

Travel report, Graduate school of management, St. Petersburg, Russia

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Orientation days

The orientation days lasted for the first two weeks at the start of the semester. The two week period consisted of helpful introduction to city, visiting of the most popular places and sights of the city, and fun activities to get to know other exchanger and russian students. In first days we had a sightseeing tour with buss throughout the city and we also visited some of the most known museums and places in the city. We also visited suburban areas of the city including Pushkin (where the empress Ekaterina's palace is located) and Petergof (where is the palace of emperor Peter the great, and where we also visited old style russian village with corresponding activities).

The buddies (as they called the tutors in GSOM) did good job on organizing the introduction period and combined cultural activities with more casual events where we could get to know each other better.

Language courses

GSOM offered three types of russian language courses: crash course in the first week, one course in the GSOM faculty for 4 hours per week, and a intensive Russian course in the language faculty of the St. Petersburg state university for 8 hours per week. I participated in the crash course and the intensive one for 8 weekly hours, and I can tell that the quality of teaching and methods were excellent for a foreigner to learn Russian. I knew russian, I would say on B1 level, but during the exchange my expertise on the language grew considerably.

The academic calendar

The spring semester started on 1st of february and ended on the 30th of June. Depending on when the students chosen courses take place the semester can start later or end earlier. In Russia there were many holidays that took place on the weekdays, but this was compensated with some classes taking place on saturdays. Biggest holidays are 8th of march (Women's day), 1st of may (Labour day), and 8th of may (The day of the victory). There were also other public holidays, but one should find out about them when they start the semester.

There were two exam periods in the GSOM, first for one week was situated in the week 9 and the second was from early June to the end of the month.

The courses

Almost all of the courses I attended had international teacher from some other country than Russia, but few courses also were led by Russian native professors. The professors were competent and had expertise on the field they taught. Most of the classes consisted of multiple presentations by the students, which is one of the goals of the GSOM (to make students have as many presentations as possible). In my experience the two to three week long intensive courses were most interesting. They were workshop style forums, where students could focus the entire period of the course on the topic at hand. The exams were quite different than for example in Finland. There was only 90 minutes time to write the answer, but usually all the notes were allowed to use (even personal computer).

Practical things to consider

I lived in the university dormitory, which was really cheap for Finnish standards (approximately 75 euros per month) with apartment of two rooms, kitchen and a toilet. There were 4 of us living there, so each room was shared by two people. In the dormitory there were also apartments for 7 people with 3 people in one room. It was down to luck in what kind of room the student will end up. The dormitory wasn't exactly a luxurious one, but the community of the complex made it all up. I recommend staying in the dormitory to meet interesting new people and have fun, instead of renting an apartment from the city, which can be quite expensive (for example friend lived with 3 other people in an apartment near city centre with rent of approximately 1500 euros per month.)

In Russia, be prepared for long and complicated administrative processes. For example the visa prolongation took many weeks, in which period students didn't have their passports. We were advised not to travel outside the Leningrad district (where St. Petersburg is located) without passport. Few friends and I decided to travel without passports to Veliky Novgorod (a historical city for Russia, few hundred kilometers south of St. Petersburg) and we had little problems to travel back, since we were denied to buy tickets for a bus transportation back to St. Petersburg.

In the dormitory living there is some weird procedures for westerner to be done. When entering for the first time, students must provide pictures of themselves and x-ray pictures of their lungs. Also, the rent can be paid only with cash in one of the dormitory offices.

Be mindful that the city is very big, and distances also. With metro you can get almost everywhere, but what seems on map a short distance can take by walking up to 20-30 minutes. For transportation metro and busses are the best, but Yandex taxi (now merged with Uber) is a good option for example night time and not too costly (from city centre to my dormitory, price was something like 6-10 euros). Avoid normal taxis in the street since they will up the price for double or triple, and some instances they might rob you if you are unlucky.

In the summertime, when the maritime traffic awakens, the bridges in St. Petersburg will be up and closed at certain points of time in the night. There is always some detours available, and paid roads that work around the clock, but this is good thing to keep in mind.

As mentioned, there is many holidays in Russia which include parades on the streets and whatnot, but this offers also a good chance to explore more of the eastern giant. The nearby areas of St. Petersburg offer historical and cultural, but also leisure activities. For some students the Russian visa is harder to get so this is also good opportunity to see other cities and places (since St. Petersburg is such an european city, hence not "real Russia") Traveling between cities can be done relatively cheap with trains and busses, or with more comfortability by internal airlines. I would recommend to see Moscow, Golden ring (old towns around moscow), Sochi, and Veliky Novgorod. Some of my fellow exchangers even took the trans-siberian train to places like Irkutsk and lake Baikal.

Lastly, I recommend learning Russian language even just a little bit. Many customer servicers can not (or will not) speak any English, but with just simple phrases it's much easier to complete everyday tasks for example in stores or transportation. The people in the street seem rude, but they will open up and be friendly if you hold a little smalltalk with simple phrases like 'hello' and 'How are you?'