

## AHASoc: Placement Guides



### *Moscow, Russia*

I didn't quite know what to expect when I landed in Moscow, in February of this year. This was partly due to the Russian system of handling things and partly because – although having spent time in Russia before – I didn't quite know what to expect from spending five months studying in a foreign country, with a family I had never met, and all the other things associated with embarking on a length of time abroad.

With just under two weeks to go, my survival gear had begun to take shape: thermals, gloves and scarf, boots with industrial grips, knitwear/bulky hoodies and jackets. There wasn't much left to tie up, I was starting to really look forward to leaving for Moscow. That is until I had a quick look on BBC Weather. The forecasted temperatures for the week before I left read: Maximum (warmest – if you can call it that): -22°C and Minimum: -28°C . I began to question what I had let myself in for.

Joking aside, I couldn't wait to get there and get involved. On February 22<sup>nd</sup>, I along with the other students who would be studying either in Moscow or in places beyond, such as Yaroslavl and Petrazavodsk, left Heathrow for Domodedovo. After four and a half hours of travelling we landed, and safely navigated the treacherous passport control. Those going to Moscow got siphoned off and then split into two further groups of five and six depending on whereabouts we were going to live.

As I stepped out of the airport, wearing four layers, I was met by the severe cold that I knew had been coming. In my mini-bus I was joined by three other girls; one who had spent the previous semester in Moscow, another who had been in St Petersburg and the third in the south of France. The journey to our various accommodation took about two hours. We passed various landmarks that we recognised like the Лужники (Olympic Stadium) as we tried to decipher where exactly we'd be living. As the journey progressed, we soon got lost.

I arrived finally at about 11.30pm (Moscow-time), and was glad to be at the end of an exhausting day. The snow was piled up all around the apartment block where I was to live, in places four or five feet high. I got inside and was introduced to my хозяйка (host-mum), Marina, by the co-ordinator. The first meal I was given turned out to be a bit of a staple for me: watery soup with the infamous - for me anyway - чёрный хлеб (black bread).

The next morning we had to report to the platform of metro station Новослободская (Novoslobodskaya) at 10am. Fortunately for me, this was only two stops on the metro and I didn't even have to change trains. Unfortunately, it was about a 1km walk to the metro. Not too far I know in the grand scale of things, especially living in such a big city like Moscow, but the cold certainly made the walk all the more arduous. Having arrived, and

upon meeting our rep, we left for classes and to complete the formalities like the registering of our stay with the authorities and getting our photograph taken for our student ID card. This, unlike with our St Andrews one, actually got us a fair few discounts and free entries.

Afterwards, we sat an exam, which lasted about two and a half hours so they could put us into sets that matched our abilities. The day concluded with a welcome talk by the head of the school and a brief warning on the rules and regulations and the importance of registering at the local authorities whenever we wanted to travel outside Moscow for more than three days.

Our day finished at about 2.30pm and so we were free to do whatever we wanted. We went to the pub/restaurant next door, called Вокзал and discussed and debated what was going to happen and tried to get any information from those who had been the first semester as well.

The way the classes worked out in the first week was that we were on the 'intensive program'. I've put it in inverted commas because it wasn't actually intensive at all. It just meant that instead of having two/three classes per day (each of which lasts 90 minutes) of the various different elements of the Russian language: translation, grammar, literature etc., we solely had oral classes.

After the first week passed, we had the whole range of classes. I had three hours of class (two lessons) on a Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, and four and a half hours of class (three lessons) on a Thursday. Classes consisted of two on translation, grammar, oral and media and one on literature. Every Friday we had off. Some treated this day as a cultural/sightseeing day, others to make a serious dent into their dissertation, and others as a hangover/recovery day.

For the most part, I was pretty impressed with the standard of teaching we received. Some of the teaching, I'd even say, was of a higher standard than what we get in St Andrews, and I know that the people I studied with from other universities would agree.

So aside from the teaching, the actual living is the more interesting part. Daily routine was very different. No longer could I wake up twenty minutes before a class, shower and have breakfast (on the way) and still arrive on time, albeit looking a bit dishevelled, like I could in St Andrews. In Moscow, I had to wake up about an hour and a half before class was to begin.

Breakfast changed pretty much on a day-to-day basis. Some days I had cereal, others porridge and pancakes and fritters on the days in-between. Lunch I ate out, because I was at school so that also varied. Evening meals weren't great for me as I often had soup, but in amongst this I also had traditional Russian dishes like плов (plov) as well as more European ones like spaghetti bolognese.

During my time in Moscow, I managed to go to some football matches, an experience that

I'd definitely recommend despite the hostilities that flare up at times, as well as go ice skating on Patriarchs Ponds and do the typical tourist stuff like looking around the Kremlin, St Basil's cathedral and Red Square.

We went to a good mix of pubs, bars and clubs, and always found that there was something on. The biggest call on any night out was whether you went home on the last metro at 1am or stayed out until the trains started running again at 5.30am. It was a decision that sometimes was the correct one to take and in other instances, the wrong one as we found ourselves floundering at 3am. Of course if you really did feel like going home, you could. Our reps at school recommended we only take licensed cabs, but the gypsy cabs (although warned against them) were always fine and definitely cheaper.

Our locals, so to speak, or favourite pubs/bars were Мастерская near the Большой Театр (Bolshoi Theatre) and Кружка which had many bars all over the city. I'd recommend also the Irish Pub Silvers, near to metro station охотный ряд, and just beyond the Ritz hotel. It served some of the best pub food I've had in a long time, including pubs from the UK. For a club that is a bit out there, but still a great experience (and a very unique one at that), you should try out Зона.

Moscow in my experience, regardless of your hobbies and interests, has a lot to offer and of those who spent one semester in another Russian town or city first, the majority said they wished they had spent their entire time in Moscow. I, for one, wish I could have spent the year there.

On a final note, your language will improve immensely and you will at the same time have a lot of fun. To expect that you'll be completely fluent upon returning to St Andrews is unrealistic although not impossible. The teaching and the free time allows you do study to the lengths that you want, even if your dissertation/year abroad project hinders you somewhat.

But the way I viewed my time in Moscow was that studying was of course important, but of equal importance to me was getting out and getting the most of my experience, maximising my exposure to all things Moscow and Russia. And it proved to be my best semester of university so far!