

## Into the Deep End of the Pool; Lifeguards From Ex-Soviet Bloc Are Swimming in Culture Shock

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Author: Steve Hendrix - Washington Post Staff Writer

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Andrian Gherbovet, a 20-year-old native of the Republic of Moldova, has found many things difficult since he arrived in May to spend the summer as a lifeguard at an Alexandria condominium complex. Getting a ticket to the consumer economy wasn't one of them.

"I was surprised to get credit card so quickly," said Gherbovet, who received a ready-to-swipe Visa less than a month after arriving on his first visit to the United States, before he'd even mastered the local bus routes. Gherbovet, the son of a taxi driver, had never seen a charge card before. "I don't know anyone in Moldova who has one."

Welcome to America. Will that be debit or credit?

While the seasonal influx of international lifeguards from Ireland, Poland and the Czech Republic is familiar to anyone who swims in an apartment pool in the Washington region, this year's crop includes students from even more distant European reaches. The fall of the dollar against the euro has pushed pool management companies to recruit ever eastward, including in such non-E.U. countries as Russia, Kazakhstan, Moldova and Kyrgyzstan.

And for the students who sign up, a summer in the American suburbs is a season of surprises.

"The further we go from the West, the more these students are just wide-eyed when they get here," said Steve Lavery, head of High Sierra Pools, which has contracts to staff lifeguards at more than 350 pools in the area. In addition to about 500 U.S. lifeguards, his company brought in 500 foreign workers this year, housing them in 100 apartments around the region, providing them with 90 rental cars and more than 1,000 mountain bikes.

Recently, Lavery said one of his Ukrainian lifeguards took a short cut to work by way of riding his bicycle along a stretch of the Capital Beltway. Two others were so tormented over their Euro-skimpy bathing suits by teenagers at a Mount Vernon pool that the company rushed over some emergency relief trunks. He's had lost lifeguards, homesick lifeguards and lifeguards baffled by the language of their new profession. (How do you translate "No noodles in the pool" from the Serbian?)

"They think they know it from the movies, but actually being here is like walking on the moon," Lavery said.

For Gherbovet, who has cropped black hair and a Tom Cruise squint, the biggest challenge -- once he finally found a 7-Eleven that sells phone cards good for Moldova -- has been eating. Since arriving at Dulles International Airport in late May, Gherbovet has had little but McDonald's and other fast food, those being the most recognizable options.

"I start to feel a little sick," said Gherbovet at his poolside station at Porto Vecchio Condominiums in Alexandria. "I tried your Chinese food, but this too is very heavy."

Tursunbek Japarov, a 20-year-old economics student from the Central Asia country of Kyrgyzstan, has also struggled with American cuisine. Japarov and the four Eastern European lifeguards he lives with in a two-bedroom Bethesda apartment no longer cook communal meals. ("The Ukrainian guys eat too much," he said.) So now Japarov's typical dinner is a plain chicken drumstick cooked in the microwave.

"Four minutes and it is done," he said. "But every night before falling asleep I think about my mom's borscht and plov."

For all the New World trials, most of the imported lifeguards seem delighted with their baffling new home.

"Everyone in America is so friendly," said Japarov, who has already been on several impromptu field trips with helpful locals. When he went to a Bethesda post office to see about getting a driver's license, a kindly customer drove him to the nearest motor vehicle agency. After he helped a woman change her tire near Tuckerman Lane, she gave him a sightseeing lift into Washington.

"Before in my mind, America is New York," said Japarov, who was pushing a vacuum around the pool at the Knights Bridge Apartments off Briggs Cheney Road one afternoon last week. "I never heard of Silver Spring, but I like very much the people here."

Most of the lifeguards are university students who paid \$3,000 to \$4,000 in airline tickets and recruitment fees for a chance to practice their English, see the country that supplies much of their pop culture and get a tan that would be hard to achieve in landlocked Moldova. Gherbovet, who said he was bright red after his first day at the pool, still doesn't

bother with sun block. "I do not think it is useful," he said. "Now I am dark."

In exchange, the workers, most of whom are here on J1 student visas, will spend about four months pool-sitting for eight or nine hours a day, seven days a week, with free housing and wages starting at \$7.10 an hour.

Japarov, for one, will try to take most of his salary back to Kyrgyzstan to repay his mother, who took out a loan to bankroll his American summer. But others will end their stays with a shopping spree.

"We see a lot of laptops going home," Lavery said. "Lots of iPods, lots of Smartphones."

Dascha Pavlova, 18, a linguistics major from Moscow, plans to plow some her wages back into the mall economy. Not much distinguishes Pavlova from an American-born lifeguard, except that instead of flip-flops with her rescue red bathing suit, she wears stylish pink peep-toe flats.

Pavlova is also one of two High Sierra employees credited with a save this season, after she pulled out a youngster who had waded too far into the deep end.

She shares a Gaithersburg apartment with four other Russian lifeguards, two women and two guys named Sergei, which is furnished by their employer with air mattresses, a card table and plastic chairs.

"We have a whole room for our clothes," said Pavlova.

On a recent night, after a dinner of hot dogs and spaghetti with ketchup (on the spaghetti, not the hot dogs), Pavlova and her roommates walked half an hour to the nearest Giant for their first shopping trip. They marveled at the expanse of a full-service American grocery store, and also at the expense. Food costs more here, they said.

"How do we get it home?" Pavlova asked. "Can we take this cart?"

The lifeguards tend to spend their few free hours at home, Pavlova said, or at gatherings of other European workers. While they are old enough to go clubbing and drinking in their own cities, those under 21 are enduring prohibition on this side of the Atlantic.

At 30, Ivan Zikic, is one who can legally partake of American nightlife. A pool supervisor from Serbia here on an H-2B temporary workers visa, Zikic said he has found it easy to make local friends at bars where soccer is on the television.

"My favorite place is Friday's," Zikic said, "the one on Rockville Pike near the Barnes & Noble library."

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