

A Russian Reflection or Moscow vs. St. Petersburg

Written by Susan McDaniel
Tuesday, 20 August 2013 21:11

{joomplu:2359 left}

Shortly after arriving in Moscow I got a text message from a friend asking "is it beautiful?" Hmmmmm, um, no, not really beautiful. It is a huge city with hoards of traffic zooming everywhere. And I do mean zooming...even the green pedestrian walk man seems to be running. People, there is a reason the metro stations at extremely busy traffic intersections double as underground pedestrian crosswalks!!

Having arrived from two weeks in the Dolomites and their breathtaking natural beauty and magic, it was hard to think of Moscow as beautiful. Interesting, amazing and fascinating, yes. Some beautiful architecture, yes. But overall, not a beautiful city. A week exploring unearthed many hidden treasures of the capital. I was staying in a room on the top floor of an old building that had perhaps been housing during Communist times. Well, in fact, except for the ground floor and the "Inn's" 5th and 6th floors, it still is housing. My room, similar to Communist times, had a shared bath and a shared kitchen. In spite of the dreary facade of the building and the dingy stairwell, my room had a huge window (with a decent view), giving it a light, cheerful feel. Braving the often times smoke filled stairwell for 6 flights was preferable to the microscopic and screechy elevator.

My route (bus, metro, short walk) from Sheremetyevo airport to my room was an experience. First the 40 minute bus ride. I wasn't too confident when I got on the bus and the first thing I saw were 3 huge fire extinguishers. I was already a little nervous after seeing those YouTube videos about Russian drivers!! Then the bus driver honked his horn numerous times at other vehicles during our ride but he did get me to the end of the bus line (which is the beginning of the metro line) in one piece. I also noticed that I was the only person on the shuttle bus with luggage. Where were all the tourists?!? My fellow passengers must have been airport employees....apparently most tourists take a (\$\$\$) taxi! The bus/metro only cost me 50 rubles (\$1.54) to get into town...a smoking deal. Of course, having just withdrawn money from the bank machine, my smallest bill was a 1000 ruble note. Thank goodness the bus driver had enough to give me change. And oh, the Moscow metro! I had to ask the police where the entrance was...another long ride...I counted the stops on my map (one I had brought with me, thank goodness....but next time need to make sure to print the Cyrillic version!)---10 stops---so I would know where to get off, since everything was in Cyrillic only. Once off the metro, I attempted to talk to a metro employee---older gentleman who put on his reader glasses to see what street I was looking for---tried to be very helpful despite not speaking English...and surprisingly I did pretty much understand his directions. Actually I wasn't even sure I would ever get out of the metro. My metro stop had three lines going through it so it was HUGE. I didn't see any exits when I got off! (Note to myself--- review how the word exit is spelled in Cyrillic Russian!!)

A Russian Reflection or Moscow vs. St. Petersburg

Written by Susan McDaniel

Tuesday, 20 August 2013 21:11

St. Petersburg, on the other hand, truly is a beautiful city. It was simply due to Aeroflot scheduling that I ended up in Moscow first. Direct flights from Zagreb only go to Moscow. I am glad it worked out that way. Moscow, in its own way, was lovely. Had I been to SP first, I think Moscow would not have fared so well with me.....I might have even found it somewhat depressing. The vibe in the two cities is like night and day and I felt the difference immediately. Kind of like the USA's East Coast/West Coast. Although I had predominately sunny days in Moscow and predominately rainy days during my 11 days in SP, Moscow felt dark and cold whereas SP felt warm and sparkly. (Definitely spending more days in SP was a good decision....)

It was not hard to imagine Communist Russia in Moscow, almost as if it is just under the surface.....gazing at the former KGB building while having lunch on the 6th floor terrace of a restaurant across Lubyanka Square, the building still looks intimidating and I can imagine the fear that must have dominated. Meanwhile, the former KGB building in SP, as well as the street intersection it is on, is undergoing construction. I am sure the place was equally scary back in the heyday but, with all the construction going on around it, it didn't emit the same dark vibe.

I can't forget to mention seeing Lenin---- yep, I waited about 50 minutes to spend about 50 seconds seeing his (quite well) preserved body under heavy guard in front of the Kremlin walls. Then there is the Graveyard of Fallen Monuments to help conjure up the past. Near Gorky Park, this is an outdoor "museum" where many former Soviet statues (Stalin is there) have ended up, some in better shape than others.

Moscow is not about catering to or pleasing the tourist. I saw very few hotels in the Red Square/Kremlin area.....most hotels are not only extremely expensive but quite a distance out from what has to be the main tourist attraction. My "Weekend Inn" was in a killer location, less than a mile from Red Square and a great price as well. Just don't expect any tourist information at the check-in....come prepared with your own. By contrast, SP abounds with a variety of hotels in the various neighborhoods all around the city. The Moscow tourist information was closed one day (this is mid July mind you, the height of tourist season) and when I popped by later in the week, I overheard the only staff person tell someone that they were currently out of city maps. SP has tourist info everywhere.....maps, signs, brochures and the likes are plentiful.

As I walked to Red Square my first evening in Moscow, I almost gasped when I first caught sight of St. Basil's Cathedral.....wow, those domes! I think it is perhaps this first impression that makes me prefer St. Basil's exterior to that of SP's [Church on Spilled Blood](#) . As for the interior.....that goes to Spilled Blood---possibly because I was one of the first inside the day I went and had the place almost to myself for about 15 minutes. Incredible experience.

A Russian Reflection or Moscow vs. St. Petersburg

Written by Susan McDaniel

Tuesday, 20 August 2013 21:11

To my knowledge, Gorky Park has no match in SP. I loved this park although it did not resemble the images I had after reading the Martin Cruz Smith book. (It was soooo much better than I imagined!)

My one rainy day in Moscow, I found my way to Novodevichy Cemetery, which was quite large and had many tombstones that were really works of art. It was quite an experience, especially in the rain! There were no maps (of course not) and everything was in [Cyrillic](#) so I had no idea who any of the (some well-known/famous) "residents" were. I kept hoping I would somehow find Tchaikovsky (maybe a tombstone full of musical notes, something...) but I never did. Hahaha...imagine my surprise when I finally found him at the Tikhvinskoye Cemetery in SP, which did have a map!! And an English version, no less! I am not sure why I thought Tchaikovsky was buried in Moscow. The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Moscow has a changing of the guard that is impressive to see. Although SP has a Tomb of the Unknown Soldier there is no guard present so not quite as interesting.

The ballet (Bolshoi in Moscow and [Mariinsky](#) in SP) and the Russian Art museums (Tretyakov in Moscow and the State Russian Museum in SP) are spectacular in both cities. Side note---Tretyakov has a pretty set route to follow when you visit the museum whereas in the Russian State Museum you can wander about as you like. And although everyone has heard of SP's renowned [Hermitage Museum](#), it was enchanting for me to discover the Hermitage cats, as well as the [Republic of Cats](#) Shelter nearby.

SP has incredible [restaurants](#) [Zoom Café](#), L'Europe, [Jamie's Italian](#) and The Idiot to name my favorites. Georgian food is great in both cities. Yum! SP's Neva River, the many canals and bridges are all magical, especially at night. The Moskva River does not compare and can not compete with this.

When all is said and done, I can't imagine visiting one city without the other. To go to SP without making a journey to Moscow would be a pity (or vice versa although I think very few tourists end up in Moscow without making the trip to SP). The two are only a 4 hour [Sapsan train](#) ride apart so it is not a difficult trip to make. With the Visa process being what it is for Americans, (a nerve-wracking nightmare for me! I mean really, why does the Russian government care to know all the countries and entry dates that I have been in for the last ten years!), spending more than a few days in Russia is definitely worth it. I am already looking forward to a return visit to include a trek up Mount Elbrus! Pretty sure I am ready for the bureaucracy needed to get the [permits](#)

A Russian Reflection or Moscow vs. St. Petersburg

Written by Susan McDaniel

Tuesday, 20 August 2013 21:11

for that. From what I understand, reaching the summit is actually easier than getting the permits. No easy task considering Elbrus is Russia's highest peak, at 5642 meters!

[Check out Susan's photoreport from both of these cities](#)

Related Article:

- [First Impressions of Saint-Petersburg by Susan McDaniel](#)

Moscow Timelapse Video:

Saint-Petersburg Timelapse Video:

A Russian Reflection or Moscow vs. St. Petersburg

Written by Susan McDaniel

Tuesday, 20 August 2013 21:11

SP Guide's Most Popular:□

- [Letter of Invitation/Support for Russia](#)
- [How to get FREE Champagne for your Booking](#)