



Odessa and the Odessans – A look back in history

Although a comparatively young city, much has been written about Odessa. Anyone planning to visit can look forward to a rendezvous with a place often dubbed the “Pearl of the Black Sea”. Odessa was founded in the last decade of the 18th century and developed rapidly in the first half of the 19th century. It is like no other city in the Russian Empire. But why is that? We would love to discuss this with you in person, perhaps during an excursion through the city itself ... Come and discover this wonderful seaport with its rich history and vibrant present!



The Potemkin Steps,
one of Odessa's
best known landmarks.
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In her book, “Odessa: A History 1794–1914” (Harvard University Press, 1986), Patricia Herlihy sums up the eclectic coincidence of circumstances which fostered the founding and subsequent success of Odessa: “Situation, climate and distance from central government (the all-important air of freedom), the marriage of convenience between Black Sea and black earth, supply and demand, ethnic diversity, a dynamic population and a wise administration. All this occurred simultaneously and gave rise to something, which can neither be repeated nor imitated.”

Initially foreigners were charged with the construction of this town on the Black Sea. The multicultural make-up of the population had enriched Odessans and created a very particular type of cultural background.

However, the First World War, the October Revolution of 1917 and the subsequent Civil War put an abrupt end to Odessa’s development.

Following these tragic events, numerous members of the intelligentsia and merchant classes fled abroad and many poorer people migrated to the industrialised regions of the USSR. Anyone who failed to emigrate or subordinate themselves to the new regime would be repressed or bankrupted through the process of nationalisation. Amongst those affected by the turmoil were both Swiss and German settlers.



At the port of Odessa

The end of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1924 put a halt to free trade, the foundation upon which Odessa was built. In the 1920s and 1930s the port's economic dynamism dwindled. The Iron Curtain, by which the Soviet Union cut itself off from the rest of the world, was the final blow to a city which had originally become rich precisely because of its excellent foreign relations.

The unique residential buildings of Odessa, often fine examples of Odesan architecture, were transformed into communal flats for the proletariat. Odessa became a run-of-the-mill Soviet town on the periphery. The difficult economic situation in the late 1980s alongside the relaxation of the repressive system (by way of Perestroika/Glasnost) led to a new exodus. The descendants of Greek and Jewish settlers emigrated, along with many Ukrainian and Russian families and other nationalities as well.

Academics, scientists, teachers, doctors, musicians – the most active part of the population – all left the city in great numbers in the late 1980s and 1990s. Once again Odessa was haemorrhaging. This flow of migration outwards lasted an entire decade as residents headed to Israel, Greece, Germany, the USA, Australia and elsewhere. By the mid-1990s numerous blocks were



just standing empty. Yet despite all the upheavals, Odessa was somehow able to retain its unique atmosphere and its entrepreneurial spirit.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union there were food shortages and a lack of basic consumer goods. But in the newly liberated Ukraine, things were already quite a bit freer. Odessa's economy thereby received a welcome boost. Pretty cafes, restaurants and shops all sprang up like mushrooms. Markets started to bustle once more, construction began again and large-scale renovations were undertaken. Today Odessa has swung into life once more and reaffirms its reputation as a place open for business and open to the world and new ideas.

Odessa is sun and warmth; hard-working, cheerful and friendly people; colourful markets; a plethora of fruits; delicious food and good wine. Odessa is the sea and wonderful sandy beaches. Come and experience the delights it has to offer for yourself!