


Kitten and The Bear do Yalta



When it comes to quick getaways, the options that make it worth your while are few. There's Paris; however, Ukrainians still require visas to even think about flying there. There's Turkey; but there again, you need to take the time to visit a travel agency. And then there's Crimea; which, despite the long-lasting reminders of Sovietism, boasts a beautiful sub-Mediterranean climate made possible because of its location sandwiched between mountains and sea. The Crimean coast, with its picturesque views spanning the entirety of the peninsula, is a must-see for anyone coming to Ukraine for the first time. So if you're looking to take a mini-break that won't break the bank but is still pretty incredible, then Yalta is where you're going to want to go.

Bear is pretty busy these days so it's me, Kitten, doing the talking this time, and finding that both of us could really use a holiday, we've booked a couple of tickets and are on our way to Perlyna Bilya Morya (the Pearl of the Sea).

A Pearl Like No Other

With no restrictions put on Ukrainians to visit the all-inclusive resorts of Turkey or Egypt, many don't even think about Crimea as a tourist destination, instead moaning about the lack of customer service, the overcrowded beaches, and the Soviet sanatoriums awaiting you there. Perhaps they don't know that Yalta was once the most prestigious, as well as the most expensive, resort site on the Crimean coastline, and at 160 years old, is considered the capital of the area.

Taking the train down is one of the ways to get there; so if you happen to be looking to buy a ticket in high season (July/August), you'd be looking at something like 320hr per person roundtrip. The time it'll take you is about 15 hours. But with breath-taking views over the vast Ukrainian Steppes, along with tiny villages that seem to appear and just as quickly disappear, it is doubtful you'll find yourself bored. It's actually a good way for foreigners to become acquainted with the Ukrainian topography, and certainly would have benefitted my dear Bear. We, however, have decided to fly, and with the help of UIA, the time it takes to get to heaven is no time at all.

Finding ourselves on our way to Boryspil Airport, we arrive, check in and board our plane with little hassle. I am seated and comfortable and ready to go when suddenly! I realise I have forgotten my

Tolstoy reading material in my checked baggage. Oh well, no need to get upset, I have Bear and he is ready to discuss any and everything – except business!

The trip only takes about two hours, and landing down in Simferopol, the air is like a cocktail of breezes, mixed from both mountain and sea. As I say this, Bear smiles, knowing that I have never smelled the air in the Caribbean, and rather than say anything at all, he just grabs my hand and heads over to a man with our names written on a piece of paper.

Settling In

Bear's friends are staying in Yalta over the weekend, and so sending us their chauffeured-4 wheel, we hop in and are off. If you don't have your own wheels, taxis are also available. One



needn't even call to arrange pick up, as there are swarms of drivers waiting to attack you as you step off the plane. Be prepared to test out your Russian, however, as the Tatars are well represented in this part of the world, and most of them speak little English. The cost to get you into Yalta from the airport (60km) is going to set you back about 300hrv/car, so if you can find someone to share a cab with, it is to your advantage. Likewise, marshrutkas can be found idling about as well, so if you're up to speed on your routes and your language, you may want to take advantage of this reduced fee (50hrv/seat).

Our drive takes about an hour and a half during which we pass by steep rugged cliffs in and amongst spectacular mountain-scapes. The president will be celebrating his birthday at his Crimean holiday home this year, and so even

more welcoming are the lights and flags saluting the Party of Regions amidst every residential district we pass.

Arriving at the Oreanda Hotel, our driver has no chance of beating the bell boy to the door. We get out, check in, and soon we are in our room; which is exactly what you would expect from a four-star European (!) hotel. It is a good size with two twin beds, a well-equipped bathroom, all the modern conveniences, and...a picturesque view overlooking the turbulent Black Sea. Now we're on vacation!

Here for just a few days, unpacking takes Bear not long at all. I, on the other hand, take my time putting things where they should be: on shelves and in the wardrobe, both more than big enough to fit all of my garb. With that in mind, I would just like to say that whatever you have heard about

Crimean hotels, including the small amount of space given to storage, you'll immediately forget once you experience the Oreanda. And wanting to learn more about this delicious little gem, I study up on its history while Bear has a little lunch.

Hallowed Halls

Built in 1907 by the legendary General Oleksandr Vitmer, the hotel was at one time seen as one of the best along the Crimean coastline, and was open for business to aristocrats only. By 1918, during the days of the Revolution, the Oreanda was used as a defence barricade against the Bolsheviks. After the Soviets gained power, the hotel was then awarded national status, until WWII, where it was transformed into a hospital. With victory at hand, the damaged hotel was granted permission for reconstruction by the State with a ►

Ukraine Travel



doesn't feel like swimming and is quite surprised by Kitten when she says her kind actually enjoy it, so a compromise is made: it's time we check out Oreanda's spa.

Welcomed in and given towels, they ask us what we might like to try. Thai massages range from 300hrv for a regular body rub down to 1400hrv for a Double Lotus with four hands! There are alternatives when it comes to Balneology as well, where a Cleopatra Bath (360hrv), Champagne Bath (660hrv), or Aroma Bath (200hrv) could be had, for one half hour each. Also, if you're looking for something really out of the ordinary, algae therapy might be something to consider. The Turkish Sauna Hamam and Finish Sauna are also an option and will set you back 480hrv/hour. Unless, that is, you happen to be a hotel guest at which point the saunas are free of charge.

Bear is licking his lips for the Champagne Bath; but ends up slightly disenchanted after being sent from the Finish Sauna to the Jacuzzi and back again. The Cleopatra, on the other hand, has left me feeling refreshed and relaxed, and deciding to take a swim in the sea water pool, the water feels wonderfully cool after a very warm Jacuzzi. Before getting ourselves out of the water to get changed for dinner, we order a bottle of champagne, and sipping on glasses of chilled, sparkling Martini Asti, we toast our little getaway.

provisional 'but': that which was left of the original structure was not to be touched. The but was acknowledged, and in 2007, the very last finishing touches were made on its 100th anniversary. Whether on holiday or simply in need of a place to stay because of business, the hotel today has everything you need and includes three conference rooms with state-of-the-art facilities, as well as a beautiful banquet hall. We're not going to be needing any of these on this trip, but what Bear might require while we're here is use of the internet, which the business centre easily provides.

Wanting to forget about business for a short while, what we'd most like to do at the moment is a little swimming and sunbathing. So getting dressed appropriately, we head down and find one outdoor pool with a kids' swimming area, as well as a spa pool with water from the sea just next to a Jacuzzi. Those we'll check out later. At the moment, we want to be as close to the sea as possible so we continue our investigation down toward the water. Oreanda has its own private beach which can only be accessed with an Oreanda Beach Ticket (150hrv), so what you'll typically find here are hotel guests lying in the surf on complimentary loungers with umbrellas not far off. The bar staff seem to know their stuff pretty well too, and to our delight have no problems running over to take your order anytime you're feeling parched or peckish.

Relaxation at its Best

Having paid for two tickets, a couple of loungers are immediately laid out for us, and laying the towels we got at the entrance down on the beds, we take a look around. The sea before our eyes is endless; the mountains, like the ones we passed earlier today, are picturesque; the sky is cloud-

less; and there are tonnes of people on all of the other beaches but ours. Actually, that's not true, ours is also pretty full, but it's not packed like the surrounding shoreline, and people here don't look like seals sunbathing on the Arctic coast. Those that are here include a few families, a group of businessmen, and a couple of pretty young girls having a blast; each of them adding to this atmosphere of total relaxation.

Wanting to try out the bar service, we order a couple of Mojitos (95hrv/ea), then sit back to enjoy the breeze and the sound of the waves. The sun beats down and the Mojitos are gone in no time – it is 35 degrees after all – so we order a couple of Iced Teas (35hrv/ea) and continue to relax. Bear



A Tasty Evening

The hotel is covered in plush carpets at almost every turn making me think that perhaps the hotel restaurant will be something just as exquisite. In fact, I am right! This place looks pretty much like a lot of upmarket spots in Kyiv with a beautiful crystal chandelier centring a number of sofas and tables. The only difference is that here, everyone seems to be paying attention to and enjoying both their company and their food. And even though this is one of the most popular and high profile hotels in the area, there is no preening and definitely no posing for the cameras.

Like most hotels these days, breakfast is included in the price of your room, but one of the great little extras about Oreanda is that they throw in dinner as well. This comes as quite a surprise. It is, however, a very good one indeed; especially since all of their seafood, various cuts of beef, French cheeses and more, are more than up to par with any European four-star you might find.

Taking our seats on the terrace to enjoy the view overlooking the pool, the music they have opted for tonight is lounge. As it plays lightly in the background, a feeling of tranquillity overcomes this place, and wholly contradicts the overall hustle and bustle of the city. Not wanting to tease you with orders of delicious eats, I'll instead skip to our digestifs: a Margarita for me and a Chivas Regal for Bear, which we sip while discussing our plans for the next couple of days.

During our little escape to Alushta last year, we spent a lot of time looking around the Swallow's Nest (a famous castle), so this year, perhaps a little coastal exploration is in order. To get a head start, we head down to the seafront and take a walk around. It's a lot like what you might find in other sea port towns and has a number of fountains, palm trees and of course an overload of people on vacation, and feeling as though we've done a little of the legwork already, Bear and I head back up to the hotel to have a seat on the summer terrace located by the lobby bar. At the moment, Chopin is coming from the piano, so we sit back with a bottle of Moët & Chandon – delicious.

Second Day's the Charm

The second day of our sojourn in Yalta looks pretty much the same as the first: beach time, bathing, spa, Martini Asti, gym, and the relax-

ing salt room. Other hotel guests seem to be busy with pretty much the same thing, and why wouldn't they? Oreanda has all of the bases covered when it comes to their guests: fitness centre, coffee bar, restaurant, disco – what else would you need?!

Carrying out a little due diligence a little later on, Bear and I decide to check out some of the local bars outside the hotel's premises, and booking a table at Nobu for 22.00, we are ready to enjoy the sea view from a slightly different angle. Once seated, we order our fave – Martini Asti (850hrv) – and immediately realise that this franchise is a tad more expensive than the one found in Kyiv! Deciding on a change in venue before we go bust, we head back (surprise!) to Oreanda's beach bar where the same bottle of champagne can be found for twice less. You'd think perhaps that there's not much here other than Oreanda and Nobu... In fact, there are a number bars to head to, there's even a McDonald's for those who can't live without their fries. Bear and I, however, rather enjoy sitting in this little paradise whilst smelling the incontestable Crimean air. It is simply like nowhere else: not Turkey, not Egypt, not Greece...

Somewhere after midnight, Matrix (a club which also happens to be on hotel property) comes up in conversation, and having booked a table earlier in the day, we head over. Tables in this venue come at a price of 1000hrv, but then you are free to order anything you want against that sum, and as there are a couple of friends joining us tonight, that works for us.

This place is open not only to hotel guests but anyone looking to have a good time (that is if you're willing to shell out 100hrv for entrance), and as it's getting pretty close to 01.00, the club is pretty busy. With hookah (180hrv) and Mojitos



(95hrv), one will be well entertained; especially when people like Loboda come to perform. We're not that lucky this evening, and instead face the musical stylings of Kyiv DJ, Miss FTV. She is still pretty good all the same, and gets my friend Tabby and I up on the dance floor grooving to the latest hits.

The day we are due to leave comes quickly; just like anything you don't really look forward to. We're not that upset, though, and still find time to nibble on some fruit in the morning while basking under the sun in the afternoon. With our driver picking us up from the hotel lobby, I have only two thoughts: if I ever come to Crimea again, it has to be Yalta, and if I ever come to Yalta again, it has to be Oreanda. There is another thought that soon occurs to me, however, and that has to do with Oreanda in the autumn: I'm sure it is nothing but beautiful, especially with the entire Yaltan coast spiced with the colour and flavour of the season.



OREANDA HOTEL

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