

Introduction

In the summer, I embarked on a six-week journey of learning and discovery in Moscow. From July 11 to August 19, I studied intensive Russian at Moscow State University. Looking in retrospect, I found that I had not only improved my knowledge of Russian, but also discovered a society that is both similar to and different from America. In this essay, I share with the reader my reason for studying Russian and my first hand account of daily life in Moscow.

Why Russian Language?

I have been interested in Russia and the former Soviet Union for a long time. I was born in Vietnam during a time of war, and at the age of four I immigrated to the United States with my family as political refugees. Growing up, I often heard conversations from my parents about the Vietnam War, and this led me to develop an interest in the history of the war. Through readings I learned about the Soviet Union and its support of North Vietnam, as well as its role in creating a bipolar world during the Cold War era. I carried this interest with me when I entered university, studying international affairs.

I graduated from university over a decade ago, but my interest in the Soviet Union continues. Prior to my six-week language training in Moscow, I had been studying Russian for three semesters at a local community college in my home city of San Diego, California. I have been learning Russian because my goal is to do research on the relationship between the Soviet Union and North Vietnam during the Cold War. I want to be able to pursue the research using original Russian sources, rather than rely on literature written from the West

Learning Russian in Moscow

What an experience I had studying in Moscow for six weeks. My Russian improved dramatically. I believe that my rapid advancement in Russian was due to the one-on-one language training in the classroom combined with my homestay. Although I had previously taken three semesters of Russian in the U.S., I was not confident with my speaking abilities. Most of the language instruction was geared towards grammar. But with the six-week program at Moscow State University, I was able to focus on developing conversational skills.

To get the maximum exposure to Russian language, I opted to do a homestay program. Upon my arrival in Moscow, I met the host family – an elderly Russian woman named Emma. At first, I tried to speak Russian with her, but failed because of my lack of conversational skills. Thereafter, we ended up speaking mostly in English. During the first two weeks, I remember feeling

disappointed and discouraged at not being able to converse in Russian with her. But as the weeks progressed, I noticed that my Russian was improving in the classroom. Then one evening, I began conversing with Emma in Russian. It wasn't long before our conversations were conducted entirely in Russian. What a great feeling that was, to finally overcome this difficult hurdle.

Russian Society

The added advantage of staying with a host family, besides greater language exposure, is being able to observe Russian life firsthand. Through interacting with Emma on a daily basis for six weeks, I learned many things about Russian people. She shared with me her thoughts about Russian society, about the modernization of Russia, and about life in general. I discovered that some of her viewpoints were very similar to mine, while others were entirely opposite. For example, while watching television in the family room one evening, she commented that she disliked how long television commercials are in Russia. I agreed, and we laughed. But she also had more serious comments. She hated how much Russia has changed, allowing some people to become very wealthy while letting others live in extreme poverty.

Disparity in income was one of the first things I noticed in Moscow. On occasion, I would see very expensive cars parked on the roads. But only a short distance away, I would see people living in poverty. Although wealth and poverty exist side by side in America as well, it is more noticeable in Moscow. What is most striking to me is the cost of living in Moscow. Although the average household income in Russia is much less than in America, the costs of food and merchandise in both countries are about the same.

One of the great things I learned about Russia is that there is government-sponsored medical coverage and no university tuition. In America, many people do not have access to health coverage or higher education. Both countries, however, share in common a diverse population. In Moscow, I saw many faces that represent the entire globe. In the subways and on the streets, I encountered people of every possible ethnic background. Because of the work opportunities in Moscow, many people from other former Soviet republics arrive on a daily basis, helping to create a melting pot similar to America's.

With the vast territory of Russia and her untapped resources, I predict that Russia will have a promising future. I hope to return to Russia in the future to continue my language training.

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