

A Ukrainian Summer: where to go, what to do...

An enriching summer at the National University of Kyiv Mohyla Academy

by Michael Jaskiw

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. – Around this time last spring I decided to enroll in the summer program at the National University of Kyiv Mohyla Academy. The program is designed for college and advanced high school students from outside of Ukraine. The first four weeks are spent in Kyiv, studying Ukrainian language, history and culture; an optional fifth week takes students on an extended field trip to another region of the country.

In preparation for my first trip to Ukraine, I found myself addressing multiple concerns, from the pedestrian to the existential. The first task was to assure my parents to their satisfaction, that the underlying logistics were solid. In this regard, the program's coordinators helpfully provided information about arrival, accommodations, etc.

However, some of my other concerns were weightier. – I had spoken Ukrainian from infancy, had attended "Ridna Shkola" (School of Ukrainian Studies) and was a member of Plast. Up to that point in my life, however, the expression of my Ukrainian identity had been largely confined to family circles and diaspora organizations. I had been introduced to the complicated and often tragic history of Ukraine, and had already formed a certain image of the country and its people.

As I grew older I became increasingly aware of differences between Ukraine as portrayed in family narratives and Ridna Shkola textbooks on the one hand and Ukraine as described in the general media on the other. My trip would provide a reality check. Would the language skills and information base I had acquired serve me well? Was I in for a pleasant surprise or a rude awakening?

My experience at Kyiv Mohyla gave me the opportunity to address these questions.

The summer program has two major strengths. The first and most obvious is location. Kyiv remains at the center of Ukrainian history, culture and political activity. No other city can provide visitors with a better sense of both the past and the potential future of Ukrainian society.

For the diaspora student making a first visit, the city holds many surprises. Kyiv is the seat of the Ukrainian federal government. As expected, all official messages – from signs to advertisements to announcements on the subway – are in Ukrainian. However, the language of most day-to-day activity in Kyiv is Russian. Indeed, a fluency limited to Ukrainian makes the diaspora visitor at times awkwardly conspicuous.

But this fact gave way to an even more surprising observation. An extended trip to Kyiv reveals that the popular characterization of Ukraine as hopelessly torn between Western-leaning Ukrainian elements and Russian-speaking Eastern elements is quite inaccurate. I met strong Ukrainian patriots from the younger generation who supported a unified Ukraine free from Russia's centripetal pull – but who spoke primarily Russian. This raised the interesting question as to how Ukrainian identity should be defined. As far as modern Kyiv is concerned, that identity is not confined to those with full Ukrainian fluency.

The second major strength of the Kyiv Mohyla summer program is its integration of classroom teaching with daily immersion in Ukraine's history and culture. On Monday through Friday students take classes in the morning and go on field trips in Kyiv and its environs in the afternoon.

The level of classroom instruction is tailored to the needs of students. My session consisted of around 20 students; we were assigned to classes based on our level of fluency. The instruction is high quality and the individual classes are short enough – around three hours a day – to maintain the attention even of students on their summer vacations. It is particularly interesting to hear how the instructors perceive the linguistic and political divisions in Ukraine. After all, these professors study these phenomena and live with them on a daily basis.

The series of field trips, led by full-time Kyiv Mohyla students, are intended both to satisfy the tourist impulse and to reinforce the language, literature, folklore and history taught in the mornings. Participants in the program visit the most notable tourist attractions of the city; the Zoloti Vorota, the Sobor of St. Sophia, the maidan (Independence Square), the World War II Museum, etc.

In addition, the trips include less obvious but equally interesting attractions, such as the Museum of National Architecture and Culture (which contains full-scale recreations of traditional Ukrainian homes from all corners of the country) and the small but poignant Chernobyl museum. Since the visits are escorted yet unhurried, students leave not just with a postcard image of the location, but with an appreciation of how that particular site or museum relates to Ukraine's historical and cultural legacy.

Finally, the program also provides an ample amount of free time for students. It is summer, after all, and students are free to pursue their desired form of relaxation during evenings and on weekends, whether it is further exploring the city or swimming in the Dnipro River.

As I had assured my parents, the underlying logistics were solid. Our group lived in downtown Kyiv just off the university campus and had excellent accommodations. The provided meals (breakfast and lunch on weekdays) were good, and Kyiv offers an impressive selection of restaurants, supermarkets and entertainment. The city is very metropolitan, and can provide virtually every amenity that a U.S. student expects.

The Summer Program at the National University of Kyiv Mohyla Academy certainly provides a wonderful opportunity to improve language skills and to brush up on Ukrainian history and culture. I would suggest, however, that the greatest benefit is the chance to gain a more nuanced appreciation of modern Ukrainian identity.

For the vast majority of our lives, diaspora Ukrainians connect with their heritage by proxy. We learn a language that in most of our families has not been the primary language of daily interactions since the time of our grandparents. On Saturdays, we learn about historical events and artistic achievements that are generally remote from our own place and time. We participate in organizations – Plast/SUM, dance groups, church choirs – that were recreated decades ago by immigrants from Ukraine. Through these activities, we develop an appreciation for Ukrainian traditions and culture. These experiences contribute to our Ukrainian identity and foster a certain conception of the country from which that identity flows.

Our common experiences are effective both in transmitting information (such as language skills) and in generating a sense of community. But, in isolation, these experiences have a shortcoming. Our history books, songs, poems and family narratives risk conveying a limited image that fails to capture the depth and complexity of contemporary Ukraine.

The diaspora's efforts to perpetuate Ukrainian language, traditions and culture are welcome and valuable, but we should always be mindful of their genesis. The Ukrainian linguistic and cultural literacy that we enjoy in North America can only be improved by an understanding of the country that provided this legacy. An extended trip to Ukraine provided the impetus for me to challenge and re-evaluate my understanding of Ukraine and its influence on my identity.

For those interested in having a similar experience, the Summer Program at Kyiv Mohyla is an ideal starting point.

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