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# What Do They Say About Moscow?

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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*Москва: Moscow*

This weekend Moscow celebrates День города (City Day), which is actually a misnomer. It's not a day of celebration, but a city-wide, all-weekend festival, with games and contests for kids, free concerts, special events in every museum, hundreds of walking tours, more free concerts, food stands all over, spectacular fireworks, even more free concerts, dancing in the streets, wild theater events, outdoor cinema, and — just in case things get boring — an election.

Короче (to make a long story short): on City Day Moscow is transformed into a 2,500-square-kilometer amusement park visited by 12 million people, which is really fun if you like hanging out with 12 million of your closest personal friends in a non-stop noise-fest.

I'm not so crazy about noise and crowds. But I do appreciate the opportunity to think about Moscow and its myths. Do other cities around the world have dozens of expressions about them? American cities certainly have distinct characters and nicknames, but other than a "New York minute" I can't even think of another expression involving a U.S. city.

But Moscow is another matter. First of all, it has epithets. It not merely столица нашей Родины (the capital of our Homeland), it's Москва белокаменная, златоглавная (white-stone, golden topped Moscow), so named for the white stone and whitewashed walls of the Kremlin and golden church cupolas.

Москва — матушка. (Moscow is our mother.) Москва — сердце России (Moscow is the heart of Russia). Москва — не город, а целый мир (Moscow is not a city but an entire world). Москва — царство (Moscow is a kingdom) in and of itself.

But also: Москва — большая деревня (Moscow is a big village). The origins and even original meaning of this expression is not clear, but now it's used when you run into your friends at a bar or when your friend across town knows you got a haircut before your mother does.

Moscow has its own origin myths, although some were borrowed from other cities: Не в день

Москва построена (Moscow wasn't built in a day) or Не разом Москва строилась (Moscow wasn't built all at once). Now, of course, Moscow streets aren't even built in a month. They are built, and rebuilt, and re-rebuilt almost all year, every year. This might alter another expression: Москва создана веками, Питер – миллионами (Moscow was built over centuries; Petersburg was built with millions).

There are a lot of expressions that differentiate Moscow from other cities in the Russian empire. My personal favorite is Новгород — отец, Киев — мать, Москва — сердце, Петербург — голова (Novgorod is the father, Kiev is the mother, Moscow is the heart and Petersburg is the head) — which neatly explains 2000 years of Russian history.

Despite Moscow's status as the heart and soul of the nation, other sayings establish Moscow as a city of trade and business. Москва людна и хлебна. (Moscow is filled with people and wealth.) В Москве всё найдёшь, кроме отца родного да матери. (In Moscow you can find anything but your father and mother.)

But it's not all business in the capital: Славится Москва невестами, колоколами да калачами (Moscow is famous for its brides, bells and bread — specifically, a soft sweet bread.) It's the place you go to if you want to kick up your heels: Поеду в Москву разгонять тоску (I'm going to Moscow to shake off the blues.) And then there's this: В Москве каждый день праздник (Every day in Moscow is a holiday). It once meant that there was plenty of fun to be had in the city. Now it means that the city government is making Moscow the festival-capital of the world.

But folk wisdom has it that Moscow is a tough city, expensive and uncaring. В Москву идти — последнюю деньгу нести (If you go to Moscow, bring every last kopek.) Москва слезам не верит (Moscow doesn't believe tears). This expression originally meant that the out-of-towners who came weeping and pounding their breasts to petition the tsar for help or mercy were not convincing to the jaded members of the court. They'd seen rivers of crocodile tears. Now it means: Don't whine. Москва не по ком не плачет (Moscow doesn't cry for anyone). Москва по чужим бедам не плачет (Moscow doesn't cry over other people's sorrows).

After a while, many out-of-towners long to go back home, where the long arm of Moscow can't reach: Москва деревне не указ (Moscow's word isn't law in the village). And besides: Москва — царство, а наша деревня — рай (Moscow may be a kingdom, but our village is heaven.)

In the end: Хороша Москва, но не дома. (Moscow is magnificent, but it's not home.)

Almost of millennium of Moscow sayings — as true today as they were when they first appeared.

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