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Deciphering Moscow's Digital Dating Scene

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Is dating by app easier than dating in person? Some expats give it a try.

I'm out to lunch with James when he notices the pretty girl sitting at the table next to us using Tinder.

"She's going to see my profile!" he whispers to me anxiously.

I peer over. The girl is tossing aside preening man after preening man with the flick of her thumb. She stops to take a closer look at a man in trunks with washboard abs.

James, whose brief visit to Russia saw him flooded with a deluge of matches on the app, starts twitchily checking his own profile to see if he's received the swipe of approval. The idea of turning around and simply saying "Hi" to the girl is unimaginable.

Welcome to the clandestine virtual battlefields of Tinder.

The use of Tinder, which enjoys ubiquity and notoriety as a dating app in Europe and the U.S., is growing in Russia. The app works like this: You create a profile and the app shows you photos of people in your general vicinity who are also on the app. If you would be open to going out with them, you swipe their photo to the right; if not, you swipe to the left. If you swipe right on someone who also swipes right on you, you are "matched" and have the opportunity to communicate via the app's messaging system.

I got myself a Tinder account and assembled a group of experienced users to help me make the most of it. When I ask my friends Hans, Vinnie and Arkadoosh why they use Tinder, they answer to "meet women" — using neither of those words.

The Photos

"They're almost *never* as good as they look in their profile pictures," Hans, 25, warns me.

Girls put a lot of effort into their profile pictures, which are frequently glossy, high-resolution snaps taken by high-end cameras. Headshots of girls gazing pensively off-camera are common. Slap on a black-and-white filter for extra emo points. Also popular: girls in summer dresses posing amid flowers and trees; bikini shots standing knee-deep in the ocean; unsmiling close-ups with a palace, a cathedral, a London telephone box, a mountain, the Eiffel tower; provocative selfies taken in bed, with frilly nightclothes and pouting lips; duckface.

Walking around Moscow, it's easy to catch many of these photos in the making. Many profiles contain supplementary links to Instagram accounts where a greater wealth of artsy, filtered photos await perusal.

In person, these Tinder dates often turn out to be shorter, more casual, less done up than their photos. My friends see nothing wrong with this, but every one of them has a story of a date who turns up looking substantially different than her profile pic.

In contrast to the obvious effort put into the photos, the profile descriptions tend to be a list of personal attributes, hobbies, interests and philosophies boiled into a jumbled mosaic. A great deal of Russian women on Tinder invariably list yoga and traveling as key interests. One bafflingly lists "Stephen Hawking" as an interest, before "music" but after "reading."

One profile I saw was communicated almost entirely through hashtags: "#freedom #love #chilling #universe #personal development #openmind #art #vegetarian #positive vibes #meditation."

It's also fairly common to toss tiresome platitudes and aphorisms into the descriptions like "Never look back," "Follow your heart," "Let it be" — the sort of thing people inanely tattoo in cursive on their wrists.

The Dates

I match with Alya, and after several rounds of messaging, we agree to meet.

Alya, 22, is a cheerful girl who laughs loud and often. She is "totally in love with Tinder" and prefers it to meeting men in clubs, as it better allows her to select her "type" of man.

Indeed, it seems to be that while men hungrily swipe right, right, right, approving nearly every girl who appears, girls ruthlessly swipe left, left, left, filtering out men based on their own esoteric criteria.

My second date, Elena, 32, also prefers Tinder to clubbing. A busy woman with a lot of responsibilities, Elena often doesn't have the time to go out and meet lots of men, so Tinder is ideal.

And whom do Russian girls want to meet? Tinder reviews I read by Russian women online often excitedly brag about their ability to use the app to line up a string of dates with foreign men. Vinnie, who is Brazilian, feels that many of the girls match him because they find him exotic.

Many female Tinder uses in Russia ignore entirely Tinder's ostensible purpose as a hook-up app. Indeed, several profiles state a broader desire to simply meet people and make friends. In some cases this a smokescreen used as a pretext to more easily dispose of unwanted attention. However, it is frequently genuine — many profiles warn users that they are married (in some cases wedding photos make it onto the profile) and that they are just looking for friendship and interesting conversations.

Making friends is why Anya, my third date, uses Tinder. A charming and intelligent 20-year-old with superb English, Anya doesn't like going out drinking, so Tinder provides an ideal way to meet people. Prior to Tinder, she used a now-defunct Russian website called Cinemate that matched up strangers who didn't want to go to the movies alone.

I match with Maria, 22, who likes my smile. She flakes on our Friday date, but at 4 a.m. on Saturday, she spots me at a club and approaches, excitedly introducing herself as "Maria from Tinder!"

Meeting a Tinder match by chance in real life was a little strange and unsettling. I wasn't even keen to stick around and talk, the club just felt like the wrong place.

Better Than Real Life?

Hans agrees with me that it's easier to meet women in real life. He also feels he is able to better attract women more suited to his liking by popping on a suit and doing his thing in Moscow's nightclubs. He finds the texting tiresome, and feels that Tinder robs flirting of the crucial non-verbal element.

Arkadoosh disagrees. Although he loves going out, he's not a dancer and finds it hard to talk to girls in clubs. For him, Tinder offers the perfect solution. "It cures boredom," he explains. He has taken to filling his weekday evenings with Tinder dates to theaters and art galleries. He relishes the opportunity to practice his Russian, meet Russians and explore Moscow.

Vinnie is content with both approaches. Whether he meets women through Tinder, in a classroom or at a club, they all end up on the same set-menu date for Salsa dancing.

I ask my friends if they have anything they would like to say to the Russian girls of Tinder.

Vinnie: Stop posting Instagram links! Post more pictures where you're smiling.

Hans: I have nothing to say to them.

Arkadoosh: Love me.

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