

# SHORT STORIES

## Only in Russia: The Russian people

Foreigners and Russians alike often ask me why I have been living in Russia for such a long time. 'Is it the money or the adventure that keeps you here? If not, then it must be the enchanting Russian ladies'.

All valid reasons for staying here of course, but the actual answer is different.

In 1993, in a train in Switzerland, I met a Russian family from Irkutsk – Yuriy, a Russian scientist, his wife Galya and their two young sons Mitya and Lonya. As I was a mere law student from Holland, meeting Russians rather impressed me and we struck up a conversation. Before I got off the train, we exchanged telephone numbers and that was the end of it. I had forgotten all about them until one year later; in the summer of 1994, early in the morning, I arrived by train to the city of Irkutsk in order to visit the Lake Baikal. Hesitantly, I called the telephone number I had been given one year ago and when I heard the 'allo-a' on the other side of the line I said: 'Yuriy, this is Jeroen. Do you still rememb....'. Before I could finish my sentence I heard a mighty roar from the other side of the line: 'JEROEN, it is you! We have been waiting for you the entire year!'. Before I knew it, I found myself sitting in their apartment, with their entire family around the kitchen table loaded with food and drinks. It was unthinkable that I would stay in a hotel, so a place was found for me in their two room apartment. I stayed for a week. Yuriy took some days off from work and showed me all around Irkutsk and Lake Baikal. He and his family have been great friends ever since.



Celebration of Shrovetide (Maslenitsa) in Russia



Matreshka

It is now 16 years later and I have been fortunate to befriend many more extraordinary Russians. Only after making Russian friends did I understand that the grumpy, cold and harsh impression Russians often give in public, is more than offset by the warmth and emotion they display in their private lives. My Russian friends have taught me what it really means to be human, to be sincere and generous. Unconditional friendship is something I first encountered in Russia. In Europe, agendas, expectations and conditions dominate friendships. In Russia, there are no bounds to the depth or width of friendship. More often than not, when you make a

friend, you practically become a member of the entire family of that friend. During my 16 years in Russia, by making a couple of friends, I have acquired a great number of mothers, cousins, uncles, aunts and grandparents! You happen to turn up while your friend happens to have a dinner party? No problem; an extra chair, plate and glass are easily provided and food is loaded on to your plate from the plates of the other guests. You just want to have some company after a hard day's work? No problem; you can always crash on your friends couch without saying a word.

It took me a long time to understand that there is a very specific Russian expression for the feeling that has kept me bound to Russia for all this time. It is the word 'radnoy'. Literally, it means something like 'a relative' or 'native', but the exact Russian meaning of the word cannot be translated into one specific English word. In a wider sense, it means feeling at home with a person or with a country. A 'radnoy' person is like 'one of our own'.

When you get to know Russian people, you will unavoidably come to understand what I am talking about. And when you do, you will blink an eye, and realise that you have been here much longer than you ever imagined or planned to stay, and that Russia has become a part of you.

**The short stories were sent in by Jeroen Ketting, Lighthouse.**



**Samovar used traditionally to drink tea**



**The Holiday of St. Cyril and Methodius, the creators of Cyrillic alphabet, May 24, 2010 in Moscow, Russia**



**Jeroen Ketting**

Jeroen is Founder and Managing Director of Lighthouse. He has been living in Russia for over 15 years giving him fluency in the Russian language and

a thorough understanding of the Russian business culture. Jeroen has founded and operated numerous businesses in Russia and has assisted in the establishment of more than 20 Western-Russian business ventures. Jeroen's extensive experience in the Russian market is backed by a strong track record in strategic business advisory. He is an expert negotiator and mediator in the Russian-Western context and is a regular speaker at international events and seminars related to Russia. He frequently contributes to Russia related international publications.

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## **Only in Russia: “Have a drink in the morning and you are free for the rest of the day” (s utra wiypil, ves den svoboden)**

This Russian saying used to apply to the daily business practice of foreigners doing business in Russia in the nineties. A regular business meeting at around eleven in the morning could take an unexpected turn when your host would close the door behind you after you entered the room. With the door closed something else would surely be opened, and that would be the drawer of your host's desk, out of which, a bottle of Vodka, and if you were lucky, some dark bread would be produced. Two hours later, at around lunchtime, you would be trying to find your way back to the office dressed in a smart suit and tie, but hardly being able to put two straight steps in front of each other. Now, in the twenty first century, the risk of running into a bottle of Vodka during a time of the day when your mind can only say “Cappuccino” is not so big anymore. Luckily, Russia's drinking culture has evolved in the last 20 years. Where in the nineties the saying “Have a drink in the morning and you are free for the rest of the day” (s utra wiypil, ves den svoboden) applied, nowadays, it is “sdelal delo, gulyay smelo” (having done your business, you are free to party). Still, Vodka is an important part of the Russian culture, and therefore, of Russian business culture. The farther you are from Moscow, the sooner this will become clear to you. Drinking Vodka is unavoidable in Russia and the best policy is: “if you can't beat them, join them”. And join them you will, sooner or later because saying no to a Russian who offers you a drink is like trying to avoid death or taxes. You may delay it a little, but in the end, it will catch up with you. And if you drink, it is important to understand that it is not only what you drink that is important, but also how you drink. Shots of Vodka are not drunk by little sips. They go down the hatch in one go. You are allowed though, to loudly express any kind of emotion after you have downed a shot of Vodka. Delight or suffering may be expressed by groans, gurgles and other noises, just as long as you do it with conviction. You may eat a pickled cucumber to soften the feeling of a vodka-burned throat; alternatively, if you want to show your worth, you simply deeply sniff a crust of brown bread. This may seem tough in the beginning, but you will notice that after three shots of Vodka it is actually not that bad. The first shot is just as tough for the Russian as it is for you, but the difference is that the Russian's genetic memory harbours the knowledge that it gets better after two or three shots. Contrary to popular belief, it is not necessary to drink bottle after bottle. Everything from five shots (or 250 grams) and more will do the trick. If after five shots you stop drinking, that will be respected. But you are free to continue of course. The Vodka drinking is nothing less than a ceremony, with its own specific etiquette. Every glass you drink will be preceded by a toast and you will be expected to say a few of them. A good toast is highly appreciated and the third toast (standing up) is always proposed to the ladies present. A glass can only be poured when the glass is standing on the table (as opposed to holding it up in the air); an opened Vodka bottle is not closed again and empty bottles are taken off the table. One rather dangerous moment is when your Russian host starts drinking ‘na pososhok’ (one for the road). Although you might think that he is delicately trying to get rid of you, the ‘pososhok’ is actually more often than not, the start of a long line of drinks for the road. But these are just few of the customs that rule the drinking table. Drinking Vodka is an important part of doing business, although, no business is usually done during the drinking. Something much more important takes place while you progress from one glass to the other. A personal relationship and trust are being established; two crucial ingredients for successful business in Russia.

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## Only in Russia: Love and hate

There are two kinds of people in the world: those who love Russia and those who hate it. The first group is motivated by the adventure, authenticity, warmth and generosity of the Russian people, and, not to forget, by the enormous market potential. The second group sees a dangerous, dirty, corrupt, inefficient and unorganised country, with grim and rude people. Depending on how you look at it, there is some truth to both views on Russia. And it is a fact that most foreigners, and even many Russians, oscillate between love and hate for Russia several times per day. But there is one truth that is undeniable, which is, if you do not enjoy and love the country most of the time, you will have no chance of success in Russia. I often see them sitting next to me in the airplane before landing in Moscow: The western businesspeople, wiping their moist palms on their trousers, for fear of what lies in store once they put their feet on Russian soil. These fearful visitors run the risk of encountering one problem after the other. There is a 50 meter long queue at passport control and the window closes just when you are next in line; when it is finally your turn, you almost get arrested because your friendly effort to say 'zdrastvuitje' (hello) in Russian is misinterpreted by the grim officer in front of you. Subsequently, while waiting for your luggage at the luggage belt with the sign 'Berlin', as that is where you came from, it arrives at the belt with the sign 'Paris'. This, of course, you find out only after you have already spent an hour trying to declare your luggage as 'lost'. The taxi driver rips you off and at your hotel, they cannot find your reservation and do not accept your credit card. Business has not even started yet, but your trip is already ruined and there is little chance that your luck will change for the better. On the other hand, those business people who focus on the positive side of things and welcome

the chance to experience something out of the ordinary, and who can appreciate the unorganised adventure that doing business in Russia is, usually succeed. They learn a little Russian, wink at the mustachioed lady at passport control and are not surprised to find their luggage at the wrong luggage belt. These are the people who get satisfaction from solving Russia's daily riddles. These are also the people that have a genuine interest in their Russian business partners, and eventually end up making friends with them. Often, people ask me what the main secret of success in doing business in Russia is. The answer, without a doubt, is – 'a good sense of humor'.



Fountain in Manezh square – Moscow



Statue: The old fisherman and the fish (a Russian fairy tale) – Moscow

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## Only in Russia: Russians and rules

Russians have an interesting interpretation of rules. See a 'no swimming' sign and you can be sure that there will be people swimming. See an emergency exit and you can be sure that the exit is either used as a regular exit or it is closed with a lock rendering it useless in the event of an emergency. See a garbage container, and usually, you will find the trash next to the container. See a 'no smoking' sign in airports and public buildings and you will see that the largest congregations of smokers assemble within a 2 meter radius of this 'no smoking sign'. Moreover, on closer inspection, you will notice that close to the 'no smoking signs' you can actually, in most cases, find ashtrays placed there by the facility managers. The Russian needs his freedom and when the foreigner gets used to this way of life, he or she usually starts to appreciate certain aspects of the Russian's particular relationship with rules. While standing in a long line at passport control at the airport, the Russianised foreigner will try the empty line for diplomats and will be gladly surprised that nobody says a word. Next time, he will try the shorter line for Russian citizens and also understand that this is no problem whatsoever. He will be happy to understand that you can park your car almost everywhere and that speed limits only apply there, where the police controls them. The thing in Russia is to understand that most Russians are practical instead of formalistic about rules. Very often, the short term objective takes precedence over the long term rationale of a rule. This can be exasperating to foreigners once in a while, but once you get used to it, you will sometimes see the benefits of a liberal and practical interpretation of rules.



Monument to Emperor Alexander II, the Liberator  
Tsar - Moscow



Manezh square - Moscow

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## Only in Russia: Better to have 100 friends than 100 rubles

'It's better to have 100 friends than 100 rubles' is a saying that every Russian will consent to. Dealing with the daily reality in Russia can be a daunting task. Many domestic matters, daily chores or banal issues at work that can be dealt with in the blink of an eye in many countries, often manifest themselves as major obstacles in Russia. The service sector is still underdeveloped

in Russia and official institutions and organisations are still lacking. For the most mundane tasks that elsewhere, you can solve in minutes by opening the yellow pages or browsing the internet, in Russia, you will need to rely on the people who you know. This network of people that are close to you and that you can rely on, is something I call the Micro Cosmos. You will see that every Russian has this Micro Cosmos around him or herself. After 16 years of living in Russia, I also came to realise that I created this Micro Cosmos that helps me to deal with most problems in one or two phone calls. Via friends and friends of friends you can get just about everything done. Your work permit, the right apartment, your car registration, without the need to stand for hours in a queue, the best doctor in town or the right business partner. All of this can be easily arranged through your Micro Cosmos, whereas, the official channels mostly come up blank when you need a solution. The Micro Cosmos does not only exist on the level of individual people; the government and big Russian companies function according to this principle. Business and political leaders always



Iverskaya chapel, Red square - Moscow



Petershof - Russia

bring their close group of trusted people whenever they occupy a new post. Even corporate and national political policy often stems from the idea of this Micro Cosmos. Russian businesses prefer to do everything in-house, whereas, their Western equivalents would outsource many tasks. Also, the Russian national policy is focused at establishing independence from the outside world. Russian political leaders would deep down prefer to deal with other countries from the position of autarkic independency. These Micro Cosmuses are the building blocks of the cohesion of Russian society. Each Micro Cosmos functions according to its own rules and systems and although Russia often seems unorganised and unexplainable to foreign eyes, much can be explained by recognising and understanding the workings of the Russian Micro Cosmos.

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## Only in Russia: Pride

According to good Russian tradition you may find yourself at a certain point in time sitting around a kitchen table, with your Russian friends, discussing all that is right and wrong in this country. After a good meal and the customary glass of vodka you may hear a certain discontent being expressed by your Russian friends. 'why is there such a bureaucracy in this country?'; 'why can't we fix our roads?' and why don't the rich do more for their country?'. It is only natural in such a discussion to add some views of your own and contribute some criticism you have to add about Russia. But the moment you do this, do not be surprised if silence descends over the kitchen table and your Russian friends turn to you in indignation. It is like a husband complaining about his wife to his neighbor. He can tell his neighbor all about her shortcomings, but the moment his neighbor agrees and adds some more shortcomings on his own initiative, an invisible line is crossed and an insult is inflicted. With Russians and Russia, it is the same. They can complain about all they think is wrong in Russia, but as soon as a foreigner attempts to chime in, the Russian pride gets hurt. No matter what a Russian says about Russia, he always has a very strong sense of pride when it concerns the Russian people, soul or soil. You always need to be aware of the Russian pride, especially, when telling a Russian that you – or "we in the West" – know how to do something better. Apart from the fact that this is not always true, you are guaranteed that Russia's doors will remain closed to you by doing so. If you want to convince a Russian colleague or business partner about a better technology or method, or way to do something, it is best to expose him to this method or technology and to let him come to a conclusion on his own. And if ever in doubt, just remember that with respect, you can never go wrong and that all that Russia requires from the outside world is to be taken seriously.



A Russian winter



Luzhniki – Moscow

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## Only in Russia: SUPERstitions and Tfu tfu tfu...

The satellite and the space rocket, the first nuclear power plant, Mendeleev's Periodic Table and the first electric tram. Russia's status as one of the world leaders in science and technological inventions dates back to, at least, the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Russia is also well known for its academic prowess and for having one of the highest literacy rates in the world. But in spite of Russia's impressive academic and technological credentials, daily life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is still very much ruled by superstitions.

Russia is a very emotional country and in many ways, Russians consciously choose the emotional and superstitious over the rational in life. I have to admit that after 16 years in Russia, I have also started to adapt my daily life according to a number of these superstitions, although I was once born as a rational and level-headed Dutchman.

There are superstitions that deal with luck, money, relationships and marriage, as well as drinking, quite obviously, and many other things in life. Some of them are hard not to notice. For example, whistling will cause money problems and any Russian will immediately urge you to stop whistling. Shaking hands, kissing, hugging or greeting someone across the doorway should also be avoided at all cost! When the threshold of a doorway divides people during a greeting, it will bring about a quarrel.

Ladies, don't put your bag on the floor because that also means you will not have money! And by the way, to those ladies who are not yet married, after you have taken care of your bag, don't sit down at the table facing the table's corner or you will stay unmarried for seven years!

If by accident you step on a Russian's foot, don't be surprised if he or she will step on your foot in return. This is done to avoid a quarrel that would have otherwise surely materialised.

When giving flowers, always make sure to give an uneven number of flowers, unless it is for a funeral, where an even number of flowers is given. And if you want to break up with a lover, then giving yellow flowers is a fail-proof method to cause an argument and end the relationship.

If your nose itches you, better be aware as you will have a drink (see the previous article on Vodka drinking), get into a fight or fall in love. And if the itch leads to a sneeze, while you were saying something then what you were saying, or your last thought, can't be anything but the truth. If, however, your ears itch, have a look around the office, because someone is saying bad things about you.

If you have forgotten something, and have to return home after having closed the door behind you, bad luck awaits you. However, this situation can be averted by looking in the mirror, before



Russian traditional hohloma design

leaving your home the second time. But make sure the mirror isn't broken! If you leave on a big trip you will need to sit down (preferably on top of your suitcase) before leaving and be silent for a moment. Also a drink is often drunk 'na pososhok' (one for the road) in order to guarantee a safe trip. However, bearing in mind that the average Russian usually doesn't limit himself to "one" for the road, this habit may actually increase and not decrease the risks of the trip.

If you have bought something new (from a pair of shoes to a car or a house) you need to 'obmiyvat' (wash it over) by – what a surprise! – drinking something alcoholic. In the case of a pair of shoes, this can be a glass of champagne. But in the case of a car, this can involve some more extensive drinking (please refer to the previous article on Vodka drinking). This prevents the item from getting damaged or stolen and ensures that the item serves you well. It is not known if the amount of alcohol consumed is directly proportional to the amount of protection provided, but Russians tend to drink more than enough, just to be on the safe side. As a result, the cost related to the drinking often exceeds the value of the purchase.

One of the scariest superstitions is the 'Sglaz', comparable to the 'evil eye' or the 'malocchio'. The Sglaz is a negative influence of one person on another on an energetic level. A Sglaz can happen consciously and subconsciously. Causes for the Sglaz are usually jealousy, egoism and greed. A very strong Sglaz is like a curse. Some of the symptoms of a Sglaz are laziness, sleepiness, irritation, bad luck and regular nose colds. But then again, if one were to go by this superstition, then every second expatriate and just about every Russian suffers those symptoms (one Russian friend suggested you get the Sglaz automatically, at passport control in Sheremetyevo international airport), so maybe the Sglaz is not so dangerous after all. More importantly, never wish a Russian good luck; this may also invoke the evil eye (shtob ne sglazit). It is better to wish someone 'neither down nor feathers' (ni pukha ni pera); this started as a hunter's ritual, meaning may he return unsuccessful. The appropriate response to this is 'go to the devil' or 'go to hell' (k Tchortu). Also gifts are not given before a person's birthday.

And if, in this labyrinth of dangers, you ever feel lonely, then know that a whole army of creatures accompanies your every move. First of all you have a Guardian Angel (Angel Khranitel) standing on your right shoulder. The nemesis of your Guardian Angel is the Devil (Tchort) who is lounging on your left shoulder. Is there something you think you misplaced in your apartment or you can't light a match? Then that is your Domovoi at play. Your Domovoi is like a good house spirit (imagine something like a gnome or troll); although he protects the house and its occupants, he can sometimes be a little mischievous and break stuff or hide your keys. Most likely, when you have to return home to pick up something you forgot, it is your Domevoi at play and he will be laughing, while you look into the mirror to ward off the bad luck before you leave your home the second time.

Ever saw a Russian spitting over the left shoulder and emitting a sound that goes something like 'tfu tfu tfu'? Remember this and learn to copy the gesture and sound! This is the antidote for all the bad stuff that can possibly happen to you and if you want to get through your stay in Russia in one piece, the 'tfu tfu tfu' will serve you better than a Lloyd's insurance policy. And why spit over the 'left' shoulder? That is where your Tchort was lounging about of course!

A book could be written about Russian superstitions, but this short article should get you through your first year in Russia. The rest you will find out along the way, with a little help by your Guardian Angel.

(Oh and by the way, beware of the woman with the empty buckets.....!!)

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## Only in Russia: Authority works!

It doesn't take a long time for newcomers to Russia to understand that to attract the attention of a waitress in a restaurant, it is not sufficient to look in her direction or raise an arm. The only thing that gets her attention is to call out loud: "Devushka" (Miss); an action that would get you almost thrown out of most restaurants in Europe. In the office, you will notice that after having had a long meeting with your team, during which you thought everything was discussed and agreed upon, everyone is still looking at you to take the final decisions. In a newspaper, you may read with some surprise that next to Vladimir Putin, Josef Stalin is the most popular Russian leader of all times.

There is one common denominator to all three situations described above and that is the concept of authority. Authority is important in Russia and a key ingredient for making things work. For effective leadership in Russia, authority is much more important than consensus, whereas, in most western countries the exact opposite is the case. In Russian companies, the director decides on everything. Very little power or mandate is delegated to lower management levels. In the workplace, the boss is expected to know everything and to carry a paternalistic responsibility for his employees. Russians in general work harder and longer than most Europeans. The formal nine to five culture does not exist in Russia. Working until late at night or meetings during the weekend is all within the normal course of business. But the Russian worker needs to genuinely respect his boss. If respect is lacking, then it is very hard to motivate a Russian worker to 'go the extra mile' and in that case, no HR process, training or management technique will increase the output of your employees.

For foreign managers in Russia, this means that they need to be more firm and decisive than they are used to being in other countries. This also means that you should be careful not to lose the respect of your employees. Losing your cool too often and starting to shout is seen as losing control, and consequently, leads to a loss of respect. Once respect is lost, it is very hard to regain.

Another proof of the fact that 'authority works' in Russia can be seen in traffic or in queues. You may be surprised that drivers cut right in front of other drivers without any repercussion. Something that would cause road-rage in Europe and a shoot-out in the USA, is calmly accepted in Russia. If you want to merge into traffic hesitantly using your turn signal indicator you won't get anywhere in Russia. You need to be bold and just cut in. Just try it! You'll see it works. If you are afraid to dent your car you can start with the queue at passport control. Just cut in front of the queue, acting as if you own the place and see what the reaction will be. If you do get a reaction, next time, try it with more authority!

Being nice and gentle is not yet really understood in Russia. It is often mistaken for weakness. You can be many things in Russia, but at least you have to be firm and strong. Otherwise you won't get anywhere. This is one of the things that is often difficult to understand for newcomers to Russia.

It is not for nothing that Russia knows something called the 'komandniy golos' (the commanding voice). It's the tone of voice you need to use if you want to get something done here. Even after 16 years in Russia, I find it hard to find the right 'komandniy golos'. When the 'banshik' (stoker or bath attendant) in the Russian banya (bathhouse), where I usually go proposes to increase the heat and steam, I am usually the first to say 'khorosh' (it's enough, no need to increase). But no matter how I say it - loudly or softly, with a deep bass - the stoker always continues to increase the heat. But, if one of the Russians around me says 'khorosh' or 'esho' (more), this one word is enough to spring the stoker into action.

Russians and authority, one more aspect of Russia's unfathomable mystery. And for most of us foreigners, there is only one conclusion we can come to - 'if you can't stand the heat, stay out of the banya'!