

Photo by Ilya Khuroshvili

STORIES

Late to the Party: Where Have Kyiv's Expats Gone?



By Tim Louzonis November 14, 15:55

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“Who are you?” Maz Kanata, Star Wars: The Force Awakens

As an expat, I was late to the party. Despite finishing one of America's top Russian studies programs in the mid-90's, I never joined the Gold Rush of fortune-seekers in the former Soviet Union. In the late 90's and early 00's while living a quiet life in the DC area, speaking Russian all day at work, with occasional business trips to Tashkent and Dushanbe, I heard rumors of wild

and prosperous times in Moscow and Kyiv. But when we sold our last mobile operators in 2007, moving overseas was the last thought on my mind.

Things changed in 2008 after a long bike ride with my former colleague Tom; he told me, “Tim, if you’ve got the stomach for it, they’re going to be rebuilding the former Soviet Union for the rest of our lives.” Dropping my half-hearted DC job search, I networked with abandon, and was interviewing in Moscow and Kyiv that summer. In Moscow I felt like the prettiest girl in the room—oil was at almost \$150 a barrel, Moscow had more billionaires than London or New York, and companies had thousands of vacancies at highly-paid positions for expats; this was going to be easy. By July I got an attractive offer for a job in Moscow and was on my way. But then my offer was retracted (“Dear Mr. Louzonis...In light of global financial markets, our investment plans have changed...”). So I reached out to Roberta, who had interviewed me in Kyiv and learned that her fund was still going forward with its project in Lviv. And on my Polish-Ukrainian grandfather’s 95th birthday they made me an offer — hooray, I was headed back to Ukraine after more than 14 years.

When I first came to Ukraine in 1993 as an exchange student in Odessa, the country had a different currency called the karbovanets’, which began to fall like stone the moment I arrived. Almost immediately after landing in Lviv in 2008, the hryvnia began to fall — sorry Ukraine, I’m your bad luck charm. Not surprisingly, my job in Lviv didn’t last long. So why did I stay? I met a great girl (roughly 50% of single male expats in Ukraine are here for a girl and the other half are lying to you). Anyway, in

2009 it was much cheaper to be an unemployed finance guy in Ukraine, and back in the US my Swiss-Army-knife-for-the-former-Soviet Union resume would get me nowhere.



During the interview for my position in Lviv, I was asked, “have you thought of how you will get back to the US after this job?” Legend has it that the Spanish Conquistador Cortés burned his ships so his men would “conquer or die.” After I lost my job in Lviv I wasn’t going back to the US to beg someone in HR for a dull corporate job, I was hooked on the expat lifestyle and I made a long-term bet on Ukraine.

The next years in Lviv were great, I reconnected with my Ukrainian relatives, learned Ukrainian, made great friends, and drank way too much coffee. I had joined other downshifting expats, who were exchanging a Western income for a cooler lifestyle and the adrenaline rush. In between projects, consulting gigs, freelancing, and a couple startups that failed to launch, I made periodic job hunting trips to Kyiv. After hearing a few

times, “You know, you’ve got a great resume, but there isn’t anything here for you now,” I’d quickly head back to Lviv. Then in the post-Maidan spring of 2014 I introduced two Kyiv expats to each other. From that introduction a business idea was born, I was invited to join them in Kyiv and here I am.

Kyiv’s Mos Eisley Cantina

Kyiv in late 2015 is a galaxy far, far away from public perception in Western countries (“Aren’t you scared to go to Ukraine? There’s a war going on there.”). It’s true that the global financial crisis, the Yanukovych years, and Russia’s annexation of Crimea and invasion of the Donbas and have shrunk Kyiv’s foreign expat population, and today there’s an uneasy peace between Russian and Ukrainian soldiers in the East. But there is a surprising vibrancy to expat life in post-Maidan Kyiv, and today the city is well-positioned to be the new Prague of this decade.



*Photo by Jeff
Christiansen*

Young and youngish Kievans have created a cool art, music, cafe and club scene that's affordably attractive to location-independent global nomads. And there's a surprisingly high level of fluency in English among young people that makes the city accessible to expats who don't know a word of Ukrainian or Russian. The variety of today's expat landscape in Kyiv reminds me of the Mos Eisley Cantina in the original Star Wars; that pirate city saloon on the edge of the universe had a rambunctious cast of alien races and there was a touch of danger in the air. In Kyiv you'll find an odd mix of global nomads, IT guys, couch surfers, sketchy older guys and sexpats, diplomats, English teachers, missionaries, NGO workers and volunteers, long-time expats, and the fortunate fewer and fewer, who are in Kyiv on the increasingly rare "expat package." By night these cliques and clans often co-mingle at Fryday Kyiv, BUCC, MultiNations, and other social events. Yes, many Western companies have scaled back operations or exited Ukraine altogether, and new investors are skeptically waiting to see if this will be the time that Ukraine truly awakens in the post-Maidan afterglow. But in the meantime the party goes on.

Are you a Kyiv expat who's tired of only being able to watch movies that are dubbed into Ukrainian? Want to see Star Wars in the original?

Join the [Force Awakens in English Movement on Facebook](#). There's a movement afoot to speak with Ukraine's Ministry of Culture to create once a month movie nights in English with Ukrainian subtitles. However, to make this work, we're going to need your help for a show of force.