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Why I Love Russia (Despite Everything)

By Marilyn Murray

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Moscow? Russia? Is it safe to live there?"

This is the response I often receive when people learn I spend half of the year in Moscow. Many people from the U.S. assume that Russia is a dangerous place and that I, as a single female, should not attempt to live there. When my daughter visited me in 2004 and saw the exterior of my Stalin-era apartment building she gasped and said, "Mother, I can't believe you are living in a place like this!"

Even boxer Mike Tyson shook his head when he came to see me and said, "This is really bad. It's like where I grew up in the slums of Brooklyn."

"Welcome to my hood," I quipped.

The exterior door of my apartment building gets painted now and then, and the babushka who cleans the interior works hard to keep the cracked cement and broken tiles on the floor as free of snow, mud and dirt as possible. The tiny elevator works most of the time but occasionally reeks of spilled alcohol or urine. When I arrived 10 years ago, it was almost impossible to keep

a light bulb in the small hallway outside my apartment door. The darkness, coupled with awareness that our stairwell is a favorite drinking spot for the young men in our building, often draped a veil of uneasiness over me as I struggled to fit my key into the lock. I am aware that many of the robberies here occur from the time you enter the building until you enter your apartment. As I step inside, I always quickly engage all three locks on my door and utter a prayer of thanksgiving for arriving safely.

Despite living in a
run-down
building,
elevators that
smell like urine,
being kept up all
night by noisy,
drunk neighbors
and being robbed
once on the
street, I still love
Moscow.

We have the standard small playground in our courtyard where many of our residents gather day and night. It was cleaned up this year with new playground equipment, flowers and grass. It actually looks quite presentable now. I do feel safer when I come home late at night and know that usually several people will be relaxing in the courtyard. The most apprehensive trek is on a narrow sidewalk between the side of my apartment building and a fence. I have to walk this gauntlet every day to get to the street and the metro. The local alcoholics use this passageway for a urinal and it is literally like trying to navigate in an outhouse. It is unlit so at night it becomes rather treacherous to watch where I step and also be aware of the possible presence of other people. I always am relieved to turn the corner and see our little playground with young lovers sitting on a bench as I head for my apartment door.

My apartment building is next to the metro and thus is a gathering place for young and old. From my fourth-floor windows, I watch a most interesting panorama. In addition to the normal shoppers, families and friends, other characters appear. I awoke one night at 3 a.m. and looked out to see three, black-leather-jacketed men materialize from a large Mercedes. One carried a bulging briefcase, and as they passed directly below me I could see pistols emerging from the waistbands of each man. I knew they probably were making a night deposit in the new bank on the ground floor of our building. On many weekends, I am kept awake all night by the raucous partying below my bedroom window: young men drink, laugh, sing, yell and fight. The following mornings reveal a sea of vodka and beer bottles.

If someone had been watching from my window one afternoon last year, they would have seen me being robbed of my billfold as I exited the small store next to our building. When I realized what happened, I went back inside the store and they took me to the back room to look at their surveillance film. They stated it probably was a couple of young men from the North Caucasus. We scanned the film to find anyone likely to fill that description. But much to our

surprise, we found the thieves were female and not Caucasus native. Since that moment, the store staff now gives me special attention, and even the stock boys greet me and offer to carry my bags.

I have lived in my little apartment in Moscow longer than any one place in my entire life. And despite all the craziness here, I often feel as though I have a passionate love affair with Moscow and Russia. Like any passionate relationship, there are good features and also messy ones. A relationship works if the good outweighs the bad.

The people in Moscow who I consider my friends include the smiling young man in the stand where I buy my weekly rotisserie chicken who always has mine ready when he sees me coming. On numerous occasions I have met him on the street, and he goes out of his way to greet me even if he is with a group of friends. There is the woman who runs the fruit and vegetable kiosk who is always excited when I return to Moscow and leans far out of her window to give me a hug. One time when I entered the small store in the basement of our building, a woman came toward me with a big smile and outstretched arms. I knew she looked familiar but could not place her. At first I thought maybe she was one of my students. But as she hugged me and asked how I was, I realized she was the woman who resided in the little compartment in the corner of the basement where I exchange my dollars for rubles. For years I had only seen her head and arms through a small window, but that didn't help when I tried to identify her outside of her cage.

In the U.S., I do not know my neighbors in the condo building where I live. No one in the supermarket where I shop ever greets me by name or knows when I am in or out of the country. I can travel all over town and rarely see anyone I know, and that city is one-fourth the size of Moscow. Yet in Moscow, I have been in the center of this huge city and have run into as many as five people I know well in one day. It makes me feel very much "at home," and I understand why Moscow is sometimes called "a large village." This exciting, outrageous, captivating and sometimes dangerous city will always own a piece of my heart.

Marilyn Murray is an educator specializing in the treatment of trauma, abuse and deprivation, with more than 2,000 people attending her classes in Russia and other countries from the Commonwealth of Independent States over the past 10 years. Her second book, "The Murray Method," was recently released in English and Russian.

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