

Moscow 'Tourist Police' Elusive as Initiative Takes Effect

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'Tourist Police' armed with helpful demeanors and foreign language skills were set to hit Moscow on Tuesday.

Despite the announcement that a force of 100 so-called tourist police would begin monitoring Moscow's most iconic destinations on Tuesday, confusion reigned among the officers patrolling Red Square.

The Moscow police department announced earlier that a league of officers armed with foreign language proficiency and tourist-friendly interpersonal skills would take to the streets to patrol the city center.

When approached at random with touristy questions in English about the locations of popular landmarks like St. Basil's Cathedral, Sokolniki Park and the Izmailovo Market, police officers around Red Square found themselves unable to assist.

A Moscow Times reporter went undercover to see whether police would be able to direct her to famous Moscow landmarks.

"This is the first time I'm hearing anything about this," one officer said.

When asked whether Moscow actually boasts a tourist police force, another officer responded: "not yet."

Only one of the eight police officers approached proved capable of assisting an English-speaker.

"These are not classic tourist police like you might see in Spain during vacation season," said Sergei Spilko, chairman of the Moscow Committee for Tourism and Hospitality Management. "The format is a little different. The police officers underwent basic language training and they were taught how to best communicate with foreigners. This is only the beginning. I think it would be possible to expand this operation in the future."

The Moscow Police had not responded to requests for comment by the time of publication.

In the summertime, Moscow's tourist police are mandated to patrol heavily touristed parts of the city around the clock.

They will be assisted on a part-time basis by 30 volunteers from the Moscow State Tourist Industry Institute with knowledge of a variety of foreign languages, including English, German, French, Spanish, Mandarin and Japanese.

"When there are tourists, there is work," said Vladimir Berezin, the director of the Moscow State Tourist Industry Institute's volunteer center. "And when you have work, you earn a salary. Our students understand this. So we are trying our best to make the city a more tourist-friendly place."

The Moscow State Tourist Industry Institute runs a separate volunteer program aimed at assisting non-Russian speaking tourists in need. Easily recognizable by their bright red "Welcome to Moscow" T-shirts, volunteers can be found scattered around the city center.

"Russians are very friendly people once they get to know you," Berezin said. "But they don't always smile at you when you are not acquainted with them. Among many things, we teach our students how to smile."

In a TripAdvisor survey asking tourists to rank 37 cities in terms of the "best overall experience," Moscow finished third to last. The Russian capital also finished last in the "helpful locals" category. The survey, published in May, was based on the opinions of 54,000 respondents.

In 2013, 5.6 million tourists visited Moscow. Foreigners from non-CIS countries, whose lingua franca is often English, outnumbered citizens of CIS states among Moscow's tourists last year, according to municipal authorities.

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