

Moscow – Kiev – Vienna - Helsinki (October 1996)

[Preface: During the time I was a software trainer for ESRI, I had the opportunity to travel to Moscow nine times to conduct classes. This story is about one of those trips in October of 1996.]

This trip began with a Delta Airlines flight to New York and on to Moscow. I was fortunate to be upgraded to business class where we were served a delicious dinner of grilled sea bass roasted in elephant garlic and parmesan cream sauce. The man seated next to me was from the “Nuclear Disarmament Commission” on a mission to inspect Russian nuclear stockpiles. (He didn’t talk much about the mission, for obvious reasons) For the dessert course we had a poached apple stuffed with glazed cranberry, prune, and hazelnuts – excellent! I was able to get a few hours sleep before we landed in Moscow early the next morning. The weather was beautiful, like our “Indian Summer” which the Russians call “Woman’s Summer”. Unfortunately, the immigration procedures were as slow and inefficient as ever with the entire 767 aircraft full of passengers waiting in line for **one** immigration officer! Eventually I passed through immigration and headed for customs clearance where there was a RED channel (for something to declare) and a GREEN channel (for nothing to declare). The RED channel had a very long line which never hinted at moving, while the GREEN channel had no line but looked like it was closed. I made a dash for the GREEN channel and walked quickly past three customs officers who didn’t bother even glancing at me! Upon exiting the customs area, I was able to avoid having to hire a porter who were the only ones with baggage carts and charging highly inflated prices for their services. The arrivals hall was a dark, depressing, and chaotic scene as I searched the crowd for a familiar face or at least someone holding a sign with my name on it, but to no avail. So, I parked myself and my luggage in the center of the huge hall and fended off a constant hustle of taxi drivers while I waited.

After about 20 minutes, Michael from “Glavnivc” (Russian Geological Institute) emerged from the crowd to greet me! Then we loaded my bags into his very old black Volvo and sped out of the airport onto the main northwest highway toward the city. As the old Volvo bounced, swayed, and shuddered down the highway weaving in and out of the typical chaotic traffic, we passed beautiful forests and fields changing into their brilliant fall colors of red and gold. The scene was such a nice contrast to the hot, brown, dusty land of southern California that I had left yesterday! After an hour or so, we finally arrived at Glavnivc and it was still looking the same as my last visit a year ago – grey, dull, and depressing despite the brilliant fall sunshine and the warm colors of the surrounding forest. To my pleasant surprise, I was shown to a different room than last year, one a bit larger and with a sofa, as well as two chairs of heavy wood covered in old Victorian fabric – almost antiques! It was a nice touch, though the rest of the room looked much the same as last year, and still no mirror!



Glavnivc Office



Apartment building – “Glavnivc Hotel”



My "hotel" room

After putting my bags away, Michael and I went to "dinner" at about 1:30pm (2:30am California time) in the Glavnivc cafeteria. As we entered, I was immediately struck by the brighter décor, a lot more green plants, and a brand-new glass wall separating the kitchen from the dining room. Even the old ladies in the kitchen had new dark green and white uniforms. All these changes, although very nice, failed to change the quality of the food, still basic meat and potatoes, or the attitude of the staff, surly and rude!

After "dinner", we had a short meeting with Boris, director of Glavnivc, and then I retired to my room to get some rest, but not before Svetlana helped me to buy some basic food items – sausage, cheese, bread, and tea, the same as last year! I also bought some beer at one of the local shops near the apartment building where I was staying. Boris had given me over 1 million Russian rubles as my "per diem", the equivalent of \$30 USD per day, even though I told him there was no way I could spend all of it. The currency exchange rate had stabilized at around 5400 rubles to a USD. Upon returning to my room, I fell asleep at about 5pm (6am California time) and woke up a few hours later to the sound of several car alarms going off – meaning nothing except for a major irritation! Later, I awoke again, this time from a beautiful dream of home while still aware of being in Moscow and thinking it was the next morning. Then I thought I heard someone say it was 11am and my first thought was that I had overslept. But as I finally came awake, I looked over at my travel clock and saw that it was almost 11am – at least in California, but in Moscow it was 10pm!

The next morning, I prepared some tea to go with my "breakfast" of sausage, cheese, and bread before meeting up with Boris to discuss the schedule of the training class. After everyone in the class was introduced, I gave my first lecture, and fortunately all of the students understood English just fine, although many of them had trouble with the "spelling" of English words since the Russian language uses the Cyrillic alphabet with characters that are quite different. For instance, "computer" is spelled компьютер but is pronounced the same way as in English! At the end of the day, Michael and I spent a couple of hours preparing the computers for the next day as we sat drinking large bottles of foul-tasting Russian beer! (brewing beer in Russia is not up to the same standard of excellence as the distilling of vodka!) Somehow, we managed to get the PC's ready for the next day's class. When I arrived back to my "hotel" room, I found an old Russian man in a dirty undershirt in my room making up the other bed! I had been assured by Boris that no one else would share the room, so I was very upset and felt my privacy had just been violated! I immediately made it obvious to the "hotel" manager that I was extremely unhappy with the situation and that I did not want a roommate! (I could tolerate the small space, sharing of the toilet, shower, and kitchen fridge – but **not** a total stranger sharing my bedroom, especially one who smoked! The old man may have been a nice guy but not as a roommate) Finally, after a phone call with Michael, she moved the old man to a different room, and all was back to normal, whatever that was. I spent the rest of the evening listening to a classical music radio station playing mostly Christmas music! I thought it quite unusual that I never heard a "commercial break" or even the voice of an announcer – it was a very relaxing evening.

The next morning it was once again "breakfast" as usual before the training class, followed by lunch of some kind of "mystery" meat, potatoes, cabbage, and a bowl of borscht in the Glavnivc cafeteria. (the

lunch menu rarely varied with the exception of a different vegetable; however, the borscht was always excellent and something I looked forward to) After the class, I walked over to the neighborhood shopping area and bought five cans of Tuborg beer from one of the many small kiosks, all of which sold the very same things for exactly the very same prices! I surmised that the business success of each kiosk was totally dependent upon customer loyalty! My shopping trip was mostly a process of me pointing at what I wanted to buy and handing over a bunch of rubles to an old lady behind the counter, then having her return some rubles to me since there were very few prices marked anywhere. And of course, there was an attempt at communication during the transaction, mostly her rambling on in Russian and me saying “spaceeba”, which means thank you! (I honestly think that she really thought I understood every word she said!)

After my shopping trip, I took a long walk through the park adjacent to the main road and took photos of the gorgeous fall colors as families were out walking with their children and dogs. There was a real feeling of a “neighborhood” and I had to wonder how many people I passed realized I was a visitor?



Neighborhood park



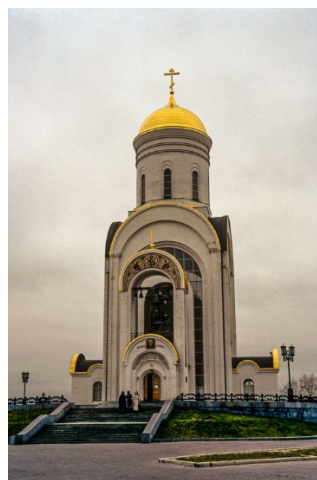
Local shops

Upon returning to my room, I fixed my usual evening meal of bread, cheese, and sausage, which would become the same every evening! Later, I had a cold beer from those I had stored in the community fridge as I listened to the radio.

The next day was a day off from the training class, so Michael, Nina, and I visited a new military monument established to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the end of WWII. It was a massive design typical of the old Soviet era. Nearby was a beautiful new church designed in the style of earlier centuries, but with lots of windows that made it very bright inside – a strong contrast to the normally dark environment of old churches. Later we visited the enormous campus of the University of Moscow situated high above the Moscow River. On the campus was a beautiful old church among a forest of trees clad in their finest fall colors.



WWII Memorial



New Russian Orthodox church

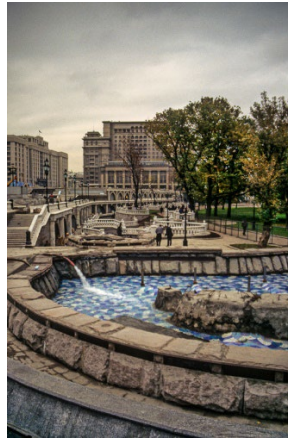


New Arbat Street



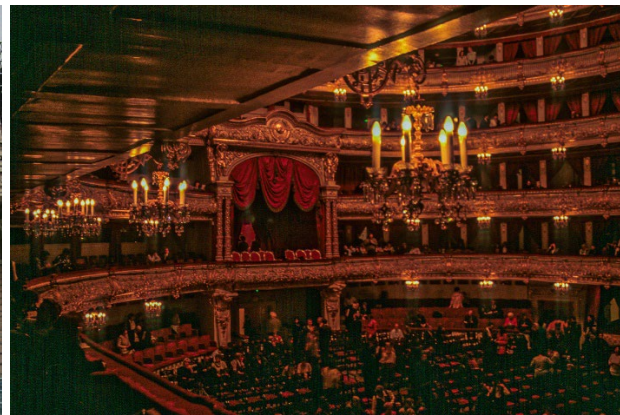
Musicians in front of McDonald's

Upon returning to the city center, we walked along “New Arbat Street” where there were lots of new outdoor cafes and bars, as well as many street artists displaying their work. From New Arbat Street, we walked along the south side of the massive Kremlin wall and past a series of new lovely fountains and pools that had been constructed earlier that summer. It felt very nice to be out and about in the lovely afternoon weather.



New fountains and pools

That evening, Michael and Nina invited me to join them for a performance of the classic Italian opera “Tosca” at the famous “Bolshoi Theater”. We had great seats in a second level box right next to the Royal Box! The entire theater was designed to be the most opulent in appearance and remains one of the most beautiful and elaborate in the world. It was a full house that night and the performance was thrilling - it almost felt like the Czar himself was there that night!



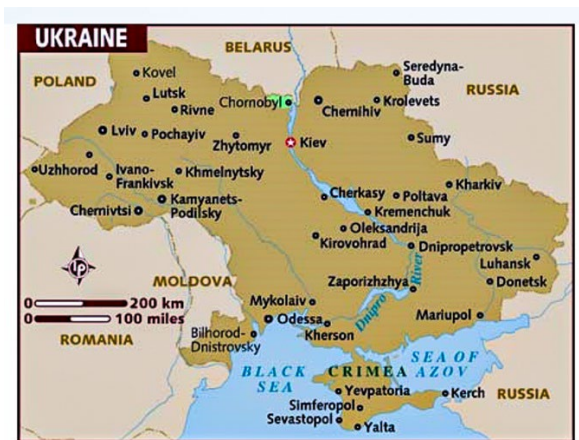
Bolshoi Theatre



Russian Orthodox churches in the Kremlin

Finally, the day came when we celebrated the successful end of the training class, and to my surprise, Boris had planned a party for us in his conference room after the class. In the tradition of legendary Russian hospitality, the table was filled to overflowing with an amazing assortment of delicious foods, as well as many bottles of vodka! I joined Michael, Nina, Boris, and the students for the celebration. It was a very fun and enjoyable evening, but then there came a time when both the vodka and the effect of jet lag overcame me, and it took all my effort to walk (aka stumble) across the street to my “hotel” room! It was a remarkable, lovely, and memorable night that fully captured the “soul” of Russia! (and I survived it)

The next morning, I was up at 5:00 am for the Glavnivc driver to take me to the old Vnukovo Airport south of Moscow, where I had to wait for over an hour before being allowed to check in for the flight to Kiev. (I could certainly have used another hour in bed) The old Soviet era airport was a very dark, cold, and depressing place, which didn’t surprise me! But luckily, I was traveling in Business Class on the new Russian airline “TransAero”, so I was able to take advantage of waiting in their new Business Class lounge – a world away from the drab airport departure hall. At last, the Kiev flight was called for boarding, but rather than proceeding to a gate, we were led (more like “herded”) onto an old WWII Soviet army truck! After 10 minutes or so, the truck pulled up beside a new Boeing 737 aircraft, and soon I was able to relax in my business class seat with a cold gin and tonic. My seatmate was a young American woman who had lived in Fairbanks, Alaska for seven years, so we had a lot in common to talk about. She also spoke fluent Russian and helped me read the choices for breakfast – a turkey sandwich or an omelet.



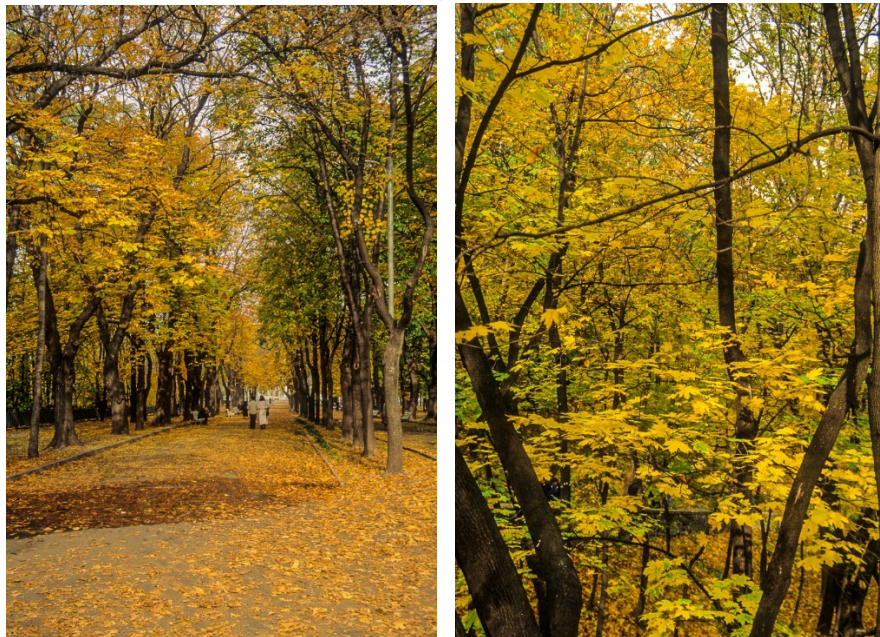
An hour and a half later we landed in Kiev, and Evgeny, our Ukrainian Esri representative met me at the airport. He drove me to the “hotel”, which was actually more like “student housing”, and it came with no heat and no hot water! As soon as I entered the room, I knew it would become a serious problem – I could

tolerate a cold room, but not a cold shower! I spent the rest of the day exploring the city on foot. There were countless old Orthodox churches, each with beautiful, onion-shaped domes gilded in brilliant gold.



Lavra Church and Monastery

As I came to one of the largest churches, I stopped to observe the very traditional service, where everyone stood throughout the entire liturgy. Later, I came to the “Golden Gate”, part of the ancient wall that once surrounded the old city. As I walked down one of the old, narrow, winding streets, I passed a multitude of musicians and artists. Just then, I spotted a little sidewalk café and stopped in for a delicious Apel Strudel and a cup of espresso. Further along the street, I came to a very interesting “underground” bar that had several small, dark wooden booths along a single, long narrow corridor. The German beer was great, but what I remembered most of all, was the one and only toilet. It was located inside a small, narrow “closet” under the stairs, and at the top of a series of steps – functional, but very weird! (Most of the public toilets I saw were of the Gallic type – basically nothing more than a hole in the floor, and almost always gross and disgusting!) In beautiful contrast were the brilliant autumn colors of the trees that lined the banks of the Dnieper River. Later, I walked through a lovely riverfront park and stopped for dinner at a cozy outdoor café, where the traditional borscht and dark bread were superb.



Riverfront park

That evening, I joined Evgeny and Andrei to watch a ballet competition at the historic “Taras Schevchenko Theatre”. It was a gorgeous 18th century opera house, but I was a bit nervous when Evgeny “sneaked” us in

through a backstage door! However, the performances of the young ballet students were amazing, and we had a very enjoyable evening.

The next day, we went to Evgeny's office at ECOMM, located in one of the old buildings of the State Geology Centre. To say the building was in bad shape would be a gross understatement – no electricity to power the elevators (we had to climb five flights of stairs), no water above the third floor, and more gross, disgusting toilets! In fact, the toilets were particularly weird – being standard sit-down toilets, but “sunken” into the concrete floor so that the toilet seat was “level” with the floor! It was pretty obvious that one was required to “squat” on the seat in order to use the toilet! The old offices were cramped, drab, and dreary – the hallways choked with heavy cigarette smoke. And if that wasn't enough, there was no heat. (the Geology Centre had not been able to pay their utility bill for several months!) To make matters even worse, the noise from jackhammers on the floor above almost drowned out normal conversation. Thankfully, my time in the ECOMM office lasted only a couple of hours. Later in the afternoon, I was moved to a different “hotel”, where I was promised hot water, but still no heat! I was told that the central heating system for all buildings in the city was “scheduled” to be turned on October 15, regardless of the weather. I was shown to a large apartment that had two bedrooms, sitting room, bathroom, and kitchen – spacious, but sparsely furnished. As it turned out, this “hotel” was part of the Academy of Science, where visiting scientists and academics stayed.

When lunchtime rolled around, we all went to a small restaurant next door. As I entered the place, I noticed it was once again decorated in the classic old Soviet style of dull brown and faded red, with the windows covered by heavy curtains – a very dark and depressing atmosphere, with the one exception being a couple of bright, multi-colored panels of beautifully painted Ukrainian wildflowers. They were a welcome breath of fresh air amid the stagnant surroundings! Sadly, the food was as mediocre as the restaurant, with half-cooked chicken and soggy, greasy potatoes. The only ray of sunshine during the meal was a bowl of traditional Ukrainian borscht, which was excellent. Meanwhile, a huge Great Dane stood in the doorway eyeing our table, and I would have gladly given my plate to him! After a couple more hours of work at the ECOMM office, Evgeny took me grocery shopping so that I would have something to fix for breakfast in the morning, as well as some beer for the evening. The new supermarket was much the same as one might find at home, with the exception that it included a full bar and currency exchange – but it had run out of beer! So Evgeny stopped at a local street vendor and filled a large plastic bag with a dozen bottles of Ukrainian beer, of which three of them leaked. So, by the time I reached the hotel and entered the elevator, beer was dripping steadily from the plastic bag! That evening, I decided to take a hot shower before heading to bed, just in case the hot water disappeared by morning. My evening entertainment was provided by an old color TV, with an antenna that consisted of a six-foot section of electrical wire. I spent over half an hour “repositioning” the wire, searching for the right location to get the best reception. Ironically, the huge central radio/TV tower was only a stone's throw from my room! (maybe that was the problem!)

The following day, I gave a technical presentation at the second annual Ukrainian GIS Conference, which was held in an old Soviet era trade institute in an eastern suburb of Kiev. Among my observations during the conference:

- Still no heat in the building
- Presenters seated at the head table were constantly coming and going on and off the stage
- Very old lecture hall with incredibly uncomfortable seats (most likely designed to keep people awake)
- Almost all the presentations had no visual aids or at best, just a few poorly designed overhead slides which were mostly unreadable (only one other presenter besides me used a computer and video projector)

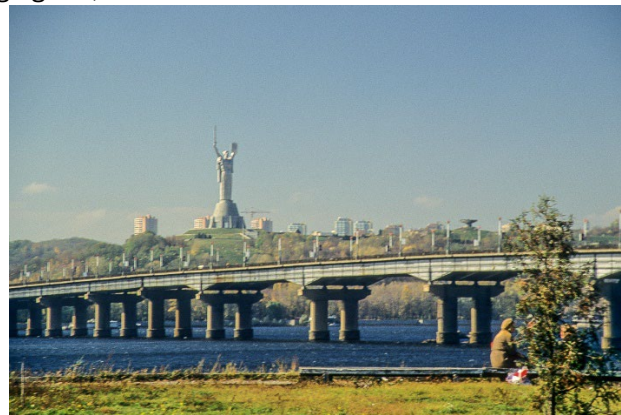
- Most of the presenters just “droned” on and on about various computer system configurations – without even a hint of a system diagram, only reading names of hardware and software components, as if they expected us to “imagine” how they all worked as a system!



Trade Institute

At one of the breaks, I met a lady from Data+, our Russian office in Moscow, who had traveled by overnight train to attend the conference. Later, lunch was served in a high school cafeteria on the other side of a busy 4-lane expressway. Rather than use the pedestrian underpass 50 meters away, 300 people dashed across the highway, narrowly missing being hit by the heavy traffic! (I chose to use the underpass) The meal was typical of what I had experienced in Russia – boiled cabbage and beets, boiled potatoes with carrots, heavy black bread, borscht (the best part of the lunch), and some “mystery meat” that looked a bit like Swiss steak. And just as in Moscow, there were no knives, just some flimsy aluminum alloy forks and spoons, neither of which could begin to cut the mystery meat! After lunch, we all returned to the lecture hall, most of them dashing across the busy highway again. As I sat in the cold, dreary hall, listening to another “drone”, I longed to be outside in the beautiful, sunny, warm Indian Summer – the golden yellow and brilliant orange trees softly dropping their leaves to the ground with the slightest breeze. At the same time, I don’t think anyone was listening to the speaker, not even the speaker himself! Soon my thoughts turned to how much I was looking forward to going to Vienna at the end of the week – sort of like “decompressing” from the “challenges” of Eastern Europe, much like the feeling I always had whenever I arrived in Hong Kong after spending two or three weeks in China.

At last, the first day of the conference concluded, and Evgeny took me for a walk in a park on a hill overlooking the Dnieper River, where there was a huge grey metal statue dedicated to the veterans of WWII. At the base of the monument was a large collection of old military equipment from the 1930’s and 40’s, including a massive old railroad tank that had two huge guns, one at each end.



WWII War Memorial



Dnieper River Valley

From the top of the hill was a gorgeous view of the river valley, with a beautiful sunset reflected off the golden dome of an old Orthodox church across the river. Then Evgeny and I joined Andrei for dinner. After finding two restaurants closed, we ended up at the “Restaurant Dnieper” in old Kiev. We were seated in a classic dining room named the “Al a Carte Room”, and promptly served ice cold glasses of Ukrainian vodka. For dinner, Evgeny recommended “Chicken Kiev”, an original recipe of the restaurant. (breast of chicken, fileted and wrapped around a stuffing of wild mushrooms, exotic spices, and butter, then deep fried to a crispy outside, but soft and juicy inside – really fantastic!)

The following morning, the hot water came on at 6:30 am, so that by 7:00 am I had a nice hot shower, as the sun rose over the city. Ironically, as soon as I turned off the shower, the hot water suddenly disappeared, entirely – nothing but air came out of the faucet! Needless to say, I was very fortunate. For breakfast I fixed a typical Slavic meal of hot tea and small sandwiches of dry bread and sliced sausage. Later, after a morning conducting the training class, we had lunch at the “hotel” nearby where I had spent my first night. The food was simple, but very tasty. However, when Vladimir asked about the hot water situation, he was told it was still off, which made me glad that I had insisted upon changing hotels! After the training class, we drove back to the high school to attend the conference Gala Banquet. As we arrived, we found a huge room full of large tables filled with dishes of mystery meat, fish, fresh vegetables, fruit, and loaves of dark bread. And on the corner of each table were several bottles of mineral water, wine, and of course, Vodka. During the dinner, there were countless toasts of Vodka to everybody and everything. It seemed as though there was no excuse needed to propose a toast, other than the fact that there hadn’t been a toast within the past five minutes. As the evening progressed, Evgeny kept introducing me to people who needed support with software, but who had no money. Communication was very difficult, as Evgeny translated for me, trying his best to search for the right words from his limited vocabulary of English. I felt as if I was being “handled” the whole evening – very uncomfortable and exhausting! At one point, Evgeny introduced me to a large man who was a high-level government official. The man was very drunk from the large bottle of Vodka he carried with him. Then, all of a sudden, he lunged forward, gave me a huge bear hug, and planted a very wet “kiss” on my cheek! I was stunned and stood silent, not knowing what to do. (and Evgeny had no explanation either) But at last, the evening came to a close and we drove back to my hotel.

The next day, during the training class, workmen on the floor above us, spent most of the day pounding hammers on the concrete floor – not an ideal learning environment. Meanwhile, the weather had turned very gray and cold, with the threat of rain or snow at any time. If it hadn’t been for the beautiful golden leaves on the trees, it would have been very drab and depressing. That evening, we went to a very nice restaurant near Evgeny’s office. It was elegant, despite the heavy brown fixtures and classic “drab” Soviet era decor. There were very few people dining, but the food was great, especially the Bulgarian salad of fresh

diced tomatoes, cucumbers, and onions, topped with shredded goat cheese and black olives. We finished dinner with a cup of strong Turkish coffee. When I got up the next morning at 7:00 am, I discovered there was no hot water, so I went back to bed, and a half hour later, the hot water returned – thankfully. Later in the day, Evgeny accompanied me to the “City Architecture Office” for a meeting with the department head, and it turned into a long, difficult conversation, again due to Evgeny’s limited English vocabulary. The lack of heat in the office didn’t help the situation either. After the meeting, we walked to a nearby metro station, and descended into what seemed like the “bowels of hell” – by an incredibly long escalator into a very deep subway. The metro station was beautiful, much like the classic Stalinist metro stations in Moscow. The journey on the metro took us to a lovely park on a large island in the middle of the Dnieper River. When we arrived, a wedding party was having their photos taken beside the eternal flame honoring the veterans of WWII. The bride’s sparkling white dress shined brilliantly against the background of golden leaves on the trees and deep red shrubs surrounding them.

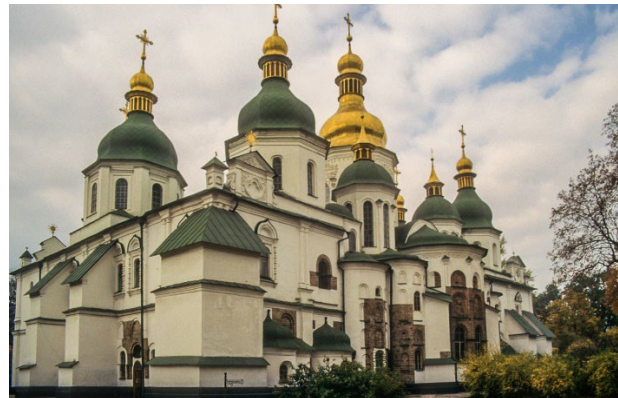
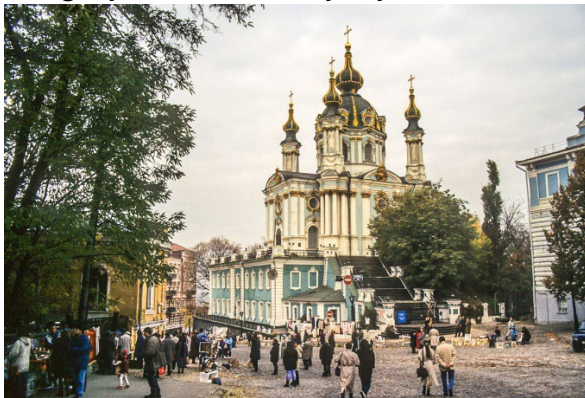


Watching the wedding party in the park



Evgeny

We walked through the park and across a wooden bridge to an old part of the city, where an ancient stone wall surrounded the church and monastery of Lavra. As we entered the main gatehouse, there were ancient paintings of many old Saints, with their heads surrounded by halos of gold, hanging on the walls. The old church had been bombed during WWII and left in its state of destruction as a war memorial. The ancient treasures of the church, which had been confiscated by the Soviet state, were now on display in a new museum next to the church. The domes of the church and monastery were gilded in gold, which shined brightly even on a cloudy day.





Lavra Church and Monastery

We continued down a steep old street paved with huge blocks of stone, worn smoothly by people and carts over the course of a thousand years. Eventually we came to an old iron gate and the entrance to the catacombs (caves) beneath the church, but they were closed for the day. However, Evgeny said he would try to see if they could be opened for an important foreign guest like me! So, we entered the “Church Relations Office” and enquired. We were delighted when a nice young monk volunteered to guide us on a special tour of the caves. We followed him along the stone path, through a vineyard, to the entrance, where we were both handed a small candle. Then we proceeded down some steep, narrow steps into the ghostly darkness of the caves. It was difficult to see much of anything, since our candles were almost going out many times, due to the wind. The dark narrow passageway became very eerie as our candles flickered, throwing strange shadows on the walls and ceiling. Soon we came upon several ancient wooden caskets with the remains of saints dating to the 10th and 11th centuries. The tops of the caskets were covered with glass, revealing the mummified bodies of the saints, dressed in elaborate robes made of gold thread. On several occasions, the young monk stopped to kiss the glass to honor a particular saint. The dark, narrow passageway began to make me feel a bit nervous and claustrophobic! Some of the saints were actually buried into the wall, with a glass window for viewing them.

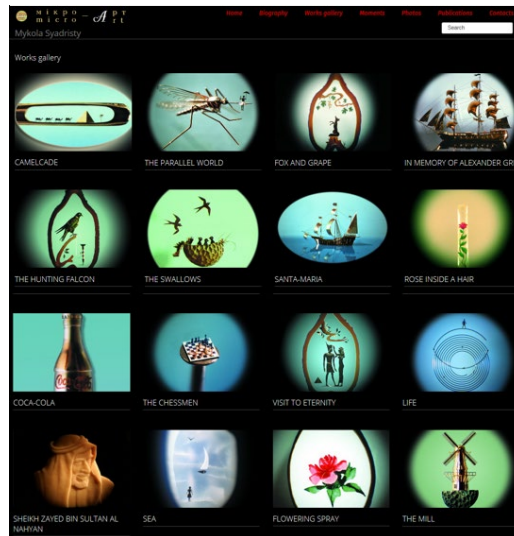
Meanwhile, our young guide kept telling us stories about the saints as we walked past them, but after the first 10 or 12, I lost track, since all their stories seemed pretty much the same. However, I’m sure to the faithful, each saint represented a unique position in history and honor in the church. Near the end of our tour, we came upon three small chapels, carved deep in the caves, dating back to the 10th century. Just beyond was a very small room carved out of the rock, once the residence of Saint Anthony, the first monk to establish the Greek Orthodox church in Ukraine. Nearby was another very small room carved into the wall where a saint had himself “entombed” to await his death – weird! (there was no evidence of just how long he had to wait) As we made our way to the exit, we passed a group of young priests dressed in black robes, engaged in prayers and meditation. Back up on the surface and into the world of the living, I felt as if I had just travelled back in time a thousand years – such an historic, yet macabre experience! And just as we were about to exit the catacombs, the electric lights suddenly came on, illuminating all of the dark passageways through which we had walked with only the faint light from our tiny candles! (so, the candles must have been for “special effects”)

Located near Lavra monastery was the “Mykola Syadrysty Microminiatures Museum”, which Evgeny described as an extraordinary display of miniature objects. I assumed there would be a lot of familiar things in small scale versions. But to my surprise, all the exhibits were so tiny they could only be viewed through a large magnifying glass – true “MicroArt”. Among the most impressive and unusual objects were:

- A complete chess set carved on the head of a pin
- A rose flower carved inside a human hair
- A set of golden shoes on the feet of a flea

- A working clock inside the eye of a dragonfly
- The entire score of an opera, written on the face of a pear seed
- The world's smallest working electric motor
- A 4-masted sailing ship, the size of a pencil point, made of gold

To say this exhibition was one of the wonders of the modern world would be an understatement – truly an amazing and fascinating museum!



From the museum, we walked back through the park to the metro station, and the scene was especially lovely, with a thick carpet of gold and red leaves rustling beneath our feet. Along the way, on our return to the hotel, Evgeny needed to call Vladimir, so he walked across the street to a bank of four old telephones, only one of which worked, but he didn't need to pay for the call – public phone calls in the city were free, as long as you could find one that worked! Later we met Vladimir and went upstairs to the “Salyut Restaurant”, where we began dinner by sampling three different kinds of Ukrainian vodka. After a fabulous meal of authentic Chicken Kiev, Evgeny invited us to his house in the woods, 20 miles outside the city, for some cognac and to meet his girlfriend, Natasha. She greeted us dressed in her bathrobe! It was pretty obvious she wasn't expecting us. We got to see Evgeny's young German Shepherd and her nine two-week old puppies – beautiful! After many toasts of Cognac from Crimea, Vladimir drove me back to the city.

The next day, Evgeny and Vladimir took me to the “Pirogovo Open-Air Museum” on the outskirts of the city, where there were many old, historic wooden buildings of all shapes and sizes from several regions of Ukraine. In addition to the beautiful old buildings were several classic old wooden windmills. The origin of a few of the oldest wooden structures could be traced back hundreds of years to people from the Carpathian Mountains, who shared a common history with ancient Greece and Troy.



Pirogovo Open-Air Museum

As we were leaving the Open-Air Museum, we soon found ourselves following a large group of people, and it wasn't long before we discovered that we had inadvertently become part of a wedding ceremony! Just then, as we were about to excuse ourselves, an old woman said, "never mind, join us anyway!"

The next morning, the weather turned very cloudy and damp, so I felt very fortunate to have had beautiful sunshine for my photos the day before. As I went down to the hotel restaurant for a delicious breakfast of cheese blintzes, I noticed that much of the hotel space had been leased to private businesses, one of which was the "Ukraine-American Law Company"! After breakfast, Evgeny met me with his driver Yuri, for the drive to a meeting at the "Ministry of Civil Defense" and a tour of their training centre. As we drove through the center of Kiev, I couldn't help but notice that Yuri "draped" the seat belt across his lap "unfastened", in order to appear to the police that he was obeying the law – never mind the aspect of safety!

After enduring a long, tedious meeting with the Director of the training centre, we were taken on a tour of the facility. The whole place resembled a “museum”, with scale models of everything from a sugar mill to a bomb shelter, and even a pig farm. Most of the displays had lighted panels that demonstrated various processes, like water purification and electrical power generation. Throughout the massive facility were large rooms of old, outdated 1950’s analog technology for “monitoring” disasters – but curiously, there were no computers anywhere to be seen! Near the end of the tour, we were shown an extensive 3-D model of a typical town, before and after a nuclear bomb blast – complete with flickering lights and fires, for both daylight and nighttime simulations. As we left the training centre, my impression was that of an outdated facility, better “re-purposed” as a public museum, with an admission fee. At least that would help pay for the heat! In stark contrast to the Ministry of Civil Defense was our next destination, the offices of the “Ministry of Emergencies”. There we found a large, new building of fine Italian marble and exotic Asian hardwoods, nothing like the drab old Soviet style at the Ministry of Civil defense. It even had a huge new \$70,000 state-of-the-art video projection system. Judging by the names of the two ministries, it begged the question, “does an emergency not call for the actions of civil defense”? But it seemed clear that emergencies were far better supported financially than civil defense preparation. Evgeny had also arranged a spur of the moment meeting with the Minister, and as soon as we entered his palatial office, he offered us glasses of French brandy, another obvious difference between “emergencies” and “civil defense”! Thankfully, the meeting was a short one, and we were soon on our way to dinner at the “Dniepro Hotel Restaurant”. We were warmly greeted and shown to a very nice, huge buffet of many traditional Ukrainian dishes, including the ever-famous Chicken Kiev. The restaurant was very busy, mostly with foreigners who could afford the price of 48 Grynna (about \$25.00), which was very expensive for Ukrainians. But the dinner was a hundred times better than anything at the “Hotel Ukraine” where I was staying – thanks very much Evgeny!

At last, the day came that promised a return to more comfortable surroundings – my flight to Vienna. Evgeny and Vladimir picked me up at 10:00 am, each with a gift of Cognac from Crimea. Then we drove downtown for breakfast at the “Nika Restaurant” (Hikā in Russian). It was a very nice little café with white marble topped tables and bright, cheery colors – obviously a new place, in stark contrast to the surrounding drab neighborhood. The menu had some unusual items, including “flabby eggs with omelet” and “roasn beef”. I speculated that the eggs must be scrambled, but I had no idea about the beef. I chose fried eggs Turkish style that were served with diced fresh peppers and onions – delicious! As we sat in the restaurant, Evgeny kept dashing outside and around the corner to check on my luggage in his car, to make sure the bags were still there. (which begged the question of whether his car was locked or not?) After breakfast, on the way to the airport, we made a short stop at Lavra monastery so I could take a few more photos of the gold domes glittering in the bright sunshine and surrounded by a forest of red and gold – stunning!

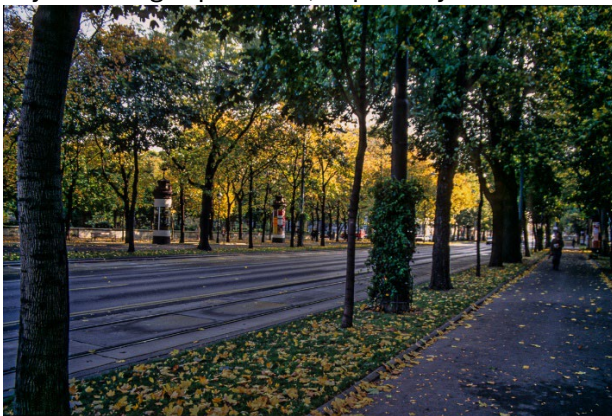
At the airport, I said a fond farewell to Evgeny and Vladimir, with heartfelt thanks for their generous hospitality. Passing through immigration and customs, I checked in for my flight to Vienna and then proceeded to the departure hall. Unfortunately, there was no Business Class lounge, so I occupied my time shopping and found a couple of handmade lacquer boxes painted with lovely scenes of old Kiev, as well as a traditional icon painting of the Virgin Mary. After shopping, I spotted the “Irish Bar”, sat down, ordered a cold beer, and prepared to bring my travel notes up to date. When the pint of beer arrived, I was informed that only US dollars or German Deutschmarks were accepted as payment! Suddenly, that left me with 80 Grynna in local currency, as well as 600,000 Russian Rubles, both of which were totally worthless outside of Ukraine and Russia!

The flight to Vienna on Austrian Airlines was very nice, with a delicious lunch of veal scallopini served as well. My seatmate was an American businessman who had the very latest mobile phone, with many of the features that we take for granted today in our smartphones, including wireless access to the internet. It was quite a large device and had a very expensive price tag, but it was the latest technology available at the

time. Looking back, it would most likely reside in a museum today! I arrived in Vienna to find cold, cloudy weather, a sure sign of approaching winter. I took the train into the city and walked to the Hotel Sofitel Belvedere, a small historic hotel on a quiet street near the “Stadtspark” (city park). For dinner that evening, I walked to the “Railway Pub” to have the world’s best Wiener Schnitzel and a cold stein of local Gösser beer. As I savored the light, crispy schnitzel and cold beer, I reflected upon the unique and challenging experience I had in Ukraine. With the recent fall of the Soviet Union, I was confident that things would soon improve for Ukraine, especially given the warm hospitality of the people, and I looked forward to another trip to Ukraine.

[How the world has changed dramatically since my visit to Kiev. The fate of Ukraine and its people hang in a delicate balance between NATO and Russia! Senseless violence, desperate people, and no immediate solution in sight. In the meantime, millions of Ukrainians must endure the very “depths of Hell”! Let us pray for peace and the end to the war! And at the same time, I also wish my Russian friends a swift end to the insane reality they must also endure!]

After a great breakfast in the hotel the next morning, I had a couple of hours to walk around Vienna before I needed to return to the airport, so with camera in hand I walked down the “Operaring Strasse”, a wide, tree-lined boulevard with some of the city’s most exclusive hotels. Then the sun began to peek through the heavy, gray clouds and bathed the trees in warm sunshine as they were in the early stage of changing color, since autumn in Vienna was at least 2 or 3 weeks behind Kiev. During my walk I came upon an unusual and disturbing work of art in the center of a small square on the way to the “Hofburg Palace”. It was a set of three stone sculptures carved into grotesque bodies in obvious anguish and pain. As I read the sign posted nearby, I understood it was a memorial to all those people who perished in the Mauthausen Nazi Concentration Camp during WWII, one of the largest in Austria. The sight of the sculptures was definitely a moving experience, especially when I read the story about the victims of the Nazi occupation.

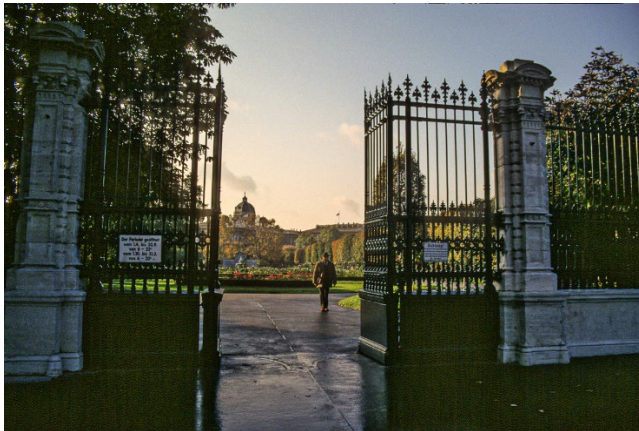


“Operaring Strasse”



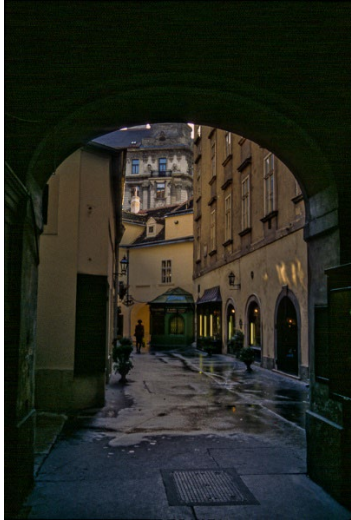
Stone sculptures

By now the sun was shining brightly among huge puffy white clouds. I passed a large building with huge statues on top of its roof – two of them holding large golden globes of earth, glittering in the sun. I felt it must have been a beautiful tribute to something of which I was unaware. I walked on through some narrow cobblestone streets to a large square where the main gate to the Hofburg Palace had stood for hundreds of years, built on the early foundations of the old city which were now excavated and on view for visitors. Meanwhile, horse drawn carriages with tourists passed through the tall arches of the gate and into the wide expanse of the inner courtyard of the palace. The dark green grass in the courtyard contrasted sharply with the bright white marble stone buildings. In the distance rose Norman style spires and Mansard roofs of many old, elegant buildings surrounding the courtyard. The trees and flowers in the adjacent “Volksgarten” (people’s garden) were lovely, especially the wide variety of roses in bloom.



Hofburg Palace and courtyard

After taking several photos, I walked to the “Rathaus” (city hall), an old French Renaissance style building on the edge of the park. From there I continued along the beautiful tree lined Operaring Strasse to “Karlsplatz” where there was a classic old metro station decorated in lovely green and gold trim. Finally, I returned to my hotel, picked up my bags, and boarded the shuttle bus to the airport. After checking in, I spent about an hour in the Austrian Airlines business class lounge catching up on the world news. It was a very nice 2-hour flight to Stockholm and then another hour to Helsinki. A delicious lunch of smoked salmon was served on the flight. On the way to Stockholm, there were very nice views of the beaches along the southern Baltic Sea coastline of Poland and the city of Gdansk. We also had a glimpse of the Carpathian Mountains covered in the first snow of winter.



Narrow cobblestone street



Karttsplatz Metro Station

We landed in Helsinki as night began to fall, with heavy gray clouds and chilly temperatures. (much like it would be in Anchorage at this time of year) Riitta, from the office of Meridien, the Esri distributor in Finland, met me at the airport and took me to their company apartment in Espoo, a suburb west of Helsinki. When I entered the apartment, I was surprised to see two other Esri employees also staying there, Duane and Earl. So now it had become the “Esri” apartment! After settling in, Illka, Director of Meridien, came by to take all of us to dinner in downtown Helsinki. On the way, we stopped at a small shop near the harbor to buy some food for later at the apartment. Then we walked along the main shopping street to a restaurant named “Raffaello” which was decorated in the classic style of northern Italy. As we entered the restaurant, we were immediately struck by the sight of American flags and colors of red, white, and blue everywhere! It turned out that it was “American Week” on the menu! (in an Italian restaurant in Finland – how strange!) However, Illka helped us order some traditional Finnish food, starting with fresh salmon roe on toast, followed by Reindeer filet roasted in wild cranberry sauce – it was absolutely delicious! Along with the meal we had a tall glass of “Karhu”, one of the best beers brewed in Finland. On the way back to Illka’s car, we walked past a shop selling “Johnson and Meyer’s” shoes, and in their display window were photos of Abraham Lincoln, John F. Kennedy, and Bill Clinton! Apparently, the company has made shoes for every American president since Millard Fillmore in 1850!

I spent most of the next day conducting a “Trainer Certification Seminar” for five Esri-Finland staff, all of whom appeared extremely “reserved” and almost unresponsive at times. Later I was told this was a basic character trait of all Finnish people! However, after a while, they began to loosen up and even managed to crack a smile or two in the afternoon! As a class, we went to lunch at a Chinese restaurant in the adjacent shopping center. It was a bit strange to hear the Chinese waiters speaking fluent Finnish, a very difficult language to master! Later at the apartment, I took 3 shirts to the nearby laundry, which was the first such opportunity I had since the beginning of my three-week trip. When I returned to the apartment at the end of the day, I was a bit shocked to find that the laundry would cost me about \$15 and my shirts wouldn’t be returned for 3 days! (at least they should be clean!) Then Earl and I decided to look for a place to have dinner and started to recon the nearby shopping center for available restaurants. Our first stop at the “Vintoria Pub” looked as if the dining room was full, but then we saw it was full of tables with couples playing cards, not having dinner! In fact, when we enquired at the bar, we were told they had no food available after 8pm. While it was a lovely old-style pub that would have been great for a beer, we were in search of more substantial sustenance. As we headed to another place, we entered the shopping mall and suddenly found ourselves in the middle of 50 youngsters doing the equivalent of a “rodeo” on skateboards! As we continued to walk, they skated past us at breakneck speed jumping obstacles such as plastic trash cans and benches! After passing a few fast-food places, we ended up at the local “Pizza Hut” where we had

some very nice lasagna and a cold Finnish beer named “Kukko”. As we walked back to the apartment after dinner, a chilly light rain began to fall, and winter felt like it was just around the next corner!

The next morning, I called Delta Airlines to see if I could get on that day’s flight to New York which would enable me to leave a day early, but no such luck! However, I was informed that I could get a confirmed business class seat on the same flight in two days’ time – so that’s what I decided to do. I spent the rest of the day cleaning up old email files on my computer and drafting plans for next year’s user conference. That evening, Duane, Earl, and I went back to the Chinese restaurant for dinner and shared some of our travel experiences over a couple of beers. Then after dinner, back in the apartment, we watched a bit of the World Series on TV before retiring for the night.

I completed the Trainer Certification Seminar the next day, and afterwards we all went to lunch at a local Finnish restaurant where I enjoyed a delicious fresh roasted salmon. Later that evening, Kari invited me to his home for dinner where I met up again with his wife and two daughters whom I first met in Cairo several years earlier. (Kari and I had worked on a UN project in Egypt at that time) We shared a wonderful dinner of fresh baked salmon and roasted garlic potatoes. For dessert, Kari’s wife served us a very special treat – wild cloudberries, freshly picked from Lapland in the far north of Finland. They were delicate and delicious! After dinner, we sat around the kitchen table and talked about many personal and family experiences that not many people would probably share. That’s when I found it was most out of character with the “public” image of the Finns! It was a very warm and special evening with Kari and his family.

On my last day in Helsinki, I decided to take the city bus into the center of town to the old harbor area. The day started out very cloudy and cold, as usual. As I walked around the harbor, I passed an area of classic “turn of the century” Russian Imperial style buildings surrounding a large open square. Earlier, Kari had told me that this place had been used many times to film “Russian” locations for movies like “Gorky Park”, before the breakup of the Soviet Union! It looked identical to places I had seen in St Petersburg on a previous trip to Russia in 1994. Then I walked down to the old harbor where I encountered the daily “farmer’s market” with many stalls selling fresh vegetables, fruit, and seafood.



Russian Imperial style buildings



Outdoor “Farmer’s Market” at the harbor

From the outdoor market I continued along the waterfront past many beautiful old red brick buildings. On the hill above the harbor was a large Russian Orthodox church built of gorgeous red brick and topped with traditional onion-shaped domes! Even under the heavy gray skies, they shone brightly! Then I walked over to the huge ferry terminal where ships departed daily for Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Estonia, and Russia. Inside the ferry terminal building, I saw a large souvenir shop with Reindeer pelts and racks of antlers piled high outside! Looking at the size of the pelts and antlers, I had trouble imagining how tourists would be able to take them home as “hand luggage”! They were definitely items that would need to be shipped.

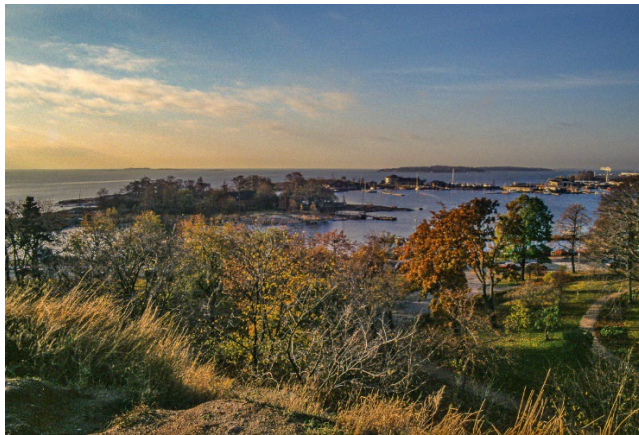


Ferry Terminal

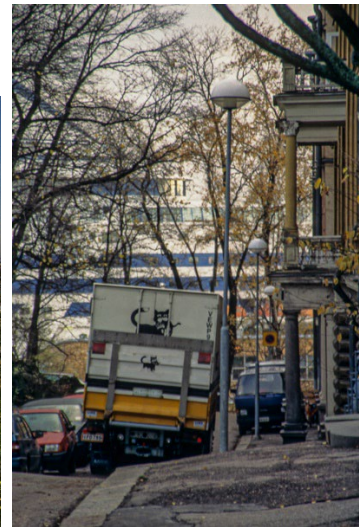


Old Russian church

From the ferry terminal, I walked along some old, narrow cobblestone streets past many old red brick warehouses of Victorian style which had been converted into a boutique hotel, a couple of upscale restaurants, and a few shops. I continued on around the harbor to a beautiful park on a small hill where the trees were turning a lovely golden color, and the grounds were carpeted with soft yellow and red leaves. I left the park and walked down the hill through an old neighborhood when I saw a truck pulling up beside an old building. The logo on the back of the truck was rather unusual, the silhouette of a mother cat carrying a kitten gently by its neck, and as I suspected, it was a moving company! (how clever was that!) Not far away was another lovely park near the edge of the water with a path through a small forest of trees cloaked in their finest colorful foliage. Beyond that I came to another small hill with large granite boulders from which I could gaze upon the full extent of the harbor with a myriad of small islands. As I stood on top of the hill, the sun suddenly burst from behind the heavy dark clouds, and the scene was quickly transformed from winter into spring.



View of the harbor from the hill



The “moving company” truck

The landscape seemed to come alive as the sea reflected thousands of beams of bright sunshine! It was the first time I had really seen the sun in Helsinki. I looked out upon scores of small islands scattered throughout the harbor and remembered that Illka had said Helsinki was built on a large number of small islands that were eventually connected by landfills and bridges to form the center of the city, much like that of the city of Stockholm. As the day went on, I walked to the Central Railway Station, a grand old building from the 1800’s and through the outdoor market again, taking photos of old Victorian buildings and beautiful parks now brightly illuminated by the warm sunshine. The character of the city seemed to change slowly, as if a heavy weight was gradually being lifted by the sun!



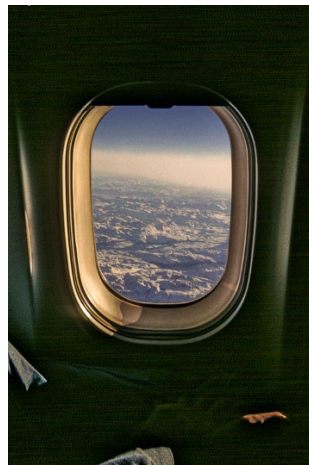
Helsinki harbor



Russian restaurant

On my way back to the apartment, I stopped at the shopping center in Tapiola where I picked up my laundry. At the apartment, Duane and I packed our bags and dragged them over to the Esri Finland office next door, where my students insisted upon having a photo with us as they gave me a beautifully wrapped gift. (it was so unexpected) Then the company car took us to the airport where I checked in quickly, since I was traveling in business class, but unfortunately, Duane got stuck in a long line for the overbooked flight to New York. After passing through Immigration, I spent a half hour relaxing in the Finnair Business Class Lounge that had a self-service tap of local Lapin beer. As I entered the men's toilet, I was surprised to see an iron and board against the wall! (a new experience) Once the flight was announced for departure, I settled into a comfortable business class seat, while Duane was stuck in the next to last row in coach! (the coach section was packed and looked like a real "zoo" – I felt sorry for Duane)

The food and wine aboard the Finnair flight to New York JFK airport was superb! At one point during the flight, we had a brief, but spectacular view of Iceland and Greenland.



View of Greenland

The eight and half hour flight was very pleasant, and upon arrival in New York we had a clear view of the stunning skyline of Manhattan, the Twin Trade Towers, Statue of Liberty, and the Verrazano Narrows Bridge! The Delta Airlines terminal at JFK was very crowded and I failed to get an upgrade to first class on the flight to Salt Lake City, but coach was pleasant, and I got a couple of free beers because the only US money I had was a \$100 bill! Everything was delayed on leaving New York, being a Friday evening, and the connecting flight in Salt Lake City was late as well. Unfortunately, the Crown Room in Salt Lake City airport was undergoing repairs, but "Squatter's Brewery and Pub" made up for it. Finally, we arrived at Ontario airport, and I was home again after almost a month of travel. It felt great to be home and to be welcomed by Leslie and my Siamese cat Magellan! Despite the long trip, I had some wonderful memories of Russia, Ukraine, Austria, and Finland to share with my friends and family.

PHOTO GALLERY



Moscow University



Celebration – 850th Anniversary of Moscow



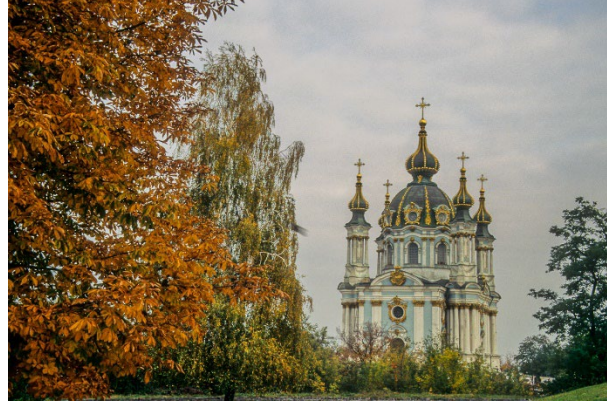
Central Place of Kiev



View overlooking Kiev



Lavra Monastery



Russian Orthodox Church



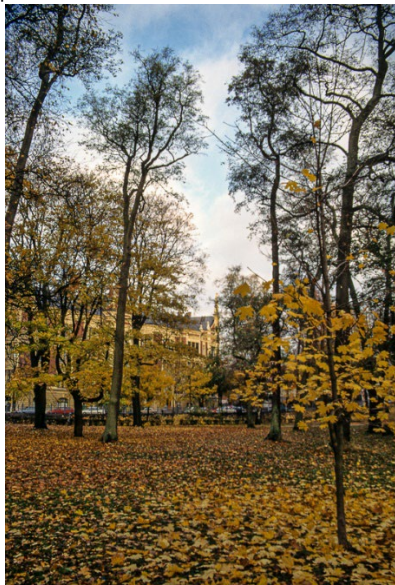
Fall colors in Kiev



Central Town Square – Helsinki



Old warehouse now a boutique hotel - Helsinki



Fall colors in Helsinki Park



Main Street in Helsinki

Travel Map (October 7 – 24, 1996)

