



The Cathedral of Dormition, which has Orthodox Christian saints painted on its outside walls

A Sojourn in Kiev

By Dr Desmond Wai

It has always been a pleasure to participate in overseas conferences, especially if I have not visited that country before. In April 2010, I spoke at a conference in Kiev, the capital of Ukraine, which was organised by the Ukraine Ministry of Health and the National Medical Academy of Ukraine.

I knew that Ukraine was in Eastern Europe, and was a former state of the Soviet Union. I had also read that Ukraine had some quarrels with Russia over the supply of natural gas from Russia in 2009. Otherwise, I did not know Ukraine very well.

The journey was long as I had to transit at Frankfurt. At Kiev International Airport, the immigration clearance was slow, and

I only passed through customs after 40 minutes of queuing. Finally, I was greeted by Yana and Eager, my local contacts, and was sent to my hotel.

It was supposed to be early spring, but the weather was still very cold at about 10°C. After a good night's rest, I proceeded to the National Medical Academy for the conference. I browsed through the booths in the Exhibition Hall but could not understand anything, for everything was in Russian. The Ukrainian language is very similar to Russian, and Ukrainians spoke Russian when Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union.

Yana and Eager then brought me to a local restaurant for lunch. The local dishes we had included beetroot soup with

sour cream, bread dipped in garlic sauce, marinated white fungus, baked potatoes with braised pork, cherry dumplings, and fresh cranberry juice. This was the first time I tried Ukrainian or Russian food and everything was surprisingly delicious.

Yana was shocked when I ordered mineral water for my drink. I looked around and realised that almost every local customer was drinking beer. Beer was like cooling water to them.

Over lunch, Yana told me she used to live near Moscow when she was growing up. Prior to the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, life was good. Ordinary people had jobs, enough food, and received reasonably good education. Yana's family would also go



Beetroot soup with sour cream (foreground), and bread dipped into garlic sauce are traditional Ukrainian dishes



Baked potatoes with braised pork tasted very unique

for holidays annually. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, society was in chaos, lives were miserable, and there was no proper government system for many years.

After lunch, we visited the Kiev Pechersk Lavra (Kiev Monastery of the Caves), one of Kiev's most iconic buildings. The Pechersk Lavra consists of the Cathedral of the Dormition and its surroundings. It was founded in the 11th century, although the original Cathedral of the Dormition had been destroyed during World War II and was only rebuilt in 2000. The official religion in Ukraine is Orthodox Christianity, and the monastery is considered Orthodox holy grounds. So Ukrainians from all over the country travel there to pay pilgrimage. Unlike other tourist spots, there was very little English on the signboards, and everything was in Russian.

One of the must-see attractions at the Pechersk Lavra is the caves, which gave the place its name. Orthodox monks lived underground in these caves, and when the monks died, some of their bodies were kept inside. Amazingly, their corpses remained intact over a thousand years. Some of the caves were open to the public. I saw many coffins in which the bodies of deceased monks were kept. Parts of the bodies were visible and they looked undamaged. How



Marinated white mushrooms made a delicious starter



Dumplings filled with cherries were a wonderful dessert

The Church of the Saviour at Berestove, part of the Pechersk Lavra, and located over some of the caves there



these bodies remain untouched by decay is still a mystery! I also saw many Ukrainians praying in the tunnels.

Yana and Eager then brought me to Central Street and Independent Square. This was like our Orchard Road, with lots of designer stores and crowded with locals. I did not buy anything as the prices were higher than in Singapore. Nevertheless, it was a great experience.

My return flight was at 2pm the next day, so I visited the Chernobyl Museum in the morning. In the 1980s, the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant was the largest nuclear plant in the Soviet Union. On the fateful day of 26 April 1986, an explosion occurred in one of the reactors, which resulted in the leakage of plutonium-239 and other radioactive materials. The magnitude of the blast was

equivalent to the release of 100 atomic bombs, and all those who were working near the blast died instantly. Many of those who went there on rescue missions and to fight fires died within three weeks. Those who survived died of cancer later in life. Plutonium-239 has a very long half life and Chernobyl will only be free from the effects of radiation after 48,000 years! Fortunately for Kiev, a two-hour drive away from Chernobyl, the wind carried radioactive particles released from the disaster in the opposite direction, leaving the capital unscathed.

I had my last round of local food on the way to the airport. According to Yana, who lives in Singapore most of the time, there are no Ukrainian or Russian restaurants in Singapore, so I have to wait for my next trip to Ukraine to enjoy Ukrainian food again.

Ukraine: its people are warm; its culture, rich; and its food, delicious, making it a perfect destination for a holiday. **SMA**



Desmond is a gastroenterologist in private practice. He has a toddler son and is enjoying every bit of fatherhood.



The bustling Independent Square