Student Dispatch: A Note from Kiev

My love for Eastern Europe started in 2009 when I met some Polish friends in Vienna. They were my incentive to go back to Vienna in the summer of 2010. During that summer, I met a lot of friends from Kiev, Ukraine, and had to take a trip. I spent the next summer (2011) in Krakow, Poland, and when it came time to plan my summer for 2012, I had no idea where to start.

I had been spending some time in Germany teaching English, but my visa expired on June 30, 2012. Luckily, I had the great idea to book my flight home for July 30, a month too late. I knew it would lead me to something good, but just wasn’t sure what exactly it would be. I tried to organize a summer trip to Poland, but had to think of something new.

Then I suddenly knew where I was going to spend the best summer of my life. I ended up taking an English teaching course in Kiev, Ukraine. As it is not in the Schengen zone, it was a perfect setup to buy me some time in order to fly back home on July 30. This was my third time in Kiev, and definitely the best. I had been looking for an apartment for a few months, and finally found one the day before I left. When I arrived, I got my keys, threw my stuff into my room, and left to go meet some friends. I arrived during the last few days of the 2012 UEFA European Football Championship, and I didn’t want to miss any of the action.

I met my group of friends, and we went directly to the fan zone; what a crowd! I made it an early night because I had been traveling for a long time and needed some rest. Plus, the next day there was a free Elton John and Queen concert that we couldn’t miss. After going to the concert, my friends and I ended up walking to the river and staying there until the sunrise. This long session of talking, laughing, and making jokes was a perfect start to the long week of classes.

The classes were every day from 8 AM to 5 PM, in which we then had homework and preparation to do in the evening, but that didn’t stop me from meeting up with friends and classmates almost every day after class. We went swimming in the Dnipro River, ate sushi (a very popular dish in Kiev), took a stroll through the zoo and the various parks in the city, and checked out a skyscraper called Panorama, which had a great view of Kiev from the top balcony. Getting to know the workers at Pizza Celentano, where my classmates and I ate lunch every day, was a great way to practice and improve my Russian.

What made this trip great, was that I got to stay for a whole month. My first visit was three days, and my second was five days. This time I got a taste of what life is really like in Kiev. From not being able to find an apartment, to having no hot water for most of my time there, to seeing how different my Ukrainian teacher’s teaching style was from the standard US teaching style, to buying delicious fruits from women on the streets, I found I loved every minute of it. Now that I am back in the US, I really miss all of my friends, the great dairy products, beautiful
sights, and liveliness of the city. Even though I don't know when it will be, I am already looking forward to my next trip to Kiev; with my track record, it looks like it might last longer than a month.

Zachary Grotovsky is a 2011 summer graduate from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and a 2011 undergraduate FLAS fellow. Grotovsky studied to be a German teacher, earning a BA in German Studies. Growing up Grotovsky had some exposure to Polish when his grandma, who was originally from Poland always spoke Polish to her dogs. Grotovsky never really paid too much attention to this until he studied abroad in Austria, where he made some Polish friends. Now he is very glad to have one more reason to be closer to his grandma. Grotovsky spent the 2011-2012 academic year in Regensburg, Germany as a Fulbright English Teaching Assistant. Since completing his year in Germany, Grotovsky has returned to the University of Illinois to complete a MA in Germanic studies, and hopes to achieve a graduate minor in Eastern European studies. He is currently taking classes in both Russian and Polish to further his connections with Eastern Europe.