

Spreading the Love...

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Time was, there were few cars in Moscow. No, really. Take a look at the McDonald's publicity photos from the opening of their first restaurant if you don't believe me; what will stop you in your tracks is not the long line of people waiting to gain entry to this high temple of consumerism, but that there are so few cars on the road.

I'm not going to go into a long diatribe about the rise of car ownership and how it has changed this city; there are no doubt plenty of native Muscovites who could do a far better job of that than I can. But it didn't take long; by the time I first visited, back in 1995, the madness was already in full flow, and it was already difficult and sometimes dangerous (remember the not infrequent use of vodka as windshield wash in the winter?) to drive in this city.

Things have improved on the roads since then, but driving a car in Moscow is still not a job for the faint-hearted. You need, in no particular order; nerves of steel; by personal preference an automatic gear box (call me a wimp, but otherwise there's too much fussing about changing up and down); an iron-clad resolve to keep your car tidy inside (there's nothing worse than sitting in a jam surrounded by the festering juice-cartons, old banana skins

and the Kinder Surprise wrappers that seem to come as standard with any 5-year-old and their car seat); and patience. Miles and miles, and miles of patience. For the one thing that you can never assume when driving anywhere in Moscow is that it will just be a quick five-minute journey.

Sometimes it is, sure. But sometimes, due to the vagaries of traffic regulations, the small percentage of drivers who appear to think that normal common sense rules (such as not driving as if they were playing an arcade game, for example) do not apply to them, and what seems to my Western eyes to be the unreasonably high number of traffic "incidents" (could these three facts be related, by any chance?), the clearest road can clog up in a matter of seconds.

So, patience is the name of the game. But take heart; it's not all doom and gloom on the roads. For every idiot who drives as if the Third Ring Road or the MKAD is their private fiefdom, there are nine others who are more accommodating. Merging into heavy traffic on a main road from a side road, for example, is considerably easier here than it is, say, on The King's Road in London, where you can sit watching Chelsea Tractors (aka RangeRovers and BMW X5s) inch past for 20 minutes without being allowed to join the party. In Moscow, where the traffic is almost always heavy, that is much less the case — due mainly, I believe, to the unspoken understanding on the part of most drivers that we are all in this mess together...

When I started driving here nearly two years and countless gray hairs ago, I was surprised by this attitude and felt it deserved some recognition, so I blipped my hazards at the driver behind me if they had let me in. My husband thought this was crazy and a waste of my time. I didn't agree — what would a little politeness hurt — so I carried on regardless, ignoring the perplexed looks from those around me. I would occasionally see someone else doing the same thing, but in the main it was pretty much a solo pursuit. My husband continued to scoff, and I continued to ignore him. Until one day this week in the morning rush hour, when I was sitting behind a bus that I had just allowed to join the main stream of traffic. It blipped its hazard lights in recognition.

Let me repeat that; a bus driver — in Moscow — blipped his lights in recognition of being let in.

But the best thing? While it was nice to be acknowledged by one of Moscow's famously tough bus drivers, it was even nicer that it happened while my husband was in car.

Spreading the love, people. One jam at a time...

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