

A Handbook for the Frugal Tourist

By Karen Johnson

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Have you been to Prague recently? The town square looks like a Rainbow Child gathering — hundreds of foreign youths sit cross-legged on the cobblestones, braiding one another's hair, playing guitar, swapping tips on the cheapest eats.

Moscow has missed out on all that.

But to the probable horror of local tourist authorities — who have always liked their tourists rich and in huge, cost-effective groups — that may be changing.

The flagship is "Rick Steves' The Baltics & Russia Through the Back Door," a self-published 80-page booklet that tells you where to sleep in Moscow for \$5 a night and where you can enjoy a filling dinner for \$1.

Russia has begun its slow transition to backpacker's land.

Until now the only alternative for the poorly-heeled tourist was "The Lonely Planet Guide to the U.S.S.R.," which for most budget travelers is the bible to exotic destinations. But the latest edition was published in 1991, back in the days when Intourist still had a chokehold on accommodations and tickets.

The intervening two years have brought a lot of changes. Quick-thinking Russians are setting up alternatives for travelers who aren't rolling in money. "Through the Back Door" has gathered up all the information into one tidy, usable bundle.

Written primarily by Ian Watson, a former editor of the "Let's Go" series, the book tells you how to get here, what to do when you are here, and how to leave. It has everything from a history timeline to annual temperature charts to tips on stomach medicine (Flagyl, for example, is the drug of choice for St. Petersburg's giardia).

The book promotes gritty experiences — not glamour — urging you to smell the rancid meat and molding vegetables of the tawdrier state stores. It does not sidestep the unpleasant realities of drunken street brawls or the frustration of being jostled in the street by brusque Muscovites.

"Through the Back Door" also takes you step by step through the various arcane methods of securing a visa and supplies valuable information



on how and where to enter the former Soviet Union. It deciphers all those little numbers and letters on your train ticket, and coaches you on negotiating with the ticket mafia. It also wisely advises you how to wedge the door of your sleeping compartment shut so you won't be cleaned out in the middle of the night. In sum, it has the most relevant, up-to-date facts for the independent budget traveler.

But the subtitle — "Moscow, St. Petersburg, Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius" — tells the tale. Except for a few suggested day trips, the booklet only deals with these major cities. Once off the beaten track the budget traveler is in uncharted — and generally expensive — territory.

The only real flaw lies not so much with the guide as with the realities of budget travel. In St. Petersburg, for example, there is only one place to stay. And in Moscow, trying to stick to the aim of "satisfying food for \$1 to \$5" is a toughie. Anyone who believes that the way to the heart of a country is through its cuisine will be disappointed to find only five eating spots listed for Moscow, one of which was McDonald's.

But "Through the Back Door" gets the overall

picture right. And the tell-tale details that reveal the author's understanding of the situation are there — the booklet points out that despite the gloom-mongering of the Western media, it is a myth that all Russians are starving; the truth is that the poor diet actually makes many people overweight, which ironically has even prompted the appearance of Ultra Slim-Fast on the local market.

It is still too early to expect an inundation of backpackers to Moscow, but this invaluable booklet points the way for the first hardy few. If Russia is to join the rest of the world, it is only a matter of time before it becomes a regular stop on the summer itineraries of free-wheeling college students — and Lubyanka Square will be overrun with unwashed guitar-strumming hordes.

To order the book in Europe, send Visa or Mastercard information to Communicate with the Baltics, Akadeemia tee 21-G, EE-0026 Tallinn. Tel. 372-5-247-832, fax 372-2-527-555. The cost is \$5 postpaid. In the United States, send a \$3 check to Europe Through the Back Door, Box 2009 Edmonds, WA 98020 USA. Tel. 206-771-8303.

What's TO BE DONE!

To Putt or Not to Putt

Golf enthusiasts pining to sink a putt need yearn no longer. The Tumba Golf Club's nine-hole course, conveniently located between the Swedish and German embassies, is open weekdays and can be yours for the afternoon for a mere \$18 per nine holes. Payment is by credit card only. The clubhouse is located at 1 Ulitsa Dovzhenka. Tel. 147-6025. Nearest metros: Universitet and then bus 67 to Ulitsa Mosfilmovskaya or from Kievskaya metro bus 505.

Classic Novel on Stage

One of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's characters springs to life this Wednesday at 7 P.M. at the Central Army Theater, where his novel "The Idiot" has been adapted for the stage. The play recounts the tragic destiny of an innocent person living in a world of destructive passions. The theater is located at 2 Suvorovskaya Ploshchad. Tel. 281-5120. Nearest metro: Novoslobodskaya.

Lair of the Boyars

Find all the trappings of 17th-century Russian aristocrats at the Boyars Romanov House museum. On the second floor one can view the dresses, books, mirrors and other accoutrements of the country's first tsar. The museum, located at 10 Ulitsa Varvarka, is open from 11 A.M. to 7 P.M. Wednesdays and from 10 A.M. to 6 P.M. the rest of the week. Closed Tuesday. Tel. 298-3706 or 298-3235. Nearest metro: Kitai-Gorod.