

Adventure capitalists

To Russia,
with love:
ugly
Americans.

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IT IS A GIVEN that Russia in the post-Soviet era is eagerly awaiting American instruction in the proper way to live and prosper. So it came as some surprise to us when, bound for St. Petersburg from New York recently, we found ourselves under the care of a Russian tour guide, Natasha, who felt compelled to regale us nonstop with American-tourist horror stories. Her accounts were enough to make even the most smug of our group start bleating manic apologies—for our fellow Americans, and for simply

At Large

being Americans ourselves.

As I sank lower and lower in my seat, she recounted dozens of tales—most of them tending toward the coprophilic. There was the Montana man who "pooped" his way through the Baltics, using the cruise ship's built-in hair dryers as commodes; the young California woman who "murdered" her elderly husband in Estonia by administering a fatal enema; the aging Seattleite who wiped his feces all over the Hermitage Museum.

It was 49 degrees when we arrived under the gray summer skies of St. Petersburg. Long sprays of grass, growing up through the runway's buckled cement, did little to break up the otherwise endless monochrome landscape. A

huge red *sign* reading "LENINGRAD" stood anachronistically in the distance. Once outside the terminal, Natasha quickly shepherded us into a luxurious motorcoach complete with air-conditioning, heating, and linen-covered seat backs. Cocooned, we made our way to the Grand Hotel Europe, passing acres and acres of cropland with no apparent crops. A little farther on, we came upon 500 acres of state-owned greenhouses, filled to capacity with produce.

Entering the city limits, we saw the bread and milk lines that we had heard so much about back home. There was nothing chaotic about the scene, simply a group of people living out their lives as they were somehow meant to be, like spouses resigned to a bad marriage. We saw a soot-covered city bus filled with weary passengers sitting in each other's laps.

We arrived at the Grand Hotel. In spite of its splendor, this converted palace stood as a bleak reminder of the oppressive, inaccessible opulence that inspired the Russian Revolution. Just around the corner, on the dimly lit Nevsky Prospekt, there were masses of shabbily dressed people. A legless man sat in a wheelchair, offering a scale on which patrons could weigh themselves. Women carrying babies on their backs wandered the stores with seemingly empty hopes and pocketbooks. But the Grand, with its crystal chandeliers and heated bathroom floors, at hundreds of dollars per night, was filled to capacity with the likes of Joan Rivers, the Forbes family, Caspar Weinberger, and other less celebrated but no less prosperous foreign guests.

We dined that night at the hotel's exquisite buffet. Having repeatedly heard and read that there is no food in Russia, I was surprised at the array of every kind of meat and exotic fruit imaginable. I would have thought that those in our group couldn't have been more pleased. But the first thing my compatriots did was complain about the fact that we were served red caviar along with the black. Then, as is the American custom, they made their way to the buffet and piled their plates high.

Natasha piled her plate no less high, and even returned for third and fourth helpings. At the end of dinner, when asked which of the seven desserts she wanted, she said sweetly, "One of each, please."

"What kinds of diets do the Russian people have, anyway?" a Mr. Moore asked. Natasha, her voice still sweet, replied, "Oh, we don't diet here. We eat whatever we can get." As if his question weren't enough to sate his appetite for the asinine, he returned with "You mean the Russian people don't eat like this every night?"

Silence.

Mr. Moore prodded further. "What kind of diets do Russian dogs have?"

"They eat what we eat," Natasha replied tartly. "We don't have dog food."

A few nights later, some of us made our way to the Grand's brightly lit discotheque, where, for \$300-\$500 per night, foreign businessmen can pick from

among legions of Eastern beauties with Western flair. That night one woman wore a cowboy hat and boots and rode an imaginary horse around the dance floor. Except for their designer miniskirts and 4-inch heels, the others were more staid and discreet. They sat, stately as tsarinas, lavished in expensive jewels, with long faces and dead eyes belying their opulent trappings.

Around midnight, a meek-looking man in my group metamorphosed into a beast. Looking around wildly, he spotted a woman sitting alone, looking very much like a cub separated from her litter. Before long he was running a hand up her leg. Then he was sticking his tongue in her ear. She focused steadily on a point on a distant wall, with the composure of a prima ballerina. "The hotel has everything under control," Natasha assured me, somewhat mysteriously. "As part of the rules she'll also get taken out to dinner."

The next morning, our young American guide, Bobby, was doing his best to field a deluge of complaints. Ms. Dunne was demanding reimbursement for the Evian she used for brushing her teeth. Mrs. Dylan was wondering aloud why she hadn't brought American toilet paper. Mr. Reed, exasperated that the cafe had run out of food the day before, was screaming, "WHY CAN'T THE RUSSIANS GET IT TOGETHER?"

As for me, having recently read in Francine du Plessix Gray's *Soviet Women* that there is no feminine protection to be found anywhere in Russia, I was idly thinking about the Tampax I saw stacked to the ceiling at a local pharmacy. Tampax is so cheap here, I thought to myself. To my horror, I realized I had said it aloud. "Perhaps for you!" Natasha shot back.

That evening we took in a performance by the St. Petersburg Opera at the Menshikov Palace and then retired to Count Stroganoffs Palace for dinner. A Mr. Harrison from our group stood, cleared his throat dramatically, raised a fine crystal glass, and said, "May the best of Russia's past be the worst of her future." It was intended, apparently, to be affectionate and profound. Mr. Moore, clearly moved, slid to a perch on the edge of his seat and waited to say or do something equally dramatic. As he drew his breath in, I tried to avert my eyes and ears. With a flourish best reserved for courtiers, he handed something to our waiter. "This is for you," he said, his eyes glistening. I assumed it was a tip. But as our waiter walked away with no expression on his face, he opened his hand, revealing Mr. Moore's token of grandeur. It was his dinner roll.