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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Flying with Dostoevsky

Reflecting while cruising at an altitude of 10, 000 feet.

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I am someone who, when push comes to shove, probably falls into the category of a frequent flyer.

Like anyone who spends long hours on planes and in airports, I have developed a habit of paying attention to small details. My particular pastime is to note down the names planes I am flying on have been named after.

Initially, I didn't have a particular goal — I kept track of the planes just for the sake of statistics, not much different from when I collected postal stamps or themed sugar packets.

Eventually the list got longer. Some names kept turning up again and again while others were new and rare. After a while, I had enough data to come up with some conjectures.

It is not unusual for airlines to name their fleet after attributes of their country as a way to customize airplanes and give them an identity. In some countries, you'll see planes which carry the names of parks, squares or cities of various sizes. I remember that, many years ago, Air France used to put the names of famous French chateaus on its Boeing 707s — which added a luxurious flavor to airline travel.

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But Russia stands out in terms of how often its planes are named after famous people, rather than places or anything else.

Luckily, Russia has plenty of luminaries to choose from. But who makes the cut and who doesn't is an interesting topic in and of itself and provides fodder for reflection — while cruising at an altitude of 10, 000 feet — on Russia's place in the world.

Since I started this list seven years ago, I have flown on planes named after Mstislav Rostropovich — music is king in the air, it seems — four times. Three times I traveled on planes named after Vasily Kandinsky, Ivan Shishkin and Vladimir Mayakovsky.

One of the first conclusions I reached was: Scientists and musicians have the greatest professions. They are practically immune to political changes and personal preferences. They're there to stay, once and for all. This is what our country can offer the rest of the world.

Neophytes can enjoy musicians like Tchaikovsky, while connoisseurs will appreciate, say, Mussorgsky.

Both are national treasures and are strong Russian contributions to world heritage that are recognized and accepted across borders. And the good news is that their merits can easily be defined and explained to foreigners who might not be familiar with them.

According to my list, Russian planes are most often named after scientists, cosmonauts and explorers, which makes sense as all of them work with facts that contribute to an objective reality.

When looking at these names, you realize that at least in one area we can find common ground. In tumultuous times, this is a refreshing thought. We disagree as a nation on many things from our past and we are still searching for basic unifying ideas but here, on the side of a plane, you can find mutual consensus. This brings with it a pleasant feeling of community.

More than once, the person whose image can be seen on the side of a plane has made me chuckle. There is something amusing about boarding a plane named after Gogol or Dostoevsky, the authors of such classics as "Dead Souls" and the "Possessed." Pushkin, Tolstoi and Turgenev seem most appropriate for long-haul flights, given their writing style.

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Let's also not forget about important questions like: "What would these people themselves

have thought?" Could a decorated writer like Iosif Brodsky imagine such a turn in his posthumous career – his name in blue letters on an A330 flying across the Atlantic to his beloved New York City?

Or, how many passengers still feel uneasy when they board a plane named after Andrei Sakharov – who only 30 years ago was a persona non grata?

And then there are the small nuances — for instance it apparently is better to use the words "famous goalkeeper" rather than of "sportsman" when describing legendary footballer Lev Yashin.

The best thing about all of this is that it spreads basic knowledge — a precious asset these days. After recently returning from Volgograd, I looked up the name of Pavel Cherenkov, who turned out to have been a physicist and Nobel Prize winner.

When flight attendants — who generally announce the plane's name over the loudspeaker in a neutral, monotonous voice — make a pronunciation mistake, I usually correct them before disembarking. I was especially irked when one of them decided that "Nemirovich" was the patronymic of Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, the founder of the Moscow Art Theater. In fact, I explained, he just had a double-barreled last name.

But you can hardly blame airline staff. Most of these names are buried in the depths of history.

So the next time you fly, think about the story behind the name on your plane. It may seem like a trivial matter but it has a big impact. As for Russia, hopefully, common sense will triumph and I won't find myself on a plane named after Ivan Grozny.

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