

The Kids Are All Right

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It has to be said that Russians are not universally perceived as being caring people. A friend told me recently that when her father slipped on some ice and broke his hip here a few years back, the majority of passers-by simply stepped over him, assuming he was drunk.

Certainly, the Muscovite air of purpose, the "get out of my way" attitude, can be overwhelming when you arrive here for the first time and are looking around you with the panicked eyes of a deer in headlights. The customs officials who greet you at the border are cold; the waiters are brusque and rude; the shop assistants clearly have better things to do than to attend to your needs; and anyone in an official uniform is downright intimidating, if not scary.

And yet...

Arrive in Moscow with young children in tow, and the situation is completely different. Strangers will go out of their way to offer them a seat on the crowded metro or to show your family the way to the correct office to get your immigration forms stamped. Elderly museum

attendants will — once they have overcome their innate suspicion of children not clad in snow pants in September — smile benignly and ferret around for cards giving you a translation of the legends on the wall. And the dreaded queue systems... well...

Not long after we moved over here, my sons (then 4 and 6) and I found ourselves in the old Sheremetyevo airport terminal, trying to check in for a flight. It was madness. There were no staff on the three desks assigned to our flight, the crush was getting tighter and tighter, and the minutes were ticking away until the plane was due to leave. Then, when only two check-in staff arrived for the three desks, whatever space there had been between aspiring passengers disappeared as the mass of people surged toward the open desks. It was not a comfortable situation.

Suddenly, though, almost out of thin air, we found ourselves surrounded by an honor guard of babushkas. They pushed and fought their way to the front of the business-class queue, having formed a sort of cordon around the boys and myself, and carried us along with them. Any foreign business-class traveller green enough not to know the score and to question their right to do this was firmly put in their place: It was pointed out that I had young children with me and that they should be ashamed of themselves for not stepping out of the way without being asked. Needless to say, I was not travelling on a business-class ticket. Needless to say, when faced with my security detail of formidable babushkas, the woman at the check-in desk passed the three of us through without comment...

I have to admit that, over the last couple years, I've become accustomed to this preferential treatment when I have the boys with me. Indeed, I now walk straight to the front of boarding queues in airports, and I shamelessly seek out the diplomatic channels with the shortest lines at immigration (although the introduction of the 'pen' system at Domodedovo will probably make that unnecessary from now on, thank heavens). So when recently arriving at Heathrow and dealing with a small boy desperate for a bathroom, with not a working loo in sight and immigration lines of record length, I had no hesitation in walking to the woman at the entrance to the empty Fast Track lane and asking if I and my sons could use it to gain quicker access to the toilets that I knew were just on the other side.

To say that her face was a mask of horrified surprise at my request was an understatement. Go through the Fast Track *without the official right to use it?* Just because my little boy needed the bathroom? The answer was an unequivocal no. Instead, we were sent to the back of beyond — my younger son's legs crossed as he walked — to find a toilet that was open. And I was left asking myself where on earth I had thought I was flying into...

It certainly wasn't Russia.

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