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Is it Nice in Nice?

By The Moscow Times

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Along with a large section of Moscow's population, I'm traveling outside Russia at the moment. Sadly, in my case this does not mean touring the south of France, Italy, or a selection of theme parks in Florida as many of my (Russian) acquaintances are doing. No, in my case this means taking the expat's line of least resistance and returning to my country of origin for long enough to remind my children what their grandparents look like, of the correct pronunciation of "can't" (always to rhyme with "aaaah" rather than with "ain't"), to remind them that their soul food is fish & chips and Cornish pasties, and to learn how to expect the most glorious summer day to turn to rain, obviously. (Because then there is always the chance one might be pleasantly surprised by the weather.)

Yes, folks, we're in England.

It's great to be here, but (and isn't there always a but?) it does rather bring home to me the huge number of misconceptions that most people who have never visited Russia have about the country. I've found myself biting my tongue a number of times when introduced to a new acquaintance. "So you're the friend / daughter / sister / colleague who lives

in Moscow!" they invariably say. "What's it like? Is it ... nice?"

I don't think that they ever really expect me to say yes. And I don't disappoint. Because "nice" is about as far from apposite as it's possible for a description of Moscow to be.

What they appear to expect in answer is a confirmation of their belief that Russia — Moscow — is the gray utilitarian totalitarian state that they recognize from the Cold War of their childhood. They expect me to tell them only that it's freezing for months at a time, is a city of food shortages and queues, there are no bright colors, and that the Mafia is everywhere. In short, their unasked question is often; why on earth would anyone want to go and live there?

I don't blame people for thinking this way when this image is perpetuated by newsrooms and fiction writers all over the world. Admittedly it happened a few years ago back, but on one memorable occasion in the mid-1990s my then boyfriend phoned me (in London) from Moscow, and I mentioned in passing how cold it had looked there when I watched an item on the news about Russia earlier that evening. The reporter had been standing in front of a backdrop of a window opening onto a wintry sky with flakes of snow swirling prettily around. My boyfriend was nonplussed by my question. "What on earth are you talking about?" he asked. "Cold? Here? It's 18 degrees C outside!"

So in the way of all expats, I talk up my current city of residence. Never mind that some of what they believe about the city is unquestionably true (it is cold 5 months of the year, for example). I find myself telling my new acquaintance that Moscow is by turns exciting, depressing, beautiful, ugly, hot, cold, bright, gloomy, full of possibilities, surprising, bureaucratic, entrepreneurial and frightening. But that most of all, it is never, ever, boring. This invariably comes as a surprise to my listener, who by now is often looking over my shoulder for a friendly face or the nearest fire escape. Poor sods, they were only being polite in asking their question; they never expected a proper answer.

I can't help myself, though. It's that word. Nice? Is Moscow nice? No, of course it isn't "nice." But then neither, now I think about it, are most other interesting cities I've visited. Is London "nice"? New York? Paris? Hong Kong? Bangkok? Not in my book. Not generically. Geneva, Singapore, maybe they're "nice." But Moscow? No. And thank god for it.

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