

A RUSSIAN EXPERIENCE – MOSCOW AS A TRAVELLER

ANTONIA HOOGEWERF*

Having seen many of the main Tourist sights in Moscow as recounted in the last article, I now moved on to a different phase of my time in this great city. After this evening our group will be splitting up so twelve of us decide to have dinner together at the historic Kafe Pushkin. The Kafe is set in a lovely old mansion and although Alexander Pushkin never lived in the house, he often frequented the area and met and married his wife here. Pushkin means “*Cannon*” in Russian – quite onomatopoeic! – and he is regarded as the Russian equivalent to Shakespeare (co-incidentally a name also meaning a weapon). He was the darling of Moscow, then when quite young, his brother-in-law tried to seduce his wife so he challenged the offender to a duel and to everyone’s horror he was shot dead, at just 37 years old.

It is a beautiful restaurant on many floors, the rooms lined with light oak panels and soft lighting and the food excellent. I have a seafood platter with crab, scallops, prawns and squid – quite delicious. Around 10pm my friend Sergei joins us and everyone plies him with questions about Putin and modern day Russia which he answers with aplomb. I was a little worried but he takes it all in his stride and of course as a film director he is used to addressing groups of people, he is cool and they all like him.

Fond farewells to my fellow travellers then Sergei and I wander back, stopping at little wine bars and coffee

houses and talking all the way. We go to the Shisha bar and smoke and suddenly it is 3h30am – another typical Russian evening!

Next day I call some of my contacts. Natasha Perova is a publisher and friend of one of my best friends in Paris. We agree to meet for lunch the following day. I try to get hold of Yevgeny Yevtushenko but he is out of town and anyway must be quite elderly by now – but it would be fun to meet him as I always loved his poetry and will never forget his vivacious “*Precocious Autobiography*” written when he was in his twenties.

I wander round Red Square and lunch in the pretty Kafe Bosco. Later I go shopping but the stores are all very expensive and stock mostly Western goods I can get at home, probably less pricey too. The city gives the impression of being quite prosperous which I am not sure is the case in the rest of Russia, the people living here have to be comparatively well off. The West is still much looked to for clothes, music, fashion, ideas about modernity. I have supper at “*Les Artistes*” then go back to see Red Square by night, brilliantly lit up and with flowers and fountains playing everywhere.

Natasha is charming and we meet outside the Bolshoi Theatre – I spot her at once from afar, it cannot be anyone else, a bundle of books under her arm. She is short, with a very round Russian face and bright intelligent brown eyes. She tells me she was born right here in the centre of Moscow and grew up around the Theatres, going to the Bolshoi several times a week – she mourns the changes since the “*Restoration*”, the original ivory, marble, and the beautiful wood has all been replaced with cheap plastic apparently, but although I have not been inside, to me it is still impressive.

We walk through the square and end up at the comfortable Kafe Vogue where we have an excellent lunch,

* The writer is British born and bred but has spent much of her adult life in France, the Loire Valley, the Deep South. She has now been living in Paris since 1999. Her passion is travelling, exploring the world and its people and experiencing their various and diverse cultures. For the last 17 years she has spent the winters travelling widely in India, a country she loves, always coming back to rest in Kolkata. These articles are random extracts from the travel notebooks she wrote to record her experiences around the world.

The author may be contacted at : antoniahoogewerf@hotmail.com

discussing many things. She is very outspoken, like Sergei and Misha and Anastasia and all the Russians I have met to really talk to. Apparently Yevtushenko is a monster despite his inspiring poetry and I should not try to see him! We talk about the Good and Evil inside all of us, in some the contrasts greater than in others. Is it necessary to admire the artist in order to appreciate his work? On balance I think not – even if Wagner, Mozart, Yevtushenko could be cruel, wicked and even evil, to me the fact that they could use their Art so sublimely declares them capable of the highest and noblest thoughts and emotions and this stands alone.

One evening I decide to visit Gorky Park – how can one not? I will be meeting Sergei later but it is just 7pm and still sunny and hot although a few brooding clouds loom in the distance. There is a grand colonnaded Entrance Gate, and lots of security. I suddenly remember it is Marine Day – a day when all the Marines are allowed to go crazy and do whatever they like to the local populus. In Yeltsin's time they used to go mad, roaming the city frightening and attacking people, swimming naked in the fountains and naturally drinking much Vodka, but Putin put a stop to those excesses and it is calmer today. But many of them are here in the Park of course! which is a little unnerving, as it is a favourite place to go and make merry with their friends, and indeed there are plenty of drunken sailors around.

I wander down the central alley, the Park is huge with massive flower beds, and fountains and although late it is

still full of people, but the clouds are looking definitely threatening now and I decide to go back. As I exit the park the rain starts and it is a real downpour. I dive into the nearest Metro not having any idea where I am going or where I am and of course all the signs are in Cyrillic. The escalator takes me down down into the depths and I take out my map hopelessly. In front of me is a young couple and I ask them for the Bolshoi – a good landmark! They are adorable and immediately tell me how to get there – it means changing lines and they look at each other. It is clearly out of their way but they are so kind and helpful they decide to take me. I had been told if lost to ask young people as they will probably speak English and so it was. I have to change lines twice! On the way we are somehow joined by another young man, a stranger to us all, and between them they decide he will take me the rest of the way. They are all so friendly, so sweet and concerned. His name is Leo, he is quite timid but does speak a little English, and again I am taking him right off his route home but he says no matter! he is not in a hurry. We manage to chat a little in his faltering English. I wonder if it is still raining and he says Moscow is big, it is always raining somewhere! Good as his word he takes me up to the correct exit. Holding open the door he says goodbye shyly, refusing the cup of coffee I offer him. Indeed it is still raining, pouring buckets now and luckily I have brought an umbrella with me although I am quickly soaked to the skin crossing Theatre Square to get back to the hotel.

The days pass happily – I have been to plenty of galleries and museums, and now I just want to walk the streets and talk to people, which I do. I meet Sergei again several times and spend some lovely Moscow evenings with him and other friends. I read the Moscow Times and am amazed by how openly they report many seemingly anti-Putin stories.

Moscow is a colourful vibrant city, full of busy people, music in the streets, flowers everywhere, many cafes, great street-life – much more modern and gay than I had imagined. The Moscovites are not very forthcoming until the ice is broken and then they can be the friendliest and most charming of people.



Bolshoi Theatre

Here is an example.

One evening I am sitting having my last Shisha on the terrace after my friends have gone to bed – it is 1am and still warm and the Kafe is busy, full of people who look at me, recognizing a stranger, but do not smile and some even appear quite hostile. Suddenly a man approaches me with a huge grin on his face, arms outstretched, a big bearded bear of a man, advancing fast with little dancing steps – he is looking so pleased, so happy to see me, saying something unintelligible of course. He grabs me by the shoulders and then falls on me, in a big embrace, looking into my eyes and then ... bewildered I throw a quizzical glance at the waiters thinking maybe he is drunk? But no, all at once he realises that I am not whoever he thought I was and is overcome with embarrassment, “*Izvinite! Izvinite!*”

The man backs away from me apologising extravagantly, I am sure if I could see in the dark he would be blushing and all of a sudden the whole restaurant is laughing. The waiters are falling about, the girls giggle and wave at me in gales of laughter, the men look over and

smile broadly, the man telling them over and over who he thought I was. I am smiling and laughing too and suddenly hey! they are all my friends, now they can talk to me, the ice is broken. He makes it last a long time, he cannot get over the joke and when I finally leave about an hour later, he is still telling the story, leaning over the flowers on the railing and everybody smiles and waves me goodbye.

This is what makes a Russian a Russian – temperamentally they are quite different from other nationalities – the highs and lows, the intense mood swings, the aggression, the charm, the moroseness, the gaiety ... and I loved it all.

Russia is a great experience – it is always good to go and see for oneself without making prior judgements, not relying on what one reads or hears. After taking in the sights as a Tourist this is what Travelling is all about, getting to the heart of the people. And the Russia I saw in these few days was something very different from the one I had imagined and it was wonderful to discover that the Romance and magic is still there despite everything. I look forward to returning one day! □