After a very long and difficult academic year, summer 2013 could not have started any better. I finished my papers, drove to my dad’s that same night, and was on my flight from Chicago to Warsaw the next morning. From there, I had a long train ride to Kiev waiting for me. With a fair amount of hand movements and confusion, I was able to buy my ticket right on the platform and was soon on my way for a summer in Eastern Europe.

I spent my first month in Ukraine with frequent trips to the grocery store and lots of time at home because of the rain. Since I was staying with somebody, this ended up to be the best way to see what Ukrainians live like on a daily basis. My first meal was homemade meat dumplings called pelmeni. Delicious! My second meal was luckily also homemade pelmeni, but this time it was from a new batch that I helped make. Although the first batch was decidedly better, I know now that all I need is a little practice with shaping the dumplings and adding the right amount of butter and sour cream. Then, I can almost pass for a real Ukrainian.

Since this wasn’t my first time in Kiev, I enjoyed the small things that make it so special even more: the old men and women selling their strawberries on the street corners and the various markets with everything from slippers to fake Chinese iPhones to big 3 liter jars for pickles. Now I can truly say that I feel at home in the city.

From Kiev, I traveled around Ukraine a bit. By far the biggest event for me, however, was my first trip to Russia. Having met some Russian friends in Champaign, it was a perfect opportunity to visit them in the summer, especially since they had plenty of time for visitors during the white nights. We took advantage of the increase in daylight by walking around as tourists and visiting churches, museums, and palaces. Once the sun went down around 2 a.m., we were finally able to watch the bridge opening ceremonies and get some sleep. Of course, the sun was up again at 4 a.m., making sure we wouldn’t miss anything. After taking a night bus to Moscow, we finally arrived to Liza’s family. The sheer size of Moscow, of the different monuments and buildings, put me in shock. Having read The Master and Margarita, a lifetime dream of mine was to see Red Square. It was very exciting to stroll around Patriarch’s Pond and to come across the sign saying “Never talk to strangers!” We did it regardless. But luckily, there was no giant talking cat anywhere near.

From Moscow, we returned to Kiev, and the next day, I was on my way to Lublin (Poland) for my FLAS Polish classes. I spent seven weeks there traveling to a few cities nearby. Although this second half of summer was less adventurous because I spent the majority of my time studying, my ability to speak Polish greatly increased. The ten to twelve hour days at the university exhausted me. So, returning to the US, even if only a day before the new semester started, was a welcome change. Of course, now I miss Poland, Ukraine, and Russia. But these three places are definitely not gone forever.

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