

April 6 2006

Ukraine? By train?

“Why do you want to go to Ukraine? And you’re going by train – taking 30 hours? You must be crazy – why don’t you fly?” That is the usual reaction I get from friends in Bratislava – some Slovak, many American – when I tell them I’m off to Kyiv, something I’ve done some half-a-dozen times over as many years.

The last of these questions is the easiest to answer: flying may have got cheap in Western Europe, but east of the EU it’s as expensive as it ever was. True, in the Ukraine embassy in Bratislava I once read a notice about an Aeroflot subsidiary which promised cheap flights, but following up their website led only to out-of-date information and unanswered emails. A more positive reason for the train is the sheer pleasure of leisurely travel: the freedom from day-to-day stresses, the people you meet, and above all, the varied faces of Mother Earth as they roll past your window.

For the Carpathian Mountains between here and Bratislava offer Ukraine’s most spectacular scenery. By accident or design, the timing of the trains means you pass through them by daylight, both coming and going and at any time of the year. Your first sight of a wood-and-gilt church reflecting the spring sun takes your breath away. When you first see a pony-drawn sled, carrying not tourists but turnips, you can indulge the sentiment of having stepped back into a more peaceful age. And when, about halfway through your journey you find yourself with a three-hour stop at Chop --- the assonance is irresistible – you can relish the atmosphere of a place one imagines little altered from Soviet times.

Now Chop, in case you don’t know, is within a few kilometers of both the Slovak and Hungarian borders, and not all that far from Romania. Apart from the innumerable uniformed figures around the station, the most obvious indication of a frontier town is an engineering one: the time-consuming but robust process dictated by the difference in rail gauges between East and West. Yes, there are still through carriages, and if you are in one, it will be hydraulically raised a foot or so – whatever that may be in metric - for the new set of bogies to be rolled underneath. So, if you don’t feel safe in abandoning the carriage that you may by then be thinking of as home, you have the equivalent of the Royal Box from which to enjoy the stage show below. Disappointingly, these days you are entertained by fewer actors than when I first did the journey in 2001; the guitar-playing gypsies and fruit-selling babouchkas seem to have left the scene, and even the urchin beggars appear now only in the summer. But at the heart of the drama, doing the real work, are the engineering team – to call them rude mechanicals, Shakespeare-fashion, or plain stokers, would be to insult their industry and competence. Greasy rather than grease-painted, they variously occupy centre stage and join with you their audience, shouting instructions to each other and to the driver of the shunting locomotive with an enthusiasm which belies the routine nature of their task, and which the sceptical might say is none too common in Ukraine generally.

However, these days I skip the show and, once the visiting officials have indicated their permission, set off for the town. This involves a walk of anything from 100 yards to half-a-mile, depending on whether your carriage has already been shunted off to the bogie base. But rest assured, it will be back at the platform by the time you depart. I now prefer the walk for a number of reasons: to stretch my legs, and to experience both the frustrations and charm of what seem like remnants from Soviet times. The charm is epitomized in the station itself by the well-preserved wall-painting that depicts the usual themes of Communist ideology: guns-to-plowshares-to- Soyuz following the Great Patriotic War, with a Soviet soldier bayoneting an abstract symbol of Nazism rather than “another worker at the other end”. The frustration arises from attempting any such a routine activity as buying a ticket, but that will be necessary only if the rail staff at your departure station were having a bad hair day.

But the over-riding reasons for deserting the carriage are for the fundamental bodily needs. On my first journey, I traveled first-class (still cheaper than a business ticket from Birmingham to London, one tenth the distance) and assumed that I could enjoy the corresponding luxury of a restaurant car. Bad mistake! The only sustenance your carriage attendant can provide – depending on his or her mood – is tea, biscuits and possibly peanuts. Happily, there is a restaurant/hotel just outside Chop station, and these days the waitress no longer greets me with a glare; an accolade, presumably, accorded to someone recognized as a regular. Indeed, with little prompting, she automatically brings me my borsch, omelet and “Fries”, the only items on the menu I can recognize unambiguously with my shameful Russian/Ukrainian. The arrival of my food prompts another reminder of one of those trivial but easily forgotten differences between East and West; it is pepper rather than salt that comes from the cellar with the single hole. The food itself is good, and to accompany it I usually manage to get a glass of wine and maybe a local cognac. The bill, when it comes, is so small that tipping becomes a more than usually embarrassing dilemma, especially as it is written in so careful, school-girlish hand and in such painstaking detail. Last time I got the menu back to try to decode this detail, only to discover how more complicated it would have been if I’d settled for a sandwich; “1/65” cryptically annotating the cheese variety – surely not date of manufacture! – as opposed to the “10/30/2/10” attributed to the caviar version. No doubt an explanation would be offered by one of the four “administrators/ officiants” who had signed the menu.

Napoleon may have had a point about armies and stomachs, but one suspects that it was organs lower in the body that gave his sergeants greater concern. So the restaurant W.C. has to be the main focus of the Chop-stop, and the one that incites almost Proustian nostalgia. In 2001, there was no paper, no seat, and the hand-drier had to be activated by plugging into the wall, presumably because the switch proper had stuck; on my most recent trip, they had at least fixed the seat. In any case the facility remains a great improvement on that offered in the train, despite the brave interventions the attendants make in the cause of hygiene. But infuriatingly they are also under orders to lock the door whenever near a town of any size, which means most of the journey.

“Why do you want to go to Ukraine?” For all its inconsistencies and frustrations epitomized at Chop, those of us in Kyiv at least know the answer: to arrive here is much better than to travel here, however hopefully.