

Transcript of Podcast 055: Back in the USSR

{Intro -

Ви слухаєте «подорожі оповідання з-поза брошури», подкаст босоногого туриста.

[You're listening to 'Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure', a podcast by The Barefoot Backpacker.]

}

{intro music - jaunty, bouncy}

{Intro standard announcement:

Hello. Thank you for tuning in. You're listening to Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure, a fortnightly series looking at unfamiliar places across the world, and aspects of travelling you may never have thought of. I'm your host, The Barefoot Backpacker, a middle-aged Brit with a passion for offbeat travel, history, culture, and the 'whys behind travel itself. So join me as we venture ... beyond the brochure.}

{Music fades. Podcast begins}

Hello!

So how are we all this sennight? You may have noticed I did indeed drop my first Spaces as a podcast last week. Since we've now done four Spaces, it does definitely feel like this will be an ongoing and regular thing. And more content is good, right? I mean, the Spaces I did last week, on 'mental health and travel', was a bit of a nightmare; I didn't feel fluid at all and there were technical problems in the middle, which didn't help. But hopefully I can rescue it and make it sound all right.

One thing last week's Twitter Space podcast did remind me is how much of a ball-ache transcribing audio is. Normally it's something I only really need to do for people's contributions to my podcasts, because I always write my episode scripts before I record. It just means all my time is spent pre-record rather than post-record, and is one of the main reasons why I never managed to do a weekly podcast. If all you do in your episodes is chat to a friend off the back of notes, recording a podcast episode is simple and easy, and then, to make it even easier for you, why would you need a transcript anyway? Fortunately most of my podcasting friends are much more accessibility-minded than that.

I am aware, hypocrite mode on, that many of my earlier episodes don't have transcripts. This is merely because I didn't upload them at the time [and didn't transcribe my contribs] and then I found shinier things to do. It'll happen, it's on my list, or at least it will be once I put it on the Trello board me and my VA have to share ideas and plans.

The other thing that uploading that Space as a pod has done is messed up my episode numbering system. Is the Spaces episode 55? Is the Spaces part of a new series, and would that be odd to have two concurrent different series running? Do episode numbers even matter anyway? At my end this is episode 55 but that'll almost certainly confuse me when it comes to uploading this episode (which on the directories will be listed as episode 56). So I'm dispensing with episode numbers. Which is going to irk me when I refer back to previous episodes going forward since I know them by episode number rather than name.

Anyway.

Oh, also admin-wise, it might be that by the time you listen to this episode, my VA will be knocking up the first of a fortnightly newsletter, filled with all things brand-related. If you're interested in signing up to get news from The Barefoot Backpacker, then keep an eye out on the website or the soash-meats for more information. It's something we'd have done a while ago but we had issues with logo design, best summarised as 'when is a circle not a circle? When you're designing in Canva'.

I also checked some pod stats this weeks and it seems I have a following in an unexpected place. I was looking at geographical downloads, and I know there's some scope for variation etc, but with regard to the USA, the state where I've had the most downloads is California. Fourth is Illinois, fine, and Fifth is New York. Third is

Virginia, which is, okay, not what I expected but okay. A long way second, snapping at California's heels, is, of course ... Ohio. I don't know if I have a specific following in Ohio, or if it's a characteristic of US internet providers to be based there, but if you're listening in from the Buckeye State, a very special hello to you all!

Now, I was unsure what to do this episode on. Unfortunately not Ohio. Although my VA did say it was time for another geographic-based pod, and to be fair they are the easiest to write, and it means I get to do some nice research. It also helps that I can mostly plagiarise my own previous blog posts. Not that I'm revealing Dirty Secrets From Beyond The Brochure, of course. I was going to do one on Bangladesh, but that's required more research than I'd intended, so that'll be for next time. Rather, it's occurred to me that in the spring of 2014, I did a backpacking trip around the western edges of what when I was growing up was the Soviet Union. Because of this weird sense of, and the word is slightly wrong but I don't really know what word to use, 'nostalgia' for it, it was always somewhere I'd wanted to visit. While I'd been to Russia and Latvia in 2006, my entire Russian experience was three days on a train and then an overnight bus – I had about six hours in Moscow – and then my Latvian adventure was only one full day in Riga. None of which I really remember that well.

My visit took me from Romania, which doesn't count for this pod, into Moldova and Transnistria, then a hop into Ukraine, followed by trains to Belarus and then Lithuania. I would say: I'm giving you this travelogue as a memorial of more peaceful times, but as we shall see, that was not the case.

As an aside, I am aware the world is full of warzones. But if I'd been to Syria, or Yemen, or Afghanistan, I'd probably have already podded about them. I nearly did go to Syria once, over ten years ago, when my good friend and future lodger Sarah had broken up with her then boyfriend and felt she needed a trip away. She's very interested in ancient history and Syria definitely appealed to her but she only had a week available and we felt that part of the world deserved more time, so we went to Italy instead. We could always go to Syria some other time. Listeners: we obviously never went to Syria.

On a more personal note, the 2014 trip is quite seminal as it was the first part of my career break when I travelled around much of the world for a year, but additionally it's the first trip taken under the 'Barefoot Backpacker' brand. I'd created it in the February, in preparation for the trip, and while it wasn't the first trip I'd live-blogged, it was the first trip I'd blogged for the visibility of an audience wider than my mother and my work colleagues.

The way I'm going to do this podcast is reflective of that – while those daily blog posts are no longer available online (as they didn't really fit what my website later became), I'm going to be using them as the framework for this pod, and reading them verbatim to give the vibe of how travel blogging used to be. In between the posts, I'll be offering other observations that I missed out at the time, and putting things into more historical context. It's also revealing just how much my writing style has changed, even in such little time.

So, let's step back in time, to May 2014 ...

{standard separation jingle}

Let's start off with an observation I made at the time about the overnight train journey I had from Bucharest in Romania to Chisinau in Moldova. Much of this I did keep live on my blog; I turned it into a general post about train travel across the old Soviet Union, taking in the several experiences I had later on.

{separation jingle}

Soviet Trains

It's a slightly different experience, travelling by train in and around the former USSR, as compared with travelling in the UK.

For a start, the trains tend to be a bit longer. Not much longer in the case of the train I went from Bucharest to Chisinau on, but for example the long-distance services in Russia are huge – to the extent if you stand in the middle, on the platform, you can't see either end.

The carriages are a big higher than UK ones, and you have to climb up a couple of iron steps to get in. Once

inside, there's a long corridor along one side of the carriage, off which there are a series of sliding doors to each compartment, which in second class contain generally four 'sofas' arranged like bunks, in a 2x2 pattern. When I travelled 1st class on the Trans-Mongolian back in 1996, there were only two 'sofas', arranged either both on either side of the compartment, or one on top of the other like two bunks, depending on the train. Bedding is provided (generally a thick 'base' to sleep on, a couple of blankets, a large pillow and a pillowcase). Each bed has a small light, there's a small table by the window, and small curtains that oft don't cover the whole window.

At first glance there isn't much space to store stuff, but the bottom bunks 'lift up' to reveal storage space below. Some of the more wily passengers on some routes - especially the ones in/out of the EU - use all manner of interesting storage spaces for smuggling stuff - it's amazing where you can hide a pack of cigarettes.

There's a toilet at one end of each carriage, and an urn for hot water at the other. On the longer distance routes, the train stops at major stations for maybe 20-30 minutes so you have time to go shopping for things like pots of dried noodles which you then use the urn to make.

Not long after the train departs, the conductor comes around and takes your tickets. They return them to you at the end of the journey (on my trip into Moldova they returned the ticket but not the confirmation of the seat reservation). I have no idea why they do this ...

Crossing the international border from outside the ex-USSR to inside requires changing the bogies - the wheel base that the train runs on. This is because Soviet railways have a different gauge/size to non-Soviet railways, apparently because it made it harder for countries to use the rail network to invade them. The process of changing the bogies involves moving the train to a specialist piece of line with both gauges on it, lifting each carriage separately, rolling the old bogies out, sliding new ones underneath, and reattaching the carriage. They're only attached by a couple of nuts and bolts. It took around an hour for the train into Moldova to be changed.

Events at crossing the border depend largely on which border is being crossed, but generally it's exactly how you'd expect - stop before the border and get passport checked, the train moves across the border, then stops beyond it as passports are checked in the new country. Customs are more thorough exiting than entering (on the way into Moldova the conversation between us in the compartment and the customs official in the carriage went 'Have you anything to declare?' / 'No' / 'Okay then'). In addition, a doctor came round and asked if we were all feeling okay - this as an even quicker conversation.

The only snag with many of these border crossings is that, as the journeys are long, they're often overnight, which means the borders are often reached around 3-4am. Since the process of crossing the border may take a couple of hours if the train's quite long, this often means disturbed sleep. The trains are also often slower than buses doing the same routes, and more expensive. However, being longer and having a bed rather than a seat, means you are more likely to be able to get some sleep at least.

{separation jingle}

This was my first experience with trains in this part of the world. The train I took a week later from Ukraine to Belarus was very much the same, and a later journey I took in Uzbekistan felt familiar too. They all have slight differences, for example actual carriage layout and the positions of the bunks (if memory serves, the one into Belarus had bunks either side of the main aisle so I was a little more exposed). That said, they all had a very similar comfort level, and I think, regardless of what I wrote at the time about the Belarus train, my less than great sleep was more because I was angsty about the journey than anything about the bed itself.

In general, trains are the only form of transport I can get any kind of sleep on. It's one of the many reasons they're my favourite mode of transport.

Now let's continue, with the travelogue itself.

{separation jingle}

Saturday 3 May 2014 : Did someone ask for Sikowitz?

Today saw me lose my fleece. I hung it up on a coat-hook in the train compartment, and ended up leaving without it because it was hot outside so didn't think of it. I do this sort of thing a lot - in SE Asia I left my hat in restaurants and cafes about 14 times. With me it can sometimes be 'out of sight out of mind' with clothes and ephemera, and is why my work ID swipe card was permanently tied to my trouser belt.

We wandered back to the station in the late morning but Chisinau station is barely used (about 9 trains a day, which for a European capital sounds a little weird, but it's basically only on one rail route and in this part of the world they favour long infrequent trains rather than short frequent ones. Also there are no suburban lines), so there was no-one around to ask and no lost property office. Bah.

Chisinau feels like quite a small city. The train didn't seem that popular, and coming out of the station into the main square, rather than the taxis and bustle you expect from a normal mainline station, I was greeted by a street market with people selling all kinds of wares (though mainly women's clothing and electrical items) just on the side of the road.

There seems to be two kinds of bus here; the trolleybus - a long single-decker powered by overhead lines that acts like a normal bus route (although with less frequent stops), and some of which look like they were rejects from other Soviet states - and the minibus - effectively white vans that follow fixed routes but which seem to be able to be stopped at any point on the route. The former have conductors, the latter you pay the driver (often by handing your money to other passengers who pass it down the bus), which feels a bit more like Africa than Europe.

Chisinau isn't exactly beautiful. There's a lot of trees and some of the city centre does feel quite 'green', but it's punctuated by somewhat Soviet architecture (grey buildings, straight lines, not much adornment). And statues. I guess it looks pretty much exactly how you'd expect, really.

I'm staying the night with another couchsurfing host, a chap from Germany called Gerhard who's been here a few years, originally on a volunteering program. One of the things he does is take classes for teenagers who want to learn/improve their English, so obviously he invited me along for a couple of sessions today.

The weather started out dry and hot, but took a turn for the worse mid-afternoon, with a sudden thunderstorm. This wouldn't have been so bad, except that we were out walking in the main park at the time, waiting for Gerhard's lessons to start, and neither of us had coats. In addition, about 10 minutes previously, the rubber 'hook' on my left sandal that was holding the cord in place snapped, making the sandal pretty useless so I was also barefoot by necessity.

It's interesting how a 20-minute rainstorm can cause so many floods - some of the roads were pretty much torrents of water, just as I'd seen in Budapest. Although the rain eased a bit by the time we decided to escape the cover of the trees, it ended up raining pretty much all day so by the time we got to the class, we were quite soaked.

It being in the middle of a series of holidays here, plus the weather being wet, and the classes themselves being voluntary, not too many people turned up for either of them (he hosts two, one after the other). However, those did turn up seemed happy to chat with a native English speaker. They seemed quite able to understand me, and hopefully they could see the difference between the way I speak and the way that Gerhard speaks - they don't get many native English speakers pass through.

There was no set pattern for the discussions, they were just whatever the conversation naturally led on to, so we were free to talk about pretty much anything. I did talk a bit about the UK though; it does seem as well that quite a few people have heard of Nottingham, although oddly mostly because of Nottingham Forest football club rather than anything mythological involving bandits...

It was only drizzling by the time we left about 6pm, but the roads and some pavements were still pretty flooded. Still barefoot (which made it psychologically easier to wade through the floods), it took only about 20 minutes to get back home.

In the evening (now with my heavy, worn-out, "I was going to dump these after Chernobyl" shoes on), we went

out to a local restaurant with one of Gerhard's friends, a lady from Romania. There's a lot of Romanian/Moldovan cross-over, and many people seem to have dual nationality (Romania seems to have allowed Moldovans to take Romanian nationality quite easily depending on family history a couple of years ago). Recently it seems too that Moldovans have been allowed free right of passage into the EU (or Schengen area, at least), but as most of those who would want to seem to have already added Romanian nationality, it isn't expected to make a lot of difference.

{separation jingle}

Sunday 4 May 2014: Fire and Water

I have a replacement fleece.

Well, it's actually a jacket rather than a fleece. It doesn't have a hood but it does have lots of pockets, which is always useful. It was also only about £9, from the large 2nd hand market on the edge of Chisinau. It being Sunday, and in the middle of yet another torrential rainstorm, meant it was a particularly grey and lonely place - many of the stalls were closed, the passageways between them covered by various shades and strengths of tarpaulin, with much dripping of water between them.

This was pretty much the highlight of the day; we didn't venture out much other than that. I went for a walk around lunchtime around the nearby Armenian cemetery, which is actually pretty huge. The main difference between this and cemeteries in the UK is the tendency to engrave pictures of the deceased on the gravestone. This leads to two issues; firstly, given its history, there's an awful lot of people who look very 'Soviet Army General' - broad-built, severe-looking faces, in uniform; and secondly, this is how you're going to be remembered, and when you commission yourself a full-sized portrait of yourself evidently living up to the 'cool' of the 1970s, it doesn't really look good on a gravestone. #JustSayin.

Also in the area is the war memorial - a rather bizarre red pyramid with an eternal flame burning underneath which gives the whole thing the impression of being a very cheap volcano. It's guarded by two soldiers who stand so still it was only when I saw their eyes move that I realised they weren't stuffed.

Other than that, quite a quiet day. Had a small party in the evening with a couple of Gerhard's friends, and was introduced to home-made Moldovan wine. I'm very much getting the impression though that there's a lot of 'undercurrent' in Moldova, not in a revolutionary way, but more in a 'resigned' way - I don't get the impression the place has a bright immediate future. But that's a muse for another post.

Tomorrow, I believe I'm going to Tiraspol, in Transnistria. The situation in Odessa seems to be getting worse at the moment, so I think I shall be foregoing there in favour of heading directly to Kiev from here.

{separation jingle}

So. This is where I need to point something out about the timing of my visit. This was two months after a revolution in Ukraine where the President, Viktor Yanukovich, had been forced out of office by mass protests (known as the Revolution of Dignity). A month later, Russia had invaded Crimea. It was a very tense time to be visiting Ukraine, and there had been potential flashpoints across the country.

During my time in Moldova, there were some riots in the neighbouring city of Odesa between supporters of the revolution and supporters of Yanukovich, culminating in an arson attack on a building in the city which led to the deaths of over 30 pro-Russian supporters, the exact circumstances surrounding which have never been quite agreed upon. Odesa, despite being in the far west of Ukraine, has a strong Russian-speaking vibe; even though almost 70% of the city is ethnically Ukrainian, it's estimated that a similar proportion of the city speaks Russian rather than Ukrainian. In addition, Odesa is the nearest major city to Transnistria, which as we'll see is largely Russian-speaking and Russian-leaning (indeed many of those who died in the fire are believed to have had Transnistrian links, a thought I even seem to have noted at the time as you'll hear), so it's a city where troubles are often feared to occur.

Despite what my mother thinks, I've no desire to wander into a warzone.

Anyway, back to the travelogue.

{separation jingle}

Monday 5 May 2014: Land of the urban spaceman

*"I'm the urban spaceman baby, here comes the twist:
I don't exist".*

The lady at the post office looked at me as if I'd gone mad when I tried to send a letter abroad today. She had to even look up the price in her big book. Evidently not many people send mail to countries further away than Ukraine and Romania from Moldova.

Today was mostly spent doing admin, or, more specifically, ranting at (in turn) Windows 8.1 RT, my photo editing app, and my website host. I was trying to upload some pictures to somewhere else on the blog, but firstly I had problems with Windows auto-rotating the images so if I took an image with my camera held not in standard landscape, Windows automatically rotates the image to Portrait view. However, as the original image isn't rotated, when I upload said picture to WordPress, it's in Landscape view not Portrait view, but I can't change the rotation because according to Windows, it's already rotated.

Then, I remembered the problem I have with images uploaded via WordPress; research last time I had issues suggests that my website host has issues with the way WordPress uploads images, and won't allow images where one dimension is over 2000 pixels to be uploaded. This means I then had to edit every one of the pictures I wanted to upload, to get it below that magic number.

And I'm not used to this photo editing app yet!

As you can tell from that above wall of text, today was not an interesting day In truth I barely did anything travel-related until about 4pm; it was the archetypal 'day of rest'. However, then I caught a bus to Tiraspol, in the Republic of Transnistria.

I will blog about Transnistria in a separate entry in the 'country' blog, suffice to say that it doesn't exist. It's a breakaway part of Moldova on (mostly) the Eastern side of the Dniester River that's been trying for independence since about 1991, but no-one recognises it as a state. It has its own police, money, postal service, etc, and to all intents and purposes operates as a separate state, but legally belongs to Moldova. The impression I get is that neither side of the Dniester River want it to remain part of Moldova, but can't do anything about it.

I'm staying here with an ethnic Russian couchsurfing host, who (amongst other things) wants me to go to her son's after-school class tomorrow to talk English with them, in presumably the same way as I did in Chisinau on Saturday. Apparently she gets many requests for couchsurfing from people who want to come to Transnistria (for reasons she can't understand) but as yet no-one natively English.

She does say though to avoid Odessa - The apartment is exactly 100km from Odessa, the people around here know it well, go there often, and have relatives there, and are currently advising even each other not to try at the moment. So, back to Chisinau I will go before heading to Kiev then. My mother will be pleased...

Finding her apartment was a bit of a hassle; while I knew roughly where it was, the numbering system of the tenement blocks themselves seem to make no sense, plus at some points the paths disappear (it's right on the edge of the city) so sometimes you think you've gone the wrong way. Just for the record, there is no Google Streetview In Tiraspol.

The journey in was quite rough. It's not very far from Chisinau to Tiraspol but the roads heading out the city are pretty dire. Either that or the minibus I was on had virtually no suspension; I was being bounced around all over the place. In addition, the stereo was blaring out some kind of Russian-language electro-dance music.

The border crossing was pretty painless, although apparently incorrect. When the bus stopped, a border guard came on and checked everybody's passport. When he noted I was British, he indicated I ought to get off and

go to a roadside booth to be 'stamped' in (there are no stamps, which is a shame, but my passport details are recorded). After doing this, I then got back on the bus.

Apparently, what's also supposed to happen is that they give me a piece of paper to fill in with my registration contact details, which I then have to give to the local police station in order to register me as being in the country (if I stay more than 24 hours). They never gave me this paper. Olga said though that hopefully it won't be too much of an issue.

{something?}

Tuesday 6 May 2014: Support your local Sheriff

I was actually a bit fearful that I'd get bored in Tiraspol, but in the event I didn't actually get enough time to walk everywhere I'd intended to. This was mainly because I got distracted by something as simple as sitting in the park. That may sound strange, but if there's one thing that Communists have done well, it's town planning, and specifically local amenities. Victory Park (which looks and feels about as Soviet as it's possible to get) is very pleasant inside, with large open areas where people can sit and look at statues/fountains. It's also a good place to people-watch, although most of the people I saw were watching each other's tongues rather than paying attention to nosy-parkers like me.

Tiraspol has a bit of a reputation (amongst people who've heard of it in the first place) as being in a kind of 25-year time-warp, where the 1980s never left. Musically, I'll concede that most of Moldova itself is a bit like that (the first song playing in one of the Chisinau minibuses was an early Kylie number; lucky (lucky) me ...), and certainly Tiraspol has its fair share of Soviet-era posters and buildings, but I have to say (and whisper it quietly), I actually preferred it to Chisinau. Possibly because it felt more 'normal' as a city, grid-like and structured rather than the chaos and randomness of Chisinau, and partly because maybe more of it looked more like how I perceive a small town to look - one long main street with shops, multitudinous side streets coming off it with smaller shops, churches, and residential accommodation. Like a small English (or even American) town. Or maybe that's just me.

There isn't a lot to do in Tiraspol for the average tourist, but then it's not really a place for the average tourist to go. The 'sights' are limited to such things as the statue of Lenin outside the parliament building, the tank on the grassy ramp next to the high street that serves as one part of the war memorial to the Transnistrian dead (the tank is from the war of independence in 1991/2, the other two wars commemorated at the memorial are WW2 and the war in Afghanistan in the 1980s. In my younger days I wrote a poem about that war for a school assembly. No copies of that poem exist. I'm not disappointed by this), the Dnieper riverfront and promenade (nice for a walk), and that's about it.

Quite a bit further out to the west is the stadium of Sheriff Tiraspol FC, the leading Moldovan football side which seems to be bankrolled by a rich Transnistrian businessman who's related to the previous president of the republic. Sheriff is a petroleum business, amongst other things, and has a monopoly on petrol stations in the republic. Indeed, the arms of the Sheriff business stretch across much of the republic and there's not much where their money doesn't come into play. Not just Soviet then, but modern Russian too.

The mother tongue of most Transnistrians is Russian, as opposed to the Moldavian/Romanian language on the other side of the Dnieper; and whereas many Moldovans study abroad and have relatives in places like Spain and France, the Transnistrians tend to study and work further East, in Ukraine and Russia. Odessa, the nearest major Ukrainian city (100km away) has quite a large Transnistrian diaspora; indeed many of the dead in the recent firebombing in Odessa were of Transnistrian origin.

(One of the things I always find important when I travel is to learn about the places I'm going to. It's not right to just turn up, visit a couple of museums, have dinner in a fancy restaurant, and then bugger off again. Any fool can put a 15th-century religious painting on their wall.)

I spent the afternoon with my couchsurfing host's son and three of his friends, who wanted to chat to a real life native English speaker, as we appear to be quite rare in this part of the world. It has to be said though that we ended up in an interesting place called 'Freedom', aka the 'Anti-Café'. It's quite an interesting concept - it has refreshments like tea, coffee, and biscuits, but also music, computer games, air hockey, etc, but rather than

paying for everything individually, you pay for a period of time and in that time everything you want is free. I ended up watching them play Fifa14 on the Xbox...

In the event I was registered with the local police just fine, and now when I leave Transnistria all I need do is show them a little white piece of paper. No idea what's written on it since it's in Cyrillic, and while I can read the typed Cyrillic letters, I never got to grips with the written ones (written Cyrillic is supposed to use slightly different forms of letters, a bit like cursive writing in English as opposed to print-writing letters. I never mythered with cursive: I like to be able to read what I write).

All registration involves is my host going with me to the office, my host confirming their address, and then the office seeing my passport and giving me what effectively amounts to a visa, with a 'valid until' date on it, which in my case is Thursday 8 May. Since I intend leaving here tomorrow, that should not be a problem. How I leave here tomorrow, now that's a problem...

{separation jingle}

I did indeed blog about Transnistria, and much of what I said there about Tiraspol can be found on one of the only blog posts I ever re-wrote about this part of my career break travels - also called 'Support Your Local Sheriff'. You can infer from this, by the way, that I prefer amusing blog titles to ones that work for SEO. This tells you all you need to know about my blogging style.

I also have mentioned it on a previous podcast. When I talked about how international borders aren't necessarily the defined and precise boundaries that everyone assumes they are, as long ago as my twelfth podcast, I used my experience of crossing from Moldova into Transnistria as an example of this. At the time of my visit it was a border you could only legally cross one-way; coming from Ukraine, the Moldovan authorities didn't consider crossing into Transnistria as a legal entry point so if you then tried to cross into Moldova from Transnistria, you'd be arrested as an illegal immigrant. Which is odd if you consider Moldova (and everyone else) claims the whole territory as theirs. Not long after my visit though, they came to an agreement with the Ukrainian government and resolved the situation.

As an aside, yes my blog posts on the whole career break, and indeed on previous adventures I had, did often veer into the mundane rather than about the place I was in. I know that sort of 'personal' information is quite liked amongst travel bloggers now, but honestly ... I feel it's one of those 'misplaced nostalgia' things that everyone gets from time to time, that makes us go 'ah things were better then'. I'd argue, regardless of context, 90% of the time, things really weren't better then. (Have you ever *seen* a Geocities website from circa 1999?!). I remember that sort of blogging vividly. While it certainly gives you a sense of who someone is as a person and what makes them 'tick', too much of it gets really boring and feels almost ... narcissistic? It's like, making everything about you, rather than about the journey you're on. I don't think people need to know, for example, the score of every game of scrabble I played with my then girlfriend when we inter-railed around Spain.

Anyway. Back to the travelogue.

{separation jingle}

Wednesday 7 May 2014: High-Speed Shuttle Service

Following violent incidents in Odesa on 2 May, the FCO advise against all but essential travel to Odesa city.

So, I had to be in Kiev by Thursday because I'm going to Chernobyl on Friday. There were two ways I could have realistically done this:

1) catching the morning train from Tiraspol to Odessa, then a train or bus from Odessa to Kiev. This was my original plan; the disadvantage being I go through Odessa.

2) returning to Chisinau, and catching the bus to Kiev from there. The disadvantage is that there are only two buses a day, one very early and one very late, so it would mean effectively 'wasting' a day in either Tiraspol or Chisinau.

Last night I did attempt to buy tickets online for routing 1) but my website of choice claimed there was no

availability. Now I'm sure it was lying, but I didn't fancy trying to buy a ticket from a hectic ticket office where no-one could even read English characters, never mind speak it.

Then I remembered something about the bus I'd caught from Chisinau on Monday, and the routing it took.

At 10.40am, and about £80 poorer (though in the larger scheme of things, £80 isn't really significant), I was boarding a flight from Chisinau airport ...

... along with 12 other people. In a 30-seater plane. With propellers. And an awful lot of bumps in flight. Beautiful journey though - we flew quite low and there was no cloud so we could see the whole of Western Ukraine laid out below us.

No hassles through security - went from plane to city bus link in a handful of minutes (gotta love travelling with only hand luggage). Interestingly for a major city airport, it was almost completely empty. We were the only flight being processed at passport control/customs, and I didn't see any other people waiting for flights. I know that much of the country is on holiday at the moment (the 1st and 9th are both holidays and it seems due to the days of the week they've fallen on, most people have taken the whole period off), but I didn't expect it to be quite that empty.

It was another hot day here, but yet again I did a lot of ambling around. Had difficulty finding the hostel at first due to a couple of the buildings not having consecutive numbers on, but I got there eventually. It's a small place, and it's only about half-full I think. Cheap though; about £3.50/night (many of the hostels are that cheap in Kiev it seems; to be fair though they seem to be quite cheap across most of Distant Eastern Europe - the one in Bucharest was similarly priced, so it's not just that no-one's coming to Kiev), and conveniently not far from the main railway station, where I have to be at 8am on Friday morning. Boo.

That said, it's quite a weird little hostel. It feels like it should have some 'vibrancy' about it, but it doesn't seem to. It's a bit like the one I stayed in in Bethlehem last year - a really cool place let down by a lack of people, which in a small hostel like this one (one dorm, 12 beds) is much more self-evident. I'm not alone in the hostel (I think just over half the beds are occupied), but I can't tell how many of them are being slept in by people who work here/know the people who work here, and how many are other backpackers. I suspect a lot more of the former than the latter.

Much of today was spent exploring the city, visiting several areas of greenery, and seeing a few memorials. I ended up by the banks of the Dnieper River, and the views over it towards central Ukraine are pretty immense - the Eastern suburbs of the city then blend into the vast expansive forest. And the vista is very wide indeed; it's quite a sight.

Kiev does seem to be a very green city too - like Tiraspol only obviously more so as it's that much bigger. And I have to say again I've been really taken by it; it seems friendly and bright. Not sure how it would look in Winter though.

My walk took me along a road very close to the city centre but which felt like it was in some remote forest - deep woods either side with only a couple of buildings along the way that give any indication of civilisation - invariably restaurants, oddly. But this road takes you out right past Dynamo Kiev's football ground, and, immediately after it ...

... well, it would be a road junction but it looks more like the remnants of a warzone, with ash and detritus everywhere, the area surrounded by tyres, and hand-built memorials everywhere. This is the edge of the area where the revolution happened in February, and the effects are still in evidence. Nearby is an art gallery that's currently showing a retrospective photo-journalist collection taken at the time.

Maiden Square is just around the corner. This is a huge pedestrianized square that would normally be filled with shoppers, walkers, sk8er boys...at the moment however it seems to be full of memorials, stallholders selling memorabilia, more tyres piled up in rows, and people in camouflage outfits living in tents. There's also a stage in the centre, in front of which were singing a Ukrainian choir. In the distance a PA was blasting out anthemic Western music ('The Final Countdown', for instance). This was the epicentre of the revolution and by the looks of it, they're still expecting 'issues' to happen. Note that this may be heightened as 9th May (Friday) is a holiday in Ukraine (Victory Day, I believe), and some demonstrations are possible. I'll already have buggered off by then of course.

The tents and the detritus continue right down the main street, some of the walls are covered with pro-Ukrainian and pro-peace graffiti, and a couple of the buildings around the square show the evidence of considerable fire damage (one in particular, I think a bank, is probably only fit for demolition).

Having become a bit maudlin, and with my feet about to fall off, I headed back to the hostel (via a pizza restaurant called 'Marios'. Street food is all very well but they don't like it when you try to buy a 9 hryvna item with a 100 hryvna note).

Hryvna is a transliterated name, as the Ukrainians use the Cyrillic alphabet. It's pronounced 'grivna'. Confusingly, the Russians transliterate it as 'Gryvna' (and when I've dabbled previously with the Cyrillic alphabet, the letter in question should generally indeed be a 'g'. No idea why the Ukrainians spell it with an 'h' in the Western Alphabet). Anyway there's about 19 of them to the £ and a bottle of water is about 8 of them.

{separation jingle}

Thursday 8 May 2014: Parklife

I've been on my travels for just over a week now, and I'm in my second country with a bit of a recent dodgy reputation (assuming you consider Transnistria a country - I did send a #LetterACountry from there but called it country 2½). However, the most dangerous things to have happened to me so far are traffic (I come from a country where red means stop. However a lot of countries seem to have a 'turn right on red' rule - Ukraine included), sunburn (it's been very hot this week, apart from the earlier thunderstorms), and being impaled on the ticket barriers on the Kiev Metro.

The metro works as follows: buy a token for travel from a booth or the attendant, for 2 hryvnia. Insert token into ticket barrier. Walk on. However the ticket barriers lull you into a false sense of security, as they look always open (no barrier in place). Try to walk through them, though, without inserting the token, and you suddenly find metal bars coming out of them poking you in the sides. 1980s Japanese Game Shows may have taken some of their inspiration from this.

Today was another walking day. I couldn't face those bloody shoes again (as soon as I get out of Chernobyl, I'm going to dump them), so have tried as best I can to patch up my sandal with some wire that the hostel seems to have lying around in their 'sewing' box. It's not perfect, in fact it's nowhere near suitable, but it works (after a fashion). The sandal is very loose, keeps veering to the right as I walk, and I now have a sore undertoe where I'm stepping slightly on the plastic toe thing cos the sandal isn't straight, but it'll do for now. I will apparently have string in Belarus ...

Kiev has a lot of churches. They're also quite ornate in their own way. And quite a few of them are rather large. Unfortunately, this means for the traveller like me that once you've seen the inside and outside of a couple of them, brilliantly-white golden-domed overly-decorated buildings become slightly blasé.

As mentioned before, Kiev also has a lot of green space. And on hot sunny days like today, people are out in them in full force. They seem to start early, but it's in the evenings when the parks really come to life, with street musicians, tables and tables of people playing chess and backgammon, photographers doing model shoots, and people just sitting under parasols in the open areas by the cafes, drinking kvas.

Ah, kvas. I was introduced to this in Tiraspol by my host's son's classmates. It's kind of the missing link between beer and bread (not that anyone ever suspected there was such a missing link); it's based on beer but with a low alcohol content (not sure how strong as it doesn't say, but I'd guess it's about 0.2% or something. Children are allowed to drink it), but has a strange taste and texture that's quite like drinking a malted loaf. It's a little rich, a bit thick, refreshing but quite filling. It's served from stalls and comes in plastic glasses.

I also had a wander to the railway station, to exchange my train confirmation for Saturday night's trip to Belarus for a real ticket, and to try to find where I need to meet up with the tour group tomorrow. It's a huge station, with 14 platforms (and a walkway right over the top with full access to all the platforms. Birmingham New Street, I'm glaring at you), but also a small outdoor locomotive museum with old engines in it.

After Euro2012, quite a lot of stuff in Kiev has been made more accessible to foreigners; this includes the railway station with all its ticket windows fully labelled. Railway stations (and post offices, in fact) have different windows for different things. We do this a bit in the UK, with a window for eg changing foreign money, but in Eastern Europe in general things seem a lot more demarcated - so for me today, there were only a couple of windows (of the 35+) that I could do this exchange at, but the window was clearly labelled with 'internet bookings' in English. Sometimes it is embarrassing to be English and have to rely on these things. I'm awful with languages, but that's a post for another day.

I still like Kiev, it feels like a good city.

{separation jingle}

At this point the travelogue has a gap of two days. This is because, as I briefly mention in my next post, I went to the remains of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant for a tour, including an overnight stay in Chernobyl City. I never blogged about it at the time because I was going to write a proper post about it afterwards, since there was an awful lot to say. Listener: you may be unsurprised to hear that I never did write a post about it.

I will at some point, thought obviously much of the advantage I'd've had about writing it at the time, in terms of SEO and general interest, has now been lost. I was tempted to talk about it a bit in this podcast, but I think if I did it would make the pod much longer than I'd intended. In any case it probably deserves its own discussion.

As for the pronunciation of Hryvna, well if you think about it, the letters g and h can sound very similar. Grivna. Hrivna. It's one of the things that seems to separate Ukrainian and Russian, and is also seen in my own blog's branding: the word barefoot being 'bosonoho' in Ukrainian as opposed to the Russian 'bosonogo'.

Anyway. My travelogue now heads north, into Belarus. According to Google Translate, "barefoot" in Belarusian is **басанок** (basanož), not that I think I'll ever need to know that!

{separation jingle}

Sunday 11 May 2014: Bouncing Czechs and Drunk Latvians

People tracking my journey will no doubt have noticed that there is no entry for the past two days. The reason for this is that Friday and Saturday I took a two-day tour of the Chernobyl/Pripyat area, and this will go onto a separate specific entry in the 'Life During Wartime' section, once I write it.

Arrived in Minsk just before 9am after a patchy sleep in a train upper bunk that was also too small for me. Had problems getting up there and couldn't get comfortable. That the train took an hour to cross between the border posts of Ukraine and Belarus didn't help - how slow was that thing going?!

For these two days in Minsk, I'd been joined by a good friend from back home, Ali, who's a major ice-hockey fan. At the time of visiting, Belarus is holding the World Ice-Hockey Championships, so I asked her if she fancied coming over and meeting me there.

It's a good time to visit Belarus, as during the tournament they've removed all visa restrictions for tourists holding tickets to any of the games. Normally it's a country with Soviet-style admissions policies, that require a visa, a sponsor in the country, full police registration, a drop of your blood to write the immigration form in, your twitter password, and a regulation to smile even less than allowed on a UK passport application.

I'd had this impression therefore of Minsk that it was going to be very drab, grey concrete buildings, miserable, with a whole vibe of 'frigidness'. In fact I was pleasantly surprised. Whilst the suburbs (where the apartment was) is definitely Soviet, even here the blocks are in pastel shades rather than all grey, whilst in the city centre it felt a bit like parts of Paris, with wide boulevards, a myriad of styles of imposing buildings, and lots of cafes. There were also a few big Orthodox Christian churches, a bit like Kiev, though it being Sunday morning we didn't go in any.

We did visit the 'Island of Tears', a very small memorial on an island in the river dedicated to the fallen soldiers of the Afghanistan War. Also known as the 'Soviet Vietnam', this was the war in the 1980s where the Soviets tried to impose a friendly regime in Kabul, and failed. While I saw a small one in Tiraspol, I didn't

notice a reference in either Chisinau or Kiev; maybe this suggests it's only the Eastern-looking regimes that choose to commemorate this one.

Like Tiraspol and Kiev, there were a number of parks in and around the city centre. Gorky Park in particular was pretty huge, although oddly parts of it resembled more of a British park than a regulation Soviet one. Much of Gorky Park (does every Russian-leaning city have a Gorky Park, I wonder?) was given over to a large children's funfair, complete with candyfloss, popcorn, waltzers, and apparently very dodgy toilets. Though these facts are unrelated.

My impressions of the city may be coloured by the fact that it is the ice-hockey world championships, and the city's been cleaned up, decorated, and made tourist-friendly (the signs in Minsk station are both evidently new, and dual-signed in English). This also means there's a lot of tourists; although there's 16 teams taking part, the city seemed to be full of Latvians, Russians, Slovaks, Czechs, and not a lot else. The Latvians were the most numerous, the loudest, and, seemingly, the most partial to spending time in the cafes drinking the local beers. They're also a very friendly lot, and were invariably surprised to find two Brits in the city who were going to the games ('Do the UK even play ice-hockey?!' was a typical question. As it happens the UK is one of the four founder members of the IIHF, and even won a gold medal at the Winter Olympics. Granted it was as long ago as 1936, and that the team was made up almost entirely of ex-pats in Canada and dual-nationals, but ...), but definitely respectful for it. People even asked for photos with Ali when she was wearing her GB shirt as it was so unusual,

Most of our transportation involved taxis – the apartment was quite a way out and the taxis were relatively cheap- around \$7 for the 15-min ride to/from the city centre (bear in mind this is a European Capital during a major tourist event). It seems you can also pay for taxis in at least three different currencies (apart from the local Rubel, USD and EUR are also accepted. Ukrainian Hryvna are not), and I suspect you could probably pay in the Russian rouble as well.

The Belarusian Rubel is a fairly worthless currency, in that there are 16,800 to the £, and notes of 100 rubel exist and are used. It's also fairly non-convertible outside the country, making it one of those currencies you get a whole stack of when you change money and then have to worry about being able to spend it, bearing in mind you can eat very well in a café for 30,000 rubel.

So to the game: tonight's was the Czech Republic v Sweden, a game the Czechs should have won but didn't take their chances and didn't kill the game off, so Sweden won on penalties after a 3-3 draw.

We saw the game in the smaller of the two ice-hockey arenas in Minsk, the Chizhovka Arena. By 'smaller' I mean it only holds about 9,500 people as opposed to the much larger Minsk Arena. Still much larger than anything in the UK, obviously. And perhaps surprisingly, given the fact both are European countries, the vast majority of the crowd were Czech-supporting. We were sat right at the front of the upper tier, behind one of the goals, and right next to a whole gaggle of very vocal Czech supporters (of the kind that keep chanting. And chanting. Endlessly. They also went through phases of all jumping up and down, which actually caused the area we were seated in to bounce too). It was quite nice at the start but got very annoying very quickly. That being said, because the rest of the crowd had pockets which were doing the same thing, and given the stadium looked pretty much full, the atmosphere was incredible. It's also the only time I've ever heard anyone from Sweden being booed and jeered.

Obviously it being the world championships, it was very clear just how much quality there was on the ice – the game in the UK is much less smooth and fluid, and much more stop-start with more penalties and errors. It shows the game in the UK has a very long way to go, and to be honest will probably never get there, not to this level at least.

{separation jingle}

Monday 12 May 2014: Wobble

Technically, today is the first day of my holiday. That is to say, today is the first day of my designated 'Career Break' from work – the days up to this point were me using my holiday entitlement up. It's only a small point, but it does mean that from this day on, I'm not getting paid etc, and it's kind of feeling like this is where the

adventure really begins.

Not related to the above, I felt quite 'low' this morning; having difficulty working out things to do with friendships back in the UK, having difficulty figuring out what they want/need from me, given that I'm travelling so far for so long. This trip will have an end and there will be normality at the end of it, but a year is a long time, Is it too long? Am I aiming to do too much? Am I right to do this much? Am I being selfish? Should I have stayed at home another year first to make sure my future's what it wants to be?

I am very insecure sometimes.

Anyway.

Today was more of the same as yesterday: walking around Minsk with the occasional trip into cafes, except that today it was raining quite a bit – I don't seem to be able to avoid the stuff. As states previously, some cities look nice in the rain, others don't. Surprisingly, Minsk falls into the former category. Standing underneath the tarp in the entranceway to the Hotel Europe, and looking out at the buildings around, they seemed almost to 'glisten' with the moisture on the walls. It also enhanced the colours, bringing out the yellows, the creams, the greens, the blues. It definitely didn't feel like a Communist's playground.

We popped into a museum (entrance fee only £2, but we decided against doing the hologram exhibition add-on) of Belarusian history and culture. Exhibits included the usual stone-age finds and Roman coins (I didn't think the Romans came out this far, but there seemed to be an awful lot of them for it to have been just evidence of trade. I wonder what they would have made of the Winter snows here), but also a selection of guns and swords, and some Japanese prints (by a Belarusian who made it out that far), and a series of old photos of Belarus towns. Quite an odd and mixed museum really, small but with a little bit of everything.

We may have found the most expensive beer in Minsk, by the way. We succumbed to the temptations of an 'Irish bar' as we passed it in the rain. The place looked quite ornate from the inside (but definitely not Irish-themed), half the beers weren't on tap, the service was horrendously slow, and the beers cost around £3 each. The whole 'bar' seemed much more geared up for food than drink, and they were surprised we only wanted a beer anyway.

This all makes it sound like a bad experience. On the up-side, when it came, the beer was probably worth the wait and the price; a dark beer from Belarus that tasted very smooth with faint hints of liquorice; quite easy-drinking for a dark beer and not at all malty really. I didn't get the alcohol %, unfortunately, but at those prices we weren't going to have more than one anyway.

Tonight's game was again at the Chizhovka Arena, and again involved the Czech Republic, this time against Canada. When I was booking the tickets, I tried to buy for matches between top nations, although at the time of purchasing, some of the matches had already sold out (or at least all the tickets in that wave had been sold) – this is why both games were at the smaller arena.

Canada being even further from Belarus than Sweden meant that again the crowd was incredibly partisan towards the Czechs. Our seats this time were in the corner of the arena, but still front row, and we were in a small gaggle of Canada-flag-waving supporters (although most of them were Belarusian), Genuine Canadians were few and far between, but relatively easy to spot in their NHL jerseys.

There's a cliché in football – 'it's a game of two halves', Ice Hockey has three periods but the same principle applied to tonight's game; the Czechs dominated the first period but couldn't kill the game off; Canada completely walked the second period to lead 4-1, and then a very tense and dramatic last period saw the Czechs pepper the Canada goal but could only score twice more. Throughout, and even in losing, the Czech crowd were in very loud voice, although two losses in two days in games they could (and probably should) have won means they're not in a great position in the tournament.

So, a good couple of days in Minsk in general, and definitely a city worth visiting if you get the chance.

{separation jingle}

I had my first 'travel wobble' in Minsk, hence why I titled that post. There was a lot I didn't say, but, as I've said

on many occasions, including on my most recent Twitter Spaces chat, while I often have low points on my travels and experience situations with regard to my mental health, those situations are almost never caused by the place I'm in. Rather they're brought on by factors usually external to my travels, including money, personal relationships back home, imposter syndrome, social anxiety, and many other reasons that go through my head at the most inopportune moments.

In Minsk it was partly caused too by the fact I was spending my time with someone else for a change. And I spent the whole time being fully conscious of the fact that I didn't consider myself to be a very applicable or apt travelling partner, especially as the friend I was with at the time has a very different way of travelling, of approaching places, etc, than I do. Having been travelling on my own up to that point, it was quite the jolt to my system, and it knocked me a bit off-kilter.

As I did say on the Twitter Space though, my mood is often lifted simply by moving on to somewhere else. And this is exactly what happened, as you'll now hear.

{separation jingle}

Tuesday 13 May: Everyone has the right to be unique

Uzupis (there's an inverted hat on the z but getting fancy characters on this tablet is a hassle!) is the artistic quarter of Vilnius, and, with a bit of tongue firmly in cheek, has declared itself an autonomous republic. On the wall of one of the streets there is the constitution of the microstate, black on silver tablets, in 20 different languages. It's all very philosophical and utopian, but it's meant to show a point whilst still being humorous. Also in Uzupis is the rather odd pub called Snekutis, which is a mishmash of ... 'things' that somehow make a building with a small bar and about 6 or 7 tables. They brew their own beer, so naturally I had a pint (well, 500ml) - "Jovary Snekutis", at 6%, quite foamy at first, light and sweet, with a texture and taste a bit like honey lemsip. I liked it. Others perhaps wouldn't. I also had a pie; kind of like a shepherd's pie (mainly potato) but filled with pigs' ears rather than mince. This seems to be a local delicacy. And I'm all for eating local food ...

I'd arrived in Vilnius around 1.30pm and no sooner had I left the station than it started to rain. Torrentially. It did ease off but not until I was most of the way to the hostel. This was the weather pattern for the whole day really - a sudden torrential downpour not long after leaving a building. Anyone might think that the Gods had it in for me, until you remember that I'm English and flippers/rubber skin come as standard issue. We do have 6576828 different words for rain, from 'mizzle' at one end to 'OhChristItsComingInThroughTheWindow' at the other.

Despite the rain, Vilnius looks a very pretty city, and very definitely the least Soviet of all the cities I've visited so far. It actually resembles more a central European city, of the Prague/Krakow type, despite being part of the USSR for several decades - I don't know why, maybe they just never got round to Russifying it (in terms of architecture at least).

It's also the place I've visited so far that has the most command of English. Whilst other cities have some things in more than one language, the people of Vilnius (even more than Bucharest) actually seem able to speak it, at least in enough limited capacity to make useful conversation.

Odd lack of Bureau-de-Change but plenty of banks so changing money isn't a problem. And no, GBP, not anything more obscure. I could have paid for my hostel in Euros, actually, but the legal currency here is the Lita, at about 4.2 to the pound.

As you can gather from this, I managed to get out of Minsk without any trouble at all. Used up as much rubel as I could in buying breakfast (from the same, logically named, 'cafe' underneath Minsk station) and some snacks for the journey. Train was a bit cramped but spent the time updating my travel journal and looking out the window at, mainly, forests bathed in sunshine. Which makes the torrential downpour I had on arrival even more unexpected.

I'm feeling quite a bit more contented today, which is good. I'm here for another two full days, and have no real plans to do anything except just casually explore.

{separation jingle}

Wednesday 14 May: Vilnius is nice when the sun's out...

BMQ: high. #selfconfidence #IAmEnough

Speaking of self-confidence, I even went into a local supermarket on my own today, and bought stuff. This rarely happens, as I usually get too self-conscious about not knowing where anything is, what anything looks like, how much the bill will be, that I won't understand anything, etc. I once tried it in Toulouse (France), a country where I can get by in the language, broke the self-service till machine, got all flustered, and never went back in that shop again ...

The next step is the financial one of buying stuff in one that I can then cook with in the hostel, rather than buying crisps, chocolate, and apples (I don't eat anywhere near as much fruit as I ought, Partly though this is that I find all the easy fruit boring, and I wasn't in the mood to mess with a mango). I suspect that will be tomorrow's plan, as the kitchen in the one I'm staying in is quite large.

Much of today I spent walking around the city of Vilnius, but a couple of hours of that was on one of those free walking tours that oft occur in cities, led by students or local people interested in their city and looking to make a bit of cash in tips. Today's was led by a lady called Jolanta, who was really interesting but maybe talked slightly too quickly? It wasn't a big group (about 7 of us), but quite diverse in age and nationality.

Some of the places we went I'd walked yesterday, including the Uzupis district, but it was good to hear more about it rather than just passing through and going 'oh that looks nice'; so for instance while I knew about the micronation yesterday, today I found out that their 'Independence' Day is April 1st (!) and on that day, mock border guards stamp your passport as you cross the bridge. Also, anyone can be an ambassador to the micronation, you just have to ask (so they have eg an ambassador for Clouds). Strange people, artists can be!

The walk tended to take us around the less commonly-visited areas of the old town and surrounds, including the site of the old synagogue (destroyed during WW2, eventually demolished by the Soviets and replaced with a new-build Kindergarten, which is now itself slated for demolition and replaced with, er, a synagogue). (As an aside, Lithuanian-Israeli relations are 'complicated' due to Lithuanians being caught between the Nazis and the Communists in WW2; either way, the Jews bore the brunt of it.)

I had lunch in another pub, with decent home-brew and potato pancakes. I also had what might be described as 'fried bread chunks' - basically small pieces of bread, deep-fried, and served with a sour cream dip. It takes the place in Lithuania that peanuts or pork scratchings occupy in the UK - something to nibble on while you drink. They are very fattening of course, and you couldn't eat a whole plateful (it's bigger than I expected).

The hostel I'm staying in is virtually opposite a museum that goes by two names: the 'Museum of Genocide', or the 'KGB Museum' (I assure you this was accidental, though it made the road the hostel's on easy to find on a map). It's actually the old KGB headquarters in Vilnius, and is now a 3-storey museum dedicated predominantly to the plight of 'un-communist' Lithuanians arrested by the Soviets in the post-war era (they were generally either shot or 'relocated' to Siberia). There were also some exhibits on the KGB itself, and recreations of what some of the rooms would have been like in KGB times, from the 'listening room' to the cells below ground. There was even the execution room, with a glass floor under which you could see some personal effects of prisoners, like shoes and glasses. Weird.

It didn't rain today. Yay.

{separation jingle}

Thursday 15 May: Luton Airport?

BMQ: All bar about 8 minutes, in a park, of all places. Might have to write some kind of specific entry on this.

I think I've decided that Vilnius is one of the most pleasant cities I've been to. It's calming, restful pretty, a nice size, and seems to have everything you might need. As a non-Lithuanian speaker, it was relatively easy to get

around, although learning the local language would bring more benefits than it would in, say, the Netherlands. It's just a nice shade of cool without being too 'hip'.

Did a lot of walking today. Started off by walking past the head of Frank Zappa, because of course nothing says 'obvious' than a statue of a 1970s experimental musician. Yeh, no, I've no idea really, but apparently it's quite a famous 'thing'. And I guess it makes a change from Pushkin.

After a quick sojourn through Vingis Park (huge, full of joggers), I walked along the river to the opposite side of the city centre, to take a look at The Hill of the Three Crosses. On the top of a hill just to the East of the city centre there's a series of densely wooded hills, that were Incidentally the site of some of the original fortifications of the city. Atop one of them are three pure white crosses; torn down by the Soviets but subsequently replaced. Lithuania does seem to be quite a religious country; churches are abound, and these crosses wouldn't seem out-of-place in any of those countries much more associated with it.

Just on the other side of a small tributary, back towards the city centre, is another hill, this one topped by a small tower - Gediminas Castle. It's a steep climb up a cobblestone road to the tower, and once you get inside there's a bit of a staircase, but the views from the top are pretty cool as you can see right across the cityscape of Vilnius (it's a reasonably flat city, really).

From here I headed back towards the hostel, to stop at one of the nearby pubs which also sells microbrews. And fried bread with dip. See, this is a cuisine I could just about live with ...

I did however change my plans for the day. Originally I'd been due to fly out of Vilnius at 6am tomorrow morning, and then spend 10 hours getting from London Luton Airport to London Heathrow Airport. However, partly because this would mean having to get up at 4m or something, but mainly for personal reasons, I decided to change my flight to leave this evening instead. So I picked up my bag and headed off to the airport, via a bit more of the old town centre.

Vilnius Airport is close to the city centre (about 5km), and quite quiet. The airport's railway station is a single-platform on a single-track line with a train every 45 minutes (and for some reason reminded me of Cinderhill Tram Stop in Nottingham). There was virtually no-one else on the train, and to be honest not many people in the airport. The flight was surprisingly quite full, so I don't know where all the other people were hiding. We left the airport about 15 minutes late, which had the knock-on effect of my missing my train to Nottingham and having to get a convoluted route back. "Luton Airport Parkway", incidentally, is a very misleadingly-named station; you have to catch a bus from the airport to reach it. Given the airport's proximity to Luton town itself, one wonders what the point is...At least East Midlands Parkway, although a bus-ride from East Midlands Airport, is in the middle of nowhere so getting a bus there (and not to, say, Loughborough) makes perfect sense.

So that's the first leg of my RTW trip over! Next stop, Chile.

{separation jingle}

When I first started my podcast, I had a section called 'Lesser-Known Destination Of The Week'. It wasn't a very long-lived segment, so I'd be surprised if you remember it. However, the destination in my very first podcast, where I talked about travelling barefoot, was Vilnius, and much of what I spoke about then was around how the city made me feel relaxed and calm after my Minsk adventure, and especially because I was finally able to cast my sandals aside and be barefoot much more than I had been thus far on the journey. Indeed, that's the meaning of the BMQ references that appear at the start of some of the entries - it was a subtle reference to a friend of mine who's noted for her preference for being barefoot.

That said, here my casting aside of my footwear was largely by default than by choice. The shoes I had for Chernobyl were literally falling apart and ended up in a bin outside the hostel. And I gave up on the sandals; pretty much the main reason for changing my flight was because I did manage to get a new pair sent to my home address, so it made sense to take the opportunity to go and pick them up. No-one seemed to care at any point in Vilnius, nor even on the journey back to the UK, that I was barefoot, and this was in the days before my crocheted barefoot sandals too so it was, you know, blindingly obvious I wasn't wearing any footwear.

Although that was the end of the journey, I did make a couple of other observations in blog posts at the time.

One was about the train journey from Minsk to Vilnius, which was completely unlike the other trains I'd taken, and the other was about some of the food I'd eaten along the way.

{separation jingle}

Post dated 13 May: More on Soviet Trains

Of course not all trains in the ex-Soviet Union are like previously described. The one from Minsk to Vilnius was a two-carriage effort that looked for all the world like something you'd find plying regional railways in the UK. Except much nicer, obviously (mmm London Midland, mmm East Midlands Trains...). Still, I guess the journey is only three hours and that includes the border post.

The recorded announcement at the start of the journey was I three languages (Belarusian, Lithuanian, and American) and for some reason accompanied by the sound of panpipes. In addition, the digital display in the carriages tells us useful things like current speed (80km/h in Belarus, rising to 114km/h in Lithuania) and the temperature (13 degrees C at the start of the journey outside, 22 C inside). Seat's not very comfortable though, and I'm a bit squashed-in (my backpack is under the seat but doesn't quite fit, and there are people sitting opposite me).

The driver sounds like he has a very shrill hand-held whistle that he blows on entering a station. This is different to the train's horn that he blows at every level crossing.

Leaving Belarus was very quick (well it's a small train) and consisted of a gaggle of guards coming on en masse and processing everyone like ticket inspectors would. I'm still impressed by the way they have laptops to process things with (complete with barcode-reading slot so they can scan in things like the passport and even the ice-hockey ticket).

Passport and customs for entering Lithuania were in Vilnius Railway Station itself, like Eurostar.

{separation jingle}

Post dated 14 May: Nice place, if you like potatoes

Mmmm, 'bubblegum & marshmallow' flavoured ice-cream. Cheap and definitely useful on a warm day. Ice-cream seems to be quite common across Eastern Europe, although as the above flavour was bought from a park stall on the May Day holiday in a popular park in Bucharest, I'm not sure if the cornucopia of flavours is repeatable elsewhere (say on a cold wet Wednesday night in Minsk).

As far as I've found, the 'standard fayre' seems to be a variation on 'meat and two veg', although the veg in question tends more towards cabbage and polenta rather than peas and carrots. Certainly cabbage has a flexible life in the local cuisine ... (Romanian fayre: Stuffed cabbage leaves with polenta) ... as the Eastern Med do with vine leaves, so the Romanians and Ukrainians do with cabbage - roll up the leaves and fill with meat or rice, then steam till cooked, and served with polenta.

The potato, however, is ubiquitous, and can be found pretty much everywhere - it's been so historically important to the culture of Belarus that a museum there devotes a whole floor to an exhibit about them. One of the more common snackfoods involving potatoes is the 'potato cake', available in most cafes and eaten the way the Brits might eat 'baguette and chips'.

When it comes to snack food, the rule seems to be 'if it's bread-based and you can deep-fry it, then it works'. Doughnuts and other deep-fried snacks can be bought from roadside stalls for a pittance; sometimes plain but often stuffed with cheese, meat, vegetable, or some combination. Cheap and filling - if I lived in Ukraine for any length of time I'd get fat.

Lithuania is slightly different, although still definitely fond of the potato, they seem to have a more Germanic influence, with pork being the most common meat dish. And "kiaulės ausis", or pigs' ears, being quite a delicacy; here served in a kind of pie made predominantly with potatoes.

They taste quite smoked, and are a little chewy, but they're a lot nicer than you'd expect. In the UK we just tend to feed them to dogs.

As for drink, well most areas brew their own beer, and bottle their own spring water (there's a tendency for a couple of these countries to have slightly suspect drinking water). However, in a couple of countries (notably Ukraine, but also an extent in Belarus and Transnistria they seem to have merged the two, and created Kvas.

As an aside, it's interesting how much more expensive anything with mushrooms was in Belarus. If a large slice of pie cost around 40,000 Rubels, a large slice of pie containing mushrooms was often more than double that. I have no idea why; I don't imagine mushrooms are any harder to get hold of in Belarus than anywhere else?

{separation jingle}

And that's where my travelogue ends. You'll have noticed in listening to those entries that I had a very strange sense as to what was important to note, and what wasn't. It's clear they wouldn't really stand up to current travel blogger practice, and indeed that's one reason why the only destination I've ended up writing a proper descriptive blog post about is Transnistria, and to be honest even that was more because it matches my brand niche rather than it being a definitive and informative post. It kind of shows that even when I started as a travel blogger, I was clearly not a travel blogger as such, and there's not much there that people could use as a basis to travel for themselves. There's a couple of titbits, like how to navigate the Kyiv Metro, but even that may well have changed over the years since I went. But, as a snapshot of what a backpacking journey was like in May 2014, as well as an insight into the mind of a barefoot backpacker, it's probably interesting to a sociologist or social historian.

Someone like me, in fact.

{standard end jingle}

Well that's about all for this episode. Join me next time when I take another trip Beyond The Brochure. Until then, [do something], and if you're feeling off colour, keep on getting better.

{Outro theme tune, same as intro, just a different bit of it}

{Outro voiceover:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure. I hope you enjoyed it; if you did, don't forget to leave a review on your podcast site of choice.

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Until next time, have safe journeys. Bye for now.}