The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Confessions of a World Cup Jailbird

The inhabitants of World Cup jails are less nefarious than you might think.

By Molly Zuckerman

June 28, 2018



Vladimir Kondratov / Interpress / TASS

I don't even like football.

But since I happened to be in St. Petersburg during the World Cup, and since my friend's friend just happened to be flogging a spare ticket because she was sick, I figured there were worse ways to spend my Tuesday night. I set off anticipating a night of warm, expensive beer and ringing eardrums.

As we approached the security check at the stadium, my friend slipped "my" FAN ID around my neck and handed me "my" ticket. "I'm going to be 'Nastya' now?" I asked, looking down at a picture of a blue-eyed, brown-haired girl. (I do actually have blue eyes, but unfortunately

not brown hair.) “Sure, sure,” my distracted friend said. “I can’t wait to get inside and paint my face.”

I was immediately stopped by a young woman checking tickets. First, she asked me to back up, then she looked me up and down, then she called over her partner to get a second opinion. “This isn’t the same chin,” someone said as they scrutinized me and my FAN ID in turn. I stayed calm even as a swarm of around 30 security and police officers gathered to peer intently into my still relatively calm face and apparently foreign chin.

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At this point, I saw no reason to give up. After all, I was invoking my experience as an 18-year-old in the United States trying to get into a bar with an older friend’s ID. The bouncer, upon noticing that I wasn’t “Angela Lee” or some equally ridiculous moniker, would send me on my way with a “better luck next time.”

But this is Russia. So when the head of security took the ingenious step of looking in my wallet and found a two-year old university ID with a name on it that was neither “Nastya” nor Russian, I was not sent home. Instead, I was hustled into a detention center underneath the stadium where I was to stay for the next five hours, familiarizing myself with the seedy types who inhabit World Cup jail.

We were not an especially nefarious bunch. There was me, the confused American, an equally confused Russian grandfather-type with an electric-blue wig (I never found out what he had done), three drunkards, a Mexican fan who had unfortunately lent her sick daughter’s FAN ID to her Spanish-speaking tour guide and the Spanish-speaking tour guide.

Most of us managed to stay on the far side of the actual barred cages (one drunkard hit a police officer for no apparent reason and was unceremoniously shoved inside), which were filled with the aforementioned drunkard and one incredibly depressed looking foreign fan who seemed to be in there for the sole reason that he didn’t speak Russian.

One by one, we gave our stories and fingerprints to the head officer, who shook his head over our naivety about the strictness of FIFA’s rules. This process was going smoothly until the youngest drunkard adamantly refused in broken English to admit he spoke Russian.

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Another snag was prompted by the older gentleman, who had requested a medical envoy for his diabetes. Drunkard number two, sensing an opportunity in this, began shouting about his high blood pressure and the possibility that he could spontaneously have some sort of attack without a doctor present. Another medic was dutifully called, a blood pressure cuff was applied and no one died.

When it was my turn to be fingerprinted, I joked easily with the young man using the both high-tech and poorly functioning fingerprinting machine. Not in uniform, the man’s shirt read “Greasy Monkey Garage and Repairs,” which I translated literally to his and his partner’s

delight.

Once everyone had been put into the system, we were herded into one of the giant, barred, bulletproof riot police vans, where we sat on the back benches (un-seatbelted) as we jostled over St. Petersburg's potholes and took selfies with our arresting officers.

After arriving at the police station to pay our $50 fines, we were asked to wait around for 20 more minutes for some bureaucratic Russian reason. Drunkard number two had apparently had enough and covertly called Russian emergency services on his cellphone, whispering his complaint of "high blood pressure induced by police arrest." I left the police station at 2 a.m., $50 lighter, to the sound of approaching sirens. My friend met me outside with a burger and an unused 20,000-ruble bribe.

Now I really don't like football.

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