

A Trip of a Lifetime

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When Doctor Kats asked me to accompany him on his yearly trip to Russia with his students, I felt it impossible to refuse. Who in their right mind would pass up on such an opportunity? I had been traveling with my family since I was very young, getting a chance that other Americans my age can only dream about. I had been to Egypt, China, France, England, Ireland, and Norway - just to name a few. I had seen many things and places that my peers only read about in their history classes. Besides having some bragging rights, I had a more important, less tangible experience: exposure to other cultures.

With such a rich background of travel, I felt it appropriate to continue my exploration of the world – that, and I would get to visit two countries my parents hadn't been to. Despite missing a few more days of school than I had anticipated (and the prospect of having to work very, *very* hard to catch up), I accepted Dr. Kat's offer. As everyone kept telling me, and as I understood well beforehand, this was a chance of a lifetime – one that might never come again. It was well worth any hardships I would have to endure.

Little did I know that this chance *wouldn't* come again. At least, not the trip I had experienced. Dr. Kats had announced to us that this would be his last trip to Russia, and I'm very happy that I went along. Yet, the days leading up to the trip, I wasn't so sure. As Spring Break loomed over the horizon, I didn't know what to expect. I had read plenty of Russian literature and had a fair knowledge of Russian cultural history. I also had heard my fair share of horror stories on Russia from a friend who had traveled there last year. This, combined with *plenty* of words of caution from Dr. Kats painted a picture of a terrifying, corrupt country that had some presentiment against Americans. What I encountered in my trip followed these expectations only slightly.

I saw little evidence of corruption with my eyes, but Russia proved to be harrowing.

The typical St. Petersburgian I met was an ever-scowling person of few words (the only time I saw a Russian smile was when they had a bottle of vodka in their hands, and I'm not kidding). When they did speak to me, it usually was in a semi-aggressive tone in a language I didn't speak a word of. As a result, I was forced to cling to the side of a Russian-speaking member of our group. I was so helpless in Russia, I needed help to order a bottle of water, to the mixed annoyance and amusement of a few in our group! Few Russians spoke English well, with the best they could manage being broken sentences; even fewer English-speaking Russians were polite to us – even the Russians in our group. The former is to be expected – this isn't New York or London, after all. What else would you be expecting in a foreign country that doesn't speak English as a primary language?

Yet the latter came as quite a surprise to me. I had been warned of growing resentment against Americans, but I wasn't expecting it as widespread as it was. Actually, the Russians didn't seem too friendly to everyone who wasn't Russian, not just Americans. I

don't mean to attack or insult the Russian people with this statement – my time in Russia was relatively brief, and I can't make generalizations like this without spending more time there. Still, my experience in Russia wasn't entirely negative – and I did have a lot of fun there. While in Russia, I saw a lot of beautiful palaces, many masterful pieces of art in the Hermitage (which everyone should visit at least once in their lifetime - the collection of art in the Hermitage rivals the Louvre in Paris), and I got to go and visit the school where Alexander Pushkin himself, the greatest poet in Russian history, went. Of all the palaces I saw, the Yuspov Palace and the Hermitage were my absolute favorites. They just simply stood out from all the other palaces. If I saw another gilded *anything* in the other palaces, I was about to scream.

I also had a bit of a culture shock while in Russia – a bigger one than I was expecting for a European country. I learned quickly that the Russians are sticklers for rules, and you better follow them. A few people in our group thought they could get away with a picture or two in a crowded area where pictures were forbidden. Immediately, a woman looking to be in her late forties came screaming the Russian equivalent of “no!” from the other side of the room. We got the message.

There was a few other more novel, less aggressive cultural lessons I learned. For example, at a few museums, we were required to wear “special” slippers over our shoes so that we didn't get the floor dirty. We also were required to pay the equivalent of 4 dollars in Russian currency for permits to take pictures at the museums. At first, I didn't buy these permits, not thinking they were worth the money. After seeing a few of the palaces and museums we went to, I really regretted not making the purchase. There was just so much that we saw that were so amazing I can't really describe in words (and that's pretty bad, considering I'm a writing major). One of the favorite things I couldn't take a picture of at these museums was the Great Gottorp Globe, the so-called (and one of the many, for the Russian tour guides like calling various things in Russia this) “8th Wonder of the World.” It is a massive, full-colored globe about a meter or so in diameter, with all the countries, and lines of longitude and latitude painstakingly accurately drawn on there. Inside, however, is what makes the globe special. There's a table that seats less than a dozen inside all of the clockwork and gears that allow the globe to rotate. Painted on the interior walls is an accurate painting of the signs of the zodiac, corresponding to what month they appear. Look it up and see it for yourself. My words doesn't do the globe justice.

One thing that was nice about going with Dr. Kat's group was that it wasn't structured like a normal tour. We had a lot of freedom in what we could do. Tours tended to take up only a small fraction of the day, and we had the rest of the time to ourselves. Dr. Kats encouraged us to go and explore St. Petersburg on our own. For the first few days of the trip, I was really nervous to go do this, but after going with a few friends, I became a bit more adventurous. And it really was quite an adventure. We got lost on the St. Petersburg metro; we went to a Russian supermarket (which is a tale in itself!), where I got culturally shocked when you had to buy your bags along with your groceries; we ventured down Nevsky Prospect and tried a few restaurants and shopped for art... We did so much in St. Petersburg that I could write another five pages or more about it.

Yet, truth be told, Russia wasn't my favorite part of the trip. After we went to Russia, we went by night train to Estonia, which I ended up liking a lot. Not many people have heard about Estonia save having to learn it in geography class – and I was one of those people, before I went there. When I told my friends about my trip and mentioned Estonia, they asked, “What is there to do in Estonia? Why would you want to go there?” It turns out that Estonia's capital, Tallinn, is a quaint little city, sporting a mere 400,000 people, or a third of the country's population. The people there, in contrast to many of the Russians, were nine times out of ten, fluent English speakers and very friendly to Americans and tourists in general. Everyone felt very welcome in Estonia, which was a nice change compared to Russia. Tallinn also supports a budding medieval town. It's the only place in the world that I've been to that you can go down the street from your hotel and eat in a as near-as-authentic medieval tavern that you can find – complete with boar, ale, and servants and entertainment wearing 14th century attire. To make a long story short, being a sucker for all things medieval, I absolutely adored Tallinn.

In summary, my trip to Russia was indeed a trip of a lifetime. It was well-worth all the trials and tribulations I had to put up with – both while there and when I got back- and I look forward to going back there this summer – this time, with my family. Dr. Kats' program was worth the hype that he kept giving us and I sincerely regret that he is stopping his student trips to Russia. And I know from talking with my peers that many feel the same way as well.

Thank you, Dr. Kats, for giving me, and so many others, such an opportunity.