

The six-week mark

I can't believe it! In just two days I will have spent a half a semester studying abroad. I have experienced so much and there's no way to wrap my head around it. Each day is an adventure with its own triumphs and trials. But here I'll try to briefly summarize and share a few thoughts about life as an American student in Moscow, Russia.

This is my first time in Europe, and my first adult experience outside of the States. I thought about this a lot during the nine-plus hour flight from Washington DC to Moscow. Some of the questions I asked myself were: Will the language be an issue? How am I going to get around? Are Russians nice? Will I be okay? I find that by this point I'm still asking myself some of these questions, but at least by now I have some idea.

By far, my biggest concern involved the language barrier. Although language improvement was (and still is) my main goal, I was still nervous about having to use Russian the majority of the time and doubted my ability to do it. The reality has been different. Thanks in part to a tendency to talk a lot, my Russian oral skills have improved considerably. I enjoy the challenge of using Russian on a daily basis and even try to practice it with my American friends.

But it wasn't always easy. I remember the first day when I tried to purchase minutes for my cell phone. I remember how discouraging it was to hear the words "Ya ne Ponimaiu" (I don't understand) from an angry the sales clerk, how he angrily turned away from me, and the frustration that followed on behalf of both parties. I also remember the difficulty in trying to purchase internet and doing things as simple as buying a book, asking for water (oh the accusative case!) or purchasing a metro card. But I'm thankful for the trouble because it has only encouraged me to be more diligent in my study of the language. It amazes me how only six weeks later; I have practically no fear of going about the city and functioning in Russian. Sometimes, I realize that I've even begun to think in Russian!

Just a week ago, I realized that I could understand all of my professors when they spoke. I don't know if I've had the enlightening moment yet, the moment where everything is supposed to "click," but I'm extremely happy that I'm constantly making progress.

One of the most mind boggling parts of life in Moscow for me is the Metro. It's like survivor from the moment you approach the entrance until a few seconds after you exit. People push and shove you out of the way, they don't smile at strangers, and everybody's focused on what they have to do. I remember the first week I fell while running past the escalator. At first I was really embarrassed but then realized that there was nothing to be ashamed of. No one noticed. At the beginning I was amazed at the speed at which people move- both the very old and very young zoomed pass me across the platform and into the train. Even now, sometimes I imagine that I can keep up. I like to pretend.

One of my favorite parts of the day is riding the escalator. It's always interesting to watch the people who are moving in the opposite direction. I get to see how people really look, the way they dress (very fancy) the expressions on their faces (serious, and always with a purpose), and how they look at each other (with a hidden interest, at least I think). Sometimes they look back at me. Sometimes I feel like we are all on display, which can be awkward, but it's always an interesting part of my day.

As far as the Russians I have met on a personal level, I realize that they are just like any other people. Some are nice, some are not, some are very serious, some less so, and some are just plain weird! But first impressions are almost always deceiving- most can be very friendly. For example, I remember when I first met my host mom. At first, I was afraid that I the cultural shock would be too much for me but thankfully, I decided to stay with a host family. Staying with a host family is wonderful- and not just because of the home cooked meals. It's a rewarding cultural experience.

Am I ok? No. I'm actually much better than ok. I'm great. I'm very pleased with all of the progress I've made in my language development, my listening skills, and all of the places I've been to (especially the some of the picturesque Cathedrals, gorgeous museums, and the very impressive Red Square.) The first time I saw St. Basil's Cathedral was on a cold, snowy winter night. It was simply beautiful. I know there's more to come and I hope that the second half of my trip is just as or even more rewarding.