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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Moscow Ranks Near Bottom in TripAdvisor Cities Survey

By Breffny Morgan

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Tourists enjoy a sunny day on Red Square. However, 54,000 survey respondents expressed unhappiness with high prices and poor service in Moscow.

Sanctions may come and go, but bad reviews last a lifetime. TripAdvisor, the second most popular travel website, has recently blasted Russia on several counts of being the world's worst travel destination in its yearly Cities Survey.

This is not an overt move by a TripAdvisor editorial team to manipulate a perspective in light of East-West tensions: Rather, this represents organic, grassroots condemnation from a pool of 54,000 TripAdvisor survey respondents from around the globe.

Of the 37 cities on the list, Moscow finished third to last in terms of "best overall experience." Across 16 categories, there were no placements in the top three of any category. There were nine instances of bottom three placement. Moscow, apparently, is the absolute worst for: helpful locals, taxi services and taxi drivers, value for money and hotels. The Moscow Times

recently spoke to a number of Moscow hospitality and tourism industry professionals to get their take on the city's abysmal showing.

"The rating is understandable: the city is expensive, and Russian is not the easiest language to pick up," said Natasha Kuznetsova, co-founder of Cabinet Lounge, a Moscow city center "club office," catering to the business travel community. "But if you are prepared to spend the money, the city has a lot to offer: Great restaurants and varied food, very professional service, plenty of English-speaking locals and amazing historical sites — those are within everyone's budget."

However, Kuznetsova conceded that "Moscow is certainly one of the cities that require preparation: you need to know where to go, where to stay and certainly book your cabs in advance." On the topic of cabs, Moscow still lives up to its received image as a black market hotspot: The Moscow Transport Authority estimates that there are still about 40,000 gypsy cabs operating in the city despite a 2011 law that made them illegal, meaning that there are about four gipsy cabs for each officially registered taxi.

"Moscow and Russia is still a land of mystery, and local knowledge is essential to get the best out of it," Katerina Cronstedt, managing director of Katerina Hotels, said. Ironically, her Katerina Park Hotel has found itself top-rated on TripAdvisor. Cronstedt expressed surprise at Moscow's second-to-last place showing for "family friendliness" in the TripAdvisor survey, remarking that "I know no other city that so frequently has dedicated and staffed play areas for kids in their restaurants."

With Russia's birthrate rising, the perspective of family-friendliness is a matter of Russian national importance, and Moscow public initiatives reflect this. "The fact that the city has provided bicycles for rent in the city is a huge sign we are on the right track," Cronstadt said, adding that with recent renovations, Moscow parks were on an international level yet attracts few foreigners.

If parks and other leading amenities are not promoted to tourists, it begs the question as to why? Does Moscow not need tourism? As an energy-exporting superpower, tourism may appear small change to the country's coffers. Russia has 23 million visitors per year, yet only 9.7 percent of them are tourists, according to the WolframAlpha database. TripAdvisor and other review sites generally are bastions of leisure appraisals and represent only this small fraction of Moscow visitors.

"Most of our foreign travelers have been to many destinations," Privet Hostels CEO Daniel Mishin said. With visas being bureaucratically intimidating and the legacy of the Cold War still hanging, Russia still remains low on many people's list of places to visit. Hoteliers like Mishin seem to find that accomplished travelers tend to be the ones who visit Russia, and accomplished travelers make for picky travelers and thorny reviewers.

There is another, more empirical defense of the city: in the report, Moscow placed healthily in the middle of the pack in the categories of culture, street cleanliness, and public transportation. To see this in action, one need only travel via the metro with its daily ridership of 6.7 million people, with its vaulted marble ceilings, chandeliers, hourly-swept tiled corridors and forever functional and punctual trains that often boast in-carriage art exhibitions.

From the data, it seems that the West looks East with a highly critical eye. Conversely, especially when it comes to catering for visitors, East looks West for comparison and inspiration. Karina Grigoryan, Partner at the Maison Dellos Group said that "We are looking for chefs, ingredients: It is difficult to achieve what the West takes for granted," adding that she felt Russian restaurants were now a match for international rivals. "Service in Moscow is on a real high. No London attitude, no Paris swagger, no Asian fuss. We respect the customer, indulge him. We do not shoo anyone out of the restaurant at closing time; we wait until the last patron decides to go ... We are number one in hospitality and soulfulness."

While most Western tourists may not agree with Grigoryan on the benefits of Russian service, Moscow restaurateurs and hoteliers may well benefit from the decline in the value, making the capital marginally cheaper for Western visitors. And if it is any consolation for Russia's capital, its longtime rival St. Petersburg wasn't included in the survey at all.

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