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A Life Less Ordinary

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As Spring sets in (finally! Hurrah!), we're reaching that time of year again in expat-family land when friends on rotation announce matter-of-factly that their two- or three- or four-year contract in Russia is coming to an end and that when the school year finishes, they will be packing their bags and braving the journey around MKAD toward the airport for the last time.

Some of them are delighted to be sharing this news; they feel that they can't shake the dust of this city from their shoes soon enough. The long winters, the traffic, the bureaucracy, the language, the traffic, the expense, the long winters, the traffic; it's all too much and they can't wait to move somewhere more comfortable, or warmer, or more user-friendly, or just more like home. Or, indeed, home.

I'm pleased that such people are getting what they want, but a little sorry they didn't enjoy their time here more. They may have made the best of it they could, but these unwilling residents rarely open themselves up to all the city has to offer, preferring instead to stay within their safety zone and limit their exposure to the lows of Moscow living as much as possible. The problem is, if you limit your exposure to the lows, you're unlikely to get

the chance to feel the highs either.

For other expats on rotation, however, leaving Russia is a wrench. This country can get under your skin in a surprisingly short amount of time. Mundane tasks like buying a metro ticket take on an added dimension when you're doing it in the glamorously dingy — yes, a contradiction in terms, I know, but somehow it works — Moscow Metro. Trudging through the underpass from one side of Tverskaya to the other, past the tiny underground kiosks selling everything from stockings to cigarette lighters, from fur hats to chocolate bars — all within a 100-meter stretch — should be a chore but only serves to remind them that, wow — they're in Moscow. Wrapping up properly against the minus-15-degree chill in the winter somehow seems — to them — much more bearable than rushing out into a plus-2-degree morning back home wearing only a raincoat. Even battling rush hour here can seem more of an adventure than it does elsewhere.

Life may not be comfortable as an expat in Moscow — especially when you first arrive — but it's certainly an adventure. And before you know it, many expats come to be living a life less ordinary — or at least, a life less ordinary than the one they left back home — and that can be addictive.

I freely admit to falling into the latter camp and know that when my time comes to move on from here, as it will eventually, I will be left with a sense of unfinished business and a feeling of nostalgia for the rush that living in this city can give you. So saying goodbye to friends is bittersweet; I hate to see them go, but at the same time it's a useful reminder to make the most of the opportunities here before we, too, have to return to a life more ordinary...

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