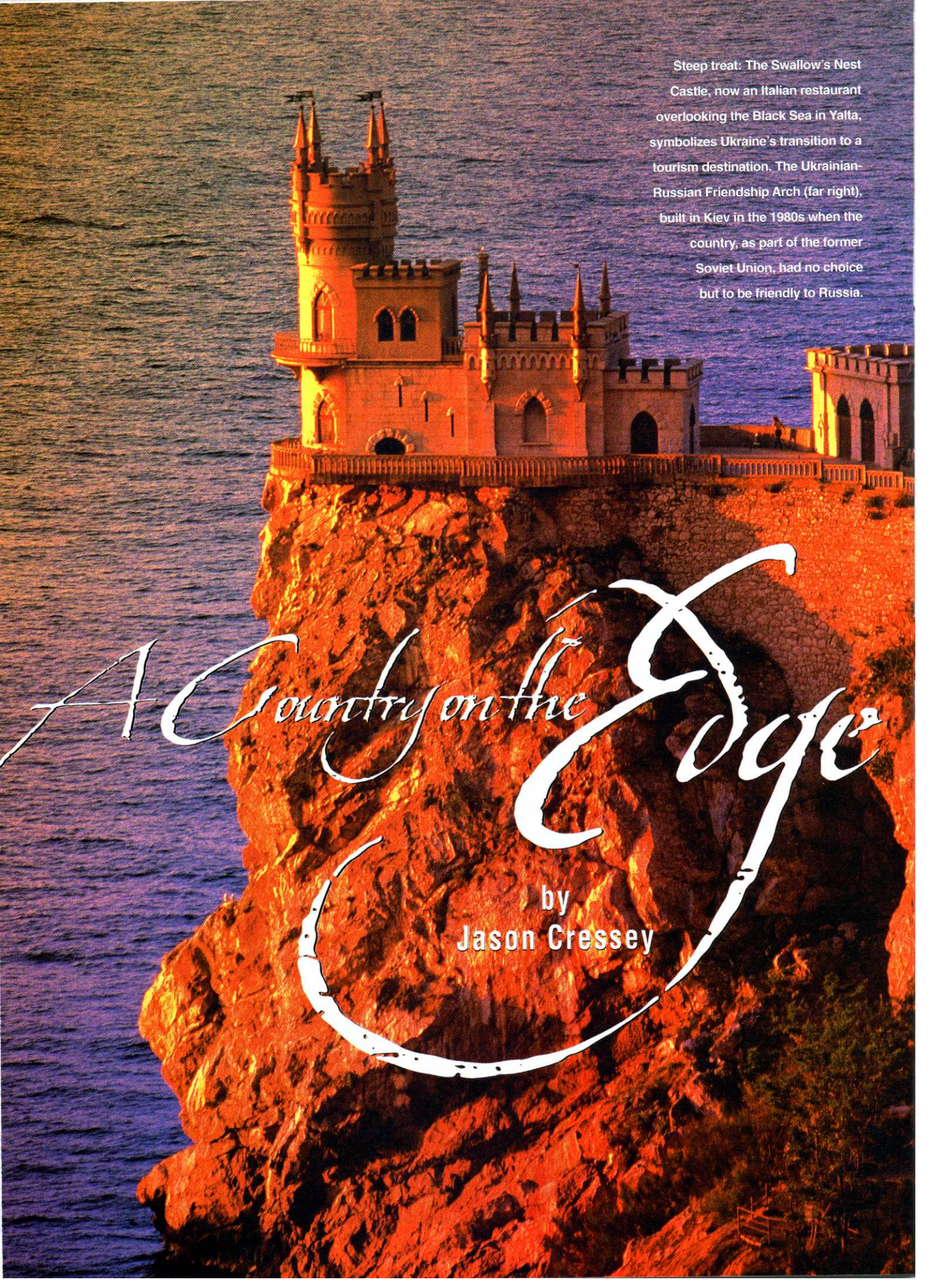
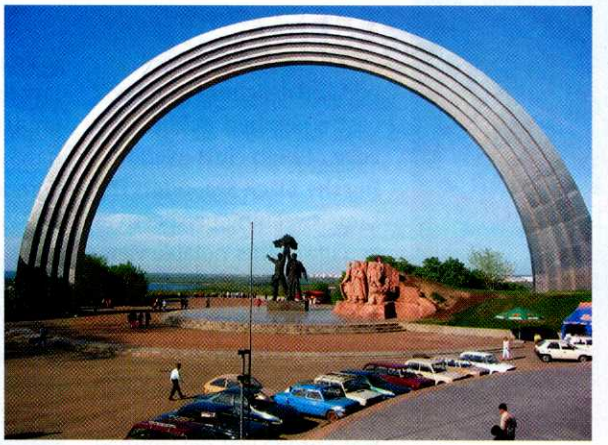


Steep treat: The Swallow's Nest Castle, now an Italian restaurant overlooking the Black Sea in Yalta, symbolizes Ukraine's transition to a tourism destination. The Ukrainian-Russian Friendship Arch (far right), built in Kiev in the 1980s when the country, as part of the former Soviet Union, had no choice but to be friendly to Russia.

A Country on the Edge

by Jason Cressey



Slowly emerging from the shadows of its communist past, Ukraine looks to the future with newly gilded churches, fast-food pirozhki *and dreams of joining the European Union*

"If you are concealing anything," hisses the officious, bespectacled gentleman in a tone that makes me think the Iron Curtain is about to clang shut at any moment, "you will be taken to the *special room* . . . ." • The Ukrainian customs inspector evidently isn't kidding. The vexing thought racing through my mind in the stark surroundings of Kiev's Boryspil International Airport is that I'm *leaving* the country – not entering it. And even in an era of intensified customs procedures, this menacing fellow is intent on emptying, searching and X-raying every last pocket and cavity of my suitcase. Finding nothing to detain me further, my diligent inspector nods toward the west and mutters, "*Have a nyss treep*." • As I head off to catch my flight, I wrestle with conflicting emotions: relief at having made it through customs, sadness to be leaving a country that I'd been so curious about when I'd arrived two weeks earlier. While I don't share the heritage that makes Ukraine such an irresistible lure for millions of exiled emigrants who now make their homes in Canada and elsewhere, I was fascinated by its landscape of vast wheat-filled plains, rugged mountainous coastline and grand cities instantly identifiable by their onion-domed churches.

Had the country's rich Byzantine history and architecture survived the clenched fist of communist rule? Were tasty Ukrainian cabbage rolls and perogies still in favour after decades of watery soup and stale bread? Would the locals, most of whom are poor by our standards, welcome relatively affluent western visitors? After a fortnight of exploring the country's back roads and major destinations, I'd come up with a few answers in this land of paradox and endless possibilities.

My first taste of Ukraine is a bowl of steaming borscht served for dinner on a 36-hour ferry journey from Istanbul across the Black Sea. For a reasonable fee (equivalent to $80), I receive my own comfortable cabin and all meals en route to Odessa, famous for the first stirrings of revolution in 1905 led by mutinous sailors from the battleship *Potemkin*. A century on, it's an *economic* revolution that preoccupies many of the city's million or so inhabitants. Tourism, as it does in so much of the world, represents Odessa's best hope for the future.

Once the most significant port in the Russian empire, the city is now a study in contrasts. Pizza parlours and Internet cafés line the town squares, while in leafy market areas, elderly ladies sell beautiful hand-painted Ukrainian Easter eggs. I'm soon told that what we commonly call "Russian" dolls – each outer wooden layer housing a smaller facsimile within – are not Russian at all, but Ukrainian. The clarification exemplifies a fragile sense of national identity, critical and ever-present, in a country that only regained its independence 13 years ago. While Russian is almost universally understood here, the language of choice is Ukrainian. The unit of currency, the *hryvnia*, is not influenced by the rise or fall of the Russian ruble, nor is the crime rate soaring as it is in Moscow.

A lovely city, Odessa is filled with elegant, tree-lined boulevards and a marvellous array of 19th-century architecture highlighted by the massive stone Opera House. Friendly university students clustered on a waterfront promenade tell me that Ukraine's split from Soviet Russia in August 1991 was the cause of great happiness. The mood remains buoyant today. Independence understandably tastes sweet for a nation variously occupied by the Greeks, Lithuanians, Turks, Russians and numerous wartime coalitions over the centuries.

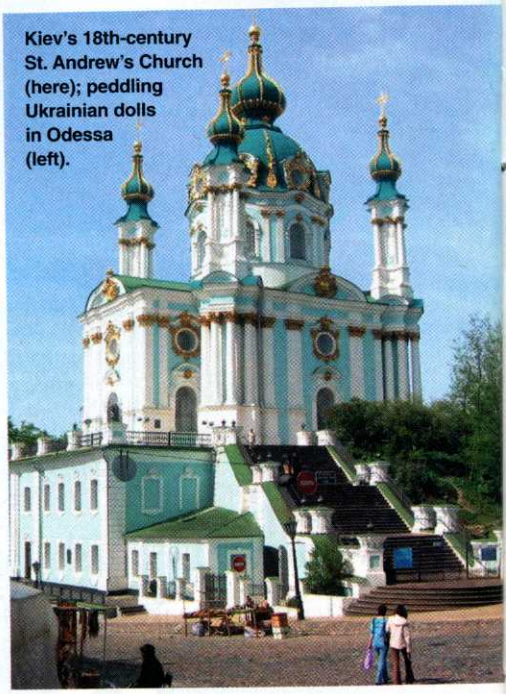
Photographs: (left) Peter Christopher/MasterFile, (above) Jason Cressey

A luxurious overnight train journey in an affordable first-class sleeper carriage takes me to Yalta, the tourist capital of Ukraine and, not so long ago, of all Eastern Europe. Yalta bears some resemblance to Vancouver, B.C., with its mountains, forests and coastal setting. Add the healing waters of the local sanatoriums, and it's no wonder the resort town was so popular with the communist elite. Dozens of these saltwater spas are still operating, their prices now pitched at wealthy foreigners and well beyond the means of most Ukrainians (whose average monthly salary equals $200).

The Swallow's Nest, an odd and delightful storybook castle perched at the very edge of high cliffs overlooking the Black Sea, offers the same sweeping perspectives as Yalta's other notable viewpoint, the Acropolis, a Soviet job-creation project with little charm and few visitors. Down at sea level in the Lavadia Palace, the destiny of post-war Europe was determined by Churchill, Stalin and Roosevelt in February 1945.

Dining options range from brightly painted Italian restaurants to drab canteens serving potato soup and cabbage rolls. Service doesn't come with a smile in the latter, but the food is hearty and the experience authentic. It is here I learn that *pirozhki* are not the slightly emaciated boiled potato dumplings we in Canada call "perogies." These, in fact, are known as *vareniki*. True pirozhki are deep-fried and stuffed with delicious mushroom, cheese or cabbage fillings. For the equivalent of 10 cents, I feast on a hot pirozhki while strolling along Yalta's seafront to the main square, where the solitary figure of Lenin stands atop a high column. Beneath his very nose, tour operators hawk their day trips with the fervour of born-again capitalists.

With Yalta as the jumping-off point, it's



Kiev's 18th-century St. Andrew's Church (here); peddling Ukrainian dolls in Odessa (left).

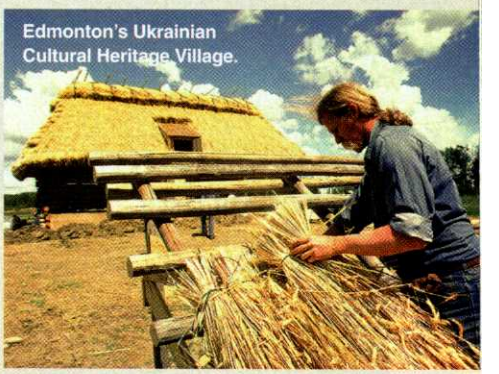
possible to explore the Crimean Peninsula on old trolley buses, some seemingly dating back to Lenin's era. The roads are winding, the views dramatic. One of Crimea's most enigmatic destinations is Sevastopol, which until the 1990s was strictly off-limits to visitors; it was the kind of cold-war hot spot one needed special permission to enter and *extra special* permission to leave. At the height of Soviet power, the Black Sea naval fleet was based here. Among those employed by the navy was a squad of dolphins trained to guard the port's perimeter from enemy scuba divers. Now decommissioned, the aging mammals are kept in shockingly poor conditions and earn their keep by participating in therapeutic swim encounters.

Another overnight train and 18 hours later I arrive in Kiev (*Kyiv*), literally Ukraine's golden capital. The Eastern Orthodox faith is experiencing a post-Soviet renaissance, and the roofs of its churches are all newly gilded. The same golden hue illuminates the interior of the recently built shopping mall, the Metrograd, located beneath Kiev's Independence Square and the first of its kind in the country. It is here that the modern face of Ukraine shines brightly, its free-market

Photographs: (opposite) Jason Cressey, (right) courtesy Travel Alberta

Ukrainian Houses on the Prairie

The first major wave of Ukrainian immigrants began arriving in Canada in 1892, lured by the offer of 65 hectares of land for a token $10, a policy established – in the Dominion Lands Act (1872) – to populate the western provinces. Settlers were obliged to build a home and cultivate at least 12 hectares of their land within three years, an attractive proposition for those facing heavy taxation, over-population, political unrest and enforced divisions of landholdings back home, particularly in the regions of Bukovina and Galicia (in the west of the country bordering Romania).


Edmonton's Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village.

The majority of the newcomers settled in Saskatchewan and Alberta, and overcame the challenge of their harsh new environment by banding together and sharing skills in tight-knit communities. The second wave of Ukrainian immigrants, some 70,000 (generally from military and professional backgrounds), arrived in the 1920s to escape a homeland devastated by war and political upheaval. The third wave, more than 35,000 mostly displaced Ukrainians who had been forced into slave labour by Nazi Germany, arrived between 1945 and 1954.

Today, efforts to preserve Saskatchewan's Ukrainian heritage are well underway. The St. Petro Mohyla Institute in Saskatoon (*www.mohyla.ca*) attracts students of Ukrainian heritage as well as young visitors from Ukraine seeking a "home away from home"; courses cover Ukrainian literature, history, music, crafts and folk dancing. Founded in 1936, Saskatoon's Ukrainian Museum of Canada (*www.umc.sk.ca*) is dedicated to the preservation of Ukrainian culture and language. For a taste of life as it was for immigrants at the turn of the century, the Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village (780-662-3640), next to Elk Island National Park just east of Edmonton, features authentic settlers' buildings and staff in period dress. The Winnipeg-based Ukrainian Canadian Congress (*www.ucc.ca*) provides a voice for Ukrainian Canadians. □ *–J.C.*

The capital of Kiev, along the mighty Dnipro River (far left). A Yalta church (left); the Orthodox Church has made a dramatic comeback since the country split from Soviet Russia in 1991.

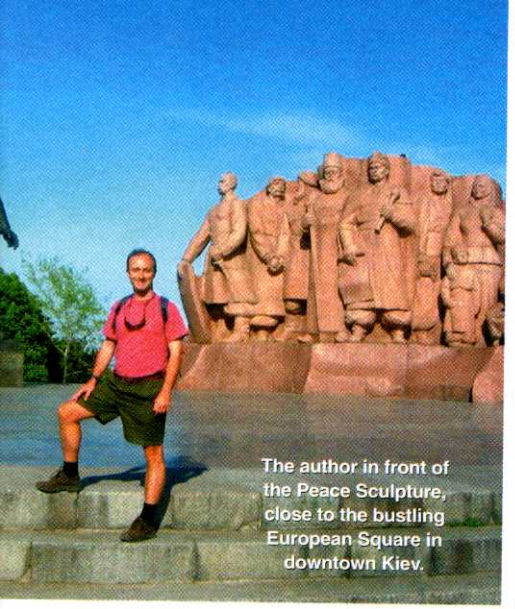
optimism personified by the fast-food restaurant chain that sells cabbage rolls and pirozhki, not burgers. Gone are the black marketeers who, I'm told, once frequented every tourist area of the city. But while they've been replaced by an army of street merchants, the tourist industry is still in its infancy; stepping off the beaten track in Kiev, you'll be met with quizzical looks and, if you've mastered a few basic Ukrainian phrases, welcoming smiles.

One of Ukraine's greatest poets, Taras Shevchenko, once wrote that "the first Tsar [Peter I] racked my country dear, the second [Catherine II] gave the final blow . . . that brought my land to utter woe." It is heartening to see that in little more than a decade, Kiev, the heart of the ancient Rus kingdom, has regained its place as a grand capital of an emerging, independent Ukraine. The Soviet workers' statue on the steep bank of the Dnipro River now seems more of a tourist curiosity than an imposing emblem of authority. The locals are reticent when speaking of the past, even when communicating through a translator (very few locals speak even basic English). They seem more intent on surviving in a free market and even aspire to joining the European Union one day. With former Soviet republics Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania already in the exclusive EU club, many Ukrainians ask, "Why not us?"

The answer emerges as I take an expensive taxi ride to the Kiev airport on the day of my departure. Every kilometre or so along the highway is a single sentry box, complete with an armed guard – members of the national militia that doubles as both police force and army. I somehow convey my puzzlement to the taxi driver. He laughs, then shrugs his shoulders. "They are from the *old days*," he tells me in broken English, and leaves it at that.

An hour later I'm walking away from that uncomfortable interrogation at customs to board a short flight to Estonia. There, I'll learn that the Ukrainian government is famously keen on preventing large sums of money, often thousands of American dollars at a time, from being exported abroad – a favourite pastime for those who don't share the government's optimistic projections. It seems those armed guards and customs officials are living reminders of Ukraine's Soviet past and its legacy of distrust. For the largest nation wholly within Europe is still a perplexing mix of old and new, east and west, communist and capitalist, contradictions that

Photographs: Jason Cressey



The author in front of the Peace Sculpture, close to the bustling European Square in downtown Kiev.

make Ukraine Europe's largest paradox as well. Its many charms are enough, however, that stories of even the most intimidating customs officers can later be told with fond affection. And if the experiences at border controls won't bring me back, the pirozhki certainly will. Although I never did find out what happens in that *special room.* W

Jason Cressey is a communications consultant, an avid traveller, writer and tour guide.

Kiev Calling

Planning and preparation are vital for travel to Ukraine. All visitors need visas, available from the Consulate General of Ukraine in Toronto (416-763-3114). Visas range from $85 to $140 and *must* be arranged before your trip – apply at least a month before departure. Hotels generally need to be pre-booked through a travel agency (a good choice is *www.travel-2-ukraine.com*, based in Ukraine and with a staff that speaks excellent English); expect to pay upward of $20 per night for rooms. *Always* carry your travel documents with you as spot checks are frequent and can get very complicated without the correct documents. Take a Ukrainian (definitely *not* a Russian) phrasebook with you as English is rarely spoken, especially outside Kiev.

Flying to Ukraine from Canada is straightforward, with connecting flights through major European cities (including London and Frankfurt) to Kiev. Land transport by train or bus is possible from Russia and Romania, and ferries sail daily from Istanbul to Odessa. The Ukrainian *hryvnia* (UAH) is only available within the country (currently $1 Cdn. = 4 UAH), but reliable ATMs are plentiful. Long-distance travel is best done by train, which is inexpensive and offers an excellent way to see the country. □ *–J.C.*

CAA Saskatchewan agents can assist you with travel arrangements and information.