

Uzhgorod Culture

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During your visit to Uzhgorod, you will meet warm, generous people. Often you may think, "They are just like us," and in many ways they are. However, in many other ways, they are quite different. Both you and they may think the other rude at times because of cultural differences. You may sometimes think that they are very inefficient and slow to accomplish important tasks, and they may think you are "pushy." They may become irritated if you suggest that they should do everything the way it is done in the U.S. -- while they do realize the need for change, they want to develop processes that work for their people in their culture.

The economic situation is currently very difficult for workers and professionals. A few businesspeople have become extremely wealthy, but the standard of living for many people has actually declined since the fall of communism. The assumption will be that you are wealthy (they think Americans actually live like the characters on imported U.S. TV programs), and many people will ask what your salary is. This is not considered rude in their culture, and if you discuss such matters, please be sure to include how expensive it is to live here (cost of housing, food, utilities, health insurance, education, etc.) so they get a clearer picture of reality.

Alcohol and food are sometimes problems for visitors to Uzhgorod. Their food is often quite fatty (lots of butter, cream, fried foods, etc.), and the meals are larger than we are used to. Be prepared for three hot meals a day. Most people eat the big meal (dinner) at noon and a smaller supper at night. However, for visitors both the noon AND evening meals tend to be several courses: appetizers (cold cuts, cheeses, bread), soup, fish, meat (sometimes more than one course) and potatoes. Meetings during the day will probably also include pastries, and most meetings and meals (except breakfast) will include alcohol -- wine, vodka, champagne, cognac (sometimes all 4) and lots of toasting. Do not be afraid to say you prefer mineral water or juice. On the other hand, if you do choose to drink, try sipping -- they will refill your glass as soon as it is half-empty. Do NOT feel you have to keep drinking as long as they keep filling. In their culture it would be impolite not to keep offering more until you simply stop drinking.

Communication among people of the same culture is complicated enough. Communication among peoples from different cultural backgrounds requires special skills and knowledge, if misunderstandings are to be avoided. Also, it is often difficult for us to recognize the limitations imposed by our own cultural biases and filters on our perception of the outside world. Words and behaviors may have special meaning in one culture and none whatsoever in another. For instance, if you say, "I really like that idea," your intent may simply be to be polite, but your Uzhgorod counterpart may assume that it means you will do something to make it happen. They have little understanding of funding limitations, etc., so they sometimes think that if you express enthusiasm for a collaboration or exchange, it is a "done deal." Always try to clearly express your meaning, and try to word phrases so there can be no misunderstanding.

The city of Uzhgorod is almost 1000 years older than Corvallis. Nevertheless, the sister cities have much in common, including climate, topography, agricultural products, and universities. Uzhgorod sits at the base of the foothills of the Carpathian mountains on the River Uzh. The city and surrounding areas remind Corvallis visitors of the mid-Willamette Valley and the Coast Range.

Uzhgorod is located in the far southwestern corner of Ukraine, near the Hungarian and Slovakian borders. It is the capital of the oblast (region) of Transcarpathia. Transcarpathia has a unique history in Ukraine -- in fact, it did not become part of Ukraine until it became part of the Soviet Union after WWII. Between the two World Wars, it was part of Czechoslovakia, then Hungary. It had been part of Hungary before WWI also, and its Hungarian name, Ungvar, is still used by some Hungarian residents there. The city of Uzhgorod celebrated its 1100th birthday in 1993.

Although the name is usually, but not always, spelled "Uzhgorod" in English, you will hear it pronounced two ways there -- the Ukrainian pronunciation is "Uzhhorod," while the Russian pronunciation is "Uzhgorod." "Gorod" means "city," and the name of the river is "Uzh" (meaning "grass snake").

The population of Uzhgorod is between 120,000 and 140,000. Because Uzhgorod has belonged to so many different countries, everyone there is at least bi-lingual, and most residents know three or four languages fluently and understand a few more. The approximate ethnic breakdown is:

<i>In Uzhgorod:</i>		<i>In the region:</i>	
Ukrainian	70%	Ukrainian	70%
Russian	15%	Hungarian	17%
Hungarian	10%	Russian	7%
Slovakian	>1%	Slovakian	3%

Other ethnic groups, including Romanians, Albanians, and Roma (Gypsies) are represented in smaller numbers.

A few expressions in Ukrainian:

good day	dobryj den'
good morning	dobryj ranok
good evening	dobryj vechir
good-bye	dopobachenja
please	proshu
thank you	djakuju
thank you very much	doozhe djakuju
yes	tak
no	ni
I don't understand	ja ne rozumiju

NOTE: in transliteration, u=oo (as in pool), a=short o (hot), y=short i (big), i=ee (seek), j=y (yes)

Things to Take

Gifts are very important in Ukraine. You will be given many lovely gifts, and you should also have gifts to give. Give an especially nice gift to the one or two people with whom you work the most, and smaller gifts (seeds, pocket calendars, etc.) to others. If you eat at someone's house, a small gift is in order. If you run out of gifts, you can buy candy or champagne or flowers (always buy an odd number of flowers) very inexpensively in Uzhgorod, and sometimes American or European food or beverage products at the tourist hotels. Suggestions of American or Oregon gifts:

1. Books or calendars with pictures of Oregon (Book Bin has half-price Oregon calendars)
2. Corvallis bags -- great for shopping, since folks carry their own bags to shop there (sold at Chamber). The Oregon tourist book is free and has lots of pretty pictures of the state.
3. Vegetable seeds -- U.S. cucumbers, tomatoes, etc. (No hybrids -- they'll want to save seeds from the crop for next year)
4. American chocolate

Personal items:

1. Money belt -- You will not need much money, but what you take should be cash. Credit cards are fine for Budapest, but are not always accepted in Uzhgorod. Some types of Traveler's Checks are now accepted at some hotel exchange windows (when they are open), but cash is best, and it is easy to exchange money, as long as it is crisp and clean (unmarked, untornd bills).

2. Toilet paper or kleenex -- this is important. Many public restrooms do not have toilet paper. (Actually, you will want to avoid public toilets as much as possible.) The hotels and homes have toilet paper, but it is the European variety, which you may find to be stiffer than you are used to.
3. Transformer/voltage converter -- for appropriate wattage for any electrical appliances you are taking. Their outlets are for Eastern European plugs (2 round prongs) and are 220 volts/50 hertz).
4. Lots of business cards -- everyone there exchanges cards.
5. Aspirin or other pain relief medication, prescription medication, extra eyeglasses, hearing aid batteries, etc.
6. A washcloth, if you use one. Only hand and small bath towels are provided.
7. Any American snack foods you think you might miss. They do sell several American candy bars in the kiosks.
8. You might want to take a small (camping-type) water filter if you have one and want to drink plain water. You can get plenty of mineral water wherever you go, but it is carbonated and salty. Bottled water, juices & soft drinks are readily available. You may have a small refrigerator in your hotel room.
9. Although the winters in Uzhgorod are colder than in Corvallis, the rest of the year has seasonally similar temperatures. Raincoats or umbrellas in spring and autumn are a good idea, and boots are helpful, as sidewalks may be slushy and puddles are numerous. The streets and sidewalks are quite uneven (often cobblestone), so comfortable shoes are a must.
10. Wash and wear clothing is best, and bring Woolite or similar for hand washing in the hotel. Have one "nice" outfit for official receptions or gatherings, but other clothing can be casual.
11. Photos of your family, workplace, home.
12. Additional items you may have use for: small flashlight, small first aid kit, Swiss army knife (take in checked luggage only), duct tape.

Etiquette

A few simple rules of etiquette that should be followed when visiting Ukraine:

- * If invited to a family home, it is traditional to bring a gift. A bottle of wine, something from your country, or a bouquet of flowers are customary. If giving flowers as a gift, make sure that the number of flowers in a bouquet is uneven (an even number of flowers is considered bad luck). If there are children in the house, it is appropriate to bring a small gift for them as well.
- * Do not shake hands across the threshold of a door. It is considered bad luck to do so.
- * When eating dinner at someone's home, casual dress is accepted. Also, be prepared to give a toast at dinner, as guests are often asked to do so.
- * Accept all food and drink offered to you when visiting friends unless an allergy, medication, or religion prevents you from doing so. Ukrainians are known for their generosity when it comes to feeding others. Refusing food may be considered rude.
- * Be prepared to take off your shoes upon entering a home. The streets are quite dirty and this is necessary to keep apartments clean.
- * Be careful when complimenting a host's belongings -- he or she may offer it to you.
- * If wearing gloves, take them off before shaking hands with someone.
- * When using public transportation, seats should be given up to accommodate the elderly, mothers with children, and people with disabilities.
- * Offer to share snacks with those people around you.
- * At the entrance of an upscale restaurant, expect that your coat, briefcase, or baggage will be checked.
- * For business, dress should be conservative. Men should not take off their jackets unless asked to do so.
- * In Orthodox and Greek-Catholic churches, women wear scarves or hats, and men take off their hats.
- * Some gestures are considered extremely rude or obscene. Do not place your thumb between your first and second fingers. Also, do not make the "OK" sign with your fingers.
- * Women should not sit on stone steps or table corners (superstitions are taken quite seriously).
- * Legs should not be crossed in such a way that the bottom of your shoe faces another person (ankle on knee).