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# Q&A: How a British Banker's Wife Beat Culture Shock

By Andrew McChesney

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Henrietta Challinor

Henrietta Challinor suffered overwhelming culture shock when she left her home in an upscale British village and found herself snorting like a pig in a Moscow supermarket in a desperate attempt to explain the items on her shopping list to the meat-counter attendant.

"We had some fun and games negotiating the grocery shopping. I would stand at the meat counter pointing at varying meats and going 'oink, oink, oink,'" Challinor said, making each "oink" by snorting emphatically through her nose. "The guy just looked at me with a stone-straight face and said, 'Chto?' And then I'm going" — Challinor made frantic bird noises — "and the guy said, 'Nyet.'

Henrietta Challinor

**Education**

1991-92 — Alliance Francaise, Geneva, Switzerland, Diplome de Superior Langue et Culture Francaise
1992-93 — St. Aldates College, Oxford, Britain, bilingual (French/English) business and administration honors diploma
1998-99 — London School of Public Relations, Britain, diploma in PR and reputation management

**Work experience**

2007-Present — Hfcphotography.com, Russia, photographer
2001-06 — Talk of the Town Events, Britain, owner and managing director
1994-2000 — Development Securities, Britain, including assistant to chairman; arts and PR and media coordinator; French properties liaison

**Favorite book**: "Noble House" (1981) by James Clavell
**Reading now**: "Eating for England: The Delights and Eccentricities of the British at Table" (2008) by Nigel Slater
**Movie pick**: "Out of Africa" (1985), directed by Sydney Pollack, and "Chariots of Fire" (1981), directed by Hugh Hudson
**Favorite restaurant**: Roni, 20/1 Ulitsa Petrovka
**Weekend getaway**: Rome

"It was just such a shock moving to Russia," Challinor said, speaking over tea at an Arbat-area restaurant near the supermarket where she had gone shopping after moving here with her husband, a senior British banker, in September 2007.

"I felt completely overwhelmed, unable to cope and really desperate," she said. "I really, really, really hated it. I was very unhappy. And of course if you're unhappy, the children are unhappy. Ryan was at his new job, working hard, busy, busy, busy. It felt like endless nothing."

But then Challinor, a vivacious British native who was born in South Africa and unabashedly acknowledges that she has a tendency in conversations "to hop around like a grasshopper,"

picked up a camera.

With a determination born out of a desire to not only survive but to flourish during her husband's Moscow posting, she captured the seemingly chaotic sights and sounds of her new home — and in the process started to make sense of her surroundings. Her aim-and-shoot method of coping quickly blossomed beyond a therapeutic exercise. Challinor's photos have now been showcased at two solo exhibits at the NB Gallery and are scheduled for a third show in May next year. They also can be found in private and corporate collections, including in the Moscow office of an early backer of her work, U.S. entrepreneur Bernard Sucher.

Challinor, a 40-year-old mother of two boys, ages 8 and 6, sat down with The Moscow Times to reminisce about her love-hate relationship with Russia, to explain why expats need "onion goggles" to live here, and to offer advice to other couples on how to adjust.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

**Q: Why did you move to Russia?**

A: My husband started working four to five days at a time in Moscow when his company expanded its office here in early 2007. I think I knew before he did what was going to happen next.

Ryan came home early from work on a Friday — and he never came home early. He appeared after lunch. I was like, "OK, he's either been fired or he's got some news." It was a lovely April day. We were sitting in the garden, the sun was shining, the daffodils were out.

Ryan said: "I've got something to talk to you about. I've been asked to go and do this job in Moscow."

My immediate response was: "Mmm, I knew that was coming. But I don't know if I can cope with the gray." Frankly, I knew nothing about Russia at all beyond the spy novels that we've all read.

Then I said, "Do you want to go?" and he replied, "I think I do. They want us to go tomorrow for a look-see." I said, "They can wait if they really want you. I mean, we'll go in two weeks' time."

We flew over during the May Victory Day holiday. Everything was a shock. We had an appointment with the British International School, but there was no one there. It poured with rain continuously the whole time we were here. We visited Rosinka and it was like, "Uh-uh." You see, we had moved to our Oxfordshire village a year and a half before that and had gotten used to a quiet country existence. In my head, I thought I was just going to live there for 20 years.

Actually, I don't think too much about something before jumping. I didn't think: How are the children and I going to cope? How much will I see my husband? Is it manageable? What's the exit plan? After the visit to Moscow, I just went home to the U.K. and said "OK."

As we left London, my son Aubrey, who was not yet 3, refused to go through security. He dropped his bag and said: "I'm not going to Russia." We literally had to manhandle him

through. I've learned now that I should listen to him more. He's a very intuitive boy.

I cried all the way to Moscow in the airplane. I returned home in December, and I cried all the way back to Moscow the second time, too. Driving from the airport, I thought, "I can't do this. I hate it. It's a dark road, and I'm drowning."

And now look at me, full of beans, bouncing away. I absolutely love it. I don't love it. I sort of love it, and I sort of hate it. But I think I'm not the only one who feels this way because Russia is a constant contradiction. It's fascinating. My favorite analogy about Moscow is it's a big onion. You peel the layers and it makes your eyes water. But if you can cook and chop it the right way, it can be sweet and delicious. It makes the dish. But get your goggles on. You need to get onion goggles.

**Q: What was the spark that turned you on to photography?**

A: I was so miserable that I looked for things that made me feel better. When I was a pupil at school, I truly believed I didn't have a creative bone in my body in terms of art. I was rubbish at pottery. I hated sewing. And I really wasn't very good at painting or drawing. They didn't do photography. But as you get older and life progresses, you start to learn things by yourself. One thing I love about life is it is a continuously evolving process. You can reinvent yourself several times, although I think the core should always be the same.

Anyway, I've always liked photography, and taking photos was a good way for me to start to explore Moscow. After a year, I was invited to a birthday party. I suppose it was a stroke of luck. I think that's Moscow. There are many strokes of luck here because it's full of fascinating people doing fascinating things. At the party, I met a lovely lady called Natalya Bykova, who runs the NB Gallery. We didn't talk about photographs but about art, and she talked a bit about her gallery.

We stayed in touch after that. A few months later, I told her, "You know, I've been taking photographs. Would you be able to give me your opinion on them?" She was the only person I knew in Moscow at that time who might have an opinion for me. I would have carried on taking photographs no matter what she said, but I think that I work better when I have an impetus or a goal. It motivates me.

Natalya had a good look through absolutely everything, including photographs that I specifically had not wanted to share, and said, "Keep going."

A few months after that, we had another conversation, and I said, "What do you think about me showing my photographs somewhere?" She said, "I'll show them." And so the first exhibition, "Resident Tourist," was born.

**Q: How did photos help you come to grips with Russia?**

A: When I sit nice and cozy in my comfortable car and it's freezing outside, I often think about the old women sitting in the perekhod or on the corner of the street with their begging bowls. I see ordinary people going about their ordinary lives, the thousands of workers on the street, trudging to work in their overcoats in the cold. They walk a mile to the tiny little spaces where they live with eight other people. Then they trudge again. They don't have the luxury that we

have, really. We can escape. We can go on holiday in the sunshine. We're only visiting. Our life doesn't stop here.

When I take photographs, I'm capturing Russia in a still moment that stays. Then I can take the time to reflect.

There's a chap who plays the accordion on the Arbat, and he's been there ever since I first arrived. His shoes are too big, but he plays beautifully. He's got a wonderful, wonderful face. Those lovely eyes, beautiful hands. For me, he's like stillness in the chaos. There's something serene about him. He's not there every day. If you walk down the street, you might see him or you might not. But just when I haven't seen him for a while, he'll reappear. He offers reassurance that, against all the elements, you can survive.

I photographed him on Victory Day in the crowd. But you could pass him by and not notice. It would be a shame to miss him. He was wonderful. There are lots of people like him.

**Q: What else has helped you adapt?**

A: You have to have a daily plan here because that's how you get through a day. My husband loves having a plan, and in the mornings he likes to know what the plan is for the day. But he's not allowed to ask me about it until after at least one cup of tea because I don't really want to have a plan. But you have to have one. Otherwise, the day will overwhelm you, and you'll never get anything done.

When we first arrived, a very seasoned expat with five children who was on her sixth or seventh posting in 20 years said to me: "What is your problem? What's not to like? Sure, it's frustrating and the winter is difficult, but get off it."

I said: "I am so frustrated. I have this list of 20 things to do, and I never get anything done. I am being pushed back at every turn and never getting what I want."

She said: "It's very simple. You only put one thing on your to-do list. Then you do it. You'll achieve it somehow, and then you will have a sense of achievement and feel better about yourself. After that, bravely put two things on your list."

It was like learning to walk. But she was right. I now always give this advice when I see someone struggling. Actually, I can get 10 things done on my list now!

Bernie Sucher also gave me a very good piece of advice when we first got here. He said: "Leave every eight weeks, even if only for 24 hours. Go. Then you can come back and do another round."

**Q: What advice would you offer to stay-at-home expat spouses?**

A: Learn Russian. Even if you don't learn it really well, learn some. Once, my parents came for Christmas and wanted to buy one or two little Russian things. It was hard because I didn't have enough Russian, and without Russian everything is always a big, scary adventure.

About two years later, I went back to the Izmailovo souvenir market because I wanted to buy some of these beautiful, linen tablecloths for my mother for Christmas. I stopped and greeted

two old ladies, and we had this enormous chat. I was there for a half an hour. They got everything out of the boxes. We discussed everything. We talked about the weather. We talked about the children. One lady told me some lovely story about her great-grandmother and how the pattern on the tablecloth had come from her. It was wonderful. It was a completely different experience because I could meet them halfway linguistically.

So my advice is to learn Russian because living here without it would be a very dead experience.

**Q: What would you say to the spouse who brings his or her partner to Russia?**

A: As I see it, the working spouse has a ready-made life. He or she has a focus at the new job and is sheltered from the challenges of starting somewhere new. So I would say: Be understanding. The challenges facing the person who stays at home are as great as and maybe occasionally greater than the ones you face as the new person at the new job. We're experiencing difficulties at home, and we don't have a support network to begin with or a secretary who speaks fluent Russian and English. We don't have anything ready-made when we come, so we have to start with a blank canvas. And if you are at home with children, it also takes time for the children to adjust.

To the spouse who stays at home: Remember that your spouse faces new challenges at work. Doing business in Russia comes with a new rule book. We went to a fancy dress party and saw a guy wrapped in tape. He was red tape. Another guy had bank notes tucked in on all of his sides. He was bribery and corruption. And another person came with just a red square painted on him. He was Red Square. These were the people who worked at offices. None of their spouses who stayed at home dressed like that. They came as Russian brides and Swan Lake.

So work together. If you are understanding and are there for your spouse, then the world's yours, and you can have a most wonderful, wonderful time.

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