

If you've been following the progress of the G-8 Summit held in St. Petersburg this year, you know that Russia is in a state of flux, and it was exciting to be there at such a transitional time, studying Russian history, politics, economics, education, business, and arts with a group of 15 college instructors from different disciplines.

In this first component of a Fulbright project sponsored by the Midwest Institute, which will culminate in a conference next April, I learned more than I could have hoped to and also realized how much more I have to learn, particularly about Russian people. An American student we met there compared them to walnuts, with a hard exterior and soft interior (once you get to know them), as opposed to Americans who, he said, are more like apricots, soft on the outside with a hard core. I can see why Russians are "a hard nut to crack." They have had to be tough to survive the oppression, deprivation, and upheaval they have experienced, and they are surprisingly warm and open after all of that.

Our first stop, Perm, an industrial city with a population of about one million, included a meeting with the mayor and visits to the Palace of Youth Creativity, Perm Ballet School, and the Art Studio of the Tarasovs. We also visited Perm State Pedagogical University, an orphanage, Perm State Art Gallery, the Municipal School of Economics, Kungur Ice Cave, Belgorod Monastery, and Perm-36, a Gulag prison camp.

Next, we traveled on an overnight train to Nizhny Novgorod, billed as "one of the most beautiful and ancient Russian towns." It is situated at the confluence of the Volga and Oka rivers, and it was founded in 1221. It is now the third most populated city in Russia but seems smaller because of its walkability. Our visits here included the Kremlin (the term used for any place in Russia where you'll find military monuments) and museums devoted to the writer Maxim Gorky's childhood as well as his home where he wrote some of his most famous works. We also visited a museum devoted to Andrei Sakharov and the Gorky automotive museum.

Moscow was next on the itinerary, with visits to the world-reknowned Tretyakov Gallery of Russian art and the Sergiev Posad monastery, as well as the Kremlin and Red Square. We met the editor of several business publications and Vladimir Pozner. Other items on our itinerary included the Anton Chekhov museum and Novodevichy Cemetery, where many famous Russians, including Nikita Khrushchev and Nadezhda Alliluyeva-Stalin (Joseph Stalin's wife), are buried. The subway stations in Moscow are so beautiful that they are worth a tour in themselves. With a population of about ten million and many modern buildings, as well as big business, the city looks and feels a little like Chicago or New York, but the way people actually live is in sharp contrast to the opulent architecture. How the average Moscow resident can afford to live in one of the most expensive cities in the world, with a salary of \$375 a month, is still a mystery to me.

After a brief stop in Novgorod Veliky, where we visited a cattle farm, an elementary school, and an open-air architectural museum, as well as being entertained by students who performed an "American Idol"-style talent show, our final destination was St. Petersburg, considered the most European city in Russia and one of the most beautiful in the world. Our six-day stay there included visits to the Hermitage, the palaces of Peter the Great, the Church of the Spilled Blood, and the Siege of Leningrad Museum. I also had the opportunity to meet Alina Melentieva, one of the Russian women writers I'm studying for the focus of my project, and attended a folklore conference, where I presented a paper on the ways in which a culture's fairy tales reflect its values, attitudes, and beliefs. We were even given a tour of Fyodor Dostoevsky's home by none other than his great-grandson.

There is so much to talk about, including the language, food, and restroom facilities of Russia, that there is not enough space here. I hope to incorporate everything I learned into the course materials, papers, and presentations I will develop for this project as well as continue my study of this fascinating country. The fullness and diversity of our itinerary made it an excellent introduction, but I still feel like I've only scratched the surface. In my study of Russian women and their literature, I hope to gain greater insight into the people, events, and traditions that have created such a complex culture.