

I am not a Magician

Living and working in Vladimir
Putin's Russia

In 140 short stories, Gary Hays paints a lively picture of Vladimir Putin's Russia. Based on his own observations and experiences, he creates a wonderful tale that takes the reader from the hectic life of the Moscow *marshrutka* driver to the elegant diplomatic residences near the Red Square. A journey through places and times that leaves a lasting impression on anybody interested in a country so rich in history and culture.

Ron Keller, Netherlands Ambassador to the Russian Federation (2009-2013)

Gary Hays turns out to be just as creative on paper as on the football pitch. His book 'I am not a Magician' is the best eyewitness account of how a dictatorship has developed into an oligarchy through the years, written amiably, laconically and affectionately, and especially filled with beautiful details and some hilarious scenes. If you are looking for a book on present-day Russia that is both insightful and humorous, this is it.

Jan Donkers, Dutch journalist, producer and presenter of music radio programmes, the father of Dutch pop journalism, visiting professor of Dutch literature and writer of numerous collections of essays, travel stories and novels.

A book worthwhile readingas Gary Hays falls under Russia's spell, where something unexpected happens every day.

Professor Fons Trompenaars, cultural guru, thought leader (inducted into the Thinkers50 Hall of Fame), top management consultant and best selling author (for example 'Riding the Waves of Culture, Understanding Cultural Diversity in Business')

A wonderfully insightful book. A must read for anyone who wants to understand Russia and Russians and get beyond the stereotypes. Gary Hays brings the multitudinous facets of the Russian soul to life in his self aware and inquisitive analysis of his time in Russia. An experience you feel you are sharing in real time as you go on a journey of discovery with him. Still absolutely relevant today and very readable. Best book on Russia I've read since Hedrick Smith's '*The Russians*'

Peter Howes OBE FCA, expert on Russia, the former Soviet Union and Central Asia

Gary takes you on a journey, revealing the peculiarities of life, culture & the history of Russia. A great and witty observer, you can feel the richness of the experience, whilst better understanding how those in power shape collective views. If you ever thought to move to Russia to live, don't go there before reading this book. And the more you read, the more you may think nothing more could surprise you, but wait ... grab the book and enjoy the ride!

Joanna Pilatowicz, Polish dancer, artist and author of 'The Oracle' series

Gary Hays has written a sympathetic and highly readable account of his 2 years living and working in Moscow and his immersion into Russian life, people and history. Gary is an insightful storyteller with a keen eye for detail. The book gives a detailed snapshot of living in Russia a stone's throw from The Kremlin in the middle of Putin's Presidency.

Dr Colin Schaverien, Russophile

Ever wondered how it is to live and work in Putin's Russia? Gary Hays takes you on a fascinating journey as he discovers Russia, its people, culture and history. His vivid language instantly transports the reader into Russia with all its complexities, peculiarities, beauty, contradictions and traditions. For me, Gary's candid story fits perfectly with the poem 'The mind cannot understand Russia' written by the Russian poet and diplomat Fyodor Tyutchev in 1866 (translation by Anatoly Liberman):

*You will not grasp her with your mind
Or cover with a common label,
For Russia is one of a kind -
Believe in her, if you are able...*

Kristine Racina, Director The Expatriate Archive Centre, which collects and preserves the life stories and source material of expatriates worldwide for academic research.

Having spent time in Moscow, I thoroughly enjoyed this book. I was left with a desire to explore Russia and its eccentricities further.

Mandy Reid, International teacher in Russia & Kazakhstan

Thank you for loving my country and writing about it so that other people can understand it too.

Irina Romanenko

I am not a Magician

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Putin's Russia

Gary R Hays

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Introduction

'Whatever you say or believe about Russia, the opposite is also true'
Jeroen Ketting

'Like first love, the heart of Russia will not forget you'
Fyodor Tyutchev

The decision to go to live and work in Moscow was both head and heart. The project was intellectually challenging and I knew I could make a difference. In my current company, I had already completed in fifteen months what they thought would take three years. The timing was good.

But it was also emotionally a second chance. I was supposed to go to Russia seven years earlier as head of HR for Russia and Kazakhstan for Shell. I'd accepted the job but days later, as sometimes happens in large companies, someone else needed my job and I went to lead a huge change project in head office instead. Additionally, visiting St Petersburg was for years number one on my bucket list. So head and heart decided. Friends of mine said it was great I was doing it. Would they do it? I asked. 'Of course not!' they replied.

The book title comes from a phrase that every Russian seems to know. The pageboy in the 1947 classic, black and white, Russian film of Cinderella says 'I am not a magician, I am only practicing' as he disappears in front of her eyes. The book is based on a number of blogs I wrote whilst I was in Russia. Most of it is true, but some might be Russian illusion.

I want to thank many people for helping and making me fall under Russia's spell. Some are in the book, some are not and some names are changed. My thanks to all of you (I hope I haven't forgotten anyone) and to the Moscow Times, which gave me an invaluable English-language Russian mirror.

Alexandra, Alla, Alexei, Alina, Amy, Anastasia, Andrey, Andrey, Andrey, Angela, Avril, Bart, Bart, Bella, Carolyn, Chris, Damir, Dan, Daryl, Dasha, Denis, Denis, Denis, Diana, Diederik, Dima, Edna, Ekaterina, Ekaterina, Eldar, Elena, Elina, Evgeniya, Hans, Ian, Inna, Irina, Jack, Jeroen, Katya, Karina, Kees, Krzys, Kseniya, Lena, Lesley, Lisa, Luc, Margarita, Marina, Maria, Maria, Mariya, Masha, Mikhail, Nadya, Nastya, Natalia, Natalya, Nicole, Nikolay, Nina, Olga, Olga, Olya, Onno, Paul, Pavel, Peach (Ira), Piotr, Rita, Ron, Sarah, Sasha, Sasha, Sergei, Sergey, Sophie, Sveta, Svetlana, Tatiana, Tina, Ulyana, Valentina, Vladimir, Yana, Yuliana, Yuri, Zoya

Gary R. Hays
July 2020, The Netherlands

Foreword

"I met him during my work for the company he joined. It was September 2011. I had just come back from my amazing vacations in Scotland and was looking forward to share my impressions with the colleagues. We agreed to meet at the coffee place at our 19th floor, where we were all working, and I was sitting and waiting for them, as I was the first to come of course. And then I saw him. Actually, I saw a big warm smile first and then the elegant gentleman to whom this smile belonged. He was crossing the open-plan working space to get his cup of coffee from the machine, smiling at everyone, who managed to lift their heads up from computer screens. We discovered later, that there was a coffee machine just a few steps away from his glass cubicle, where his working place was, so there was no necessity for him to cross the whole floor every time he fancied a cup of coffee. But you need to know him to understand this. I was surprised, how genuinely interested he was in Russian history and culture, politics and simple peoples' way of life. It was not that cold, detached curiosity which often shows through the talk with some expats in Russia who ask you questions about your country just to fill the pause or start a small talk. You can understand them – they are trying hard to manage change on a massive scale that is in every area of their life, adapting to new personal and professional environment, new culture with different values and ways of doing things. But again, you need to know him to understand why he is different.

It was not a big surprise for me to discover later, that he was writing a blog about his Russian experience. This blog is very different from the other expat blogs I happened to read. It is not just the description of events, people and places; every topic in the blog is supported by historic and cultural reference. I even discovered a few facts, I was not aware of myself! He tries to analyse events he witnessed, displaying deep cultural awareness and keen interest. The blog is far from being judgemental and is full of respect for the country and its people. Thank you for loving my country and writing about it so that other people can understand it too".

P

Contents

2011

1	I have to write my full name twice, my name and initials once and sign three times, but for what I don't know	14
2	Sour cream and tarragon	17
3	Apartment hunting	19
4	Marble walls, high ceilings, ornate chandeliers, statues, carvings, paintings and mosaics	22
5	An inconspicuous cabinet towards the end: the cabinet with 10 Imperial Fabergé eggs	25
6	Red Ribbon Ball in Moscow to mark 10 years of the AIDS Foundation East-West	28
7	The House on the Embankment	30
8	Reassuringly Computer Clinic No.772 looked the same as any other computer clinic anywhere in the world	33
9	Breakfast at Chez Geraldine: Pozner on Pozner	36
10	Windows was in Russian and why wouldn't it be given that we are in Russia?	39
11	When the staff start talking to you in Russian	42
12	I had never met an agent of a star professional hockey player but he fulfilled my expectation	46
13	My companion decided he was a spirit who had been sent to help us and was now returning from whence he came: I didn't argue	49
14	Team building starts before the meeting: apparently we are expected to swim	53
15	"Not from Moscow"	55
16	The average waiting time was more than 24 hours, in sub-zero temperatures	57
17	A Yak-42 aeroplane, as Russian as you can get	59
18	The Polar Bear may not yet be an endangered species	62
19	Strange things are happening and not only in Moscow	64
20	The New Year party season is in full swing	67
21	Preference is given to disabled veterans of military actions defending the Motherland	71
22	С НОВЫМ Годом: Happy New Year!	73

2012

23	Walking through my park, people watching	76
24	Old New Year's Day followed by thousands of Russians all over the country jumping into freezing water through holes cut in frozen lakes or rivers	78
25	I was at the corner of the car which would hit or be hit by one of the other cars	81

26	Vodka is more at home in the medicine cabinet than the drinks cabinet	84
27	A serious incident	85
28	The chair adjusted to the contours of my back as if it had a life of its own	87
29	The Spartak supporters stood in the dark, strangely silent	89
30	The outcome is certain but the rules are uncertain, exciting and change	91
31	My Moscow may at times be exasperating, but it is anything but drab and boring	94
32	By now my belief was that I was understanding every word in Russian	97
33	Woken up by the sound of police in the courtyard	100
34	This is a holiday for real men	101
35	Like every sensible city Moscow too has a Radio Jazz	103
36	Unfortunately I just missed Mr Putin's tears	105
37	In black with shiny helmets and large silver riot shields	109
38	Every action has an equal and opposite reaction	110
39	There was much more use of 'real' three-dimensional objects in front of the painting; including dead horses	112
40	A happy wife is a happy life	115
41	1905 or The stone that every Russian wife has in the kitchen	118
42	Huge lakes of muddy, murky water are everywhere	122
43	It was a bit like a school trip: including the shouts of "Get moving!" every time we stopped	124
44	Children of the Field of Honour	127
45	Days you spend with your family, dead or alive	129
46	Pushkin and Gagarin	130
47	It is not every day the might of the Russian Army rolls past my street	132
48	It was a strange story in more than one way	134
49	Living in the centre of Moscow I can recognise the sound of helicopters and tanks quite easily	137
50	Today not only no cars, also no people	138
51	Victory Day Veterans, with a chest-full of medals	140
52	Occupy Abai	143
53	Even the Pavilions that are in use house the myriad of stalls you find in the many pedestrian underpasses in Moscow	145
54	The last bell	147
55	The Grannies didn't quite win Eurovision for Russia after all	149
56	Social teambuilding	150
57	'We need to jump into the fray and we'll work it out there'	152
58	The first Winter Olympic city ever to be better known as a sub-tropical Summer holiday beach resort	154
59	Stalin's Dacha	156
60	The Airport Express Shuttle Bus	158
61	Save the really big diamonds for the school run and the supermarket	160

62	'You plan means you live'	161
63	Today is the first of ten days when I do not have any hot water	164
64	What better way of instilling trust than to set up lie detector tests for all managers?	166
65	Collect a glass of Pimms, yes this is the Empire	168
66	I was by now convinced that it wasn't my Russian colleagues who were acting strangely but the Europeans	170
67	Officially labelled graffiti paint	172
68	I have met my first Russian cosmonaut	174
69	I am reminded it is the 31 st	176
70	We bet a bottle of vodka	178
71	The Olympics Opening Ceremony presented a challenge to Russian TV, but I suppose it presented a challenge to most countries	179
72	The video flag billowing in an electronic breeze	181
73	A cardboard box on the floor full of free puppies	182
74	The doctor disagreed. I was too floppy.	185
75	The event was described by a colleague as looking like a 'bad wedding'	187
76	The Caucasus: Dombai and Mineral Waters	190
77	The Caucasus: The Mineral Waters of Essentuki, Kislovodsk and Pyatigorsk	196
78	'I'm just smelling and predicting'	200
79	You begin to feel you are in a Disney set or even Disneyworld	203
80	There should be quick results and the timeline should be short	206
81	The Day of Older Persons	209
82	Strictly Russian style	212
83	The preparation and cooking of meat in Russia is men's work	213
84	All change	217
85	It was comforting to see that in one aspect at least, the incredibly rich are the same as the rest of us	218
86	A third visit to Saratov	221
87	The paper serviettes were folded incredibly nicely and National Unity Day, just another day off work	223
88	"The rubber has hit the road"	226
89	St Petersburg has been waiting so long for me to visit that it doesn't want me to leave	228
90	Andrey was wearing a sensible shirt for a change, rather than purple or orange	231
91	Welcome to Siberia: Tyumen	233
92	Moscow traffic congestion was level 9 on the Yandex-Probki scale	235
93	A hug, the kissing on both cheeks and we had two tickets for the VIP lounge	236
94	The new HR VP was Head of the Federal Penitentiary Services	240
95	A little 'bling'	242

2013

96	The necessity to cling film your suitcases when travelling by air	244
97	Five tigers and a lion walk one by one into the ring	246
98	If you want to make God smile	248
99	I pass the restaurant every day in the car on my way back from work	252
100	The warmer and wetter weather probably also means that the fur coats will disappear from the streets	253
101	The problem is not so much the wrong kind of snow but the wrong kind of soil	255
102	A plastic toy soldier	258
103	Learning Russian: by my calculation the choice of 170 endings to regular Russian nouns	260
104	The Russians – and their money – are important to the future	262
105	The picture on the cover is of a very pretty Russian looking woman: what more do you want?	264
106	May your life be full of joyful moments, smiles and beauty	266
107	Think Dobby the House Elf from Harry Potter but then covered in hair and with normal size ears	269
108	I was probably one of the few non-millionaires in the room	272
109	We did what was expected of us on the 9 th Day	274
110	“Slavery is no longer mandatory in Russia”	276
111	The corporate mentality changed overnight	278
112	The concept of ‘Normative Orders’ probably plays a role	280
113	No white rabbits were harmed in the preparation of the food	283
114	The Iron Woman	285
115	She immaculately rolls all my electric leads into neat and tidy coils	287
116	‘A repository for troublesome women’	289
117	In the afternoon we go to Victory Park: millions of Russians have the same idea	292
118	Empty chairs at empty tables	294
119	For whom the bell tolls?	298
120	Half of all Russians do not know the name of Russia Day	301
121	A strange but actually deeply impressive experience	305
122	I try and look as if I belong there, amongst the testosterone and very large muscles	308
123	Nice as it was to find Lomonsov, I had actually been trying to find the Metro station	310
124	Good to know he not only learned about ship building but also about building a little something for the garden	312
125	In her spare time she sells helicopters	315
126	‘Attention. Moscow is Speaking’	317
127	She has only voted once in her life and even then her friends thought she was mad to do so	321

128	The export of daggers, swords, guns and pistols from Russia has become extremely complicated	324
129	Global warming has been blamed for many things but the demise of headhunting seems far fetched	326
130	Kolomna: as good as it gets in tourist Russia	329
131	Zvenigorod: I was the honorary Tajik, cutting the grass and harvesting the fruit	333
132	Thinking about Rosneft	336
133	We threw a party and nobody came	342
134	I threw a party and everyone came	344
135	Two years minus one day	346
2014		
136	My own 'You know you have been in Russia too long when.....'	347
137	Epilogue	350
138	Lake Baikal in Siberia: lots and lots of water	352
139	Whatever happened...	356
140	...to Ira?	358

2011

1. I have to write my full name twice, my name and initials once and sign three times, but for what I don't know

My first day at the Russian oil company in Moscow turned out to be 'Oilman's Day'. The day the pioneers of the Russian oil and gas industry and their current successors are celebrated. I was not the only one surprised in the foyer of the office just before 9am. Live music, turves of real grass (which people were tripping over and from which the loose soil was constantly being swept up by a team of cleaners) and colourfully dressed women handing out food and drink. The best I can describe the costumes was a mixture of Rio carnival and school play interpretations of the Four Seasons. But with more flesh on display. And on the obligatory very high heels. Having their photograph taken with everyone. Explain that at home.

I had arrived in Russia the day before. Actually this was my second time, having visited on a 'selling' trip (on me) a couple of months earlier. Russia is a country we all think we know, so getting a tourist visa at the Consulate in The Hague was tricky. But that was my fault and a missing document. And stood in line at Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport, waiting my turn at Immigration for a very stern and silent lady in uniform to let me into the country, even then it was really no worse, or even not as worse, than I have experienced in China or America. Where one little crossing out or not filling in the full address of your hotel on your immigration card, can send you to the back of the queue to fill in a new card and another two hour wait. The pre-conditioning on Russia is that it was going to be difficult.

But this time I knew what I was doing. An invitation letter from one of the largest Russian companies for a work visa was treated with respect at the Consulate. And I had the right papers. Including proof that I was HIV free.

The day before I did not even have to stand in line. It is possible to buy VIP treatment. This was the land of the free market after all. I was met at the gate of the plane by a pretty girl in uniform, who whisked me away from the rest of the passengers, took my ticket for my luggage so it could be collected for me, and walked at a brisk pace through locked doors and the rest of the airport, past Duty Free, to one of the VIP lounges.

There I still had to hand over my passport and relevant forms to a similar unsmiling woman, but it somehow lost its menace when you were the only 'guest'

in what looked at first sight to be a run-down bar. (And there was indeed a bar and a barman).

As I entered the lounge I was met by another attractive woman who greeted me by name, and I started thinking “I hope that this is my driver”.

Very tall with long dark hair half way down her back, parted at the side, black top and trousers, beige scarf and brown boots. Mobile in one hand and a list in the other.

But no, Katya was the airport representative and hostess for my stay in the VIP lounge, and if she could do anything to make my stay more pleasant I need not hesitate to ask. Meanwhile I had followed my escort into the room where she sat down to wait with five other escorts, which was not the idea, so I went back into the waiting room and sat on the well-worn brown leather settees, opposite a pot plant that had seen better days and may have even been plastic.

There was only one other guest in the place, sat on the next settee, who got up from time to time to look at the arrivals and departure screen. Grey suit, no tie, shiny shoes, slightly curly grey hair, he must have been in his mid-fifties. I imagined he must be flying out, as VIP treatment was also for outgoing passengers.

But no, eventually he came up and asked my name and yes he was my driver, Mikhail. He had left the sign with my name in the car. Mikhail spoke some English, had worked for the American Embassy and was a former professional ice hockey player. We left together and magically someone turned up with my suitcase, and it was welcome Moscow traffic. From the number and speed of the cars it looked like Mikhail and I would spend a lot of time together.

Partly because the company for which I worked knew how to handle these things, even obtaining my Migration Card was quite straightforward. I had to report to their office at 3pm on Monday afternoon (my first day was conveniently a Friday). Mikhail said that because of traffic we had to leave well in advance and one of the company lawyers joined us, explaining that this was a very small and insignificant part of his job. (Which I guess is why I had the car and driver and he didn't). The office in the building where we had to be was locked so we awaited the occupant. She arrived 5 minutes later and I was ushered in by the lawyer, on my own, like a naughty schoolboy summoned by the headmistress to their room. Again no words, with the exception of “Passport”.

The spell however was somewhat broken by the transistor radio that was playing in her office. 'Magic moments' by Perry Como, anno 1957.

After consulting the computer I was given my card to "Check". Well I recognised the photo but the wording escaped me (although by the end of Monday I had seen my name so often in Cyrillic that I could recognise it, and by Tuesday I could write it). Then we moved back into bureaucracy with the proffering of a red leather hand-written ledger in which I had to write my full name twice, my name and initials once and sign three times, but for what I didn't know.

Within 5 minutes I was expelled to the corridor and the lawyer showed his worth by checking the wording on the plastic card, that along with all my other documents I was expected to carry with me at all times.

The next day at work I got a message at about 1pm that 'Before 1.20 pm' I had to present myself to the in-house notary and to pay 1350 roubles to them in cash, about 35 euros (which would be reimbursed at some unspecified time in the future). I found them in the building and their desks had the same red leather hand-written ledgers. They read a number of documents in Russian out loud, I paid the money and in the ledger I had to write my full name once, my name and initials once and sign two times, but for what I didn't know.

It all went very smoothly. No months waiting for documents. No hours spent queuing. Yes, but I don't know what a mess it was behind the scenes, said Nadezhda, my boss's assistant, who had arranged all this for me. Nadya - it already seemed that all Russians had a number of different names - was young, tall with very long blonde hair parted on one side. Her English was good and she would also assist me. So I assumed, wrongly as it turned out, like Mikhail, I would be dealing with her a lot.

There were further interesting bits of internal company bureaucracy even on my first day. I was happy to sign a three-page contract in both Russian and English for the laptop that was entrusted to me, and I could see why I also had to do this for the mobile phone (even if the smartphone was so smart that it had been set up to have everything in Russian and the possibility to switch to other languages had been disabled). I started to have contract fatigue when I also had to sign for a calculator (which I gave back explaining there was a calculator function on the computer) and most bizarrely I also had to sign for a stapler. I could only assume they were in short supply and that there was a commercial opportunity to import them. But no, Denis and Olga, the two colleagues with whom I was going to share an office, helpfully explained that historically trust was low and this was a way of keeping control. I was also given a gas mask, that lived under my desk and that I

had to wear if we needed to evacuate the building, and two pens and two pencils that had been ordered for me, but I did not have to sign for them. Or write my full name or name and initials.

A friend of mine in Holland gave me a book by Jelle Brandt Corstius as a parting gift. He writes that Russia is a country where something unexpected happens every day. I was already beginning to understand what he meant.

2. Sour cream and tarragon

Andrey, my boss, told me the drink offered to me on Oilman's Day was lemonade made from water and tarragon, known as *tarhun*. Pale yellow in colour, it was also available from supermarkets and vending machines in a marvellously vivid green.

Andrey had worked in sales for Coca-Cola and was then CEO of a juice company that he sold to Coca-Cola and so when he said that Russian lemonade was very good, whereas some of the well-known international brands of fruit drinks did not actually have any real juice in them at all in Russia, but are purely chemical, "a P&L – profit and loss – issue", I believed him.

He was the Vice-President (VP) for Human Resources (HR) and Organisational Development for the whole company and I was his Deputy. At least that was my job title.

When we first met in London for an interview he annoyed me and impressed me in equal measure. We met at a restaurant at lunchtime so I assumed I would eat. But he was already eating with his previous appointment when I arrived, and kept me waiting for almost an hour while he finished. I then joined his table and got coffee. However he showed me what they had started doing in talent development and talked about their plans and it seemed exactly right.

Andrey came from St Petersburg and had crazy straight straw-coloured hair, rather like the Straw Man from the Wizard of Oz, and a small moustache of similar structure. As I would come to learn his dress sense was similarly unusual. A love of bright single, but strange, colour shirts, think lime-green (*tarhun*) or bright orange, and non-matching ties.

He hadn't worked in an oil company before and he hadn't worked in HR before but he was smart and knew what he didn't know. Given I'd had global HR roles and business roles, we understood each other well.

The second time I'd met him was on my 'selling' weekend in Moscow. He dismissed my driver the headhunters had arranged, by signing the form with a flourish and handing over some banknotes, and drove me around Moscow while we talked. But this time I at least had lunch. We both had *borsch*, beetroot soup, and I watched transfixed as he mixed the sour cream into it, resulting in an apparently unappetizing greyish-red liquid with the cream floating in globules on top.

Food and drink was one of the subjects on which I got mixed advice before moving to Russia. The joke that all Russian dishes consisted of 'sour cream, tarragon (again), unidentifiable meat, more tarragon and more sour cream' was not necessarily what I had encountered. I also wasn't sure if the present of a cookbook on Russian food before I left was serious or amusing (Typical recipe: 'Add more sour cream and tarragon to the boiled unidentifiable meat').

Soups were certainly a specialty, and an important part of the meal. *Borsch* really was good (the unidentifiable meat was usually beef). A Russian ex-colleague of mine in Holland sung the praises of her mother's soup back in Moscow (and if I ever got really desperate she would ring her mother and she would cook soup for me). *Blinis*, or pancakes, with a variety of different fruits for example (and cream) were excellent for breakfast. And I'd discovered *pelmeni*, which were small meat-filled dumplings, a bit like ravioli, except again eaten with lashings of sour cream.

I was however missing vegetables from the diet, although this could have been because the hotel and company restaurant food was concentrating on the minimalist and presentation, rather than healthy substance. A visit to the local supermarket proved that some fresh vegetables were available. I had been warned of one potential barrier. As in the Netherlands and elsewhere the produce was weighed and the price and bar code was printed on a sticker and attached to the plastic bag of vegetables or fruit. However you did not do this yourself. You queued up and handed over your purchases to a supermarket worker who weighed and attached the price sticker to the bag and handed it back to you to take eventually with the rest of your shopping to the cash register. Thereby keeping people in employment who would have normally have lost their job moving from an old-fashioned greengrocer to a serve-yourself supermarket.

This supermarket was in a not even half-full shopping centre, with many empty lots boarded up. Next to the supermarket was a pet shop with, in the window, very small, fashion accessory dogs in glass compartments in which I would have expected to see rabbits or guinea pigs. Upstairs, totally out of context with the rest of building was a 'Golden Bazaar' with three gold and jewellery stores, and two

very bored security guards. A gun shop was next door. Your local everyday set of shops.

The one exception to the lack of vegetables so far encountered was mushrooms. It was mushroom season in Moscow and they were in special dishes everywhere. My roommate Denis went mushroom picking with his wife in the forest at the weekend and came back with 5 kg. Unfortunately there were too many other Russians also picking mushrooms, he said. When I asked him how he knew which mushrooms were edible he said it's just something everyone grows up knowing. I guess if you didn't get it right you didn't grow up. They would be going back to the forest next weekend to celebrate his wife's birthday, picking mushrooms. Her suggestion.

However if I got really hungry, then Moscow had warmly welcomed many global brands and foods. McDonalds and Subway were available and despite having hundreds of coffee bars, many with English names (Coffee Bean, Coffee Mania), there were more Starbucks in Moscow than in the whole of the Netherlands.

Birthdays were as extensively celebrated at work in Moscow as in Holland: speeches, gifts, shaking hands, kissing and even singing – in English – Happy Birthday. The only English many Russians know. Back on my first day we had a similar celebration for my colleague Sasha (short for Alexander). And we celebrated not with cakes, but with that other Russian speciality: six different kinds of Pizza.

3. Apartment hunting

The first couple of weeks at work were rounds of get-to-know-you meetings. Mainly with my new colleagues who reported to Andrey (like Denis and Olga), but also with the HR Directors of the businesses and a start with some of the senior company leaders. Some spoke English and had even worked for foreign companies, but many did not, so I had started to value our in-house team of interpreters.

The second main activity was apartment hunting. I could stay in the hotel for up to two months but obviously I wanted to find a more permanent place to live. The estate agent who was helping me was Tina, a Georgian from Tbilisi who seemed to have been in Moscow for years, knew everyone and worked 24/7. Like the rest of Moscow. She sent me links to various rental apartments with photos, I made a choice and a couple of evenings a week or at weekends we went with her driver and viewed.

Moscow really was a city of apartments, some blocks, many buildings, but those in search of even a terrace house would be disappointed. At least anywhere near the centre. At least if you were not a billionaire. After all how else do you house the 15 or so million people that Moscow has? (Only 11.5m permanent residents according to the last census, but together with another 1.8m temporary residents with documentation and an estimated minimum of 1m without any documentation, you get close to 15m).

Even a week of viewings taught me the main differences in styles and history.

Pre-Revolutionary buildings built in the late 19th/early 20th centuries were impressive. They looked good and had reasonably sized rooms with high ceilings and large windows, and may even have original mouldings and other features.

Stalin-Period buildings were later (30s to 50s) and tended to be larger but not less attractive. Again high ceilings, large windows and with thick walls, there might be several hundred apartments in the building and probably only one bathroom (not in the building but in an apartment), but again perfectly fine.

Post-Stalin buildings from the 60s and 70s were smaller and more utilitarian: lower ceilings, less space and compared to Pre-Revolutionary and Stalin-Period, plain facades.

Ministerial Buildings were built in the 70s and 80s to provide elite apartments for Communist and Soviet officials. These were spacious (apartments, entrances, halls, storage) and came with built-in security (concierges, fences, guarded parking). They also tended to be built in yellow or brown brick rather than concrete.

Then we got to the less attractive and more modern. The ones in which most Russians live but however much I said I wanted something authentic, there was such a thing as being too authentic. Block and panel prefabricated buildings were built in the 70s and 80s. Simple and low cost. Low ceilings and plain rooms.

Finally there were two types of modern. An extension of the block, except very, very high rise instead of high rise. Cheap. And modern, modern. With underground parking, gyms, swimming pools and gated communities. Near the international schools. Just like other major cities catering to the rich and the international. Expensive.

When you visited an apartment, the first impressions of the entrance to a block were not always reassuring. Gates, steel doors, security codes, locks, sometimes

dark, sometimes dirty. And even spookier given the children's playground which would be somewhere near the entrance. Eerily identical to every other children's playground by every block throughout the city. And no children in sight.

Then you would be in the entrance hall and the chance was that a number of your senses would be impacted. Especially the sense of smell. There might be a dirty piece of carpet. Well worn stone steps may seem historical and appealing in an ancient castle but less so in your new apartment block.

Concierges really existed in many apartment building entrances. One building will have many entrances and almost all would have a woman of a certain age, a *babushka*, Russian for grandmother but an all-embracing term for older women, who was the security for the building. Three shifts of 8 hours if you were lucky, and a pride in their work. Or just over day during the week and apparently incapable of doing anything except trying to look menacing, if you were unlucky. They appeared to live in a small office, cabin, some cases a cupboard, even in a tent at one place. There might be a small bed. And they certainly cooked there if the sense of smell was reliable. But then the sense of smell also suggested they lived with hundreds of cats and dogs who stayed indoors for all of their bodily needs.

Then the lift. If you were lucky enough to have a lift, because we were dealing with historical buildings after all. In most cases as long as there were no more than two of you, and you were both suffering from anorexia and you both held your breath in, then you could manage to use the lift. Except if you had a suitcase; then the stairs would be the only option.

So you then stood before the door to the apartment. Thick, steel, maybe padded with leather to make it look more attractive. Not. But behind every door there was potentially a surprise.

You opened up the door, with at least two keys. The doors were always thick and heavy. The locks secure. You put on plastic orange overshoes like in a hospital operating theatre for the visit and enter. The Russians always take off their shoes and wear slippers or thick socks as they enter houses (sensible given the snow for much of the year).

I saw lots of nice 'expat' places in the beginning, bland and in areas with no life or people on the streets at the weekend, but nothing special and with one disadvantage or another. Noisy because they were on the 'Ring', the 6-lane highway round the centre, or with a box room rather than a second bedroom, or no boiler for the two weeks when the communal hot water was turned off. Tina and I also saw some with tremendously posh entrances (often near the embassies)

but then the flats although large had very little natural light or a view of the River only if you stood on a chair in the spare room which was too small anyway for more than a narrow one person's bed.

So the search would continue until I found something special.

4. Marble walls, high ceilings, ornate chandeliers, statues, carvings, paintings and mosaics

I attended Andrey's extended team meeting for the first time, with his direct reports and the HR Directors of the businesses. We were all squeezed into the small meeting room opposite my office, with a too large table in the middle, leaving little space for everyone to sit around it. Masha, the assigned interpreter for the meeting, sat next to me. Masha was small and looked incredibly young, with long brown hair parted somewhere in the middle and a wide smile. Her English accent was precise and her simultaneous translation was, as far as I could tell in the beginning (and would be confirmed in the future), quick and accurate. She said Andrey was one of the most challenging but intellectually interesting persons for whom to interpret, because he used such a wide range of words and inventive metaphors, similes and comparisons. So Masha could not translate them directly but came up with some highly descriptive English for me.

There was an agenda, although it was soon clear this was the only structured part of the event. It was an hour of mayhem, people speaking through each other, people shouting, arms waving, people standing up, and no chance for me to ask questions. Every so often we appeared to move from one agenda item to the next but I had no idea what had been agreed or if any decision had been made. Masha did brilliantly but I was none the wiser. And suddenly it was over and everyone escaped from the room as quickly as possible. This was not going to be boring.

I went back to my desk and computer and found an email from another Olga. We had a mutual acquaintance back in The Netherlands, where Olga had studied for a while. She had seen that I had signed up for a meeting of Internations, the international organisation that arranges social gatherings in cities across the world, aimed mainly at expats. So we agreed to meet for coffee beforehand. Mikhail drove after work and we were clearly becoming Russian, got caught in the traffic and I was 45 minutes late. Olga, or Olya as she became, was still in Coffee Bean waiting. She was a lawyer working for a well-known oligarch, Mikhail Prokhorov, had dark shoulder length hair parted to one side and wrinkled up her nose when she smiled. From what I could gather she spent her time de-registering and re-

registering his yachts in various tax jurisdictions, which meant she got to go to places like Monte Carlo, although she would prefer The Netherlands, she said.

We went on to the nightclub where Internations was being held and met some of her friends, including more lawyers. Carolyn, an American, had been in Moscow for years. And Sasha, who is Russian but spoke English with a New York accent, was indeed in America for many years, where she worked for her husband running hotels. But after what appeared to sound like a very messy divorce, now specialised in Russian child custody cases, often across international borders. Based on her own successful experience. Internations is supposed to be for expats, or locals with attachments to abroad such as Olya and Sasha. The club was dark but many of the hundreds of attendees looked very Russian, female and scantily clad to me.

Olya suggested I might like to go with her to a jazz club that Saturday. She knew some of the people playing. Which meant it was time to use the Metro for the first time.

I was a little wary when you don't know where you are going or how to get there and having a driver limited my opportunities. Especially as Mikhail was clear that he thought he should be driving and I should not be let loose alone on the Metro. I had travelled on the New York subway, Chicago's notorious L, the Paris metro and I was brought up on the London underground. But I had heard stories of crowds of people in the Moscow Metro, difficulties of getting in and out of the trains, and of understanding exactly where you were, given that all signs were in Cyrillic and all announcements in Russian. After all 7 million people use the Metro every day.

I hoped that Saturday night it would not be so crowded. The nearest station to my hotel was about 10 minutes walk away at Dinamo, next to the football stadium. You bought tickets from a kiosk and basically you get tickets for a given number of journeys. You paid per trip, irrespective of how far you went or how many times you changed lines. There were electronic gates, and that was the only time you needed the ticket, when you entered the station. There were no checks on the trains (try doing that with so many full trains) or when you left the station (the same problem).

I went down the escalators into the bowels of the earth and that was the first time I realised this would be an experience in itself. The first stations date from 1935 and many of them are as magnificent as the guidebooks say. Under Stalin the Metro stations were built with marble walls, high ceilings, ornate chandeliers, statues, carvings, paintings and mosaics. Dinamo had the requisite gleaming marble

everywhere and stone carvings of footballers. And it was by no means the most ornate. Mayakovskaya near the centre, which I needed for the jazz, had the most amazing mosaics. Fans of art deco would not be disappointed.

Directions in the Metro were relatively simple – and would become even easier when my reading of Cyrillic script got better. The network was basically a hub and spoke model. There was a circle line that indeed circled the city. Then there were 11 other straight lines that started at one end of the city and went through to the other end. Each had a number and each was colour coded. And even when two or three went through the same station allowing you to change lines, the sub-station had its own different name for each line, making things even easier.

The experience continued when you actually waited and then got on a train. First you don't really have to wait. Trains come along every 2-3 minutes. And 90 seconds in rush hour. Second you don't hang about getting on (or getting off) the train. The doors are open for less than 10 seconds and are not going to wait for you. And third there is the speed. The distances between stations are quite far so the train can really get up speed. According to the Metro website the average speed of a Metro train was 41 km/hr. Not the top speed, the average speed.

The level of anxiety rises when you think it's time to get off. There are announcements as to the next station, and things happen so quickly that they actually announce what the next station will be, even before you have left the station before to give you a chance to act. And how do you push your way through the crowds to actually alight in those few seconds? Yes the guidebook was correct again, and it would become one of the most important Russian phrases. You politely ask the people between you and the door "Are you getting out at the next station?" If they are not they move out of the way for you. If they are then you follow them as quickly as possible.

The only other anxiety you then have is deciding what direction you need to go in. Again the deciphering of Russian helps and even if you get it wrong you just get out and go over to the other side of the platform. But there was another trick: the announcements in the trains as to the next station (and whatever else they say; I'd noticed at work that Russians often appeared to use lots of words for what I imagined to be fairly concise ideas) were given by a man when the train was going towards the centre (to work) and a woman for trains moving away (to home). And by a man clockwise on the circle line and a woman anti-clockwise.

I was also surprised by the number of people hanging around the stations not bothering to get on trains. But basically it is an underground life: you meet people, you talk to people, there were benches to sit on. In the middle of winter you were

not going to meet someone on a cold and snowy thoroughfare if you could do it in the warmth and light underground.

The concept of 'the last train' was also slightly different. The entrance to every single station closed automatically at 1am. If you were inside by then there would be a train to get you home.

Exiting the station was the last test: which end of the platform did you need? Tricky, as at ground level you could be one side of a motorway or the other. Leaving via the escalators allowed you to look at the woman (it always seemed to be a woman) whose job it was in turn to watch you. At the bottom of every bank of escalators she sat in a small metal cabin looking at a TV screen feed from cameras on each of the escalators. What else she did I never discovered but I think this might have been an example of a peculiarly Russian and potentially unnecessary profession: Metro Escalator Guard; or perhaps Escalator Concierge.

I found Olya close to the (correct) Mayakovskaya exit, waiting outside B2, a well-known club with multiple stages and rooms. The Moscow Ragtime Band were playing and were led by the Sales Director from one of the international drinks companies in Moscow, whom Olya knew from working there previously. In his spare time he not only toured but also promoted. There were 30 people there maximum, in a small room.

But before they played, the supporting band of people who looked like old hippies playing with a couple of their children, turned out to be a famous Russian girl band from the late 80s to mid 90s, Kolibri, with a lead singer with an amazing voice. Despite the apparent years of debauchery, whisky and cigarettes, when I compared her earlier physical appearance with You Tube videos I later found. Kolibri were known for their avant-garde theatrical stage movements and costumes, in addition to their individualistic lyrics and songs. And then someone else apparently famous (and blind) who had been giving a concert elsewhere came along and jammed with the Ragtime Band.

First the Metro and then everything you would expect from an old-fashioned, Moscow jazz culture. Every day the expected unexpected.

5. An inconspicuous cabinet towards the end: the cabinet with 10 Imperial Fabergé eggs

The next day, Sunday, I got to use the Metro again. The sun was still shining - I had been warned not to expect to see the sun again until April next year, which

supposedly explained some of the colourful painted ceilings I have seen in apartments - and I went on a tour of the Kremlin.

I was invited by Ian, the deputy head of the Anglo-American School. I had known him in The Hague and the joke was that I had been to more of his schools than I had to my own children's. He had organized the trip for his new boss, their family and a visitor from the States. And having done the tour a number of times, was more than happy to do me a favour and generously forgo the opportunity to accompany them. Guessing that I may myself have to organise at least one of these tours (you need to book this with an official guide) and having nothing better to do on a wonderful Sunday morning (no apartment visits at least), I jumped at the chance.

Our guide was Tatiana, which might seem an incongruous name for a sixty-something Russian *babushka* but Tatiana is a name that has never gone out of fashion.

She had clearly been an official guide for a while, recognising other wizened guides in the queue and commenting that her colleagues all seem to have started looking old lately and that maybe they had all been doing the job for too long. (Official retirement age is actually 55 for women and 60 for men).

Although it was her occupation, she shared the enthusiasm many Russians have of desperately wanting to tell you about the history of Moscow and Russia and the meaning of the various statues and monuments. If you were interested, and even better knew some of that history yourself, then a bond was immediately created. So I knew that next year was the 200th anniversary of Borodino, where Napoleon managed only the second ever occupation of Moscow, and that this would be extensively celebrated.

To get into the Kremlin we had to go through the airport-style metal detector doorway with armed guards. But times have changed in Moscow. The guard asked in good English with a hint of a smile on his face to the most unlikely people (our American lady visitor for example) where they had secreted their knives and sub-machine guns.

Once inside the grounds it was time to queue up again to enter the Armoury. And once in the building the first stop was to hand over our coats to the women who looked after the cloakroom. Wherever you go in Moscow, restaurants, pubs, clubs, public buildings, there was usually a well-organised and free (with no tips expected) arrangement to hang up coats. Which made sense shortly given the cold outside temperatures and the warmth of the buildings.

The Armoury was one of the two main exhibition centres (the other, next door, being the Diamond Collection), which together with the grounds, and the three cathedrals - and the Bell That Never Told and the Gun That Was Never Fired - could be visited as part of the tour.

The cathedrals were especially interesting for the lesson I got in iconography. How do you find the name of the church or cathedral you happen to be in? You look at the three icons that are always facing the entrance. The centre one is always Christ, the left Mary and the one to the right is a depiction of the name, either the saint or the biblical scene.

We didn't 'do' the Diamond Collection (eventually the tour took 3 hours, which I hadn't been warned about in advance). But even in the Armoury there were an unimaginable number of jewels that I did not complain.

What we did not see much of in the Armoury were arms. However there was a large collection of Royal Carriages (including a sled carriage which travelled from Moscow to St Petersburg), clothes (including boots made and worn by Peter the Great) and, yes, jewels. Jewels in thrones, jewels in crowns, and jewels in jewels. And then cabinet after cabinet of gold and silver and icons (and jewels) made into every imaginable gift, from the 16th century through to the beginning of the last century to the Russian royal family and court.

Tatiana knew her stuff. Every cabinet, every object, Tatiana knew the story or told a story. Although by now the American visitor and I attempted to find the very few places you could sit whilst listening to the explanations and descriptions.

Until we got to an inconspicuous cabinet towards the end. The cabinet with 10 Imperial Fabergé eggs in it. And a number of other Fabergé items that were also presents. Such as the dandelion clock made of real dandelion down. Except each seed was connected to the stem with silver and had a diamond at the end of each tip.

The first Fabergé egg was made for Alexander III for his wife the Empress Maria Fedorovna, an Easter Egg, in 1885. This was so successful that Fabergé became the Court goldsmiths and eggs were commissioned each year. Following Alexander's death his son Nicholas II continued giving them to both his mother and his wife. Until the Revolution interrupted things somewhat, the customers disappeared (permanently), the House of Fabergé was nationalized and the Romanov treasures moved on the order of Lenin to the Kremlin Armoury.

Of the 50 known Imperial eggs 42 have survived. There were also 15 other large eggs made (those in the Kremlin are on average 15 cm in height although a couple are well over 30 cm). 10 of the Imperial eggs are in this cabinet in the Armoury. A large number were sold by Joseph Stalin in the 30s to get foreign currency.

They were spectacular. Each egg - itself a masterpiece of gold, platinum, silver, diamonds and rubies at the very least - contains one or even more surprises. So the Memory of Azov Egg has an exact replica of the cruiser Memory of Azov (but in gold, platinum with diamond windows, you get the general idea), the Moscow Kremlin Egg has the Annunciation Cathedral (and if that is not enough it is also a musical box with a gold key), the Alexander Palace Egg has five portraits of the Nicholas II's children (including Tatiana) which is amazing in itself, but inside the egg is hidden a replica of Alexander Palace. Others are different but just as amazing. The Romanov Tercentenary Egg for example has 18 miniature portraits of the Romanov tsars and emperors on the outside and a rotating dark blue globe inside the egg, with the territories of Russia in 1613 and 1913 represented in gold.

My favourite though had to be the Trans-Siberian Railway Egg. Secreted in the amazingly ornate but fairly small (26 cm high) egg, a map of Russia engraved with the route of the Trans-Siberian railway on a central silver section, the length of the train itself is 40 cm and it is apparently still a working model. A platinum locomotive with lanterns made of rubies pulls five gold coaches, which are labelled 'mail', 'for ladies only', 'smoking', 'non-smoking' and 'chapel'. And the train is obviously wound up with the requisite gold key. Every little boy's dream.

Alexander and his son Nicholas could give a mean present. Even allowing for the more slender means that the rest of us have (with the exception of a number of Russians in Moscow; one of my 'oligarchs' who owned our company has 12 eggs – 9 Imperial and 3 others), they put the rest of us to shame when it comes to choosing and buying presents for our nearest and dearest. And even our guide Tatiana had few words to match their beauty.

6. Red Ribbon Ball in Moscow to mark 10 years of the AIDS Foundation East-West

Denis and I settled into a morning routine. Although the official starting time was 9am, due to the uncertainties of traffic very few other colleagues were normally there. And they made up their time by staying later than 6.30pm. Which I tried not to do. So the two of us had coffee first thing and discussed life and my transition into the Russian working environment. Denis had studied abroad in Germany and his English was excellent as was his sense of humour. He dressed

smartly and had naturally slicked-back black hair (although I learned much later that this was because he was 'partly Bulgarian'). He was previously in charge of HR for GazPromNeft but when they recently moved their HQ from Moscow to St Petersburg he left, partly because his wife had a good job. So he had only been here a few weeks longer than I and saw working for Andrey as a step down, especially as he knew our oligarchs well, having worked here before and could see lots of things in HR here that could be improved. Which was presumably why Andrey had hired him. Bizarrely he was also a fan of 'Dutch cookies' as he called them, *gevulde koeken* in Dutch, the filling being almond paste. Doubly bizarrely they actually sold them in the vending machine on our floor. The only place I ever saw them in all of Russia.

I'd been told that our company was one of the best managed in Russia and an email sent round to all staff seemed to confirm this. Our leaders were in the top three in seven of the eight professional nominations of Russia's Top 1000 Managers rating according to the Kommersant Publishing House, and Andrey was the top HR Director for 2011. Given his short experience in HR and that I'd been supposedly brought in to coach him, this either said much about the level of HR in Russia or that Kommersant might be owned by some people close to the company. Or both.

On Saturday I attended a Red Ribbon Ball in Moscow to mark 10 years of the AIDS Foundation East-West (AFEW), the first event of this kind in Russia. AFEW is a Dutch public health foundation that works across 8 countries in the former Soviet Union. They run programmes with prisons, healthcare systems and local communities and their approach is based on the premise that everyone should have equal access to treatment, prevention and care. HIV cases were growing rapidly in Russia. Ironically to get my work permit I had to undergo test to show I was HIV-negative.

My elder daughter knew someone involved in the organisation, which is how I heard about it, and I invited Olya to join me. Which was just as well as there were not that many people who attended. AIDS/HIV was still a difficult topic in Russia. 5 years previously AFEW tried to organise something similar in Moscow and had to cancel as they only sold 5 tickets.

The evening was interesting for a number of reasons.

I had my first experience of traditional Russian folk music. The live music was provided by the Orchestra of Russian Folk Instruments of the Russian State TV and Radio, led by Dmitry Kalinin, who himself is an accomplished balalaika player. The ensemble must have been about 25 strong, with many playing

balalaikas, a sort of mandolin, of various shapes and forms and domras, a sort of long-necked lute. In addition to more recognisable instruments (flute, oboe, percussion) there were also three bayan players, a Russian accordion which together with the balalaikas and domras has a very important role in the music. Finally, centre stage, was a magnificent gusli, a sort of clavichord and one of the oldest Russian musical instruments, standing on four legs, which has both strings and is played with the fingers like a harp, but also has a keyboard with 8 white and 5 black notes. The skill level was high, the music extremely enjoyable, both rousing at times but it could also be quite tender. Olya kept saying “I remember this from my childhood”.

I also met a couple of interesting people. Onno was second in command at the Dutch Embassy, and we agreed to meet for lunch sometime. The main celebrity though was Vladimir Pozner, one of Russia’s best-known journalists and TV interviewers. He grew up in America and spoke English with a flawless New York accent. He became a familiar face in Russia and abroad as a charismatic Soviet spokesperson during the Cold War, then in the 80s and 90s as the co-host of TV discussion programmes with the US when few people here knew much about the world outside Russia, and he still had his current affairs programme on Russian TV. Vladimir was on the Board of AFEW and hence was the local name to attract attention for the evening.

There was a raffle to raise funds as part of the evening’s activities and it would have been churlish not to take part with so few people there. So I won a large, framed photograph of a female prison in Moldova, by the Dutch photographer Adriaan Backer, more attractive than you would imagine because of the overpowering bright blue sky (and snow). But the main prize was breakfast with Pozner in his own restaurant in Moscow. An opportunity I could not miss in exchange for my newly earned roubles.

The same evening President Medvedev announced he would effectively switch back roles with Prime Minister Putin in the upcoming elections. Denis and Olga expressed their shock when we discussed it on Monday morning. Apparently I was the only person not surprised that Putin was coming back to be President again. Today’s unexpected thing I guess.

7. The House on the Embankment

I was slowly realising how few of my colleagues, or even senior managers, spoke English. Which was one of the reasons Masha and her colleagues were so necessary. So unsurprisingly almost nobody in the rest of our part of the

organisation did either. Irina, who worked in the training department, was the exception. Pretty, with long brown hair and with a knowing smile, Ira (the shortened version of Irina) learned her fluent English at university, and suggested we have coffee together in the kitchen area where Denis got his cookies, to help her practice her English. That summer she had been in Scotland and she told me her ambition was to somehow leave Russia and live and work there.

Evenings and weekends I was still looking at apartments with Tina my wonderful realtor. It was taking so long because I wanted something out-of-the-ordinary, Russian even. Unlike most expats apparently, I didn't want something that was nice and modern and could have been in any city in the world. Tina rose to the challenge and even started to enjoy looking at some very strange flats. We'd probably seen thirty apartments so far and they were getting wilder. I was allowed two months in the hotel, so I could afford to look at many places.

'The House on the Embankment' is a huge, grey, giant of a building fairly close to the Kremlin, part of which is on the banks of the River Moskva and completed in 1931. Originally called 'The Government Building' it also became known as 'The House of Ghosts'.

It was intended as a luxury dwelling for Soviet nomenclature. For highly ranked party leaders, senior military officers, actors, writers, artists and heroes of the Soviet Republic. An embodiment of the new way of life. 505 apartments but far more than that. It was thought to be the first residence in Moscow to have hot running water. It had its own post office, bank, laundry, food store, library, kindergarten and central cooking facility. A city on its own so that the chosen few could enjoy the benefits of Soviet life, without having to mix with the proletariat.

But then came Stalin's purges and in 1938 the disadvantages suddenly outweighed the benefits. 280 of the 505 apartments were suddenly empty and sealed. Only The Ghosts of the disappeared remained.

So obviously we took the opportunity to view a couple of apartments in The House on the Embankment. Even if it was impractical by car over the nearby bridge in rush hour and had some of the worst and smelliest entrances I had seen.

The first flat was empty, large, dark and depressing. But I viewed the secret staircases used by the NKVD to 'disappear' people, which were now emergency exits. But so black and narrow I did not rate anyone's chances.

The second was a flashback to 1931. Exquisitely furnished, it could have been a museum. What looked like antiques were everywhere. It was the only apartment I

have seen that had its own library, on two levels, with one of those special sets of library steps. It also, somehow, had two great views in both directions, between the other wings of the block. One of the river, the other of the gardens.

I didn't want to think about how much it must cost, even excluding fittings and furniture. Tina didn't want to think about to whom it might belong. You would not have won an argument with the landlord. We made our excuses and left.

But with time we moved on to the strange and intriguing.

The modern flat that was circular, with a huge, vertical, colourful, tropical fish aquarium in the middle. Serviced once a week as part of the rental agreement.

The apartment close to the centre which had been decorated to the taste of a very young bride married to an older man with money (looking at the photographs). With the ceiling of the main bedroom dark blue with clouds and stars. And fairies hanging from the chandelier above the bed. A real-life Barbie house, a little girl's dream.

The extremely small apartment with a view over Patriarsky Ponds, in 'The House of Generals' another historically important building. A balcony but too small even for one person, in a living room in which only one person could sit, together with a giant TV.

The Armenian flat with a huge dining table that could seat twelve, oil paintings, stuffed animals and large carpets, but which had a kitchen in the middle without any windows and through which the guests from the second bedroom would have to walk to get to the one bathroom.

The apartment above Mayakovskaya Metro station which had not been used for ten years because the owner hoped her son would live there. A time capsule of taste and the best that was then available. White plastic expansive cupboards and mirrors in the living room (and kitchen) which no doubt were sought after at the time. With fake Roman columns in the living room, made from the same material. But as a rich expat, I would be allowed to live there. At which point Tina whispered in my ear "Let's escape".

The flat which the owner explained had been lived in until recently by an ex-ballerina from the Bolshoi, with two hidden video cameras recording 24 hours a day the outside of the door and the hallway. And a very thick metal door which he insisted had proved thick enough to keep bullets out. I didn't doubt him and presumed the bullets were aimed for him and not the lady from the Bolshoi.

And then the Doll's House. One of those hidden gems you did not expect when we entered the building and behind the plain door when it opened. Six years of renovation and rebuilding by Yuliana, the owner, so proud of it and rightly so. She was planning to live there but in the meantime had got married, had children and got divorced, and it wasn't a place for small children. She would however be sending her ex-husband around immediately to mend anything that needed mending.

Superb craftsmanship, high ceilings and windows, Venetian chandeliers, artistic tile work in the entrance hall and both bathrooms. Two floors across half of the flat as the ceilings were so high. Two separate bedrooms there, one with a double bed and the other with two singles, made from old-fashioned wooden doors, and a bathroom with jacuzzi and some artistic male and female nudes on the walls. The bedrooms having glass windows (and heavy drapes if required) opening out over the living room and kitchen downstairs. Which is why if you are downstairs looking up into the rooms it seems like a Doll's House. Light and airy with a large, decorative, spiral, metal staircase in the middle of the room. Dark red wood furniture, the same colour as the staircase and the radiators and pipes.

Quirky, stylish, tasteful. What more could I want? But it wasn't quite ready because of the cleaning up and Tina wanted to haggle over the price.

Less House of Ghosts, more Fairy Tale. Tina wanted to continue the search, but the Doll's House had been found.

8. Reassuringly Computer Clinic No. 772 looked the same as any other computer clinic anywhere in the world

Work was becoming real as I became involved in more projects, even though I still had the idea I wasn't really doing very much and started wondering if I would even be kept on for my enormous salary after the three months probation period ended. In particular I was working with a large consultancy firm who was supposedly helping us, because the Deputy CEO Maksim Barsky got to know them when he was seconded to BP in London. I had understood from Andrey that Maksim was one of the main reasons I was employed in the first place. Having sat through a three-hour meeting run by their junior consultants, I felt a bit better because I certainly knew a lot more than they did.

Barsky's links to BP came because our company TNK-BP was actually a 50-50 joint venture. AAR – Alfa-Access-Renova –a consortium of three companies and

four oligarchs owned 50%, the international oil company BP owning the other half. Mikhail Fridman (Alfa) was CEO of TNK-BP. Len Blavatnik (Access) seemed to have purely a financial interest and lived in the US. Viktor Vekselberg (Renova) had a company office and came to the top leadership meetings, in addition to owning the Fabergé eggs. German Khan (also Alfa) was the most hands-on of the four and my boss's boss.

I had also started working closely with Olga, and had realised that the work that Andrey had showed me at the interview in London was hers. Olga was older than the rest of my colleagues and came from the Urals. She indeed looked more Eurasian than ethnic Russian with her shortish black hair and glasses. Her English was good with a clipped accent. She was a psychologist by training and had an impressive psychology and HR background. Olga had worked for Yukos, which at the time had some of the leading HR practices in Russia, leaving just before the company was taken over by the Russian state to form what was now Rosneft, the Russian national oil company. She then worked four years in TNK-BP when BP was in the ascendance, leaving at the time of the first major shareholder disagreement when the BP boss had to escape Russia. Or, as Olga put it, “the mountain gives birth to the mouse”. She had come back to TNK-BP in May and was looking forward to working and learning from me. She was passionate about her work and highly detailed, but admitted that she needed help with the ‘big picture’. I was already helping her with the HR processes and she would help me with the People Strategy.

I had also started another routine: Russian lessons, three a week and during company time. My Russian teacher was Margarita, an ex-professor of linguistics who was probably in her early sixties. I already understood her love of language, her patience and her stories of Soviet times.

As you can learn Dutch in 18 months to two years, I asked a couple of long-term expats I had met who were fluent in Russian how long it took them. The answers were uniform: “7 years and by the way am married to a Russian”. Unfortunately my contract was only for 3 years in Russia and I would have to be quick to take advantage of the second opportunity.

The story you hear in Moscow is that lots of expats don't even try to learn Russian. Too difficult. There is not enough time. They do not expect to stay long.

I believe that if you live somewhere, you can't feel at home or begin to understand the country or the people, if you can't eavesdrop on public transport or in the street or in bars and restaurants. And I was working for a Russian company where

most meetings were in Russian anyway. And I was offered lessons. So I definitely wanted to learn.

Back in the hotel at the weekend however disaster struck.

My computer crashed. It had been working fine during the morning and afternoon. But told me I had a problem with Windows when I turned it on in the evening. And despite promising me that if I chose the right option to click it would repair itself, it of course didn't.

Whilst the computer was only a couple of years old, it had travelled around with me a lot. And it was looking in need of a clean. But even so - like everyone else when faced with a crashed computer - I was not expecting it to happen. And I presumed it had nothing to do with the cup of coffee I spilt over it that Sunday morning.

Denis, Olga and Nadya all insisted that the IT people at work would be able to fix it. After all Russians were good at computing and had a long history of mending electronics when it was difficult getting supplies and spares during the Cold War. Well they tried. But by the time they had finished the computer was not even promising me that it could repair itself. Their analysis was "Sorry but there is something serious with the hard drive".

The good thing though was that my Russian colleagues were trying really hard to help. So the next step was an IT repair shop and Denis offered to come with me.

The nearest one was a few blocks away and poetically named Computer Clinic No. 772. Thereby reinforcing my beliefs that previously in the Soviet period, things tended to have numbers rather than names, as indeed schools still had numbers. Reassuringly once in Computer Clinic No. 772 it looked the same as any other computer clinic anywhere in the world. Computer boxes on the floor, unidentifiable pieces of electronics everywhere, a young girl on the telephone in front of a screen acting as a help desk and two youngish guys helping a couple of other people and myself at the same time. And mumblings of "hard disk" and "motherboard".

I left the computer behind in the hope that Computer Clinic No. 772 would repay my faith in Russian computer hacking skills and technological ingenuity (and that Russian ingenuity had been clearly evident in some of the apartments I had seen).

In one piece of good news, Tina had negotiated a lower rent of 165k roubles a month (more than €4000) for the Doll's House, at Staropimenovsky Pereulok 14,

Apartment 5. We were still looking half-heartedly at other apartments - the total was now forty - but barring any more mishaps the search for a place to live was over. All I needed now was a working computer.

9. Breakfast at Chez Geraldine: Pozner on Pozner

Sometimes you meet famous people without even realising how surprising it is. Especially when you've just moved to another country.

I won a breakfast with Vladimir Pozner at the AIDS charity auction within a month or so of being in Russia. So Mikhail and I set out earlier than usual on a weekday to be there at 9. This time we were early and I waited outside for 25 minutes in the car.

Pozner will supposedly be 80 on 1st April 2014, but looked much younger, was energetic, sharp, a born and charming raconteur and a vital part of Russian TV current affairs & political journalism.

I guess there are at least three phases of his professional life. The Official Voice (and the voice in English is disconcertingly that of a bald, native New Yorker) of the Soviet Union in America and the West during the Cold War. The Russian host of the ground breaking TV 'spacebridges' in the mid 80s, the bilateral satellite programmes with live audiences in the studios in the US and Russia. And then in the first half of the 90s as co-host with Phil Donahue of a weekly discussion programme on CNBC. Followed since then by almost weekly appearances on Russian TV, with his almost independent (in Russian terms) current affairs and political interviews and chat shows.

We met for breakfast at the French restaurant he owns with his brother, Chez Geraldine, named after their mother. We shared hot chocolate, omelette and croissants and spoke for an hour. Apart from the two of us there were the security guard on the door, the hostess, a waiter and the chef. I do not think Chez Geraldine normally offers breakfast. One particular photo of Geraldine was everywhere and I now realised the place was not Russian but very French.

Cosmopolitan does not begin to describe his upbringing. Born in Paris of a Russian-Jewish father (although not really Russian according to Pozner) and a French mother they moved to New York City and then in 1939 back to Paris. But with the outbreak of the Second World War it was back to New York via Marseilles, Madrid, Barcelona and Lisbon. Hence the genuine accent.