

By Pam Mandich

I am writing this from my hotel room in Moscow where we are taking a family vacation, since my daughter has a week off from school to mark Eid ul Fitr, the three day celebration at the end of Ramadan.

While Canadians tend to vacation in sunny and warm places, in the United Arab Emirates we choose places to escape the heat. And although things cool down in September - it was only 39 degrees when we left - we wanted to go somewhere where fall coats and hats are required.

Moscow is a direct flight from our home and the daytime temperature is around 14 degrees, so it fit the bill perfectly. Since we arrived, I have been trying to come up with one word to sum up this city's ambience. At first, 'grim' came to mind, but that implies sadness and a certain aloofness, and I do not think that is quite true of Moscow.

We have met some truly kind people here. As we left a ballet performance at the Bolshoi, a lovely older couple practically walked us back to our hotel when we asked for directions. Like most people here they didn't speak English, and since they were uncertain we understood their gesturing, they wanted to make sure we got back to our room. Another young man approached us to give us directions after seeing us get nowhere with others we had approached.

The word I would use to describe this place is serious. It is a place with very little smiling, with the vast majority of people dressed in dark and sombre colours, a place that seems to be trying to catch up with the world after starting the race a little bit late. It is also a place still governed by rules and bureaucracy.

We have been actually yelled at by various bureaucratic types - once because we chose to walk down a subway escalator that wasn't moving, and once at a hockey game when my husband went for snacks and left our row by the closest exit, which happened to empty into the seat section reserved for the opposing team.

Even at night, when the parks fill with young people hanging out and drinking their beer (you can drink beer anywhere here - on the street, in the subway), there seems to be very little laughter or spirit of fun. Mostly what you hear appear to be serious discussions or intense arguments.

I am not sure why this is - maybe because it is a globalized world now and in a rush to catch up, the Russians are very focused on the race.



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