Baby goes to Mother Russia.

In the summer of **2006**, I traveled from my home in Philadelphia in the United States to Moscow in Russia with the intent to bicycle the Golden Ring. This is an irregular circle of ancient towns popular with visitors for their monasteries, their natural beauty and the nearness of the Volga River. The trip was arranged by a Moscow bike club and the ten-day trip would be led by an experienced English-speaking Russian bicyclist, with a support van, driven by his friend. Other bicyclists from Moscow and other bicyclists from English-speaking countries would join us. The other English-speaking members of the group had never met before, with the exception of me and my adventurous friend from Philadelphia, who decided to come too. I had no particular excuse for wanting to make this journey except that something about the plan captured my attention during a now-forgotten Internet search. One of several unintended consequences of the Internet is that it gives a practical pathway to what would seem in a previous time to be inexplicable vacation choices.

By way of explanation, I should say that I like to travel by bicycle. I enjoy a minor notoriety with my peers for riding across the United States during one particularly energetic summer and, several years later, making a separate trip by bicycle through parts of China. However these trips, and all my other bike holidays, were undertaken either alone, or with an easy-going friend or equally accommodating relative. These vacations although physically difficult at times, were not challenging emotionally, by which I mean I mostly could get whatever I wanted---food, drink, lodging or choice of route---whenever I wanted it. This was not the case in Russia. Traveling with a group by bicycle, unable to speak Russian and unfamiliar with the roads, customs and basics, was frustrating. I am not used to being dependent, and turning to another person, in this case, our guide, for my needs and wants was uncomfortable at best and at worst, made me feel a need to bite someone, although I could never figure out who deserved to be bitten. At some level, since I neglected to learn to speak or Russian before I left, the blame probably falls nearer to me than to anyone. Besides being dependent on the tour leader for the basics, I also had separation anxiety; whenever he was out of sight, I touched my passport to make sure I had it with me and I took an interest in the locations of the nearest US Embassies. Once or twice I developed what I termed ‘Country Claustrophobia” which was the panic to get out of Russia and get home immediately. So rather than feeling safe in Mother Russia, I more

had the sensation of being a young child visiting an aunt; some degree of comfort and familiarity, but with a periodic and strong desire to return to my real home.

Those points made, our Russian leader did a remarkable job helping me enjoy our bike tour. I read a passage in a book about the virtues of the great wilderness of Russia—described as silent, somber, and infinitely patient[1] and those words also describe our leader exactly. Patience was his principle virtue because I acted like a restless child, one half-step away from asking him, "Are we there yet?" My concerns were always infantile: the location of the nearest bathroom, naptime, or the proximity of juice, cookies or milk. Even when provoked at the end of a long day, our leader was always measured and constrained, never losing his temper or using more words than needed to gain his point. I would also add to the list of adjectives to describe our guide the word 'practical'. One of the moments that best captured my experience of our Russia guide was to watch him deftly take his shirt off as it began to rain so it wouldn't get wet: Americans would put on a jacket in the face of rain, but the Russian response is simpler and more elegant.

Listening to a language I didn't understand recapitulated the sensation of being an infant: I absorbed the tone of people talking to me in Russian but could discern no content, which is how I imagine babies first learn the meaning of language, deciding whether the gist of the gibberish is good news or bad. Sitting in places where some groups were speaking in Russian and other groups in English, I always felt more kindly disposed to Russian strangers. Because I couldn't understand what they were saying to each other, I assumed it was sensible and worthwhile conversation. However I could understand the silly things that English tourists would say, evoking decidedly unkind feelings toward strangers. The off-putting conversation of a group of hung-over British teenagers at the Moscow Airport comes to mind.

Overhearing Russian conversations is one thing, but being shouted at in Russian was something entirely different. As we rode our bikes through villages, people would usually stare at us silently, but sometimes they would yell: because I couldn't understand what they were saying, I could have interpreted the shouts as positive encouragement, the Russian equivalent of you-go-girl. Alternatively, it could have been the Russian equivalent of get-

[1] The Icon and the Axe, Billington quoting Kennan, 1956.

the-hell-out of our town. So I interpreted these shouts based on my feelings of the moment. Deciding on the intention of people yelling at you in a foreign language is a Rorschach test of mood.

Human infancy is defined as a period of reliance on others for food, and like an infant, getting food in Russia was one of my concerns. During our bike tour, the food was grain-based (a polite way of saying gruel), supplemented with fresh fruit, strawberries and blueberries, because they were in season, many cucumbers and tomatoes, and not much meat, eggs or fish. There was bread at every meal, but no butter. We ate buckwheat or millet porridge, which is healthy but makes it hard to look forward to meals. Although this was not true of our guide or fellow bicyclists (mostly), the average Russian drinks beer literally like water, for breakfast, lunch and dinner, and it is a common site to see a well-dressed and otherwise presentable woman headed for work in the morning drinking a 32-oz can of beer. I found this habit unnerving. The other thing I noticed was a strict relationship between the temperature of food and the temperature of drink in Russia. Borsht and beer are an example. (Although Borsht is the cliché Russian food item, this stereotype arises because it is a mainstay). It is always served with beer, but as you will recall, this is true of all food in Russia. The beer is served from warm to cool. The temperature range of Borsht is wider than for beer, from steaming-hot to ice-cold. However if the Borsht is cold, then the beer is warm; likewise, if the beer is icy, the Borsht is steaming hot. Whether this is a rule in Russian cuisine or a satisfying coincidence, I don't know.

***Camping*.** When you see someone carrying an axe at a Russian campsite you think 'firewood' whereas in an American campsite you think 'serial killer'. In the US, camp sites are maintained: they often have toilets, groomed sites for tent camping, electrical and sewer facilities for the recreational vehicles, are mostly free of trash, and have a shop where you can buy the basics: firewood, packaged foods and cold drinks. In Russia, the camping we did was in locations that are apparently open to the public, but were not advertised or even signposted. They had views of the Volga River, or were snuggled in forests, but they were also filled with trash. There were no amenities besides the river (in which we bathed). We slept in our sleeping bags on the ground and sat on flat stones and small logs around a fire pit. One of the benefits to Russian camping was that it made biking

more alluring because the bike saddle was a comfortable place to sit. The mosquitoes were numerous and hungry, and when offered a choice of food, preferred American flesh. I wanted to soak every item I brought and every inch of my skin in 100% DEET, and damn the neurological consequences.

These free campsites are available because Russia is relatively undeveloped: thirty minutes by train outside Moscow, there is no suburban sprawl like you would see near even a medium-size American city, and the countryside in Russia is open land. There are miles and miles and miles of forest and grasslands, with no person in sight and no human structures. I can understand why Russia was often invaded, it seems like they have room for more people. There is a sense that you can roam endlessly in Russia, offending no one and going unnoticed. However once Toll Brothers discovers Russia, and if the Russians have the cash, the McDonalds will soon be joined by the McMansions and this open space will close. So go now.

***The Russian way of life*.** Living in Philadelphia was good training for visiting Russia, because I am used to the famous Philly attitude of blank looks that border on hostility, which is a routine part of our daily business transactions. The first thing I noticed about Russia was that its people have taken the famous Philadelphia attitude to the extreme. When you approach someone for assistance anywhere in Russia, i.e., to buy something in a shop, to check into a hotel for the night, there is no welcoming greeting or show of friendliness. The workers at the hotel desk are not happy to see you, and (apparently) no manager insists that they act otherwise. My initial reaction was to be offended, but I began to realize that Americans demand what amounts to dishonesty from the people who serve us. In the ideal world, perhaps the people who work at hotel desks would be sincerely glad to see you, but in reality, my guess is that this is seldom the case. After the initial shock that Russians are even ruder than Philadelphians, I now value the saccharine smile of the American worker less, and the rare but sweet smile of the Russian (or Philadelphia) worker more.

The second thing I noticed about Russia is: it's always something. If there are two roads to get to some key location, like a train station, both roads will be under construction and impassable at once. The electricity goes off; no one knows why. The girl who stamps the passports is not here today; no explanation. The store advertised as open twenty-four

hours a day, seven days a week is closed, shut and dark. The door labeled as the exit in case of fire also has a sign that says it is locked everyday from 8 to 5 pm. This is the original “dog ate the homework” country, where there is no penalty for ignoring the social contract, not turning work in on time, or following fire and safety codes. Visiting Americans are annoyed by the Russian lack of remorse about these lapses, the blocked roads, the lack of electricity, the absent workers, but Russians accept these inconveniences. They can’t do anything about the problem so they endure until something changes. Since stepping away from your post is a national pastime, Russians wait; the person who stepped out will be back—sometime. At first glance, Russians suffer from learned helplessness but there are methods to cope. For instance, when there is a long line, some people push forward, which should cause trouble but it doesn’t: those that can wait tacitly agree to queue patiently. For instance, women who urgently need to use the toilet jump the queue, pay their rubles, and go to the front of the line. The triage seems to be an almost religious variation of “each according to her need”. So although powerless in the face of the larger problem, people have developed ways of getting by. Wait when you can; otherwise, push.

Although Americans talk about freedom, there is a sense of personal liberty in Russia that was remarkable and unexpected. While it is probably best not to criticize the government loudly in public places, you can sit on the train and drink a beer without comment. If you are a man, you can also ride the train on a hot day without a shirt, and no one will say a word to you. As a woman, underwear can be worn in full view; black bras with open white shirts, and thongs with low rise pants; no worries. Fear of the visible panty line is unknown. Everyone can laugh loudly with friends in public even before lunch. You can throw your trash into the street. We can debate about whether this is freedom; to be drunk, unclad and able to litter without fear of reprisal, or anarchy; but there a small strange voice inside of me which warmed considerably to the prospect of living in a place where nothing matters very much. This freedom became apparent to me in the small city of Jaroslav. Sitting in a beer garden, watching people meet friends, talk, eat dinner, drink beer and smoke in a way that is both aimless and relaxed. Their deaths from liver disease and lung cancer are distant. It wasn’t that they weren’t ever worried about personal concerns it’s just that they weren’t worried right now; the time was their due; no one expected them to be elsewhere.

Somehow the beat of the drum calling Americans to work and achieve was silent, and all I could hear was the laughter of friends and the clink of glasses.

Some things do matter in Russian---a little. Trying to discern what is important to Russians and what it not important, as a thought-game, first came to me while visiting the Hermitage Museum (after the bike trip). Although this museum is the centerpiece of Russian culture, some features of the museum were treated so casually it was a bit like seeing a priest dressed in his jeans and sneakers. There are female guards in every room of the Hermitage and a believable rumor has it that they ex-KGB agents. They sit and watch everyone with a fierce eye, enforcing rules with seriousness, except when they are sleeping, which is often. The European art is meticulously displayed, and the rooms that house these collections are spotless, whereas other exhibits, such as the Asian art collections, although housed in ornate gold leaf rooms, are decaying (the rooms are decaying, but this applies to some of the art as well), and the art-work is captioned with dirty hand-lettered signs, taped to the wall with brittle cellophane. So Europe matters, Asia does not. There are only a few bathrooms in the Hermitage, and I watched beer-bloated men eye the vases in the emptier display rooms surreptitiously. However there was a bright sliver of pure humanity; amply cushioned chairs in almost every room for sitting and viewing the exhibits. If you don't smoke, eat, take pictures, slouch or drink you can sit almost anywhere you choose until closing time and gaze at the pictures. Trying to figure out what the administrators of the Hermitage hold most dear, I would say Renior followed by comfy chairs. The rest doesn't matter.

The most delicate issue I faced during the trip in Russia was the issue of money, and here more than anywhere did I feel the effects of the different economic histories of the two countries. There are two catch-phases that Russians use about themselves to summarize their recent changes in fortune: first, that the Iron Curtain has been replaced by a Money Curtain, by which they mean everything once scarce is now available but for a price that most Russians can't pay. Second, an oft-repeated phrase was that Russian people want to work like Russians (i.e., not much) but earn like Americans, although some Russians have a sharp eye for economic opportunities (I noticed that pay toilets could always be found next to Beer Gardens). But I was surprised by the conviction with which ordinary Russians believe that ordinary Americans are immoral and selfish. In their view, a

democratic government functions by mob rule—and thus, from their perspective, a government by and for the people is inherently self-interested. The alternative and pervasive view in Russia is that one good man can rule the country and make reasoned decisions for the benefit of everyone but, sadly, they would admit, this system falls short when you have trouble finding the right guy. Which to hear the Russians tell the story happens frequently. I was surprised that Americans were viewed as so self-centered and greedy, and I was also surprised by the value placed on generosity by Russians. The moment captured in my mind's eye is a sour-faced old women giving money and food to a beggar; not kindly and not hoping for thanks, but in a matter of fact way.

Besides being generous, Russians are proud. One of the reasons that money was a delicate issue was that as American visitors, we had a lot of money and the Russians, who were our equals in education, age and experience, did not. However I was mindful that to try to give them money or material items was condescending. It is easy to take the relatively even-handed way resources are distributed in America for granted because inequalities do exist, but we have come to expect that people who do the same type of work will have roughly the same personal financial resources. With the Russians I felt too rich. However I have been on the other side of this financial equation, feeling too poor, which can occur sometimes with my Japanese work colleagues. Differences in relative wealth are easier to see when people do the same work but do it in different countries. The experience comparing my own fortunes with those of my Japanese counterparts gave me insight into why Russians feel that Americans are immoral and selfish: because we get more money for the same work for no obvious reason, it leads them to question whether we are playing fair with the rest of the world.

For all the lack of money, in dealing with foreign tourists Russian business people were remarkably causal about payment. For instance, we did not have to give our credit card numbers to secure hotel reservations, which is a degree of financial trust almost unknown (now) in America. The settling of bills was equally casual. Some hotels we checked into did not ask for our credit cards because it was very early in the morning, and the desk clerk wanted to go back to sleep. In one place we stayed, my traveling companion did not actually pay a deposit or give his credit card until the day of departure. Perhaps the

Russians accept that American travelers have lots of money, and therefore they don't worry too much about us skipping out on the bill.

One way Russians cope with their lack of material wealth is to focus on their cultural and artistic richness, which they do by keeping their classical authors and composers, the ballet, theater and architecture as a major part of the current culture. Although they value the beauty of their oldest buildings, for political reasons, in the early part of the century, exceptional cathedrals and churches were suddenly abandoned or destroyed outright. Those that did survive were sometimes used for secular purposes: For instance, during the early part of the last century, a church in St Petersburg was changed into a gym with a swimming pool. There is a movement now to restore these churches and cathedrals to their former glory, but the workers start from the onion spires, painting them bright gold. We would see a village in the distance and bike toward the brilliant spires, but as we came closer, we could see that the building underneath was rotted and near collapse. This detail has stayed with me: the gilt being repaired before the structure is fixed. To my mind, this is an example of Russian pride: a desire to show the world that what they have is perfect and beautiful even in the face of collapse, like gilding a dead lily.

The Internet has changed travel. I was standing in a monastery in the Russian countryside, examining an iconstasis (a floor-to-ceiling panel of painted and gold-embossed paintings) irreligiously thinking to myself, "Grrr. No internet". I wished I had 'Googled' this monastery and church before I left home. No one among the Monastery staff spoke English, and no one could describe (in English) the meaning of the images now before me, but I was certain that if I typed the name of the Monastery into an Internet search engine, the English-language information would flow like a river. We used to travel as explorers, finding things and places unfamiliar and inaccessible to those people back home. This situation has changed. How many of us have surveyed shops whilst traveling, rejecting items as gifts because we can get the same item, often cheaper, at home. Now it is rare to find a place or a thing that is not described on the Internet. Some of you will be thinking, not so! If this statement annoys you, take this test: type the remotest and most interesting destination you have ever found on your travels into your internet browser and see what happens. Do it now, I will wait.

You see my point: we no longer have to travel to acquire information. If you want to know what is in a specific room in the Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg Russia and you read and speak only English, I can tell you from personal experience that you are better off in front of your computer at home that you are standing in that room of the Hermitage. No English language signs to tell you the history of the paintings. I am not complaining to you (or to the administrators of the Hermitage, although they could take note if they cared to do so). This is just a fact. But type a snippet query into your web browser, and the gush of information, in English, will knock you over.

Travelers vary in how they cope with these changes in the age of the internet. Some people have not given up with finding the unexplored or at least undocumented nooks and crannies; they also react negatively to any location that is tainted by American culture (go to a McDonalds restaurant in Moscow, never!). They are constantly searching and comparing, searching and comparing. They hunt until they can remark, "we would never get food X or product Y at home". People mourn the cultural homogenization. The whole world is dotted with McDonalds, from Chendu China to St Petersburg Russia to my hometown of Philadelphia, but to waste time in despair over the ubiquitousness of American culture is to miss the point in my opinion. The world is changing, and it is time to savor the experience of travel for what it is now, an experience of the time, place and people, and not a hunt for the unknown. No internet search will replace the experience of the smell of the Volga River in the morning, the delight you feel from receiving the first smile from a citizen of Moscow, or the emotional experience of standing ten thousand miles from home and thinking about the people you love.

***The bike part*.** My only souvenir of the trip is a tattered white sheet of paper printed with our itinerary: a list of small towns and museums we visited and the mileage traveled between points. The biking was physically easy because we rarely put in a full day, we cycled slowly, we stopped often, and the roads (although not smooth), were usually paved. Looking at the printed itinerary now, the biking seems remote and yet the biking was the most important part of the journey because it separated us from the ordinary tourists, and allowed us to avoid the pitfall of viewing another country only from behind the glass window of a bus, car or train. People ask me where I went in Russia and although I have learned a rote and satisfactory answer to this question, e.g., the Golden Ring, Suzdal, Uglich, the

actual answer is that when you go somewhere on your bike, it doesn't matter where you went, how far you went, or how fast you went. To me at least, it matters only that you were there.

"How was the trip to Russia?" People ask me about my recent bike trip and I dread to hear the question, "How was Russia?" because they expect a pithy answer, which I don't have. Russia is not like the place described to American children, and is not like the place described in American spy novels. Perhaps the short honest answer is the one that nobody wants to hear: Russia is just like the US. Some things work well, and some things are ruined beyond redemption. Some people are happy and others are rich, some people are both, but most people are neither. Regardless of what you might believe about Russia or hear on English-language news reports, it all does work. It is not perfect, and it is not better than America, but it is also not worse. Prince Odoevsky, author of *Russian Nights*, writes, "in Russia many things are bad, but together everything is good". I couldn't have said it better myself.

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