

What I Really Wanted to Say Was ...

By [The Moscow Times](#)

October 31, 2011

The  Moscow Times

Not long ago, I found myself in conversation with a group of expats who had all arrived in Moscow more recently than me.

It's a new experience for me — being the one to whom people turn for local answers. I still think of myself as being a newbie, and yet, to these people, I'm an old and grizzled veteran of life in Russia. OK, maybe not grizzled, and definitely not old. But if you include my visits in the 1990s and over the 10 years since then, I probably have a fair amount of experience in this city.

I answered some of their questions and promised to take a couple of the more adventurous newbies on the metro. All the while, I was conscious not to talk too much as A) They no doubt have lives to get on with and B) In some cases I was fairly certain they wouldn't listen to what I said anyway.

These conversations are a bit like chats about childbirth. When talking to a newly-pregnant or even a heavily expectant first time mother, and you have an ounce of humanity, you do tend

to tone your own birth story down a little.

So here, for the record, are some things I might have said to the new arrivals about living in Moscow if I had, for example, been writing a blog post rather than talking to them face to face:

1. Yes, life in Moscow is expensive. The only thing you'll find it cheaper to buy here than 'back home' is probably petrol. If you manage to do the weekly shop on less than 6000 rubles (\$195), you will be doing a jig by the supermarket checkout and causing the shop assistants all sorts of consternation until they realize that you are a foreigner and simply tut loudly or shout abuse, depending on which side of bed they got out of this morning.

2. Having said that, the expats I run into are generally paid well to be here. Many of them get a 'hardship' payment on top of their normal wage. My advice to these people? Do not assume that this extra cash is all for your kids' college fund. It's tempting to do so, but in that case you will need to make the choice between those out of season strawberries you fancy and saving \$10? Mr. Kellogg's finest cornflakes or the generic equivalent? Please note, new arrival: The generic, local equivalent will not taste the same because it is not the same. Mr Kellogg charges a premium for a reason.

3. Yes, the traffic is terrible. However, I suspect that you, Mrs./Mr New Arrival will, like 95 percent of the expats in your circle, never sit behind the wheel of a car here and will let your driver take the strain. So just assume that each journey will take at least twice as long as it should and then when it doesn't, you'll be pleasantly surprised. You win!

4. Or, better yet, get out of the car and on to the metro, which is rightly hailed as the eighth wonder of the world. If you can bring yourself to climb out of your air-conditioned 4x4 and enter a metro station, you'll find it cheap, clean, and incredibly prompt. Yes, it gets crowded, and a little smelly during summer rush hour, but anyone who's been on the Tube in London will appreciate that this state of affairs is not unique to Moscow, and if you can't read the station names in Cyrillic yet, count the stations. Simple.

5. Yes, you can expect the winter to be cold. We are in Moscow, for goodness' sake.

I could go on, but don't worry, I won't. For the moment, at least.

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