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Moscow's grandeurs and get-used-to-it charms

By Keith Spicer

MOSCOW. Welcome to the Kremlin. Shiver as you touch the rough wooden throne of Ivan the Terrible. Revere ancient icons painted on soaring walls, and peer into saints' faces to lock eyes with God. Marvel at the tombs of czars and the fortress's cornucopia of treasure, including Catherine the Great's silver goblets, gilded carriages and dozens of brocaded dresses – one for each lover? In the citadel's broad avenues, gawk at the world's largest broken bell, even a gigantic cannon pointing at President Vladimir Putin's office in its ochre-and-white building. No doubt his steely eyes dare the cannon to fire.

You can see all that in the Kremlin. But you can't step outside on Red Square to eight-onion-domed Saint Basil's Cathedral and persuade the *babushkas* taking tickets to smile. Courteous requests in three western languages for guidance draw contemptuous shouts of *Ruski, Ruski!*

That's surprising when you remember Russia's splendid education system, including widely-praised foreign-language teaching. And Moscow's presumed interest in attracting tourists. But is that cliché still true? Another woman sitting 200 meters from St. Basil's, when shown the words "Red Square" in Russian, refuses to point the way.

Why such chip-on-shoulder distrust of foreigners?

However peacefully the Cold War ended, the West won and Russia lost. Always beneath the surface seethed Russian humiliation and resentment. Putin famously said the dismantlement of the Soviet Union was the greatest tragedy of the 20th century.

In his and most Russians' view, the West took advantage of Russia's weakness to plant alliances and military bases on ex-Soviet dominions. Western free-enterprise advisers helped create a Wild-West atmosphere under Boris Yeltsin where a handful of crooks called oligarchs stole state assets on a vast scale, especially natural resources – then bought up media to cover up their crimes.

In this worldview, the West also sent meddlesome missionaries to preach free media and liberal democracy. It incited journalists to undermine Kremlin authority. Hundreds of western media and electoral "advisers" helped produce pro-western regimes in former Soviet lands such as Ukraine and Georgia. The same goes for election monitors. These, claim Russian nationalists, helped rig results via inflammatory public statements. In recent parliamentary elections, Moscow reacted by playing phony visa games to torpedo supervision by European monitors.

To note all this is certainly not to excuse Russian paranoia or repression. Putin has created a new dictatorship, relatively 'soft', if not yet totalitarian. Finessing the constitution, he is kicking himself downstairs to prime minister to cling to power. But it would be folly to ignore how most Russians now see the world. And why they give Putin approval ratings of over 70 percent which western politicians can only fantasize about.

Westerners living in Moscow assure that ordinary Russians' private friendliness to

foreigners remains lively. But society keeps a hard edge. Rudeness is routine, everyday business a combat, bribery everywhere. Violence – against dark-skinned “foreigners,” business rivals and crusading journalists – intimidates many. The murder of anti-Kremlin journalist Anna Politkovskaya remains unsolved over a year later.

Even taking a taxi is risky. The very few licensed cabs may take you for a harrowing ride if you don't know Russian. And “gypsy cabs” (ordinary drivers flagged down to pick up passengers) demand steely nerves and a genius for bluff.

The cure for all this drama might be a visit to history-drenched Novodevichy Cemetery. Assassins here share peaceful pathways with famous poets, novelists, scientists, musicians, political leaders. Or you can browse the State Pushkin Museum to ponder the loss of Pushkin's young life in a duel with his wife's lover. Better still: the Andrei Sakharov Museum, containing exhibits from the Nobel Peace-Prize laureate's *Ottawa Citizen*-sponsored visit to Canada in 1989.

What's your best hope for a Russia you can love? Why not attend nuptials at Moscow's Wedding Palace no. 4? A Stalin-era institution warmed up to suit the city's new prosperous times, the marble palace churns through two weddings an hour, each with the same ritual of string sextet, flowers, champagne, exchanged rings, sealing kiss, and a tirelessly enthusiastic presiding female official in a red dress.

Glow at the wonder of new and committed love, the excitement and support of old folks, siblings, cousins, children, everybody who cares. Prepare for a vodka-and-wine-soaked banquet with a thousand toasts, each a whit less cogent, but no less heartfelt, than the last. Then wild dancing in a club somewhere. Eternal, blood-stirring stuff.

Watching the Wedding Palace's large flat TV screens replay each ceremony, and laughing at the champagne-popping-and-pouring that's part of each wedding package, you forget the tough town outside. Rogue taxis and subway rudeness fade into triviality. Here inside stands the Kremlin of the heart. And in it, to the strains of Mendelssohn's endlessly, cheerfully bowed Wedding March, even the *babushkas* are smiling.