CULTURE, ARCHITECTURE

THE NATIONAL PSYCHE
Within the Russian Federation, one's 'nationality' refers to one's ethnicity rather than one's passport. And Russia has dozens of nationalities. Nonetheless, despite the enormous cultural variation, there are certain elements of a common psyche. The classic image of miserable Soviet receptionists snapping *'nyet'* with a 'get-lost' shrug is still to be found in certain 'service' industries (though things are rapidly improving), but the overwhelming Russian character trait is one of genuine humanity and hospitality that goes much deeper than in most Western countries.
Russians are often coy in their initial approach to strangers. But once you've earned a small crumb of friendship, hospitality typically unfolds with extraordinary generosity. Visitors can rapidly find themselves regaled with stories, drowned in. vodka and stuffed full of food. An invitation to a Russian home will typically result in all this repeating several times, even when the family can ill afford the expense. This can be especially true outside the big cities, where you'll meet locals determined to share everything they have with you, however meagre their resources.
There's a similar bipolarity in the Russian sense of humour. Unsmiling gloom and fatalistic melancholy remain archetypically Russian, but, as in Britain, this is often used as a foil to a deadpan, sarcastic humour.
You'll soon learn how deeply most Russians love their country. They will sing the praises of Mother Russia's great contributions to the arts and sciences, its long history and abundant physical attributes, then just as loudly point out its many failures. The dark side of this patriotism is an unpleasant streak of racism. Don't let it put you off and take heart in the knowledge that as much as foreigners may be perplexed about the true nature of the Russian soul, the locals themselves still haven't got it figured out either! As the poet Fyodor Tyutchev said, 'You can't understand Russia with reason...you can only believe in her'.

THE RULES OF RUSSIAN HOSPITALITY
If you're invited to a Russian home, always bring a gift, such as wine or a cake.
Shaking hands across the threshold is considered unlucky; wait until you're fully inside.
If you give anyone flowers, make sure there's an odd number of flowers, as even numbers *ire*-for funerals.
Remove your shoes and coat on entering a house.
Once the festivities begin, refusing offered food or drink can cause grave offence.
Vodka is for toasting, not for casual sipping; wait for the cue.
When you are in any setting with other people, even strangers such as those sharing your train compartment, it's polite to share anything you have to eat,drink or smoke.
Traditional gentlemanly behaviour is not just appreciated but expected, as you will notice when you see women standing in front of closed doors waiting for something to happen.

LIFESTYLE
In the world's biggest country, the way of life of a Nenets reindeer herder in Siberia is radically different from that of a marketing executive in Moscow or an Islamic factory worker in Kazan. Not only this, but as Russia grows more prosperous, the gap between rich and poor - and the lives they lead - becomes larger.
This said, there are common features to life across Russia, such as education, and weekly visits to the *banya* (hot bath, a bit like a sauna) and dacha (country home), that are worth noting.

The Banya
For centuries, travellers to Russia have commented on the particular (and in many people's eyes, peculiar) traditions of the *banya;* the closest English equivalents, 'bathhouse' and 'sauna', don't quite sum it up. To this day, Russians make it an

important part of their week and you can't say you've really been to Russia unless you've visited one.
The main element of the *banya* is *theparilka* (steam room), which can get so hot that it makes Finnish saunas seem wussy in comparison. Here, rocks are heated by a furnace, with water poured onto them using a long-handled ladle. Often, a few drops of eucalyptus or pine oil (sometimes even beer) is added to the water, creating a scent in the burst of scalding steam released into the room. After this some people stand up, grab hold of a vem'A; (a tied bundle of birch branches) and beat themselves or each other with it.
It does appear sadomasochistic, and there are theories tying the practice to other masochistic elements of Russian culture. At the very least it's painful, although the effect is pleasant and cleansing: apparently, the birch leaves (or sometimes oak or, agonisingly, juniper branches) and their secretions help rid the skin of toxins.
The *banya* tradition is deeply ingrained in the Russian culture that emerged from the ancient Viking settlement of Novgorod, with the Kyivan Slavs making fun of their northern brothers for all that steamy whipping. In folk traditions, it has been customary for bride and groom to take separate *bani* with their friends the night before the wedding, with the *banya* itself the bridge to marriage; a modern version of this custom is depicted humorously in every Russian's favourite film *Ironiya Sudby Hi s Legkim Parom* (Irony of Fate). Husband and wife would also customarily bathe together after the ceremony, and midwives used to administer a steam bath to women during delivery. (It was not uncommon to give a hot birch minimassage to the newborn.) The *banya,* in short, is a place for physical and moral purification.
This said, many city *bani* are run down and unappealing (with a few classy exceptions, including Moscow's splendid Sanduny Baths); grab any chance you get to try a traditional one in a countryside log cabin.

The Dacha
For the vast majority of urban Russians, home is within a drab, ugly housing complex of Soviet vintage. Although quite cosy and prettily decorated on the inside, these apartments are typically cramped and come with no attached garden. Instead, a large percentage of Russian families have a dacha, or small country house. Often little more than a bare-bones hut (but sometimes quite luxurious), these retreats offer Russians refuge from city life and as such figure prominently in the national psyche. On half-warm weekends, places such as Moscow begin to empty out early on Friday as people head to the country .
One of the most important aspects of dacha life is gardening. Families grow all manner of vegetables and fruits to eat over the winter. Flowers also play an important part in creating the proper dacha ambience, and even among people who have no need to grow food the contact with the soil provide an important balm for the Russian soul.

Education
From its beginning as an agrarian society in which literacy was limited to the few in the upper classes, the USSR achieved a literacy rate of 98% - among the best in the world. Russia continues to benefit from this legacy. Russian schools today emphasize basics such as reading and mathematics, and the high literacy rate has been maintained. Students wishing to attend a further two years of secondary education must pass rigorous tests. The hurdles are even tougher for those wishing. to attend a university, but many are prepared to go through with them -particularly men who can delay or avoid compulsory national service by going on to higher education.
Technical subjects such as science and mathematics are valued and bright students are encouraged to specialize in a particular area from a young age. While Russian teachers and professors are held in high regard by their international peers, at home they are among the worst victims of Russia's new economy, their -government-paid salaries being among the lowest in the land.

WEDDINGS RUSSIAN STYLE
Cohabitation remains less common in Russia than in the West, so when young couples get together they often as not get married. During any trip to Russia you will not fail to notice the number of people getting hitched, particularly on Friday and Saturday when the registry offices (called ZAGS) are open for business. Wedding parties are particularly conspicuous, as they tear around town in convoys of cars making lots of noise and having their photos taken at the official beauty and historical spots.
Church weddings are now fairly common; the Russian Orthodox variety go on for ages, especially for the best friends who have to hold crowns above the heads of the bride and the groom during the whole ceremony. But for a marriage to be officially registered all couples need to get a stamp in their passports at a ZAGS. Most ZAGS offices are drab Soviet buildings with a ceremonial hall designed like a modern Protestant church less the crucifix, but there are also dvortsy brakosochetaniy (purpose-built wedding palaces), and a few in actual old palaces of extraordinary elegance.
The ZAGS ceremony has been mocked numerous times in Russian films. The registrar, typically an ageing woman with a funny hairstyle, reads an extremely solemn speech about the virtues of marriage with an intonation leaving no doubt that a happy marriage is something well beyond her experience. The speech is accompanied by usually recorded classical music of the couple's choice, though in wedding palaces there are often live musicians.
After the couple and two witnesses from both sides sign some papers, the bride and the groom then exchange rings (which in the Orthodox tradition you wear on your right hand) and the registrar pronounces them husband and wife. The witnesses each wear a red sash around their shoulders with the word 'witness' written on it in golden letters. The groom's best man takes care of all tips and other payments since it's traditional for the groom not to spend a single kopeck during the wedding. Another tradition is that the bride's mother does not attend the wedding ceremony, although she does go to the party.

ARCHITECTURE

Architecture
Until Soviet times most Russians lived in homes made of wood. The *izba* -single-storey log cottage - is still fairly common in the countryside, while some Siberian cities, notably Tomsk, retain fine timber town houses intricately decorated with 'wooden lace'. Stone and brick were usually the preserves of the Church, royalty and nobility;

EARLY RUSSIAN CHURCH ARCHITECTURE
Early Russian architecture is best viewed in the country's most historic churches, such as Novgorod's Cathedral of St Sophia, dating from 1050. At their simplest, churches consisted of three aisles, each with an eastern apse (semicircular end), a dome or 'cupola' over the central aisle next to the apse, and high vaulted roofs forming a crucifix shape centered on the dome.
Church architects in Novgorod, Pskov and Vladimir-Suzdal developed the pattern with varying emphases in the 11th and 12th centuries. Roofs grew steeper to prevent heavy northern snows collecting and crushing them, and windows grew narrower to keep the cold out. Pskov builders invented the little *kokoshnik* gable, which was semicircular or spade-shaped and was usually found in rows supporting a dome or drum.
Where stone replaced brick, as in Vladimir's Assumption Cathedral, it was often carved into a glorious kaleidoscope of decorative images. Another Vladimir-Suzdal hallmark was the 'blind arcade' - a wall decoration resembling a row of arches. Early church-citadel complexes required protection, and thus developed sturdy, fortress-style walls replete with fairy-tale towers - Russia's archetypal kremlins.

MOSCOW
Though the architects of two of the Moscow Kremlin's three great cathedrals built between 1475 and 1510 were Italian, they took Vladimir's churches as their models; the third cathedral was by builders from Pskov.
Later in the 16th century the translation of northern Russia's wooden church features, such as the tent roof and the onion dome on a tall dram, into brick added up to a new, uniquely Russian architecture. St Basil's Cathedral, the Ivan the Great Bell Tower in the Moscow Kremlin and the Ascension Church at Kolomenskoe are three high points of this era.
In the 17th century builders in Moscow added tiers of *kokoshniki,* colourful tiles and brick patterning, to create jolly, merchant-financed churches. Midcentury, Patriarch Nikon outlawed such frippery, but elaboration returned later in the century with Western-influenced Moscow baroque, which featured ornate white detailing on red-brick walls.

BAROQUE
Mainstream baroque reached Russia with Peter the Great's opening up of the country to Western influences. The focus was on his new capital, St Petersburg, as he banned new stone buildings elsewhere. The great baroque architect in Russia was an Italian, Bartolomeo Rastrelli. He created an inspired series of buildings, the style of which merged into rococo, for Empress Elizabeth. Three of the most brilliant were the Winter Palace and Smolny Cathedral, both in St Petersburg, and Catherine Place at nearby Tsarskoe Selo.

CLASSICISM
In the later 18th century Catherine the Great turned away from rococo 'excess' towards Europe's new wave of classicism - an attempt to re-create the ambience of an idealized ancient Rome and Greece with their mathematical proportions, rows of columns, pediments and domes. Catherine and her successors built waves of grand classical edifices in a bid to make St Petersburg the continent's mdst imposing capital.
From the simpler classicism of Catherine's reign, exemplified by the Pavlovsk Palace near St Petersburg, the more grandiose Russian Empire style developed under Alexander, with such buildings as the Admiralty and Kazan Cathedral in St Petersburg. The heavy St Isaac's Cathedral, built for Nicholas I, was the last big project of this wave of classicism in St Petersburg. Moscow abounds with Empire-style buildings, as much of the city had to be rebuilt after the fire of 1812.

REVIVALS & STYLE MODERNE
A series of architectural revivals, notably of early Russian styles, began in the late 19th century. The first, pseudo-Russian phase produced the state department store GUM, the State History Museum and the Leningradsky vokzal (train station) in Moscow, and the Moskovsky vokzal and the Church of the Saviour on Spilled Blood in St Petersburg.
The early 20th century neo-Russian movement brought a sturdy, classical elegance to architecture across the nation culminating in the extraordinary Kazansky vokzal in Moscow, which imitates no fewer than seven earlier styles. About the same time, Style Moderne, Russia's take on Art Nouveau, added wonderful curvaceous flourishes to many buildings right across Russia. Splendid examples include Moscow's Yaroslavsky vokzal and St Petersburg's Vitebsky vokzal, and the Singer Building.

SOVIET CONSTRUCTIVISM
The revolution gave rein to young constructivist architects, who rejected superficial decoration in favour of buildings whose appearance was a direct function of their uses and materials - a new architecture for a new society. They used lots of glass and concrete in uncompromising geometric forms.
Konstantin Melnikov was probably the most famous constructivist and his own house off ul Arbat in Moscow is one of the most interesting examples of the style; Moscow's *Pravda* and *Izvestia* offices are others. In the 1930s the constructivists were denounced, and a 400m-high design by perpetrators of yet another revival - monumental classicism -

was chosen for Stalin's pet project, a Palace of Soviets in Moscow, which mercifully never got off the ground.
Like the US and German governments of the 1930s, Stalin favoured neoclassical architecture, which echoed ancient Athens - 'the only culture of the past to approach the ideal', according to Anatoly Lunachar-sky, the first soviet commissar of education. Stalin liked architecture to be on a gigantic scale, underlining the might of the Soviet state. Convict labour was used, with a high death toll, to create enormous structures around the country. They reached their apogee in the 'Seven Sisters', seven Gothic-style skyscrapers that appeared around Moscow soon after WWII.
Then in 1955 came a decree ordering architects to avoid 'excesses', after which a bland international modern style - constructivism without the spark, you might say - was used for prestigious buildings, while no style at all was evident in the drab blocks of cramped flats that sprouted countrywide to house the people.

CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE
Since the end of the Soviet Union, architectural energies and civic funds have principally gone into the restoration of decayed churches and monasteries, as well as the rebuilding of structures such as Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour. St Petersburg in particular is spending millions of roubles on renovating its stock of historic architecture (although critics say that much of the work is little more than a temporary facelift).
However, as far as contemporary domestic, commercial and cultural buildings are concerned, post-Soviet architects have not been kind to Russia. Featuring bright metals and mirrored glass, buildings tend to be plopped down in the midst of otherwise unassuming vintage buildings, particularly in Moscow, where a campaign to preserve the city's historic architecture is under way; for details go to www.gif.ru/eng/places/maps /city_578/fah_3259/. Possibly the most interesting (and certainly the most controversial) contemporary structure in Russia will be the new Mariinsky Theatre in St Petersburg.

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