

Exchange Report Moscow / Higher School of Economics / Aug-Dec 2016

Preparation & Introduction

Landing in Moscow, you get an overwhelming feeling of having landed on 'the other side'. With the conflict in Ukraine, the downing of MH17 and the revival of the East vs. West rhetoric, most people were bewildered and confused when I told them Moscow was the destination for my exchange. Don't be affected by this – Russia is an amazing, beautiful country with more to do and see than you can ever imagine. You will end up loving it and understanding the country in a way invaluable to your personal and academic development.

Before you go to Russia, it's important that you get the invitation from your host university so that you can apply for the visa in The Netherlands. To do this, go to the Visa Handling Service in The Hague, which is a lot faster than The Russian Embassy. The visa is quite expensive (150€), will be single entry and only covers the first 3 months – this is not an issue, as you will extend it for a multiple-entry visa when you get to Moscow.

You also need to fill in a health declaration form and get it signed by your physician. Finally, although not a necessity, I strongly recommend you at least learn to read the Cyrillic alphabet, as everything apart from the airport is in letters you will otherwise never be able to decipher. It also helps with learning Russian at a much faster pace when you arrive.

Arrival

Before departure, take some rubles with you (can be exchanged at Schiphol) and arrange a buddy with the ESN, who will pick you up from the train station and help you settle in to your accommodation. You can apply for a dorm like I did through the application procedure of the university; I highly recommend it as it is an easy, cheap and fun way to spend your time in Moscow – I was living with 150 other internationals in one dorm close to the city. It's possible to get your own place sorted but it is a lot more difficult and uncommon. Getting from the airport to the train station is easy; take the AeroExpress (around 8 euros) and you'll skip Moscow's notorious traffic. Your buddy will meet you there to take you onwards to any one of a number of dorms that the HSE provides.

ESN organizes a week of activities for introduction and getting to know the city, the university and your friends. Although not crucial and containing some very boring lectures, I would recommend it as you get to know all your fellow students, get used to the city and can sort out some stuff before the semester begins. ESN also introduces the procedures you have to follow and apply for in your time there (there are a ridiculous amount, so was helpful) and introduces some trips and activities they will organize throughout the year. I also went to St. Petersburg in the few days we had off between so it was well worth it.

As a mobile provider, I recommend Megafon. It offers Internet throughout Russia (useful when going to non-English speaking places like Siberia & Murmansk) and only costs around 300 rubles (5 euros at time of writing). For 5 euros extra per month, you can get unlimited internet so for 10 euros a month you should be all set. (The exchange rate between the euro and ruble varies extremely, so for ease I will use the average rate (1 eur = 70 rub) throughout this paper. Check yourself what the exchange rate is when you leave, Moscow is quite an expensive city but with the exchange rate it turned out to be a lot cheaper for me.

Courses

I needed to get 24 ECTS (same as the HSE credits) in my exchange, 12 of which were in my field of studies (economics and business). It takes a while and a lot of frustration to put together your own schedule, as many courses overlap or are in buildings that are over an hour's travel away from each other. With a lot of patience and trial-and-error, you will manage in the end. I chose the following courses:

Russian Language Course (6 credits) – I highly recommend taking the language course in your free space, as many people in Moscow speak no English (except your fellow students). It's both rewarding and useful to be able to order food, talk to your taxi driver and buy train tickets, even with limited Russian skills. The locals also really appreciate the effort.

International Entrepreneurship (5 credits) – This course was basically a specific marketing course, designed around (you guessed it) Entrepreneurship. Although a bit slow-paced, it's an interesting course as you make several presentations about different products, environments and come up with your own business plan.

Russian Space & State (4 credits) – This was by far my favorite course of the semester, and is my #1 recommendation for anyone studying in Russia. This course covers everything from the political and historic to the ideological and economic aspects of the Russian nation and people. The professor is also very enthusiastic and knowledgeable, and his personal quarrels with Vladimir Putin made it even more interesting.

Global Governance (4 credits)– This course covers the huge variety of international institutions and organizations that govern all aspects of the globalized world, from NATO and the UN to the International Atomic Agency and several Development Banks. Although interesting, the pace of the professor as well as the lack of discussion present made it less useful than it could have been. It is a course that is an easy way to get credits.

Poverty, Inequality & Quality of Life (4 credits) – A master course covering the trends, measurement and policy towards the three aforementioned factors, it was very interesting to be able to combine simple statistical analysis (just

regressions and other basic tools) to actual economic data and to see how it can be used for development. Having lived in Kenya, it was very applicable for me. *Megatrends of Global Development (3 credits)*– A somewhat misleading title; despite apparently concerning trends in development, it ended up being a more political course. Although it was interesting, lectures were on a Saturday which was far from ideal. The lecturer seemed to have a knack for a monotone voice which put everyone to sleep, but the readings and guest lectures were interesting.

Finances

Pre- Departure Expenses

Visa - €150

Flight - €300 (return – BUY A ONE-WAY TICKET, as you don't know when your exams are and this won't become clear until mid-December. Otherwise you may book a return flight before Christmas, while some people here had exams on Christmas Eve or even later as Russians celebrate Orthodox Christmas.

Monthly Expenses

Dormitory	€20
Food	≈€200
Mobile	€10
Going Out	≈€200
Public Transport	€20
Trips	≈€500
Total	≈€450 (€950 with trips)

Trips

As evident in the finances section, a significant portion of my time and money was dedicated to trips outside of Moscow itself. Although Moscow has a vast array of things to do and see and you could spend all your time doing something new each day, the best way to explore Russia is to get out of the city life of Moscow. This way you will truly get a grasp of Russia, the people living in it and the infinite amount of landscapes, cultures, religions and historical backgrounds that make up this vast country.

Of all my trips, I would recommend two the most

- 1) Siberia – I took the Transsiberian for a few days with a group of 6 from my dorm. We flew to Novosibirsk, took a 3-day train to Ulan-Ude (bordering Mongolia) and then managed to get to Lake Baikal. The size, beauty and remoteness of the lake as well as the region made it one of the more memorable experiences. The distance covered (8000km one way) also really made us appreciate the size of Russia.

- 2) Murmansk – The Polar Circle – I took a trip with one other friend to the most northerly city in the world – Murmansk. We were obsessed with trying to see the Northern Lights and this was the best place for us to do so. By pure luck we managed to see them, and to an extent that only happens a few times a year. Instead of flying back to Moscow, we took a train to St. Petersburg, then to Helsinki and also managed to go to both Estonia and Latvia for a few days. The combination of all of these countries and activities made it my favorite trip in my time there.

Daily Differences

There are many ways in which, particularly the first few weeks, you will notice Moscow and its inhabitants are strikingly different from what you are used to. People tend to be a bit more closed off, look less happy and there is security everywhere (why this is you can find out in Russian Space & State). But as time passes, you learn to adapt yourself to your surroundings. Don't expect people to go out of their way to adapt to your ways; you are a guest in their country. You will get a few curious/suspicious looks, particularly from the older generations, when speaking English. This is why it's almost mandatory to learn some Russian, so you can at least say a few things and show the locals you are doing your best in showing an interest in their culture. They will really appreciate it and it will make your time in Moscow a lot more interesting, fun and memorable!

A small detail that was probably the most shocking to me is the central heating that is in place throughout Russia – from October till March, the temperature inside EVERYWHERE is 27C, and it's impossible to turn down/off the heat. So, you will walk around the dorm in shorts and flip-flops, and then put on 4 layers to walk to the metro in -15C. This takes a bit of getting used to and you will have a cold almost semi-permanently in your time there.

Overall, Russia is less well organized than The Netherlands, so don't be surprised when courses change buildings, times or even get dropped without you being told. Bureaucracy is as crucial to Russian daily life as it is an impediment and delay to daily life. Don't let this affect you or your mood too much, as it can drive you slightly crazy. Just go with the flow, and as our Dorm's motto stated, 'eventually everything will work out ok.'

If you have any questions, comments, or concerns feel free to send me an email at rene.bulent.voskamp@gmail.com or add me on Facebook and I can clarify/explain whatever you need help with.

Rene Voskamp

18/1/2017

Pictures

I included a few pictures from my trip for you to get an overall idea of the things I did/saw. Clockwise from top right – the main University building; the Red Square by night; the Northern Lights; Hiking in the Arctic Circle; boarding the Transsiberian

