

## Magic & Tragic in Moscow

Alexandra Dahlström from Fucking Åmål speaks to Marie Darling Birde about why Russia has a special place in her heart. Marie feels only a little lost. But she eats blintz, scouts out Russian blondes and gets a taste of a TV-loving woman and her mom. And it gets a little easier to understand Moscow.

- You have to promise not to feel bad about Russia; it's actually my heritage and culture! During my childhood, I often used to accompany my mother on business trips here and play with chalk on the sidewalk or grin at the darling porcelains in the souvenir shop.

A sort of lost in translation feeling arises already at the airport in Moscow. If you are looking for a completely different culture than you are used to, you've come to the right place. The Russian words are really, really long and weird. Though one nice thing about the Russian culture is that they sometimes choose to turn around the way things really are: when it rains, they say, for example, that it gives good luck.

Alexandra explains the trip structure:

- We will catch up with a CEO, a restaurant owner, a woman who works at the Ministry of Culture and a graffiti artist - you must like Russia!

In Moscow, called Moskva Mockba. It is also the name Alexandra uses for the city as she is constantly thinking about it and visits whenever she can. There are great monuments and buildings everywhere with a long history behind them. It's like walking around in a big museum, and even our hotel, Ukraina, has a historical background - as one of the white, showy "Stalin scrapers" called "Seven Sisters" and it was built in the fifties because Stalin wanted to prove Moscow's sovereignty. On the whole, you become overwhelmed by this city because it's striving so hard to become modern and European, but stuck with some outdated elements - like the foul exhaust from the Russian cars and trolleybuses. No one understands how the buses work, but it looks cool. A few days later, we sit in one of them and talk delightfully cliché about culture and class struggle.

Buildings take over the skyline with flashing lights and billboards. Memories of Las Vegas will return when you see casino after casino along the streets. Everything is apparently a casino right now. Casinos are the flavor of the month. If Moscow was a style of music it would be hip - it is big, bling-bling and everyone is thinking about money.

- This city is not for epileptics, says Alexandra. Not in the winter anyway.

Alexandra's comment:

The air is filled with the magic and a frosty sort of melancholy. Everything sparkles, women take care of themselves, their fur hats and stroking their hair, men become helplessly drunk and swear that it is the first time they've

been there and they fall in love... But that will have to wait a bit. First we need to eat.

Oleg Beglaran is a restaurant owner; he has known Alexandra since she was two years old and wants to welcome us to the culinary Russia. At his restaurant Donna Klara you can live the dream and eat caviar and drink Russian champagne. Russian pancakes, blintz, served either with meat or with parsley, grated hard-boiled eggs and red caviar. It is not very expensive. The waitresses wear great little romantic dresses in pale pink with deep red accents on them and whisper in the ear of Oleg when they want to suggest something that they think is better. It's like having dinner with a nice Don Corleone.

- You know I feel that I should have been born in this neighborhood, at Astuzhevaya. When I'm here with my mom I'm the worst sentimental, I usually yell at her because I did not get to live here and go to school which is around the corner, says Sasha (in Mockba Alexandra is called Sasha).

When the plates are empty, they are replaced with borscht, which is tastier than it sounds: marrow bones and beetroot. Russian salad with crayfish tails and avocado and finally Donna Klara's specialty - cakes and cookies. Their chocolate cake is award-winning and the poppy cake has so many seeds in it that it certainly would have an impact on a drug test. Everything tastes divine.

- Do you see the man at the next table? Asks Oleg suddenly and looks over very slyly.

- Yes.

- Sasha, he is none other than the son of your mother's youth idol, actor Arkadi Rajkin. His name is Constantine.

All kinds of people hang out at Donna Klara: young, old, successful, forgotten and unknown. For them, sitting down is like coming home at their cafe. After dinner we bussed on the streetcar.

Alexandra's comment:

Russian cars smell how only Russian cars can smell. Much like adrenaline from the fear of worn out breaks, rush hour traffic and the sight of glistening frost. The driver has the same glasses as Erlend Øye of Kings of Convenience. The streets glisten from all the decorative lighting along the Moskva River.  
- Next time, we drink vodka, says Oleg happily before he lets us go.

We visit the hotel bar Art Club next. We think it suits us because it sounds sophisticated and fun. On the walls hang paintings of dull flowers, that's about as much art that's shown here. But all the Europeans are staying here at the hotel. We might feel a little more misunderstood and homeless in this new country than we think, but that's because it's different than anything we're used to. They come from Holland and hang with a Portuguese band. They mention in passing that all Russians are angry, unpleasant and trying to

cheat them.

- No! You must not think that about Russia, says Sasha. Everyone is nice, everything smells good!

It's like we have a membership together, some of which have the same credentials - Lost in translation again. For the same reason, Sephora is the first store we visit. Even when we passed it before in the car we were delighted - makeup is just as much fun in all countries. The range here is not as large as in other cities, but there is Chanel nail polish and it's really the only thing you need if you want to feel glamorous. Unfortunately, all the colors we are looking for are gone. And it feels very ... Russia! So we move on to the Kremlin.

- Did you know that the architect who built Lökkupolerna had his eyes gouged out when he was finished, says Sasha. They did not want him to build something more beautiful.

It's too bad. Otherwise, maybe all of Moscow would have been built beautifully and colorfully. Red Square is closed and does not open until three o'clock.

- There is no reason, it just is, says the soldier who guards it and smirks about the issue.

Adjacent is a new luxury mall full of fine fashion labels and calling to people who want to be warm. But it is not for us, we want something more genuinely Russian. At the Kiev station, there is a market, and we imagine babushkas and maybe the odd balalaika. The subway on the way there is crammed with people who do not have time to stop and look at the chandeliers on the ceiling and all the crazy mosaics. That happens in the subway. There, ten million people have built up a lucrative trade - the so-called underground transitions into the underworld which is full of small shops selling everything from burned CDs to cheap perfume. It's like a dream to go there and trade mittens, Issei Miyake perfume and Russian cigarettes. Down here, there are some good finds.

But there are also thieves in this market - so you have to hold on tight to your bag. Everyone wants us to be in their position, it does not matter if they sell rubber ducks, pineapples, beautiful handmade scarves of goat, hats or shower gel. Sasha thinks it's amazing and is happy to chat a while with the men selling fur coats. They all want extra money for beer or maybe not.

Dmitry Strashnov is the CEO of Philips in Russia, and would be happy to sit on an island and read books as a possible career change. He is tonight's date. As the modern man he is, he takes us to one of Moscow's trendiest restaurants with Italian food on the menu and windows facing the street that we can't photograph because they are so designed. Dima, as Dmitry is named in Mockba, is a little stressed out because he's finishing some important

business at midnight. Nevertheless, he took the time to show us Russian hospitality and generosity. Though he is a little shocked when we did not want to eat as much as he had planned that we would.

- Sasha, you must tell us that you do not eat just one dish in Russia. Here we enjoy the food.

Then he barks at the staff for not paying attention or being knowledgeable enough.

- They do not even know the difference between fettuccini and tagliatelle!

And gives us tips on cool places we should visit such as the place where "media, advertising, business and fashion people go."

While we were eating, the militia stood outside the restaurant and waited for people to go passed in their flashy cars. Dmitry becomes suspect and is chased by the blue lights before we find a refuge and can stop. Police ask Dmitry to exit from the car and check his papers. In the car Frank Sinatra is playing.

- It was quiet, I had not drunk anything. But otherwise it is usually okay as long as you have money. I've heard that if you're really drunk you can pay so that you get escorted home, says Dmitry when he comes back to the car.

At the Art Club there is a man who is playing on a piano. His name is Brandon, he is American but lives in Italy and works as a TV photographer.

- Oh man, I cannot believe how happy I am I met you! You speak perfect English and everything!

We are the only guests at the Art Club this evening. We understand each other. Dutch Jurrien we met a few days earlier has also managed to get up for breakfast the next morning. There are very weird and strange meat stews to choose from. But we do not: hard-boiled eggs, sandwiches with cheese and lots of coffee is more our thing. Jurrien likes that we're from Sweden since his former girlfriend is Swedish and there's a great movie from there:

- Show Me Love, have you seen it? He asks.

- Duh!

Of course we have!

In the lobby is Ludmila Shatrova, she is waiting for us dressed in fur. She has a Ministry of Culture background and her specialty is the historic Moscow. She takes us to the half-built modern places and says laughingly that this would be where the new Moscow would have arose, but somewhere along the way, someone took the money and bought drugs. She has a beautiful dark sense of humor that always takes the edge off the horrible stories she tells, for example, the beautiful KGB building on the banks of the river is where people lived for just a couple of months before anyone told on them, then they were

murdered and the informer had to move in. She also knows which professions are well-paid in Russia:

- Banker, lawyer, doctor.
- What about working girls?
- What should I say, my friend... That's absolutely the oldest profession ever.
- Oh no. How much are they?
- Thousands of dollars per hour.
- Wow.
- But I do not speak from experience.

She takes us to a small Greek Orthodox Church. It is one of the few old churches that survived the religious purge of the Communist era because back then it was used as a storage space. It is charming and the women singers are unreal. At first, we did not know if it was an album playing or if the singing was real - but it is very much real. Ludmila says there are many young people who go to church nowadays.

Just around the corner from our little church is the large cathedral. It might look old, like churches usually do; but in fact, it is newly built, using money donated by individuals and businesses, and with the old cathedral as a model. Everything is identical to the old building - but the old style is hard to emulate, and perhaps this is why the church feels less sacred than the others. All Russians who have fallen in war are said to have their names here. Opposite the church is the Museum of Private Collection and they have cheap lunches. At the diner, we order almost everything on the menu: everything from the Russian national dish pirimini to soups, coffee and chocolates. It costs no more than 50 kronor per person.

To get in some literary culture, the next stop is Mikhail Bulgakov's The Master and Margarita house, which has become a museum. There's a guestbook in a niche in the wall where visitors from around the world have drawn cats and cite their favorite piece. You can watch a movie about a writer and admire the period clothes. Sasha is the first to find the drawing area, where she transforms into an artist. It's at this time that we find out that in Russia gay men are called "blue."

- Where is the youth culture then? We ask Natasha.

It turns out that there is a path that goes past the Manolo Blahnik store (further proof that in Moscow there is room for the most expensive and most modern artists. "Try on as much as you want," says the shop assistant) and onto the campus.

- Here are the musical elite and where you have coffee, says Ludmila when we walk past Coffeemia - Moscow's equivalent to the coffee chain Wayne's Coffee.

Inside, they play RnB music and stylish, trendy youths of all ages dancing in their seats and appear happy. Art Club is booked for a figure skating team

this evening. We sneak into their party, but do not think that the band playing is especially interesting.

- Why don't we go and eat at that restaurant that Dima recommended? The magazine Vogue surely cannot be wrong, if they start a bar/restaurant, there must be something good about it.

Vogue Café is not known to everyone and it becomes a little difficult to get there. Finally, we find a taxi with a good eye that takes a shortcut so we don't have to pay so much for the trip. It happens all the time in Moscow. Once again, we get so excited that the driver does not want to overcharge that we pay him anyway. The Vogue Café is full ("Please come back later"), but they have a whole group of restaurants nearby and Biskvit sounds nice. Biskvit has modern furnishings with oriental influences and many pillows, set inside a long corridor beside flashy clothes shops and jewelers which are also very good. In the corner sits a bunch of Englishmen who are speaking cockney and our tuna and green beans taste amazing.

Back at the Vogue Café, we note that there really is a special Russian fashion - full of leopard spotted shirts and high boots. Everyone has that Russian blonde color of hair; Sasha tries to explain that it's from the water, or bad highlights or cold or something. Here they all want to be or are successful models.

There is a total clash between tonight's flamboyance and folklore with the morning market at Izmajlovskij Park. A bear keeper begging for money and being licked on the cheek by muzzled bears. The horses all have scabies and the caretakers asking for money to feed them. We've only just arrived here but Kolmården feels very far away. But the market meets all of our expectations, with more dolls than you can count, all the fashion one can buy, shawls with typical Russian flowers and medals from the war. The farther in you go, the harder it becomes.

It's unsuitable for us, says Ludmila.

That's where the old war heroes stand selling off their medals and they are not too fond of Westerners. She invites us back to her place for lunch instead. Her apartment is less than forty square feet, which she shares with her mother, Natasha, and is located at the front of an apartment building - one enters in the long corridors, and opens several iron doors to find it. It smells like disinfectant and the smell settles into the walls, clothes, hair, skin, everywhere.

- Granny's bags smell like this when she comes to visit. Russian medicine. Plenty, says Sasha.

While we eat cabbage soup they tell us about their lives: Natasha was the director of a theater company when she was young, appeared at the front during World War II and has received several medals for her loyalty, Ludmila is happy that she is one of the privileged who still get 5,000 rubles a month

(about 1,200 dollars) and she's so good that she's put it in retirement. We drink vodka and plum, they are excited to have guests, and we are pleased that we have met Moscow's most hospitable people. They love to watch television. It is common for mother and daughter to live together as they do. When we leave they say that we do not need to be concerned about them, and that if we do not come back to Moscow we will probably never meet again. They cannot afford to go abroad. Their sad Russian eyes looking forward. We promise to send a card.

Alexandra's comment:

Last time I met Vanja, I was seventeen years old and became involved in his graffiti and a pretty fun soccer match between Lokomotiv Moscow and Azerbaijan. One day we climbed up on the roof of a demolished building with a couple of his friends where there was an entire view of Moscow that took your breath away. This time we could not spend more than an afternoon. We met at three in the Pushkin Square and walked to a house with unusually nice graffiti paintings. Soon after we met up with Vitalij and Sasha outside a supermarket and go to a new demolished building smelling of aerosol and champagne. One time they had a party there and everyone who came got a bottle of champagne. Having known me for twenty minutes, he and his friends buy a movie reel and a metro ticket for me. I'll mail some Underground Productions and the Swedish graffiti magazine to them and tell them to go to school more often. But anyway Vitja says he wants to become a graphic designer.

Oleg is already waiting for us when we get back. He brings Russian champagne and chocolates as a parting gift and is very pleased that he is the one who will take us on a farewell dinner at Donna Klara. There, he tells the story of when he was young and drank twenty-six beers at the brewery as the school was next door. Then he fills up our glasses with Russian vodka and smiles his quirky smile.

Art Club is closed this evening, but we do not want to go to bed yet and look up American/Italian migrant Brandon. He is in his room and we fix a feast. It's snowing over Mockba and we regret a little that we didn't throw coins at Red Square. If you do that, it means that you will come back. We have only scratched the surface of Russia - and it's been special. Love that what Sasha is talking about is easy to understand but difficult to know.

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