In late July 2012, I travelled to Odessa on the southern coast of Ukraine with help from the Ruth Owen travel award. The Odessa Language Study Centre had been recommended by my tutors as a great place to go over the summer after completing my ab initio year of Russian, for intensive language lessons. Odessa is the second most visited and the fifth largest city in Ukraine, most famous for its seaport on the Black Sea. Although it is in Ukraine, the city is predominantly Russian-speaking. The obvious choice for a student of Russian would be to go to Moscow, or St. Petersburg, but they require a visa, plus I had heard fantastic stories from students in higher years in the department who had visited Odessa and said it is a more affordable and friendly place to be eased into the language.

On arrival at the airport, I tried to adjust to the amazing, hazy midday heat of the day whilst being greeted by the School's representative, who took me to my home for the next month. The shared student apartment was right in the heart of the city, on Ekaterinskaya street which bustled with tourists, shops and cafés, and I met my housemates- two students from Austria and Spain, and a businessman from Italy. One of these housemates had already spent three consecutive months living and studying in Odessa, with another three months to go! It was encouraging to think about how much knowledge he had gained so far, and to see his faith in the language school.

The school was welcoming, with friendly staff and a non-daunting test on arrival so we could be grouped according to ability. I spent my first week in intensive group lessons for six hours a day, which were a lot of fun and I met many students from all over, including Germany, France, Norway, Switzerland and USA. However, I changed to individual lessons for three hours a day for the next three weeks as I wanted to maximise my learning experience; this enabled my teacher to address my personal difficulties with the language and I felt freer in the lessons, especially when we chatted in Russian one-to-one. Every day as homework I was given exercises to do, articles to read and discuss, and short compositions to write about topics discussed in class. All of this was beneficial and helped to cement grammar and vocabulary in my head.

As well as focusing on my Russian studies, I wanted to explore all that Odessa had to offer; the vast array of activities, tourist trips, the beach and the general hubbub of the bustling city was exciting from day one through to the
end of my month living there. One of the first places I explored was Shevchenko Park, with its long avenues of tree-lined pathways and the panoramic view over the harbour and port. There are many monuments and also the Chernomoretz Stadium there, along with speakers hidden among the trees—sporadically, and quite oddly, playing dramatic orchestral music and giving long speeches about the history of the park. From here, I often walked down through all the tourist stalls to Lanjerón Beach, which was always busy but great for a swim after a long day of lessons.

Throughout my month I tried to fit in as much as possible around my language lessons; I went on a City tour organised by the school which was interesting as our guide spoke both Russian and English throughout and told us quirky facts about each monument, especially the Potemkin Stairs which were made famous in the film 'The Battleship Potemkin'. We also heard about the catacombs and I was fascinated by the labyrinth tunnels so went on a tour of a tiny section in the north of Odessa. There are 2500km of tunnels under the city, the largest catacomb system in the world, and were regularly used in World War II by Soviet partisans, and for illegal smuggling or burglaries. The tunnels are shut off to the public now, except for tours like mine which finished in the Museum of Partisan Glory. However, many people believe that the catacombs hold secrets and that there might still be activity happening beneath the city.

A Ukrainian friend I made lived in the suburbs of Odessa, and wanted to show me the open-air Memorial for Heroic Defence of Odessa during World War II. We arrived at dusk after my first bus journey, a long way out of the city centre, and saw army tanks, trucks, cannons and heavy artillery machines, but most impressively— a Soviet submarine, in the middle of the park.

Many times I walked along the coastal path, which led all the way from Lanjerón beach to Arcadia area, which is hugely popular for its beaches, bars and clubs. I also walked over the springy Mother-in-Law bridge, which has hundreds of love locks padlocked to its sides. I went through the Passage, a famous indoor walkway with elaborate sculptures inside and out, which used to be a heaving marketplace just off Deribasovskaya street, and I wandered around many of Odessa's parks as I soaked up the sun, including City Garden. There was often a brass band playing in the bandstand, and I came to see that Odessa was alive with music; wherever I went there was a cellist busking on the street, live Ukrainian folk music, or demonstrations of capoeira with bongo drums in little underground bars. The Opera Theatre is prestigious, and it was nice to sit by the outdoor fountains where there were always crowds of tourists posing in front of its Italian baroque exterior, peeking in the window around the back to look at the luxurious interior.
The city is full of decadence— I went on a catamaran tour with other students from the school which allowed us to view Odessa from the sea. There were multi-million pound yachts and sailing boats moored next to us in the harbour and I realised just how popular this place was with people for whom money is no object.

One of my favourite things to do in foreign cities is to visit markets, and Odessa was no exception. There was a book market on Aleksandrovsky avenue where you could get Russian language versions of anything— like Harry Potter, or Jamie Oliver cookbooks, and a large souvenir market in Sobornaya square crammed with hand-painted babushka dolls and 'Odessa Mama' t-shirts. Near the end of my trip, a Russian friend took me to the Flea market in the east of the city where there were hundreds of locals buying and selling in the streets; anything from broken forks to working guns, vintage handbags and fur coats to Soviet memorabilia. We spent hours haggling in Russian with the sellers, buying old war badges and perusing family photograph albums. It felt much more real than the tourist stalls in the centre.

Ukrainian cuisine is not something I had ever tried before, so I went to a few different traditional restaurants during the month. I had borsch (a soup which originates from Ukraine and is usually made from beetroot), kvass (a slightly fizzy, fermented bread drink), and, of course, multiple complimentary vodka shots— often served with a gherkin.

I went to Puzata Hata, a Ukrainian 'fast food' style restaurant, which serves many varieties of vareniki, soft boiled dough that either have meat or fruit inside and served with smetana, sour cream. Also in the daytimes I loved to pop into bakeries to buy some piroshki— bready pies with vegetable or meat filling. That was always fun as it tested my Russian skills, and I wasn't always sure what filling I was going to get!

My time in Odessa was exciting and well-spent, with my lessons every day challenging me and improving my Russian, and exploring the city a great deal outside of class. I enjoyed the culture differences and meeting other students from all over the world. One of the most important things I did there was making friends with Ukrainian locals and Russians who were living in Odessa for a short time for work or study, as I spoke Russian with them informally and gained a lot of confidence. I left the Odessa Language Study Centre with a certificate that states I successfully completed a course in Russian of 80 hours at A2 Level, with a final grade of A. Being surrounded by an alternative culture and having to speak in the language every day, just to buy food or get on a bus, has helped so much and there is a noticeable improvement in my language skills at Queen Mary this year.