

Two weeks of staying in Kyiv and Kharkiv are enough to be the subject of every scam guidebooks warn against

Letters To The Editor of the Kyiv Post

A three-scam trip has Australian wishing for crackdown on shysters
25 February 2009, 18:29

Dear editor,

I just returned to Australia after two excellent weeks visiting Kyiv and Kharkiv. The Ukrainian people were friendly and tolerant of my lack of Ukrainian or Russian language skills. The food was better than it has ever been described in guidebooks. And, even in winter, the scenery was magnificent. Wandering the side streets in Kyiv, I was struck by the dichotomy of the very old side-by-side with the very modern.

I appreciated reading [the Kyiv Post] since it was generally the only thing in English I found while I was in Ukraine. It occurred to me that my experiences might make an interesting article for your readers. Unfortunately, I had three bad experiences and that is the subject of this lengthy letter. If I had experienced only one of these incidents, I would have written it off to coincidence. But to have so many in such a short time is both alarming and disappointing.

I arrived in Kyiv on a Sunday night and went directly to my hotel on Khreshchatyk Street. The hotel was in a superb location and priced lower than expected. [After going out for a walk], as I reached the top of the steps coming up from the underground by Globus, a bloke brushed past me and there was a plop by my foot. I looked down to see a clear plastic bag with what appeared to be a wad of United States dollars inside. I glanced up to see the man had slowed to just a few steps in front of me. So I called out to him and pointed to the bag by my foot. He indicated that it was his. Already my suspicions were aroused. This situation had been described in the guidebook as a possible scam. So I merely kicked the bag in his direction and continued walking.

He quickly caught up with me to express his “thanks.” Then he asked where the second bag was! And, at that precise moment, another man walked up, identified himself as a police officer with a quick flick of a badge (not long enough to clearly see it or to get any details of the ID card next to it), and asked what the problem was. Then he and the other man went into a long discussion in either Ukrainian or Russian, I’m not sure which, and the “policeman” asked to see my wallet. Not my passport or other identification, but my wallet to ensure that I did not have the other man’s dollars. Not being a complete novice about international travel and potential scams against foreigners, I had only a few hundred hryvnias in my wallet and nothing else.

Then I was asked to turn out my pockets so the “policeman” could see that I really did not have any dollars in my possession. By this time I was convinced that it was a scam and was very damn glad I had only a few hryvnias on me. If I had had any dollars, the

nice “policeman” would have confiscated them. I simply walked away, leaving both scammers no doubt disgusted that their little con had not scored this time around. Welcome to friendly Kyiv.

I finally left for Kharkiv, likewise a beautiful city with many attractions. I enjoyed a pleasant stay there until the day I departed to return to Kyiv, and then on to Australia. As I was having my bags x-rayed by airport security, and after I had already presented my passport and received my boarding pass, one of the uniformed guards by the x-ray machine approached and asked for my passport.

After flipping through it and looking at all of the various visas and stamps I’ve accumulated, the guard motioned me to a tiny room and closed the door. In not bad English, he informed me that my papers were not in order, but he would overlook it this time. Of course, in the spirit of cooperation, it would be appropriate for me to offer him a small gift.

Since I had collected all of the necessary visas, stamps and approvals in Kyiv when I entered the country, and since my passport had already been scrutinized and passed inspection to receive my boarding pass for my flight, I felt reasonably confident that this was another scam. Unfortunately, he had my passport in his hand and I only had a couple of 100 hryvnia notes left in my wallet.

I suggested 100 hryvnias as a “gift,” which he cheerfully accepted. He returned my passport, shook my hand and opened the door so I could continue my trip. Talking with an English business consultant who had preceded me in line, I discovered that he had lost 50 hryvnias to the same guard for the same reasons. While we were discussing this bit of corruption, we were joined by an Asian university student who had likewise been the recipient of the same guard’s attentions. However, having been through this many times at the Kharkiv airport, he now knew not to have more than 10 hryvnias with him.

I do not expect this sort of blatant behavior in a supposedly European country like Ukraine. My experience and observation is that this sort of low-level corruption occurs when the higher echelons are similarly morally challenged.

I caught my flight out to Kyiv and thought I was home safe. Little did I know that Boryspil International Airport had a surprise waiting. As I walked into the international terminal from the domestic terminal, I was approached by a gentleman who saw the Aussie flag on my suitcase and introduced himself as a wealthy “Russian” pensioner on his way to Moscow.

We wandered off to the Internet cafe by the departure hall, swapping stories about kids and grandkids and where we’d been and other trivia. We were soon joined by an “American” businessman from New York named Mike (who had a suspiciously thick Russian accent and little actual knowledge of New York or its environs). Soon, the “Russian” pensioner suggested playing a “friendly” game of cards.

There is no such thing as a “friendly” game of cards. As soon as the “Russian” pensioner began his explanation, a young man at a table next to ours asked if he could join in. A fake “American” on my left, a dubious “Russian” pensioner on my right and now an unknown young man to my front. I decided to play along and see what developed. After the Russian brought out a dog-eared deck of cards, we all settled in for a few hands.

Not surprisingly, I won the first hand of about 60 hryvnias or so. As the winner, I was passed the deck to shuffle and deal the next hand. Before I could deal the next hand, I was distracted briefly by the “American,” but I noticed the pensioner pick up the deck and put cards on the top. [After the deal], I glanced at my cards and was not the least surprised to find that I had what had to be the winning hand.

After I had about 100 hryvnias in the pot, I announced that I simply didn’t have any more to bet and would have to fold. The “Russian” pensioner offered to loan me enough to cover the \$150 bet I needed to stay in the game. By now, the pot exceeded \$500. It was odd that everyone at the table had dollars but me – and all of it in brand new \$100 notes too. The “American” put in \$500, then the young traveler came up with \$1,000. Now everyone was looking at me to front at least \$3,000, according to the complicated betting rules that seemed to be made up as we went along. I declined, explaining my lack of cash in hand. But the “Russian” pensioner pulled out a thick wad of currency and offered to lend me even more money.

The “American” folded and without any comment on losing his \$500 bet, encouraged me to take pensioner’s money and continue to play. Since very little of the pot was actually my own money, I told the “Russian” he could play my cards if he wanted to continue. Any winnings would be his. No, no, he insisted; they were my cards and we could split the pot when I won.

By now though I’d had enough and announced that I was going to fold. I thought there were going to be a couple of heart attacks. Within 30 seconds after the young man took the pot and left, Mike the “American” was right behind him, going out the door and the “Russian” pensioner, who had claimed to have plenty of money earlier, now wanted me to show him my wallet, go with him to the ATM to get out money or sell my camera to repay his loans. As I explained to him, it had been a “friendly” card game and someone was going to come out losers. This time it wasn’t me.

All along I had stressed that I was at the end of my holiday and had no cash left beyond taxi fare home and my plane ticket. Obviously, they believed I must have had hidden resources.

After a few fruitless minutes of trying to get me to give him my camera, my watch or anything else of value, he wandered off. Eventually he left and I caught my flight back to Australia in safety.

Will I return to Ukraine? Certainly. I've met too many good and honest people to let a few crooks scare me off. Will I let my friends know about my experiences? Again, certainly.

I won't stop extolling the beauties and attractions of Ukraine as a tourist destination just because of a few bad actors. However, Ukraine has to come to grips with the crooks, thieves and corrupt officials that can ruin its good name and reputation. These kinds of scams, cons and thefts occur only because the government tolerates it. It is the responsibility of honest Ukrainians to ensure that visitors leave with a positive impression, not conned and cheated by unscrupulous scammers.

Joseph Rooney

Contracts and Procurement Specialist

Darwin Operations Centre

ConocoPhillips Australia Pty Ltd

GPO Box 2266

Darwin, Australia

joseph.c.rooney@conocophillips.com

Contact us Copyright © 2000 -2008 "Bigmir-Internet".All rights protected by Ukrainian laws.