

# **RUSSIA – Advice from Fulbright Alumni**

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## **Russian Language**

Embrace it! Russians are proud of their culture and rightly so. Knowing Russian helps but if you don't, make sure to have good solid local contacts to guide you.

Learn as much Russian as you can. Try to find a native speaker to practice with.

Russia can be a challenging country, depending on your fluency in the Russian language and your familiarity with Russian customs. My first recommendation would be to familiarize yourself as much as possible with the Russian language, at the very least mastering the Cyrillic alphabet.

It is very helpful to know the language.

It is worth the effort required to learn the Cyrillic alphabet before arriving in Russia. This makes it possible to figure out street signs, bus destinations, name plaques, and maps.

For living outside the major cities it is definitely necessary to understand and speak some basic Russian.

No English! As I conduct research and engage in social activities, I use only the Russian language. People here more often than not take this as a sign of respect and appreciate the effort that I go to to accommodate them, rather than expecting them to accommodate me. I participate in the meetings of several NGOs and their "club meetings", take classes at the linguistic university with Russian master's students, go to public lectures and academic-themed clubs. I'm never home! And I try to accept as many invitations as possible.

I found difficulty with the language (signs menus and directions for example), but that is my fault for not knowing Russian.

Even though I speak NO Russian, I encountered negligible difficulties as a surprising (to me) percentage of Russians speak some English.

Like anywhere else in the world, facility in the language opens doors; I strongly recommend continuing language instruction during the tenure of one's Fulbright, unless one is already fluent.

My only suggestion for future Russian ETAS would be an obvious one- namely to work as hard as you can to learn and review Russian before you depart. I wish I had reviewed more before coming.

## **Local Culture(s)/Local Living**

Soyot and Buryat culture is unique, interesting, very warm and generally welcoming; far too much so to adequately and properly discuss here. Those that plan to travel to these unique places in the Urals, should do their homework and travel prepared. Nonetheless, I found the local hospitality and food to be outstanding. Many farmers and producers in the very remote Villages were always curious as to what brought me to their region/village. I had the opportunity and privilege to visit several remote Schools in Russia, and was always greeted by young students and faculty alike who wanted to test their English speaking skills with a native speaker. Most all were very interested in my country and what I thought of

their country. Be prepared for unique facilities (Turkish type bathrooms, even outhouses and no running water) unusual foods and customs, questions about your politics and values. Expect to entertain questions relating to politics and country rumors. Exercise understanding and patience. The most significant hurdle was the language; realistically this was not an issue at all as many of the younger university students and villagers spoke English. In the situations where they did not we usually found a way to communicate with little issue. Relax, have fun, take pictures, laugh and visit enjoy/embrace your newly-found curiosities. Be flexible, adaptable, creative and open to change and others. Try everything once maybe twice, think outside the box, say thank-you, make eye-contact smile and enjoy the trip in what might very well be that a once-in-a-lifetime-experience.

The Altai is a marvelous mix of cultures and people. About 50% Russian, the Altai indigenous people have five nations. Plus there are students and faculty from Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Egypt, Uzbekistan and more. All have incredible stories to share and rich cultures.

The people are genuinely friendly, and I always felt safe wherever and whenever I went out. There are a wide variety of restaurants to suit any taste or budget, some of which are American.

The main recommendation I have with regard to local culture is to be patient. You can't expect things in Russia to work the way that they do back home. Layers of bureaucracy are thick and even when they're not, procedures that seem simple to you in the context of renting or school or work, may indeed have legitimate difficulties in Russia. If you can remain good-natured and considerate about them, you'll win the admiration of the locals and learn a lot about how the place really works.

Expect that certain conveniences may not be available there, while others, such as public transportation in the major cities, are plentiful and inexpensive.

If you're in Novosibirsk, take advantage of the Theater. Novosibirsk Opera & Ballet Theater is one of the best in the country (and hence, for ballet, one of the best in the world), and tickets are inexpensive. There are also good local theaters, a Philharmonic, and Musical Comedy Theater, all worth patronizing. The city has a nice zoo, 150r for adults, which I also recommend, though they do move many of the animals inside during the winter months. The circus and puppet theater are also popular, but the children's theater has fewer shows for children than it used to 10 years ago.

Go to the theater, etc, as much as you can!

I love Moscow, I think it's crazy, chaotic, expensive, rude, wet, and the traffic is insane. I had one frappuccino at a Starbaks (Cyrillic spelling) and when I realized it cost twice as much as it would have at home, I also realized it was my last.

Travel is a hassle. ATM's work well. Housing is expensive.

Some good advice I got from a previous grantee, and that I would give, is to adjust your expectations! You're in Russia! Apartments aren't the same, dealings with people and bureaucracy take time, but these are easy to adapt to when you know they're coming - and it's all part of learning to live in the culture (I love Russian apartment buildings!).

It is annoying that smoking is so embraced here... there is smoking sections in every restaurant. Or I should say, that in some restaurants there are non-smoking sections.

I really expected the winter to be colder and more horrible by the way it was described but it really isn't any worse than Minnesotan winter.

### **Interacting with Russians**

I found that while the average man on the street was indifferent, at best, to strangers, once the locals were acquainted with you for a few minutes it was as if you were a member of their family. They would do absolutely anything possible, including literally giving you the shirt off of their backs, to assist you.

You are expected to negotiate for nearly everything you pay for in the country, from cab rides to gloves, to fruit in the local markets. Be prepared to negotiate, or get assistance from a helpful local. In fact the best thing you can do is ask your host institution to make sure you have a native person to assist you in some of your daily needs such as arranging transportation beyond the use of buses and trains.

Professional artists in Krasnoyarsk were warm, interested in my artwork and me and supportive of events that I presented. Also, local residents displayed active curiosity and were welcoming.

You may hear a lot before you come hear about vodka drinking, but socially this is actually less important in most contexts than taking tea. Being invited to stay for tea with a group means that you have been accepted as one of them.

Arrive in Russia prepared to give presents to both men and women who host various activities for you. Accept hospitality when offered, as it is rude not to.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, I found most Russian strangers to be quite open and willing to help if the situation called for it -- getting help with directions, how to accomplish some every day task, etc. We stayed on for the summer after our teaching was finished. June/July turned in to the month of dachas, with multiple invitations from Russian friends. It was great, but also grueling in some ways. You have to like roughing it. 1. Be open minded. 2. Be sensitive. 3. Be creative.

Russians are cold to strangers be they foreigners or their own countrymen. You will "belong" to whomever cooperated with Fulbright to bring you to Russia. This may make others at your institution feel that they cannot approach you socially or professionally, so you must work to approach them.

People are friendly, even though they don't say "hi" on the streets. Get used to shaking hands for "hi" and "bye" with most of your colleagues.

One thing that continues to be a challenge for me is gender relations in Russia, which carry a much different set of expectations on both sides than we're used to in America; I think that I am far from alone in saying that it can be difficult for American women in their 20's to relate to many Russian women at the same age. In addition, the notion of male/female friendship is less developed in Russia, making it difficult to have male friends.

Russia also does not have the notion of 'political correctness' we have, and people often make remarks about racial and sexual minorities that here would be seen as off-color or offensive. For me, the best way of dealing with this is neither ignoring it, nor acting confrontational, but to gently ask questions about why the speaker feels this way about this group of people and point out that this conception is probably based on limited contact and/or stereotypes. Although this usually does little to change the person's attitude, it at least proposes alternatives.

Russia is very homophobic. I don't recommend that a gay Fulbrighter "come out" in Russia outside of Moscow or St. Petersburg.

## **Housing**

Housing was "excellent" at my institution; my housing was clean, accommodating, modern, comfortable and affordable.

It is tempting to try and find housing on the internet prior to departure. I tried this myself, but here in Tomsk, that will end in frustration. Local landlords simply cannot know more than a few days in advance if their flats will be available or not. It is best to get here first, with a handful of phone numbers, and take a few days after arrival to find something that you can be comfortable in. Costs here are reasonable, and my one room flat was 10,000 rubles per month, plus utilities.

With regard to housing, lots of people will send you to [expat.ru](http://expat.ru), which is fine, but apartments advertised there usually disappear pretty quickly. If you use the agencies you pay a month's rent as a commission. The best bet really is word of mouth. Ask your local contacts and previous year's Fulbrighters for recommendations and to ask around.

I was very grateful to find housing within walking distance of my host institution, but did take public transport in bad weather. I recommend you explore different transportation options and try to find housing with relatively simple means of arriving at your daily destination.

In order to stay within the allotted budget for housing, the Fulbright Scholar should work with the host institution to find housing BEFORE they arrive to the host site. I recommend insisting that a real estate agent work with the host institution and Fulbright Scholar to find appropriate housing that fits in the scholar's budget. Also, perhaps, the budget line for rent should be increased. I have found that persons staying three, four, or six months are charged more than if they signed an eleven-month lease.

You can rent an apartment by the hour or day at the airport or train station. This will be cheaper than a hotel and allow you to time to find a permanent place that meets your needs.

We found our flat with help from our host institution, sight unseen except for some photos. It worked out OK, but I would advise most people to arrange some short-term housing while looking for a flat yourself. The host institution, no matter how kind and helpful, doesn't really know what you want and what you will like. If your knowledge of Russian is good, I would advise using Google to find real estate websites directed at the local market, to get a sense of types of properties and likely rents in advance.

I would suggest to future grantees to link up with locals via [couchsurfing.com](http://couchsurfing.com) prior to arrival. The site is frequented by generally young and helpful people interested in helping new people in town. They might be able to help find an apartment through friends, the only real way to get a reasonable price in the region

## **University Life, Teaching and Research**

It took more than one month before I was to begin teaching the painting master classes! Also, I did not get to teach a steady course... I worked to meet with students whenever I could to introduce myself to them, look at their work, and attend various art events in the city in order to make my presence and intentions known.

. Take the initiative in setting up meetings, courses, and collaborative activities, rather than waiting on your hosts. They are usually glad to support your efforts.

I went out of my way to sit down with new people in the cafeteria every day. Sounds cliché, but it works. Especially here, where people don't meet too many Americans. 2) I watched a lot of Russian movies. This is useful, because when conversation drags, I always have something to bring up "Oh, did you see this movie?"

For a 3-month period, the combination of teaching and research is a conflict, the more so if one's area of research does not relate to what you are teaching as was the case with me. Although I enjoyed the classes I taught, it was not a teaching experience in the sense of having full responsibility for a class and becoming part of the university "it was more like being a guest lecturer but doing it weekly and for some of the same people. It was fun and I enjoyed the contacts but it did conflict with my time for research, already divided between several libraries, museums and archives, and now divided between the time allotted to RGGU (where I taught) and time spent negotiating the places I needed to access for research.

My teaching at RGGU was not really as an art historian; my lectures provided students who were studying English with an opportunity to practice English in the context of a thematic topic.

I would suggest not using the Consulate/Embassy mail service [i.e., the Pouch]. It was more trouble than it was worth. I wish I had bought a Kindle-type device for books. It would have meant buying as an e-book some books I already owned, but it would have been much easier. I mailed some books home at the end of the trip, and 1/2 of them never arrived.

### **Cell phones/Internet**

ISP service was available and affordable, even in the most remote parts of Russia. Cell phone service is extensive and excellent "even in the most remote of villages. I found both Internet and phone service to be a vital link with my home and host institutions; and especially with my translator while in country communication efforts were simplified when using text messaging.

Cell phone carriers, toward the end of my stay, I found an MTC plan that cost around 500 rubles a month for unlimited Moscow-wide talk and data. I still switched even though I only had a couple months left because it saved me so much money. Who knows how long that plan will last but it's sure a great one.

### **Transportation**

Public transportation is good and cheap, but make sure you allow enough time to get places. There is a strong likelihood that you can find a branch of your church in the city.

The public transportation system is useful and reliable, if somewhat cramped.

I would suggest that future visitors to Moscow avail themselves of the excellent Metro system there. The traffic is so congested that we frequently were stuck in vans for long periods of time. The few trips I took on the Metro were very efficient.

If you're riding the Moscow subway during rush hour in the morning or afternoon, you should be prepared to be wedged in like proverbial sardines. I did whatever I could in terms of scheduling classes and appointments to make sure that I wasn't on the metro during rush hour.

## Banking and Money

The handbook does have a lot of useful information in it. I read it carefully, made notes, made lists, and basically prepared myself before leaving. However, do not work yourself up over the inability to find clean, new money to take with you. I could not get brand new untouched bills from my bank but when I arrived in Moscow, I only exchanged money at a small bank near my apartment and I never had a problem. I did not, however, get the best rates but the Exchange places which say "bez protsentov; bez kommissii" are actually not telling the truth. Fortunately, you can find out before you hand over your money that they do in fact charge a fee.

Always carry cash, don't rely on credit cards, though they are being accepted in more places.

Money exchange at local banks and ATM's was easily accomplished without any difficulties. Do arrive in country with a bit of local currency, small bills if available as this helps with having to find and deal with such matters when you are tired. My bank was very helpful in obtaining such before I left for RU, at a very nominal fee.

ATMs are common making access to finances reasonably straightforward. The one catch is this: Sometimes machines do not offer English. But once you either master the Russian, or you find one that has an English interface, money is unlikely to be a problem.

Regarding money, it's pretty simple: ATMs are everywhere. I would usually use Citibank ATMs because they allowed me to take out \$500 (in USD or Rubles) at a time rather than the \$200 or \$300 at most other banks. Fewer transactions mean fewer fees, which in the course of a year saves quite a bit of money.

In Russia, most services are paid for in cash so it is necessary to do "ATM hoarding" some time before rent or other major expenses are due. American ATM cards worked very well at Russian bank machines. If you keep looking you will easily find machines that offer you the choice of instructions in English.

Acceptance of credit cards is not universal and, consequently, requires carrying or having large amounts of cash.

An ATM card is the best way to get your money, find one with minimal foreign ATM fees and currency exchange fees. We used CapitalOne, which was a flat \$2 per withdrawal, and no commission on the currency conversion. Bank Levoberezhni ATMs allow you to withdraw the largest amounts of money, so use those whenever possible.

I got most of my money via ATM from 1 of 2 accounts in the U.S. I opened a second account in order to have access to funds in case there was a problem with my primary account, but the 2nd account turned out to be more hassle than my main account. If you do open a second account, do so well in advance to make sure all the kinks are out. I would advise making sure you get a bank card and a credit card with low (1%) or non-existent foreign fees. Start doing online bill paying, banking, etc., well in advance of departure if possible, so you are ready for it when the time comes. Skype proved to be essential, especially for calling 1-800 numbers in the US to deal with financial matters, etc.

At least in St. Petersburg, people wanted exact change for cash transactions. Generally no one minded if this meant extra time fishing for the right money, but it was annoying when you couldn't buy things because you couldn't get change.

Bank machines are available in most large cities.

We found that a checking account debit card had a lower exchange rate fee (1%) than a major credit card (3%).

In terms of withdrawing money, new grantees should make sure they verify with their bank what the international ATM fee is. Mine is relatively high -- 3%. Also make sure they acquaint themselves with the banks in their host city which do not charge additional surcharges to international users. Having ATM cards from two different banks was useful in case one account had a security compromise. Once I needed to use both in the same day to make a payment to the university for housing which exceeded my daily limit on one of the accounts.

The stipend covered most expenses, but Moscow is very expensive. There is plenty to see that does not require much money, but be prepared with enough money when you leave the hotel. The housing was quite good. The hotels were nice and in convenient locations.

### **Travelling inside Russia**

If possible and allowed by Fulbright authorities, make your destination city the first Russian city you land in. I made the mistake of changing planes in Moscow, which meant going through customs there and transporting luggage to a second airport. If I had changed planes in Helsinki for St. Petersburg, my luggage would have remained checked until arrival in my host city.

If traveling to remote Villages or locales, it is best to ask your host if one needs any special travel documentation. I had one such experience in a very remote area bordering Mongolia (a closed/controlled area) in which I was delayed by RU Military Police due to lacking paperwork (all non-local citizens had to have proper registration papers and "stamped documents" ). A colleague argued my Russian Visa should be enough to satisfy such a requirement and that argument worked. It would be much easier to simply inquire with your host, if any such need exists prior to travel, rather than risk the chance of a missing a once-in-a-lifetime visit. Be advised, remote villages may lack all but the most common creature comforts found in a host institution "" be prepared. I found it handy to travel with a bit of food, a light sleeping bag and my own toilet paper. Travel is generally comfortable in hostels and boarding houses, but such can be unorthodox and unpredictable. I found myself to be with new roommates, daily, even though I asked for a private "single room.

Travel was long and often uncomfortable (crowded and cramped). Travel was relatively inexpensive and affordable. Be prepared for onboard Vodka and beer drinkers and fast and furious driving on local roads that are rustic, at best.

When travelling to other cities, be sure to have Visa-supporting documentation from your "Host" Hotel as you will be asked to produce it at other domestic hotels and airports.

If you stop in Moscow for more than 24 hours, you'll get charged again for your bags and any extra weight.

My advice would be to keep in communication with other Fulbright fellows so you always have a welcome face wherever you travel in Russia.

## **Food Shopping**

One of the biggest difficulties I had was finding a grocery store with good quality food. Kristovsky is one of the best chains. Aliye Parusa, Azbuka Vkusa, and Sedmoi Kontinent all have good stuff but are really overpriced.

A few mega supermarkets allow you to just put items in your basket without asking someone behind the counter for assistance--and thus having to speak in Russian. However, the quality of meat and produce is higher in markets where you require assistance, and even behind the supermarket counters.

## **Health**

Do bring OTC medications that you need. You may not find an exact equivalent in Russia. The headache remedy that I was offered at the pharmacy included ingredients that I could not take.

## **Visas**

I mistakenly believed that the HIV test was only needed when reapplying for a visa extension after arrival, not for the initial 3 month application. It is necessary right away, including for children. This issue, combined with the Russian Embassy being closed for 2 weeks in early January, caused some stress-inducing moments during the visa process. It took a long time for my invitation to come through also, so start the visa process as soon as you can.

## **Children**

Those traveling with kids should be prepared for a big change. Without a yard, most of their normal toys, local friends, or knowledge of the language, our kids were very dependent on us (twin 10 year olds). Much effort was put in to finding suitable activities for 10 year old boys. School/homework was also a big time commitment.

If you have children, the university you are working with \_may\_ be able to help you with detskii sad (kindergarten) or school. The public detskii sads are overfull and have waiting lists, so you'll need to have leverage from the university to get into their assigned location.

## **Web sites and other helpful resources:**

www. expat.ru has a lot of listings for apartment shares and rentals -- I checked it daily, responded to a lot of them, and finally found the one I'm in about two weeks before my flight to Moscow. I had never used Skype before but I set it up before leaving and it's a terrific asset.

waytorussia.com

For entertainment, you can't beat: <http://www.afisha.ru/>

translate.google.com saved my life countless times. Google maps was also helpful. For cultural opportunities in St. Petersburg and Moscow, operaandballet.com was invaluable. The online and offline editions of the St. Petersburg Times were also helpful.

I found that the use of Google satisfied all of my queries and furnished more-than-adequate background information

This single most useful website is DoubleGIS: <http://maps.2gis.ru/novosibirsk> It has every building in the city, and what businesses, etc. are in the building. Also has bus, marschrut and metro routes and stations, etc. More useful than Yandex.ru, unless you have a car. Also, it's easier to search by business name, type, etc. It's easy to find websites for the opera, MuzKom, etc just by googling, but we didn't use them to purchase tickets. Kiosks are available in some of the subway stations, or you can go to the box office. The DNS chain of stores is useful for any computer related gear you weren't able to bring.

If you are in Petersburg and need visa support for family members coming to visit, I would recommend: <http://www.introbyirina.com/visasupport.html>

Russian news: [www.gazeta.ru](http://www.gazeta.ru), [www.lenta.ru](http://www.lenta.ru) Affordable travel by air: [www.avianova.ru](http://www.avianova.ru) Travel by train: [www.rzd.ru](http://www.rzd.ru)

[www.fulbright.ru](http://www.fulbright.ru) I relied on Oksana Anistratenko and Anthony Koliha of the Moscow Office. Their support and assistance were incredible and they should be highly commended. As a part of my research I tried to get access to the Yuri Gagarin Cosmonaut Center but was unsuccessful. The Fulbright Office got me access, invited other Fulbrighters, and paid for the excursion, truly above and beyond.

<http://russiaprofile.org/>

news in Russian: [www.lenta.ru](http://www.lenta.ru)

Google Translate is helpful and opens up the world of Russian language websites. <http://astranovosti.ru/> <http://www.astrakhan.ru/> <http://wikimapia.org/>

Moscow Times (English-language newspaper)

The book "THE RUSSIAN'S WORLD Life and Language by Genevra Gerhart published by SLAVICA in Bloomington, Indiana, 2001 was a very useful text for cultural preparation ISBN:-13: 978-0-89357-293-4