

The Moskva River is flanked by the Kremlin with its golden domes. In the mid-distance are the towers of the expanding financial district

Red Square revisited

Nearly 30 years after his first visit, **Barry Stewart** finds Moscow dramatically changed – and asks whether it's been wholly for the better

PHOTOGRAPHY: BARRY STEWART

THE LAST time I visited Moscow, it was in the middle of a bitter winter nearly 30 years ago, as the first stirrings of Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika and glasnost presaged the looming collapse of the Soviet system.

This time it was at the height of summer, with temperatures around 30°C – and the Russian capital's Western-style shopping streets could have been in Manchester or Minneapolis, apart from the Cyrillic store signs.

The contrast between the late Eighties and the second decade of the 21st century couldn't have been more marked. Unlike the grey, austere city of the Soviet era, Moscow is now a glitzy European capital, with designer shops in neon-lit malls, fast-food restaurants and the conspicuous consumption of the West.

However, scratch beneath the surface and you'll find the similarities are often superficial. Under the not-so-benign eye of President Vladimir Putin, modern Russia to some extent experiences the worst of

both worlds: combining the authoritarianism of the Soviet years with the excesses of Eighties-style rampant Western capitalism.

Parts of Moscow are simply exquisite. Red Square epitomises the mystique of the city's long and turbulent history. The Kremlin's cathedrals, onion-domed St Basil's and the astonishingly ornate

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Metro system make up some of the finest architecture in the world. Even the 'Stalin Gothic' skyscrapers of the Soviet era have a certain grandiose charm.

Yet in this city of more than 12 million people post-Communist plutocrats and bribable local officials live the high life while bleak housing estates of tower blocks stretch almost as far as the main

airport, nearly 25 miles away. Limousines ferry the great and good to hedonist hotspots while head-covered babushkas seek spiritual solace in the awe-inspiring Orthodox churches.

During our visit, more than 50 city centre streets were being torn up in the massive 'My Streets' pavement-widening project, the biggest road reconstruction

work in Moscow's history. It's a laudable aim but has led to footpaths being replaced by a labyrinth of temporary wooden walkways that wouldn't survive a health and safety inspection over here.

It's worsened the city's already notorious traffic jams and, according to some reports, seen treasured archaeological features summarily bulldozed. Articles like

this usually go on to say that the spirit of the local people triumphs over such adversity, and so it does... up to a point.

While many Muscovites we met were friendly and welcoming, particularly the younger ones in hotels and restaurants, more influenced by the West, many others were surly to the point of rudeness. Ironically, those in the public services were often the worst.

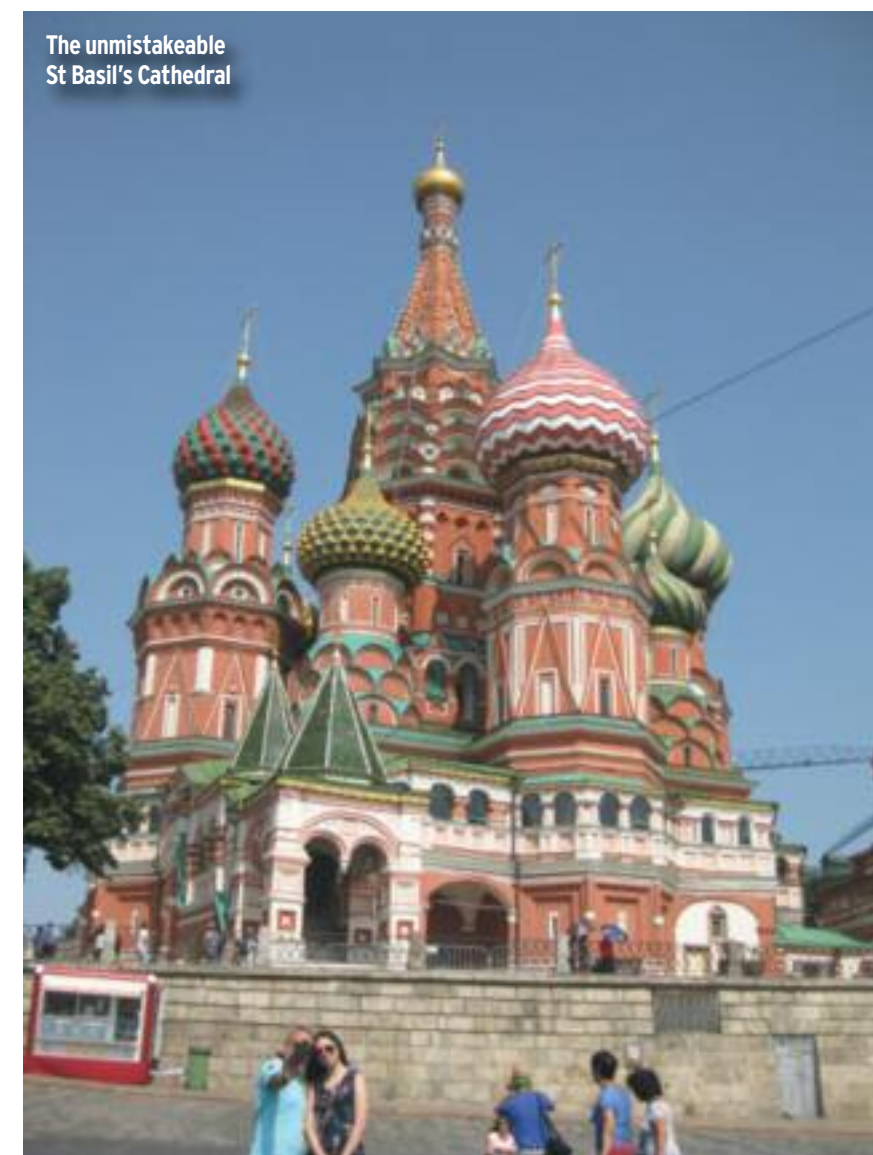
My, admittedly limited, attempts to speak their difficult language were often rebuffed, which I'm sure wasn't wholly down to my appalling accent.

It's hard to blame them: Russia's traditional fear of the foreigner has been stoked by President Putin in an attempt to create an 'us against the world' siege mentality, which has made him



Soldiers guard the Eternal Flame at the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior

The unmistakable St Basil's Cathedral



Each of the domed towers in St Basil's Cathedral forms the roof of a smaller church

remarkably – though not universally – popular in the world's largest nation.

The coolness of some Muscovites towards foreigners was apparent from day one. It was at the height of the Russian Olympic doping scandal, and massive queues built up at passport control where stony-faced customs officers kept visitors waiting nearly two hours as they endlessly pored over the blank pages of our passports.

Russian may now have fully embraced capitalism, but many Muscovites certainly haven't been to the 'have a nice day' school of customer care.

In fact, one of the broadest smiles we received was from a young woman carrying



One of the gates to the Kremlin



The Kremlin contains a concentration of golden-domed cathedrals

◀ a red banner in a rather forlorn little parade through Revolution Square by what is left of the Communist Party. And on a stall selling Leninist and Stalinist literature, an elderly comrade was happy to tell me about his exploits with the Soviet navy in the cold northern seas.

Moscow discovered

Having got all that off my chest, let's try to accentuate the positive.

As I've said, Moscow at its best is unbeatable. For a ridiculously small entrance fee, we were able to stroll around the public parts of the Kremlin for as long as we liked (and, to his credit, Putin is planning to open even more of the fortress to visitors – though he's had a presidential helipad built there, too). There's an additional charge to visit the Tsarist treasures in the Armoury.

The clutch of cathedrals standing cheek by jowl in one small part of the Kremlin must form the biggest single concentration of ecclesiastical art and architecture in the world. From floor to ceiling, every inch of the walls is covered with frescoes, mosaics, murals and icon-adorned altar screens.

In the Cathedral of the Archangel, built in the early 1500s, lie the tombs of generations of Russian rulers.

Outside, Red Square stands solid and unchanging, thronged by selfie-snatching tourists, and V I Lenin still lies embalmed in his mausoleum. For a few hundred

roubles you can have your picture taken with two Stalin and Lenin lookalikes, although the fact they were later spotted chatting amiably to the 'Tsar' cast some doubt on their ideological soundness...

Opposite is the GUM (pronounced 'Goom') store, infamous in Communist days for its shortages and queues, now a Harrods-style palace to consumerism, with its designer stores and X-ray security entrances. Also nearby is the State Historical Museum, established by Alexander III in 1894 and containing everything from mammoth tusks to a 5000-year-old longboat.

Perhaps the biggest surprise was St Basil's, with its famous collection of colourfully patterned, onion-shaped domed towers.

Being accustomed to the Western church tradition, we had expected it to contain a vast nave, but in fact beneath each dome is a small church or chapel,



The moving monument to the victims of totalitarianism



Muscovites rub the leg of this statue of motherhood on the Metro to foster fertility

decorated with sumptuous richness. Almost rivalling the architectural and artistic splendour of the cathedrals, the Moscow Metro is also a riot of marble, mosaics and murals. It was built largely under Stalin to show that nothing was too good for the working class, and its hundreds of statues are of ordinary Russian workers and farmers rather than monarchs and military leaders.

The Metro is also very cheap and efficient. We booked on a tour of some of the main stations, and our young guide was funny, friendly and highly informative.

According to one, possibly apocryphal,

story, the Circle Line around the centre of the city was added after Stalin left a circular stain when he put his teacup down on the designers' map. This dark sense of humour is one of the Muscovites' more endearing features.

Today, though, images of Stalin have been removed from the Metro, and the rest of the city, and we had to go to a sculpture park south of the river to find one. Across the road from Gorky Park, it features a host of 'retired' statues of Communist luminaries like Lenin and Karl Marx, along with some more modern works.

Nearby is a huge, and over-the-top, statue commemorating Peter the Great, standing on the prow of a massive sailing ship. The 300ft-tall monument is so colossal that it has to have an aircraft warning light on top. Moscow's souvenir



Soviet memorabilia is still popular

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shops are good value, their shelves stacked with the inevitable Russian dolls and icons, along with a certain amount of Soviet cap badges and militaria. There are also rows of T-shirts portraying Putin as a bear-wrestling, 007-type character, which although light-hearted make you think that the former KGB man would be secretly flattered.

Our excellent hotel, the Mercure Arbat, was at the gateway to the Arbat area, formerly the haunt of Moscow's artists and intelligentsia, now a Carnaby Street-style thoroughfare complete with a Dunkin'

Donuts and, improbably, an Alice in Wonderland attraction.

It's great for people-watching, as impossibly attractive and well-dressed couples parade up and down as if on a catwalk, past the rather more bohemian buskers and painters. The reception, restaurant and housekeeping staff at the Mercure Arbat were all superb, as were the facilities, at a very reasonable price.

The receptionists were particularly helpful in chasing up our lost luggage (the fault of the airline, not the Muscovites!). Alexandra Dakhno, the front office manager, even took



A handful of Communists keep the Soviet flag flying in Revolution Square

time to reply to my positive review on the inevitable feedback form.

Literary Moscow is another eye-opener. Russians are said to revere their novelists and poets, yet the writers' museums we visited very low-key in comparison with the UK's literary shrines. Maxim Gorky's breathtaking 'Style Moderne' house, for example, with its sinuous limestone



The Moscow Metro system is famously ornate





Many Soviet-era monuments have been dispersed to the sculpture park across the river



The final triumph of western capitalism in this glitzy shopping mall

staircase, was advertised outside by a sheet of plastic-covered typed A4 paper. Upstairs, reached by a separate entrance, is a beautiful 'Old Believers' chapel, where you have to wear overshoes to avoid damaging the floor.

Likewise, we had great difficulty finding the museum commemorating the 20th century author Mikhail Bulgakov, tucked away on the misnamed 'Garden Ring' road. Once inside, though, it was worth it.

Bulgakov's surreal, satirical classic, *The Master and Margarita*, was banned by Stalin but now has a global cult following. It was fascinating to visit the small flat where he wrote his masterpiece while neighbours argued and fellow writers and artists dropped in for a chat.

The walls of the staircase leading to Bulgakov's fifth-floor apartment are covered with graffiti from fans depicting scenes and quotes from the novel, which features a giant talking, long-haired, pipe-smoking black cat called Behemoth.

Confusingly, there appeared to be two

Climate...

Friends and family whom we told about the Russian trip beforehand were surprised that the August temperatures would be so high. Although it's on a similar line of latitude to Edinburgh, Moscow's climate is more akin to that of parts of Canada, with freezing winters and broiling summers.

... and cash

The Russian currency is, of course, the ruble, and despite the post-Brexit fall in the value of the pound, the exchange rate is such that you end up carrying tens of thousands around with you, so be careful. The coinage seemed virtually worthless.

Changing times... Starbucks, Dunkin' Donuts and McDonald's

separate Bulgakov museums next door to each other with no apparent connection. In the second, remarkably, a real-life, large long-haired black cat lay serenely on the carpet, being much photographed, though apparently without the power of speech.

Meanwhile, the two younger members of our family visited the Cosmonautics Museum with its dramatic, soaring 300ft-tall Space Obelisk, and also scaled the 1770ft TV Tower after enduring interminable security checks.

These two landmarks form part of the All-Russia Exhibition Centre – VVTs in Russian – a sprawling 'Stalinist theme park' in the northern suburbs that was designed to extol the USSR's economic achievements. They also journeyed back to the Eighties to sample the lower-tech delights of the Soviet Video Games Museum.

Moscow's art galleries are among the finest in the world, including the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts and the Tetryakov Gallery, with its 100,000 pieces of Russian art.

Music and dance are also staples of the



Russian scene. We marvelled at the legendary Bolshoi Theatre but sadly time was too limited to take in a ballet.

Predictably, as a former socialist capital, Moscow has an excellent public transport system: as well as the Metro there are buses, trams, cheap taxis and even trolleybuses.

The Metro claims to be bigger than the London Underground and is just as complex. However, one of the friendliest encounters during our stay came when, as we were clearly lost at Kiyevskaya Station, a kindly Russian woman escorted us several hundred yards out of her way to the right platform. Despite this, it is not pedestrian-friendly outside the central areas and cycling is looked upon as an eccentricity. We wanted to take a stroll along the banks of the Moskva River but couldn't get across the six-lane highway along the embankment.

Some of the pedestrianised areas are delightful, however. We were there during the annual Jam Festival (the Russians are big fans of the conserve: they even have it



A gardener has used a bust of Lenin as a temporary coat-hanger at the Sculpture Park while, across the path, is his inspiration, Karl Marx



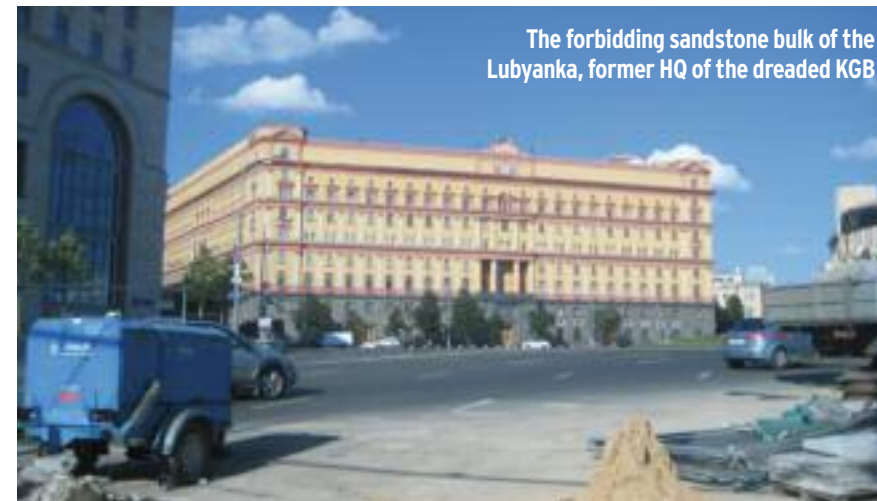
Karl Marx still looks out across Revolution Square, urging the world's workers to unite

in their tea), and the streets were bedecked with colourful kiosks and floral arches.

Another excellent way of getting round the city is on one of the open-top bus tours, which allow you to see some of the sights further out of the centre, such as the 1980 Olympic stadium and the dachas where the Soviet nomenklatura used to live. The two-hour tour is hop on, hop off, and this can be useful when the bus is gridlocked in city-centre traffic.

We were only in Moscow for five days and didn't have time to explore this sprawling city beyond its central area, but I think we got a taste of the contradictory characteristics of the cosmopolitan capital of Mother Russia.

Moscow is a microcosm of all that is good and beautiful, and bad and ugly, in post-Soviet Russia. Its modern, secular,



The forbidding sandstone bulk of the Lubyanka, former HQ of the dreaded KGB

sometimes violent vitality contrasts starkly with the spiritual tranquillity of its ancient places of worship and galleries.

As Winston Churchill famously said: "Russia is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma."

Passport to Moscow

Getting there

■ UK visitors to Moscow need a visa, which involves stringent security checks, including fingerprinting. We flew by Brussels Airlines from Manchester via Brussels to Moscow's Domodedovo Airport, website: (www.brusselsairlines.com). The airport is a long way from the city centre but is easily accessible by train. However, we splashed out and booked an air-conditioned large taxi, which was well worth it between four of us.

Getting around

■ Travel by Metro, tram, bus and trolleybus is easy and cheap - but don't attempt to drive.

Where to stay

■ We stayed at the extremely comfortable, admirably air-conditioned Mercure Arbat, a new 109-bedroom boutique-style hotel near Smolenskaya Square, part of a French-owned group, website: (www.mercure.com).

Where to eat

■ Since the fall of Communism, a lively food scene has emerged in Moscow, with everything from Western chains like McDonald's to restaurants reflecting Russian's many culinary traditions, of which the Georgian is perhaps the tastiest - and healthiest. As a treat, we dined one night at the five-star Café Pushkin, one of the city's plush restaurants, a re-creation of an aristocratic eating-house where the waiters are dressed like characters from a Tolstoy novel and we were serenaded by a string quartet. The dumplings were a delight, website: (<http://cafe-pushkin.ru/en/>).

Find out more

■ For further information, log on to: (www.moscow.info).