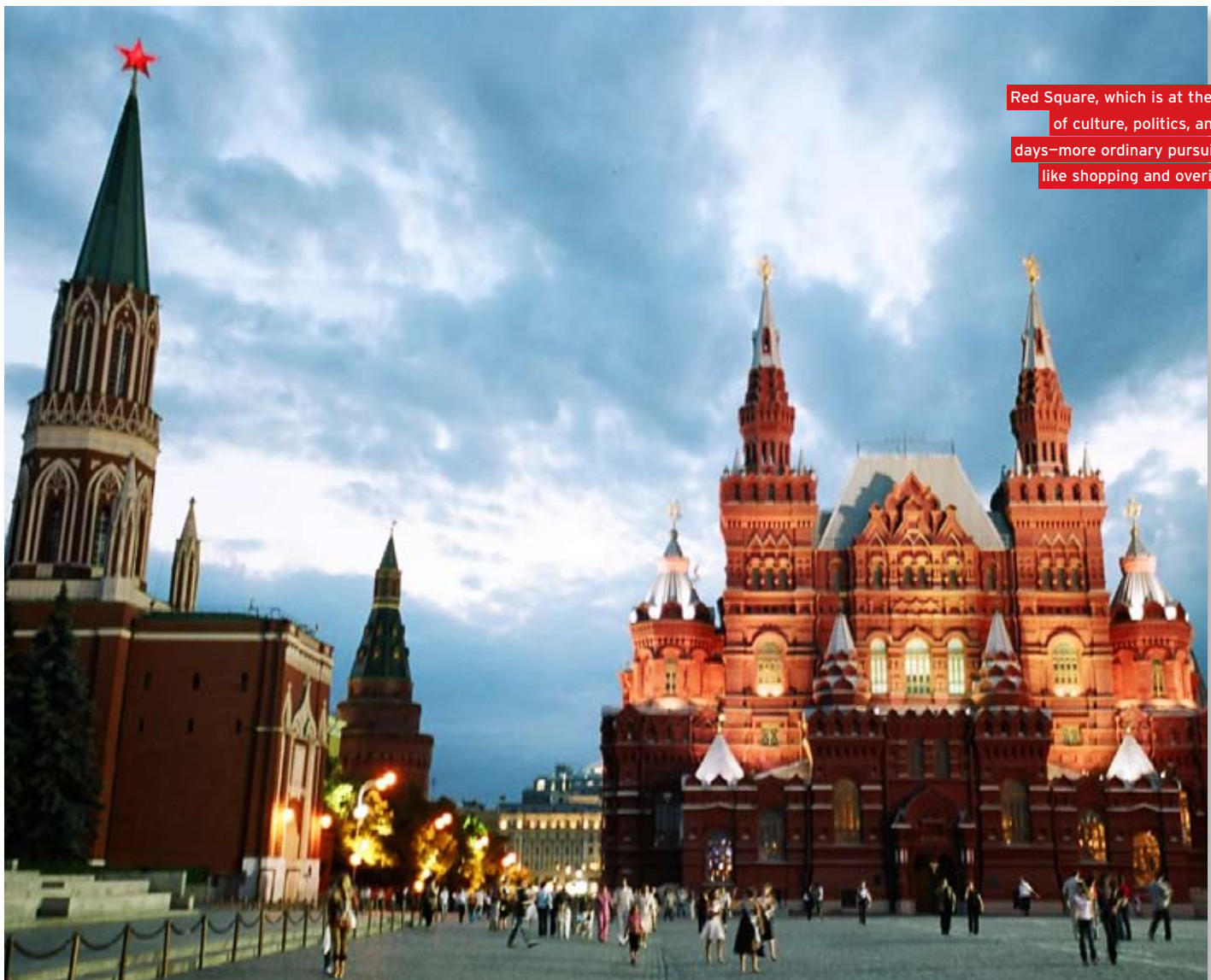


**T**he first time I saw Red Square was the night of November 8, 2006. I had arrived at Moscow’s Sheremetyevo airport on Delta’s nine-hour, 40-minute nonstop from New York only to take a cab ride to the Ararat Park Hyatt that seemed nearly as long as the flight. Moscow’s traffic is beyond horrible—the Russian newspaper *Vedomosti* actually held a forum last March on what to do about it. The Park Hyatt is possibly the best hotel in Russia: It’s modern, attractive, perfectly located, and impeccably run—i.e., several things Moscow itself is not. If you’re in one of the four penthouse suites, you can almost catch a glimpse of St. Basil’s and Red Square. But “almost” was not good enough. I wanted the real thing and I wanted to see it that night. I threw my bags on the bed, took the cylindrical glass elevator back down to the lobby, and asked, “How do I get to Red Square?”

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Red Square, which is at the heart of culture, politics, and—these days—more ordinary pursuits like shopping and overingenuity

“If I might be so bold,” said a gentleman who introduced himself as Matheo Georgiou, the hotel’s director of rooms, “as you’ve just checked in, might you want to relax a bit? Perhaps take a *banya*?”

“A *banya*?” I asked.

Yes, a *banya*, which he explained was a steam bath and a very authentic and terribly Russian experience involving ice-cold water, unbelievably hot steam, and the thrashing of one’s body with birch branches. This was definitely beyond deep tissue or Shiatsu.

“Very ancient. Very important to the Russian soul,” Matheo added.

How could I say no? Over the next hour and a half, I was immersed in the Park Hyatt’s version of the *banya*, which actually inspired the story “Sunday at the Banya,” by Steven Lee Myers, the former Moscow bureau chief of *The New York Times*. I would later find the *banya* everywhere—the most glamorous being at a dacha on the Volga River, which served as the ice-cold plunge pool.

Now refreshed, exhilarated, and equipped with a little marked-up street map the doorman had given me, I started walking. It began to snow. Furiously. As if on cue, Moscow was transformed from gray and foreboding into something terribly romantic: Red Square and the gilt domes of

St. Basil beckoned. It was—and is—a weird and glorious juxtaposition: An entire 19th-century world of very grand architecture encased in a thoroughly 21st-century setting. This was my introduction to the city. Traffic.

Chaos. A sudden snow-storm. Birch branches and hot steam. And this was just the beginning.

I would return in the spring to days that alternated wildly—snow on Tuesday, 70 degrees on Wednesday. Is this typical? I asked. “Absolutely,” one Russian would say. “Never in my eighty years,” another would reply.

Russia has never been simple nor easy to understand. For the past year DEPARTURES editors, writers, and photographers shuttled from Moscow to St. Petersburg and back on local airlines and overnight trains, cruised the Volga, visited former Soviet republics, fished for salmon in Kamchatka, and even made—and kept—their appointment in Samara (it’s a long story, don’t ask).

Russia can be tough and challenging, its appeal more intellectual and complex than the simpler pleasures afforded by other, more popular destinations. In fact, it *is* tough and it *is* challenging—for Russians and non-Russians alike. And right now, it may just be as fascinating as any place on earth.

## THE DEPARTURES GUIDE TO *THE NEW RUSSIA*

### 9 Things You Need to Know

**5** t. Petersburg is the easy destination—that’s why it’s the one Americans know best. Moscow? A totally different story. It’s not a simple city to navigate nor do you hear the great and passionate love sonnets from first-time visitors that you do from those who have traveled to St. Petersburg.

**1** Don’t bother bringing dollars in cash. It’s not like the old days; in 2007 rubles mean more. Tipping is new these last five years and not expected, though 10 percent in restaurants is acceptable.

**2** Moscow is well known for its private clubs, whose popularity changes quickly, with tough rules of exclusivity predicated on “face control” and cash. Befriend the right concierge to get a table at the right address on the right night.

**3** Be careful when hailing taxis, especially at night. Always insist the meter be turned on at the start of your ride. Hotels can arrange private cars, which are preferred despite their unreasonable expense. And only use gypsy cabs when with a tour guide. FYI, depending on the cab and driver, the same trip can vary from \$25 to \$100. I know. That’s what I was charged by two separate drivers on two separate evenings for the exact same route.

**4** Insist on a detailed breakdown of costs from your guide or outfitter. It may force you to reconsider the astronomical price of that private-access visit. To our mind, touring Stalin’s Bunker at \$500 a pop, for instance, simply isn’t worth it.

**5** Wealthy Muscovites all like to be treated as VVIPs, and Alina Demidova at Moscow Personal Concierge ([moscowconcierge.ru](http://moscowconcierge.ru)) provides them with the key: She’s an American-educated Russian who specializes in personal shoppers, cars, and hard-to-get restaurant and club reservations. For her services, clients are normally asked to purchase a minimum of ten hours priced at about \$50 per hour.

**6** Ask your outfitter to ride the Metro with you to get around Moscow; it’s cheaper and often faster in this traffic-clogged city.

**7** Avoid traveling from 7:30 to 10 A.M. and 5:30 to 8 P.M. if possible; that’s when the Metro and roads are most intolerable.

**8** Set aside one Sunday morning to visit a Russian Orthodox Church during services. Women should wear headscarves.

**9** Visit Room 107 in the century-old Le Royal Meridien National hotel (a generous tip to the concierge should do it). Lenin stayed here briefly in 1918, and it’s from this room’s balcony that he once addressed the crowds below.