

STORIES

The Antidote to Ukraine's Winter Blues



By Tim Louzonis January 26, 21:38

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“One is always at home in one's past” - V. Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*

I'm a Massachusetts boy who grew up with cold and snowy winters. My earliest childhood memories include playing on top of snowbanks that were several inches taller than I was. I've always hated the cold, and the dark days of winter get me down. Yet somehow I made the inspired choice to attend Middlebury College in Vermont, someplace even colder and snowier than my hometown. I went to “Midd” because it has America's best Russian language program, which seems fitting given the weather there. The college sits in a picturesque valley between the Green and Adirondack mountain ranges, an area that would remind Ukrainians of the Carpathians. Had I been

paying more attention in college, I would have better appreciated my time there as a prelude to my future life in Ukraine. For one thing, it was my first experience with a central heating plant, only our dorms weren't overheated, heating wasn't cheap, and system maintenance didn't mean weeks of cold showers in late spring.

After graduation I caught a lucky break and was able to use my Russian at a job Stateside and avoid the colder regions of the former Soviet Union. I escaped from the cold Northeast to the much warmer DC area, and made periodic business trips to hot and dry Tashkent and Dushanbe. My weekends in DC were spent driving with the top down on my Jeep Wrangler along the Potomac River, often from early April until mid-November. Some things are just too good to last.

“The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away” - Job 1:21

When it comes to snow removal, sometimes I think that Ukraine's mayors are channeling the spirit of former DC mayor Marion Barry, who once quoted the Bible when he was criticized for his government's inability to clear the city of snow. Critics joked that Barry's snow removal policy could be summarized in one word—spring. The incompetence of that civically-challenged, Third World-style despot eventually forced the US Congress to withdraw local control over DC's government, but no one will be riding to the rescue of Ukraine's citizens this winter.

For many expats there is a certain charm and novelty to the lack of public order and chaos in Ukraine, and the freedom that comes with it. By contrast, these days the US and EU are taxing and regulating everything that moves and many things that don't. However, this expat's tolerance for Ukraine's disarray quickly evaporates when the mercury drops, and the sidewalks become encrusted with impacted snow and ice, and we pedestrians are forced to waddle like penguins in a

desperate bid for our own survival.

I know a robust sixty-something Aussie expat, who practically grew up on a surfboard. Yet he recently took to Facebook to share his struggles to maintain his balance on Kyiv's icy sidewalks and to vent his exasperation at being passed by young girls in high heels as he crawls along.

At the risk of another pandering encomium to Ukrainian girls, I'll bet you had no idea that Ukraine has something in common with ancient Sparta. Much like the Spartans leaving sickly newborns to die, I believe that at a young age Ukrainian girls are forced to walk in high heels in the ice and snow at secret locations that are kept hidden from us expats. The girls who fail this mandatory rite of passage are stealthily removed from the population to keep the gene pool pure. So my Australian buddy should relax and stop competing with an unnatural master race of ice-walkers. Instead he should swallow his pride and order YakTrak or another brand of "crampons"... even if that last word sounds like a feminine hygiene product.



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But icy sidewalks are only one of the many attractions in Ukraine's winter wonderland. Once winter begins, buildings

and entryways are wrapped with candy cane-colored tape to warn pedestrians of falling ice. This cordoned off, jerry-rigged setup reminds me of a crime scene in CSI, but here the only crimes are improperly designed and uncleaned roofs. With icy sidewalks and the threat of falling ice we're forced to watch our step AND to look up at the same time. Ukrainian winter is a survival course that seems designed to thin the herd, especially where expats are concerned. Here at least, the ability of Ukrainians to multi-task is vastly underappreciated.

Ukrainian may be the state language (and I speak it just fine, thank you), but I can't think of a more onomatopoeic word to describe winter in Ukraine than the Russian word "slyakot'." This word is variously translated as: slush, slop, sludge, mire, and a mash of snow. Picture if you will an unwholesome slushy melange of car exhaust, road salt, and dirt and grime from streets that haven't been swept since Communist times. When daytime temperatures climb high enough, the skyakot' turns into deep rivers of watery, filthy slush, and you need to don fisherman's waders just to cross the street without sullyng your clothes. And when overnight temperatures dip below zero, you awaken the next day to a gnarly, frozen, slippery mess on sidewalks and courtyards—a dupapad. Now there's a Ukrainian word that you won't find in the dictionary.

“Now is the winter of our discontent” - William Shakespeare, Richard III

For most expats, Ukrainian winter is the evil twin of Ukrainian summer. It's a time when Old Man Winter kicks you in the stones and you're left reeling from depressingly short grey days, numb fingers, and the public's outwardly sullen mood; you're left wondering if you'll ever see those summer terraces and miniskirts again. Each winter is preceded by the seasonal exodus of fair weather sexpats and global nomads who flee Ukraine to warmer climes, and then return just in time for the "leg season" as one Italian friend calls it. I've always envied these expats for their snow bird's wings. On these cold winter

days, all I can dream about is building a business in Ukraine that I could run remotely from somewhere in Southern Europe.

Ukraine's endless January holidays offer a brief respite from the winter blues. But when the holidays end, you're left with the dull grey fog of a hangover that's both physical and emotional—spring is an eternity away. In the winter weeks that follow, the price of a sunny day in Ukraine can often be paid with temperatures colder than -15C. But these sunny days are a fool's gold that doesn't even offer the prospect of free vitamin D, let alone warmth.

As an expat in Kyiv, I sometimes struggle to turn off my American brain and hold the tyranny of time at bay. And everything here takes even longer when it's cold outside. There's more clothing to get in and out of, you have to remove those winter boots that track dirt and ice into your apartment. And when I'm in a hurry, all I can see are Butterball babushky moving at a glacial pace, clogging the narrow ice-free lanes that armies of pedestrians have carved into the otherwise icy sidewalks. I don't blame the babushky for being careful—a hard fall could have catastrophic results for a pensioner in Ukraine, where the state healthcare system is in a dreadful condition. Perhaps Mother Nature is sending me a message that I must heed more often — I should savor winter here as an opportunity to slow down.





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So how do you survive winter in Ukraine? Well, if you're not a skier, snowboarder or drinker, then you'd better be a writer, reader, or talker. Thankfully for me the latter three all apply. If you unpack a Ukrainian winter survival kit, inside you'll find copious amounts of tea, glintwine and vodka, garlic to ward off colds, babushka's unscientific medical advice, surgical masks for swine flu panics, and a holiday schedule that would make any Southern European or South American envious. But a Ukrainian's real secret to surviving winter is quite simple — spending lots of unstructured time leisurely with family and friends. Here we're definitely not talking about “quality time” — that American, less-is-more concept is analogous to an air freshener that's deployed in a failed attempt to cover up the odor of decaying relationships in the overly “busy” societies that many of us expats call home.

“My old grandmother always used to say, ‘Summer friends will melt away like summer snows, but winter friends are friends forever.’” - George R. R. Martin, A Feast for Crows

Some of my fondest winter memories in Ukraine were born out of spontaneity. Like the lazy Saturday that I spent with my German friend Markus. It began with a long walk to and through Lviv's Stryiskyi Park—we had it all to ourselves as we trudged through knee-deep, fresh fallen snow. And it continued with a several hour conversation over a hearty meal that we enjoyed at Kupol on Chaikovskoho Street. Imagine dining in your prosperous Polish grandmother's 19th century home and enjoying the taste of the bone-in pork chops served with cranberries, potatoes and roasted apples, while gazing out of

snow-glazed windows. That day ended with a snowball fight that I lost despite having the higher ground—tricky Markus took cover behind a police car. Then there was the time my friend Denis on whim, drove all the way from Moscow to Lviv through a snowstorm to visit me and experience the Christmas spirit in Western Ukraine. And I'll never forget the time in Lviv when I returned home after a party at 4am only to find my outside door frozen shut when it was -20C. I couldn't get into my apartment and had to crash at my Italian friend's place, where he served me cheese that his mother had sent him from Naples. "Teem, you are sooo lucky that I was not sleeping when you called. Maybe we should eat something, eh?" Andrea is always so hospitable.

In my search for the antidote to Ukraine's winter blues I can't really say that I've "discovered" the succor and comfort of friendship—it's been there all the time. But nevermind that mushy stuff, would you believe that we still must endure another two months of this bleeping cold and snow?! There I go again. Excuse me, but I really need to meet a friend for tea or perhaps something stronger.

Let's get in touch

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

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