

Expeditions Fund Report 2015

Liden & Denz Language School – St. Petersburg, Russia

I kindly received a sum of £500 awarded by the Expeditions Fund QMUL which contributed greatly towards the cost of my four week trip to St. Petersburg.

After much contemplation and advice from my personal advisor, I decided that the Liden & Denz branch in St. Petersburg would be the best option for me – it is an internationally recognised and awarded institution associated with excellence.

Located just a few minutes from Nevsky Prospect, the prestigious language school is right in the heart of St. Petersburg with a vast array of activities on offer which I could balance alongside my time studying there.

I chose an intensive course which offered purely one to one tutoring five days a week, enabling me personalise the course to my own needs and thus I was able to make the most of my short stay of four weeks in St. Petersburg. I thoroughly enjoyed being able to study at my own pace and being able to delve further into topics and grammatical structures which I have previously misunderstood. As the only student, I felt more comfortable asking and answering questions which I might have otherwise brushed aside.

Accommodation was organised through the institution and I stayed with a Russian mother a few stops on the Metro away from Liden & Denz. I ate a traditional Russian breakfast with her every morning which greatly improved my Russian language skills; she could not speak a word of English so I found myself learning many new words and phrases every day.

It is incredibly easy to have a distorted perception of reality filtered through the media, prejudice and word of mouth. Misconceptions cast aside, you can discover the beautiful truth of the ornate city deeply immersed in history and culture.

From the stunning ancient architecture and opulent golden gilded rooftops of St. Isaacs Cathedral, Peterhof Palace and the Peter Paul Fortress, romantic walks along the Neva River during the White Nights, to the mouth-watering blini (Russian pancakes) - I couldn't have had a more pleasant experience.

Speculation about a country rarely portrayed in a positive light is expected, so I don't blame anyone – for I too admit to falling victim to the power of prejudice before spending time there. I thus decided to uncover the truth for myself about some of the most common misconceptions during my stay.

Whilst it is common knowledge that Russia is usually associated with an unfriendly population, this generalisation couldn't be further from the truth. Of course, if you cannot speak the native dialect, the language barrier may make things more complicated. However, if you take the initiative to learn a few words of Russian, your efforts will be admired. The majority of people, especially the younger generation speak English, so finding your way around is a simple task and from my experience, everyone is happy to help.

As is expected in any largely populated city, it is uncommon to smile at strangers, so do not take it personally if you encounter an unfriendly face – it is merely a defense mechanism which has been instilled following countless years of hardship.

My advice – visit Russia in the summer to discover the lively city at its best. My stay in St. Petersburg happened to coincide with the extraordinary Russian phenomenon, the White Nights (normally lasting from June 11th to July 2nd). Expect bustling nights which never end

and endless romantic walks along the Neva River. Broad daylight for almost 24 hours a day guarantees continuous festivities into the night and a safe passage home at any hour. I was lucky enough to attend The Scarlet Sails, a traditional event notable since the end of WWII attended by over 4 million and celebrates the beginning of summer. A magnificent ship with blood crimson sails cruises along the Neva River against the backdrop of a spectacular fireworks show. It is an event not to be missed and an experience of a lifetime.

The city is full of life during the glorious summer months with countless events and festivities organised to keep you busy.

You may also be surprised to hear that vodka is not the most common beverage among youths and young adults. When I questioned my lovely teacher on the topic, she laughed, "They prefer beer, cider and wine". Streets are relatively safe, and I found that Russia generally cares for their cleanliness and image more so than the U.K– streets and public spaces are cleaned more regularly and efficiently.

Transportation in St. Petersburg is surprisingly inexpensive. Trains run from Metro stations at just 30 roubles (30p) per journey until midnight, and after that, feel free to use Uber or Yandex, a local reliable and affordable Russian taxi service which is downloadable as an app. I would stay away from street taxis however, as they tend to charge outrageous prices verging on the border of criminal, if they sense you are not local.

If you fancy a cheap method of transportation outside of the city to Peterhof Palace for example, take a Marshrutka (a routed taxicab), from Avtovo and from Leninskiy Prospekt Metro Stations for a little over 60 roubles per one hour drive.

You are advantaged as a student in Russia, with free entry into many museums and attractions such as the Hermitage State Museum, one of the largest, oldest and most beautiful museums in the world founded by Catherine the Great in 1764. If you're there, make sure to witness the spectacular winding up of the Peacock Clock which takes place every Wednesday at 19:00.

Communication in Russia is a breeze, as sim cards can be purchased for as little as 400 roubles (£3.85) a month from the airport or any mobile store – this includes sufficient data, calls and texts. Additionally, free Wi-Fi is available at almost every café or restaurant.

I hope to either return to St. Petersburg this semester to continue my studies or enrol in the online lessons with Liden and Denz, as this experience has proved invaluable to my Russian language progress.