

## The Culture of Hospitality in Moldova and the United States

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### *The uninvited guest wreaks the havoc of marauding Tatars*

This tongue-in-cheek comparison between the unplanned visit and invasion by Mongolian-Tatarian tribes signifies at least two aspects of Moldovan hospitality. First, the treatment of guests in one's home follows a cultural norm that prescribes not only the attitude toward visitors, but also the protocol of a host's behavior. Moldovan rules of hospitality provide hosts with guidelines for proper comportment during a visit. Second, the adage suggests that guests can expect their host to adhere to a traditional standard of hospitable conduct. This helps to eliminate the uncertainty guests might experience in someone else's home and alerts them to the efforts their host exerts on their behalf. In the United States, hospitality is also highly valued. However, norms for a host's conduct are likely to range widely given the many cultures that shape American society. Whereas in Moldovan society sedulous care is paid to staying with, entertaining, and feeding each guest, such constant involvement with a guest in the United States is likely to be perceived as oppressive. In the latter context, it is most desirable to provide for the personal well-being of guests, while simultaneously respecting their freedom and individual choice.

The choices left to guests in the United States may include when to come and go during the day and evening, and if not what to eat, then when and how much to eat. The guest will typically select their own activities and may be expected to enlist their own transportation. Although this laissez faire attitude toward hospitality is largely a sign of respect for the individuality and freedom of choice accorded guests (Etiquette in North America, 2012), it is at least partially also a manifestation of an American host's individualism. The North American orientation to personal autonomy, self-sufficiency, and self-determination is not sacrificed for the sake of a guest, especially a stranger to whom we owe little more than good intentions (Wang & Liu, 2010). On the other hand, in Moldovan society dutiful adherence to the culturally defined rules of hospitality reflects upon the

class and breeding of one's entire family (Bejan, 2010).

The Moldovan guest begins his or her stay with a visit to a room (and sometimes a whole house) that represents the family's heritage and traditions. This *k<sup>^</sup>s<sup>^</sup> m<sup>^</sup>re* (pronounced "casa mare" which literally translates as "big room") contains the family's heirlooms and treasures depicting a sort of family museum. In this room are carpets with national ornaments, traditional clothing and pottery. No one lives in this room (or house), but special events in the family are held there. It is certain that the Moldovan host will quickly supply a bottle of good wine and the best food available. Food plays an integral role in Moldovan hospitality with a table full of different kinds of foods and wines in what amounts to a cult of food. A guest who rejects an offer to eat or drink is committing a grievous act of disrespect to a host. Guests are treated as hosts would wish to be treated. If a guest stays overnight, they are offered the best couches in the house. If there is not enough space to accommodate everyone, the host sleeps on the floor and the guest takes the host's bed. These are traditional expressions of the generosity that is characteristic of hosts in Moldovan society.

During a recent trip across the United States with three other international student friends, the first author was able to experience first-hand a range of practices that defined the hospitality of a cross-section of hosts. Anastasiia relied on a website [www.couchsurfing.com](http://www.couchsurfing.com) to register and schedule visits to homes across the country. These travelers based their expectations on the traditions with which they were familiar in Moldova and Afghanistan (one student grew up experiencing the hospitality customs of this middle-eastern society: Customs not unrelated to those of Moldova). The trip occurred during the break between the fall and spring semesters in December, 2011. The first stop from Alabama was in Dallas, Texas, where the students stayed in the studio of a local photographer. As Anastasiia describes her experiences,



“He met us with a very friendly manner and invited us into his studio. Right away I realized I would be sleeping on the couch near the photographer’s equipment. I guess he makes his photo shots on this couch. That studio was cold and huge; I was shaking from the cold all the time. Our host cooked for us mango and scrambled eggs for breakfast. The most interesting thing about this visit was that we were expected to eat sitting on the floor. Also, he had a separate place for his dog around our “table.” He treated his dog very well. He read him fairytales every evening and took him almost every place he went. The fact that our host was from Cambodia, and practices Buddhism, may account for much that occurred. Overall, it was a nice experience getting to know our host.”

The next stop was in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Anastasiia and her friends stayed with a medical student with whom they discussed common interests related to many public health issues. After only a few hours, the host left the travelers with the key to his apartment and went to study. Anastasiia was shocked: “This situation is unlikely ever to occur in Moldova. It does not mean that we do not trust our guests; but the guest may feel uncomfortable being responsible for another person’s home. I could not even open my sister’s refrigerator staying in her apartment by myself.” Nevertheless, the travelers cooked dinner before the host returned. When the host finally arrived, he washed their dishes despite their polite objections, explaining that they were his guests. The visitors began to feel quite comfortable in that environment. The next day, the host purchased a bottle of wine for his guests and cooked a Thai dinner. Everyone was sad to leave Albuquerque.

After New Mexico, Anastasiia and her friends visited the Las Vegas home of a woman who was born in the United States, but tries to follow the traditions of her Serbian heritage. She was initially quite friendly, but then did not pay any attention to her guests. The travelers found this highly unusual and felt uncomfortable. Later they discovered that their host was devoted to the practice of yoga. From what she knew about yoga, Anastasiia decided that the woman simply intended to give them complete freedom in her home by not structuring their activities or holding them to any specific rule of social protocol. In the evening, their host provided each person with a sleeping bag and suggested that they sleep on the floor in the living room. In the morning, the international students were

introduced to other friends of their host who had stayed the night in sleeping bags on the kitchen floor. The travelers concluded that sleeping bags were typical bedding in that house. Anastasiia summed up the experience with her Las Vegas host: “We all the time were trying to adapt to the situation without our host adapting to us.”

From Las Vegas, the road led to San Francisco where the students found their “American grandfather.” He was a senior citizen. They loved spending evenings in his cozy living room listening to the stories he told about his large family. He brewed their morning coffee, and waited every evening to have dinner together. In Anastasiia’s words, “It was nice to know that somebody is waiting for you at home. It was almost the same as in Moldova. The only exception was that our host went to bed at 9:00 p.m. and we were still awake until midnight. But we were pretty happy about this.”

Next, it was on to Los Angeles to stay with a young couple who expressed much interest in the national customs and languages of their international guests. After spending part of the visit discussing the background and cultures of the students, these hosts became busy with their own activities. It was here that Anastasiia and her friends spent the New Year holidays. From there, traveling south to San Diego led to the home of a young man whose house was the site of endless parties. Anastasiia reports that their experiences in San Diego were unexpected after the restful visits enjoyed in San Francisco and Los Angeles: “After spending a day exploring San Diego, we were pressed to participate in all of the parties, despite our wish to go to bed. Evidently the doors of his apartment had never been closed because of the constant flow of new guests. We tried to find a spare space in his apartment, but eventually settled on the floor. By that time, we were no longer shocked to sleep on the floor.”

In El Paso, Texas, the travelers stayed for one night in the home of a middle-aged man from a German background. Everything was prepared for their arrival and a separate room had been set aside for each guest with an extra blanket and towels placed in each of the rooms. Everything was in order. The last destination was San Antonio. The visitors were boarded in a recreational vehicle parked behind the house of their host. As Anastasiia describes this experience, “We had never been in an RV before. In the morning, the ground around the vehicle was full of sleeping deer. Our hosts were continually feeding them. Even the deer liked our hosts.”

Anastasiia and her international student friends arrived back to Troy University after visiting many cities in the United States: places in which they found themselves in unfamiliar situations during visits with hosts from many different backgrounds and lifestyles. They all agreed that the people they visited were unanimously hospitable and kind to their guests. Nevertheless, unlike the customary doting on guests to which they were accustomed in their homelands, their U.S. hosts maintained respect for their freedom and self-determination; and they did not let their guests wreak the havoc of “marauding Tatars” in the name of hospitality. Moldovans are extremely hospitable and they love to entertain. Indeed, [www.couchsurfing.com](http://www.couchsurfing.com) has dozens of registered persons and families in Moldova who are eager to host international strangers. But Anastasiia and her fellow travelers discovered that hospitality can take many different forms. They had opened for themselves the door to hospitable America in all of its diversity.

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