

# Red, White, Blue and Yellow



An American's Guide To  
SHORT-TERM MISSIONS IN UKRAINE

**Brandon Price**

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Thanks for loving me even when I said “I’m almost finished” a thousand times.  
I love you so much and couldn’t do these crazy things without you.*

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# Introduction

## My Home Away From Home

Ukraine has been a part of my heart for the last eleven years, and before I say anything else in this book I want to make something very clear:

I love this place.

Much to the surprise of every Ukrainian I meet, I do, in fact, love living here. Just like with anything else in life, there are pros and cons, but try as they might, the negative aspects of living in Ukraine can't keep me from loving my life here. There is so much history, so much culture, and I can't help but love the people.

But there is also a lot of pain here.

Even though Ukraine is considered a Christian nation, so many here are spiritually hurting. They are hurting from the effects of hundreds of years of being kicked around by neighboring nations. They are hurting because of the godless oppression of the Soviet Union. They are hurting because of alcoholism, drugs, and one of the fastest growing HIV rates in all of Europe. They need help. They need a savior.

People in America have asked me, "Why don't you stay in the United States and work? There are plenty of lost and hurting people here." That's absolutely true—there are many lost and hurting in the U.S., and I wish more people truly understood that. The thing is, I don't work in Ukraine because the people here are so much worse off than the people in America. I don't work here because I think I, as an American, am their savior. So why do I choose to be here? Why live so far away from family and friends and a language that makes perfect sense?

Because I *want* to be here.

I want to work here, and there are far fewer people who want to work in Ukraine than there are who want to stay in America. God has instilled in me the desire to serve here, and I don't want to waste it. I am not Ukraine's savior, but I know who is. It is my prayer that how I live here and the seemingly insufficient words I share point people in His direction.

Ukraine is a beautiful country and it is home to a beautiful people. My hope in living here is to remind the Ukrainians of this truth, and to remind them of why it is true. God created Ukraine and He knows every single Ukrainian by name. He desires every one of them be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. And so do I.

I love this place, and I'm excited you are coming for a visit.

## **Ukraine Is Not America (And Isn't Supposed To Be)**

Over the last eleven years I've worked with more than a few mission trips in Ukraine, and I've always been on the receiving side of these visits. It's always fascinating to watch first-time visitors experience this place, especially when it happens to be their very first trip outside of the United States. It is a joy watching people experience the beauty of learning about a new culture, especially one I love so much.

Unfortunately, there have also been quite a few unpleasant moments with some of these American visitors. Times when some of them overstepped the line. Times when they were not as sensitive as they needed to be. Times when, whether they meant to be or not, they were just plain rude. It's called being an "Ugly American," and it is not pretty.

Many Americans are raised with a very narrow worldview. We were born into the most powerful and prosperous nation on the planet. We have a government that takes very good care of us. We are used to getting our way, right away. Because of this, we often unintentionally carry ourselves with a little too much confidence when we visit foreign places. We get upset when a foreign country doesn't have the courtesy to speak English, and we can't understand why they wouldn't. We feel a little put out when we can't find anything on the menu that appeals to our taste buds. *Didn't they know that Americans might be visiting this place from time to time?*

The idea for this book came from watching many visiting Americans struggle to say or do the right things in the Ukrainian culture. Whether this will be your first or fifteenth visit to Ukraine, this book is an effort to help you understand things about this place which will make your time here easier and more enjoyable. This book is a way to say things that aren't usually said to those journeying here on short-term mission trips. It includes tips and instructions which I hope will give you a head start on making your trip the best it can be.

I have lived in Ukraine for a total of five years and counting. That's not as long as some, but it is longer than most. During this time I have devoted myself to observing and understanding the Ukrainian culture as best as I can. I don't know everything, and I certainly don't get everything right myself, but I have learned some things that I think can help you as you prepare for your mission trip to Ukraine.

Thanks for your time,

Brandon Price



# A Little Bit About Ukraine

## History

Ukraine's earliest roots can be traced back to the ninth century. Its capital, Kiev, is one of the oldest cities in Eastern Europe. Though *Kievan Rus'* was a powerful nation during the Middle Ages, by the fourteenth century Ukraine was under the rule of various external powers. Its fertile farmlands (which have earned Ukraine the nickname "The Breadbasket of Europe") and its location was always a tempting prize to surrounding nations. Being ruled by outsiders would go on to define much of Ukraine's difficult history.

In the early 20th century, Ukraine became part of the newly formed *United Soviet Socialist Republic*, or as we often call it, *The Soviet Union*. Mother Russia did its best to wipe out Ukrainian culture and, to a certain extent, get rid of Ukrainians themselves. In the 1930s, millions of Ukrainians died of starvation, and many believe that Russia systematically enabled this to happen. After the famine, Nazi Germany brought World War II to Ukraine and occupied the country from 1941–1944. After the liberation, Ukraine spent the next half century as a quiet member of the Soviet Union. As time went on, eastern Ukraine began to look and act more like Russia, whereas the western part continued to maintain its sense of nationalism for the Ukrainian language and culture.

In 1991, after the fall of the Soviet Union, Ukraine declared its independence. The new democratic government was celebrated, but it also brought unbelievable growing pains. Due to Ukraine's abundant natural resources, many expected Ukraine would quickly become a wealthy nation, but instead of building, people started stealing. During those early years, the most corrupt gained the most power, and today Ukraine still struggles with a greedy and dishonest government. The economy during those early years was terrible, and those who had grown up receiving equal handouts from the government under communism were not able to make sense of the new system. The world congratulated Ukraine for their newfound freedom. Ukrainians responded with, "Thank you. Now what are we supposed to do with it?"

## Outlook

I want you to really think about how the history of Ukraine might influence the culture and mindset of the Ukrainian people today. I have friends here who have lived in two



different countries but have never changed their address. Think about that. How would that affect you? How differently would you feel about your government if you survived a forced famine? What would you feel if everything you knew about your country changed in a single day? How would that affect your relationships? How would that affect your thinking?

Here's an example. Americans have had a long history of success in many different fields. We are raised with the belief that we can do anything we put our minds to. Stop and think about that for a second. Is that statement *really* true? Can we really do *anything* we put our minds to? Not at all. There are many things we can't do no matter how positive we feel about it. Regardless, that positive attitude defines our culture and our own personal mindset. We look at the world with a lot of hope for change and improvement.

Ukrainians, on the other hand, tend to look at the world more fatalistically. That is, they believe good things rarely work out. Why would they feel this way? Because that's been their experience. If you were born in a country that has been kicked around by other nations for hundreds of years, you're going to look at the world differently than if

you had been raised in a nation which has succeeded in everything it has done. Ukrainians tend to look at the world without a lot of hope for change and improvement. This doesn't mean Ukrainians are hopeless, it just means there is a general, underlying mindset that things aren't as wonderful as Americans tend to think they are. It also doesn't mean they're wrong; it just means they're different. We've had different experiences, and so we see the world differently.

What both Americans and Ukrainians need to understand is that true hope doesn't lie in the successes of a nation. Nations rise and fall, as do their economies. What Americans and Ukrainians need to know and believe is that true hope in this life is found in a relationship with God.

## **Ukraine Today**

Ukraine is the second largest country in Europe and is about the same size as the state of Texas. Ukraine is home to almost 45 million people, but more are dying than being born, which means the population is steadily declining (as is the case in most European countries). Ukraine is rich in mineral deposits and fertile farm lands. It is the world's largest producer of sunflower oil and is one of the world's largest grain exporters.

Despite the enormous potential for a financially successful nation, Ukraine is crippled by its corruption—corruption which goes much deeper than crooked politicians. Everyone can be paid off. Police officers (who are called *militia* officers) are told during training that their salary will not be enough to live on, so whatever money they can make by collecting bribes is encouraged.

This is the way it works here, and almost everyone plays this game. A police officer can threaten you with a 1,000 grivna ticket, or he'll promise to forget all about it if you pass him 300 under the table. Which would you choose? If you think you'd go with your principles, don't forget that might mean you go without food for the month. I have even seen police officers keep someone from doing the right thing, leaving no other option except to pay them off.

The corruption isn't limited to government officials. Students also pay bribes to teachers for their grades. Not only will a lazy student pay his instructor for a good grade, a good student might have to pay his teacher to ensure he actually receives the grade he earned. This isn't true across the board (we know many teachers who refuse to be a part of this system), but it's not uncommon either. Things like this happen in both grade school and college.

Because of this corruption and because of other factors in Ukraine's history, Ukrainians tend to not trust others very quickly. Everyone does whatever they can to ensure their own survival. There is so much lying and cheating and using people that Ukrainians don't open up until they really, *really* trust you as their friend.

Ukraine has so much potential as a nation, but too many people here can't bring themselves to believe that. However, now that an entire generation has grown up in the independent Ukraine, I am just starting to see glimpses of hope in the eyes of its youth. This generation believes things can be different in a way those before them did not. These young adults are now having kids themselves, and they are far enough removed from Ukraine's difficult past that they aren't carrying the emotional baggage their parents and grandparents have had to bear. I see a beautiful future for this country, and it gets me excited.

But of course, that could just be the American in me talking.

# Cultural Tips

While spending time in Ukraine, you will have a unique opportunity to see firsthand how another culture lives. It is fascinating to observe the cultural differences, and it is even more fun to participate in them. There are so many tiny nuances which can easily go unnoticed by an outsider. Sometimes we might even offend someone by doing something which is completely acceptable for us to do in our own culture. Even though we'd all agree it's important to show courtesy to others, it can be difficult to know exactly how to do that as a foreigner. Here are some important cultural tips to keep in mind while you are visiting Ukraine.

## The Importance of Saying Hello

Watch carefully how Ukrainians enter a room. They greet everyone unless it is truly not practical to do so. They will either say hello to the whole room at once if there are a lot of people, or they will make their way around and say hello to everyone individually. This initial greeting is very important. It's the first way to show those around you that you really see them, that you acknowledge they're there.

When I asked a friend what things Americans needed to know about coming to Ukraine, he told me, "Many Americans ignore people, especially older people. In Ukraine, people pay a lot of attention to the greeting. When an American doesn't even say hello, he can offend a Ukrainian. It's like the American doesn't see you at all." Try not to make this mistake. Watch how Ukrainians greet each other, then try to do likewise.

In general, it's a good idea to greet anyone you make direct eye contact with who is in a close proximity to you. For example, if you are in the stairwell and are about to pass someone going the opposite direction, it's always a good idea to say hello as you pass. Or, if as you exit an apartment building you see several older ladies sitting on a bench and they happen to look over at you, make sure to say hello. Where this guideline does not apply, however, is on public transportation. Ironically, even though you're much closer to one another and spending more time together, greeting people on public transportation isn't done.

Another interesting tidbit about the greeting is that Ukrainians do not greet each other twice within a day. There are exceptions to this, but say, for example, you greet someone at a Bible study in the morning and then don't see them again until lunch. It's

very strange to say hello to a Ukrainian a second time. In fact, if you do, they will most likely tell you, "We already said hello today." Though there are different feelings as to why this is, I think it goes back to the deeper meaning of the Ukrainian greeting. If you say hello twice, it might mean you forgot the first time. And that means that you didn't value that first greeting. It's almost as if you didn't feel the person was worth remembering. Ukrainians aren't offended when Americans greet someone twice, but they are confused by it.

Remember, greeting people here means much more than giving a casual hello. In Ukraine, it's a way to show you acknowledge the presence of another individual. It's a way to tell them they are worth your attention. Do your best to value those around you by greeting them.

### Why Don't Ukrainians Smile?

One of the first impressions Americans have about Ukrainian people is that they don't smile as much as we do. Walking on the streets, riding on public transportation, or standing in line somewhere, Ukrainians don't smile when they make eye contact with you. Since this is our custom in America, this often hits us funny. *What's wrong with him? Why are people here so serious? Why is everyone so mad all the time?*

Someone once said that Ukrainians smile when they mean it. I think that's a perfect explanation. Ukrainians don't smile on the streets because, *What's so great about walking on the street?* Ukrainians don't smile on public transportation because there is nothing in their soul rejoicing about being on a bus. When an American looks over and smiles at a Ukrainian while in a grocery store, this is genuinely confusing. *What in the world is he smiling about? Why is he smiling in a grocery store?* When Ukrainians see a stranger smiling in a situation that doesn't warrant smiles, they think there is something wrong with that person.

Of course Americans don't see smiles this way. We're not smiling because we're happy to be stuck on a hot bus, we're smiling because we want to communicate that we truly see the other person. We want to convey friendliness and respect. We want to acknowledge the other person's presence. A smile to a stranger is the American version of the Ukrainian greeting.

Even though this is true, Ukrainians don't know it. So, as long as you're thinking about it, try not to smile at strangers while you're out and about. It just doesn't communicate the same thing here as it does in the States.



*Smiling at strangers just doesn't communicate the same thing here as it does in America.*

## **Shaking Hands**

In addition to the greeting, it is expected that only men will shake each other's hands as long as they are in reach to do so. Men greet ladies with a simple vocal greeting unless the two know each other well enough to warrant a hug.

Ladies also do not shake each other's hands. They exchange hellos and maybe a hug depending on the situation and the relationship. Ukrainian women who are used to Americans visiting might extend their hands to you, knowing you will probably do so anyway. If you find you have just shaken hands with a woman, don't freak out. It isn't offensive, it's just unusual for them.

There are a couple other interesting notes about the Ukrainian handshake. First, it's not considered polite to shake hands over the threshold of a door. In this circumstance, wait until you or the other person enters before shaking hands. Also, Ukrainians don't shake hands with gloves on. Even during the bitter cold of winter, Ukrainians will take their gloves off before extending their hands to each other. And finally, wet or dirty hands do not cancel the need for a handshake. In these cases, Ukrainian men will extend their closed fist to you, and your job is to grab the other's wrist for a brief moment.

Don't stress too much over these details. A friend once told me these rules only apply to those who know they exist. If you happen to forget and extend a gloved fist to someone, Ukrainians won't be offended because they know all foreigners are a little awkward anyway. At the very worst, they'll just be surprised you didn't know better.



*If a Ukrainian's hand is wet or dirty, it doesn't cancel the obligatory handshake.  
When he offers you his closed fist, grab his wrist for a moment, then let go.*

## Personal Space

The term “personal space bubble” doesn’t exist in Ukraine. People here get very close when talking, especially if you already know one another. I remember being uncomfortable with this when I first came to Ukraine. Someone would come within inches of my face and begin to speak. I’d take a step back, then they’d take a step forward. I’d take a step back, then they’d take a step forward. It took me quite awhile to be comfortable with having a normal conversation so close to another man’s face.

## Sharing A Meal

If you are lucky enough to get invited over to a Ukrainian’s home for a meal, you are in for a wonderful experience. Ukrainian food can be quite delicious, and Ukrainians love treating their guests like royalty. Here are a few things you should keep in mind when heading to a house for a meal.

### *Never Come Empty Handed*

First, it is customary to bring a small gift with you. This is usually something sweet to have after the meal with tea. Historically, Ukrainians didn’t have a lot of extra money. Bringing some cookies or even a small bag of sugar was a way to keep your visit from becoming any sort of financial burden to your host. Today, Ukrainians still hold to this tradition even if it’s not always a financial need. When you’re on your way to dinner, pick up some chocolates, fruit, cookies, or maybe some special tea for your host.

### *Shoes and Hats Off*

If you are visiting a Ukrainian in their home, make sure to take your shoes off when you enter the house. Ukrainian streets aren’t as clean as American streets, and in a walking society it’s much easier to track in dirt. Usually Ukrainians will have slippers you can wear, especially if their home is cold. This is also the moment you should take off your hat if you’ve got one on, as it is not polite for men to wear their hats indoors.

### *Try Everything*

When eating at a Ukrainian’s home, try everything put in front of you. Obviously if you have an allergy to certain foods, it won’t be rude to explain that. (If at all possible, though, try to warn your host about any food allergies ahead of time so they don’t feel like they have nothing significant to offer you.) Try to seriously differentiate between “don’t like” and “can’t eat.” Personally, I really don’t like the taste of cucumbers, but I can eat them. Other foods (like asparagus) really test my gag reflexes. In these cases I take a small bite so I can say I’ve tried it, and then I simply decline seconds if they’re offered.

### *Compliment Them By Asking For More*

Since ladies are often watching their weight, they can usually get away with declining seconds without causing much of a fuss. But if you're a man, the only way to prove to your hostess that you liked the food is by asking for seconds (and maybe thirds). Ask if you can have more even if there is more sitting right in front of you. Let them know you liked what you had. (Be sure you are expressing you want more because you like the food, not because you are still hungry. If they are sharing everything they have with you and you appear not to be satisfied, this might hurt their feelings.)

### *Pace Yourself*

Ukrainians often serve their meals in courses. If you don't see any main dishes on the table when you have come specifically for a meal, try to pace yourself as best as you can. There might only be soup and salad on the table at first, after which they'll bring the meat and potatoes, then tea and dessert. Salads in Ukraine do not contain lettuce, but they almost always contain mayonnaise. And dill is a garnish on many, many, *many* dishes.

## **Other Cultural Tidbits**

### *Don't Sit On The Ground*

Ukrainians don't sit directly on the ground, so avoid doing so while you're here. This is connected to a belief that sitting on cold things is bad for your fertility and—let's just be honest—concrete is just plain dirty. It doesn't make any sense to Ukrainians when they see you putting your clean pants onto a filthy piece of ground.

### *Shoes and Feet*

When sitting, Ukrainians will completely cross one leg over the other if they want to cross their legs at all. Very rarely will they rest their ankle on top of their knee like most younger men do in the States. The bottom of the shoe is considered a very dirty thing (because it is). Don't rest one foot on your knee if there is someone sitting right next to you. Also, be sure not to prop your shoes up on the backs of any chairs. In general, keep your shoes and your feet away from people and the things people touch.

### *Washing Your Hands*

When Ukrainians enter someone's house, the first thing they ask the host after they have greeted each other is, "May I wash my hands?" Since most will have traveled

on public transportation and will have touched their fair share of germs on the way, this is important. Many Americans don't think to wash their hands the second they arrive to someone's house, but it's a good habit to get into here. If your host asks you if you'd like to wash your hands, don't turn them down.

#### *Referring To Alcohol*

There is a hand sign Ukrainians often use when referring to alcohol. It is shown when speaking of someone who is drunk, when telling a story of someone who was drinking, or it may be used by someone who is indicating they want to go drink (like when they're inviting you to go along too). The sign is made by flicking your index finger against the side of your neck near your jawline. Just know that if you see this gesture, they're talking about alcohol. And if someone is pulling at your arm while making this gesture, definitely don't go anywhere with them.

#### *Pointing*

It's not polite to point in Ukraine; not at people, and not at objects. Try to motion to someone or something using your open palm. It's not that it's terribly rude to point, it's just not very polite.

# Out and About

## Get Ready To Walk

Ukraine is a walking culture, so be prepared to get your exercise. It might take a week for your legs and feet to get used to all the walking, but your body does adapt. Not only is walking an obvious result of most people not owning cars, this is also something Ukrainians enjoy doing. A common favorite activity for friends is to go out walking together because it's some of the cheapest and most quality time you can have with someone. Be prepared to enjoy walks with the new friends you will make.

When crossing the street, be extra paranoid about oncoming traffic. Though cars are required to stop for pedestrians at crosswalks, this doesn't mean they will. If the crosswalk you're using doesn't have a *Walk/Don't Walk* light, slowly make your way into the street just far enough so that an oncoming driver sees you want to cross. If they begin to slow down, you're good to go. If they honk or don't seem to be slowing, this means they don't want to stop, and probably won't.

## On The Bus

Some buses in Ukraine employ only a driver, while others have a driver *and* a conductor. This seems to vary city to city, so whatever you see where you will be working is probably what it will be like on all the buses there. When there is no conductor, you pay the driver directly. This is easiest to do when first getting on, but often if a bus is too crowded you may have to enter near the back. When there are too many people to allow a passenger to take their money directly to the driver, Ukrainians simply pass their money to the front of the bus. This might freak you out initially, but it's normal. You simply need to hand your money to a person ahead of you, say (or indicate with your fingers) how many you are paying for and they'll pass your money up. If you need change, you should receive it within a minute or two.

If the bus has a conductor, you simply stay where you are and they will come collect your money. Often they will give you a ticket for proof of payment and for their own accounting. Hold onto this for the whole ride in case the conductor doesn't remember you paid. If you're not sure which kind of bus you are riding—that is, with a conductor or without—just watch what others are doing when they get on. Are they paying the driver? Are they passing their money forward? Do you see someone walking through the bus collecting money? Just keep your eyes open and you'll be fine.

When you are coming up on your stop, it's good to go ahead and make your way to the door. On larger and newer transportation, there might be a button to press to request a stop. Occasionally, if a driver doesn't think anyone wants to get off, and he sees that no one is waiting at the bus stop for him, he might simply drive on by. If there is a button to press to request a stop, push it. If not, simply getting up and making your way to the door *should* be enough for the driver to see people are preparing to get off.

This information also applies to other above-ground public transportation. Trams are the vehicles which run along a track. Trolleybuses have wheels like a bus, but they run on electricity and stay connected to overhanging power lines above the street. Then there are the smaller shuttle buses. These are more specific "route taxis" that hold fewer people and go to more specific areas of the city.

## **At the Grocery Store**

Most grocery stores—both large and small—require that you leave your backpacks and other larger bags you may have with you at the front of the store in a locker or with an attendant. If you leave your bag with an attendant, they will give you a tag or token you must present in order to pick up your things later. Stores do this to discourage people from easily swiping things off the shelves.

You might also notice male employees walking around keeping an eye on you. These guards are there to let you know that they are watching, so don't even think about trying to steal anything. Though it can feel like an invasion of privacy, they're just keeping an eye out. Ignore them and don't steal anything and you'll be fine.

When buying produce in a grocery store (or when buying candy in bulk), you have to make sure to weigh it *before* you check out. This is usually done in one of two ways. First, the store might have an employee stationed at a counter in the produce department. If this is the case, after you put your produce in a small plastic bag, take it to this employee and he or she will weigh it and stick a barcode on it to be scanned at the checkout counter.

If there is no employee around, look for a computerized scale where you are expected to do this yourself. Often there will be a number posted on the produce sign which you need to enter when weighing your fruits or vegetables. Or there will simply be a guide at the scale. Look for your item, enter the number, and it will print out a sticker for you to place on your bag. When visiting a store for the first time, the quickest way to figure out what you should do is to watch what others are doing. Are they lined up in front of an employee? Are they all taking their fruit to the same scale after they bag it up? Keep an eye out and you'll be okay.

The checkout line can be very intimidating to first-time visitors, so the best thing to do is be honest and patient. You might be asked if you have a store discount card, or if you're participating in their current promotion, and you will most likely be asked if

you need a bag for your groceries. That last one is important. You pay for your grocery sacks here. Though the cost is minimal, it is an extra cost. For planned trips to the store, people bring their own cloth bags or previously used plastic sacks with them. If you'd like to avoid the cost, bring your own bags with you.

If your checkout clerk begins asking you questions, just say, "I'm sorry, I don't understand." If the question wasn't important (like having to do with a discount card), they'll forget about it. If it's about grocery sacks, they might motion to the stack of bags and look for you to make a nod or shake of the head. Just do your best to understand, but be honest when you don't.

You bag all your own groceries here, so don't wait for someone to do it for you. Almost all stores have tables near the exit for you to rearrange your groceries if you need to before you leave. This is especially helpful when you want to transfer any heavy items to a backpack you put in a locker before you entered the store. Some stores have a guard waiting by the door who will look at your receipt and glance through your bags, so keep your receipt with you until you leave.

A *produktiy* is the Ukrainian version of our convenience store. These places are everywhere and usually carry basic foods and other items. What makes them different is that there is usually a counter separating you and the merchandise. In these stores you have to ask the clerk for what you want, and then they will get it for you. The exception is the drinks, which you can usually grab yourself and then take to the counter to pay.

## Correct Change

One of the unexplained phenomena in Ukraine is the lack of change that exists when making a purchase. Cashiers in Ukraine are always begging for correct change. And for good reason—if you take a look at their cash drawers, they're often quite empty. I'm sure there is some logical, economical reason as to why this happens here, but I prefer to think it's a big conspiracy of some kind.

Though it will be impossible to always pay with correct change, do your best to do so. This is especially important at grocery stores because they seem to have the most problems with making change. If something comes out to be 13.20 and you only have a fifty, some ones, and some coins, try to give 53.25. That way they can give you some larger bills (two 20s, let's say) and five kopeks. They really do appreciate this. Sometimes when it's not possible, they will try to make you feel like a terrible human being. Don't take this personally. Also, due to the near-worthlessness of the smaller coins here, you may be short changed every now and then by five or ten kopeks if they don't have it in their drawer to give. This is normal, and you don't need to worry about it.

Buses and other forms of public transportation often do have change, so you can usually get away with paying with bigger bills if you need to. If you're traveling on buses frequently, this can be a great place to gradually make change (paying for one person's ride with a twenty, for example). However, it's best not to do this near the beginning of the day, and sometimes if several people have already broken larger bills ahead of you, they won't be able to help. I have on occasion even paid for myself with a 100 grivna bill. Just know that you will not always be able to do this.

Nicer, busier restaurants are also a good place to make change. However, if you are eating with a large group and everyone is paying for themselves, the restaurant will not be able to handle it if everyone pays with 200s. These are the times when it's best to have one person pay for three or four others, and then later you can pay each other back as you are able.

## **Eating Out**

Speaking of restaurants, Ukraine almost never offers fountain drinks, and there is no such thing as a free refill. In all my years living and traveling in Ukraine, I have found only one place that offers free water, so definitely don't expect that either. Since people don't drink water straight from the tap, you have to buy bottled water wherever you go. Pace yourself with your drinks so you don't end up spending more than you should.

Many small cafes and restaurants need a lot of time to prepare food for a group. Don't be surprised if it takes 30 or even 45 minutes to receive your order. Portion sizes in restaurants are also not what Americans are used to getting, so brace yourself and don't eat so fast.

Leaving tips is a fairly new concept in Ukraine. Waiters are not paid below minimum wage like they are in the States, however they are not paid well either. Some Ukrainians think you should leave tips, and others think you shouldn't. Nicer restaurants will suggest making a 7%, 10%, or 15% tip based on your satisfaction. As a general rule, leaving around 10% isn't a bad idea. However, since leaving tips isn't necessarily expected (depending on who you ask), I make it my personal rule to only leave tips in places where I have been served "above and beyond" the simple task of taking my order and delivering my food. This is of course a personal guideline, and others might disagree. Finally, Ukrainian restaurants and cafes almost never split a check, so don't count on that.

## **Public Restrooms**

Finding public restrooms while you are out and about can be quite a challenge. "For customers only" is the primary rule of thumb. Americans are spoiled with free bathrooms everywhere they go, and it is often an unwelcome surprise that they have to

pay to use a public restroom here in Ukraine. You may call this an outrage, but here it's regular life. Try not to make too big of a deal over things like this, especially in front of Ukrainians. (And, when you do the math, you're only paying a quarter to use the restroom. Let's try and keep things in perspective here.)

Asking where the "restroom" or "bathroom" is will most likely confuse the Ukrainians around you. If you need to use the bathroom and want to be understood the first time, ask where the *toilet* is. Also, Ukraine often (though not always) marks the location of restrooms the way much of Europe does, with the letters *WC*, which stand for *Water Closet*.

Europe uses a lot less water in their toilets than America. As such, there is a much higher chance of leaving a mess in the toilet when you are done. For this reason, you will see a toilet brush in every restroom. This is not there for a once-a-week bathroom cleaning, it's there for *you* when *you* need to scrub away what *you* left behind. Use the brush while you flush the toilet, shake it off inside the bowl to keep it from dripping, then put it back into its holder.

One way to avoid some of this potential mess is to lay down a couple plies of toilet paper inside the bowl before you use it. This is especially helpful if you are using one of the older toilets that are basically designed with a shelf inside (you'll know it when you see it). However, if there is a wastebasket next to the toilet, this usually means that you shouldn't flush the toilet paper. Plumbing in old buildings is often not able to handle all the toilet paper that gets flushed in a public restroom. Though you might get lucky and flush your paper without problems, it's best not to risk it. If there's a wastebasket full of used tissue, that's where yours goes. If not, feel free to flush it.

If you have to pay to use the restroom, they always offer you toilet paper. This is usually handed to you by the lady who takes your money before you enter the bathroom (she will give you more if you indicate you want it). The occasional free restrooms you stumble upon while you're out (like at the public events center or school you are renting for your group's VBS) might not have toilet paper at all. For this reason, it is good to carry tissues with you at all times. Sometimes, when visiting lower-end cafes for example, it's not a bad idea to take a couple napkins from the table with you before you head to the restroom if you don't happen to have your tissues with you.

## The Squatty Potty

Many nicer establishments now feature western-style toilets, but it is not a surprise to find squatty potty toilets even in newer public restrooms. The squatty potty is a very foreign concept to most Americans, but it is a very common toilet design around the world. Not only is it a very sanitary way to use the toilet, it is also considered by many to be a healthier and more efficient way to relieve yourself.

Most Americans are quite confused about how to properly use a squatty potty, and so I want to offer the instructions below to save you time and potential embarrassment. And maybe—if you're like me—you will find yourself preferring this kind of public restroom since you will no longer have to imagine the thousands of other people you've shared your toilet seat with.

Ukrainian squatty potties are designed to be used facing the stall door. You will notice that most toilets include a ridged area on either side of the basin. These ridges are where your feet go, and are designed this way to give you a little bit of traction when you squat.

When undressing, it is important to pull the top of your pants down *only as low as they need to go*. It is a mistake to drop everything to your ankles because this can—at the very least—allow your clothes to touch the bathroom floor and—at the very worst—create an unintentional catch-all of what you're trying to get rid of. This is probably the most valuable piece of squatty potty advice I have ever received, and you will do well to follow it.

When you squat, it is important to keep both feet flat on the floor. For some strange reason, Americans usually balance on their toes when they squat. This is a very unstable way to sit and you won't be able to maintain this position for very long. Keep your feet flat for balance.

In an effort to save water, many toilets have two flush options: a small button for simple flushes, and a big button for when there's more to go down. Also, *many* Ukrainian toilets require you to hold the flush in order to completely empty the tank.



**WRONG**

*Pulling down your pants all the way can lead to some unexpected consequences.*



**RIGHT**

*Pulling down your pants only as far as they need will ensure everything turns out fine.*

# Cultural Sensitivity

## Respect

When traveling to a foreign culture, one of the ways we fall into the role of the stereotypical “Ugly American” is by acting like we own the place. Many Americans unintentionally carry themselves with a confidence that is very distasteful to much of the world. We often can come across as having a sense of entitlement, and since we’re not from around these parts, it can really rub people the wrong way.

You know how it’s okay for you to call your own family crazy, but whenever someone else does it you get a little defensive? It works the same way with cultures. Ukrainians might complain about their own quirks and problems, but when outsiders do, it can very easily come across as rude.

Ukraine is not your home. You are a guest here. Approach your visit to Ukraine like you would approach a first-time visit to someone else’s home. You wouldn’t walk into someone’s house and immediately start pointing out how strange their design choices are, or how poor the craftsmanship is. You wouldn’t make fun of their hairstyles, tell them their bathrooms are disgusting, or that you can’t wait to get home so you can use “normal” toilet paper. You wouldn’t take a look at the food and say, “There’s no way I’m eating that!” Sadly, this is essentially the same thing many visiting Americans do when they are in Ukraine. Understandably, it can be very insulting, and we need to take extra care to ensure we’re not coming across this way.

Learn to replace sentences like “That’s weird,” “That’s crazy,” or “That’s ridiculous!” with phrases like “That’s different,” or “That’s interesting.” *Different* and *interesting* are words of observation. *Weird*, *crazy*, and *ridiculous* are words of judgment.

Recently one of our friends who has interpreted for Christian groups for several years was telling us how frustrating it is when Americans come and insist on taking pictures of the unflattering parts of Ukraine. “Ukraine is a very beautiful country, but everyone wants to take pictures of rundown houses and old toilets and then share them with their friends on Facebook.” Think about what message that might send to the people here. Though I know we don’t mean to be rude, it can very easily look like all we notice is how gross some of the bathrooms are. Remember, many of these Ukrainians will become your friends on Facebook. What story are you sharing with people back home that your new Ukrainian friends will see online?

Part of the reason why Ukrainians might be so self-conscious of their country's inadequacies is because many of them look to America as their standard of perfection. Ukrainians will often ask if you think America is better than Ukraine, looking for you to confirm what they're convinced is true. Try to use these opportunities to point out things you like about Ukraine. When they press you to admit that America is better, answer with statements like, "I love America because it's my home, but I really enjoy how Ukraine..." Remind them that every place has its own pluses and minuses. If they tell you the roads are better in America, tell them the public transportation is fantastic in Ukraine. In these situations, don't give in to the pressure to talk badly about Ukraine and only sing praises for the United States. Instead, try to help them see the good things there are in their own country.

You are a guest here, so be the kind of guest you would like to host in your own home. Treat Ukraine the way you would like the United States to be treated. Remember these things and you will do well here.

And you will be missed when you leave.

## Patience

I once had an American missionary tell me that everything in Ukraine takes *at least* twice as long as you would expect it to. This is absolutely true. In America, we are used to speedy services and catering to the customers. That's not how it works here. In Ukraine, the customer is rarely right. Stores don't care if you are satisfied with their service, and sometimes you might get stuck with a wrong order at a restaurant with no consolation prize.

Ukrainian lines can also be quite the surprise to American visitors. They often don't look like *lines* so much, and they don't work like you'd expect either. Sometimes you'll see someone come in and cut right in front of everyone else just as the line starts moving. Sometimes this is cutting, and sometimes they've simply asked someone to hold their place in line while they go do their other shopping.

Here, there is a lot of "hurry up and wait," and this often pushes an American's patience. They begin criticizing the way things work. They begin making suggestions to the Ukrainians standing nearby as to how this situation could improve. It is often during these times you hear Americans say, "This is crazy! Why would they make you wait this long? Don't they know this is bad for business?" It's in these very moments you need to remind yourself: *Ukraine is not America, therefore I should not expect for things to work like they do at home.* Never demand to be right. Don't force your interpreter into an embarrassing situation because *you* have been put out. We are guests in *their* country. We can't forget this.

Remember, the root of all frustration is unmet expectations. When you expect things to work like they do in America, you will be frustrated when they don't. If you

catch yourself saying, “You would think they would just...” that should be your first red flag. *You* would think that. *They* don’t.

The only way to keep yourself from feeling frustrated while you are here is to adjust your expectations. When you expect things are not going to work the same way they do back home, you won’t be surprised when they don’t. If you expect things to take at least twice as long to accomplish as they would in America, you won’t be frustrated when you find out it’s true. Adjust your expectations and you will limit the number of frustrations.

### **Look Like You Want To Be Here**

When you are here, it is so important to look like you actually want to be here. That may sound funny, but when you can’t speak the language, it’s easy for even the most outgoing person to come across as shy. And, when you’re traveling in a big group of Americans, it’s easy to default to what’s comfortable and simply talk amongst yourselves. Doing this can really confuse the Ukrainians who were under the impression you came to Ukraine to work with them.

One time a Ukrainian preacher asked me, “Why are Americans like that when they come here?” I was a little confused and asked him to explain. He said, “You know, they stand in the corner and look like this,” at which point he shrugged his shoulders, stared at the floor, and looked just like a shy two-year-old being forced to meet someone new. It was funny because it was true. I’ve seen Americans do that. In fact, I’ve been that American.

When you don’t know the language, things can be pretty scary. Of course it’s perfectly understandable, but when you’ve volunteered to travel halfway around the world to work in Ukraine on a mission trip, you can’t let that be an excuse. In Ukraine, foreigners are not graded on performance, but on effort. As long as we’re trying, they welcome us with open arms.

Meet everyone you can, and be careful not to form accidental cliques and exclude the less outgoing Ukrainians (or those who simply don’t speak English well) around you. If you don’t know how to say something, ask. Be ready to make a fool of yourself and have people laugh at the way you pronounce things. Try to enjoy the awkward silence with someone when you both have run out of ways to communicate. The more you put yourself out there, the closer the Ukrainians will feel to you. In every situation, ask yourself, *How can I show that I’m happy to be here right now?* When you come up with an answer, follow through.

## Show Genuine Interest

In Ukraine, asking “How are you doing?” is a way to show genuine interest in a person’s well being. The problem is, to us Americans, asking “How are you doing?” is more of an extension of saying hello or, if anything else, is a barometer to quickly measure a person’s general mood. When asking Ukrainians how they are doing, be prepared to listen to their answer *and* be sure to respond. Asking and then walking on past will be seen as strange and can possibly be hurtful. When a Ukrainian actually answers the question, give them your attention. It’s important to ask people how they are doing, but it’s equally important to listen to their answer.

Another way to get close to the Ukrainians you work with is to show genuine interest in who they are as individuals and as a culture. Ask them about their families. Ask if they have children. Ask what hobbies they have. Ask them what changes they’ve seen in the country during their lifetime. It can be tempting to just have these kinds of conversations with the interpreters you’re working with since they speak English, but this excludes quite a lot of people throughout your day. Take advantage of having an interpreter and go meet someone who doesn’t speak English at all.

Ask Ukrainians to teach you how to say *meaningful* things in Russian. I’ve often heard young Americans ask to learn ridiculous or nonsensical phrases just to make others laugh. Things like this have a very short shelf life. Learn things you can actually use to *communicate*.

## Noise Levels

You know how there’s no one in the world who can embarrass you out in public quite like your own family? You know that feeling when you just want to disappear because you’re embarrassed *and* you’re embarrassed for the other person? Well, on behalf of all Americans living in foreign cultures all around the world, please hear this next sentence with the love and understanding I intend when I share it.

You people are *so* loud.

We Americans are noisy, noisy people. I have no idea why that’s our tendency, but it is. This is especially true in large groups. It’s almost like we think there is a contest to see who can be the loudest. Many cultures are not like that, and when you integrate a loud culture into a quiet culture, that loud culture seems even more loud.

When you are out in public in Ukraine, listen more than you speak. Keep your eyes open, gauge what other Ukrainians are doing, and carry yourself similarly. Observe how quiet everyone is on public transportation: It’s not that people don’t talk to each other, it’s that they do it *quietly*. When you’re walking around outside in a group, you will attract attention simply because you are foreigners. Try to attract positive attention as much as possible.

I once was riding on a bus with another group of Americans I didn't know. One of the girls was talking so loudly to the interpreter next to her that *everyone* on the bus could easily hear the conversation. When they got close to their stop, they started *yelling* to the others to get ready. This group was so oblivious to the fact that this bus was already quiet. We Americans get into such a habit of being loud that we're loud even when we don't have to be. There are, of course, situations when Ukrainians get loud too, but these are the exceptions, not the rule. Please—*please*—keep your noise level similar to those Ukrainians around you.

I'm begging you.

## Ukrainian Style

I have never felt as underdressed as often as I do in Ukraine. The U.S. is a very casual society; jeans, t-shirts, and tennis shoes get us through 99% of our daily activities. Europe is different. All it takes is one trip over here to make any American feel like a complete slob.

Ukrainians view a trip outside the home as an opportunity to get dressed up. This is especially true for the girls. They value looking nice, and since most of their fashion influences come from western Europe, their nice is *very nice*. Nothing baggy, nothing frumpy. No youth rally t-shirts for every day of the week.

You are more than welcome to wear your regular clothes on your trip to Ukraine. You'll look different, of course, but when you're a foreigner there's only so much you can do to blend in. However, I have heard many American women express feeling overly self-conscious about looking underdressed once they get here. If you think that might be you, make sure to pack accordingly. (Obviously if you will be working at a children's camp, you won't see as much high style and shouldn't be packing dress clothes to wear everyday. However it is a good idea to have a couple sets of nicer clothes for special events.)

As is the case everywhere, men do have a little more leeway in this area, and generally the younger someone is the more casually they dress. However, unless they're working in the heat, or just hanging out in their neighborhood at the end of the day, Ukrainian men generally dress nicer than American men most of the time.

It's important to understand that Ukrainians do not have near the amount of clothes in their closets that we Americans do. It's also not nearly as convenient to wash your clothes here as it is in America. Because of this, Ukrainians often wear the same clothes several days in a row. That is to say, they wear their clothes until they actually *need* to be washed. (If they only have one nice shirt, they will want to look nice as long as possible before having to go without that shirt.) Though in America most wouldn't be caught dead in the same shirt two days in a row, it's completely normal to do so here in Ukraine. Try to keep yourself from making any comments or jokes about it.



*Americans often dress more casually than Ukrainians.  
If you think this might make you too self-conscious while you're here,  
be sure to pack accordingly.*

## Modesty

Groups from America are often warned about the different standards of modesty in Ukraine. “You are going to be shocked at how immodest the girls are over there,” they’ll say. This is true, you will probably be shocked. However, have you thought about what this looks like from a Ukrainian’s point of view? One time I was talking with a friend who was going to be interpreting for Americans at a camp for the first time. I thought it was quite funny when he shared that another friend who already had several years of experience told him, “You are going to be shocked at how modest these American girls are.”

Though it’s hard to comprehend, what we’d consider purposely pushing the limits in America is considered absolutely normal here. Ukrainians also don’t adhere to some of the clothing contradictions we do in the States. If a woman can wear a bikini at the beach, what’s the big deal about wearing a see-through blouse around town which shows her bra?

Sexuality in Ukraine is much more in your face than it is in America, and this can really come as a surprise. Do your best not to look shocked or disgusted, and try not to call an unreasonable amount of attention to it in your conversations in front of other Ukrainians. Doing so can come across as unreasonably judgmental since you are the visitor.

My biggest piece of advice when it comes to interacting with a Ukrainian’s level of modesty is to remember that this is *their* culture, and what you’re seeing is normal to them. If you are working with a group of Ukrainian Christians, follow their lead. If they’re not freaking out about it, you really shouldn’t either. It could very well be that they also don’t approve, but they’re choosing their battles. Purity and modesty are, after all, characteristics that start in the heart and work their way out.

Try to remember what you came for. Was it to launch a campaign against the oversexualization of Ukrainian women, or was it to share the gospel with someone who has never heard it before? If conversations about modesty come up naturally, use those times to listen, understand, *then* teach with love and compassion. Focus on sharing *why* you believe what you believe about modesty, not just *what* you believe.

## Modesty and Men

In more conservative Christian circles in the States, men are also held to a standard of modesty that is just plain bizarre in Ukraine. There is nothing strange about men going shirtless here. Boys might spend the entire summer with their shirts off, in and out of Bible class. Men who are working outside or making deliveries are often shirtless. Again, if the Ukrainian Christians you’re working with don’t seem bothered by it, you shouldn’t be either.

Ukrainian men also sport Speedos or tight-fitting trunks when they are at the beach or around the pool. Though this is almost always a humorous sight to Americans, keep reminding yourself it is completely normal here and, to a certain extent, you're the one who looks ridiculous swimming around in your clothes.

## **Fatal Attraction**

Certain people will be drawn to you only because you are American. They will respond to event invites not because there will be a Bible study, but because there will be Americans present. They come because they want to practice their English or because they want some kind of help. They want to ask you to send them a laptop when you get back to the States or help them with a financial problem that they are having in their lives. In short, they want to use you.

We recognize these people much easier in our own culture, but it can be difficult to see them when we're on a mission trip. I remember witnessing this firsthand during my first summer in Ukraine. A group of Americans came for a two-week campaign, and a lot of new faces attended. When the Americans left, however, so did those Ukrainians. Later, I saw one of the free books the Americans had handed out for sale on a table in the market.

Unfortunately, there isn't a lot we can do to avoid this. We are who we are and people see us in a certain way. This doesn't mean we shouldn't come at all or that we shouldn't give of ourselves. There is, however, one very effective thing we can do when it comes to discerning how much of ourselves we give to certain people: We should listen to the Ukrainian Christians around us. Ukrainian churches see these kinds of visitors every summer, year after year. They watch as Americans fall for a story and give away their help to someone who has done this ten times before. Don't promise your help before you take the time to talk with the preacher or with any other knowledgeable person you're working with.

One friend shared with me that Ukrainian Christians who are truly in need can be hurt by watching this happen. They don't go up to a stranger from America and start telling them what they need because—just like in America—it's socially unacceptable to do so. However, Americans who are on a mission and excited to help everyone they come in contact with jump at these opportunities without questioning where they are throwing their pearls.

This is a very difficult subject to talk about because we don't like to make these kinds of judgment calls. Yes, God desires for even people like this to come to a knowledge of Him. Try to connect visitors with church leaders, and seek advice from them when you are confronted with opportunities to financially help strangers. And, while you're talking with them, maybe ask if there are any church members who might better benefit from your help.

## American Paparazzi

Be sure to earn the right to take pictures here. Ukrainians enjoy taking pictures just as much as we do, but I think it's very important to show people you care before you show them your camera. You're not on a safari, you're on a mission trip. When visiting a church gathering on Sunday morning, it's not necessary for everyone to pull out their cameras and take pictures during the worship service. *Worship* with your brothers and sisters. If one or two happen to take pictures, get a copy of theirs later.

## Watch What You Waste

Americans can be very wasteful at times. Be mindful about what you throw away or spend your money on in the presence of Ukrainians. Many things in Ukraine are less expensive than they are in the States, and Americans can appear rich and careless with their money when they say things like, "I'll buy ten of these because they're only five bucks!" Also, in cafeteria-style restaurants where you pick out your food like at a buffet, try not to go overboard. It's much better to go back for seconds than to leave plates full of uneaten food. Poverty and famine are a very real part of Ukraine's history; throwing away perfectly good food is unthinkable to most adults here.

Most Ukrainians believe in the stereotype that all Americans are rich and can buy whatever they want. Do your best to be a good steward of the money you have been blessed with, and try not to foster this false view of America that Ukrainians see in the movies.

## Avoid "Maybe"

As a general rule, "Wouldn't it be nice?" means "This is a real possibility" to a Ukrainian. Don't give out false hope if you're not serious about following through. Americans live in a dreamworld of positive hypothetical situations. A Ukrainian might say, "I would love to visit America one day," and an American might respond, "Oh that would be great! You could come stay at my house and we could travel the States together and I'd show you everything." To an American, we are thinking, *Wouldn't it be great if that could actually happen?* However, Ukrainians don't spend time in hypotheticals unless there is a real chance it will take place. To them, our positivity sounds like a plan. I've seen this be hurtful in two different ways. First, Ukrainians get their hopes up and are discouraged to find out the American wasn't serious. Second, Ukrainians begin to think Americans aren't ever genuine about the things they say.



*Show them you care before you show them your camera.  
You're on a mission trip, not a safari.*

# The Language(s)

## Don't They Speak Ukrainian In Ukraine?

Ukrainian is the official language of Ukraine. However, due to the long rule of the Soviet Union, many Ukrainians speak Russian as their native language. The discussion over which should be the primary spoken language has been one of the most controversial issues since Ukraine declared its independence in 1991. Battle lines have been drawn almost directly down the middle of the country. Those west of the capital city of Kiev primarily speak Ukrainian, while those east of Kiev generally speak Russian. The closer you get to the middle the more you will hear a mixture of the two (which Ukrainians call *Surzhik*).

Ukrainian is similar to Russian, but make no mistake: it is a different language. Just because you can speak and understand one of the two does not mean you can speak and understand the other. It's not unlike the differences between Spanish and Portuguese. They are similar languages, and you do find words that sound alike, but you don't know one simply because you know the other.

Most people born in Ukraine over the last twenty years speak and understand both languages fairly well. As an American, it is fascinating to me to watch an entire nation use two languages simultaneously. On the television show *Ukraine's Got Talent*, there are three judges and one host. The host and one of the judges speak only in Ukrainian, while the other two judges speak completely in Russian. They interact with each other and talk with contestants completely fluently without missing a beat.

Not long ago I met a young married couple. They both grew up in Kiev, but the husband grew up speaking Russian natively, and the wife grew up speaking Ukrainian. They speak and understand both languages fluently, but they generally choose to speak to each other in their respective native languages.

For many here, having Ukrainian become the primary language is a very important issue. It's a way to keep ties with the past and to foster a sense of pride and independence for the future. Maintaining a sense of unique culture is very important to many Ukrainians. Even though I, a visitor, might have my own thoughts and opinions about this subject, it is important to remember that I will always be a foreigner, and I cannot truly understand what this situation means to native Ukrainians. As much as it may seem similar to hearing more and more Spanish in the States, it's not like that at all.

## **Is it Russian or Ukrainian?**

Russian and Ukrainian use very similar alphabets, and sometimes it can be frustrating trying to figure out a word only to discover it's not even in the language you are studying. Here's an easy clue to help determine if you're looking at Ukrainian or Russian words: Look for our English lowercase letter *i*. If you see that letter it means the word you are looking at is in Ukrainian because this letter does not exist in Russian. Of course this letter is not in every Ukrainian word, but it can be a helpful tip when you are trying to figure it out.

## **Russian**

The Russian language is a very difficult language for English speakers to learn. One of the first things you will notice when visiting Ukraine is that Russian, unlike Spanish and other Latin-based alphabets, looks completely different from English. Russian uses what is called the Cyrillic alphabet. Even though some letters look similar to our English letters, most have very different pronunciations. The Russian language has a total of 33 letters, two of which are actually impossible to pronounce by themselves.

A two-week mission trip isn't nearly enough time to really get a grasp of the language, but don't let that discourage you from learning what you can before you come and while you're here. Learning the alphabet is the best place to start and isn't terribly difficult. In fact, many words on billboards and even some menu items have English words written in Russian letters (like интернет and кетчуп, for example). If you know how to sound out the words, you might find you understand more than you thought you could.

I've included the alphabet with pronunciation help on the next page. If you need any clarification, be sure to ask a native speaker.

# Alphabet Pronunciation

Аа	<i>ah</i> as in <b>author</b> ( <u>not</u> as in apple)
Бб	<i>b</i> as in <b>boat</b>
Вв	<i>v</i> as in <b>view</b>
Гг	<i>g</i> as in <b>get</b> ( <u>not</u> as in genius)
Дд	<i>d</i> as in <b>door</b>
Ее	<i>ye</i> as in <b>yesterday</b>
Ёё	<i>yo</i> as in <b>yoke</b>
Жж	<i>zh</i> as in <b>pleasure</b>
Зз	<i>z</i> as in <b>zoo</b>
Ии	<i>ee</i> as in <b>eel</b>
Йй	<i>iy</i> as in <b>boy</b>
Кк	<i>k</i> as in <b>kitchen</b>
Лл	<i>l</i> as in <b>like</b>
Мм	<i>m</i> as in <b>mom</b>
Нн	<i>n</i> as in <b>night</b>
Оо	<i>o</i> as <b>born</b> ( <u>not</u> as in bone)
Пп	<i>p</i> as in <b>park</b>
Рр	<i>r</i> as in <b>rain</b> (always a rolled <i>r</i> )
Сс	<i>s</i> as in <b>sea</b>
Тт	<i>t</i> as in <b>take</b>
Уу	<i>oo</i> as in <b>food</b>
Фф	<i>f</i> as in <b>fame</b>
Хх	<i>kh</i> — a rough <i>h</i> (like a cat hissing)
Цц	<i>ts</i> as in <b>sits</b>
Чч	<i>ch</i> as in <b>chair</b>
Шш	<i>sh</i> as in <b>shop</b>
Щщ	<i>sh</i> as in <b>sheep</b>
Ъ	Hard Sign, no sound of its own
Ыы	a deep-throated <b>ee</b> (ask a native speaker to demonstrate)
Ь	Soft Sign, no sound of its own
Ээ	<i>eh</i> as in <b>peg, pet</b>
Юю	<i>yoo</i> as in <b>universe</b>
Яя	<i>yah</i> as in <b>yawn</b>

## The Russian Bible

The Russian Bible is organized a little differently than our English Bibles. This can cause problems when an English Bible study or sermon is being interpreted. Take for example, *Psalms*. Psalm 9 and 10 in the English Bible are combined to make up Psalm 9 in the Russian Bible. Therefore, our classic Psalm 23 is their classic Psalm 22. The two languages stay about one chapter apart (there are a few speed bumps between 114 and 117) until they meet up again in chapter 147 so that both Bibles have 150 psalms in total. The verses in the Psalms are also often off by one verse because the Russian Bible will sometimes count the psalm descriptions (for example, "To the choirmaster") as the first verse.

The order of the books in the Old Testament is the same as ours, but instead of *1st Samuel*, *2nd Samuel*, *1st Kings*, *2nd Kings*, they have *1st*, *2nd*, *3rd*, and *4th Kings*. In the New Testament, however, the book order is quite different. After the gospels and Acts, the Russian Bible has *James*, *1st* and *2nd Peter*, *1st*, *2nd*, *3rd John*, *Jude*, all the letters of Paul (in the usual order), then *Hebrews*, and *Revelation*.

If your interpreter has participated in Christian studies before, this will most likely not be a problem. However, many first-time interpreters get quite confused when you begin reading the same-but-different psalm, or when you say, "Turn over to the next book of..." and that next book isn't the same in their Bible.

For those of you who will be working with Ukrainian speakers, the Ukrainian Bible is a whole different beast. Whereas English and Russian book titles and people names often share similarities, the Ukrainian Bible might use a different word entirely. If this is the case, there is little you can prepare for ahead of time other than by having a conversation with your interpreter. Make sure they are aware of things like the location of your scripture references, the Bible names you might use, etc. Again, if your interpreter has participated in Christian studies before, these things will most likely not be an issue.

## When Ukrainians Speak English

Most Ukrainians learn English in school, and they learn it from Ukrainian teachers. This means the information they get isn't always reliable and can lead to a lot of misinformation. Ukrainians also study British English almost exclusively, and much of what they learn comes from outdated textbooks. I say this only to point out that though the interpreters you might be working with speak well, they don't necessarily speak "our" English. As such, it will be useful for you to keep the following things in mind:

### *Give and Take*

In English, we *take* tests at school. In the Russian language, they do the opposite: they *give* tests (and sometimes *write* tests). It is very common to hear a Ukrainian say in English, "I must give my exams." Translation: "I have tests to take."

### *School Is For Kids*

In English we refer to "school" as any institution where learning takes place, therefore we can ask a kindergartner *and* a graduate student, "How's school?" and think nothing of it. The word *school* in Ukraine, however, only applies to education *through high school*. It is very common for an American to ask a 20-year-old, "So do you go to school?" Ukrainians often make a face at this and say, "No, I go to *university!*"

### *Children Can't Be Students*

In Ukraine, students are called students only in higher education institutions. Students in "school" are referred to as *pupils* or *schoolboys* and *schoolgirls*.

### *Good Marks*

Ukrainian students don't receive grades on a 100-point system like Americans. In elementary, middle, and high school, they use a 12-point system (12 being the best). In higher education, they switch to a five-point system (five being the best). Because they study British English in school, they refer to "grades" as "marks."

### *My Speciality*

Most Ukrainians don't understand the question, "What are you majoring in?" or "What did you get your degree in?" Simply asking, "What do you study?" or "What was your *speciality?*" will get you the answer you're looking for.

*A Holiday Over The Holidays*

In American English, we use the word *vacation* whereas British people use the word *holiday*. You will probably hear the word *holiday* here much more than the word *vacation*. "I went to the Black Sea on holiday" means "I went to the Black Sea for vacation."

*How Many Brothers And Sisters?!*

When you ask a Ukrainian how many brothers and sisters they have, they will include their cousins in the count. This is because in Russian the distinction is made by the adjective which comes before it — *blood brother* vs. *cousin brother*. Just know that when you ask about how many brothers and sisters someone has, you'll likely have to ask a follow-up question about how many are "real" or "blood" brothers and sisters.

## **Tips On Speaking With An Interpreter**

It takes a while to get used to having someone interpret everything you say. It's hard to learn to slow down, to take breaks between sentences, and to check to make sure everyone is understanding what's being said. Though working with an interpreter is more of a skill you learn while doing, here are a few things to keep in mind to get your words off to the right start.

### *They're Partners, Not Gofers*

Because your interpreters will be some of your only real connections to the culture and the language, it can be very easy to begin treating them like hired help instead of a hired voice. You might suddenly find yourself wanting to ask them to do things for you that go beyond their normal job description. Ukrainians are some of the most helpful people in the world, but be sure you're not taking advantage of their servant hearts. Interpreters are your partners and should always be treated as equals. You couldn't be here without them, and they wouldn't be here without you.

### *Preparation Is Key*

You are coming to communicate a message to others, so do everything you can to make sure that is happening. Talk with your interpreter ahead of time to ensure they understand the idea of the lesson. Check with them to see if the jokes you want to tell will make sense when translated. Make sure they understand how to play the games you're going to teach the children.

Most poems and songs do not translate well since the only way to keep the rhythm or tune is to use different words. The spirit of the song is kept the same, but the words may be quite different. Sometimes visitors want to quote from classic Christian songs, and interpreters have to reconcile the two versions on the spot. If you plan on quoting poems or songs, check with your interpreter beforehand. Remember, the words won't feel the same way they do to you once they're translated. When in doubt, go without.

Encourage your interpreters to ask clarifying questions when they don't understand something you've said. First-time interpreters get very nervous about saying everything correctly, and they're often embarrassed to show they've misunderstood something. Be sure to tell them that being understood is most important to you, and so you'd rather them stop and ask whenever they're not sure.

On that note, many interpreters get frustrated when they ask the speaker to repeat what's just been said because, more often than not, we reword the sentence entirely when we answer. The problem is, we assume their question means they didn't understand (or, in reality, we simply can't remember what we just said). However, when the interpreter has 90% of your point in their head and they just need to hear that key

phrase again to complete it, it's frustrating when we give them something brand new. If they ask you to repeat, *repeat*. If they didn't understand, they will let you know in other ways.

#### *Watch What You Say And How You Say It*

Avoid using idioms as much as you can remember to do so. Saying things like, "Piece of cake!" and, "Don't judge a book by its cover" can really throw an interpreter for a loop. (*Throw someone for a loop?*)

Most interpreters are not capable of simultaneous interpretation (speaking at the same time you are). The best practice is to speak in full sentences, and only one or two at a time. We seem to have a natural desire to speak in half-sentences when we are being interpreted, especially when we are trying to put an emphasis on something. This is very difficult to interpret due to the complex nature of the Russian language. Keep things simple as you learn the capabilities of your interpreter. Over time, you'll both ease into a natural rhythm together.

Ask questions to your audience every now and then to verify your message is getting across. Their answers will be a good indicator as to how well your interpreter is understanding you.

When working with children it can be difficult to remember that the kids don't understand you when you are trying to keep them under control. Often, especially during crafts or games, both the teacher and the interpreter are distracted by different children. I've watched teachers make an announcement to a group while the interpreter was busy helping a child, and neither one realized that nothing was actually communicated to the kids.

#### *When They're Not Christians*

Depending on the size and nature of the event, the church or group you're working with may hire non-Christian interpreters. These may be people who have no religious affiliation at all, or they may be those who call themselves Christians based on cultural traditions. As you get to know your interpreter more and more, it would be a good idea to engage them about their faith to find out what they actually believe. Many interpreters have been converted over the years because of the words they interpret and because of the relationship they build with their speaker. Remember that your influence on them can either help or hurt their perception of Christians. Don't be shy about your faith, but be loving and respectful in how you share it.

Be extra careful to make sure they understand the Bible words and names you'll be using. Also, Christian interpreters are good at translating Bible verses on the fly because they are familiar with them. Non-Christian interpreters can have difficulty with verses, and it may be better to have them open their Bibles and read them directly.

*When You're Not Satisfied*

Working with interpreters can be a wonderful experience, but sometimes it can get awkward. Sometimes they show up for the day in a bad mood, and suddenly your words about how much God loves us don't sound so appealing anymore. Sure, they're *translating* your words, but they're not *interpreting* them. They're not conveying your excitement or emotions. Sometimes it becomes obvious your interpreter just isn't capable enough for the specific job they've been given.

It's important to deal with these situations because you are here to communicate, and if you aren't communicating well, you're not accomplishing what you came to do. No matter what the frustration may be, it is always important to talk with your interpreter first. If they're having a bad day, listen and show compassion for how they are feeling. Express to them you can see their mood carrying into their interpretation. Remind them it's very important to you that the audience hears not only your words, but also your tone and emotions.

Be forgiving and be patient, especially if it is their first time to do what they're doing. However, if things don't seem to be improving, it might be time to talk to the Ukrainian who is in charge of the event to see what can be done. If it is a concern over ability, maybe they can switch places with someone interpreting a simpler class. If it is a concern about attitude problems, it is important that the boss talks to them about their performance.

The relationship you make with your interpreter can be a lifelong blessing for the both of you. Always be sure to express your thanks for their time and talent, and make sure they feel appreciated for giving you the opportunity to speak.

# Basic Words and Phrases

Below is a list of basic words that will be good for you to know while you are in Ukraine. These are my personal phonetic transcriptions, and are focused more on getting you to say these words in the easiest and most understandable way. If you happen to show these to a Ukrainian, they might be appalled since many are not technically correct transliterations of their Russian counterparts.

The part in bold is the part of the word you put emphasis on. For example, we don't say *pro-nunc-i-a-tion* in English, but rather *pro-nunc-i-a-tion*. Also, every "y" in the examples below is to be pronounced as *y* as in *yes*, not *y* as in *dye*.

Hello (formal)	<b>strahs</b> -vwee-tyeh
Hello (informal)	preev- <b>yet</b>
Goodbye (formal)	dah-svee- <b>dahn</b> -ya
Goodbye (informal)	paw- <b>kah</b>
How are you?	kahk delah?
Good	hah-rah- <b>show</b>
Fine	nor- <b>mal</b> -nah
Bad	<b>plo</b> -ha
Good morning!	<b>doe</b> -bro-ye <b>oo</b> -tra
Good afternoon!	<b>doe</b> -bree d-yen
Good evening	<b>doe</b> -bree <b>vye</b> -cher
Good job! (to one person)	mah-lah- <b>dyetz</b>
Good job! (to more than one)	mah-lah- <b>tsee</b>
Excuse me! / I'm sorry!	eez-vee- <b>nee</b> -tye
Please	puh- <b>zhal</b> -stah
May I? / Is it possible?	<b>mozh</b> -nah
Uncarbonated water	vah- <b>dah</b> bez <b>gah</b> -za
Where is the restroom?	g'dye too-ah- <b>lyet</b>
What is this called?	kahk <b>eh</b> -tah nah-zee- <b>vai</b> -yets-ye
More	ye- <b>show</b>
Money	<b>dyen</b> -gee

Remember, the Russian *R* is always pronounced as a *rolled R*, so if you want to sound even better when you speak, roll that thing.

# In Closing

You know those moments when someone has food stuck in their teeth and you don't know how to tell them? You start feeling all panicky inside and hope someone who is closer to them than you are sees it soon so they can tell them it's there. That's what I hope this book was for you. Nothing I wrote was intended to scare you or make you overly paranoid about the way you act in Ukraine. Ukrainians are very forgiving and often enjoy watching our American quirks and idiosyncrasies. I know that none of us intend to offend in any way, but the truth is, sometimes we do. I just want to be the friend who lets you know you have food in your teeth.

## Experience vs. Reality

One thing I want to leave you with is the understanding that, in your life, *your* experience determines *your* reality. If you only spend three weeks working in Ukraine, be careful not to make blanket statements about what Ukraine is or who Ukrainians are. If you have come here every summer for the last ten years, you still have a very limited understanding of this country and its people. Even someone like me who has lived in Ukraine for many years has to be careful how he generalizes Ukraine.

You may have had a terrible food experience working at a summer camp for a few weeks, but that doesn't mean "Ukrainian food is terrible." You may have experienced awful customer service at a restaurant, but that doesn't mean "Ukrainian waitresses are so rude." Even though your experience made that your reality, that doesn't mean your reality is an accurate representation of the culture as a whole. Do your best to use words that honestly reflect the experience you had. Say things like, "I saw a lot of..." and, "They were all *generally*..." and, "The people I worked with *seemed* to be..."

Remember what you tell people back home will most likely end up being the only impression of Ukraine they will ever have. Try to be fair about what you say, and be respectful in your criticism.

## I Don't Know Everything

On that note, I want to say again that I don't know everything there is to know about Ukraine. The things I've written are based on my own experiences in this country and my conversations with Ukrainians. Just because I have seen some of these things to be true in my experience doesn't make them true across the board. There will always be

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exceptions, and there will always be those who don't agree. Please use the things you've read here as a jumping off point. Ask Ukrainians what they think about these things. Gather information. Learn about this culture.

Ukraine is a very special place to me. Thank you for giving me the chance to share my heart with you. I love when visitors come to experience Ukraine, and I hope I can make that experience be as positive as possible.

—*Brandon Price*

*Conclusion*

Please send questions, comments, or any other feedback to  
[feedback@brandonandkatie.com](mailto:feedback@brandonandkatie.com).

(Seriously. I would love to hear from you.)