

Cyrillic-language-only signage can slow you down

Russia deserves careful by the time-strapped vis

Moscow is experiencing a dramatic growth in air services as carriers race to service the new breed of Muscovites — cashed up and eager to see new places. Over 19 million Russians travel abroad each year and travel expenditure abroad has increased by 15.5 per cent annually since 2000, putting Russia in the top ten tourist spenders, writes Chris Hurd.

Moscow is claimed to be home to the second largest concentration of billionaires in the world. Its economy is strengthening year by year thanks mainly to higher energy prices and tax breaks. The city attracted 1.5 million visitors in the first six months of 2005 many of them businessmen keen to get in on the action. Moscow also is an important gateway and the main hub for the developing CIS countries.

Dubai-based Emirates Airlines identified a growing market when Russia began opening up and started scheduled services 18 months ago. The airline currently operates five services a week but this is expected to increase to daily in 2006. Emirates was followed by Vietnam Airlines, then Thai International last month, next early in the New Year, Singapore Airlines will begin services and from March Cathay Pacific will begin a three times weekly service. Last month's open skies deal between Russia and the US also is expected to prompt a raft of new services.

Emirates is operating its Moscow services using Airbus 330-200s. The aircraft is configured with 18 first, 42 business and 183 economy seats. Flights leave Dubai on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays at 0830, reaching Domodedovo at 1355. The journey is surprisingly quick with a flying time of just over five hours from Dubai to Moscow.

Emirates and most of the new airlines are operating to Domodedovo airport. The airport, about 35 kilometres south of Moscow, is Rus-



Modern Moscow: Muscovites on a fun run through Red Square.

sia's largest and fastest-growing airport and has good road and rail links to the city. It has two runways capable of handling 75 flights an hour and a modern passenger terminal with the latest facilities, including automated check-in counters, air-bridges, baggage carousels and information technology. Airport authorities are currently expanding the terminal to increase capacity to 8000 passengers an hour and by 2015 it is expected to handle 20 million travellers a year.

Arriving at Domodedovo Airport the welcome was fairly curt, but I put that down to the language barrier. This was my first visit to Russia and my expectations were tempered by an earlier visit many years ago to East Germany where I experienced a similar welcome. I still remember the drab city streets and people downtrodden by years of political and social upheaval and quite frankly expected much the same.

But Moscow surprised me. First impressions were very good.

The sun was shining on a warm Septem-

ber day, people were smiling and there was activity everywhere as we strolled along Arabat thoroughfare, a short distance from our hotel The Ukraina. Young people in smart-looking clothes complete with the mandatory mobile phone accessory, kept the street cafes busy. Moscow appears to have embraced capitalism with open arms. It was apparent there was plenty of new money around. But after a few days realism showed itself. There are two sides to Moscow. There are the new rich and those that are still trying to come to terms with the new order. The transition from a centrally-run government system to a free market-based economy has not been easy for most. Mainly the old and poor have the most problems adjusting. Nowadays the middle-class is growing and getting stronger. This in turn is driving business which is what is attracting the airlines. Elsewhere in Russia the economy is struggling but here in Moscow it is bounding along.

If you are planning a trip to Moscow and it's your first time, hire a driver and interpreter. It could be the best investment you make, espe-

planning visitor



cially if you have a tight schedule. Transfers from the airport cost approximately A\$50 and a car with English speaking driver is around A\$30 an hour. Language can be a big problem. I saw few if any direction or information signs in English. My partner speaks and understands a little Russian but we still got hopelessly lost on the ageing underground network. All signage is in Russian and unlike other European cities, the Cyrillic alphabet letters give few clues to its meaning. Communicating with taxi drivers was very difficult and sometimes impossible. They have a 'take it or leave' attitude to the inflated prices they quote. And it is no good trying the next taxi in line as our Russian friends have quickly learnt the lessons of supply and demand. There is one price for locals and another often twice or three times the rate for foreigners. A good tip is to get your hotel concierge to book a taxi, write down the address and negotiate the rate. We did a lot of walking in Moscow until we worked out a basic understanding of the transport system, unfortunately too close to the end of our visit to make a difference.

Moscow, home to around 10 million people is a large, spread-out city built on the Moskva River, which connects to the Volga River. Architecturally the city is attractive. Wide avenues and boulevards house the palaces of the Tsars, the great buildings of Stalin, and the ever present gold topped churches of the Orthodox Christians. The city features the seven Stalin skyscrapers. Most are government buildings but one houses the Ukraina Hotel, our accommodation for the visit. It is built in the grand style but its rooms are in much need of renovation and will be upgraded in the New Year. There is also much new development underway, including apartment buildings and office towers.

Moscow accommodation will be unusually tight in 2006. The 2300-room Rossiya Hotel is being demolished. New hotels are being built including the Radisson which will help meet demand but the city needs more accommodation options and until it gets them, be prepared to pay top dollars for hotel rooms.

Moscow sightseeing is dominated by the Kremlin, Red Square, Lenin's Tomb, the State Historical Museum and the colourful St Basil's Cathedral. The Kremlin, virtually in the centre of Moscow, was originally built as a fortress. The towers around the Kremlin form an irregular triangle with its sides facing the Moskva River, Alexander Gardens and Red Square. Inside the Kremlin are several cathedrals, the administration offices for government and the Armoury museum, the oldest museum in Russia, boasting the best collection of Faberge eggs, weaponry and collection of royal stagecoaches in the world. Red Square is impressive. It is a pleasant open square with much activity and plenty to see. Moscow is a reasonably safe city but beware of confidence tricksters and scam artists. Tourists are easy targets. The famous GUM department store is adjacent to the Kremlin on Red Square. Shopping here is quality with all the top designer labels available, with prices to match. Muscovites have embraced capitalism in a big way at least the shopping aspect and are now big spenders fuelling the high prices.

As a cultural centre Moscow is famed for its theatres, ballet and performing art and today it has a fast developing, modern culture. Fashion stores and entertainment venues including casinos are now very much part of the city's fabric. The city has many museums and art galleries showcasing its rich heritage. The Pushkin Fine Arts Museum is well worth a visit. It is home to the great works of artists like Monet, Renoir and Van Gogh. The gallery features the largest collection of French impres-

PHOTO: MELISSA JAYNE HURD



The grand exterior of the Ukraina Hotel — one of the seven Stalin skyscrapers.

sionists in Russia. The State Tretyakov Gallery houses a collection of art, tracing the development of Russian culture from the 11th to the 20th century. Moscow also boasts many parks and gardens which provide quiet solace from the hectic, often dangerous road traffic. Gorky Park, a large amusement park by the Moskva River, is the traditional site for large-scale cultural events. Sokolniki Park, is another popular area for Muscovites and is known as the 'dancing park' for its shows of traditional dancing.

Dining in Moscow has come a long way in recent years. One can still get a bowl of borsch, but fine dining has arrived, albeit at a price. The range of cuisine available is on a par with any major global city. One can choose from French, Asian, Armenian, Jewish, Arab, Indian, Italian or Latin American dining right through to the home-grown product of Russian delicacies such as juicy shashliks and sterlet and Siberian dumplings.

Nightlife can be wild in Moscow. Many young Muscovites starved of a good time for so long just let rip. Drinking is excessive. Street drinking is often overlooked and alcoholism is a growing problem. The main party strip is in a district called Arbat, but caution is advised in selecting a watering hole. Prices can vary quite dramatically. Most clubs have some form of control over who can and cannot get in.

Weather-wise Moscow has a range of extreme climatic conditions. In winter it can be bitterly cold; in summer it can be swelteringly hot. From November to April the temperature rarely rises above freezing (0 degrees Celsius or 32 degrees Fahrenheit) and snow is common. However, in July and August it can reach the mid 30 degrees Celsius (95 degrees Fahrenheit). We visited in September and the weather was ideal.