

STORIES

Comfort Zones and the Expat Echo Chamber



By Tim Louzonis December 18, 11:26

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“Life begins at the end of your comfort zone.” - Neale Donald Walsch

Have you ever had that “you again(!) moment” as you pub and club crawl through the Lv’a Tolstoho-Palats Sportu corridor from Parovoz to Dogs & Tails, to the Alchemist, and Arena City? Take out a map of Kyiv and draw a big circle connecting Universytet, Kontraktova Plosha, Poshtova Plosha, Maidan, Klovska, and Olimpiiska metro stations. Roughly 90% of Kyiv expats live, work and play in this Right Bank oasis. And inside this circle you’ll find Zoloti Vorota, home to the unofficial diplomatic quarter, where about half the city’s embassies and consulates are located. And the Left Bank? Sure, some of us will trek out to Art Zavod Platforma for the Street Food Festival. Others will only get as far as Olmeca and Bora, Bora Beach Clubs on a summer day; and these places aren’t even on the Left Bank. To get our nature fix in the city, we’ll stroll, bike or picnic in Holosiivskiy and Feofania Parks. But these places are bright shiny islands in grey seas of (mostly) Khrushchovkas and characterless new buildings that are well outside our comfort zones as expats in Kyiv.



Photo by Ipernity.com

We usually accept it as a matter of faith that being an expat forces us out of our comfort zone. Upon arriving we’re faced with a strange culture, usually a different language (one that we often know poorly if at all) and strange ways of doing things. But we deceive ourselves into thinking that we’re being more adventurous than we actually are. Most expat assignments trace a familiar arc that allows us to quickly settle into a rhythm: find a supermarket and a gym, map our commute to and from work, discover a few expat-friendly restaurants and bars, and join a few international clubs to make a few expat friends. Expat parents have the added challenges of finding schools, childcare and kid-friendly places and activities, and amorphous “safety” concerns, which consume most parents everywhere. However, not long after arrival, our lives are comfortably placed on autopilot and we’re ready to give the bulk of our attention to our employer (work is the reason we’re here after all). We settle in and settle, swaddling our lives in protective bubble wrap.

“Money is better than poverty, if only for financial reasons.” - Woody Allen

Your salary and personal finances go a long way in determining the size of your expat comfort zone. Those in Kyiv who are fortunate to be on corporate packages, or who have plumb posts with international organizations, are surrounded by assistants and colleagues who are fluent in English and other European languages; they also have the benefit of English-speaking lawyers, accountants, doctors, and even housekeepers. They are insulated from many of the challenges of everyday life in Ukraine with exception of driving in Kyiv. (God help those who attempt this—diplomatic plates may shield you from “subjective” treatment by traffic police but they won’t save you from the, ahem, “uncourteous” behavior of local drivers, poorly marked roads and addresses, and hazardous traffic patterns.)

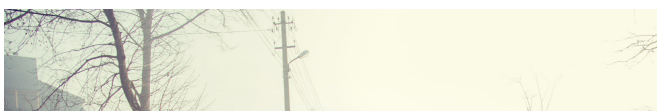




Photo by Juamede

By contrast, having a low housing budget (\$400 or less per month) can be a jarring introduction to the rough side of local life in Kyiv. Here you're treated to rude and distrustful owners, dishonest brokers, and the language barrier smacks you upside the head; and I've even heard stories of some owners in this segment who don't want to rent to their apartments foreigners at all. One local friend of mine signed an apartment lease only to move in and find different (read: much cheaper and less functional) appliances. My fitness trainer was scammed out of thousands of hryvnia by someone who offered a daily rental apartment for long-term rent using falsified ownership and identification documents. This World Extreme Cage Fighting is the what lies outside the awareness of more fortunate expats in Kyiv.

Fortunately, aside from housing, expat life in Kyiv is getting more comfortable all the time. Economic progress is smoothing out the rough edges of life here. The advent of supermarkets in Ukraine (several years ago) has made life easier for expats—it's no longer necessary to point, gesticulate, or otherwise engage in an elaborate mime routine at open air markets and corner grocers; heck, there are even supermarkets with English-language websites that let you order groceries online. Indeed the global contagion of English is making inroads in Kyiv well beyond an expat's workplace. As a Lviv transplant, I like to say that in downtown Kyiv it's often more difficult to find a Ukrainian-language menu than it is to find an English one and I enjoy chiding well-intentioned waiters, who eagerly offer me an English menu, "Khiba, vy ne maete menu na dezhavnoyi movi Ukrayiny?!" ("Really, you don't have a menu in the government language of Ukraine?!").

Despite the global march of English, some gung-ho expats enthusiastically sign up for language lessons as a way to survive and understand their host country, thinking it's "the right thing to do." In Kyiv this usually means studying Russian since it's supposedly "more practical," although Ukrainian-speakers and their supporters don't like to hear this. Many expats learn enough survival Russian to get a taxi, order a coffee, get from point A to point B, feed themselves, and meet other basic needs. This being said, I've met several long-time expats in Kyiv, who have shockingly poor local language skills. Since most expats' time in Ukraine will be limited and Slavic languages are difficult to learn, it's understandable that few want to expend the considerable effort that is required to achieve working proficiency in Russian or Ukrainian. And for many, learning Russian is often quickly abandoned to the graveyard of self-improvement projects and New Year's resolutions, the final resting place of our good intentions.

Expat English enclave and back to high school

Kyiv expats often friend filter for knowledge of English out of necessity (Russian and Ukrainian aren't languages you can "pick up" after six months of living here), but even if we know Russian or Ukrainian, this filtering helps find those who are more likely to share our views, creating an expat echo chamber of shared views. Each day we deeply inhale this recycled air and pretend to ourselves that we are experiencing Ukraine and life on a deep level. Among those of us who are capable, how many have local friends who speak little or no English? I certainly don't. Yet when back in our home countries how many of us actively seek out new friends with whom we knowingly disagree?



Photo by Sunny Lapin

Socially there can be an unspoken divide between different classes of expats. There are those on the full expat package and the local package, global nomads, the semi-retired, lifestyle expats, who left corporate life and are striking out on their own. And in my year in Kyiv the only sure way for me to meet embassy personnel is to attend the IWCK Christmas Bazaar. Then there are families and the single crowd. But most mysterious to me are missionaries, who seem to keep to themselves and usually avoid the typical expat haunts. Sometimes I wonder—where are all you folks hanging out? Spending your weekends and socializing? Many of us may

be living in the Right Bank expat oasis, but our lives are separate and apart from each other—it's just like we're back in high school. Good thing we have the new Star Wars movie to bring us all together this weekend.

Let's get in touch

In this column I'm going to explore the many facets of Kyiv's expat life and subculture. What's your Kyiv expat story? Drop me a line.

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