

In June 2009 six MA-EUS students visited Russia as part of our partnership with the Moscow State University for the Humanities. Here, Leen Verkade relates what happened next.

When Richard asked me to write a report about our Russia trip, I immediately realized it would be difficult to write a concise story properly describing our many crazy adventures in Mother Russia, but it was nice to recollect our experience there, I hope you will enjoy reading this as much as I enjoyed writing it (and experiencing it, obviously).

The road to Moscow

The great thing about making a trip to Russia, is the foreplay. Unfortunately not the kind that involves a gorgeous woman in your bed on a lazy Sunday morning. It is more the kind of “having to wait forever at the consulate to get your visum” kind of foreplay. So if you’re into that, definitely go for a Russia trip, you’ll have a ball. For someone notoriously impatient (like myself) it was living hell, although I suppose the total of two hours waiting was not that bad, and it gives a good perspective how Russian society works: ... s l..o w l.... y....



Anyway, once the visa annoyance was over, it was packing a suitcase, and off to Schiphol. Here I met three of my classmates, who would go on the trip to Domodeva airport (which looks like a spaceship), via Zurich with me. After an unremarkable five hours in the plane, we landed and would meet our pick-up, of course after a very thorough patience check at the passport control. After this we met three very friendly Russian girls, that would make sure that we would arrive at Moscow university safely, with a taxi-bus. The taxi-bus driver immediately started yelling at us when we arrived, nice, but he got us where we needed to go regardless, which is quite an accomplishment given the traffic conditions in and around Moscow. We stopped by the university for a bite to eat, and to meet the other Russians in the group, after which we were dropped off in our hostel, which from the outside

looks like an Soviet factory from the 1930's, but from the inside was surprisingly nice. Here we met our two classmates (which came directly from their homes in the Baltic) and two students from George Washington university. To celebrate this, we had a run in with a couple of bottles of vodka, and Russia's finest: Baltika Beer! The bonus of the evening was, that watching from our 6th floor hotel room, gazing over Moscow's finer power plants (coal ones of course) and prettier factories, we saw a steam train!!! Awesome! That's one of the things I like about Moscow, the contrast between the modern 22nd century "oil dollars part", and the soviet "barely industrial revolution" 19th century part.



The next day our program started with a trip through Moscow, and although the logistics and planning of the tour were far from optimum, this was really cool. The Kremlin and Red Square are truly amazing locations, and the rest of the city is very cool too! We visited the Christ the Saviour church, with a spectacular view over the Kremlin and the Lomonosov building, very nice! To make it a real Russia experience, we also visited a war memorial. Moscow is literally littered with war memorials, and as would later appear, so is the rest of Russia, remembering the two great patriotic wars is a big thing in Russia (those being the invasions of Napoleon and Hitler). I found this a strange cultural phenomenon, also when talking to Russian people. The thought of war and military seems to be far more embedded in Russian culture, than it is in Western European, but this is just a personal observation (no bad thing about our Russian hosts, very friendly people!!! And I am not just saying that as a matter of courtesy). Anyway, we closed of the day with dinner at the Uni and a performance of the Russian students in dancing and singing etc. which was surprisingly good, these kids know what they are doing! For someone who does not like watching singing and dancing at all, it was quite enjoyable. After that it was back to the hotel, and contemplating venturing into Moscow nightlife, but we decided to do that the next day, and just have a few drinks in the hotel.



This was partially because we had to get up early the next day to go to the Duma. I will start out immediately by stating it was not very interesting, except for the cultural, Russian bureaucracy part. As mentioned before, at the airport and the embassy, Russian bureaucracy does NOT work, NOT at all. Basically all the visit to the Duma involves, is two security checks, a passport control, and another passport control (why everything needs to be done double, god only knows, but that's Russia for you). First security check (and come to think of it, the third passport check) went quite quickly, so did the second passport and security check, but the middle passport check (and entering into the Duma systems of personal data)... Man, that was amazing, craziest thing I've ever seen (and I've seen a crazy thing or two in my days). It is kind of hard to explain, you gotta see it to believe it, but it involves five of the slowest computer users I have ever seen, five stone age computers, no discernable queue system, and a too small room that was heated!!! (it was typical Moscow summer weather that day, a nice and chilly 33 degrees). Anyway, 90 (!!!) minutes later everyone got to the passport thing, and the tour started. First we visited a plenary session, which was obviously in Russian, maybe it was interesting, maybe it was not, absolutely no way to tell. After a tour through the rest of the building (looks like any other parliament building), a somewhat extensive and tedious explanation of the Russian political system and a good lunch, we had a very interesting debate with the Russian deputy minister of education, mostly about Nashi youth and innovation, concepts we would become more familiar with later on in Seliger. After that our trip continued to one of the municipal governments of Moscow. Does not really sound interesting, but it actually was, it was very interesting to see the idea's these people had about governing the huge metropolis (and believe me, Moscow is HUGE, quite overwhelming). What was even more interesting was the impressive information technology they had at their disposal for doing so.

That was the final part for the sightseeing in Moscow, although there were still some clubs that required closer inspection. This would have happened, were it not for the fact that we were locked in our hotel.... Apparently the door closes at 11, and you can only get out if you made prior arrangements, sucks, but we managed to have fun in the hotel as well, and it was probably better, since the bus bringing us to Lake Seliger would pick us up early the next morning (obviously we would rather have gone clubbing though).

Lake Seliger: its madness, I am telling you!

After another exciting tour through Moscows favorite past time (traffic jams) and a brief stop for supplies it was time for a lecture. Somehow one of the Russian teachers was under the impression that we carried some alcoholic beverages, which in principle is forbidden at the Seliger camp. After pointing out that, like all students, we dislike alcohol and therefore would never bring it with us, it was time to leave Moscow, and go onto a journey beyond sight and sound, into the Russian forest. After six or seven hours on the (incredibly crappy) road, mostly filled with discussing Moscow and anticipating what would await us at Seliger, we were approaching the camp. At this point we had only seen signs of human life every 10 or 20 km (in the form of bus stops, bloody amazing), making this the most desolate place I have ever been. Now I have to point out, that as a Dutchmen, anything that is further than a 5 minute bike ride from a sizable town is desolate, but still.



At any rate, it was time to enter the camp, and the most remarkable part of our journey. And by camp, I mean camp with a capital C. Unbeknownst to us, the organization had invited approximately 8,000 Russian, besides the 30 or 40 odd we were with. Some of the Russians of our group had

already gone ahead the day before, and set up camp in a small patch of forest, just outside the main camp. All we had left to do is set up our tents and it would be time to explore the facilities of the camp. Here the most shocking part of our stay in Seliger came (don't worry, I will get more positive again in an paragraph or so). There is no running water!!!..... severely impeding cooking, cleaning, showering etc. abilities. Right after this we were summoned to get water out of the lake and chop and saw some wood, for the fire, so we could actually used this water. After that we got a lecture about the necessity for tight discipline in the camp.... Suddenly coming to Russia did not seem like such a good idea anymore, but on the upside, things would get a lot better after this.



The next morning started with calisthenics, which I could have done without, but fine. The most interesting part of this is, that most of the camp gathered for this. Yep, there were actually a couple of thousand Russians doing calisthenics together in the middle of a Russian forest (they had actually created a stage for it). To top it off, at the end of the session, all of them suddenly started running into the forest, to go for their morning jog. For us however, no morning jog (what a pity!), but breakfast. Not this was particularly good, but as good as can be expected from a combination between a campfire and canned food, and I am not going to bitch about the lack of luxury anymore, it actually started to grow on me after a couple of days (it really did, quite amazing isn't it).

The rest of the day (like the days after) was filled with lectures by our own Richard, an American professor (Michael Arno) and the head of "our" Russian university, which were all very interesting and sparked some heated debates. Another very entertaining part of the day in Seliger was our daily Russian class, not too serious, but we could actually say some things in St. Pete's later on, which is cool, I have gotten at the age where I can come back from an holiday and actually be happy that I

have additional information inside my head, instead of just a hangover. This usually left on or two hours during the day to spend on a swim in the lake, or check out the rest of the camp, which was quite interesting as well.



The first thing that strikes when walking around the camp is the number of political messages and Russian or federal subject (state, republic etc.) flags, and the number of information stands of universities, companies etc. The camp is organized by the Russian government, and lasts several weeks, each week with a different theme, with this week's theme being innovation. It was a pity that everything was in Russian, because we have seen some pretty interesting things and ideas, fortunately some of the Russians were friendly enough to translate. Part of the idea of the camp is the prior mentioned calisthenics and the lack of running water and facilities, so that Russian youth learns how it is to survive in nature and become physically strong. And this youth are supposed to become the new leaders of the new Russia.



To a bystander, this may sound a bit freaky, and I have to admit, it sort of is. The camp is somewhat nationalistic, and I have seen little sign of other political parties than United Russia. On the other hand, no one denies that it is a politically tinted camp and that it is for the improvement of Russia, which to some extent is of course a very good idea, and I don't think the nationalistic part should be exaggerated. There is also a lot of fun stuff to do in the camp, such as recreational things on the lake, like sailing, there is a whole set of climbing walls and various stands and exhibitions of the various cultures of the Russian federation (something we often forget in the West is that Russia is comprised of dozens of cultures). And there is also a monastery worth visiting next to the camp (which we did).



The evening hours were mostly spent in our small camp, usually first with group activities and games, and later in the evening for a small disco, which were both a lot of fun, and occasionally followed by a nocturnal campfire session. The last two nights were a bit different, with the last night having a bigger disco at the main stage, good times. The night before that was the celebration of midsummer night, it was a very interesting experience to witness a holiday celebrated in a Russian way, involving a lot of strange dances, sticking dolls on fire, throwing flower things in the lake and some other stuff I am forgetting.



To sum up, we had a great week in Seliger, a lot of strange experiences (I could easily fill another 10 pages with stories) and met a lot of wonderful people, and learned something in the process. I was quite sad to leave it all and everyone, but it was time to move on to our next destination: St. Petersburg, and perhaps more important, civilization and a hot shower.

The beauty and splendor of St. Pete

After arriving in our hotel, and spending the better part of the evening in the shower, it was time to explore the city. The nice thing about Northern Russia during the summer, is that the sun barely sets, so it is very nice to stay out late. And even more positive, St. Petersburg is a nice city to stay out late. After emerging from the subway onto Alexander Nevsky prospect, I was immediately overwhelmed by the enormous amounts of beautiful buildings, and that feeling only increased as we moved around the city more, with the absolute highlights being the Hermitage/Summer Palace and the savior on blood Cathedral. As we found out later during the week, these buildings are even more amazing from the inside.



The pity about St. Pete is that it lacks the madness of Moscow or Lake Seliger, the city is nice and clean and beautiful, and therefore does not provide many interesting stories, but definitely is worth the visit. The only odd story about the city was night in a very weird bar, where we celebrated new years eve (on the 6th of July) it involved cow costumes, but the rest shall remain censored. On the last day of our trip we paid a visit to Peterhof, 30 km outside St. Pete. This is the former palace of Peter the Great. The beauty and splendor of this place is amazing, but after four days in St. Pete, beauty and splendor get a whole new meaning, we barely noticed it at this point.



After this, it was time to part ways with our friends and with Russia. All things considered, these were an amazing two weeks, and I can recommend it to anyone, if you can deal with the lack of facilities in Seliger.