

A Yacht Trip on the Dnieper

I wake up Sunday morning (June 29, 2008) with a sunburn, a tired muscles, and what should be a hangover but isn't. And a story to tell.

I was invited on a yacht party in the Dnipro. I thought it would be an occasion in which they attempted to connect foreign guys with local women. Not the case at all. It was a singles group, but I was the only foreigner in the group, and nobody's English was nearly on par with my Russian. Also, it was more mature people. Men and women from their 30s through their 50s. I spent the whole day speaking Russian and it went fairly well. I left the dictionary on shore and got along okay just on what I know.

We were supposed to meet at the yacht at 10:00. Our group got there about quarter after, and the stragglers didn't make it till close to 11:00. We sailed about 12 km down the river. The yacht club is not fancy. There are few impressive boats, and the club itself is kind of overgrown with weeds. Once we were on the river we found that there were not many other boats out there.

We were a party of 15. Let me describe the pilgrims.

The organizer is Svetlana, a handsome brunette somewhere in her 40s. She was the one who kept promoting volleyball and other games. We played a lot of volleyball, no competition, just a circle of people trying to keep the ball in the air.

Eugene, a tall, well-formed doctor somewhere in his 30s, who seems to be a yoga, a naturalist, and everything else buff. He also loves girls. He used every occasion he could find picked him up in his arms, snuggle next to them, kiss them, massage them, and sweet talk to them. The girls respond; they like it.

Sveta, actually another Svetlana, a saftig girl in her late 30s. Lovely face, sweet personality. She's the financial manager for a golf course going up 20 km outside town. But we didn't talk much about business after the first 10 minutes. Probably the most ardent fan of Eugene's attention. Loves to swim. Actually this is something that I noticed about most of the people here. In any crowd of Americans, I am about the only guy who goes in the water. I was the only guy who swam clear across the channel today, but there were a lot of people in the water. They believed in exercise.

Ira, 40-ish, something more than saftig, a little bit withdrawn, but very pleasant. I didn't get her story. Joined us when we danced on the deck on the way back.

Elena, much like Ira. Friendly enough.

Larissa, a woman in her 40s, who's pleasant when you talk to her but seem to spend about half the trip had her own dreamworld. Did not get too much chance to talk to her either. I don't think that she is much of a conversationalist, and of course that is what I thrive on.

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Alexander -- Sasha. A guy who looks like a bookkeeper. Pale, out of shape although not very fat. Has amazingly unfashionable, high pockets type swimsuit. Kept to himself a lot. I didn't get much chance to talk to him.

Dima and Tania, a couple in their 30s. There are not many names in circulation in Russia, but as anybody who knows Russian novels, there are a million nicknames for every name. Dima is short for Dmitri, Tania is short for Tatiana. Dima loves to drink and made sure that our glasses were always full. He has a bit of a gut to show for it, but when they brought out a rope for limbo and jump rope he did amazingly well, jumping rope until the girls who were twirling it got tired.

Taras, our captain. Well formed man in his 30s. The boat belongs to his family. He said that they built themselves out of wood, steel, fiberglass, and concrete. It is a pretty impressive job. My guess is somewhere between 60 and 70 feet long motor sailboat. A single tall mast which we used going down river. The captain also managed the BBQ. They call it shashlik, we would call it sheesh kebab. He built a fire on the ground using wood that he scrounged quite easily. When it was going enough to start the charcoal, he poured the briquettes on bit by bit. He had two heavy wire supports, undulating to provide support for the skewers, that he drove into the ground with a hatchet. The fire started out hot, and as it cools he simply drove them deeper into the ground to get the barbecue close to the fire. The system did an excellent job of cooking the meal, and made very efficient use of the charcoal.

Volodya, our first mate, a towering man with angular good looks. The Ukrainians are quite a mixture of tribal stocks, Iranian, Greek, Turkish, and all over Europe. This fellow has what you would call a Norwegian hatchet face. I did not get too much of a chance to talk to him. He was one of the players. By virtue of his size and imposing looks I think he always kind of dominates. He led many toasts.

This is a good moment to talk about drinking. We were provisioned with vodka, cognac, wine and beer. Among men it seems that the vodka and cognac were the favorites. Women seem to favor wine. Anyhow, most of our accountants were down for the count midway through the very long afternoon. This is the rap that you hear on Russian men, that they drink too much. My take would be that they don't hold it quite so well. I don't think that they drink any more than the rest of us, but being out of shape they maybe don't metabolize it terribly well. Or maybe it was simply clear to them that the girls were more inclined to play kiss and tickle with others and they simply decided to get in a good snooze.

Andrei a white-collar worker in his 40s., he does something in accounting. He knew about Oracle when I talked about it, and compared it to the local favorite accounting system, 1S. He volunteered to translate for me if I had any problem with Russian, and I made his day by asking. The words for "check" and "joke"

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are fairly similar, and I could not sort out that the context required "joke." Andre was happy to help.

Valentina, fiftysomething, with a pretty face and a fair amount of makeup. Looks like a bit of a party girl. I'm sure she was hoping to connect with somebody, but did not. She was wearing a very nice white outfit. This is a drama in three acts: sailing down river, the barbecue, and returning home up river. I picture a Valentina's role in act three. She is sitting at the tiller, with the captain, steering the boat. It gives her somebody to talk to. She does not want to be alone.

Janna, thirtysomething, who came with Valentina. Janna brought about four changes of clothes. Kept emerging on deck with a new outfit so the guys could photograph her. They all did. Actually, the women were pretty active as well with their cameras. There were a lot of poses reminiscent of "Titanic", with people hanging over the bow of the boat. Janna, however, was handicapped by always wearing very high heels. Not the ideal outfit for climbing the rigging of the boat. Chaucer would have found a couple of other things besides the high heels to characterize her in this Canterbury tale. She was wearing a little playboy bunny with fake diamonds. She has a narrow face with close set eyes that one might say had a stoat-like, predatory appearance. She was the only one of the group who seem to stay full-time on her cell phone.

Janna was the last person to whom I introduced myself. She was getting enough attention from everybody else. Yet, in act three, our sail home, she interrupted her telephone call routine to make sure that she got my business card and give me her information. I was surprised to learn that she is a director of marketing for a software company. In any case, I will let her contact me. If my friend Edward were whispering in my ear, he would tell me "Graham, be careful, no good will come of this." However, you must recall, Edward, that you far more often steered me into trouble than out of it. And you got quite a few good anecdotes to tell for it.

Lidia, a widow with children 20 and 29. Six months on pension. That tells me pretty exactly her situation; women can draw pension at 50. She tells me that she used to be a model, and I believe it. She's tall with very nice features, walks with a grace that you would love to be able to imitate, and was a bit more reserved than the other girls. On the other hand, she decided within about two minutes of our meeting that she wanted to get to know me fairly well, and we spent most of the day talking. I like the idea. She is interested in the world and has time to share. Of course she certainly has another agenda. So what?

That is less than 15; I think I am missing an accountant or two. Other names will come back to me. The essence of the drama was this. On the way down we got to know each other. Swapped life stories. I got a lot of attention as the foreigner. They want to know what I'm doing here, how long I plan to stay, what kind of work I do, where I study Russian... the whole thing. That conversation took

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maybe half an hour. Got us past the sprawl of million-dollar waterfront homes in Osakorski that I understand from today's discussion are built on former truck farms and which have uncertain titles. The owners cannot now sell them. After that initial flurry of introductions, I just kind of wandered around the deck and kept to myself. Svetlana asked me if I were bored. No, not at all. Just drinking in the fresh wind and lovely temperature. 76°, clean air, light breeze. Absolutely ideal.

I was also contemplating what I was seeing. Nobody in Kiev drinks the tap water. There is a huge market for bottled water, just as in the US. But they were perfectly willing to swim in the Dnipro downstream from where they take the tap water out. And the tap water is treated. The river seem to me to be totally clean. Nothing floating in it, no bad taste or smell, lots of fish. It probably is dirty miles downstream where there are a number of factories, but here it is nice.

Act Two opened with our departure from the boat down a steep, slippery gangplank. Dr. Eugene gallantly stood at the bottom helping everybody, especially the ladies. There was about a 3 foot gap between where they gangplank was sitting in the water and the shore. He collected each woman in turn in his arms and deposited her on the bank. He offered to help me, but I'm damned if I'm going to let anybody make me feel old. I jumped fairly gracefully from the gangplank to the shore and he congratulated me as "sportsman."

There was sparse furniture on the boat. A folding table and four benches strapped to the railings. They brought those on the shore and set up the picnic. The hors d'oeuvres consisted of Georgian bread, kind of a cross between Pita bread and tortillas, on which they put cheese, cold cuts, tomatoes, cucumbers, and lots of dill and parsley. There were also olives, sardines, and bottled mushrooms. A little bit to nibble as we started to drink. Dima acted as the Toastmaster, pouring cognac and vodka. Real men drank the hard stuff. We also renewed the business of getting acquainted.

While the fire was getting going, Svetlana let us out to play volleyball. I had expressed some reservations, but it turns out that I was no worse than anybody else, maybe better than the average. And nobody cared. It was a great chance to jump around in the sun. I came back with pretty good color on my face and body. I am very glad that I bought some sunscreen. Even slathering myself with number 30, I am on the verge of being burned.

The shashlik just kept coming. There was more than enough. We kept leaving the BBQ and returning. In one of these interludes Eugene showed us a bit more of his mystical side, doing some very good yoga. Then he got into massage with a very willing Sveta. He worked her back, and another girl, Valentina (?) massaged her legs. It looked like heaven. I am no slouch at massage and started to work on Lidia's neck and shoulders. She was appreciative, but didn't let go

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nearly as much as Sveta. I am happy to note that she returned the favor, working suntan oil into my back really well.

This is about the point where the real players distinguished themselves. Sexuality appears more open here than it is in the United States. The alpha males, Eugene and Volodya, entertained their harems while the accountants went off to snooze. I hung with the alpha males and there is a picture of me holding some girl in a pose reminiscent of "The Rape Of The Sabine Women." Except she was smiling. Another girl, sad to say, took a look at me and told me that she was too heavy for me. The kind of thing that deflates the male ego.

I stayed on deck most of the way home. We danced to Ukrainian popular music. English lyrics, but unfamiliar songs. Unfamiliar to me, that is. Maybe it has been too much time since high school. Lydia, Svetlana, Ira, Elena, took turns dancing. The omnipresent Eugene was there with us, of course. As I mentioned before, Valentina was in the stern keeping company with Taras as he steered the ship. Jana more or less kept to herself with her cell phone, much of the time below decks. There was one accountant snoozing under the forwards set of stairs. Don't remember where the other was. When I approached the forward cabin there was a couple seriously entangled in each other's arms. I waited a decent interval and took another look. This time it was a bare bottom had a pair of feet in the missionary position. They were going to be busy for quite awhile; I turned around and changed in the head, even though it was pitch black. I lost my watch in the process, though when I mentioned the fact, somebody magically handed it to me. Of course you and I both wonder who the missionaries were. I have shared all I know; I think I know who it wasn't.

I got home about 11 o'clock, saying goodnight to Lydia on the Metro as we got to my station. She was headed to the end of the line to stay with her son. I gave her my card just as we said goodbye and she said she would give me a call or get together and go to a museum this week.

You may have remarked that this all took place at Russian. There comes a magical moment in the study of language at which you suddenly feel like "I can do this". You transition from being a student of the language to a speaker of the language. It has happened for me this last month.

My language lessons with Elena have changed form. She used to make Xerox copies of lessons for me to work out at home, after which we would discuss and correct them. The last two weeks I have been working with verbs of my own selection. We drilled the verbs and use them in sentences, and more and more get off track and just have a conversation in Russian.

I do more and more business in the city. Buying computer supplies, getting clothes mended, buying groceries, and so on. I have become more outgoing and more adventurous as a language I use in these transactions. I got a compliment

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last week from a Ukrainian teacher of Dutch -- kind of a rare animal -- as I was shopping for a new cartridge for my laser printer.

The yacht trip was my first total immersion in a Russian speaking environment. Soon to be followed by others. I have talked about taking package tours to see the rest of Eastern Europe. I'm confident now that I will get along satisfactorily with my fellow passengers. I will see a lot and it will be cheap. So, there will be more tales to tell, but that is it for today.