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The Cranky Tourist's Russian Phrasebook

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Без укропа: hold the dill

Hey, football fans, welcome to Russia! By now you have discovered that the cities are modern metropolises with all the comforts of home, or at least plenty of malls, bars, pizza parlors, and sushi bars. That's not to mention all those spectacular museums packed with masterpieces; or the stages where some of the best musicians, dancers, and actors in the world perform; or the beautiful countryside. Hey, we told you so!

But then there's the language. Unless you come from another Slavic country — and even if you do — Russian is tough. Sign language and smiles will only get you so far. Phrasebooks lie. They bear no resemblance to actual speech. Here is a True Guide to essential Russian.

Greetings. Здравствуйте! Как вы поживаете? (Hello! How are you?) Forget you ever saw this. No one has said this since 1947 except for two librarians and the old lady lives on the third floor and thinks that sweet Nicky is still on the throne. Besides, do you really want to deal with that consonant cluster? No way. Stick with Привет! (Hi!) if you are young and Добрый день (Good day!) if you are not.

Good-bye: До свидания! Easy! Everyone knows this, and you can use it for "good-bye" but it really means "Until our next meeting." Which is even cooler, right? That other thing everyone says that sounds like popcorn popping? Пока! (Bye! See you!). Sometimes пока gets turned into the slangy покедово or покудово. It can also be repeated in quick succession — Пока пока пока — when it's 4 a.m. and really, really time to go.

How do you address people? This is an oddly unsatisfying aspect of an otherwise rich language. In the old days — before the 1917 Revolution — people addressed their fellow country-men and –women as if they were members of one big family. A young girl was дочка (daughter) and an old man — отец (father). The upper class was addressed as сударь (sir) or сударыня (miss, ma'am), now used ad nauseam in fancy cafes and restaurants to imitate Ye Olde Russe. Господин (mister) and госпожа (miss, missus) were used before names, and господа (gentlefolk, ladies and gentlemen) was the polite way to address any group of men

and women of the upper classes.

During the Soviet period everyone became товарищ (comrade), unless they were called гражданин (citizen, male) or гражданка (citizen, female). If you got addressed that way by a cop on the street, it was like the school principal calling you by your full name — that is, a sign that you were in big trouble.

Now comrades are out, but nothing much came in. So to get the eye of the young woman waitress you shout Девушка! (Girl!). If you have the bad linguistic luck of having a male waiter, you shout Молодой человек! (Young man!) If this doesn't work, try Будьте добры! (Would you be so kind!) Unless you want a black eye (синяк), do not whistle.

Most important all-purpose word: Пожалуйста (please, you're welcome). Say it when you want something: Пожалуйста! (Please!). Or in response to спасибо (thank you): Пожалуйста! (You're welcome). Or when you stand up to give someone your seat on the metro: Пожалуйста! (If you please!) Or even when you hand someone his bag: Пожалуйста! (Here you go!)

Most deceptive phrase: чуть-чуть. In dictionaries this means "just a little bit," what you say when you have already eaten a week's worth of calories but that пирожок (pie) tastes so good you'll take one tiny sliver more. Or when you'll take just a tad more vodka because: World Cup. That's what it means to you. What it means to your hostess or waitress is the largest serving they can possibly heap on your plate or pour in your glass.

Укроп (dill). If you did not grow up eating dill, you may not like it, and you are in for a rough time. In Russia dill finds its way into almost every soup, salad, meat or fish dish, savory pastry or side dish you are served. You think I'm kidding? They put it on pizza.

Let us pause to give our Italian readers a chance to recover.

If you don't want dill in your food, say без укропа (without dill), and say it early and often. Без сметаны (no sour cream) may also come in handy, along with без майонеза (hold the mayo).

Since Russians tend to be very generous, practice saying no: Нет. (No.) Не не не. (Heck, no.) Не надо! (Don't!)

But if you want more, lean back and use your all-purpose word: Пожалуйста!

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