

## AHASoc: Placement guides

### *Russia*



(NB. when referring to the '*university*', this is the university you will be studying at in Russia, NOT St Andrews)

### **Registration**

When you arrive in Russia your university will register you with the local authorities. Make sure you have lots of passport photographs for them to use to do this. Once you're registered you will get a few documents confirming your right to be where you're staying. The university will probably keep the originals, and give you a photocopy of these as well as your passport and visa on a single piece of paper which you should carry round with you at all times. If the police do ask for documentation you can show them this. If they want to see the actual documents, explain the situation. You may be inconvenienced, but there should not be any real problems. As far as I know no one I knew ever got asked to show their documents throughout our entire year in Russia (probably because tourism from abroad has become so commonplace nowadays). Therefore, if someone ever does ask to see your papers, be (silently) very cautious. The person may not even be a policeman, despite the fact that he/she (although almost definitely 'he') is wearing a uniform. The best advice is to make sure you are in or can get to a crowded area should someone ever confront you in this way.

If you ever go to another town or city for more than three working days, you have to register with the local authorities. Almost all hotels or hostels in the major cities do this for you anyway.

### **Post**

The postal system is awful. Letters or postcards going to or from Russia can take weeks or even months to arrive. Some of the large hotels however do offer a very reasonable postal service which will get your post home within a week (unfortunately this will not work the other way round). I often used the Nevsky Palace Hotel in St Petersburg, which took the mail to Finland from where it was sent on.

### **Internet and Telephone**

You might be lucky to live in a flat with an internet connection, though it's unlikely. In the major cities you can get a USB device (Yota) which connects you to a local city-wide wireless network. This costs around £20 a month, plus about £10 for the appliance. As for phoning people in Russia,

obviously it'll be cheaper to get a very cheap Russian mobile plus Russian SIM card. The cheapest way to phone home is using phone cards for use on landlines, but Skype is of course the easiest option.

### **Money**

Due to bank charges it's always a good idea to take a lot out at a time. Because Russians love money, your host family will be awkwardly forward about asking you to pay rent etc, so try to have the cash with you when the time comes to pay the monthly rent. Obviously fitting in with the crowd helps you not to stick out and get mugged. However, I made no effort whatsoever to dress *à la russe*, clearly looked like a tourist and nothing ever happened to me.

### **Transport**

Buses and trolleybuses will cost about 20 roubles (50p) per journey and are very slow. Marshrutkas are minibuses which follow the same routes as the buses and trolleybuses. They go a lot faster and cost a bit more. However, to get on one you have to flag it down, and to get off you have to tell the driver to stop. Most students wait a few weeks before daring to travel like this! If you're in St Petersburg or Moscow you also have the choice of the metro. This costs about £1 per journey and in Moscow is very useful. In St Petersburg, it is useless for travel around the centre of town. Hardly any of the stations are in places you would expect them to be, and more annoyingly there isn't one anywhere near the university.

Trains go regularly from the major cities to Moscow and take the same time as it would to drive there. There are usually three classes to travel on. The cheapest is a carriage full of benches and some overhead beds. The other two classes are a lot more comfortable and come with a lot of additions, and are relatively cheap given the prices we're used to paying in Britain!

### **Landladies**

You can be lucky or unlucky here. I was unlucky. My landladies were not interested in knowing me or helping me improve my Russian. They were interested in my payments and that was it. However, many people had lovely families (I think the majority), who would spend hours chatting to them every day. If you find things aren't working with your landlady, do ask the university to find another host family for you. For example, my first landlady in St Petersburg gave me a midnight curfew every night and forbade me to drink anything alcoholic inside or outside the house. Despite the fact that she was otherwise very nice and welcoming I had no qualms in changing family. Remember you have to live there for 4 months.

If living with a family does not appeal to you, there are agencies which will help you find flats you can share with other British students or even Russians if you're brave enough! Fortunately, the whole thing is done privately, avoiding lots of paperwork. This might sound a bit underhand, but many people did it over the year and didn't have a single problem the whole time.

Remember your landlords should be cooking every meal for you throughout your stay. Russian food is mainly plain, but often nice. If you can't stomach the food (and you won't be the first!), explain so to the landlady. She will try to cater to your needs, or let you cook for yourself. Some, however, are very possessive of their homes and HAVE to do everything for you themselves. If things still don't get better, don't hesitate to ask the university to change flat.

### **Shopping**

There are western-style supermarkets selling western food in every town. If you do want to branch out and shop Russian-style you can go to the smaller Russian grocery shops. Here, you have to decide what exactly you want to buy, ask the lady behind the counter how much the items cost, then go to another lady with a till to tell her how much it all costs together. You then pay her the total cost, she gives you a receipt, then you go back to the counter this time to actually ask for the items, making sure the prices of what you get add up to the total on your receipt. This is an old soviet-era method of buying food with the sole aim of employing as many people as possible. It is frustrating and the shop assistants will have absolutely no sympathy for you poor foreigner struggling with Russian. My advice, go to the supermarket every time.

### **Cultural Activities and Meeting People**

It goes without saying the smaller cities will have less going on than St Petersburg and Moscow. All cities will have a variety of sports clubs, cinemas, shopping centres, concert halls, theatres and bars/clubs. Ask your university lecturers and your host family if they know what people have done in the past or if they know any clubs worth joining. If you get on well with your host family you might even get invited to their country house, *dacha*, for the weekend. In Yaroslavl, for example, I joined a boxing club, regularly went to see exceptional classical concerts at the town concert hall, went to see the city's hockey team, Locomotiv, play in the largest hockey stadium in Europe, and at weekends went to a variety of bars and clubs.

There will be a good choice of places to experience Russian nightlife wherever you go. The drinks will be very cheap and, especially in the less cosmopolitan cities, Russians will be more interested in you, therefore making it easier to make conversation with them. Obviously, in the beginning take your common sense along with you to clubs, try not to get too drunk and stay with the other British students.

An even better way of getting to know Russians is becoming an English language assistant. There are many private companies looking for native English speakers to give oral lessons, as well as schools and universities. They are a good way of meeting people your own age, who are genuinely interested in speaking English and therefore in getting to know our culture.

In general, Russians are desperate to learn English, seeing it as a means for improving their situation, or even getting out of Russia. Despite what niggling doubts you have in the back of your mind about Russian prejudice towards the West, especially English speaking countries, the young Russians I met in Russia were in no way hostile towards the English students there.

### **University Work**

It is very unlikely you'll get a work load anywhere near in size to what you get at St Andrews. What you get out the classes often depends on how much you put in, and how well you prepare for them. While you are there you will also have a 4000 word essay in Russian to write for St Andrews. If you do need to do research for this in book form, I warn you that subscribing to Russian libraries and getting to read their books takes a lot of time and effort. You cannot simply peruse shelves: you have to request a particular book, though without actually knowing what books the library has (a catch-22 situation if there ever was one!). You also have to read the books in the library (they may not be taken out).

### **Final Note**

Your year in Russia is what you make of it. The most important thing is to make sure you are happy with your living situation; otherwise the year will go very slowly! Of course, you are there to learn Russian, but make sure you do lots of fun things at the same time (and not necessarily Russian activities) otherwise your will to learn will quickly evaporate.

And finally: if, like me, you started Russian in first year of university, however much effort you put in, do not expect to be fluent after a year in Russia. Your teachers will tell you with absolute certainty that you will be, but it's simply not true. If, by some miracle, you do come home having mastered every subtle nuance of the Russian language, first give yourself a pat on the back, then ask yourself why you didn't apply to Oxford in the first place.