

The True Inside Story

Thousands of miles away from the only world I have ever known is where my plane landed in St. Petersburg, Russia is a city of over six million people with a beautiful culture waiting to be discovered. As my plane touched down in Pulkovo Airport in the outskirts of the city, I gazed at the land I would call home for the next few months. Rolling hills turned quickly into a dense industrial-looking city divided by rivers and canals, all teeming with life. After making it through customs, I quickly located my driver who was holding up a sign with my name, to take me to my new Russian family.

As the van made its way to the innermost heart of the city, I was completely speechless. I had traveled to London six years prior, but nothing prepared me for the sight that lay before my jetlagged eyes that day. A sheer overwhelming feeling of unease washed over me at the realization of being a single entity among the masses of St. Petersburg. The Cyrillic lettering even befuddled my mind – of course I had studied the Russian language at my university back home, but nothing can prepare someone for the initial plunge into a land where Latin alphabet does not exist. I chose to take this trip alone; I had to rely on my independent nature significantly during the initial weeks. No other students from my university were interested in studying in Russia; I did not even come in a group from the United States – and I soon realized the magnitude of the endeavor that lay before me.

The van crossed over the Neva River to the island that contained my new home – Petrogradskaya Storona. I had never been in a city divided by rivers and canals; it was a strange sight to me. I had never been in a city such as this at all. As we drove up to the apartment building where my new family lived on the sixth floor, I was barely breathing. I can only imagine what my expression must have been when my host-sister Kseniya opened the door to their modest flat.

My first week was a very big transition. I started classes at St. Petersburg State University. I was learning slowly how the toilets worked and where to shop for food. Within the first few days I quickly realized that hardly anyone on my island spoke English. The Russian people appeared very intimidating which deterred me from testing my broken Russian language skills at first. This left me to discover everything on my own. On the first day of class, my host-mother showed me how to take the bus to St. Petersburg State University. It seemed simple enough; the bus stop was right in front of my apartment building and dropped me off a block from the university. However, she did not speak any English and failed to inform me which bus to use to return home. It ended up as a two hour adventure for me since I did not recognize the area enough when I left my flat, and therefore did not notice when the bus had passed it. I did find my way home eventually, tired but amused.

The classes at the university were taught by excellent instructors who scarcely spoke English, which was perfect. At first this was a scary notion, but then I realized how much more I would be learning from this situation. They were always prepared for the lessons and were very patient with the students who were newer to the language. My grammar

instructor even informed me of a decent gym that I could join during my stay in St. Petersburg, and would toss hints our way as to suitable bars in the inner city.

At the university I met other international students from all around the world. In my class there were students from France, Switzerland, Korea, Japan, Sweden, and a few from the United States. I quickly bonded with three other girls – Sarah from France, Stina from Sweden, and Carolyn from Switzerland. They, as well, had each come to Russia alone. Sarah lived on my island, Carolyn lived in the student dorms on Vasilevsky Ostrov, and Stina lived on the mainland near Nevsky Prospect. Since I had only been familiar with the bus system through the first week, Sarah introduced me to the famed Russian Metro system. It was convenient for traveling almost anywhere in the city, and is the number one source of transportation to the six million citizens.

Within the first two weeks my intimidation level very slowly began to decrease. In May at this time of the year, it was still quite chilly and rainy most of the time. Not many citizens own cars, so everyone walks miles every day. This gave me a prime opportunity to observe the people of St. Petersburg. Mostly grim faces passed me – eyes straight ahead, hand grasping the bag that held their items, and feet moving them hurriedly forward through the raindrops. For such a volume of people, the streets were fairly quiet from lack of conversation. For me, coming from the southern region of the United States, this appeared to be rather rude and uninviting. However, the more I studied and interacted with the faces that passed me every day, I, too slowly grew into this demeanor. My mood was wonderful; I simply developed the facial expressions of the Russians!

One very beneficial item of recognition was my Russian student identification card that I received from the university. With this, I was able to be treated as a Russian student when entering historical and popular sites. Entering the Hermitage was free for Russian students, and entrance to just about anywhere else was discounted. This allowed me the freedom to come and go as I please. I often enjoyed taking my material from class down to the gardens at the Hermitage and sitting on the benches to study after having explored the different wings of the museum. As the weeks passed, I came to feel like a true citizen. It was as if I lived in the city, because I was treated as such. I did not feel in any respect like a tourist; I did not have to follow a schedule or a tour guide. As the weather got warmer, my friends and I often pointed out the tourists and complained about how slow they would walk.

I had made many friends at the university, but mainly the three girls and I took it upon ourselves to explore. The groups of students that were there from Canada and the United States had pre-arranged excursions with a guide that they participated in almost every other day. Since I came alone, I did not have this opportunity. In hindsight, I am actually glad that I did not have set excursions or a group to be with. Being alone, I was able to assimilate as much into their culture and ways of life as I could in the time I had. The girls and I would go to Russian underground bars – our favorite was called the “Cynic,” while the other Americans and Canadians would only frequent the local bar designed for foreigners.

An experience we had at the Cynic was one of the ground-breaking moments with my Russian language skills. It was a few weeks into my trip, and we had all walked around the city for a few hours before deciding to make a stop at the Cynic. We went into a back corner where there was a large global map above a long wooden table. We chatted in the Russian that we knew mixed with some English, which caught the ear of the people at the table next to us. The table of six Russians all pulled up the benches and began conversing with us. Perhaps it was because I was comfortable with the bar setting, or because I was surrounded by my friends, but for whatever reason all notions of apprehension about speaking in Russian with Russians vanished. We talked about many things, and the words or phrases I did not understand they would act out. The Russians were all very friendly and open - overall it was a wonderful experience which really boosted my confidence.

My Polish bloodlines also aided me greatly during my stay in St Petersburg. I never realized how Eastern European my features were until I was submerged in the Russian culture. The bar manager at the Cynic one night was attempting to guess what country each one of us was from. He went around the table, but skipped over me and continued on. After he was finished, we asked him why I was skipped. He replied that he did not need to guess, because I was obviously a Russian. To me, to be assumed that I was Russian in a culture that I was infatuated with was very flattering. I met many of my Russian friends this way – they assumed I was Russian and would ask questions or directions.

I also met my best friend in a similar fashion. Around the end of my second week after arriving, the girls and I decided one Friday that we would take the boat to Peterhof and then ride the train back at the end of the day. Our experiences at Peterhof were full of mosquitoes, beautiful weather, exploring, and a homemade picnic. By the end of the day we were all very tired as we waited for the train to arrive. Being outside of the city was also a first for me. At the train station were peasants with large sacks of produce they had brought for market, as well as soldiers and other country inhabitants. Once the old Soviet train arrived at the station we began boarding with all the others; my friends found seats on the hard wooden benches, but I got shoved to the back of the car where it was standing room only. It was about a forty-five minute ride back to the city, and with the rhythm of the train I began to doze off. The train approached the next station and lurched to a halt, knocking me off balance and into the Russian Marine Officer standing next to me. My friends saw this and their eyes grew wide, as I am sure mine did as well. I did not know what to say or expect; I thought I would be in trouble. However, the young officer looked at me and started grinning and shaking his head. He was the first Russian stranger to smile at me, which sent me into a large grin as well. I apologized quickly, and to my surprise he replied in very broken English. I introduced him to the other girls, and we became fast friends. He told me later that he had seen us on the platform waiting for the train to arrive, and found us a strange bunch. He had assumed that I was a Russian traveling with hippies, because Sarah and the other girls were sitting on the ground while I stood and looked on. We all found this quite an amusing story. In the following weeks, Sergei showed us much of the Russian culture that we would not have uncovered alone.

The most memorable experience of living in St Petersburg occurred a few weeks before my departure. It was the end of June, and the cadets from the Military Academy were

graduating. Sergei, a Captain in the Marines, was taking part in the ceremony and invited Sarah and I to attend. He had a small part in the ceremony, and left us in the crowd for only a half hour or so. When he returned, he explained everything to us that was going on. It was far different than any graduation I had ever seen. There were many interlaced Russian customs in almost every element of the ceremony. It was very hard to see what was happening because of the number of people in attendance, so he took us into the Army building right behind us and told us not to speak until we passed the guards. Once we got to the third floor of the old building, we realized what he was trying to show us. The entire third floor was one big window overlooking the ceremony. From that location he explained the different traditions taking place between the officers and the newly-graduated cadets, as well as the familial traditions we were witnessing. He pointed out the generals and the large religious figure dressed in brightly colored robes. After the ceremony, he even found two cadets and brought them to us and had us conduct one of the traditional customs while wearing his officer's hat, since that particular custom was reserved for ranking officers only.

Sergei, my host family, and my other Russian friends opened the door for me into the deeper roots of the Russian culture. Although during my first few weeks in St. Petersburg I felt as if I was being swallowed up in the enormous city, I spent the remainder of my time finding my own way through a country and culture that had very little in common with the world I was familiar with. During my stay in Russia, I quickly learned to shut out the preconceived notions of the Russian culture and to learn the reality of their lives. To call this an eye-opening experience would not do it justice. I felt almost offended when I would meet tourists from various English-speaking countries, who knew nothing of the Russian language or culture, and hear them exclaim how westernized St. Petersburg was. Their stay in the city did not usually exceed ten days and they resided in a hotel room on the mainland. They did not realize that during the summer, the citizens of St. Petersburg do not have hot water, or that the toilets do not function like they are used to. Water must be boiled for at least seven minutes before utilizing it. They were not seeing the same world that I saw. I was living it, while they were visiting it. The different ways in which women are treated, the mentalities of the citizens, the hidden culture amongst near-poverty living conditions; all of these are just a few assorted incidents that I encountered every minute of the day.

The experiences and emotions that I encountered while living and studying in St. Petersburg are something that has had a permanent effect on the person I have become. My instructors at St. Petersburg State University helped me to bring the Russian language from the written page and to life. Having taken away so much from this experience, I know I will return to Russia to visit my friends and share their culture with my family and others. I do not wish for them or anyone to view the Russians as the tourists had; rather, I hope to show them the true story of the lives of the Russian people as I know it. Thank you, AMBergh for creating this opportunity for me.

Diana Summers