

Wanted: At the theater

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February 16, 2011



It was Yevgeny who saw the phone terminal in a corner of an illegal gambling den in the heart of Moscow.

This was an underground casino located in what used to be a legal casino. This seems to have been the cunning plan chosen by a number of gambling operators when they were closed down nigh on two years ago: Pretend to close down and then open up in exactly the same place but with less neon advertising.

Not long ago, it was reported that a casino was closed down on the site of a previously legal casino in the Golden Ring Hotel at Smolenskaya. If you are unsure which hotel that is, it's the one that lights up its hideous exterior with flashing lights every night because the owner presumably has a deep-seated hatred of epileptics and human beings with taste.

Police took Yevgeny and Ilya, from the rather good Moi Rayon newspaper — the only free thing you can get at Azbuka Vkusa — to Arbat earlier this month. The casino was located at the former site of one the most famous casinos on Novy Arbat.

The Arbat club owners' cover story was they had set up a poker training camp, although they shouldn't really have needed roulette wheels, chips of half a million dollars and so many pretty couriers.

All pretty standard illegal casino stuff — apart from the telephone terminal that sat there, dark and closed off. Some might imagine it was set up as an ideal place for paying a bribe, an easy way to send money to an unknown bureaucrat.

But this terminal was not for phone payment and had only one reason for existence: as a way of masquerading the gambler's location. Instead of that tempting sound of a small white ball whizzing round, the person in the booth can choose the noise of a busy airport, a car, a stadium, the theater, the countryside, an office, a cafe or the street as they blow the family life savings.

Yevgeny, a naturally curious photojournalist, tried it out and said the sound was convincing.

"I think you should choose traffic as football is not on that late," he said sensibly. There is another reason to avoid the taped sound of sesame seeds being spat and grammatically constructed crudities: The Russian domestic football season is on its winter break now.

I don't know of anyone who has seen these terminals before, but the idea has a kind of perverse genius. And it is very similar to an idea that English novelist Jonathan Coe wrote of in his last book, "The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim." One of the character's jobs in the book is to go to different airports around the world and record the background noise. This noise can then be used as background by adulterers when they are ringing their wives.

Original url: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/02/16/wanted-at-the-theater-a5074>