

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Return to Moscow

R. Daniel Foster · Wednesday, February 5th, 2020

I flew to Moscow on New Year's Day – 35 years after I first landed there in 1985 during the Soviet era. I was curious about what had changed, what had stayed the same, and moreover, where this storied land was headed, especially during our election year with Vladimir Putin on so many American minds.

In Russia, I asked a lot of questions and received varied answers – from how much more open the country now is to how citizens feel today, yet under the thumb of an authoritarian who rules over eleven time zones spanning the world's largest country.



The author, with his rental car on Moscow streets, circa 1985. Photo: R. Daniel Foster

My first takeaway: at least citizens can now openly discuss pointed views of their leader, and indeed if they choose, say that he's corrupt out loud in a public cafe.

Back in 1985, the famed *glasnost* (openness) policy was yet a glimmer in the eye of the eighth and final leader of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev. Moscow and Leningrad (as it was then called) were grey and grim, as were the Soviet republics of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan that I also visited. No one dared speak their mind.

A defeatist pallor hung in the air.

In the mid-1980s, I traveled with journalists, meeting with editors of the newspapers *Pravda* and *Izvestia*. We could, of course, ask the editors whatever we wanted. Most of our queries centered on press freedoms.



The author (with a 'stash) meeting with a Pravda editor (at the head of the table) with other journalists in 1985. Photo: R. Daniel Foster

“We can print whatever we want,” an editor of *Pravda* told me. The subtext, of course, was: as long as it follows the party line.

On my recent trip organized by [Firebird Tours](#), I spotted the country's current press powerhouse: [Channel One](#), Russia's state-controlled television network, housed in the [Ostankino Technical Center](#) near the [Ostankino Tower](#). I had just read an excellent [New Yorker](#) piece that profiled the station's producer [Konstantin Ernst](#). The magazine dubbed him the “unofficial minister of

propaganda.”

In some senses, then, things have not changed.

But in terms of travel amenities and sights – the new(ish) Russian Federation, formed in 1991 from the ashes of the crumbling Soviet era, astounded me in terms of how smart and stylish its capital city had become.

A Winter celebration for the ages

Moscow was blitzed in light displays for its winter festival dubbed “[The Journey to Christmas](#),” spanning December 13 to January 31 (Christmas is celebrated in Russia on January 7). Some displays were so monumental that they reminded me of the oversized iconography of Soviet times. They were everywhere.



Moscow blitzed in light during its annual winter festival. Photo: R. Daniel Foster

The winter festival dates to 2013; this year the theme was “European Christmas Traditions” with displays and events scattered among 81 city venues: concerts, ice ballets and “ice disco parties,” opera, snowboarding, roving performances and an unprecedented number of Christmas trees (2,500 to be exact).

From our home base – [the Ararat Park Hyatt](#) – it was about a 15-minute walk to Red Square. The first night I arrived, I bundled up and took the stroll. The crowds were thick, given that Tverskaya and nearby streets are turned into pedestrian zones for six days (December 21 to January 5).



Moscow fashion along Tverskaya Street. Photo: R. Daniel Foster

Some Russians balk that money fueling the winter extravagance should instead be put into social programs. But with nearly 20 million people attending the festival’s various venues, it’s a huge tourist draw, and moreover, a morale-booster for citizens in the darkest winter month. There’s no cost for the thousands of theater performances and 79 ice shows, among other draws.

[Red Square](#) was mobbed with people, at times I could hardly move – and the square is monumental at 800,000 square feet. Rounding a corner, I spotted St. Basil’s Cathedral in the distance; I had forgotten how fantastical it is.



St. Basil’s Cathedral, Red Square. Photo: R. Daniel Foster



Moscow’s Bolshoi Theatre. Photo: R. Daniel Foster

The square was packed with booths and rides for kids – food offerings were extensive, including Czech Trdelník, Lithuanian Šakotis, and just plain old Russian pancakes splashed with caviar.



Light displays fashioned as champagne glasses (with bubbling lights ascending the sides and bursting

stars at the top). The Kremlin is seen in the background. Photo: R. Daniel Foster

The pedestrian-only streets around Red Square had a “space” theme this year with titles of “Moscow: Dreams of Space” and “Moscow: An Era of Firsts.”



Roving the streets of Moscow – the author is second from the left. Photo: R. Daniel Foster

I loved the outré costumes, the street performances, and the odd troupes that we encountered just walking down the street.

It was sort of like Burning Man with snow.



A street performance near Red Square. Photo: R. Daniel Foster

There was even a Santa band.



A Santa band plays, one of the numerous staged performances across Moscow’s 81 winter festival venues. Photo: R. Daniel Foster

Space Race, Soviet-style: Moscow’s Museum of Cosmonautics

Speaking of space – we also visited Moscow’s [Museum of Cosmonautics](#), opened in 1981 at the base of the “[Monument to the Conquerors of Space](#),” erected along Prospekt Mira in 1967.



Monument to the Conquerors of Space, erected along Prospekt Mira in 1967. Photo: R. Daniel Foster

The museum provides a terrific overview of Soviet space exploration: from vintage satellites to the taxidermied dogs [Belka and Strelka](#), the first living creatures to go into orbit and return safely.

The incomparable Moscow Metro



The Moscow Metro. Photo: R. Daniel Foster

The [Moscow Metro](#) was launched in 1935 during the Stalin era. It opened with 13 stations and now has 232 stations covering nearly 250 miles — the fifth-longest in the world. The subway is one of the world’s deepest (it doubled as a bomb shelter) and it’s the busiest in Europe.

Dubbed the “People’s Palace,” the Moscow Metro is the most beautiful I’ve ridden (I’m a transit addict). Built for the proletariat, the system was one of communism’s stellar projects and was highly successful. It still is, and worth a guided tour to view the most notable of its art-rich stations.



Ploshchad Revolyutsii station along the Moscow Metro. The stop is named for Revolution Square. The 1938 station harbors 76 statues of soldiers, athletes, farmers, writers, schoolchildren and others. The statues symbolize the country’s transition into a post-revolution communist era. Photo: R. Daniel Foster

We stopped over at Putin's office



Vladimir Putin's office building inside the Kremlin. Photo: R. Daniel Foster

During a tour inside the Kremlin, of course we wanted to know where President Vladimir Putin worked. As we rounded a turn, the guide pointed to his office (above). Just one guard? Well, the word "Kremlin" means fortress. We were already inside one of the world's most intriguing and guarded complexes.

Firebird your travel experience

Besides Russia, [Firebird Tours](#) offers worldwide tours, including treks to such popular destinations as Lapland, Italy, Spain, Ireland and Portugal. Private and small group tour packages are available. An [Iceland tour](#) that includes the Northern Lights (if the timing is in your favor) is especially popular.

Firebird's Russia offerings feature a "dacha tour" (including a visit to a local family for a traditional "shashlik" dinner), an evening boat ride on St. Petersburg's rivers and canals to view the drawing of bridges, and a visit to one of Stalin's (then) secret nuclear bunkers, among others.

Here's a [sample Russia tour](#) with variations listed at the bottom of the site.

Moscow's blow-out annual winter festival



Moscow/s "Journey to Christmas" festival: Photo: Moscow Seasons

The "Journey to Christmas" runs from December 13 to January 31, covering 81 city venues – from Red Square and surrounding streets to residential neighborhoods. The shortlist of attractions: 15 ice rinks, 1,500 music and theater performances, 8,500 master classes and whole forests of Christmas trees (130 are located in Manege Square alone).

A [mammoth ice-skating rink](#) is located in Tverskaya Square and top Russian and European stars perform in Zaryade Park.

Here's an [extensive photo gallery](#) that helps one grasp the full overblown, blitzed out festival experience.



Moscow/s "Journey to Christmas" festival: Photo: Moscow Seasons

Moscow's superb restaurants

When I last visited Moscow in the mid-'80s, the cuisine – well, there wasn't much of anything decent amid the stew of overcooked root vegetables. Now, Moscow restaurants have gone cosmopolitan with superior offerings. A few of my favorites:

[Matryoshka's](#) cuisine is inspired by Czarist-era traditions and includes produce from across Russia. The establishment is featured in [Forbes'](#) topmost successful restaurants in Moscow.

[Kazbek](#) offers great Georgian cuisine.

[Cafe Pushkin](#) is named after the country's most famous poet – it opened on the anniversary of his

200th birth, in June, 1999. The opulent wood-rich interiors surround diners with antiques and ample amounts of Russian aristocracy (but the chefs are French).

[Bochka](#) opened in 1996 with an emphasis on hearty meat-based meals.



Cafe Pushkin / Photo: R. Daniel Foster

Top image: Kremlin's Cathedral Square / Photo: R. Daniel Foster

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