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Familiarity Breeds Contempt

By Clare Taylor

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One of the best things about returning to Moscow after a summer vacation is that you are reacquainted with some of the more interesting things about living in this city — and you actually notice them.

"Familiarity breeds contempt" runs the old saying, and while the last thing I feel for this city is contempt — "warm respect" would be more apt — I can see how it's possible to become so adjusted to life as an expat in Moscow that you cease to notice the extraordinary, because after living here for a while, it becomes your ordinary. It's a fact of life that what is remarkable when you first arrive in a new culture eventually becomes, well, just the way things are. Life has to be that way in fact; if it wasn't, we would probably never get anything done.

But life as an expat in Moscow is in so many ways extraordinary that it's a shame to become blasé about incidents that leave new arrivals amazed.

For example, I love to take photographs, but only since I arrived in Moscow did it become more than just something I did from time to time. This summer, I traveled to some beautiful

places, but it was not until I was on the way home from Domodedovo Airport and trapped in a taxi for three hours that I was tempted to photograph something other than my children for the first time in two months. What was it, you may ask, that caused me to roll down the window of the car and photograph something on the edge of the MKAD? What could possibly be more noteworthy than acres of rolling hillside covered with olive groves, or majestic castles perched precariously on steep hillsides?

A power station, ladies and gentlemen. A power station. Elsewhere, I wouldn't have given it a second glance, but here in Moscow, someone — or more likely, a team of people — had spent a great deal of time and effort painting the five great funnels in pastel shades. And not just one pastel shade, no; each of them was in a contrasting color, with stripes and checks around their necks. Because obviously, it's all about the accessories; this ***is*** Moscow, after all.

There may of course be a very practical reason for the different colors — it's probably easier to remember "There's a problem with the Green Smoke-stack" than "There's a problem with Smoke Stack No. 2" — but whatever its basis, I filed it under "remarkable" and "only in Moscow," along with the pouting Glamazon in a skin-tight dress who teetered past us at the entrance to the airport on six-inch heels, her driver abandoning the Merc in a tow-away zone to pull her two very large suitcases to the check-in desk. And then there's the babushkas ensconced at tables on the edge of the back roads around Rublyovo, selling glorious flowers from their blossoming gardens to drivers trapped in traffic on their way home, all the while wrapped in thick duvet-coats more apt for minus 5 degrees Celsius than the plus 20 that was actually the case.

I would show you the photograph of the smoke stacks — but on paper they don't look like much. As with so much that is remarkable about Moscow, you really have to see it for yourself.

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