

"Daily Life, Surprises and Cherished Moments"

MOSCOW DIARY

BY AN AMERICAN
LIVING IN MOSCOW



Francesca de Bardin

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**Moscow Diary. By An
American Living in Moscow**

«Издательские решения»

de Bardin F.

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With both US and French passports, I could live almost anywhere... And I chose Moscow. This is the story of my heart warming experiences with Russian strangers I met almost daily. You will be surprised and entertained to learn about the challenges I faced and the new discoveries I made as an American living in Moscow.

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Содержание

CHAPTER 1	6
CHAPTER 2	11
CHAPTER 3	13
CHAPTER 4	15
CHAPTER 5	18
Taxis	19
Moscow Transportation Network	20
Phone Services	21
Banking	22
International Media and Internet Access	23
Cost of Living in Moscow	24
Restaurants and Cafe's in Moscow	25
Food Markets in Moscow	26
Dachas and Banyas	27
CHAPTER 6	28
Well-known Russian Proverbs	29
Soviet Humor	30
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	31

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By An American Living in Moscow

Francesca de Bardin

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CHAPTER 1

From New York City to Paris to Moscow

It was negative 5.5 degrees Celsius (22 degrees Fahrenheit) and snowing on January 5, 2022 when I arrived in Moscow – my first day as a retired American living in the capital of Russia. I moved here from a small town in southern France where I had lived for eight years. On the day I left France, it was 16.6 degrees Celsius (62 degrees Fahrenheit) and sunny.

I stayed in a small hotel near the apartment I had rented, awaiting the arrival of my furniture and household possessions by truck from France. Eight years prior, all my possessions were moved to France from New York. The idea of starting a new life in Moscow, in a different culture was as intimidating as it was appealing. For one, I wanted the comfort of the familiar objects in my surroundings that had accompanied me for years.

I knew three Muscovites at the time and spoke two words of Russian: «da» (or «yes») and («nyet» (or «no»)). My smartphone was a lifesaver, as it could translate my words into Russian. I anticipated a rich life in Moscow – enjoying museums, the ballet, parks and gardens, among other things. Having lived in New York City most of my life, I was accustomed to big-city life. Living in a mega-metropolis like Moscow promised adventures and challenges that I welcomed. I had previously visited St. Petersburg and Moscow as a tourist and appreciated the rich culture, diversity, and history of the thousand-year-old Russian civilization.

Fate brought me here for a variety of reasons. I never intended to write a book about my experiences in Moscow until the intense anti-Russian rhetoric of the collective West became impossible for me to ignore. I decided to write this book not only as a rebuttal to anti-Russian rhetoric, but also to share how profoundly I've been touched by the openness, kindness, compassion, humanity, and generosity of the Russians I meet every day.

This isn't a history book, guide book, or discourse on culture – it's about my experiences and observations as a retired American living in Moscow. It's a very personal story, one in which I share challenges and surprises, mixed with some history, humor, thoughts on things to see, and personal insights.

It's my hope that this book will be entertaining, informative, inspiring, and touching. I hope it encourages more objectivity and respect between our cultures and a genuine desire to learn more about each other. The de Bardin family motto, in French, is «Faire Face,» which translates as «Meet the Challenge.» I do so now, with pleasure.

As an American citizen with French citizenship, I was able to live almost anywhere – and I chose Moscow. It's the first question Russians ask me: «Why are you living here?»

I was born in San Francisco, California, and educated in Catholic schools. I grew up in a middle-class home. My parents had immigrated from Italy. My values are traditional and conservative. I have travelled the world for business and pleasure, visited the world's major museums, the greatest religious places of worship, and ancient archeological sites, from the Yucatan to Luxor to Machu Picchu. I'm an adventuress by nature.

I'm also fiercely independent, a nonconformist with a penchant for speaking provocatively. For most of my life in the United States those traits were admired. As an entrepreneur in New York City, from 1980 to 2010, I achieved success founding and leading three diverse businesses.

In the 1990s, I began to see the progressive deterioration of standards in the spheres of media, academia, justice, business, politics, education, culture, and spirituality. It was a slow degradation, but obvious and painful for me to watch. It became the «norm» to go along with the social engineering that

began undermining the ethics and standards of our institutions in the name of «progress.» Meritocracy was being replaced by ideology.

Ethics and moral standards, virtue and vice, right and wrong, were ignored. Cultural values and core principles that were the cornerstone of Western civilization were replaced by moral relativism, with each individual having the right to determine his or her moral standards. Everything was permitted. It didn't take long for greed, conspicuous consumption, and superficial status symbols to pervade our lives. It was troubling to witness how avarice became the «new normal.»

Fate interceded and, in Paris, I met and fell in love with an elegant French man who became my husband, Claude de Bardin. Our conservative philosophies and values were in harmony. We divided our time between Paris and New York for 15 years. I was immersed in French culture, history, art, architecture, and the «French style.» It was a less superficial lifestyle than New York City. In Paris, I could indulge my passions for food, art, architecture, and renovating our Paris apartment. We also rented an apartment in southern France for the winters.

When my beloved husband passed away in 2014, I decided to remain in the apartment we had rented in southern France. It's a very small town of 30,000, magnificently beautiful and the perfect place to grieve. I then sold or donated most of my possessions in New York and the remaining belongings were transported by ship to France.

In early 2020, the WHO announced the pandemic status of the COVID-19 outbreak. I was suspicious about the speed at which the entire world fell into conformity, pushing masks, «vaccines,» and shutting down businesses. I did research and concluded I would resist being «jabbed.» Arbitrary laws were instituted by the French government regarding how many could socialize at home, mask enforcement, travel restrictions, and proof of vaccine or a PCR test (which cost 30 euros and was good for three days) in order to dine out or have a coffee in an outdoor café. I was having none of it and continued to refuse to be «vaccinated.»

In June 2021, fate intervened again. My landlord of eight years informed me that he wished to sell my apartment, which I could buy or would need to vacate by February 2022. While life in France was enchanting in so many ways, cultural life was limited in the small town where I resided. Though the area was magnificently beautiful, I concluded that there's more to life than beautiful weather and scenery.

Having no permanent ties to France, I realized I could now choose to live wherever I wished. I had both U.S. and French passports, so the choice was mine. I had no interest in living in the U.S. based on what I had been observing. France had its charms, but the government was becoming more oppressive with each passing week. I didn't wish to remain in France, so I chose Moscow.

Recently, a Russian man overheard me speaking English and asked where I was from. I told him I was American and had just moved to Moscow from France. When he asked why I left France, I responded, «For liberte, egalite, and fraternite.» He laughed and said, «You were right.»

But there was another important reason. In 2016, I wrote a book called *Fighting Global Tyranny*, which traces the history and methods of the global oligarchy leading the world today. Between 2020 and 2021, I noticed the strengthening of the alliance between Russia and China – something the United States had been determined to prevent, at all costs, for decades. I saw the center of gravity changing from West to East. It appeared as if a civilizational transformation was taking place: the end of Anglo/Saxon hegemony and the dawn of a multipolar world. I couldn't imagine a more exciting city to live in than Moscow, the capital of the new multipolar world. I wanted to have a seat, front and center. It was an easy decision to make.

It wasn't my first major relocation: I had moved from California to New York City to pursue a marketing career; had relocated to southern France from New York in 2014; and I now prepared to move to Moscow. I knew there would be challenges I couldn't imagine, but I have always lived by the philosophy that «There is always a solution.»

At the time, I only knew four Russians: my neighbor in France, a retired colonel in the Russian Army who visited from St. Petersburg three-to-four times a year; my Moscow tour guide, Katya, who had lived in the United States; and a couple in Moscow, Natasha and Alex, with whom I had a friendship for five years. They all encouraged me to move to Moscow.





Being a big-city girl, I was eager to again live in an international city with all the cultural things I enjoy: opera, ballet, art museums, interesting people, the promise of new cultural experiences, and an adventure every day. Living in the center of the civilizational changes taking place reinforced my decision. Many Russians tell me that I was very brave to move to Moscow alone. I always respond, «It wasn't bravery. I was escaping tyranny.»

Before making a final decision to relocate, I moved to Moscow for two months to explore neighborhoods and to see how I would feel living there. I contacted five real estate brokers to search for an apartment. Unbeknownst to me, most apartments in Moscow are rented furnished. It took two months to find an unfurnished apartment that met my criteria and budget. Having found something perfect, organizing the move was the next project.

When I arrived, my Russian friends told me that most people 30 to 40 years of age spoke English, so if I needed assistance I should look for someone that age. It was advice I followed daily. My first experience with the kindness of Russian strangers occurred almost immediately.

After I found the apartment I wanted, buying a tape measure was a necessity. I decided to walk around the neighborhood to find a hardware store. Remembering the advice of my friends, I saw three young men ahead of me and said, «Excuse me, do you speak English?» «A little,» they responded.

I explained that I needed to buy a tape measure and asked if they knew where I could find a hardware store. They said yes, that it's not far, and began giving me directions. They saw the worried look on my face, and knowing I didn't understand the directions, one of them said, «Never mind, we'll take you there.» We walked for several minutes to the store and they came inside to help me select and buy a tape measure. I invited them to coffee afterward, but they declined as they were off to visit a sick friend. «Don't worry,» one of them said. «We're not going to leave you here. We'll walk you back to where we found you so you can find your way home.» *Thank goodness*, I thought. One of the men, who also spoke French, gave me his telephone number and said, «Call me if you need anything.»

CHAPTER 2

Challenges and Discoveries I Didn't Expect

Two months after my arrival in Moscow, the sanctions against Russia began. Suddenly, most of my old friends in America ignored or responded superficially to my messages. Having access to U.S./Western media in Moscow, I could see how the media was constantly pushing an anti-Russian narrative, and any semblance of media balance was non-existent. I never discussed the conflict in Ukraine with any of them, nor did they ask me any questions about life here. I became a ghost to them. It was unsettling for me to lose contact with so many friends, but I understood they were being bombarded with only a biased narrative, and also were probably fearful of writing to someone in Moscow.

My friends in Europe didn't react this way at all. They viewed the media as one-sided and were skeptical of what they read. One of my French friends actually said, «You left France just in time.»

I now began to wonder how all these sanctions might affect my relationships with Russians. I had learned to say, in Russian, «I'm sorry, I don't speak Russian, I'm American.» The reaction was always very positive. They told me about their families in the United States, where they had visited and how much they enjoyed their travels there.

Sanctions or not, I decided to continue saying, «I'm American,» and to be ready for negative reactions from Russians. It never happened. Nothing changed. They were always so happy to see an American living in Moscow and frequently gushed over me. They were eager to speak with me in English, ask me questions, and express how happy they were to meet me. If I struggled to communicate, someone usually came forward, speaking English, to help translate. My worries about being an American living in Moscow disappeared. Russians embraced me – not only adults, but children too.

It was a warm spring day and I had just made my frequent pilgrimage to Hall 37 of the Tretyakov Museum to see the paintings of my favorite Russian landscape artist, Isaac Levitan. I was sitting on a bench in a small park pondering my next stop. A group of young students on a field trip to the museum were waiting together across from me. One of the young men approached me. When I told him I didn't speak Russian, that I was American, he ran over to his teacher and gave her the news. She came over immediately for a chat in English. She then announced to the children they had an American in their midst and they should speak to me in English! A small group of the students came over to practice English and asked me questions. They were open, friendly, and playful. One wanted to know my age. I told him I was 16. He laughed and shook his head. I tried 22, but he didn't believe that either. We had a good laugh and he finally gave up. We all took pictures and waved goodbye.

St. Petersburg and Moscow are dazzling cities for tourists. Prior to my decision to move to Moscow, I had visited them three times. In addition, I also took the Volga/Neva River cruise to the Gulf of Finland, stopping in small towns and visiting great palaces along the way. I had guides for my private visits, so that I could learn as much about local history and culture as possible. While the experience of visiting a city as a tourist can be rich and enlightening, it's never the same as living in the actual city.

What astonished me the most, from the first day I resided full time in Moscow, was the kindness I encountered from Russian strangers I would meet on the street or in stores. I was overwhelmed by their warmth, concern, humanity, generosity, and compassion. I remember the many times they would personally take me where I needed to go even if it was out of their way. They would personally stay with me until I had accomplished my goal. It was much more than a kind gesture – they always remained with me to the end. I have traveled around the world and never experienced anything like this. Not only did it surprise me, but also touched me deeply. I was very curious how and why this

compassion became such an integral part of Russian character and culture. I began to notice that their compassion brought out the best in me. I felt embraced here and I returned the embrace.

CHAPTER 3

Russians Are «We» Not «I» Oriented

It seemed that every day a Muscovite was aiding me with something over and above the normal polite assistance one encounters in most countries. I shall share some of those experiences with you throughout this book. It baffled me, and I wanted to learn why these people were so special – so eager to offer assistance, so humane and kind. I began researching to understand the source of this compassion. The first person I contacted was Ludmilla Selezneva, a Russian historian and professor whose lectures I had attended on my first trip to Russia and whose book *Growing Up Russian* I had read. I explained my mission and she generously agreed to a meeting. Her vast knowledge opened me to new revelations that I eagerly pursued. Not only that, but Ludmilla graciously agreed to review the chapters in this book for historical accuracy, and for which I'm incredibly grateful.

Further meetings and studies revealed the genesis of Russia's «we» culture – customs and behaviors that intertwined and reinforced each other over centuries of history.

Deep faith and common values are nurtured by the fundamental teachings of the Russian Orthodox Church. Prince Vladimir adopted the Orthodox faith from Constantinople in 988 which introduced cultural influences that profoundly affected the Russian consciousness. Orthodoxy had a major impact on politics, art, and nearly every other aspect of Russia's culture. The church affected the thought patterns and motivations of a whole culture and changed the way Russians thought about themselves and the ways that they lived their lives. Orthodoxy was the spiritual and moral core of society. It helped shape the character of the Russian people, their cultural traditions, ethical norms, and aesthetic ideals.

The Orthodox Church also played a role in developing laws and had a strong influence on international relations. The church acted as a unifying factor for the Russian nation with its shared traditions and holidays. Russians feel a strong sense of community with one another through a shared bond of faith. As a result of this emphasis on the community, the rights of the individual are united by common convictions and values of the Orthodox Church.

After the October Revolution in 1917, the Russian government established atheism as the state doctrine. While most organized religions were repressed, believers continued to worship in private and in some religious buildings. In 1943, Joseph Stalin relaxed the clamp on the Russian Orthodox Church in order to encourage patriotism, keep the nation united, and help fight the Second World War.

Family and community traditions with strong community bonds provided protection against extreme hardship brought about by wars, famines, and unspeakable suffering. Until the 20th century, Russian peasants, who made up 80 percent of the population, lived mainly in «communities.» They had common possession of the land and made all their decisions together. They had common responsibilities, including paying their state taxes and growing their food together. They cared for each other as family and community during hardship, sharing food and necessities to survive. They were great communalists. And this tradition created interdependence, promoting feelings of friendship, trust, and goodwill.

The Soviet educational system promoted the communist ideology through two organizations that all children were obliged to join: October Child (ages seven to nine) and Pioneers (ages 10 to 14). The rules of the organizations encouraged kindness and compassion as critical Soviet values. The essence of the children's organizations was to prepare children for their future life and to give them an understanding that a person's main task on earth is to be kind to other people – so, assistance, help, trust, friendship, and goodwill should be the very center of life. Children were encouraged to do good things.

It was only after living here that I began to appreciate how this culture of «we» can make such a profound impact on the lives not only of people, but also on nations. The «I» culture in the United States and the West is more individualistic, materialistic, and competitive. It's a striking difference. I began to observe how Russia's «we» culture permeated so many aspects of daily life among families, friends, and colleagues. I experience it daily, as «foreigners» aren't excluded from this culture. My new Russian friends were strangers I encountered who reached out to me when I had difficulties.

CHAPTER 4

My First Russian Friends

Alexey is the manager of the company that moved all my belongings overland from southern France to Moscow. He had lived in New York City, spoke English, and arrived on a snowy day in early January with five men to unload all my household goods, place the furniture, unpack everything, and put things in place. It took three days, so we had time to discuss many things. He was very curious about why I moved to Moscow and asked me many questions. After the move, he stayed in touch with me to see how I was doing and was always available if I needed advice. He always sends greetings on holidays and one day invited me to visit the Arkhangelskoye State Museum just west of Moscow. He was my first new Russian friend.

A few months later, Alexey asked me if I had ever seen a hockey game. I hadn't. I joined Alexey and his gracious wife, Anna, to see their 16-year-old son compete in a playoff match. It was thrilling to experience my first hockey game. The team's stamina, strength, and expert skating – forwards and backwards, stopping in an instant – were exhilarating to watch. The team members practice daily and the venues exist all over Moscow.



In the winter, there are free ice-skating rinks for hockey and outdoor winter sports located throughout the city. The former mayor of Moscow also established indoor ice rinks and sports clubs throughout the city. Children start learning hockey in these clubs at four years old and train until they're nine years old. Depending on their ability and desire, they can then become part of a local team. Parents pay for the child's equipment only. There are no other fees. Teams compete weekly, and practice and coaching sessions take up a substantial part of the free time of the players.

Julia overheard me asking a young man for assistance. I had just finished shopping at my favorite gourmet store, walked outside, and ordered a taxi. It was snowing slightly. The taxi hadn't arrived and my phone died. It was too far to walk home and I became worried. I asked a young man to help me, but he didn't speak English. Julia was heading into the store, heard me, and asked if she could help. I explained the problem and we chatted in English together while waiting for the taxi. She had worked for IKEA, lived near to me, and had four children. The taxi still hadn't arrived, but she told me not to worry, because I was in her safe hands. She stood outside with me for more than 10 minutes and assured me she would make sure I got home safely. She asked if I would be willing to tutor her young son in English. I said yes, delighted to oblige. We chatted and exchanged phone numbers. The taxi finally arrived and took me home. Amazingly, within an hour she called me to be certain I had arrived home safely.

One evening at Julia's home for dinner, I asked her if I could take a picture of her container of bleach, as I had no idea what to look for when shopping. Within an hour, someone arrived at the door and she presented me with a container of bleach she ordered from the market. It was a gift for me until I could buy my own. I couldn't get over her thoughtfulness.

Julia has become a good friend. We visit museums together, share meals, and have long talks. I tutor her son, who is 12, in English every Saturday. Her friend Maria asked if her son, who's also 12, could also join the group. They've all been studying English for at least four years in school. Whenever they come for a lesson, they're never empty-handed. They come with flowers, cookies, candies – no matter how many times I tell them it's not necessary.

Nailya and I were shopping in the same gourmet market when she heard me struggling to understand the different cuts of meat. She helped me find what I wanted and explained many other things. Afterwards, we chatted, gave each other our brief bios and exchanged phone numbers. Nailya lives quite close to my apartment and enjoys refreshing her English with me. She worked for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs during the Soviet era. She also worked for major U.S. oil companies in Moscow, so we have much to discuss. She's a great cook and has taught me many Russian recipes. She grows vegetables, berries, flowers, and herbs at her dacha and generously keeps me supplied. She always brings me something when she returns from the dacha. I also try to keep her supplied with special dishes I cook. It's a Russian tradition to always bring something when you visit someone, and the host always sends the guest home with something special also.

Nailya and Julia are the first ones I call for advice. And now that I know my way around more, I also inform them of my new discoveries, from a delicious new olive oil to a new hairdresser, market, or dentist.



While sitting on a bench near the Bolshoi Theatre, I saw a very elegantly dressed woman in conversation with a young man, Yuri. She wore a coat made of fur that I'd never seen before. I asked if I could take her picture, so I could show it to my fashionista friends. She agreed and left shortly afterwards. Yuri then came over and introduced himself in perfect English. He wanted to know all about me, where was I from, what was I doing in Moscow, and so on. He then told me he was a bass-baritone at the Bolshoi. I was over the moon to hear that because I'm passionate about opera, so we talked about singers and operas for a long time. I was quite excited to receive a message from him a few weeks later inviting me as his guest to hear him sing the role of Figaro at the Bolshoi. He sometimes leaves me messages of him singing his favorite Frank Sinatra songs. He's determined to perfect his American pronunciation, so I'm always on call to approve any audiobook he's considering, as many aren't spoken by Americans.

CHAPTER 5

Daily Life In Moscow

It's rarely publicized, but in February 2023, the United Nations published its Global Cities Ranking for 2022 and awarded Moscow the top spot among major cities for quality of life and infrastructure, praising the metropolis for its transportation and the well-being of its citizens. The ranking accounts for a total of 14 indicators, such as health, education, recreation, safety, housing and social infrastructure, information and communications technology, and urban mobility. (**APPENDIX I** lists Moscow's must-see places.)

When I arrived in Moscow, I was overwhelmed by the size of the city. It covers an area of 970 square miles (2,512 square kilometers). Moscow's population is estimated at 13 million residents within the city limits. The city has over 40 percent of its territory covered by greenery, making it one of the greenest cities in Europe and the world. Its architectural diversity encompasses cathedrals built in the 1400s, private mansions from every century, Stalinist-style architecture from 1947 to 1953, and seven of the nine tallest skyscrapers in Europe. In spite of its size, the city doesn't have the unsightly or noisy features of most megaregions. It's incredibly clean, no litter, graffiti, homeless or drug addicts on the streets as you walk around. Fear of being robbed or harmed is non-existent. People are respectful and polite. During heavy traffic, you'll hear little, if any, honking. Motorcycles aren't allowed to weave through traffic at high speeds, though the police allow them to race at night in special areas. You'll find that on trains, busses and restaurants conversations are muted. In short, the senses are not needlessly bombarded with negative sights and sounds, keeping irritations at a minimum. In a word, it's a very civilized place to live. Moscow has grown to become one of the world's largest urban economies, and the city is one of the fastest-growing tourist destinations in the world.

Everything in Moscow is *big*. The monuments, markets, parks, highways, malls, sidewalks, and even the size of the carrots are larger in scale than most I've seen. Taxis are a great way to see a variety of areas, but also the slowest because of traffic.

Most residents use the metro, as it's the fastest and most reliable way to travel. I always study the metro map to plan my trips. The signage at the stations is easy to follow and a passerby is always willing to help. Moscow metro stations are architectural wonders. You'll also find that they're safe and clean as you wait for the trains, which are efficient and timely.

Moscow is Russia's largest industrial city. Nearly 30% of the workforce is employed in industry and industrial research: Metallurgy, metal processing, and engineering are the largest industrial sectors. Other large sectors are textiles, clothing, footwear, chemicals, electronic instruments, and automation equipment.

Taxis

Unlike most large cities, it's impossible to hail a taxi on the street in Moscow. Taxis are ordered only by phone application and usually from a convenient spot where a taxi can legally stop. They're plentiful and arrive in less than five minutes. Once your location is identified by the app, a taxi is ordered and you determine the price by the comfort level of the taxi you select. Once ordered, you're given the color, model, and license plate of the taxi and the driver's name. You can watch it on your phone as it travels to you. The fare is charged on your debit card, so no cash is required, but you can also pay in cash if you wish. All drivers have GPS, thus allowing navigation to your destination. It's a safe, efficient system with no surprises about the fare.

In most Russian cities, car sharing is a popular, convenient, and inexpensive mode of transportation. Usually, a person has three or four services to contact by app on their phone. One of them will have a car available within a five-minute walk of your location. The phone app unlocks the car and starts the motor. The car can be deposited virtually anywhere.

Moscow Transportation Network

Moscow is served by a comprehensive transit network, which includes four international airports, 10 railway terminals, a tram system, a monorail system, and, most notably, the Moscow Metro, the busiest metro system in Europe, and one of the largest rapid transit systems in the world.

I zip around Moscow on the metro regularly. I can time my trip almost to the tee, as the stations are two minutes apart and trains arrive usually in less than two minutes. The 15 lines are color coded, and with sufficient signage to guide you. It's very clean and safe, with no graffiti or homeless people in sight, and with plenty of security everywhere.

Opened in 1935, the state-owned Moscow Metro is 237 miles (381 kilometers) long and consists of 15 lines and 258 stations organized in a spoke-hub distribution paradigm, with the majority of rail lines running radially from the center of Moscow to the outlying areas. The stations were constructed in the style of socialist classicism and were meant as underground "palaces of the people."

As of 2023, the Moscow Metro had 258 stations (295 if you include the Moscow Central Circle and the Monorail). The Moscow Metro is a world leader in the frequency of train traffic, with intervals during peak hours never exceeding 90 seconds. The metro is open from approximately 5:30 a.m. to 1 a.m.

Each line is identified according to an alphanumeric index (usually consisting of a number), a name, and a color. The lines are also assigned specific colors on maps and signs. Free Wi-Fi is called MT_FREE and available on all 15 lines (inside the trains). A trip costs 65 cents in U.S. currency.

Phone Services

Free Wi-Fi is available throughout Moscow. Most everyone has a smartphone, or the equivalent, with a translation feature, so communication is possible between people who speak different languages. Phone contract prices vary based on multiple options, like elsewhere. The bill can be paid instantly and directly from your bank account.

Sometimes I forget to add minutes, so the phone stops working. This happened when I first arrived in Moscow. I was in a store getting ready to make a call when my phone wouldn't work. I looked around and saw two men in their 20's, and they said they spoke a little English. I showed them my phone, shrugged my shoulders, raised my hands, and shook my head in confusion. One of them took the phone, and after discussing the problem, said, «Needs money.» Realizing I couldn't send money without the phone working, one of the men sent 500 rubles from his bank account to pay my phone charges and it activated my phone instantly. Having no idea this was possible, I was flabbergasted. It worked so quickly, and the man was kind enough to help me out. I then paid him 500 rubles in cash, thanked him profusely, and made the call.

Banking

I thought it would be difficult to open a bank account in Moscow, but it was simple. I chose Sberbank, the largest. After presenting my passport and visa, it was done very quickly. I opened three accounts, one each for U.S. dollars, euros, and rubles. I was given a debit card in rubles. Only Russian citizens can get a credit card or a loan. Dollars and euros could be deposited in those currencies and the bank would then exchange them for rubles. The debit card was only for rubles. My laptop and smartphone were both uploaded with Sberbank's banking application, from which I could perform transactions instantly. I could transfer my dollars/euros from the U.S. or Europe directly into these accounts via Swift overnight.

Things changed with the sanctions. I had only been in Moscow a few months when Sberbank was sanctioned. It meant I could no longer receive funds from the U.S. and Europe. So, I began a search for an unsanctioned bank. I went through the same process again with Alfa Bank, and set up all the necessary accounts. A few weeks later, it was also sanctioned. The third time I chose a bank headquartered in Italy, UniCredit Bank which has offices all over Moscow. I was becoming an expert in Russian banking. The process was the same in each bank and the banking rules are consistent. U.S. dollars and euros can be deposited but not withdrawn as of now. All currencies must be changed to rubles.

Each bank has applications for laptops or phones. I can move money by phone instantly to any of my accounts, as well as pay a bill or send money to an individual, free of charge. Checks are not used in Russia. A savings account for deposits pays 4.93% interest.

I now have nine accounts in three currencies in three banks. I'm keeping them all open just in case.

International Media and Internet Access

To the disbelief of my American and European friends, I'm able to access any media in the world, via any search engine like Google, Yandex (the Russian search engine), DuckDuckGo, Bing, YouTube, or Telegram. I can find any news outlet video or podcast I wish. Internet is available on the metro and buses, in parks – almost everywhere in central Moscow – for free.

Cost of Living in Moscow

My experience is that the cost of living in Moscow is about 50% less than Europe and far less than the United States. Numbeo is a crowd-sourced online database of perceived consumer prices, real property prices, and quality-of-life metrics. There you can compare living costs and quality-of-life metrics between any two cities in the world in any currency. It's fascinating to compare cities and very useful for anyone contemplating a relocation. Their website is: <https://www.numbeo.com>

Restaurants and Cafe's in Moscow

Every type of international cuisine is available in Moscow for any taste or budget. The Michelin Guide Moscow 2022 includes 69 restaurants.

Russian ethnic restaurants are also plentiful, representing gastronomy from former Soviet republics such as Georgia, Uzbekistan, and Ukraine. You can also find a variety of restaurants of typical Russian cuisine, from Russian fast food and buffets to Russian haute cuisine restaurants. Most restaurants have delivery services to all parts of Moscow.

Self-service or buffet-style restaurants are ideal for the budget-conscious. You can find them in central locations and in shopping centers. The quality and diversity of food available is consistently high.

Food Markets in Moscow

This is a paradise for «foodies.» There are several huge, covered warehouse markets selling every kind of food product – fresh, frozen, local, or imported – that cater to businesses or individuals. While fascinating to experience, their size can be overwhelming for personal shopping. I prefer smaller-scale supermarkets, which are plentiful. The product selections in the different supermarket chains reflect the brands and prices of the products sold. Finally, there are gourmet stores that feature high-end Russian and imported fresh and packaged foods. Both the supermarkets and gourmet stores have very large selections of prepared foods, which are very fresh and moderately priced.

In spring and summer, there are many covered markets throughout the city that specialize in the best fruits, vegetables, dairy, and pastries frequently coming from the southern parts of Russia or former Soviet republics, many of which are premier agricultural regions.

Dachas and Banyas

Muscovites live in apartments up to 30 stories high. A very high percentage have a dacha outside the city where they spend weekends and holidays. Most of the dachas are located in specific geographic areas dedicated to dacha communities. Many dachas have been passed down through generations, though many new dachas are also being built today. They all have «kitchen gardens,» where fruits and vegetables are grown and harvested for the winter months. Forests usually surround the dacha «communities,» where mushrooms and berries are collected by all.

A Russian banya is a type of a steam sauna that's usually heated in a stove. It's an old tradition that's existed in Russia for centuries. Steam bathing is considered good for relaxation and health, an opportunity to spend quality time with friends, family, and colleagues, and a way to socialize that bypasses the usual boundaries, creating an atmosphere of camaraderie. Since ancient times, the banya has been considered an important bonding place in Russian culture.

Modern Russian banyas are divided into men and women areas. Swimwear isn't used, with everyone getting completely naked and wrapping themselves with towels. Another element of the banya is being smacked briskly with a bunch of leafy branches, which provides a unique detox for the whole body and helps boost the immune system. Many families have a banya in their country homes, or dachas. It's used as a shower, sauna, and bath combined.

I was invited to visit the dacha of Galina, the mother of my friend from St. Petersburg. She and I exchanged gifts frequently on her son's visits to France. She kept me supplied with honey, fruit jams, and the finest pickled cucumbers. Her garden is quite large, and she's out there working from morning to sunset. I helped her harvest cucumbers, after which we pickled them. We also made fresh apple juice from her trees and she taught me to make blinis. She prepared a banya for me (my first), together with hot/cold water, soap, steam, and a mild «thrashing» with branches of leaves. I repeated the process for her. Then we finished it off with a shot of cognac. She sent me back to Moscow with a huge supply of cucumbers and herbs to make my own pickles.

CHAPTER 6

Social Life In Russia

Russians enjoy an active and spirited social life. Gatherings of family and friends are frequent and usually take place around the kitchen table, where food is abundant and toasts are frequent. Musical talents are encouraged throughout society, so usually someone plays an instrument, or sings and the group joins in singing along. Sometimes even dancing breaks out. Children are also encouraged to participate by performing. Starting at five or six years old, they learn to recite poems and recite fairy tales by famous Russian poets.

Telling anecdotes or jokes is also a form of entertainment. They're considered a form of literature, and may be ribald, historical, or cultural, sometimes all three at once. It's a way for guests to show their historical and cultural knowledge and to entertain the group. Some of the anecdotes also have recurring characters and, with their intrinsic quirks and similar patterns, constitute entire series of jokes.

Russian anecdotes can be about everything and anything: politics, stereotypes, nationalities, professions, religion, life and death. Joking about tragedies or tabooed topics is also okay, and most people consider the use of explicit language acceptable if it's essential for telling a story. It doesn't really matter if everyone already knows the anecdote. Telling a well-known anecdote in a new or different way is much appreciated. Knowing and sharing the same anecdotes create the feeling of fellowship among people.

Mikhail Prishvin's works are full of poetry, vivid descriptions of nature, and they display an exceptional keenness of observation. The anecdote below is a parody of his style. Reciting it will bring loud applause from the guests who've previously heard variations of it. While his house is burning, he calls home and says:

«Nearby, mixed with the chirping of birds and the unobtrusive whisper of the wind, as if illuminating the green waves of a birch grove with crimson, enveloping the heat like the summer sun in the midst of a sultry, stuffy July summer, emitting a light haze like a rising mist from the sprawling surface of the lake at dawn, scaring away the forest inhabitants – hardworking beavers, wise hedgehogs and carefree whistlers. The house is burning down.

No, it is no longer necessary to send the car.»

Well-known Russian Proverbs

«*The turkey also thought but ended in the soup.*»

«*The quieter you go the further you'll get.*»

«*Husband is a head, wife is a neck. The head looks to where the neck turns*»

«*Work loves fools.*» (People who love working aren't too smart.)

«*Eyes are scared but hands do.*» (Don't be afraid by looking at how much you need to accomplish, just start doing it.)

«*A Russian harnesses slowly but rides fast.*»

«*An affectionate calf sucks from two mothers.*» (Being nice helps you to get benefits from different people.)

«*Trust but check*»

«*Measure seven times before cutting once.*»

«*Every hut has its own rattles.*»

«*Morning is wiser than evening.*»

«*Don't go to another monastery with your own rules.*»

Soviet Humor

“Every other Friday a guard at the wheelbarrow factory saw a worker coming out of the factory pushing a wheelbarrow packed with hay. The guard searched inside the hay, found nothing, and let the guy go. This ritual repeated over several years until a time when the guard was about to retire from the wheelbarrow factory. When the guy pushing the wheelbarrow appeared at the gate, he told him: “I know you’re stealing something from the wheelbarrow factory. I’m just about to retire and this is my last day here. I won’t tell anybody, but please let me know what you’re stealing from the wheelbarrow factory!” The guy smiled and answered, “Oh, I’m stealing the wheelbarrows.””

Customer: «I want to sign up for the waiting list for a car. How long is it?»

Clerk: «Precisely 10 years from today.»

Customer: «Morning or evening?»

Clerk: «Why, what difference does it make?»

Customer: «The plumber’s due in the morning.»

“The C.I.A. sent a spy to the Soviet Union who had incredible qualifications. He was fluent in Russian, had a vast knowledge of Soviet culture and mannerisms, and could keep up his act with a belly full of vodka. The spy was dropped in a remote village where he approached a man and said, in perfect Russian, ‘Hello comrade, can you please tell me which direction is Moscow?’” The man looked at him, then walked inside. Within minutes, the K.G.B. was swarming the village and arrested the spy. While being interrogated, the K.G.B. officials said, “Quit the act, we know you’re an American spy.” The spy was baffled that they were able to tell so quickly, but tried to keep up the act for as long as he could. When he finally cracked, he said, “Alright, alright, I’m a spy. I will tell you whatever you want, but please just tell me how you knew I was a spy because I devoted my whole life to perfecting my Soviet character.” The official said, “You’re black.””

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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