

Pleasing All of the People Some of the Time

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A Russian friend recently asked me to help her select the end-of-year present for our children's class teacher. I knew that this was as much for my expat point of view as for my exquisite taste (noticing that would of course be a neat trick when, like so many foreigners here, I live in a home almost entirely furnished by Ikea). So, I happily agreed and we spent an eventually fruitful couple of hours wandering through Izmailovsky Market in search of the perfect gift.

It took a while, because my friend wanted to make sure we hit the right tone with whatever we chose; our children's class has a fair proportion of pupils with Russian parents whose expectations were for us to buy something sophisticated and memorable as a "goodbye and thank you" gift. I, on the other hand, am a hick expat who loves Russia as much for its brash, in-your-face kitschiness and bling as for its wealth of culture and history — so my expectations were somewhat different.

Plus, if I'm honest, I don't much care what the Russian parents' expectations might be. You can only please all of the people some of the time, and in this case it seemed to me that it was more important to please the teacher — who, like me, is an expat, and without baggage about the impressions other people might form of Russia from a simple end-of-year gift — than to worry about what message the gift might convey.

This seems to be a recurrent situation here: Russians who are showing off their country are often very concerned with ensuring that visitors know there is more to their capital city than matryoshka dolls, Lenin's mausoleum, and vodka. And, of course, there is — far, far more. The cultural opportunities available here are astounding, the number of museums astonishing; hell, even a short trip on the metro will show you that this is a city full of unexpected wonders and marvels. I could wax lyrical for endless pages about the parks, gardens, art galleries, walks, and exhibitions all within easy access of most people here.

But these are all the experiential foundations of happy memories, and we were looking for something to wrap up in pretty paper and ribbons and hand over at the end of the summer term. Something that can easily be bubble-wrapped at the end of the posting; not such an easy call. So it was that when my friend, thwarted in her search for something uniquely Russian that also ticked the boxes marked 'sophisticated' and 'affordable,' turned to me for guidance, I had only one suggestion.

It's not sophisticated. It probably won't impress the local culture vultures. But it is memorable, beautifully crafted, and uniquely Russian, and whilst I'm not going to tell you what we bought — it's not yet the end of term — have a look at the picture at the top of this post and take a wild guess...

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