

UKRAINE

THE GREAT ESCAPE

Richly historical yet full of modern wonders, Ukraine has something to suit every traveller. Enjoy a tour of the region in the footsteps of a Russian empress with a luxurious river cruise, accompanied by knowledgeable local experts.

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY
BY CATHERINE MARSHALL

What a grand entrance I make into the Ukrainian city of Odessa. Standing on the promenade, I gaze up at a staircase that seems to sweep all the way to the heavens. Nothing appears on either side of it – just a fringing of trees and a flat blue sky. The Black Sea laps against the wharves behind me; before this shoreline was reclaimed, water reached the bottom steps.

“From here you will go to the top of the staircase,” says our guide, Tanya Solovyova, “and you will tell me what is the difference in the view.”

Adopting the posture of Russian empress Catherine the Great – who founded this city in 1794 and whose monument on Ekaterininskaya Square is one of its most prominent and beautiful landmarks – I ascend the staircase, known as the Potemkin Stairs. It's a long way to the top: 192 steps, reduced from an original 200 due to erosion and wharf construction (a funicular is available for those less actively inclined).

But the view from the top is absolutely worth it – as I turn around, the optical illusion hidden in the staircase's design (its width decreases as it ascends) becomes apparent. While I'd seen just soaring steps looking up, now I'm peering down upon a flattened wedge of landings where the steps used to be. I can't imagine a better welcome to Odessa – and to Ukraine, a country that's determinedly shaken off the shackles of communism and is forging for itself a fresh, if sometimes unsteady, identity.

“When you are battling you see only the obstacles,” Solovyova explains. “And when you have accomplished it, you see only your victories.”

TALES OF ROMANCE

Though still faced with obstacles – the once-vibrant population of migrants that settled here in the early 20th century has been thwarted by a succession of revolutions, wars, and communist rule – Odessa is a richly sensuous and romantic city. Here modernity jars with faded grandeur, chafes against a city suffused with the patina and wisdom of old age. Why are its citizens dressed in the latest trends, I wonder, when they're occupying a bygone era?

Odessa fades from view as the *Viking Sineus* throws off from the port and begins its slow passage up the Dnieper River. On this Viking cruise, I'm retracing in reverse the journey taken by Catherine the Great towards this strategic port – which she undertook with her advisor and lover, Prince Grigory Potemkin, for whom the staircase leading



This page: Odessa is full of beautiful old buildings, such as the Odessa National Academic Theater of Opera and Ballet.

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: A Viking staff member showed us the traditional dress of the region; a folk art demonstration at Dnipro gave us a taste of the local culture; Viking guests can take part in a tasting of Ukrainian sparkling wine and caviar.

Catherine the Great was Empress of Russia from 1762 until 1796.

to the city is named – as they expanded the Russian Empire. It's a route embossed not with the nobility that characterised the empress and her court, but with the hardship of conflict and political tyranny – and the rich culture that persisted in the midst of it all.

The ship is not sequestered from the provincial landscape we're gliding through. Its dining room is serviced by waitstaff who have grown up in towns and villages along this river; their service is charming, their demeanour reserved. At breakfast we feast on traditional Ukrainian sausage made with fatty pork and chicken, and eggs Benedict scattered with red caviar pearls. At dinner the chef includes local dishes on the menu, so we can get a real taste of the country we're passing through. Highlights include Zaporizhian ukha (Ukrainian fish soup), medivnyk (honey cake), and eggs stuffed with red salmon caviar.

We pause at the delta city of Kherson – once the borderlands between the Ukrainian Cossacks, Crimean Tatars and Ottoman Turks, now tamed into a tapestry of tumbledown parks and hushed streets. It's home to the beautiful Cathedral of the Lady of Assumption, which is said to have halted a plague upon its consecration, thereby earning it the nickname 'the lucky church'. However, it's the basilica named for Catherine the Great – its edifice reflecting the Mediterranean influences that infuse much of southern Ukraine's architecture – that is most beloved, for inside it you will find Potemkin's tomb. Nearby stands a monument to the man.

“Here you can see him healthy,” explains our guide, Lena Alekseeva, as she points up at the rather jauntily clad sculpture. Then she shakes her head at the image she's conjured of Potemkin as an older man: “I agree it's better to see him young.”



SAIL AWAY

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In Soviet times, officials tried to drag this statue away, but the chains broke. Then during the Nazi invasion it was melted down to make weapons – the figure we are looking at now is a replica. Chained, dragged, melted, remade; the hapless Potemkin, while deeply esteemed by the empress, also fell foul of her roving eye. He wasn't her only conquest, Alekseeva says – indeed, she had numerous affairs.

“Later, if she didn't need them in her bed, she put them to work making the country great,” she explains.

AS THE RIVER RUNS

We continue up the Dnieper River to Zaporozhye, the ancestral home of the Cossacks in the 16th century and later a stronghold for the Russian Empire's southern border. To get there we must first pass through an impressive three-chambered lock, which carries us up into a dam high above the waterway we've come from.

This is the Dnieper Hydroelectric Station and dam – one of the largest of its kind when it was completed in 1932. But it was constructed on the bones of this city's citizens, says Solovyova, herself a native of Zaporozhye – first in the construction, and then later when the Russian Red Army bombed the dam wall in an attempt to hinder the Nazis' advance. The consequent flood was so great it submerged the shorelines downriver and drowned tens of thousands of unsuspecting civilians.

Far less catastrophically, the city also lost its sculpture of Lenin. It disappeared one night from its pedestal in Lenin Square – and no-one knows where it is today.

“Maybe it's at someone's *dacha* [summer house],” Solovyova laments.

“How do you steal a monument?” asks a guest. “Tie it to the roof of your Lada,” she shrugs.



The journey upriver takes us into a gently rolling landscape struck gold with cathedral domes. It bends to hug the city of Dnipro, founded as a summer residence for Catherine the Great and transformed into a hub for missile production and space research during Soviet times. Though now an industrial hub, you can ride the quaint trams for just a few Ukrainian hryvnia or the trolley buses for free.

FEAST OF FLAVOURS

The feasting continues onboard as we sample borscht (beetroot soup), malenky ponchiky (mini doughnuts dipped in condensed milk and chocolate) and traditional Ukrainian dumplings known as vareniki – which the ship's chef teaches us to make out on the sundeck. Ashore in the town of Kremenchug, we visit a local Ukrainian family and sample homemade korovai (local bread), khrustyky (crispy fried pastry with local honey) and apples picked fresh from the garden. We're feeding off the same fertile expanse that fortified Catherine the Great as she ventured southwards with her aides and lovers.

The city of Kiev – one of the oldest in Europe – appears slowly, a speckling of houses and people that condenses and intensifies as we navigate further along the upper reaches of the Dnieper River. It's summertime and the waters bob with tinnies bearing bare-chested, beer-swilling fishermen; the sandy beaches teem with sunbathers on striped deckchairs. I hadn't expected Kiev to be quite so enchanting.

But my entrance into this 'mother of Russian cities' is just as grand as my ascension up that sweeping staircase leading into Odessa. From where I stand on the ship, I can see Kiev flowing higgledy-piggledy over soaring hillsides, the 13 domes of the UNESCO World Heritage listed Saint-Sophia Cathedral blinking in the sunlight.

Cushioned within the city's ancient bosom are brutalist constructions, vibrant neighbourhoods, experimental bars and restaurants, and residents who are right on trend. While Odessa's antiquity seemed sacrosanct, Kiev's is incidental. Modernity doesn't chafe against the past here, for this city is poised for a renaissance and its people are dressed for the future. 

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