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Shopping Around, Moscow Style

By The Moscow Times

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I popped into a certain Moscow store this morning for the quickest of pit-stops to pick up two packets of breakfast cereal (total cost: 340 rubles) and came out an hour later and 4,500 rubles poorer. That's approximately £96, or $150 dollars. And all because I needed a couple of packs of Weetabix. How did that happen?

If you live in Moscow (or, perhaps, even if you don't) and are responsible for doing the weekly shop for a family of four, at this stage you will probably be thinking: "That's not bad. I wonder where she shops?" But the thing is, I didn't do the weekly shop. This was just a top-up trip.

Food shopping in Moscow may not be as expensive as in cities like Tokyo (a friend visiting there recently spoke in hushed tones of finding a punnet of six strawberries on sale for $200), but it's not easy to do if you are at all budget-minded.

This is, as it says on the header, an expat blog. So I freely admit that whilst I do on occasion frequent kiosks and markets, my food shopping is done mostly at supermarkets or hypermarkets. Life, I'm afraid, is just too short — especially in the cold weather — to traipse from one stand to the next in pursuit of a stall holder who actually takes the tomatoes you've

asked for from the perfect and glossy specimens on display, rather than from the pile of bargain-basement poor relations (bruised, wrinkled and spotted) nestling out of sight behind the counter.

However, that does not mean that I frequent the chandelier-decked stores at the premium end of the market instead. There's profligacy, and then there's shopping for your staples in some of the swankier supermarkets on offer in Moscow. No, generally I join the masses at a certain French chain of hypermarkets, which may be less ruinous on the pocket but is not for the faint-hearted. Even after two years here, I am still capable of walking into one of the bigger hypermarkets here, taking one look at the chaos inside, turning right around, and walking out again, unable to face it.

It seems to be mostly Russians who shop at this particular store. Certain expats of my acquaintance pale visibly when I mention its name, and I have to admit that if one's only experience of a Russian hypermarket is of a late afternoon or weekend visit, I can see why that would be. Russians en-masse can be formidable enough, but come between a babushka mid-afternoon and her choice of banana in a self-selection fruit-and-veg section, and she won't be the one carried out on a stretcher.

So I do my shopping early, when I can. And when I can't? Well, if you find yourself in a hypermarket carpark and notice a woman sitting behind the wheel of her car chanting, "Om...om...om...," before gathering up her assorted plastic bags and entering the fray, don't judge me, please...

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