RUSSIA
Travel and Communicate Without Problems
Irina Garmashova

University of South Africa Press
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This is a puzzling world ....
George Eliot, The Mill on the Floss,
bk iii, ch 9

Travel, in the younger sort, is a part of education; in the elder, a part of experience.
Bacon, Essays, 18 of Travel
Foreword

Russia: travel and communicate without problems is a completely new introductory guidebook on Russia and South Africa that strikes a true balance between differences and similarities in culture, habits and customs of Russians and South Africans. It provides a comprehensive explanation of the way to avoid cultural shock in a foreign country. Readers such as tourists, students, local and foreign diplomats who wish to understand Russia and to find answers to their questions about Russian traditions and customs will obtain useful and entertaining information.

Russia: travel and communicate without problems slips easily into a pocket or handbag. It is organised thematically, and contains the main common topics to help the reader to understand the basic cultural and psychological divergence and similarities between two nations.
It is common knowledge when travelling abroad, staying in a foreign country, or working with foreigners, that it is important to be aware of other cultures and show them respect. If you know about the differences between various traditions and customs you will avoid embarrassment or awkwardness and will make friends in a foreign country. It's important to know some of the rules of proper behaviour in that country to make a favourable impression on people — a real must for diplomats, business people and travellers.

Russia has always been an exciting country. It is situated where Europe meets Asia and the rich Russian cultural heritage makes it an exciting destination for millions of tourists. Recently the winds of democratic change reached Russia and it opened up not only to curious tourists but also to business travellers. Unfortunately, some of them may leave the country disappointed and discouraged. However, they could have avoided many disconcerting situations had they known about the differences in traditions and customs as well as in the rules of proper behaviour in Russia.

Russia! My love and pain, my glory and sorrow ... To write about modern Russia during its transitional and difficult period is not a very pleasant and rewarding endeavour. To write about culture, traditions, customs and rules of behaviour is still more difficult as the whole way of life of Russians — my compatriots — from economics to psychology is rapidly changing; we are witnessing a re-orientation of the value system; old traditions are dying; new ones are born. The
changes taking place in the country are natural, although extremely painful. Unfortunately, not all that is new deserves respect and adoration; nor is it worth being followed. But life dictates its own laws.

Acute interest by South Africans in Russians and Russia does not allow me to postpone publication of this work. Because of the political and social changes now taking place, the country that for a long time was hidden behind the Iron Curtain is becoming not only a potential partner in business, but also a real one, and is quite open for establishing contacts.

I sincerely hope that this short cultural trip into Russian traditions and rules of behaviour will help readers to solve at least some of their problems and therefore prepare them for communication with Russians during a trip there. However, I realise that only real-life, live contacts with people will fill this guidebook with concrete meaning and correct uninformed attitudes in the reader. Remember, please, ‘quick study’ of any nation, including the Russians, is impossible; we are a large and resourceful nation.

I offer this work for your judgement, dear reader!
Acknowledgements

I would particularly like to thank Mrs T Samkova – my mother – the inspirer and friend without whom some of my works would never have been finished.

I thank my reviewers who helped at various stages of the manuscript – His Excellency the Ambassador of the Embassy of the Russian Federation, Mr E P Gusarov, Mr I P Kaljonov, Mr D G Friend, Mr J du Plessis, Mrs M Hammond-Tooke and Mrs A M Dorling for kind critical comments and recommendations, also Prof G M M Grobler for translation into North Sotho, Mrs T Venter for her drawings in the text, Mrs E Stewart for editing the text, and Unisa Press for the opportunity to publish this work.

I am grateful to all my South African friends and acquaintances, colleagues and students at the University of South Africa for their hospitality, warmth, care and life lessons. They gave me the opportunity to realise that both countries are worthy of respect and admiration, and both of them are dear to me.

Irina Garmashova
Many visitors to Russia have the initial impression that Russians are unfriendly or sad as they do not smile to strangers in the street. Do not consider it a sign of impoliteness or bad manners!

Do you happen to know the reason? Our psychologists are quite sure about it. Russians believe that a smile is intended only for acquaintances or good friends. Russians have a proverb that can be translated into English as 'Laughter without reason is a sign of stupidity'. Do not embarrass Russians. If you smile as you pass, they will spend the whole day wondering where and when you were introduced to each other and why they failed to remember your name. This example is a good illustration of the importance of having some knowledge of the habits and customs of other nations and their mentality.

Foreigners have other preconceived ideas about Russians. Some characteristics of Russians are expansiveness, generosity and letting go of everything. On the other hand, Russians may think foreigners are 'stingy' – perhaps because foreigners often do not follow the rules of behaviour typical of Russians. For example, they rarely bring flowers when visiting friends on weekdays and they seldom congratulate people by giving them the same type of present as Russians do.
Arrival and Departure

1. Be prepared to spend at least 30 minutes waiting in line at passport control, and for your luggage to appear. Luggage trolleys are available as a pay service but only in roubles.

2. Complete your customs declaration form (which is also available in English) while you wait for your suitcases because this form won't be handed out on an aircraft. Declare all your valuables, especially money, precious stones, gold and silver. Remember that your customs declaration is very important. Keep it with your passport and other documents until you leave the country. Do not lose it otherwise you will not be able to take out any of the jewellery or money you brought with you to Russia. Don't forget to fill in another declaration on departure.

3. On departure to Russia arrive at the airport about two hours before your flight time (not less than 1.5 hours before check-in time at your airline). This is necessary to ensure that you have enough time to go through customs.

4. Bear in mind that there are certain restrictions and limitations on items subject to export-import duties. For instance, anything deemed of historical or cultural value (gold, precious stones, icons and other religious items, paintings and sculptures by outstanding artists) cannot be exported without special permission and documents. Confiscated items will not be returned to you. It is better to consult your Department of Commerce or Foreign Trade Mission for the most up-to-date information before your trip.
Acquaintance, Greetings

1. Russian surnames have three forms: for men, women and the whole family. For example: Petrov is a man’s surname, Petrova is a woman’s surname, and Petrovy is a family name. When a woman gets married, she usually adopts her husband’s surname.

   In official situations, particularly when addressing an elderly person or a person of higher social standing, the Russians also use a polite form of address, the first name plus the patronymic (father’s name), for instance: Marina Ivanovna or Vladimir Ivanovich.

   Naturally, foreigners find it difficult to pronounce Russian patronymic names. Do not be shy to ask a Russian to repeat his name, just explain that you are a foreigner.

   Most Russians (such as your guide or driver) would probably introduce themselves only by their first names, for example Marina or Vladimir.

2. On business occasions one can use ‘Miss’ to address a single woman or ‘Mrs’ and ‘gospozha’ for a married woman (the latter is a suitable form of address for any woman despite her age or marital status). Words like ‘Mr’ or ‘gospodin’ are normal forms of address for males, often followed by their surnames. For example: Miss Zuyeva, Mrs Ivanova, gospozha Ivanova, Mr Sokolov, gospodin Sokolov. Russians do not usually use academic titles when they address one another.

3. In shops and other public places you would address an unknown female who is younger than you are, or of the same age, with the word ‘devushka’ (girl, young woman) and a
young man with the words ‘molodý chelovék’ (young man). Unfortunately, it is difficult to find accurate equivalents for older people in modern Russian.

4 Like other nations, Russians shake hands and introduce themselves when meeting someone for the first time. When you are speaking to a Russian, the distance between you and your partner should equal the extension of both forearms. Normally, in a handshake a woman would be the first to extend her hand, while a younger woman should wait for an older woman to make this gesture.

5 When greeting Russians, you will probably be surprised to receive answers such as ‘Very bad’ or ‘Nothing could be worse’ to the question ‘How are you?’. They will not necessarily explain the reasons for their comments. These answers, as well as ‘Everything is in order/normal/good’ and ‘Fifty-fifty’, are typical of the Russian tradition of playing down something good in case they are tempting fate. That is why
typical South African answers such as ‘Fine’ and ‘Everything is all right’ may irritate some Russians because they get the impression that foreigners are not very honest or that they are trying to deceive or confuse people.

6 Observing the rules of proper behaviour for all Europeans, Russian men should stand up when a woman enters a room. Women do not have to follow suit when someone comes in.

7 To kiss a woman’s hand would be appreciated at a special evening party. Unfortunately, this gesture is becoming old-fashioned but it is still good manners, and to a Russian woman it symbolises a real gentleman.

8 Before or after a long separation relatives and close friends would kiss each other three times on the cheeks, turning their heads from right to left and back. Foreigners call it ‘the thrice-repeated Russian kiss’. However, it is not used in daily communication. A hug, which is commonly used among South Africans, is not so popular in Russia. Russian women can be embarrassed by it.

9 No elderly or middle-aged Russian woman likes to be reminded of her age, especially at the first meeting or on first acquaintance, and they can easily be offended.

10 Russians do pay compliments, but not so often as Latin Americans or Georgians, for example. A famous Russian writer of guitar ballads, Bulat Okudzhava, wrote ruefully: ‘Let’s pay compliments to each other because they are the beautiful moments of love.’
So:

• Do not be afraid to pay compliments to women.
• Usually a man compliments a woman on her looks, her clothes, etc. For example: ‘Vy prekrásno segódn’a vygl’adite’ (You look so nice and fresh today) or ‘Vy molodéyete s kázhdym dnyom’ (You are getting younger and younger with every passing day).
• If a man comes up to a group of women he should never pay a compliment to one woman only: the custom is all or none.
• Russian men do not usually compliment other men.

On a Visit

1 Normally Russians visit each other without making special arrangements in advance – ‘Na ogonyók’. If they happen to be passing the area their friends live in, they’re likely to go to visit them. They don’t expect a special meal, and a cup of tea or coffee will usually be served with some sandwiches or cakes. This is normal practice among very close friends of the same nationality. But, as a foreigner, don’t follow this practice. Instead of paying a surprise visit to Russian acquaintances, call first and make an appointment, otherwise they may be embarrassed because they have not prepared food for you or made themselves ready.

2 When visiting Russians at home, don’t worry too much about your clothes. You won’t have any problems if you arrive in casual or smart-casual dresses, or jeans.

3 If you want to be polite, never be late for a meal. But bear in mind that because of congested traffic, especially in
larger cities, Russians might often be delayed and less punctual.

4 Don’t be surprised in winter, autumn and early spring if hosts wearing slippers greet you at the door of their flats. It is a normal Russian custom because the Russian weather makes your shoes dirty. Some Russian visitors take slippers or a spare pair of shoes when visiting. Some Russian hosts may insist that their guests wear slippers. Don’t be offended if they ask you to change your shoes.

5 When visiting Russians you may be surprised to see animals, especially dogs and cats, in their tiny flats. Russians are fond of pets and they keep them even if, from your point of view, they don’t have enough space for all the members of the family. Dogs and cats are usually well controlled, and most of them are house trained and friendly.

6 In general Russians (except devout Christians) do not say grace before meals.

7 Russian hospitality is well known overseas (although Russia had some food problems in the past). Some foreigners even find it rather overwhelming. Two common rules must be taken into consideration:

- Do not eat just before you go on a visit.
- A compliment to the hostess on her cooking is considered good table manners. But never compliment her on a dish which you don’t like, otherwise you may be forced to have a second helping.

8 Russians don’t usually have milk in their tea, though Russian women with newborn babies are encouraged to drink tea with milk when they are nursing a baby. Don’t be upset if
your South African custom is not followed. Russians prefer tea with lemon, accompanied by jam, chocolates or sweets.

9 The host will normally start the meal by proposing a toast. Do not drink before the first toast. Toasts continue throughout and after the meal. Prepare a repertoire of toasts: you will need them often. The most popular toast overseas is: 'Na zdoróvyе!'. But remember that Russians usually use this phrase in response to thanks for good food or on being complimented on the food. To express 'Cheers!' correctly use the typical Russian salutation (toast) '-Za zdoróvyе!'

10 Russian men drink a shot of vodka (without any ice or water) in one gulp ('bottoms up'). After a toast they may take a sip of water (cola, soda or mineral water) and then start eating. (Be sure to eat something after each toast or you'll quickly become intoxicated.) If you don't want to drink vodka, say you do not drink at all, or you have to drive a car, or you have a medical problem that entirely rules out strong drinks, because Russians can insist on drinking.

11 Russians consider it impolite to eat and run; even informal dinners often last several hours. You may stay on for about an hour after coffee or tea has been served.

12 Make allowances for Russians if they start smoking without your permission. Unfortunately, smoking is still a very popular habit among my compatriots. However, ordinarily smokers would be asked to smoke in a kitchen, on a balcony or in a corridor.

13 In a Russian flat guests usually sit close together and spend almost the whole evening at the table, although a space
might be cleared for dancing after or during the meal. Be ready to dance and listen to Russian songs between courses (see also ‘Leisure Activities’ on page 31).

14 Russians usually see their guests to the front door only. To accompany them to a lift or to a car (bus-stop, metro, etc) is not a traditional or mandatory rule.

15 Don’t think that Russians lack good manners if you go to collect them from their flats and they don’t invite you inside, but come out to meet you at your car. It is not part of Russian tradition to invite somebody in if all of you are in a hurry and you have arranged to be elsewhere at a specific time.
Staying With a Russian Family

1. If you are going to stay with a Russian family, you'd better think of taking a present. A gift of some sort of handicraft and a book about your country or hometown would be very much appreciated (see also ‘Giving Presents’ on pages 11–14).

2. You have to remember that most Russian couples work but will be happy to show you around when time permits.

3. Foreigners are usually surprised when they see Russian apartments for the first time. Most single Russians or couples without children have an apartment with a kitchenette, bathroom with a shower, toilet and an all-purpose dining/living/bedroom and sometimes a balcony.

4. It is a common practice for two or three generations to live together because of traditionally close family ties and economics. Most Russians make every effort to care for elderly relations.

5. Children usually behave themselves. They are taught by their parents from early childhood that they are not allowed to interrupt adult conversations. If they do, they will be strictly reprimanded or even punished.

6. In the sixties Moscow intellectuals developed a special tradition – to set the table for close friends in the kitchen – which has been described by Russian writers both in fiction and documentary literature. This tradition, demanded by
objective reality – shortage of living space in an apartment – has assumed a different social significance. ‘Kitchen parties’ are intended for the most intimate and close friends – people with whom one can most frankly discuss politics and the economy of the country without fear of being accused of slander. So, if your Russian friends invite you to have supper in the kitchen, consider it an honour because it means that you are on the inside – initiated into a clan of very close friends.

7 Traditionally Russians wash in running water. That is why Russians are surprised when they cannot find a water mixer (hot and cold water in one tap) in some South African houses. You rarely find stoppers (plugs) for a washbasin in a bathroom in Russia. If you prefer to wash your face the South African way, bring some stoppers (plugs) with you from the RSA.

Giving Presents

1 When you are planning a visit to a Russian family, it is advisable to buy some flowers for the hostess, a bottle of wine (or a stronger drink) for the host and sweets for their children (if they happen to be of an appropriate age).

2 Unlike South Africans, when going on a visit people never take flowers in a vase or pot. Russians prefer to have freshly cut flowers. Usually Russian women do not keep dried or paper flowers in their houses or apartments.

3 Remember, Russians always have an odd number of flowers in a bouquet. An even number of flowers would
normally be taken to a funeral or to a graveyard (see also ‘Funerals’ on pages 19–20).

4 Sometimes the colour of flowers represents a special message or feelings as well as specific traditions. For instance:
- White flowers (a sign of innocence and virginity) would be presented to a bride at a wedding party.
- Russians would never bring yellow flowers (a sign of separation or parting) to a fiancée.
- Red flowers (particularly roses) denote love and affection (see also ‘Attending a Russian Wedding’ on pages 18–19).

However, nowadays Russian women are not that particular about colours and types of flowers. Some of them would be really happy to have yellow flowers (particularly roses and carnations, perhaps because yellow is an unusual colour for those types of flowers). Try to find out the favourite colour and flower of the specific woman and forget any possible analogy with your private feelings. The colours of flowers are not so important to the Russians as to the Japanese, after all.

5 Usually Russians are not very superstitious, but if you want to present a gift to a pregnant lady, it is better to wait until after the baby is born (see also ‘Superstitions’ on page 38).

6 Russians refrain from buying sharp objects as presents. Some of them tend to believe that a sharp object as a gift is a sign of an imminent quarrel with the giver. However, if Russians want to give a set of knives as a present, for example, they usually ask for a small coin in return in the belief that a symbolic bargain may help to avoid a quarrel.
The same applies to handkerchiefs. A set of handkerchiefs as a present implies that you will never see that person again. This superstition arose from the tradition that a young woman would embroider a handkerchief and give it to her beloved before a long journey, military operation or some form of separation, so that he would always have something to remind him of her.

7 Do not be surprised and upset by the Russian custom of giving an unwrapped present. Unlike South Africa, wrapping up presents has not yet become a convention in Russia.

8 Don’t be offended if Russians hand over a present with their left hand. They are not familiar with the conventions of other communities in South Africa.

9 See also 'Rituals; Birthdays', 3, on page 18.

Conversations

1 Although English, French and German are taught in Russian schools, remember that many Russians are shy to speak foreign languages because for a long time they were deprived of the opportunity of communicating with foreigners. Their command of a foreign language is therefore often a passive skill. Nowadays many younger people speak foreign languages quite fluently.

2 Russians have a genuinely nice sense of humour; so don’t hesitate to tell them jokes. Popular Russian jokes invariably focus on politics. You will be surprised to hear jokes
about Russians or events involving Russian culture and traditions which are also applicable to the South African context. There are many such jokes that testify to the similarity in the sense of humour of Russians and South Africans.

3 The preferred topics for conversation are politics, mutual interests such as literature, concerts, films, music, art, including Western art, and sports. Normally, Russians read a lot and often know Western culture pretty well because it has always been a Russian tradition to foster profound academic and cultural aspects of education. Besides, many Russians had an opportunity to familiarise themselves with Western literature and culture, especially European, through foreign books translated into Russian.

4 As in South Africa, sport is a popular topic of discussion among Russian men. They may be very familiar with world championships and results from the past and may try to get you involved in discussions about the best soccer/volleyball/basketball teams in the world. Perhaps many of them are not very fond of, or familiar with, rugby, cricket or golf, because these sports were not very popular until recently.

5 In the past the Russians were a more highly politicised nation: people were eager to share their political preferences and willingly listened to your political perspective. Nowadays you may also find that your new acquaintances are anxious to tell you all about the difficulties of contemporary Russian life. Listen sympathetically, but beware of adding too many of your own complaints about Russia.

6 Don’t be surprised if Russians talk about South Africa as a paradise for whites. Some of them think that South Africa offers a very easy life.
It would not be an exaggeration to say that the average Russian woman is one of the most highly qualified in the world. If you are invited to a party, do not hesitate to talk to women about interesting topics as they like to be involved in discussions about politics, history, literature, music, etc. It is my opinion that there is a lot more of equality between Russian men and women than elsewhere.

As in Pretoria, Cape Town and Johannesburg, for historical reasons Moscow and St Petersburg (formerly Leningrad) have a longstanding rivalry. (Bear in mind that St Petersburg was founded in 1703, and Moscow was founded in 1147.) Both cities played a very important role in Russian history. Don’t praise one city effusively to people from the other.

Russians always look the person they are speaking to straight in the eye, particularly if you talk about business. They believe that it’s a sign of sincerity and honesty. Try to remember this and don’t be nervous: Russians as well as Swedes look in the person’s eyes somewhat longer than English people do. However, there is nothing bad if you break this ‘visual engagement’ for a little while. But if you are trying to avoid eye contact, Russians might think that you are hiding something from them or plotting against them.

Don’t be surprised if Russians ask you about your salary. For quite a long time this question was commonplace in Russia and did not have any negative or forbidden connotation.

It is better refrain from asking too many questions about the private life and social position of Russians. Otherwise, you may be running the risk of portraying yourself as an inquisitive and importunate person.
Russians could be astonished and even dumbfounded if they are asked outright about their sexual preferences. Also, do not rush to hasty conclusions: there may be a misunderstanding because of the misuse of English words by Russians. For example, the English word 'girlfriend' is sometimes used by a woman to mean a 'female friend', or 'boyfriend' is used by a Russian man to refer to a 'male friend'. There are many such examples. Don't be shy to specify the meaning: this might save further embarrassment.

If your Russian friends speak a little English, they may be confused by some South African expressions in English and their meanings. 'Just now' will be understood as immediately. If you say to them that you will call them just now, soon after the conversation they will probably be sitting by the telephone waiting for your call. They may be very upset if you do not give them a call within ten minutes. 'Ja' as 'yes' will be totally unknown to them, but they will pick it up very quickly.

Don't smile and draw hasty conclusions about the quality of the Russian language, especially when you hear the phrase 'Kak delá? (How are you!). Remember that your own language may also sound funny to a foreigner's ears. For instance, Russians are usually disconcerted by the first greeting in Afrikaans 'Goieimôre, Goieimiddag', etc. The first part of these phrases reminds them phonetically of a Russian swear word.

Some Russian expressions and words in daily use may confuse South African visitors. Bear in mind the differences in meanings of the following words despite their similar pronunciation:
‘Lager’ in Russian means ‘a campus’, not ‘a circle of oxwagons’.

‘Robot’ in Russian means ‘a robot, or automaton’, not ‘a traffic light’.

‘Tula’ in Russian is the name of a Russian city, not ‘shut up, be quiet’.

‘Br’uki’ in Russian means ‘trousers’, not ‘panties’.

Also a magazine is a shop, not a journal; a garage is a place for keeping a car, not a petrol station; and the metro is the underground, not a train, railway or a movie house.

16 If Russians use expressions which compare people with animals, this is not necessarily intended to offend. Expressions such as ‘stubborn as a donkey’ and ‘sly as a fox’ come from Russian folklore and are part of everyday language. Others came into use from fables and poems taught during childhood and the school years.

17 If your Russian friends do speak a little English or Afrikaans they will avoid speaking Russian to other Russians during the conversation. They don’t want you to be embarrassed by your lack of understanding. If they need to talk Russian, they usually ask permission to do so. Try to avoid similar situations by not speaking unknown languages in the presence of your Russian friends. It may offend them as they may think you are trying to hide something from them.