

It's the Little Things ...

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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It's the little things that can push you over the edge as an expat, I find. I'm not talking about when you first arrive at a destination, when you're half-dazed with taking in new and strange things, and so busy acclimatizing to your environment that it seems as if your new place of residence will never feel like home. Everywhere you look — at least, to a first-time expat like myself — you see unfamiliar procedures and customs. "Why can't I turn left on this empty road?" you wonder. "Why do I have to pay for my petrol before I fill up at the pump?" "Why, when I want to buy anything at a swanky cosmetic store, is it necessary to select my goods, be given a ticket, walk to the opposite side of the store to pay, and then take my receipt back to the original counter to collect my goods?"

Good questions, perhaps, but also all things that simply are, and as my husband said to me shortly after we arrived in Moscow, "'There's no point asking 'Why?' Don't ask 'Why?' Just ask 'How?'" Excellent advice, and since I started to follow it most of those perplexing "Why" moments have disappeared. So no, it wasn't a "Why?" moment that caused me to throw my toys out of the pram and stomp crossly around for a good five minutes this weekend before deciding to indulge in the free therapy of writing it down.

What happened? Well, I'm a little embarrassed to admit that it involved ... chocolate. Namely, a Britain-sourced stash of it that I had been hoarding since a recent trip back to England, and which is entirely unavailable here in Russia — at least, on the open market. Obviously, it is possible to buy chocolate here, I know that. But if you are at all a fan of this particular form of fat in a handy handbag-sized block, you will know that not all chocolate is created equal. Chocolate, you see, is produced specifically for local markets, to local tastes, and recipes vary from one country to the next. In Russia, consumers like their chocolate sweet. And that's OK, that's fine, but if you've been brought up on semi-skimmed milk then full fat just isn't going to cut it if you want a refreshing drink. So it is with chocolate, and I'm afraid that I'm not a fan of the Russian version.

I'm sure there are plenty of people who would throw their hands up in horror at this confession. Russian chocolate is — I've been reliably informed by many Russians — the best in the world. Nothing can compare. And I learned the hard way not to argue with this when, on a crusade to educate a Russian friend on what "real" (as in "my preferred type of") chocolate actually is, I gave her a box that I had brought back from the Britain with strict instructions not to share it, only to discover a couple of days later that the individually wrapped bars of nectar had ended up in her children's lunchboxes. Oh, the horror ...

So now, I keep schtum — and on the plus side, don't have to share. The chocolate I bring back from trips to Blighty with me is mine, all mine. Occasionally I share it with my family, but since I'm blessed with a husband and sons for whom any type of chocolate will do, I can usually make shift with a locally available equivalent when they want some.

This form of brand-blindness does have it's drawbacks, unfortunately, since it also means that if any chocolate will do, my precious stash will also serve if I'm not there to defend it, lioness-like, from my husband's cupboard raids. Which is exactly what happened this weekend when my back was turned, and it was the subsequent discovery that the last two rows of the bar I had been eking out (for which read: "jealously hoarding") had disappeared into my husband's uncaring stomach, was what tipped me over the edge.

So. What have I learned from this? Oh, forget any nonsense about sense of perspective and bigger pictures. No, it's to hide my chocolate better — or at least, to put the easier-to-obtain brands at the front of the cupboard.

And what has my husband learned from this? That he can transport me to a different country, can mistakenly take the house keys to work with him when I'm not home, can forget to sign important documents, and chop and change dinner and holiday arrangements at a moment's notice and I won't turn a hair, but mess with my chocolate? Now that's a step too far ...

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