

## Salon business booms in post-Soviet Ukraine

Kiev, Sep 18 (DPA) During the dark pre-1991 days of Soviet Ukraine, only two beauty salons served the needs of more than one million women then in the capital Kiev - and appointments were fought over tooth and nail. Today, an estimated 2,000 salons operate legally and illegally in the city, supported by an army of tens of thousands of self-employed beauty professionals. Nationwide, beauty salons outnumber restaurants and grocery stores combined.

'The demand for female beauty in Ukraine, is like the demand for rice in China,' said Inge Shishchenko, a Kiev-based cosmetics consultant. 'The secret to an attractive appearance is hard work, and no one works harder at being pretty than our Ukrainian girls.'

It certainly looks that way.

On the tree-shaded promenades in the bigger towns like Kiev's Khreschtyk Street or Odessa's Deribassovsky Boulevard, stunning women traipse by in quantities exceeding most major European cities, and at times resembling the starlet parades of Cannes or Hollywood.

The story of how the Ukrainian peasant girl Roksolana through beauty and guile became the favourite wife of a 16th century Turkish sultan, and so the effective ruler of the Ottoman Empire, is a standard history lesson in Ukrainian schools.

Mikhail Zhvanetsky, a popular Ukrainian comic, even jokes: 'In summer on the Deribassovsky, men are walking into lamp posts, it's like flies on a windshield! There are too many beautiful women. They are uncontrolled by law, and your eyes don't know which way to look! It's dangerous!'

Feminism has had difficulty gaining a foothold in Ukraine.

Even politician Julia Timoshenko, a 40-something former prime minister feared by most male politicians for her oratorical skills, admits she is a just as enthusiastic customer for the beauty industry as her less accomplished sisters.

'Every girl wants to be beautiful, to have a pleasing appearance,' the elegant Timoshenko said. 'In this I am no different from any other Ukrainian woman.'

At the top of the market, women like Timoshenko looking to invest in their appearance can visit a palatial building where classical background music is played as she chooses between health club and cafe under the same roof.

Besides the fingernail specialist (\$10) and the hair stylist (\$50-\$100), she can have full-body cleansings (\$100-\$200), and vitamin and even Botox injections (\$100-\$500 a treatment).

At the stylish Kosmetika Luks salon, businesswoman Lesya Zhigalevska turned down the chocolate mask (\$80) in favour of a 90-minute facial treatment culminating in a collagen-thread massage, in all costing a bit fewer than \$50.

'I do as much for the quiet and relaxation, as for the treatment itself,' Zhigalevska said.

Pretty much all international technology can offer is available to a Ukrainian woman willing to grit her teeth for the sake of hair-free skin: chemical washes, leg waxing, electrolysis, intensive-light pulses, and good old Soviet-era lasers to zap each individual follicle.

Even Ukraine's famous mineral riches - the country boasts reserves of everything from antimony to uranium - stand ready to defend the beauty of the nation.

Ukrainian clay is, according to a Kosmetolog

magazine article 'superior to foreign substitutes - and in all ways healthy'.

The procedure is simplicity itself: for whatever mineral the patient's skin lacks, the beauty professional chooses the appropriate-coloured clay.

'Reddish clays such as in our eastern provinces are high in iron and copper, so use this clay for a patient deficient in this mineral,' the article advised.

At the lower rungs of the market ladder, a beauty salon is one of the few private businesses a Ukrainian woman can open on her own for not much start-up capital, and expect a regular income.

'My job is to help,' said Svitlana Drach, owner-operator of the single-room Nasha Krasunia salon in the village Boyarka. 'Of course I give discounts. In this business my patients only pay what they can.'

Fraud, or more kindly faith-based beauty services, remains a main risk in Ukraine's take-no-prisoners beauty industry. Among popular treatments ranging from the iffy to the downright risky are magnetic massages, ultrasonic scrubs, and 'cryotherapy', in which the 'technician' freezes the 'patient's' skin slightly.

'This is why for a Ukrainian woman what is most important is the quality of the beauty supplies, and the professional skill of the cosmetologist, rather than the interior of the salon,' Drach explained.

'Spending money on beauty is not enough for our girls - they want results.'

'A Ukrainian woman will always try to be beautiful, it is our tradition, it is part of our culture,' Shishchenko said. 'The will to be beautiful is in her blood.'

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