As an American citizen coming to Russia for the first time, over three years ago, I experienced CULTURE SHOCK firsthand. Therefore, I believe that it is necessary to explain to all those who are interested in travelling to St. Petersburg the differences in the people, city life, and quite simply overall culture in St. Petersburg. Petersburg is a fantastic city that everyone should see at least once in life. But one should prepare for a bit of culture shock!

Of course, whenever someone thinks about Russia, the first things that comes to one’s mind are: vodka, Putin, communism, and snow. The snow is a huge factor in the winter, obviously, but it is bearable. The first things that shocked me culturally when I came to Russia were the seriousness of people in public, alcohol use, the Russian language, and how wrong people are about their preconceptions of Russia. This is especially true when speaking about St. Petersburg.

The general public is something very different than I had ever known or seen in my life in America. People are generally quiet, rarely smile on the streets, and are at sometimes uninterested in helping you even if you ask them a question, and may even seem depressed. It is certain that the Russian people as a whole experienced a huge economic downfall after the Soviet Union collapsed. This therefore this plays a huge role in society today, as Russia is still rebounding and has not yet fully recovered from the horrible economic disasters in the 1980’s to the middle of the 1990’s. The quality of life plays a huge role in how people act in public. Even in the metro, you find yourself sitting down, and everyone around you just looks around and says nothing. It was a huge shock for me to see when I came here.

Alcohol is also vastly different here. The low prices of alcohol in the shops made me feel like I was in heaven for a short while. In addition, the freedom to drink in public is a huge but great surprise for one to experience in Russia. Just going for a walk around a park with a can of beer and some friends is always a great time. But it is not true that every Russian person drinks vodka on the street or vodka in general. It was a huge stereotype I encountered from my American friends before I left for St. Petersburg.
The Russian language… what can I say, it is beautiful but yet, so difficult. If one comes to St. Petersburg and either doesn’t know Russian, or just knows enough to get by, the language itself is intimidating just to hear, let alone, try to speak. It was a huge fear of mine to say the wrong thing to someone when my Russian was poor, at only a basic level. Everyone should be careful when speaking to a stranger on the street. The speed and complexity of the language was a huge cultural shock for me, and I am certain it will be one for anyone from outside of Eastern Europe or the former Soviet States.

Lastly, even though it is not a cultural shock factor, the preconceptions about Russian people as a whole are terribly wrong. Russian friends are some of the best friends and most loyal I have ever had. People will respect you if you attempt to speak their difficult language, as they understand themselves that Russian is not a simple language. Russia is not a third world backward country; it is a country with some unknown traditions or ways of life. As Churchill once said, “Russia is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.” It is true to those who never experienced the Russian life or just a visit to Russia.

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