sprung up and, while they're of varying quality, the best of them work hard to fill the gap left by the scarcity of tourist information offices and English speakers throughout Ukraine. Elsewhere travellers will rarely find their needs directly catered for and will need to be resourceful.

Still, it's well worth the effort to venture into this fascinating, less-explored part of the world.

WHEN TO GO

Spring (late April to early June), when perfumed chestnut trees bloom and people throw off heavy winter coats, is the best time to visit. The Orthodox rituals surrounding Easter are fabulous, and there's a sense of reawakening as cafés set out pavement seating and hikers take the heights of the Carpathian and Crimean Mountains. (Even in April though you might still find snow on Hoverla, the country's highest peak.)

During the sometimes stiflingly hot summer, things get pretty busy as locals head en masse for Crimea, the Black Sea Coast and the Carpathians. Indeed, Yalta in August is complete madness and probably best avoided. Most theatres close throughout July and August when the country's focus shifts to the great outdoors.

Autumn is almost as inviting as spring, as the crowds dissipate and the mercury drops to a more comfortable level. In December and January it's biting cold inland, particularly in the east; however this is a good time to head to the Carpathian Mountains, Ukraine's skiing district.

It's wise to book ahead during the public holidays in the first weeks of January and May (see p246).

COSTS & MONEY

Food, transport and museums are reasonably cheap in Ukraine, although you always pay a premium for eating out in Kyiv and Odesa. Accommodation is often wildly overpriced throughout the country.

A decent double hotel room in Kyiv will generally cost at least \$100 but more likely \$150. (Renting an apartment is a great alternative; see p241.) A basic meal in a midrange restaurant in the capital can easily cost 150uah to 200uah (\$30 to \$40) per person, without drinks.

If you choose cafeteria-style eateries or spend more time in the countryside, meals can set you back as little as 20uah (\$4). Furthermore, if you're prepared to stay in unappealing former-Soviet hotels and share a communal bathroom, you can get away with paying \$15 to \$20 a night. Decent hotels in the countryside usually start at about \$40 to \$50 a night.

Museum entrance is a bargain at between 3uah (60c) and 20uah (\$4) and local public transport is even cheaper at between 50 kopecks (10c) and 3uah (60c).

Long-distance transport prices have shot right up in the past few years, but they're still quite reasonable from a visitor's perspective. A *kupe* (2nd-class) train ride across the entire country will rarely set you back more

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Valid travel insurance (see p246)
- Checking if your nationality is one of the few that still needs a visa (see p251)
- A phrasebook, if you don't speak the language
- Ensuring your vaccinations are up to date (see p264)
- A basic first-aid kit, including sterile syringes
- A small torch, for the many unlit streets
- An eye mask to block out the light in hotel rooms, which frequently have thin curtains
- A scarf and below-knee skirt, for women visiting Orthodox churches or mosques
- A sense of humour and flexibility

than 150uah (\$30). Taxi drivers will usually escalate their prices when they hear your accent, so be prepared to haggle.

One extraordinary expense that even the most independent travellers may find themselves paying for, is a car and guide to some of the more out-of-the-way places of Crimea and the Carpathians. For this, bank on a sizable \$60 to \$100 per day.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

Only a handful of authors – of either fiction or nonfiction – have made their way across Ukraine. So take your diary – there's a gap in the market here. Anna Reid's excellent *Borderland*, her observations of the country during her time here as an *Economist* correspondent in the 1990s, functions as much as a travelogue as a history book.

Everything Is Illuminated, by Jonathan Safran Foer, follows a Jewish American searching for the Ukrainian woman who saved his grandfather during WWII. Letters between him and his language-mangling translator and guide build up a wacky, almost stream-of-consciousness novel. (Liev Schreiber's 2005 film of the book had the benefit of starring Elijah Wood and Gogol Bordello singer Eugene Hutz, but suffered from giving the story a happy ending.)

In *Long Way Round*, actor Ewan McGregor and friend Charley Boorman cross Europe, including Ukraine, on their motorbikes. However, they're not travel writers and devote at least as much space to their practical tribulations as to the countries.

More recently *Australian Geographic* Adventurer of the Year 2006, Tim Cope, spent 14 months crossing Ukraine on horseback as part of a longer, three-year epic to follow in the footsteps of Genghis Khan from Mongolia to Hungary. He completed the trip in late 2007 and, until any books, TV series or films ensue, you can read his insightful descriptions and musings at www.timcopejourneys.com.

INTERNET RESOURCES

All kinds of sites and blogs now cover events in Ukraine, so the following are just a few of the best. You can find news and links at lonelyplanet.com, including tips on Ukraine from other travellers in the Eastern European section of the Thorn Tree bulletin board.

CIA World Factbook – Ukraine (www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/up.html) Dry, but useful and frequently updated statistics and other information on demographic, social and economic basics.

HOW MUCH?

- Kyiv metro ride 50 kopecks
- Bottle of Nemiroff vodka (0.7L) 30uah
- Cup of brewed coffee 7-15uah
- Ticket to opera in Kyiv 12-20uah
- Ticket to football game at Dynamo Stadium in Kyiv 15-30uah

Discover Ukraine: the True Centre of Europe (www.pcukraine.org/tourism) The quality of this online guidebook by US Peace Corps volunteers varies wildly depending on individuals' enthusiasm for the project and their city of residence.

Infoukes (www.infoukes.com) Frequently asked questions, books to buy about Ukraine, online maps and tips on where to visit are all offered on these Ukrainian-Canadian pages.

Only in Ukraine... (www.onlyinukraine.blogspot.com) A slightly old Monty Pythonesque compilation of funny but true news stories, from 'Burglar locks self in church for five days, lives on wine', to 'Suspected smugglers flying ultralight', as well as all manner of animal stories and other oddities. As the blurb says: 'How can you not love Ukraine after stories like this!'

Try Ukraine (www.tryukraine.com) Although essentially a personal guide to living, working and travelling in the country by an American in Kyiv, this is an incredibly detailed and authoritative source.

Ukraine.com (www.ukraine.com) Up-to-date news from foreign news sources, eye-catching and quirky feature articles from around the country, and a wealth of background information all make this a useful gateway site.

Ukrainian Government Portal (www.kmu.gov.ua/control/en) Go to the Press Center to catch up on all the latest government policies and reforms, as well as new hotels, museums and transport routes.

'If you do a web search for 'green rural tourism' and 'Ukraine', you might be misled into thinking such a thing really exists.'

TRAVELLING RESPONSIBLY

Since its inception in 1973, Lonely Planet has encouraged its readers to tread lightly, travel responsibly and enjoy the magic that independent travel affords. International travel is growing rapidly, and we still firmly believe in the benefits it can bring. However, as always, we encourage you to consider the impact your visit will have on both the global environment and the local economies, cultures and ecosystems.

Unfortunately, in Ukraine there's really only one way to do this, and that's to pick up some of the country's reams of litter as you pass through. If you do a web search for 'green rural tourism' and 'Ukraine', you might be misled into thinking such a thing really exists. In fact, all you'll find are either homestays or hiking guides rather than sustainable travel options. There is a *huge* amount of hype surrounding this topic in a country where even 'national parks' aren't properly protected. For more, see the Environment chapter (p56).

Getting There & Away

Rather than flying to Kyiv, some budget travellers now take the train into western Ukraine from neighbouring Hungary, Poland or Slovakia. They do this because it's cheap, but it's probably also a little bit greener – although not too much as the country's diesel-fuelled rolling stock is pretty ancient. If coming to Ukraine, you might want to consider offsetting your carbon emissions (see the boxed text, p253). Calculate big.

Local Transport

Lined up beside *marshrutky* and buses that belch black smoke into the atmosphere, trains are the least of all environmental evils. If an *elektrychka* (electric local train) serves a route, it will be the most environmentally friendly public transport method that is available. But if you really want to travel Ukraine without polluting, embark on a bicycle odyssey (see p259).

Accommodation

Staying with Ukrainian families pumps more money directly into the local economy, but it will rarely be a truly green experience. Poor rural households consume less than their urban counterparts, however they

are generally too busy trying to get by to prioritise environmental living. Climate change isn't a topic often broached in Ukraine; it figures in the equation only for the most progressive Ukrainians, natural scientists and US Peace Corps volunteers.

TOP PICKS

Kyiv • UKRAINE

BOOKS

Some books commonly thought of as Russian and Polish, including some enduring classics of world literature, actually emanate from Ukraine. Other 'good reads' for before you visit the country have been produced by adopted Ukrainians from Russia or Ukrainian émigrés. See p17 and p41 for some brief reviews.

- *Everything is Illuminated* (2002) by Jonathan Safran Foer
- *Death and the Penguin* (1996) by Andrey Kurkov
- *The White Guard* (1925) by Mikhail Bulgakov
- *Taras Bulba* (1835) by Nikolai Gogol
- *Complete Works* (reissued 2005) by Isaac Babel
- *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian* (2005) by Marina Lewycka
- *Dead Souls* (1842) by Nikolai Gogol
- *Street of Crocodiles* (1934) by Bruno Schulz
- *Recreations* (1998) by Yuri Andrukhovych

MOVIES

Although it hardly has the most vibrant film industry, Ukraine has managed to turn out one or two absolute screen classics over the decades. Several Russian films shot in Ukraine, a couple of foreign documentaries and the blockbuster *Everything is Illuminated* also make excellent viewing while preparing to visit the country. See p42 for some brief reviews.

- *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* (1964) directed by Sergiy Paradzhanov
- *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) directed by Sergei Eisenstein
- *Everything is Illuminated* (2005) directed by Liev Schreiber
- *Koktebel* (2003) directed by Boris Khlebnikov
- *The Pied Piper of Hützovina* (2006) directed by Pavla Fleischer
- *Earth* (1930) directed by Alexander Dovzhenko
- *A Driver for Vera* (2004) directed by Pavel Chukhraj
- *Orange Revolution* (2007) directed by Steve York
- *Flowers Don't Grow Here* (2005) directed by Shira Pinson

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

A new generation of rock and music festivals has been taking its place alongside Ukraine's age-old Slavic traditions – both Christian and pagan.

- Svyata Vecherya (see Celebrations, p48)
- Epiphany (p83)
- Ivan Kupalo (p40)
- Sheshory Festival (p245)
- Kazantip (p191)
- Rainy Mriy (p83)
- Koktebel International Jazz Festival (p216)
- Kamyanets-Podilsky Days (p110)
- Pidkamin (see Dyzha, p125)
- Taras Bulba Rock Festival (p133)

Activities

Hiking across Carpathian and Crimean countryside is one popular low-impact activity, organised by the likes of **Lviv Ecotour** (www.lvivecotour.com), **Outdoor Ukraine** (www.outdoorukraine.com), **Sergey Sorokin** (www.mt.crimea.com) and On the Corner guesthouse (p147) in Kolomyya.

Food

There is a very important dictum here: choose red instead of black caviar and avoid any expensive sturgeon. Ukraine breeds and manages its sturgeon population reasonably carefully, so it's OK to select anything you're sure is a domestic variety. However, any very expensive sturgeon is likely to come from the Caspian region, where the fish is endangered. Always ask about a fish's origins if they're not displayed on the menu and if in any doubt, skip it.

Eating red salmon caviar is uncontroversial but black beluga caviar comes from endangered Caspian breeds. Be aware that there are international laws governing how much sturgeon caviar you can legally take out of the country (p243).

Responsible Tourism Organisations

At the time of research, the only internationally accredited Ukrainian eco-tourism business we could find was Odesa's Salix Nature Tours (p173), which also sold excursions through **Responsible Travel** (www.responsibletravel.com) and **Nature Trek** (www.naturetrek.co.uk). Salix offers ecotours through Askaniya Nova and the Danube Biosphere Reserve in Southern Ukraine, as well as to Crimea.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

THE BIG THREE

10 to 12 Days

The quintessential Ukrainian experience kicks off in **Kyiv** (p63), the cradle of Slavic civilisation that really rocks. Here you'll need a good three days to absorb the mix of gold-domed Orthodox churches, monumental Stalinist architecture and leafy parks. Go underground at the **Kievo-Pecherska Lavra** (Caves Monastery; p75) and downhill along **Andriyivsky uzviz** (p73) to Podil (p74), before generally revelling in the vibrant social life.

Wrenching yourself away, catch an overnight train to the slightly crumbly former Habsburg city of **Lviv** (p114). With its Italianate buildings, Austrian-style cafés and impressively Gothic **Lychakivske Cemetery** (p119), it's a cosy contrast to the colossal capital.

Finally, head south to the beguiling Black Sea port of **Odesa** (p161), famous for the **Potemkin Stairs** (p173) as well as weekend clubbing at **Arkadia Beach** (p178).

From here you could extend your journey into Crimea, on all or part of the 'Black Sea Magic' itinerary (p23). However, those with a plane to catch should hightail it back to Kyiv on a luxury bus – quicker than the train on this particular route.

Get the measure of Ukraine quickly, sampling its greatest hits. Kyiv tops the chart with its hectic urban rhythms. But on this 2010km trip, you'll also chill in cosy Lviv and swing by sybaritic Odesa, which definitely dances to its own beat.



BACKPACKERS' BLOCKBUSTER

Three Weeks

With low-cost airlines now landing in neighbouring Poland, it's increasingly common for budget travellers to cross the land border to **Lviv** (p114). Of course, this offers an alternative launch pad for the simple 'Big Three' circuit (p21), but it's also the gateway to a more down-to-earth odyssey. After Lviv, use **Kolomyya** (p146) as a base to explore the Carpathian countryside, and perhaps even climb Hoverla (2061m), the country's highest peak. Then it's only a short hop to the stunning landscape of **Kamyanets-Podilsky** (K-P; p106), where the medieval Old Town perches atop a tall rock in the middle of a river loop. Leaving K-P, detour up to Khmelnytsky (don't hang around long here) and hop on a train to **Odesa** (p161), Ukraine's premier party venue.

After a short sojourn in Odesa, catch an overnight train to **Simferopol** (p188) and keep going until you reach the reborn Crimean Tatar capital of **Bakhchysaray** (p193). This resurgent town will not only entrance you with its **Khans' Palace** (p193) and ancient cave city **Chufut Kale** (p196); it also has some good cheap places to stay and eat.

Basing yourself in startlingly beautiful **Balaklava** (p202), you can explore pricier **Sevastopol** (p198) too.

Afterwards, take the breathtaking coastal road to **Yalta** (p203). While visiting **Livadia Palace** (p209), **Alupka** (p210) and **Mt Ay-Petri** (p210) you'll inevitably have to splash out a bit more to stay in this happy-go-lucky resort, but it's worth the kitsch experience.

Retrace your steps to Odesa and branch out for **Kyiv** (p63). The energetic capital is your last stop before catching a train west out of the country, probably via Lviv. In practice, this route might take three weeks and a bit.

Keep it real, hopping across Ukraine's best budget towns and cities. This 3265km epic takes you from the rustic west to the outrageously beautiful landscapes of Crimea, before peaking in the cosmopolitan capital of Kyiv.



ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

BLACK SEA MAGIC

Two Weeks

By starting in **Odesa** (p161), which has direct international flights, you'll have more time to explore Ukraine's Mediterranean-like coast. The latter half of this route is fairly well-trodden, but the beginning features territory few foreign tourists see and overall it's an unusual itinerary. Because of the peninsula's local popularity, remember that the high-season months of July and, particularly, August are chaotic, especially in Yalta.

Take an overnight train to **Simferopol** (p188). Spend a day exploring and catching your breath, before bussing to **Feodosiya** (p214). Explore the surrounding area of this major eastern resort for a few days. First and foremost pay a visit to the unforgettable **Kara-Dag Nature Reserve** (p217), with its lunar landscape of eerily shaped volcanic rocks. Spend a day in **Koktebel** (p215) and devote at least one to Feodosiya itself. Now, up sticks and head east to **Sudak** (p212), where you can visit a **Genoese fortress** and make a winding, jaw-dropping journey to the beach at **Novy Svit** (p213). Return to Simferopol, and make an unusual day trip to **Yevpatoriya** (p192) before embarking on a circuit of more popular Crimean destinations. Travel to exotic **Bakhchysaray** (p193), relatively orderly **Sevastopol** (p198) and gorgeous **Balaklava** (p202), where you can breach the once impregnable doors of a former secret nuclear submarine factory, now a **naval museum** (p202), hidden inside a hill. Last but not least comes **Yalta** (p203). After visiting its palaces and soaking up its rumbustious seaside atmosphere, it's time to head back to Simferopol and Odesa.

Want a seaside holiday with a real difference? This relaxed 1870km route gives you a warm feeling by combining beaches, clubs and cheap champagne with strikingly unique landscapes, fascinating history and loads of culture to boot.



TAILORED TRIPS

UKRAINE'S SEVEN WONDERS

In 2007, as the world was voting on seven new global wonders, Ukraine ran a nationwide competition (<http://7chudes.in.ua>) to select its own. The result was a fascinating eclectic mix, proving just how diverse this country is.

It's official! Jointly topping the poll were central Uman's formally landscaped **Sofiyivka Park** (p102) and Kyiv's **Kievo-Pecherska Lavra** (p75), with its golden-domed churches and tunnels lined with saints' bodies. Before leaving this area, it's worth noting that Kyiv is also home to the sixth-placed **St Sophia's Cathedral** (p70), whose interior Byzantine mosaics dwarf the viewer.

In third place is the 'rock town' of **Kamyanets-Podilsky** (p106), perched on a tall, freestanding plateau in a deep, winding river gorge. The seventh wonder is also a short *marshrutka* ride away from here. Right on the westerly Dnister River, **Khotyn Fortress** (p155) was already one of Ukraine's most impressive castles even before being renovated as a backdrop for the recent blockbuster film *Taras Bulba*.

Fierce Cossacks once fortified themselves on the fourth sensation, **Khortytsya Island** (p232) in the Dnipro River. The fifth marvel is further south still. Its Crimean seafront setting is the real beauty of **Khersones** (p200), which boasts the ruins of an ancient Greek city, a cathedral, and a famous bell forged from a Crimean War cannon.



HUTSUL HAUNTS

In the Carpathian Mountains there's an area known as 'Hutsulshchyna' in honour of the region's native Hutsuls. If you wish to see these Ukrainians' vaguely Native American-style handicrafts, sample their cuisine or hear their music, travel the 'Golden Ring', a series of Carpathian villages linked by a circular road. Your starting point could be anywhere on this circumference, but the easiest option is either **Kolomyia** (p146) or **Yaremcha** (p143) – both easily reachable from Lviv and Ivano-Frankivsk. Kolomyia boasts the singularly egg-shaped **Pysanky Museum** (p146) and **Museum of Hutsul Folk Art** (p146). Just southwest is **Kosiv** (p148) with its weekly market of high-quality carved wooden objects, embroidered shirts, woven rugs and leather shoes. Nearby

Verkhovyna (p148) has musical connections but is primarily worth visiting for its gorgeous location on a valley floor ringed by low-rise mountains. If you miss Kosiv's market, **Yaremcha** (p143) has souvenir markets open almost every day of the week. With two of the region's most outstanding restaurants, it's also the place to try the berries, cornmeal, forest mushrooms and river-fish dishes so central to Hutsul cuisine. One characteristic Hutsul town off the Golden Ring is **Rakhiv** (p149). On the lee side of the Carpathians' Chornohora ridge, it hosts a 'Hutsul cheese' festival every September, while its **Museum of Forest Ecology** (p150) has informative, if slightly kitsch, dioramas recreating Hutsul customs and festivals.



On the Road



SARAH JOHNSTONE Coordinating Author

Ukrainian women love to pose for photos looking outrageously sultry and as if they're holding something in their hand – usually their husband or boyfriend. I couldn't keep a straight face trying to imitate them, especially before this plaque. It supposedly marks Europe's heart, but actually sits in 'Nowhere, Ukraine'.



GREG BLOOM The most surreal aspect of my visit to Chernobyl and the ghost town of Prypyat (pictured) was how my group would excitedly congregate around our guide and his furiously beeping Geiger counter every time he found a radiation 'hot spot'. Radiation as invisible tourist attraction? Only in Ukraine.

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