

history meets mystery in Moscow

WRITER MICHAEL NASSAR

Sometimes intimidating, often exhilarating, Moscow is never, ever boring. A sprawling, capitalist cocktail of a city, it's a nexus of all the whirlwind glory and grit to be found in the new free-market, freedom-loving Russia where *roubles* rule and everything (and everyone) has its price.

Moscow is still the old city of Chekov and Tolstoy, however – of Stalin and Solzhenitsyn, too – seething with mystery, menace and a Byzantine maze of streets. Yet at the same time supermodels sashay their stilettoed heels across the cobblestones of Red Square to GUM, an astounding concentration of luxury goods and *haute couture* opposite the Kremlin.

While communist hardliners parade around the spectacular technicolor fantasy of St. Basil's Cathedral, Michelin-starred restaurants fill with robber-barons feasting like Tsars on the champagne wishes and caviar dreams of extravagantly suspicious wealth. Later in the evening, check your Kalashnikov at the door and you'll find everyone raving to cutting edge music in a rooftop lounge overlooking Lenin's Tomb – may he rest in peace.

Modern, chaotic, proud, secretive, romantic, Muscovites heave with an unrepentant life-force that is difficult to resist. Everything is possible, they seem to say. And Moscow, their New Jerusalem, where the contrasts are as *bolshoi* as the ballet, is all too happy to roll out the red carpet.





THE RITZ-CARLTON, MOSCOW

Amusingly, the place now occupied by Moscow's most talked about new luxury hotel The Ritz-Carlton, Moscow, where room rates begin at \$1,000 per night, was previously home to the notorious Hotel Intourist, since torn down. During the height of the cold war it was the only hotel in the city to accept Western guests and rumours abound about bugged rooms, secret cameras and KGB surveillance. What a difference a decade makes!

With Swarovski crystal lights illuminating the swimming pool, created from gold-flecked black glass to create an impression of endless depth, and steam rooms coated with mosaic crystals, the new spa by ESPA at The Ritz-Carlton, Moscow, is destined to become known as one of Europe's most glamorous spa facilities.

Fashioned in dark brown marble and highly polished woods, guests are lead through candle-lit corridors of natural stone into a spa of muted shades enhanced by glittering gold glass and shimmering crystals. The oval relaxation room, with its undulating gold leaf ceiling, is the perfect place to relax before being lead to one of the cocooning treatment rooms. After being transformed by one of the personalised ESPA treatments, such as a signature facial rich in green tea and spirulina or a synchronised four-handed massage that goes on for an astonishing two hours, wander back past a golden glass mosaic water wall to enjoy light healthy cuisine beside an open fire at the Spa Café.

www.ritzcarlton.com



THIS PAGE: The grand exterior of The Ritz-Carlton Moscow. OPPOSITE PAGE: Interior pool for year-round laps and a restaurant table with a view, both at the Anarat Park Hyatt Moscow; cosy candlelit bath at Le Meridien Moscow Country Club.

LE MERIDIEN MOSCOW COUNTRY CLUB

Situated in a romantic birch grove in the Krasnogorsky district just outside the city center, Le Méridien Moscow Country Club combines all the qualities of a world-class resort with the warmth and friendly service you'd anticipate in a Russian home.

Interiors are a tribute to the relaxed comfort and elegance of classical style. Airy, beautifully appointed rooms enjoy stunning views of nature's beauty in summer or the marvelous snow-covered forest in winter. (Families, too, will find heaven in the private Russian-style timber cottages, known as *dachas*.)

A state-of-the-art sports complex not only boasts all you need to immerse yourself in the great outdoors (tennis, horse riding, mini-football, cross-country skiing in winter, and the sole Robert Trent Jones 18-hole golf course in Russia) but also the soothing ambience of Beauty Studio Guerlain, where you can surrender yourself to a variety of treatments with the intriguing Biosel line.

Uniting the concepts of bioenergetics with the principles of homeopathic dermatology, Biosel activates the energy of five skin functions which are responsible for the wellbeing and beauty of the skin – particularly revitalising in conjunction with a Dead Sea Salt Scrub or a rich Seaweed Wrap.

www.lemeridien-mcc.ru



ARARAT PARK HYATT MOSCOW

Just steps away from the famous Bolshoi Theatre, the Park Hyatt Moscow blends contemporary and traditional styles in a historic building with striking neo-classical results. Passing through a large revolving door, the eyes are immediately drawn upward, past three Willy Wonka-style elevators, toward a network of glass and stainless steel panels that create a light, airy contemporary canopy – the Hyatt signature atrium, tempered with warm, local cherry wood. An equally eye-catching spectacle lies at the rear of the ground floor, where a glass footbridge rises over a river lined with golden mosaics that gently flows to its source beneath the elevators.

The Park Hyatt mixes old Russia and new, in contrast and counterpoint. Nowhere is that more evident than at the Quantum Club, which features the latest in computerised equipment alongside traditional Russian therapies. The Russian Bath Treatment combines a national obsession – the *banya*, or wet sauna – with the modern

art of spa. Begin in the sauna with a massage of branches – that's right, local birch branches, which smell fantastic and also stimulate the circulation – then plunge into the cold pool. Now do it all over again! The radical alternating of temperatures induces a relaxed euphoria that helps muscles eliminate built up waste and toxins while setting you up for a night of sleep you'd never dreamed possible. The Armenian-honey face mask and full body peeling that follow on a warm marble table are almost overkill, but who's complaining?

Other popular treatments include the indulgent four-hand Decléor massage and a Moroccan Hamam spa ritual which takes place in the Roman Bath: after steaming you're rubbed down with black eucalyptus soap and vanilla salts (which draws out excess water), then drenched in clay to mineralise and moisturise the skin.

www.moscow.park.hyatt.com

MOSCOW MARRIOTT ROYAL AURORA HOTEL

World-famous film and theater director Franco Zeffirelli wrote to the Marriott Royal Aurora Hotel's General Manager during one of his recent visits to Moscow: "Your hotel has become my home in Moscow! I can't imagine going anywhere else when I come to this wonderful city." You might feel the same way too when you realise the Aurora's fitness center and spa are open round the clock.

With subdued lightning, stained-glass windows reflecting on the smooth surface of the swimming pool, saunas, and Jacuzzi with water sparkling like pearls, there's a tranquil atmosphere of peace and comfort for when you need that extra bit of relaxation.

Located on historic Petrovka Street in the heart of downtown Moscow, the Aurora could be considered one of the pioneers, having opened in 1999. However, it is still one of the most exclusive properties in the capital, combining European elegance with Russian traditions. From the outside the hotel looks like a palace from a Russian fairytale; inside, butler service makes every guest's stay a unique experience.

www.marriott.com



SWISSÔTEL KRASNYE HOLMY MOSCOW

Thirty-four stories high, Swissôtel Krasnye Holmy Moscow is one of the tallest buildings in the city. Conveniently across the water from Red Square, this towering architectural landmark rises above the city in a dramatic display of modern geometry.

So it's no surprise to find its insides are equally up-to-the-minute: monumental crystal pendant lights welcome guests in the lobby; subtle, circular design motifs surprise and delight throughout the hotel; and then there's the glassed-walled rain shower and white tea infused amenities in every guestroom. It's obvious why this Swissôtel was named Best Hotel by Architectural Digest last year.

In the sleek Amrita Spa – a branch of the famous spa that began at Raffles – every therapist benefits from a full medical education as part of the Swiss commitment to wellness. Basically that means you practically have to be a doctor to perform a massage, which is a good thing as one of the specialties of the house is an intense Russian Massage that puts all others to shame. Deep and penetrating, you'll have to be scraped off the table. Less adventurous spa-goers can opt for authentic Thai Massage; the first – and still the best – in the city.

www.moscow.swissotel.com

THIS PAGE: Lounging under a skylight, at the Moscow Marriott Royal Aurora pool. OPPOSITE PAGE: the Swissôtel makes up part of the city's skyline.

emerging markets

For most Muscovites, in the grip of Communism a trip to the spa was long synonymous with a trip to the doctor. Massage, steam, sauna, stretching – these practices were about health maintenance. There was nothing indulgent or relaxing about getting a massage. And while in many ways, the *banya*, or Russian steam bath is still the most restorative (and social) of spa treatments, the country is learning very quickly that wellness as a concept is big business. Suddenly the terms anti-aging, balance and detox are on everybody's lips. And getting louder by the minute. It's only a matter of time before the big Russian bear is roaring.

high fashion in red square

With all the millionaires (and billionaires, natch) in Russia these days, it's no wonder that Russian Fashion Week struts its un-ironically glam catwalk in the shadow of Lenin's tomb. The week-long event is fast becoming Eastern Europe's most prestigious fashion event.

Attracting the international fashion jet-set, it's become a true fashion 'happening' with established designers such as Julien Macdonald, Jenny Packham, Zandra Rhodes and Spain's Armand Basi showing alongside some of Russia's best up and coming fashion talents.

A highlight of the autumn catwalk was France's fabulous Catherine Malandrino, showing *La Colombe*, a collection full of soft volume and curvy lines. American Nicky Hilton presented her high-end ready to wear collection, which debuted earlier in New York. World famous couturier Paco Rabanne was also on hand to launch a joint project with Ukrainian designer Veronika Jeanvie, presented in the historic Smirnoff House.

room at the inn

Moscow has the most expensive average hotel prices of any city, according to a new survey by the hotels.com website which found the Russian capital had the highest average prices, ahead of New York, Venice and London.

The city also tops the list of 4-star hotel prices at €322 (\$645) a night, followed by New York, Venice and Paris. (Surely the Ritz-Carlton's \$16,000 Presidential Suite with its own bullet proof dining room skews the numbers slightly?)

Putting it into perspective however, when it comes to hotels Russian tourists were also revealed to be the biggest spenders, too.