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### Making the Most of Faculty-Led Travel to Russia

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Russia is a wonderful destination for educational travel. Study abroad, which we will define for convenience as a period of a month or more in one primary location overseas, is often outside the budget of many students. Not only in how much they will spend in going overseas, but often how much they might lose by not obtaining summer employment at home. Students in certain disciplines, such as engineering, and particularly those on financial aid, find it a challenge to include study abroad in their education.

Faculty-led travel provides a wonderful opportunity. Students (and their parents) feel more comfortable about travel with someone that they know, and perhaps because of the familiarity, the students are likely to be better disciplined, particular as concerns academic aspects of the program. Nearly any subject can be studied in depth in Russia – history, art, music, theater, environment, politics, journalism and more!

Here we present several pointers on how to effectively organize a faculty-led tour to Russia.

#### **Develop the concept and market**

What is the main objective of the tour? Is it more of a general tour, perhaps 10-12 days, meant to provide mainly a travel experience and an introduction to the history and culture? Or, will there be a formal educational component, perhaps with pre-departure reading and even exams? What is your destination? Will you stick with the highlights this time – visiting Moscow, St. Petersburg, and perhaps Novgorod? Or do you have a more remote destination in mind? While we are not specifically addressing travel to countries outside of Russia in this article, we would love to see more attention given to Central Asia, given the prominent place it holds both in history and in current events. Also, Kiev is an easy add-on now that separate visas are not required for Americans.

Whichever approach you take, you will find there are several avenues for promoting the program:

- Draw from the ranks of your own students. This is very successful for those of you who have long lines of students who will take any course you offer.
- Partner with another professor. This is especially important for those in Russian departments. Broaden the market by partnering with a professor in another discipline such as history or environmental studies - really anything with a larger student body than Russian Studies. This is even better if one or both of you falls into the criteria of having a large "student following." *Using connections with other departments is a great way to recruit students to your own Russian department – use this as an opportunity!*
- Market aggressively with flyers, meetings, coordination with the study abroad office, etc. This can be particularly effective if your trip offers credits applicable to a wide range of students. Keep in mind, though, that you are competing with programs in Italy, France and other places more familiar to students. Don't skimp on the quality of your marketing materials. Laser color prints are not so expensive now, so make the trip look serious and attractive!

While you are developing your trip concept think about how you are actually going to organize it. Educators are not tour operators and we highly doubt most of them want that responsibility – even temporarily. Work with someone "on the ground" in Russia who will coordinate all the logistical aspects of the trip. Such partners could be a Russian university, a tour operator, or a study abroad organization working with Russia and operating out of your home country. The latter poses several advantages, not the least of which involves arranging payment for "ground services" (the services you will need and use while abroad – this can be very complicated as many Russian agencies and institutions will require a cash payment made in person!). Whomever you decide to work with, be sure it is a responsible partner who can communicate with you and understand you clearly, including communication on all aspects of cost, budget, and deadlines.

### **Budgeting and planning**

You know your student body and your budget best. While there is not much that can be done about airfare, it is possible, especially with groups of 20 or more, to be very creative with excursions and accommodations in Russia – assembling an extraordinary experience on a surprisingly attractive budget. Also important is a basic rule of marketing: the more unique, practical, and attractive your product is, the more people will want it and the more they will be willing to pay for it. Always sell something cool for more rather than something cheap for less.

We cannot emphasize enough the need to start planning early. With enough early planning, students and Russian clubs can organize fundraisers – *pelmeni* dinner, anyone? Also, *make sure information gets out to students well ahead of Christmas. Most parents would much rather pay for a unique educational experience than join the hordes of other shoppers at the mall.*

Planning ahead is also important because travel to Russia involves following the timetables of government bureaucracy and the fluctuating rates of the travel industry. Below are some of

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the major time-sensitive components of any trip. Your payment schedule for the participants should accommodate these expenses.

- Visas. The entire visa process can take 2-6 weeks, depending on type of visa - *IF* the students already have passports. Don't assume that all students have them and make very clear that passports take time to acquire. If you are within 4 months of departure, we recommend rush processing for your passport.
- Air tickets. Both transatlantic and domestic (inside Russia). Availability for large groups is a challenge during summer months especially.
- Domestic train tickets. Train tickets go on sale 45 days before departure. Especially for a large group, getting them all on the same wagon requires putting in the purchase request on the first day of sale.
- Accommodations should also be booked as far in advance as possible.

So just how far ahead must you plan? As much as one academic year! We recommend that if you are forming a summer group (mid-May or later), you should have commitments and deposits by February 1<sup>st</sup> at the latest. This means start your marketing in September or October and have details ready for students well before they go home for the holidays.

### **Making choices**

In developing your program, you will need to make a few fundamental decisions early on, and then several smaller ones down the road.

#### *Visa types and registration*

The two applicable visa types are "tourist" or "student."

A tourist visa is applicable if a) your trip is 30 days or less and b) your group will be living in a hotel or similar situation where such visas can be easily registered. Registration of all visas is required by Russian law and is not always an easy process. The registration question, when looking for budget accommodations, and especially in Moscow, is a particularly serious one. There is a bit more flexibility in St. Petersburg. A tourist voucher, which must be issued by a travel agency or hotel in Russia and is needed to apply for a tourist visa, can be issued in one day, making the tourist visa even more expedient.

An alternative visa is the student visa, which can be issued if you will be partnering, directly or indirectly (via a study abroad group), with a Russian university. In that case, the Russian university will take responsibility for registering your visas, making that process much easier. However, an invitation for a student visa, which must be issued by Russian educational institution and is necessary to apply for a student visa, takes a month to issue on average.

Subsequent consulate processing takes two weeks, but can be expedited with rush charges. You will find invariably that at least one participant has an unusual situation or ignores deadlines, forcing you to do rush processing. Pass these expenses on to the participants!

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### *Academic content – partnering with a Russian university*

Related to the visa options above is the other fundamental question of whether you should work (again, directly or indirectly) with a Russian university. The only real possible negative of that is that in order to have student visa support, there must be a minimal contract that satisfies the university's budgetary needs. This is usually not a big deal and the benefits (other savings) usually more than outweigh this contract.

What can a Russian university provide?

- Access to inexpensive accommodations – dormitory or home stay
- Student ID cards, which lower entrance costs for many museums
- Classrooms, if you want to run additional lectures on your own
- Language and other classes (obviously)
- Access to certain offices and individuals for field trips and guest lectures, that would otherwise prove challenging to arrange
- Round-table discussions with young Russians
- Experience working with large groups of young people (not all tour operators have this!)

What we don't recommend is using a university solely as a tour operator. While they do have infrastructure and ability to provide some services at costs lower than commercial rates, this is not what they are specialized in or even what they are supposed to be doing. They can provide all of this infrastructure if they are also providing some academic content (some of this could be classes delivered in museums or other sites) but it is best not to pressure them into providing you with classrooms in which to teach your own classes, while not providing work for their own staff who often rely on income from groups such as yours.

### *Accommodation types*

Four types of accommodations are applicable for student group budgets:

- Dormitory. A good and inexpensive option available if you are partnering with a Russian university;
- Home stay. Better if with a Russian university as they have a much larger pool of regular hosts - it is very challenging to place a large group with English-speaking hosts;
- Hostels. Not recommended for extended stays as most are converted large communal apartments, meaning that for about 40 beds, there are 1-2 showers - this is fine for short side trips, but not for weeks;
- Budget hotels. St. Petersburg is very much affected by the tourist season, and although there are many new boutique hotels in the center that are reasonable, they are small and fill up quickly. Moscow has a major shortage of hotels – particularly reasonably priced ones with good locations and particularly as Moscow's three largest hotels (Rossiya, Moskva, and Intourist) are all now under reconstruction or being demolished.

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### *Excursions*

There are a few must-sees that should be on even the shortest of tours to Moscow and St. Petersburg: Kremlin and Red Square, Arbat, Novodevichy Convent and Cemetery, The Hermitage, St. Isaacs, Peter & Paul Fortress, and the summer palaces (Peterhof and/or Pushkin and Pavlovsk). Of course at least one performance, probably ballet, should be included. With these essentials, you've realistically scheduled a good portion of six days to see both cities. You may be tempted to skip some of these sites you have visited a dozen times during your career, but remember – most participants are taking their first trip to Russia and expect them to be included.

With this base in place, fine tune the itinerary to match your theme or coursework objectives. This can be done by thinking in terms of subject matter and location.

History: Siege of Leningrad (Museum and Piskarovskoe cemetery), Aurora, Yusupov Palace, History Museum (Moscow), Museum of Contemporary History (Moscow).

Art: Hermitage, Russian Museum, Pushkin Museum, Tretyakov Gallery, Mayakovsky Museum, Museum of Decorative and Fine Arts, Abramtsevo artist colony, and more. Architectural aspect easily added to such a tour.

Theater: Numerous performances (better to schedule trip earlier than later in the summer); Puppetry (including museum); Theater museum (St. Petersburg or Moscow).

Music and music history: Concerts – from folk groups to classical conservatories to bard halls to clubs; Composer and musician house-museums and monuments.

Literature: Author-specific tours (Dostoevsky's St. Petersburg, for example); Yasnaya Polyana (Tolstoy); Peredelkino (Pasternak); Multitude of other house-museums.

Business and politics: Visits to NGOs, meetings with politicians and businesspeople, the Duma, Chambers of Commerce, Embassy briefings.

Sciences (including environment, space): Star City (cosmonaut training center – outside of Moscow); Hydro-electric dam, Limnological Museum, Minerological Museum, Ice-breaker museum (all in Irkutsk/Lake Baikal area)

And then there is the list of excursions that are just plain fun:

- Red October Chocolate Factory (Moscow)
- Baltika Beer Factory (St. Petersburg)
- Sandunovsky baths (Moscow)
- Picnics

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*And most important – eating and shopping!*

In our experience, students most remember and recount their meals. It is easy for them to retell their experience through descriptions of food, or even trying to cook it themselves. After all, smell (indirectly leading to taste) is the sense with the longest memory according to studies. It is pretty hard to not be impressed by a traditional Georgian feast laid out before you, with all sorts of food with unusual names and flavors – from *khatchapuri* (cheese pastry) to *lobio* (spiced beans) and of course *shashlik* (kebab) arranged into towers on their skewers! There are also places to get traditional Uzbek food and Russian food prepared well with fresh ingredients that can make even the most skeptical mouth water. While 15 years ago the food aspect of travel to Russia was one likely to make them not want to return, it is very much the opposite now.

Minimally we'd recommend having welcome and farewell dinners. All-you-can-eat buffets (Rahat Lukum, an Uzbek buffet in Moscow, is a good example) are great, particularly for a welcome dinner, as those who are finicky can at least find something palatable and as such are less intimidated by what might be a two-week culinary challenge. We really like Georgian (such as Bericoni in central Moscow) for a memorable farewell feast. There are also some opportunities for traditional Russian banquets with folk shows, particularly in St. Petersburg.

The question of whether to include other meals is one of logistics and price. While it is somewhat less expensive to have students pay for their own meals ad hoc, this does not work on a busy excursion schedule or with a group of more than about fifteen. We have had luck having lunches catered to the department where classes are held. This allows for a pre-lunch class schedule, lunch on-site, and then immediate departure for excursions.

Shopping is another favorite, not necessary because everyone loves shopping, but because it fills a real need for souvenirs and gifts. This is one reason excursions to the Red October Chocolate Factory are so popular. Not only do you fill up on chocolate while there, you depart armed with a large, complimentary supply that can be enhanced further in the company store on the ground floor. No trip to Moscow is complete without a trip to Izmailovsky Park and its sea of reasonably priced souvenirs and antiques. It is also possible to arrange excursions to the source of many traditional Russian souvenirs – such as to the Fedoskino workshop (lacquer boxes) or the Gzhel factory (the ever-present blue and white porcelain items in every imaginable shape).

*What about things to do outside of Moscow and St. Petersburg?*

We can't encourage you enough to get out of the two capitals and into the "real Russia" as Russians call it. The capitals can give misleading impressions about the state of things in Russia as a whole. If time does not allow for traveling great distances, try to at least squeeze in a trip to Novgorod or Suzdal, even if those are still tourist centers. It is also fun to just jump on the *elektrichka* (commuter rail) and stop in a random village, and walk around on a nice day.

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If you'd like to lead a group to a more "exotic" location, then head for Siberia. The most popular attraction of course is the beautiful Lake Baikal. In terms of transportation, this will add a few hundred dollars, but local costs for groups will be lower while there, in part because the emphasis will be more on outdoor activities which do not require admission fees. While in Siberia, consider the following:

- Trail building on Lake Baikal (a nature-enthusiast and environmental endeavor coordinated by a local NGO);
- Visiting Ulan Ude, including the Buddhist Datsan and the wildly-popular-with-students traditional Old Believers' Village;
- Olkhon Island – the most popular destination for local Russians and an ecological gem;
- Meetings with local environmental groups;
- Home stays in a village on the lake;
- Siberian arts and crafts – there are many locals who will teach you how to make them and send you home with your own hand-made souvenirs;
- Visiting the Limnological Museum to learn about the unique features, history, and ecology of the lake.

Another option related to Siberia is to take the Trans-Siberian, stopping in a few cities and even holding language lessons on the train. With enough people you can have your own wagon.

On one last and perhaps most important note on planning excursions and activities: *Don't overload the participants*. Give them enough free time to explore some on their own (in small groups) and have the opportunity to meet Russian young people. One major event or museum per day, with classes, is all the more that most human beings (and especially young human beings) can tolerate before they will start planning rebellions.

At this point you are probably thinking this all looks good, but that it quickly becomes unaffordable. This is not the case if you plan well and well in advance and especially if you have a group of a reasonable size. You might also want to consider whether there are certain aspects of the tour you'd like to handle yourself, particularly some of the excursions. There are a lot of informal activities that are fairly easily self-led by educators. Most museums have on-site guides (often which speak English) that can be hired if you call ahead. However, we do recommend advertising anything you will coordinate yourself as guaranteed – unexpected circumstances can easily make informal events impractical or impossible.

### **A note about safety**

There has been considerable news lately about safety in Russia, particularly as concerns racial attacks by skinheads. While this is often overplayed in the press, it is a valid concern, particularly for those visitors with clearly ethnic features.

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Prepare students well in advance by explaining to them what skinheads are (some honestly don't know!) and how to avoid potentially dangerous situations. Discuss issues of racism and xenophobia in pre-departure orientation so that they are in a realistic and useful context. Encourage all students to always stay in groups. Short tours tend to be more structured and compact and so even when students have free time, they are much more likely to be going out in groups, which immediately lowers risks.

*Renee Stillings, Director of The School of Russian and Asian Studies (SRAS), has organized and promoted educational programs in Russia for over 10 years. The SRAS website at [www.sras.org](http://www.sras.org) includes a wealth of information and resources for students and educators, including more information about faculty-led tours and suggested itineraries.*

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