

Vladimir Travelogue

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Contents

Arrival in Vladimir	1
Trip to Moscow	3
Kazan and St. Petersburg	4
Alexandrov and Moscow	6
Exploring Vladimir and back to St. Petersburg	7

Arrival in Vladimir

So this is my first group email from Russia at the end of my first week of classes. We got here last Thursday after we had our orientation in Washington. Everything is going pretty well here. It's really tiring to try to function all day long in a language that you barely know, but I'm starting to get the hang of at least the listening part.

It's probably about 150 miles from Moscow to Vladimir (it's a 2 ½ hour train ride), but it took us almost six hours to drive because of the Moscow rush hour traffic and crazy Russian roads. Then after 24 hours of travel we were put straight into our host families. It was rough. My family is pretty cool, though. I'm living with two grandparents who started hosting Americans last summer, and their daughter and granddaughter live next door.

Vladimir is a pretty cool place. The weather is beautiful here – it's cold but always bright, sunny, still, and covered in white. And the cold doesn't really matter either, because the Russians are obsessed with warmth. The buildings are all almost eighty degrees inside, and they make hot soup, hot tea, and hot chocolate all the time. They heat things so much that we actually have to keep the windows open at the school in the Russian winter to keep it at a comfortable temperature. Also, you absolutely must wear a hat or gloves, and you can't go outside with wet hair. I mean that literally. Russian folklore states that this is absolutely the worst thing you can do. I always thought that the stories about how upset Russians get over this were exaggerated, but they're not. Some host families will keep kids inside for hours after they shower so that there's no chance that their hair will be wet when they go outside again.

The city is small, between 300,000 and 350,000 people, and compact. It's like a thousand years old and there are still some old cathedrals and stuff here. To get into the main street that has all of the most important buildings, I take the bus past the old medieval gate towers, which are now water towers, and the old city wall, which is now a sledding hill for the local kids. I live in an apartment complex about ten minutes outside of the old city. It's like a quad with all the doors on the inside away from the streets and a skating rink for the kids in the middle. I've managed to

get lost already here – I took the wrong trolley and spent like half an hour wandering around the city until I saw the cathedrals in the distance and headed for them. I felt like a hero, but since I'm in class with only two other students, it was kind of awkward to show up forty minutes late. But at least it was a good story.

Russians are pretty cool so far. It's kind of refreshing to be in such an insular place. When I studied in Latin America, Americana was everywhere, and everyone cared about America. But Russia was the ruler of half the world until the nineties, and everyone around them learned Russian and wanted to go to Russia. They don't seem to have lost that confidence in themselves.

My host family, who have had three Americans including me live with them, have asked things like "Is the White House really white?", "Do you have ketchup there?", and "What religion are Americans?" Almost no one speaks foreign languages; it reminds me of home. Moscow is probably different, but we're away from the big city here.

We're having class four days a week, with a trip every Friday, two three-day trips to Moscow and Petersburg, and a ten-day vacation in Sochi, a resort on the Black Sea, at the end of the semester. We've also been assigned Russian friends with whom we're supposed to meet at least once a week. They're volunteers, and we met them in a group and hung out to see who we got along with. We do things like go to movies, go out to bars and restaurants, go skating, etc. It's a way to practice Russian and to meet Russian people by meeting the tutors' friends. I'm with a girl named Tanya who speaks scary good but pretty funny English. Russian higher education focuses on literature, so she talks like an educated Victorian with a Russian accent. She also speaks a little Spanish. She's very kontaktnaya, which means easy to talk to or approachable.

There are fourteen Americans in the program, and we're divided into four groups for classes. We take six classes on a rotating schedule throughout the week. The teachers are really good, so it's not too bad even though we're in Russian language classes six hours a day. The kids are all cool, so it should be a good time.

More to come, especially after we go to Moscow in a week or two, or if something suitably awesome happens. PS - everyone should try Georgian food, its good.

Trip to Moscow

So this weekend we all went to Moscow as our first out-of-city trip. To do this, we needed our passports, migration cards, and student IDs, which we always have to have on us. But we were leaving the limits of our registered city, so we also had to carry our official registration papers, which have like a 4,000-dollar fine if you lose them. TIR – This Is Russia. Anyway, we took the train in Friday morning and went to our hotel/dorm. Then we went to the Kremlin to gaze upon the preserved body of one Vladimir Ilyich Lenin in the state mausoleum. You only get a little glimpse of him because you can't stop moving, and it's such a solemn and formal thing here that you can't even put your hands in your coat pockets or the guards will say something. No, I didn't do that; we were warned. It was strange – it just looks like a little short guy sleeping, but it's the body of the man who probably did more than anyone to shape the way the world would be in the twentieth century. We also got to see two museums, but the most impressive thing was the Kremlin armory. It has all of the state treasures of Russia and the Tsars, and some of them are quite impressive. There are books with emeralds the size of baseballs in the covers. And there are about ten Faberge eggs, which are impossible to describe. One had a working train set inside made out of gold.

Moscow itself is really impressive, especially since we live in Vladimir. Moscow is like being in New York or Chicago or London; it's like every other big city in the world, full of English language, rich, stylish people, and really good foreign restaurants. We saw a thousand Chinese and Japanese restaurants and pigged out in them, because it's hard to get good foreign food in Vladimir. And the people understand us, which is awesome. In Vladimir half of the people to whom we talk have probably never met a foreigner and can't understand our accents because they've never heard anyone but real Russians speak.

We found ourselves acting differently, because, in the rest of Russia, you can't speak loudly enough for others to hear you when in public. You also can't really gesture a lot or be active, meaning you can't act like an American does in public. But Moscow seems so familiar that the rules just seem different. It was fun to visit, and I want to go again on my own, but I don't feel like I'd learn much Russian there.

Also, they have a really good metro. It's the best public transportation system that I've ever seen – way better than London's. It's really fast, really simple, really clean, and it goes everywhere. It's also quite literally a football-field length underground because it was also intended to be a massive system of bomb shelters. It feels like you're on the escalator going down for about five minutes.

That's about all I can think of to highlight the trip, but I'll leave you all with this thought. This weekend is Men's Day, because in Russia there is a Women's Day and a Men's Day, not just Valentine's Day. And both are for all members of the opposite sex, not just sweethearts. So, on Friday, treat men right. Buy them a steak or something (flowers are lame).

Kazan and St. Petersburg

For the holiday weekend of Women's Day, we had a four-day break, so some friends and I decided to go traveling on our own. The first place to which we went was Kazan, which is 12 hours to the east and the capital of Tatarstan (part of Russia). I'd heard that Kazan was worth seeing – recently the Tatars have decided to remake the city as a tourist destination, because it's a pretty unique area, seeing as it's a Mongolian, Muslim nation in European Russia.

I heard right – it seems like the whole downtown is brand new, with new restaurants, a new metro, new clubs, closed-off streets for pedestrians only, and a brand new Mosque in the city Kremlin (since they couldn't have one there before). The metro is decorated with all sorts of Persian arches and such, with murals showing Arabian scenes and horse archers and so on. It's like being in Persia or something. The mosque is also awesome. It's huge and on a hill, so you can see it from everywhere, and it's white with blue domes and minarets. The windows are green, and at night they're lit from the inside, while spotlights shine on the outside of the building. It's also weird to see a huge mosque surrounded by snow banks. We saw a World War II museum and some cathedrals, too. Plus, we did heroic things, like eat an entire eel laid out on a plate, find a restaurant that serves Guinness in liter mugs, and climb the Kremlin wall (not allowed) to get sweet pictures.

In Nizhni (Lower) Novgorod, we also saw the Kremlin and some museums, plus we walked around the old part of the city. It's full of parks and sweet shops and lots of funny statues, like one of a monkey in a jacket on the side of a building. We also found a Mexican restaurant across from the Kremlin that actually served spicy food, which is a miracle and will not happen again here, because 1) Russians don't know what the heck a Mexican is, and 2) pepper is usually too spicy for Russians, let alone salsa.

Within about four days of us getting back to Vladimir, the whole program went on a trip to St. Petersburg. It took twelve hours to get there, which was not fun, but the city is incredible. It's a gorgeous city with canals and palaces, and everything looks really European. It was like being in a different country.

The palaces are the most impressive, especially Peterhof. Peterhof is the old imperial palace complex, right on a little bay in the Gulf of Finland. It's up on a hill, looking at the sea and surrounded by gardens, and it's just filled with room after room of luxury. What's even more amazing is that it, like almost everything else, was burned to ash in the Siege of Leningrad during World War II (The Great Patriotic War). The Russians rebuilt the whole city and the palaces the way they were, so props to them.

Another thing that I thought was really impressive was the ethnographic museum, built by the communists who loved to talk about different peoples and cultures of the world. It's a massive marble monstrosity with a gallery for pretty much every tribe and ethnic group to be found within the borders of the old Soviet Union. I didn't go to the Hermitage, because I'm going back in a month with some friends who couldn't make it this time.

Anyhow, I'm going back to my life here in Vladimir. It's strange to live in a foreign country for this long. When I first got here, everything was really new and exciting; then later it got dreary for a while when I missed things and wasn't quite adjusted. Recently, I've gotten really comfortable here, and coming back to Vladimir from trips feels like coming home. Traveling around here is like traveling around my own country. It's weird, and every once in a while I have this thought – "Wait a second, I'm in Russia - that's actually really strange." I didn't used to speak Russian, and I've been waiting to come here for a couple of years. Now being here is normal to me, and the experience is halfway over. It's hard to describe.

Also, it's spring here, and it's really nice. It's sunny and warm, and the air is crystal-clear. On my way to school, I look out the bus window and see about a half dozen cathedrals with gold domes rising above the city and the gates in the distance. It's surrounded by forests too, and there are trees everywhere in the city, so when it gets green, it's going to be gorgeous.

Alexandrov and Moscow

This past weekend we went on a group excursion to Alexandrov, an old town outside of Moscow that was the home of Ivan the Terrible (who in Russian is actually Ivan the Terrifying or Menacing, or Ivan the Strict). It was fairly interesting; they grabbed some of the kids and made them dress up and act out the old peasant process of selecting a husband. We also got to hear about Ivan's court, and how they would do things like not tell foreigners about the custom that each person must bring his own silverware, forcing foreign diplomats to eat with their hands. Also, apparently Ivan would like to take advantage of the fact that everyone would have to toast when he did. He would make the boyars drink until some of them died right there at the feast from alcohol poisoning.

Then Kate, Steve, Kendra, Alison and I took the *electricchka* (like a commuter train) in to Moscow. We stayed in a hostel, which was interesting since it was full of foreigners from Europe, North America, and even Australia. They were the first Westerners outside of our group to whom we've spoken in months. We spent that evening hanging out and talking to them. Also, we got some food that wasn't Russian, which was half of the point of going to Moscow. Mmm, food. The next day we split up. Kate and Alison had stuff to deliver, and Kendra and I tried to find the World War II Museum, which was almost impossible. Kendra was there last semester, but no Russian seems to have heard of it. We ended up finding the Napoleonic War Museum instead, which worked out. In the afternoon, we went to the outdoor market by Ismailovsky Park, which is huge and built to look like an old Russian fortress. We bargained in Russian, and came out fairly well, although it was probably that American-in-a-third-world-place bargaining, meaning we get quoted a ridiculous price, argue to what is for us a pretty cheap price, and the end price is still somewhere around two or three times more than it's worth. Everyone's happy, I guess. The metro station we took to get there was cool too, since the entire station is a memorial to partisans in World War II. The walls and columns have weapons hidden in trees and peasants with guns carved into them, and there's a massive statue of three partisans on the main floor.

On the way back, we missed our train because we bought a ticket for one kind of train, but it was printed on the form for another kind. This led us to look in the wrong side of the station. I found the train only by getting down onto the tracks, walking along and climbing over the wall to the other side. However, the others never found it, so I couldn't board. We waited five more hours for the next train and got home at 2 am.

For Easter, we had a huge family meal in the middle of the day. There were twelve of us, with the aunt, two cousins, and brother visiting along with their kids. We ate a lot of fish, toasted a lot, and drank mead, which I'd never had before. Then I played with the kids for a while (they're about 7) and managed to teach them to sort of play one of my computer games in the process (between flying Tanya around the ceiling). It was a pretty good holiday, all things considered. In two weeks the four of us go back to Petersburg, then four days after that we're spending a week at the resort in Sochi, and then basically home. Only 15 more days of class total.

Exploring Vladimir and back to St. Petersburg

Last Wednesday, our weekly excursion took us right across the street to Cathedral Square, the center of the old city. There they have the Assumption Cathedral and the Dmitrievskii Cathedral, built in the twelfth century when Vladimir became the capital of Russia (until the Mongols came). Since Ukraine and the first real capital, Kiev, are no longer a part of Russia, this means that, in all probability, these churches and the ones outside of the city by the old royal compound are probably the oldest in all of Russia. They're definitely the oldest that are not in ruins. It was very interesting, not only because the cathedrals are as beautiful as Russian orthodox cathedrals always are, but also because so much Russian history is connected with the cathedrals, which were built by the first Russian dynasty. There are relics there from old Russian heroes like Alexander Nevsky, for example, for any history buffs reading this. It really brought home how old Vladimir is. The old city gates that I walk by every day without thinking about it are from the same time, making them almost 900 years old.

Then, last weekend the four of us went to Petersburg again. It was great – we had three full days in the city, and it was much warmer than last time. We saw the Hermitage for five hours, but we probably saw only a fraction of it because it's like a maze inside. The Hermitage is the old Winter Palace built by Catherine the Great, and it's gargantuan. It's hard to imagine anyone living inside of such a huge building. Other than that, we saw three of the most important cathedrals in Petersburg: the Kazan Cathedral, huge and unique for its strange horseshoe shape; the Church of the Savior on Spilt Blood, built on the spot where Tsar Alexander the II was assassinated; and St Isaac's, next to the Winter Palace. The inside of St Isaac's may be the most beautiful manmade thing that I have ever seen. We also swung by the zoological museum, full of wildlife exhibits including a mammoth, because Russia is full of frozen mammoths. People find them constantly in Siberia. There was also a small live insect room, which had an 80-year-old babushka carrying around a live tarantula. You don't see that everyday.

In other news, the Yaposhka is officially the best sushi to be had in Russia, and possibly in my life. If you're ever in Moscow or Peter, find one and try it.

Tonight, which is Thursday, I leave for Sochi. Then, on Saturday morning the train actually gets there. It's going to be fun, though – I'll make sure to send messages when I get back.