

## Europe holidays

### Postcard from...Odessa

Since the conflict with Russia that began in 2013-14, tourism has dwindled in the city. And yet it still has much to offer visitors



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Tom Allan 6 HOURS AGO

As late afternoon light slants through the plane trees along Odessa's elegant Troitska Boulevard, a slight 20-year-old in an outsize overcoat is describing his dreams of becoming a professional boxer. Or rather, how they ended. "I started getting problems with my back," Alex Toroshenko tells me, lounging against the wall of the university library and flicking aside a shard of asymmetrical fringe, "so I had to find a new direction." Direction is what I need, too: I'm looking for a panel discussion on "the future of Odessa", part of the city's annual literary festival, and I'm late. But Toroshenko's story seems worth staying for.

His family moved here from Bulgaria in the early 19th century. Like the Romanian, Greek and Italian immigrants who also came at this time, Toroshenko's ancestors were attracted by Catherine the Great's offer of free land, low taxes and the right to retain their culture and religion.

Today the flow of immigrants has dwindled, and the conflict with Russia that began in 2013-14 has seen foreign tourist numbers to Ukraine drop precipitously, too. But the ongoing conflict in eastern Donbass is unlikely to affect visitors to Odessa, and foreign tourists are slowly starting to return to this coastal city in the south-west. So what does it offer those venturing here?

The food, for starters. Odessa's diverse history has created a unique culinary fusion, where Jewish staples like gefilte fisch and vorschmack (herring pâté) sit alongside Ukrainian salo (back fat smeared on treacly black bread) and varenyky (dumplings stuffed with pickled cabbage, meat or fruit). I join local guide Olga Bokhonovskaya for a foodie tour of the city,

starting with a lunchtime tasting platter in the smart Sophie Café. “Sophie was the sister of the Rubinstein brothers, the famous pianists who founded the Moscow and St Petersburg conservatories,” Bokhonovskaya explains. In Odessa, you’re never far away from high culture.

I attempt to neatly eat a delicacy called “mother-in-law’s tongue”: a grilled aubergine slice rolled around a soft filling of fiery raw garlic, mayonnaise and tomato seeds. The kind of filling that is eager to escape. “She was also friends with Boris Pasternak, who spent time in Odessa too,” my guide continues as garlic and tomato slide down my chin.

The city has been a cultural hub since Pushkin composed two and a half chapters of his masterpiece *Eugene Onegin* here (his stay is carefully commemorated in the small Pushkin museum). He described a city of clear skies, southern light and streets filled with multilingual chatter, but also one plagued by violent dust storms from the surrounding steppe. After rain, the dust turned to thick mud.

Undeterred, a succession of literary luminaries have graced Odessa’s pastel buildings since the poet’s visit. Chekhov joked that he spent half his fortune on ice cream here, while Gogol wrote the doomed second book of *Dead Souls* in an apartment near the opera house. [Edmund de Waal](#)’s family made their fortune exporting grain from Odessa’s port in the 19th century, and he visited the city while researching *The Hare With Amber Eyes*. “No one told me,” he marvelled on his arrival, “that [Odessa] was so beautiful.” It was a damaged beauty, though, with bulging walls and sagging roofs next to grand Neoclassical frontages.

More of the city centre has been restored since de Waal’s visit in 2009. The Municipality of Istanbul funded a new park next to the Potemkin Steps, immortalised in Sergei Eisenstein’s 1925 film *Battleship Potemkin*, and now a Greek park is under construction directly opposite, backed by a local construction firm with Hellenic roots. “People are joking that the Greek and Turkish parks are going to end up clashing in the middle,” my guide Bokhonovskaya comments.

After a plate of pumpkin-stuffed varenyky dumplings in a shamelessly kitsch eatery complete with straw bales, plastic pigs and waitresses in fake floral headdresses, I stroll through the crowds on Deribasivska Street to the magnificent neo-Baroque opera house. Here the best seats for *Swan Lake* performed by the Ukraine State Ballet will set you back only 200 hryvnia (£5.70) — after all, high culture is still what Odessa does best.

And the young boxer? When Toroshenko’s injury kept him from the ring, he discovered a love of books, enrolled on a course in Ukrainian literature and now hopes to become a poet. Unlike many of his contemporaries, who leave to work abroad, Toroshenko intends to stay in Odessa and write. “As Ukrainians we need to build our future ourselves,” he says firmly, as an east wind twists and scatters the plane leaves down the darkening avenue.

## Details

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For details of food and walking tours of Odessa ([odessawalks.com](http://odessawalks.com)). For event listings, see

[odessareview.com](http://odessareview.com)

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