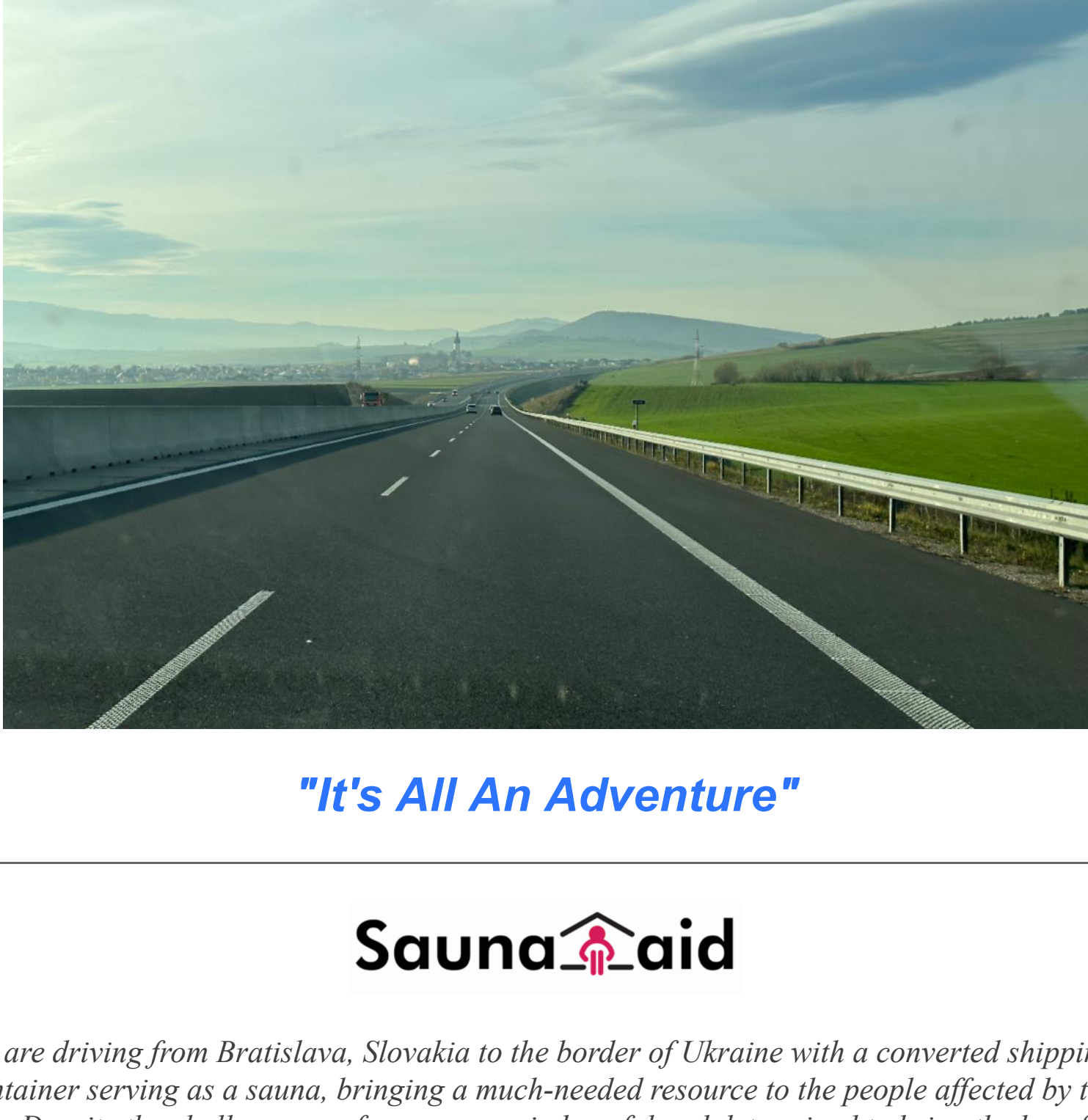


Mikkel Aaland



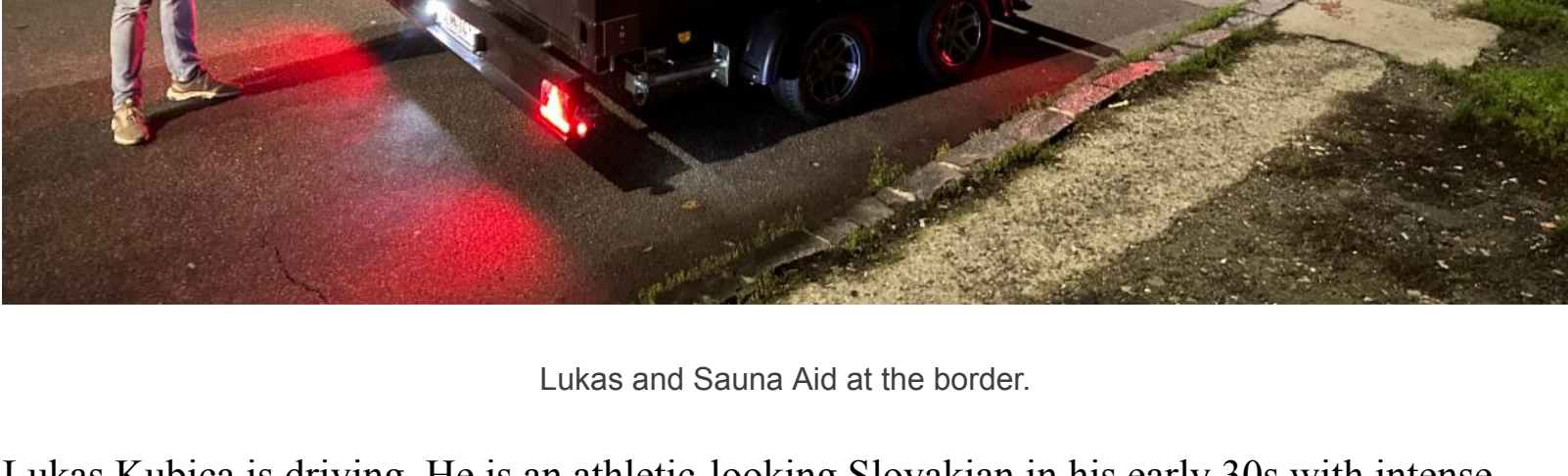
"It's All An Adventure"

Saunaaid

We are driving from Bratislava, Slovakia to the border of Ukraine with a converted shipping container serving as a sauna, bringing a much-needed resource to the people affected by the war. Despite the challenges we face, we remain hopeful and determined to bring the benefits of sauna culture to Ukraine.

At the Border

November 10, 2022. Ukraine is so close, and yet so far. We've already spent three hours on the Slovakian side of the border and the line of trucks in front of us has barely moved. We are sandwiched between two especially large semis, which are making loud noises and emitting diesel fumes into the cold fall air. Most of the trucks in front and back of us are carrying much-needed loads of food and supplies into the war-torn country. Our load is small, but we believe it will be just as appreciated.



Lukas and Sauna Aid at the border.

Lukas Kubica is driving. He is an athletic-looking Slovakian in his early 30s with intense blue eyes and a well-groomed moustache. I am sitting in the passenger seat, my legs cramped and twitchy from sitting all day. We represent **Sauna Aid**, a multi-national organization providing movable sauna facilities and support services to people affected by natural and man-made disasters. Lukas has converted a standard shipping container into a high-quality, wood-lined sauna with a top-of-the-line wood-burning stove. The container, complete with large, white Sauna Aid stickers, is trailing behind our passenger car on the trailer hitch.

Some people may find it strange that we are putting so much effort into our mission, especially since they may think that saunas are only meant for country clubs or spas. For us and many Ukrainians, however, the sauna, or laznya/banya, is not a luxury. It brings together people of different ages, social classes, and backgrounds, and promotes peace and a sense of shared humanity. We know some Ukrainians who refer to the banya as their "second mother." Because of the destruction of many public baths and the approaching winter, we know we are bringing a much-needed resource to Ukraine. We are aware of the devastating impact of the war in Ukraine, which has resulted in a major humanitarian crisis in Europe, led to food shortages, claimed thousands of lives, and disrupted both the local and global economy. While our actions may seem insignificant in the grand scheme of things, we believe that every little bit helps and we can't predict the potential ripple effects of our efforts.

The sun has set and in the dark of night dark even the UNICIF and other refugee relief stations are closed. Lukas and I are hungry, but when we reach for the sandwiches we bought earlier at a gas station just past Prešov in Slovakia, we realize they are missing. Lukas thought I had picked them up, and I thought he had. The four bottles of local beer we bought are still there, though, and we laugh at our mistake. Up until now, forgetting the sandwiches is the only thing that has gone wrong during our uneventful, if slow, 500-kilometer drive from Bratislava to the border of Ukraine.

Lukas tells me that his father used to work at this border crossing as a guard. He said that back when Slovakia was part of Czechoslovakia and separated from the West by the Iron Curtain, people could bribe guards for special treatment. Even though my legs are killing me and I would gladly pay a little extra to speed things up, those days are long gone and we just have to wait patiently like everyone else.

During the long drive I've gotten to know Lukas pretty well. He was born in 1991, a year before Czechoslovakia split in two, the same year I lived in Prague with my soon-to-be wife. Lukas tells me he used to be in the Airbnb business, renting out urban apartments. Then he came up with the idea of converting standard shipping containers into saunas and renting them out through an app. His company, **Pixla Sauna**, is based in Bratislava, but his saunas can travel all over the country near rivers and lakes. Lukas lives in a nearby suburb with his Russian wife and young daughter.

"When I discovered saunas, something inside me clicked," he says. "I knew this was something I would do all my life."

I had met Lukas at the International Sauna Congress in Stuttgart, Germany a few weeks earlier. The Congress is organized by the **International Sauna Association** and is held at a different venue every four years. Lukas was there with one of his container saunas. When I told him about Sauna Aid his eyes lit up and he was immediately on board. "My wife is Russian," he said, "but we are totally in support of the Ukrainians. And I love the concept of Sauna Aid. I get what you are trying to do."

I saw something in Lukas that reminded me of my younger self. Back in the 70s, when I was in my early 20s, I researched and wrote *Sweat*, a book on bathing cultures around the world. Sweat bathing became a life-time passion, and as I look back, I realize how lucky I was to find my groove at such an early age. For over 45 years, while making a career in photography and publishing, marrying, and raising two daughters, I have continuously advocated sauna/sweat bathing culture. As I learned long ago, there are few human activities that combine the physical, social and spiritual under one roof the way the sauna/sweat bath does. Lukas' passion is deep and committed as mine and he has his whole life in front of him. I feel privileged to spend a little time with him on this end of it.

With plenty of wait ahead of us, we snack on salty peanuts from my backpack and drink bottled water. Facing a border guard with booze on our breath doesn't sound like a good idea, so we both agree beer will have to come later. Lukas politely listens as I regale him with stories about the old days when crossing borders between every country in Europe was like this. It almost always meant long lines, presenting a passport, and dealing with arrogant border guards. Back then, with my shoulder length hair and a gold earring in one ear, I was often pulled aside because I fit the profile of one of the Baader-Meinhof Gang, a 70s radical left wing terrorist group.

Two hours later, we finally reached the Slovakian customs office. Lukas spent a full two days in Bratislava getting all the stamps and credentials he needed from Slovakian authorities to legally "export" the container sauna. "It was a miracle we got it done so quickly" says Lukas. His efforts pay off when a gruff-looking guard carefully examines Lukas' paperwork and driver's license, then stamps our passports and waves us on.

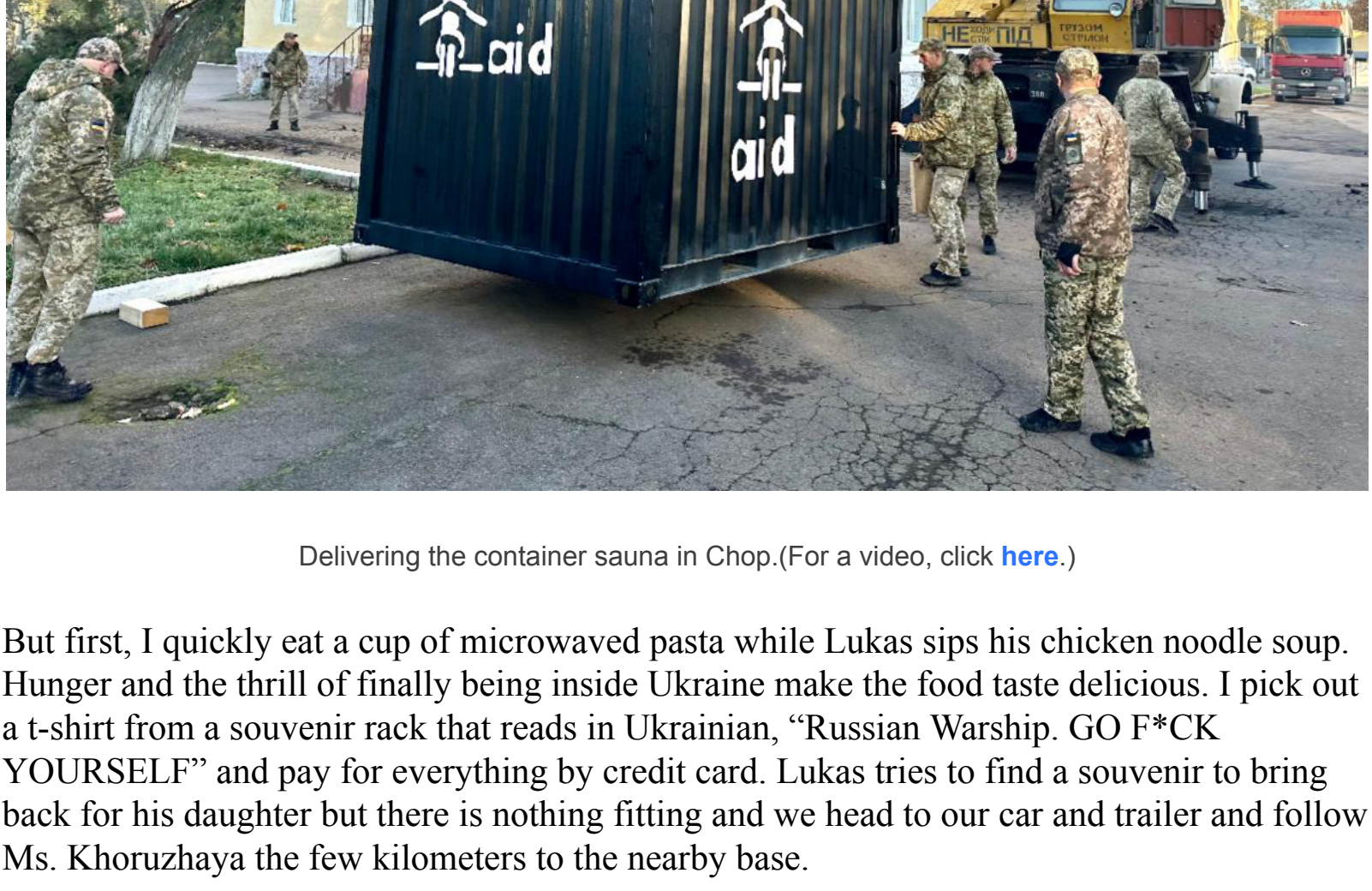
A hundred meters later, after passing through the neutral buffer zone, we pull up to the Ukrainian border crossing, located just a few kilometers outside Uzhhorod. Here we are met by a well-dressed custom's officer, holding the latest iPhone in her hand. She welcomes us and says she tried calling the customs officials in Slovakia to speed things up. She delayed ending her shift and going home to her young child just to wait for us. We are getting special treatment on this side largely because of the efforts of Maksym Bondarenko, a city council member in Kharkiv who gave the customs people a heads up we were coming. Bondarenko is the one who also helped Sauna Aid in September import a specially-built tent sauna from Finland to Ukraine for troops battling near the eastern front.

We quickly clear Ukraine customs and an escort car with flashing red lights shows up to take us and our precious cargo an hour or so further inland past Uzhhorod to the small town of Chop. All along the road is a steady line of fully loaded transport trucks that stretch at least 13 kilometers back into Ukraine. I understand why the trucks entering Ukraine are full of supplies but what are these trucks carrying out?

It is nearly midnight when we finally pull into a 24-hour gas station and surprisingly well-stocked convenience store in Chop. Our escort driver is joined by Ms. Khoruzhaya, another customs officer smartly dressed in camouflage. She works at a nearby military base, speaks perfect English and answers our pressing question:

"Grain," she says, "Grain. The Russians have chocked the sea ports and this is the only other way out."

She goes on to explain that she will lead us the rest of the way to the drop off location on the town's outskirts. There we will unhitch the trailer, find a place to sleep, then return in the morning to help unload the sauna.



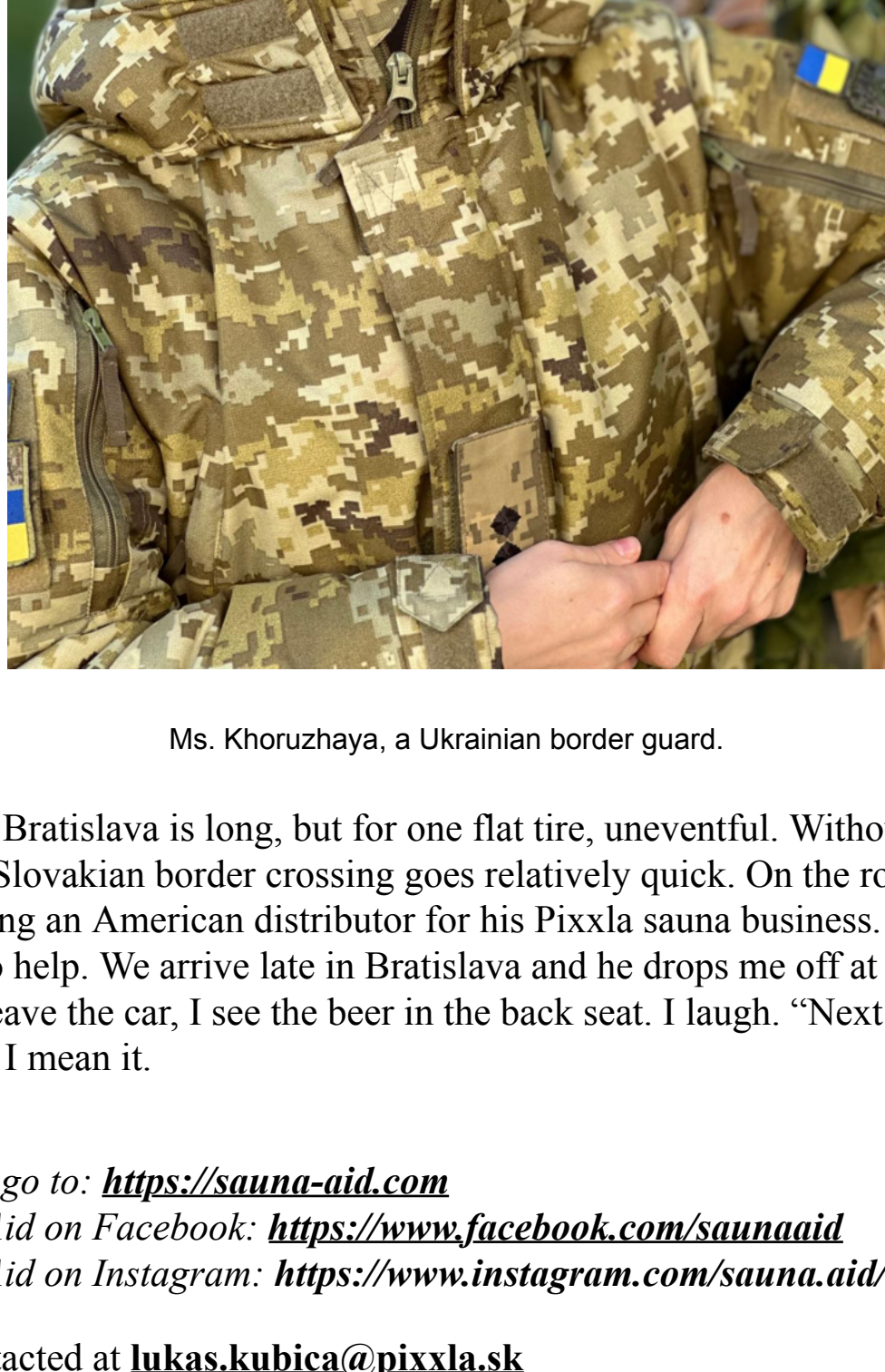
Delivering the container sauna in Chop. (For a video, click [here](#).)

But first, I quickly eat a cup of microwaved pasta while Lukas sips his chicken noodle soup. Hunger and the thrill of finally being inside Ukraine make the food taste delicious. I pick out a t-shirt from a souvenir rack that reads in Ukrainian, "Russian Warship. GO F*CK YOURSELF" and pay for everything by credit card. Lukas tries to find a souvenir to bring back for his daughter but there is nothing fitting and we head to our car and trailer and follow Ms. Khoruzhaya the few kilometers to the nearby base.

As we drive through the dark town on a war footing, heading towards our final destination, I can't help but marvel at how much has happened in just the past 24 hours. I've reconnected with Lukas in Bratislava, revisited old passions, and remembered my time living in Czechoslovakia with my wife. I've also experienced the generosity and warmth of the determined Ukrainians. Despite all the potential challenges we faced - such as pulling a heavy trailer behind an old SUV over rugged mountain roads, the possibility of one of us getting sick (Lukas had a positive COVID test but was fine by the time we left), being turned away at the border for a missing document, or even the risk of a Russian drone attack or wayward missile - I've surprisingly felt little fear.

The fact is, we've been in a groove with more than our share of good luck. Lukas has been so incredibly positive it has rubbed off on me. We are doing something we love, and something we believe will make a difference. There is little room for fear.

The rest of our mission goes quickly. We check in to a roadside hotel where we are the only guests--and from the guestbook it looks like we are the only guests in a long time. Early the next morning we drive back to the base and watch as a huge crane lifts the container sauna off its trailer. From here it will be put on another trailer and hitched to the back of another vehicle for the long drive east where it will be fired up and put to good use. Lukas is concerned: he wants to know exactly where the container sauna is going and if it will be properly camouflaged so the Russians won't mistake it for a military target. The commander overseeing the transfer says there are no guarantees but they will do their best to keep it safe. I think it is hard for Lukas to see one of his babies go. Finally, I take a photo of Ms. Khoruzhaya and when I look at it later, I see the expression of appreciation we've seen in so many others.



Ms. Khoruzhaya, a Ukrainian border guard.

The drive back to Bratislava is long, but for one flat tire, uneventful. Without the container sauna in tow, the Slovakian border crossing goes relatively quick. On the road Lukas tells me his dream of finding an American distributor for his Pixla sauna business. I assure him I will do all I can to help. We arrive late in Bratislava and he drops me off at my hotel near the city center. As I leave the car, I see the beer in the back seat. I laugh. "Next time," I say. "Next time." And I mean it.

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