

Double Vision: UK - Ukraine.

Introduction for the blog:

Hello and welcome to my blog about life in the UK and Ukraine.

My name is Lisette; I'm in my mid fifties, a self employed interior designer and artist living and working in Central London and the South West of England. On my last Spring visit to Ukraine I tasted birch sap for the first time and now I have started a new business making products from birch trees.

My London home is a flat in an old house in a leafy and cosmopolitan area called Notting Hill and in the South West I have a small cottage in the countryside on a narrow ledged steep, green valley with two neighbouring houses on the border of Somerset and Devon counties. The area is called the Brendon Hills and Exmoor; it's beautiful, rural and sparsely populated with mixed farms of sheep and cows and some arable land.

Ten years ago I began my friendship with Marta, her family and Ukraine.

Marta came to live in my flat as a lodger whilst she was working in London; I had furnished her room with shabby chic antique furniture mostly given to me by clients or rescued from skips and restored, paintings and a couple of coffin cupboards hanging on the wall (a reference to an earlier business in my career.) Unfazed and open minded she moved in.

It is embarrassing to admit that in the UK we had little knowledge of life in Ukraine as it had been a closed country for us in the West during the Soviet Union years. We heard about your Orange Revolution but not a lot more. As the months went by Marta and I became good friends as we chatted about our respective countries and cultures; I became curious to visit Ukraine so when she invited me to her village wedding in the Poltava region I was excited to start an adventure that has unfolded often surprising similarities and differences that I hope to describe here.

26th May 2015.

I recently returned from my latest Spring visit to Marta and her family in the village and Kiev. I timed my visit to coincide with the annual holiday and vegetable planting so we went straight to the village to start digging the rich brown soil and planting potatoes the next day. A fabulous homemade lunch signaled a week of convivial and hospitable eating and drinking until I thought I might burst or at the least need to fast for several days when I got home again.

When I arrived in Ukraine my suitcase weighed 12 kilos; on my return and a belt hole fatter on my jeans I struggled up the steps into my flat lugging a 23 kilo bag and a bizarre conglomeration of hand luggage. The journey from the airport to Notting Hill on the 'Tube' otherwise known as 'The Underground' had been exhausting and I was looking forward to a strong English cup of tea with milk, putting my feet up and to start unpacking my goodies.

I have a healthy appetite and there are certain foods that I eagerly anticipate whenever I visit Ukraine. Vodka, jam and honey are top of the list followed by red caviar and this time I discovered where your tasty, mineral rock salt comes from: the Bakhmut salt mines in Donetsk. In the UK we have two counties; Cheshire and Worcestershire where there are natural brine springs used since Roman times and a couple of famous seaside towns; Maldon and Anglesea where we dehydrate the sea water to make expensive flakes of salt. The old expression that a person is "worth their salt" comes from salt being used as part payment of a soldiers' wages and hence the word 'salary'.

When Marta and I visited the market in Lubny to buy some organic pork for our BBQ by the river in the village we passed some stalls with seeds and plants and I bought some packets of tomato and beetroot seed. The taste of Ukrainian tomatoes are hard to beat so I chose a few different types to grow at home in the greenhouse because we rarely have long, hot summers. We laughed as we remembered the time I went exploring Ukraine with

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a friend. We had set off with a picnic of tomatoes and small knobbly cucumbers and at lunchtime we stopped to buy some salt to accompany them. As a typical Brit reading and translating Cyrillic script, let alone mastering the language, is still a skill I lack and mistakenly bought a packet of what we subsequently discovered was washing soda. I carefully sprinkled some onto our juicy tomatoes and cucumbers and choked and spluttered with shock when we took our first enthusiastic mouthfuls.

Wandering further into the market we found a stall selling garden tools and I spied my next purchase; a shovel! Modern shovels and spades at home are rectangular with one meter handles and a 'T' on the end. They used to be heart shaped curves called Devon spades with a long handle which are much more versatile and to my delight are still used in Ukraine. At a fraction of the UK price I couldn't resist buying one. Next we found local, river rush woven baskets and short handled brooms made by the stall holder's daughter. I love baskets and still have my Mum's French wicker basket from the 1970's so I bought one to carry birch sap deliveries to my English customers. Marta's aunt gives me some great presents and she had spied the baskets and had the same thought; so now I have two - in medium and large sizes.

No wonder my suitcase of treasure weighed 23 kilos including goats wool socks from the Carpathian Mountains, a pair of ankle galoshes, several large bottles of vodka, cigarettes which are more than triple the price in UK, three jars of delicious homemade cherry, blackcurrant, and apricot jams, a special conserve with whole slices of translucent pears in syrup, village honey, a handleless spade, pumpkin seeds from a local vegetable lady, three tins of red caviar and several bars of chocolate.

I don't think I had anything illegal in my suitcase but I didn't want to draw attention and unpack it all for inspection so I packed three toilet roles printed with portraits of Putin, a plastic bag of Donetsk salt, my book, two carrying bags and various other bits and bobs in my rush baskets which I put one inside the other to make a single piece of hand luggage. Unsurprisingly when it went through the scanning machine at airport security the man monitoring the screen was immediately alerted by a confusing spaghetti of basket handles, layers of canvas and in the middle of it all a bag of suspicious looking white powder. The security lady called me over very politely asked if I wouldn't mind unpacking it for her to see. I was grinning broadly as I guessed what she might be thinking and told her that I had acquired a taste for Ukrainian rock mineral salt and that she was very welcome to taste it. As I unpacked the salt, out came the Putin toilet roles and she held them up for her colleagues to see as they all laughed at this English visitor with such a funny collection of holiday mementos. Ten years ago on my first visit I don't think I would have been treated with such good humour and waved on to passport control. I might have spent an uncomfortable hour or two trying to explain to someone who would have questioned me in Russian; not English. As I boarded the plane I reflected upon how Ukraine is gaining confidence as an emerging young democracy and felt privileged to witness it's spirit. Later in my bathroom at home I was disappointed to discover that Putin was only printed on the first few sheets of the roll and I mused that it might be a crafty ruse left over from the Soviet legacy.