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# From Russia with Love

A letter from our columnist Andrew Harris in Moscow

Dear Reader,  
I am writing to you as – with wife Delia – the most undeserving occupant of VIP Guest Room 1 (of eight) in the British Embassy Residence, Moscow. Briefly chairing yet another charity operating in Africa led to friendship with Fiona and Laurie Bristow. Fiona was a fellow Board Member - and Laurie is His Excellency the British Ambassador to the Russian Federation. Laurie invited us to stay in the British Embassy Residence as his personal guests. To ensure you don't gain the wrong impression they are two of the nicest, most hospitable and informal people you could hope to meet.

More than 70 years ago Winston Churchill said "*Russia is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.*" It still is – a fascinating country full of contradictions. It is nuclear-armed and the biggest country in the world by land

area yet is paranoid and craves respect. It appears to fear attack yet can't or won't recognise that NATO is a purely defensive alliance. It has been ruled by Tsars, communists and their version of democracy but stays authoritarian whilst preserving glorious art, buildings and traditions from all eras. Excluding oil and gas its economy is reckoned to be smaller than the GDP of our region (they should build more cars and fewer weapons) but it is an amazing place to visit if you can survive the visa process with help from a nice Russian lady in St Peter House in Manchester.

Only the narrow Moskva River separates the British Embassy Residence and the Kremlin as pictured. Most of the best sites of Moscow are within walking distance - so we have walked and walked and walked! Our first venture was to Red Square which was being prepared for City Day to celebrate Moscow with singing, dancing,

games and lots of fun you wouldn't normally associate with this severe post-communist society. Before the fun started we paid the almost obligatory visit to Lenin's Mausoleum; speculation continues as to whether the body is still Lenin or more like something from Madame Tussauds. Either way he is revered by many Russians. Then in sombre mood we walked past the Kremlin Wall Graves to the Memorial of the Unknown Soldier with its eternal flame in the nearby Alexander Gardens. We witnessed the changing of the guard which is moving. Although the goose-stepping grates this country lost more than 25 million dead in World War 2 so I respect their right to commemorate their loss any way they like.

The star attraction has to be the brooding presence of the Kremlin. The high walls are several feet thick and somehow symbolise this strange country. Within its confines is the Kremlin State



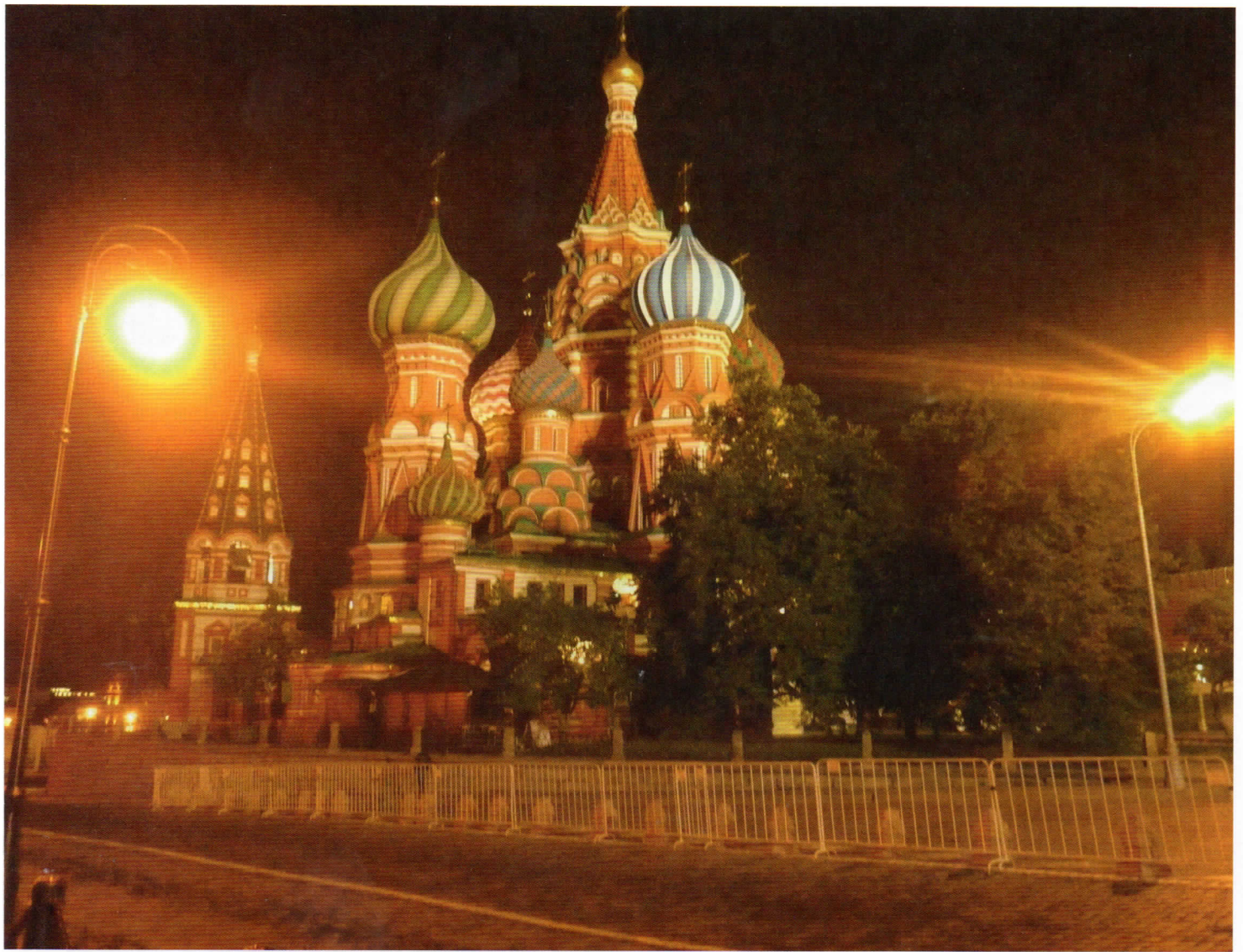
**TOP: The Kremlin viewed from our front door. LEFT: Muscovites enjoying themselves on City Day - 11th September. RIGHT: Changing the Guard at the Memorial of the Unknown Soldier.**

Armoury which I recommend to any visitor. Despite its name it houses a fabulous collection of treasures more than weaponry which give a fascinating insight into the immense wealth and power enjoyed by the Russian aristocracy throughout the centuries. The collection was started in the 14th Century and the current State Armoury was purpose-built as a museum on

the orders of Tsar Nicholas I and completed in 1851. Now that's history!

A short walk away is St Basil's Cathedral which dominates Red Square. Ivan the Terrible ordered its construction to celebrate the capture of the Tatar stronghold of Kazan – 500 miles east of Moscow - in 1552. It has red-brick towers and swirling onion domes and is said to be Russia's

most emblematic building. Entry is 350 roubles per person but at about 85 roubles to the £ it's not much more than a tolerable £4 each. The interior is unlike any other cathedral I've seen and is a series of chapels, galleries and towers all embellished with gloriously restored frescoes many of which date from the 16th Century. In modern surveyor-speak it is very cellular and



**St Basil's Cathedral: founded by Ivan the Terrible in 1552**

anything but open plan!

Occupying all the eastern side of Red Square is GUM which is a huge glitzy 19th century shopping mall with 3 arcades. It was once the largest shopping centre of its type in Europe and showcased Russia in the communist era. It remains the height of elegance with prices to match. It's worth a visit but don't buy anything there except the ice cream cornets or cups for which it is rightly famous.

Venturing away from Red Square and the Kremlin we travelled on the Moscow Metro which is worth a visit just for the amazing sculptures and artwork. River trips are also a 'must' and another way to view the centre of Moscow and beyond. Three attractions we visited are especially memorable:

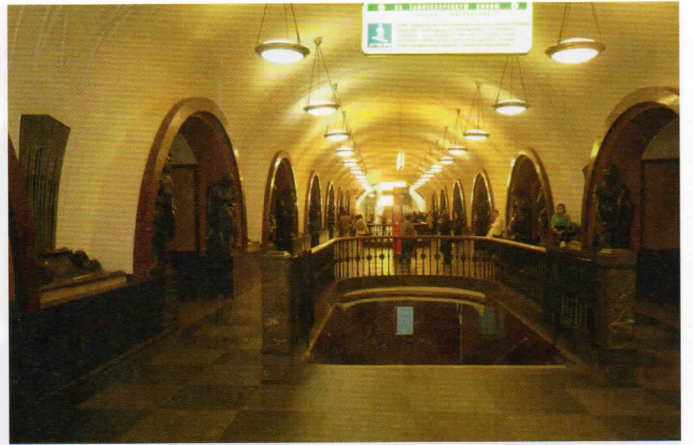
- Kolomenskoe in southern Moscow was the favourite summer residence of Ivan the Terrible - him again. It was also popular with Tsar Mikhail I (1596-1645) but it was Tsar Alexei (1629-76) who built his 'Country Kremlin' here. After Alexei's death the palace fell into disrepair and was demolished on the orders of Catherine the Great (1729-96) who preferred St Petersburg. Many historic buildings remain and the estate is a country park which is much enjoyed by Muscovites. Some of the features are ranked as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO.

- Gorky Park intrigues me as the main entrance is through huge monumental arches still adorned with symbols of communism. It is where - in thrillers - spies would meet.

Sitting down on one of the many benches seems very furtive. You feel guilty and look around for the KGB! When you realise they are not coming you appreciate a massive and beautiful park which was opened in 1928 and offers water, sporting and other facilities. These include a relatively new contemporary art gallery known as the 'Garage' - and the nearby restaurant is recommended!

- Visual art abounds in Moscow. The king of these is the Tretyakov Gallery which is just south of the British Embassy Residence and was founded in 1856. It boasts 62 rooms on 2 floors displaying a stunning range of pre-communist art. With 160,000 works it is the world's largest stock of Russian art. The cost of admission is modest but we spent hours admiring their collection - and should have allowed more time. Communist era art is displayed in the New Tretyakov Gallery near Gorky Park with a sculpture trail nearby. A nice attraction is a series of pavilions near the New Tretyakov where artists display their work; much is predictable but look closely and you can find some gems!

What was more than memorable was our visit to the Bolshoi Theatre on our final evening - last night - for the opera 'Simon Boccanegra' by Giuseppe Verdi. Everything about the Bolshoi is spectacular; it is elegance on a grand scale as befits the capital of one of the greatest nations in the world. An incredible experience!



**TOP LEFT: GUM - State Department Store - previously the showcase of Soviet Russia. TOP RIGHT: The Moscow Metro is famous for its elegance, sculptures and artwork. MIDDLE: The UNESCO-listed Church of the Ascension at Kolomenskoe was constructed to honour the birth of Ivan the Terrible in 1532. ABOVE: The main entrance to Gorky Park. Opened in 1928 it still has hammer & sickle emblems**



**TOP: The Bolshoi Theatre. 3 previous theatres were destroyed by fire. The current theatre dates from 1856 and is world-famous. LEFT: The Embassy room where Churchill stayed in 1944. He hosted Stalin in a dining room we used. RIGHT: The British Embassy VIP Guest Room 1. BELOW: Andrew Harris working on this letter.**

Before heading for Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport for our return flight to Manchester via Schiphol I must mention some of the history of this building - the British Embassy Residence. Upstairs - pictured - is the room where Churchill stayed. The main dining room was where Churchill hosted Stalin in 1944 after the Russian leader was more content about his allies as the landings in Normandy achieved the second front for which he had campaigned for so long. This building - our Embassy since 1929 - oozes history such as this.

I recommend a visit to Moscow for anyone interested in history or art. You can get by with only 6 words in an otherwise indecipherable language; da is yes; nyet is no; ok is

ok; spaseba is thank you; hi usually works and da svedanya is goodbye. I love this country and so might you.

Yours, as ever,

Andrew Harris

**Andrew Harris (mail@andreweharris.co.uk) and his wife Delia were in Moscow 7-14 September 2016. The views expressed are his alone and do not knowingly reflect the opinions of any other person.**

