

The “Air of Freedom” That Doesn’t Exist. My Thoughts After a Trip to the USA

By [Viktor Cherniivaskyi](#), July 1, 2026



Hello, friends. My name is Viktor (Gideon).

For a long time, I worked for an American product company as a developer and DevOps engineer. On February 27, 2022, after evacuating my family to the border, I became a Chaplain. However, merely providing spiritual and emotional support to the military felt like it wasn't enough. So, for almost three years now, I have been serving full-time in a special forces brigade. I am not tired of the war, and I love my unit.

I got 50+ combat missions behind me; I am a living example that being sent to the front line is not a one-way ticket. I should also add that it is entirely possible to preserve your mental health and family relationships. I would even say they are stronger now than before the full-scale invasion.

In April 2026, I went on a official advocacy trip for Ukrainian POWs to the United States, and I have some thoughts to share.

My trip lasted almost three weeks and included several events across different cities. Schematically, it looked like this: Warsaw — Barcelona — New York — Washington D.C. — Pennsylvania — Warsaw.

Flights with TAP Portugal turned out to be the most cost-effective option when flying out of Europe. In the capital of Catalonia, I had the opportunity to meet and honor a fellow Ukrainian who has been actively supporting our Defense Forces for a long time-not just with words, but with actions.

Here's an interesting fact about Barcelona (Spain) that my hosts shared with me. The city has a so-called “Diagonal”—a street that cuts right through the center. Everything north of this street consists of wealthy neighborhoods with few historical landmarks and no tourist crowds. Pickpockets have no business there.

Everything south of the Diagonal is a mix of all that makes up Barcelona. There are safe, affluent areas like Eixample, but there are also sketchy places, especially after dark, such as El Raval and the Gothic Quarter. A few of my acquaintances have been mugged in those areas.

“Dropping” into Lisbon to wait for my connection to New York, I was pleasantly surprised. It was my third visit there since 2019. For the first time, I didn't receive 10–20 daily offers from local Moroccans trying to sell illegal substances in the city center. The improvement in the security situation is evident.

Comparing the transatlantic economy class of TAP Portugal with LOT's economy class is like comparing a 90s-era Ukrainian train to a modern one. For the price, the Portuguese state airlines win on all fronts.

Arriving at JFK Airport in New York, I felt right at home in Ukraine. The roads are just as bad as in the Kyiv region, and drivers honk and cut you off just the same.

We stayed in the Ukrainian Village, not far from Taras Shevchenko street and the Ukrainian House. Having a free day, I naturally wanted to see all the major landmarks of the city.

All my life, I dreamed of seeing New York, especially Times Square. Almost every time I went to a front-line position, sitting in a trench, I would look at the world's most popular neighborhood through the **EarthCam** app. What can I say? Going there twice was enough for me—once during the day, once at night. You won't find such a disgusting stench anywhere else in Manhattan. The number of people per square meter is off the charts.

Had I come here 10 years ago, my perception would likely have been different. But when you are quite "grown-up" and have seen a significant number of countries, all the flaws stand out vividly.

A dialogue with a Ukrainian citizen who moved far away from the war: — "People who move to New York truly experience what real survival is!" — "Then why go to New York just to suffer like that?" I asked. "Why not move to a different city or state where it isn't as expensive, or to a different country altogether?"

Another dialogue, this time with a different guy: — "If war comes to US soil, will you defend this country?" — "No... I'm not defending Ukraine, am I?"

The eccentric people on the streets are fairly adequate and don't bother you, especially compared to places like Cologne, Milan, or Barcelona. They live their lives and might act out, but they leave bystanders alone. I know cases of inappropriate behavior exist, but the city is massive in both size and population. They advise against going to Central Park at night, so I didn't.

In almost a week of riding the subway, I didn't see a single rat. Locals told me I was lucky. The underground is dirty but incredibly easy to navigate—unlike ours. Every station and entrance has excellent directional signs. You just ask Google Maps for a route from A to B, and the app tells you the station names and exactly which entrance to use. GPS in the city works far worse than in Ukraine.

The city's Central Park is outstanding. Just like in the movies. We visited right when the trees started blooming, which was beautiful. I even have a video of people singing songs together during a heavy downpour.

The cost of living in New York is higher than in any European city, perhaps with the exception of London or some cities in Switzerland. On the flip side, items that would cost you an arm and a leg in Ukraine are sold at the price of our thrift stores here—Levi's, New Balance, etc. The sales are real, not just price tags being swapped out like they often are back home. For the first time in my life, I saw that regular sneakers can have six different width sizes in addition to the standard length. A basic, decent hotel that would cost \$60 in Tallinn will set you back \$200 a night outside of central Manhattan. Nowhere else have I seen such a high hotel tax—it reaches up to 30% of the room rate. I am very grateful to my brothers and sisters from the Cornerstone church, who acted biblically and offered me shelter.

My Ukrainian friends let me use their car so I could drive to the airport and take Interstate 95 down to Pennsylvania for scheduled advocacy meetings. Nothing extraordinary. I drove through a large chunk of Downtown Manhattan and Queens. The traffic might be slightly more aggressive than in Kyiv due to the cyclists. A round trip to Philadelphia cost about \$50 in tolls plus gas. Taking the train would have been about three times more expensive. For the first time, I saw highways with six lanes in one direction. It truly is a car country.

Bicycle traffic in Manhattan is a nightmare. If you are a pedestrian, you have a higher chance of being hit by a cyclist than by a car. Now I understand why the authorities ban electric scooters there. Perhaps we should learn a thing or two from them.

Washington, D.C. is often called the "New Rome" due to the deliberate intention of the US Founding Fathers to create a republic that emulates the ideals, architecture, and political system of Ancient Rome.