

2011_Russland_AIW_Golebiewski

Dear reader,

I went on a research internship at the Russian Academy of Sciences during September and November 2011. I would like you, dear reader, to follow my report closely and see why it was an experience that couldn't be forgotten by any means. If you are interested in the essentials only, I refer you to the Conclusion at the end of the report.

Preparation:

Once I was nominated for the Internship by the IAESTE Hamburg Local Committee, I prepared my application. As the internship was from a slightly different field than mine (GES/Biomedical Engineering versus the O-Forms Chemistry) I prepared a cover letter clearly stating that while polymers are my subject of choice, I am not a chemist and so wouldn't be of much help in the lab and asked for consideration of this fact.

I was accepted for the internship without further comment – GREAT! Now I had to book a flight, collect the documents needed for the Travel Bursary by the DAAD (“Fahrtkostenzuschuss”) and send them on their way. Just as well I had to take care of my Visa, which you have to pay for yourself. You will receive an invitation from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs which enables you to apply for a specific VISA (the type will be mentioned on the invitation) at the closest consulate. You have to visit twice, pay per EC-Card (no other means are available in Hamburg) and then come back to pick it up. I did all this in the 8 days before I had to leave, INCLUDING the booking of my flight. While I had no problems, the stress and unease because of the uncertainty and possible delays will be firmly gnawing at you so I cannot recommend this to everyone.

Expect to shell out around 300 to 400 € for the flight to Moscow from Hamburg. I selected a detour over Vienna versus a direct flight because a) it was cheaper b) you get free lunch TWICE on your way to Moscow and c) it is nice to use the WiFi at Vienna airport – awesome!

Arrival and Survival

Before you read on I want to state CLEARLY: DO NOT EXCHANGE YOUR EUROS AT THE FIRST COUNTER AFTER YOU UNBOARD THE PLANE! THE TELLERS CHEAT ON YOU HABITUALLY AND THE RATES ARE SUB-STANDARD! ALSO, EVEN IF YOU PROTEST YOU HAVE TO GO THROUGH SOME SOCIAL PRESSURING BEFORE THEY GIVE IN. SO I CANNOT ADVISE TO CHANGE YOUR MONEY THERE. THIS HAPPENED TO MY FELLOW TRAVELERS AS WELL. DO BRING AROUND 4000 RUB (Nov 2011 rates) WITH YOU TO GET INTO THE CITY. THE BEST OPTION TO EXCHANGE YOUR FOREIGN CURRENCY IS AT THE STATION YOU ARRIVE AT WHEN YOU EXIT THE EXPRESS TRAIN.

My Arrival at the Domodedovo Airport went without issues – although, for some reason, the Arrivals terminal smelled of burnt engine oil. I checked how to get to the city before I came so I didn't have to rely on the airport-wide free WiFi but it is there if you need it. As usual in the big Russian cities you have to buy a ticket to pass through the gates to the platform. The only easily accessible form of transport for foreigners is the “express train” – which is incredibly slow to anything you have seen in Western Europe but better than the bus or taxi which would set you back. Account for that travel at least 70 minutes.

After my arrival at Paveletskaya I found the shortest route to Yugo-Zapadnaya, where the dormitory was. Trouble is: The best station to change at, Park Kultury, was being renovated and thus closed. Long story short: I fell asleep after 5 minutes, missed Park Kultury, woke up later, noticed that fact and decided to stay in the train (the brown line is a circle line). When I passed Park Kultury again, noticing it was being renovated, I exited at the next station and hustled around until I got to the line that would lead me to Yugo-Zapadnaya. This ordeal took me 3.5 hours and I was running late – it was 22.30 already. I had the map supplied by IAESTE Russia that showed how to get from the Metro station to the dormitory – but it didn't show where north or south is! It didn't show that there are four exits from the station, arranged symmetrically, so it was impossible to get my bearings at first. Once I identified what side of Leninskiy Prospekt I should be on I had to fight the building numbering system in Moscow. In fact, there is no closed logic connecting the numbering of properties, subproperties and buildings. I had a photograph of the building – without

that I couldn't have possibly found it. Alas, some Malaysian student who studied at the adjacent Polytechnic University of Chemistry found me on the street babbling to myself in English and guided me to the dorm, where he also lived - a lucky coincidence, because understanding the guards and the "kommandant" (the dorm's caretaker) proved more difficult than I anticipated. I would have managed without his help but it made things go so much more fluently.

I was assigned a 4-person room on the 13th floor of the most decrepit yet inhabited building that I have laid eyes upon in my life. The elevators, of which there were four, didn't work except for one, which only stopped at the floors 5, 8 and 12. Some artistically endowed students took to the walls and left beautiful wall paintings right opposite the elevator doors – so the inhabitants, for all their ice-cold composure, seem to have a soul. But the fun didn't stop there: my room was part of a two-room "apartment", to which I will get back shortly, which does not have a kitchen or a common room. There is one kitchen on each of the 14 floors, but only the appliances on the floors 10, 8, 6 and 4 worked. This hasn't changed in years, I was told. The people I met were very surprised that a) someone was actually coming there, to that kind of room (money matters, you know) and b) it was a foreigner who, as I found out a few minutes later, much older than the occupants – I was almost 23, their average age was 17.8. I was told I ended up in the poorest freshman room in the entire building, and I believed them. While some of the dwellers in that dorm had SUVs and all kinds of luxuries, others lived like us. The rich guys had microwaves, Stereos or even a fridge! Yes, most people in the dorm did not have a fridge. Well, there were stores all around so that wasn't essential.

My room looked like the shambles on TV when reporters travel to Iran or similar countries where construction hasn't taken place in significant measure since the 1970's and was low-quality even then.

The (cardboard) doors were held together by the "Murky Swamp" paint more than by the nails that used to hold them, Plaster walls with only patches of green paint left, two-story bunk beds with wooden panels instead of frames (no suspension _at all_), a big 180x80 cm pillow filled with...something that was akin to wet sand in comfyness and a blanket, cover and a big pillow to "round it off". It was essentially as comfortable as sleeping on a carpeted floor. We had something worse than bugs, though: we had a cat –for some time at least. The door to our apartment could neither be locked nor closed – no matter how hard you squeezed it into the frame – it would eventually swing open, squeaking unbearably. A few days after my arrival said cat found a new habitat in our flat. Cautious at first, it soon usurped upon our sleeping niches and our food supplies so we had take the cat out several times a day. She kept coming back, insidiously sneaking in behind our backs. Our strained relationship with "it" escalated one she made our shower, which did not and still does not have a door, her toilet. As you can imagine, the usage of the shower dropped sharply, I fortunately found an interim solution at the flat of another pair of IAESTE trainees in the same building. To add spice to the situation, my room was convinced the guys from the adjacent, 2 person room were to blame. After all, if they could afford that awesome room and a microwave and two stereos, surely an eccentricity like having a cat would not be deemed unusual by their minds! After one confrontation with our perennially absent neighbors we quickly resolved to convince the animal to find a different habitat. The cat proved itself to have the character of an addicted rat, including the vicious persistence and that comes with that, taking dumps out of revenge even. Our attempts to evict the cat grew ever more violent to the point that we sent her out flying into the main hallway several times a week, whenever we got hold of her. One day she didn't come back – and our shower was ours again. The luck didn't last: the water tap broke apart a few days later and soaked the entire shower room. It took days for the dorm's caretaker to supply us a new tap – which we had to install ourselves. Duh.

The absence of a fridge in most rooms explained the minisccaffoldings outside the windows that sometimes spanned two rooms as improvised means to keep your food fresh for that one extra day – but birds of all sorts kept attacking the supplies of the negligent. Cooking took place usually through coordination with the other IAESTE trainees to keep the costs down. Speaking of which: for the bed I got, in that flat I was assigned, a whopping 223 € were deducted off my traineeship allowance. My flatmates paid 50 €, including monthly internet access. I guess somebody was pocketing the money :D

This atmosphere was definitely a refreshing change to what I was used to. Except for the sleep, which I could hardly find, the absence of any kind of tact on the part of my flatmates in terms of

keeping the noise down at say 2 a.m., everything else was great.

Now, please take note, that this only counts for you as a report if your internship is to be at the National Academy of Sciences at Ulitsa Kosygina 4 or at an architectural bureau nearby (I met an IAESTE trainee who did an internship there). Generally, you are located closer to work than everything else, so meeting others who work in different parts of the city is a challenge IF YOU DO NOT HAVE A RUSSIAN SIM. Please, buy one at the airport – you will enjoy so much more!

The life

Oh well, the life was incredibly varied. Walking the streets of Moscow is incredible, as if time was running faster. You see past, present and future at the same time - you see poor, well-off and rich at the same time – everywhere, but especially so at the outskirts (where I happened to live). I will not spoil the experience any further, you must see for yourself ;)

As only around 30 € per month were left for tickets, food, entertainment and the like, us IAESTE trainees at Yugo-Zapadnaya cooked together to save money for tickets. At the price level back then, not bringing in your own money from abroad would have meant surviving on prefab pancakes ONCE a day, tap water (which was surprisingly OK) and traveling only to and from work – the 30 € didn't cover more. So cooking every evening, sometimes stuffing pastry or stuff into yourself while you walked past (cheap, popular and veeeery tasty) is what our subsistence came down to. Due to the significant language barrier (even though all of us had at least one Semestre of Russian before we came) we usually travelled in packs of three or more. There is a lot going on in Moscow – the community of English speaking Russians is big and they all organize on the web, so I can only recommend Couchsurfing.org (couchsurfing is huuuuge in Russia!), meetup.com, craigslist et cetera to find awesome things to do with others in a similar position as you. You can be sure to do things that are way off the trodden path of tourism (like visiting the world's deepest urban nuclear bunker complex! With a live demonstration (but no nuke))

Beyond that: Moscow is majestic. Dirty, corrupt and at times wild-western in nature, but always majestic.

The work

My first day at work was very short. I found my way, thankfully together with two other trainees who were to work in the same complex as me, to the central building where, after waiting for the managing director, I was accompanied to my designated lab. It turned out that nobody read my cover letter – they did not even know such a thing existed in the application process. After explaining that I was essentially a mathematically inclined mechanical engineer, I was told to come back tomorrow and maybe they would find someone to supervise me in a field somewhat related to what I already knew.

The next day (Friday) I got an SMS (remember to buy that SIM card !) from one of the assistants I met the day before summoning me to the main building to meet Dr. Andreev, theoretical biophysicist, around one hour before the meetup. I couldn't make it sufficiently quickly and communicated that, resulting in me having a long weekend, as Dr. Andreev would only come back on Tuesday.

Dr. Andreev finally spoke proper English. He made mistakes, had an accent that was almost Italian but had a manner that was just endearing. A tough guy nevertheless, interviewing me outside (the weather mid-September was beautifully sunny) the Biophysics department. I started work the next day.

My task was very well circumscribed by Dr. Andreev. First I had to implement a MATLAB model of a previous student's analytical carcinogenesis model based on the Moolgavkar seminal paper in order to get into the subject, which took me around ten days. Then I had to present that to my lab (3 people) and got direct feedback on how I structured my presentation and what I could do better in a competitive environment. After that I went on to implement Dr. Andreev's most recent research ideas on the fly. Mainly they were conducting numerical simulations of particle-DNA collisions and so I was used as a welcome resource to help with modeling the conclusions of those simulations on the petri-dish scale.

Of all the IAESTE trainees at the Academy of Sciences that year I was the only one to actually have anything resembling a working day and week. Most people got 2 days free per week and/or only had part-time workdays. I consider myself lucky J

The activities, planned and private

Every IAESTE trainee had enough free time to go home after work and then meet up with other trainees from other parts of the capital. We mostly organized ourselves over Facebook or per our Mobile Phones (!). There are a great many things to discover in Moscow but even more so AROUND Moscow. Again, I can but recommend signing up at Couchsurfing.org and following the Moscow group.

IAESTE Russia, unfortunately, does not take the same care of their IAESTE trainees as do we here in Germany. The aforementioned "cultural program" was very stiffly organized. You receive a Mail each week from the IAESTE secretary directing you to go to a specific meeting point in order to get some "cultural experience" – Masha, the one student helping IAESTE Russia, was our guide each Sunday to, sometimes, boring places detailing Russia's history and former greatness. But, as usual, that only set the stage. You cannot help but talk with the other trainees and usually a very informal atmosphere develops. Russians, especially the girls, are very direct and the inexperienced German traveler might consider them to be very rude BUT that is absolutely not the case. They live in a socially harsh environment so their words are not too carefully chosen but there is seldom ill will, at least within the circles we frequented. So, do mingle and try that English of yours: the places we visited with our guides were usually just like the bars here so you could talk to anyone.

A large group of IAESTE interns also went to St. Petersburg by the (in-)famous night train from Moscow. It is quite the distance and takes around 10 hrs (trains are slow). We all traveled by the cheapest option: using so-called "platskartnyj" tickets, everyone got a bunk bed in a large train car with no separate compartments – the cheapest option. The experience itself is great – but only if you take good care and reserve bunks in groups. They are way too short for anyone above 1.80m so it is clever to take a bed perpendicular to the passage in the middle. This is an experience everyone should make. It is not as awesome as the Trans-Siberian in terms that Russians do not actively seek to have you join in the drinking J Either way, I can but recommend traveling around Moscow as much as possible, even on your own money.

Conclusion

To sum my stay up, I want to stress a few important points from the first part: a) you need to bring your own money because your allowance won't suffice (it might change in 2013) b) you can expect wildly varying standard of living than at home (in matters of price/performance) c) you really SHOULD buy a SIM card at the Airport, it helps so much!

Beyond that advice I can say that I really liked it in Moscow, certainly because I had a prior affinity to the Russian way of life. You will get to experience a very different perspective, a "Schmelztiegel der Kulturen" much more extreme and immediate than anything you can come across in Germany, and I am certain you will make many global friends that will be looking forward to welcoming you in their countries.

I recommend Russia to anyone if you can live with the less-than-perfect care from IAESTE Russia.