

A Step Back in Time

Across the street from the Pushkin Museum is another treasure trove of art

By [Grace Watson](#)

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Moscow offers plenty of choices for lovers of art and culture, and everyone should visit the Tretyakov Gallery and the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts. But across the street from the Pushkin Museum is another treasure trove of art — not the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, a treasure itself — but the space beneath it. The lesser-known Moscow Art Center, just steps from the Kropotkinskaya metro station, displays dozens of Russian masterpieces.

On Saturday it felt like our group of 20 had been invited to see someone's well-loved collection. In a way, we had. The acquisitions, originally owned by individuals and pre-revolutionary aristocracy, spent the Soviet period elsewhere. They later returned — sometimes with difficulty — to reclaim their place in Russia's history, a stirring past our

tour guide eagerly shared.

Our guide, Liza – knowledgeable, approachable, and passionate about art – told us about the evolution of icon frames (once unassuming metal overlays used for protection, then elaborate, jewel-encrusted displays of wealth), inspiring new appreciation for this Russian art form. We learned why Catherine the Great was portrayed unconventionally wearing pants: She loved showing off her legs. And the discovery that one of Ivan Shishkin's peaceful landscapes had once hung on the wall at secret police chief Lavrenty Beria's apartment gave the work a chilly dimension its renowned author hadn't intended.

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Recently opened in 2015, this gallery of Russian paintings, sculptures and decorative objects seems as if it has been here for much longer. The rooms' themes ("The Treasury," "The Theater Room") and ambient components emphasize what they house, all lit beautifully and with natural wooden benches in all the right places. If you stay long, you're bound to hear the chiming of bells from the Cathedral above.

The tour, neither rushed nor tedious, lasted just over an hour, a thorough introduction to what warranted further perusal. English speakers will appreciate the bilingual guides and signage (in all but the temporary exhibition hall).

The Center also holds frequent concerts and other events, held in spaces surrounded by works of art.

After stocking up on souvenirs, we walked the few blocks to the restaurant called Professor Puf. The restaurant's owner, dedicated to both food and history, unearths bygone recipes and updates them to suit modern tastes. Its amusing name is in homage to Russia's first food critic.

Our large group was ushered to the cavernous downstairs hall and brought jasmine and barberry mulled wine. Most guests went for traditional Russian comfort food to fit the cozy surroundings. Steaming venison pelmeni (459 rubles) and cheesy lyapun (399 ruble), a forgotten, pizza-type dish, soon had me questioning my pumpkin salad order.

Alas, the servers were a bit overwhelmed by our crowd. I was told only too late that my salad unfortunately wouldn't be joining the party. Lucky for me, there were pelmeni to go around.

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