explore

moscow in

motion

once again, russia's storied capital is undergoing a dramatic transformation. moscow has become sexy and sophisticated—an international destination that combines a unique imperial history with chic new experiences

BY STEVEN BESCHLOSS

Nearing midnight, the city blanketed in snow, I barrel through the dark streets of Moscow in a brand-new black Mercedes, the passenger of a wealthy Russian businessman determined to show me the high-flying shape of post-Soviet life. It's December 1992. "I used to be followed by the KGB," he says. "Now 12 of them work for me." He laughs proudly, and hands me his new cell phone. "Go ahead, call your fiancée in Finland." As I punch in the number, a blizzard of white swirling around us, I make out the glow of a red star above the Kremlin.

In those first months after the fall of the Soviet Union, Moscow was an intensely romantic place to visit. Street musicians were always performing the Beatles and Sting. Practically everyone you met wanted to hear about life in America and the West. ("Is it true," I was asked, "that when you wake up in America you are already late?") Fellow passengers on the Metro studied your clothes, fascinated and pleased to see a foreigner in their midst. There was a rich curiosity and a delicious sense of possibility in the early '90s after being cut off for so long.

Yet those days were also rife with instability and uncertainty, which, from an outside perspective, made much of what went on seem like sheer madness, or at least more akin to fiction. Consider: I met a brain surgeon who was dealing cards in a casino and a kindergarten teacher working as an escort in a hard-currency nightclub. I negotiated with a naval captain whose contacts could sell me a working submarine for $30,000 (I needed one for a movie I wanted to make). I was nearly run over in Red Square by three thick slabs in a black Mercedes, then watched as they paid off a nervous policeman, ordered a photographer to snap their picture in front of Lenin's Tomb and St. Basil's, and smiled and waved like movie stars at the gathering crowd before driving away.

At that tumultuous time—those years of ruble freefall and skyrocketing prices, shock therapy and dark uncertainty—I watched nightly as grim-faced babushki and young people lined the Metro stations and underpasses to sell practically anything: a wrapped salami, a silver wedding spoon, a puppy, a child's porcelain doll, a caged bird, even a used pair of nylons. Promised forever by the old state, they woke up one day and found that their country no longer existed and everything was open to negotiation. A proud people with a rich history, a wealth of natural resources and a country twice the size of the United States, they aspired to a better life; indeed, many Russians craved the luxuries and pleasures of the West.

That was the Moscow I knew more than a decade ago. A visually drab affair then, but a place of adventure and a journalist's dream—a chance to enter a long-closed world at a moment of historic, seismic shift where nothing is given and everything seemed possible.

If Moscow were a typical city, this would be a story of limited incremental developments. A fancy new restaurant here, a street of new shops there, an intriguing regional destination where travelers can experience the former Soviet empire in its massive capital city and witness the royal treasures that date back hundreds of years.

But Moscow is not typical. In barely a decade, it has become a genuine international city, buoyed by rising oil and gas prices, one of the largest concentrations of millionaires in the world, an expanding new class of ultra-rich for whom money is no object, and the feverish activity of a growing group of entrepreneurs and artisans determined

PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRANK HERFORT

to create a world of luxury and glamour that equals any of the world's top destinations, albeit in a distinctly Russian way. Close your eyes in the mid-'90s, open your eyes today—and get ready for quite a surprise.

A CITY IN COLOR

Walk up Tverskaya Street—Moscow's main commercial street, which extends from Red Square and the Kremlin all the way north to St. Petersburg—and what strikes you first is the presence of color. It seems almost laughable that, when a Dannon Yogurt shop opened in the mid-'90s with its familiar colorful logo, it was an event—not only for the arrival of this new international foodstuff, but also for its multicolored appearance. Long dominated by the imposing structures built by Stalin to house party bureaucrats, Tverskaya—like so many commercial streets here—now gives the feeling of a European city, complete with a full range of English-language signs, large window displays and familiar international shops selling everything from Nokia phones and Tiffany jewelry to accounts with Citibank. Perhaps the most symbolic example of transformation: a Levi's store. Not so long ago, acquiring a pair of Levi's jeans was a most coveted achievement; now anyone can walk right in and buy them. Amazingly, the Dannon shop is still there, providing a touching reminder of the city's early post-Soviet moment of transition.

Several blocks up, a turn to the right onto Stoleshnikov Lane quickly transports you to the dynamic present. The luxurious, well-polished façades house high-end boutiques from many of the world's top labels: Hermès, Mont Blanc, Cartier, Piaget, Louis Vuitton, Van Cleef & Arpels, Vivienne Westwood, Ferragamo. Stoleshnikov is far from the only finely appointed street that lures wealthy Russians and international travelers. At the sleekly stylish Tretyakov Drive near Red Square, complete with cobblestone imported from St. Petersburg and a sexy Ralph Lauren billboard gracing the entrance, Armani, Prada and Dolce & Gabbana lure wealthy Muscovites, and the Bentley, Maserati and Ferrari showrooms are surpassing dealers' expectations. Standing here, it's easy to believe a UBS report that ranked Russians fourth as consumers of luxury goods (after the Japanese, Americans and Chinese) and another survey that estimated 100,000 Russian millionaires have a combined $300 billion in available cash (and are increasingly seeking to spend it at home).

Several blocks from Tretyakov, right across the street from the Bolshoi Theatre, the just-refurbished TSUM department store—once a typically stolid Soviet outlet and a competitive cousin of the updated and gorgeous 19th century GUM—showcases more than 400 international labels along freshly polished marble halls with bright lighting and attentive staff. TSUM, one more gem in the expanding luxury shopping empire of Russia's Mercury Group, recently adorned its walls with the billboard-size face of actress-model Milla Jovovich (she left the Soviet Union in 1981) to update its image and appeal to upscale shoppers. It's also importing Italian-born retail star Vittorio Radice to do for TSUM what he did for Selfridges in London. Such are the attractive signs of the outside world stepping in.

Previous page: looking in on the new Tundra bar. Opposite: the elegant and richly stocked Yeliseev's Food Hall, previously known as Gastronome No. 1.

EXPANDING THE BORDERS

But it's the emergence of upscale, internationally minded Russian boutiques and designers like Denis Simachev that are the best indication that the city's creative energy, talent and money are combining to spawn something new and appeal beyond Russia's borders. Simachev, 32 years old and part of the new generation of young Russians who nostalgically draw from the Soviet era, integrates its symbols and images into his latest creations. Thousand-dollar jeans and jackets incorporate the old CCCP (USSR) emblem; the 1980 Olympic symbol adorns other garments; stylish rings are made with Soviet kopek coins; and T-shirts include a wolf from an old Soviet-period cartoon dressed in a CCCP cosmonaut's suit.

Set in a high-ceilinged open space with a decidedly Chelsea London feel, Simachev's creations trigger a mid-'90s flashback: I'm descending the escalators in one of the fantastically deep Moscow Metro stations. I watch hundreds of faces go by on the opposite up escalator, many of them grim. I focus on two laughing children no more than 10 years old, and it dawns on me: These young Russians will not be burdened by the dark days of the Soviet Union.

On the day I visit Simachev's shop on Stoleshnikov, a TV crew is preparing a report on the recently opened flagship boutique. My skilled guide Sergey and Simachev's model-like press assistant, Tatiana—both younger than Simachev—listen as the TV reporter asks me if the symbols used in the garments make sense to a foreign visitor. She is pleased to hear that they do, and includes my comments in her broadcasted piece. "Everybody loves the symbols of the Soviet Union—nothing serious," Sergey says later. I ask him what the Cyrillic graphic on one shirt means: "Nothing sacred."

Like many of Moscow's fashion-minded entrepreneurs with deep-pocketed backers, Simachev (rumored to be supported by Roman Abramovich, one of Russia's richest oligarchs and owner of the Chelsea soccer team) didn't just launch a shop to sell his clothing and interior designs. He also designed and opened an ultra-cool, 24-hour bar downstairs that looks like a '60s-era London watering hole with 21st-century touches and inspiration from Marcel Duchamp. The darkly lit yet dazzling space features a 300-year-old bar counter imported from England, beaded curtains, leather booths and wooden tables with visible plumbing as decoration, red velvet curtains, a strange barber-style chair with frayed electrical wiring that looks as if it came from a mental ward, a tiny dance floor backed by a Japanese anime mosaic and, behind the bar, a tongue-in-cheek photo montage with George W. Bush, Vladimir Putin and other world leaders. Am I really in Moscow? This is one sexy place.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRANK HERFORT


ВИННЫЙ ЗАЛ
ХАЛВА
ШАРМЭЛЬ

FASHION FORWARD

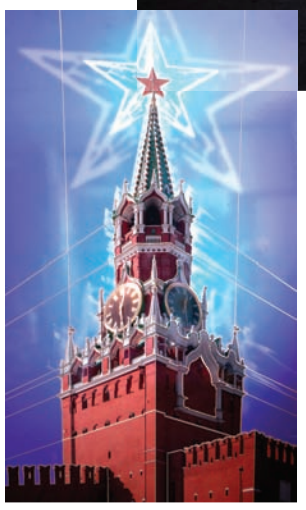
As much as Simachev impresses, a visit to the semi-annual Russian Fashion Week at the New Tretyakov Gallery, a contemporary art space, underscores that the local fashion scene is still evolving. I'm invited to see a collection, where models strut with CDs and Barbie-like dolls in elaborate headdresses, that is more performance art than couture able to attract serious buyers. The city boasts other top Russian designers, of course. Igor Chapurin, who designs for the Bolshoi, has built an international following with his couture collections and sells at his own shops in Paris and Milan. And veteran Russian designer Helen Yarmak, with showrooms in Moscow and New York, is expanding on her main repertoire of fur pieces in mink, sable and lynx with a new line of jewelry. "I don't create for the Russian market," she tells me as we drink vodka from her own private-label bottle. "I create for myself."

But Evelina Khromchenko, editor-in-chief of *L'Officiel Russia* and hired to voice Meryl Streep's Miranda Priestly for the Russian release of *The Devil Wears Prada*, insists that Russian fashion is recovering not simply from the Soviet days, but from the intrusion of imported fashion dating all the way back to Peter the Great. The wife of Russian Fashion Week's director, Alexander Shumsky, Khromchenko is like many of the new generation of Russians I met who are determined to build a marketplace that creates opportunities for young artists and designers and attracts business-minded investors. She complains that, as a fashion journalist, she struggles to get designers to organize their collections and the necessary marketing elements that make it possible to promote them widely. But that hasn't dimmed her conviction; she believes that Russian fashion is gaining strength from the country's growing economic power. "In the next 10 years," she says, "the new generation will be getting the top level." She didn't exactly use the phrase "world domination," but she did warn me that competitors in the traditional capitals of style have reason to be afraid.

SOURCES OF PRIDE

Russian pride is a powerful thing. It took a strong hit in those early days after the end of Communist rule, aided neither by President Boris Yeltsin laying siege to the Russian parliament in 1993 (literally blackening its white façade) nor by the envy my Moscow friends expressed toward the Chinese successfully pursuing a capitalist path while maintaining national stability.

These days the invigorated sense of pride takes many forms. Some may surprise Western visitors: The depth of respect for Russian President Putin, for example, and his reinvigoration of the economy through state control. The pride in Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov, as well, who is responsible for ordering the demolition of various Brezhnev-era aesthetic disasters, including the Intourist Hotel, now replaced by The Ritz-Carlton, Moscow, and the enormous—and enormously ugly—Rossiya Hotel, soon to be replaced by a complex of shops and restaurants with a hotel and a 2,500-seat performance hall designed by Britain's famed Sir Norman Foster.



Below: Once a winery and beer factory, Winzavod is an exciting new complex of art galleries, studios and boutiques, including this concept shop from Australia called Cara & Co. Opposite: Top: Designer Denis Simachev's new boutique and bar on the stylish Stoleshnikov Lane. Middle: Inside designer Igor Chapurin's Moscow boutique. Bottom: Artist Andrei Shevchenko's update of iconic Russian symbols.

On an evening walk, one of my group pauses to marvel at how lovely Moscow looks at night—"Isn't my city beautiful?" she asks—something I never heard in my earlier visits. I understand what she means: how the once-dark city is now frequently lit; how shop windows now offer light and color and a chance to look inside; how churches provide attractions with fresh coats of paint, brilliantly polished gold domes and spotlights that illuminate their architecture.

On the stroke of midnight ushering in Easter Sunday, I exit a packed and sleekly modern coffeehouse called Coffeemania (one of an expanding universe of coffee outlets decked out with the latest in javamaking). The confluence of caffeine and city life on this historic corner of Bolshaya Nikitskaya Street makes me happy: Church bells are clanging, several hundred people cupping candles circle around the 16th-century Church of the Little Ascension, and music students stream out of the Moscow Conservatory, the famed music school where Tchaikovsky, Scriabin and Rachmaninov once worked.

Both at midnight and during the day, there's an easier feeling in the city than there used to be. What does it suggest? Perhaps this: Even if you are not among that lucky group of wealthy Russians able to buy anything you want, there's a sense of possibility that comes from seeing the availability of things and the transformation of the city's landscape. You could call this the Starbucks principle: You may not be able to spend a thousand dollars on a fantastic pair of designer jeans, but that doesn't mean you won't feel good when you spend four bucks (or 100 rubles) on a good cup of joe.

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RESTAURANTS GALORE

So much for simple pleasures. In a city where the notion of a restaurant culture long seemed like a misnomer, if not a joke, it's hard to believe that Moscow has become one of the hottest (and most expensive) locales for dining and nightlife. Yet restaurants are a booming industry here: It's been estimated that more than 1,000 new ones have opened in the past year alone.

I once dined on sushi in the city's only Japanese restaurant. It was a very big deal then—an exclusive meal aimed by my wealthy host to wow me. Now sushi restaurants—and sushi offerings in all kinds of eateries—are all over the city. But what's so amazing is not the sheer quantity, but the arrival of imaginative, top-level dining that approaches the experience in any of the world's leading destinations. (One sign of this progress: Dozens of top European chefs are working in Moscow, including Germany's Michelin three-star chef Heinz Winkler at The Ritz-Carlton.)

Take the restaurant Turandot on Tverskoy Boulevard, just off Tverskaya Street and minutes from the Kremlin. It's one part 18th-century Baroque palace with hand-painted dome ceilings and porcelain fireplaces, one part Las Vegas extravaganza that specializes in "imperial Asian" cuisine and lures the city's well-heeled glitterati. Built from scratch in the past year for more than $50 million, with seating for 500 and a staff of more than 600 (some in powdered wigs), the gilt-edged, multileveled Turandot aims to astonish.

This is the latest historical re-creation from restaurateur Andrei Dellos, who includes the highly successful Café Pushkin among his growing repertoire. Opened six years ago and right next door to Turandot, Café Pushkin is styled on a 19th-century nobleman's mansion and famed for tasty Russian fare and service that gives the air of the pre-Bolshevik period, with ruffled sleeves and thoughtful attention. At the Saturday lunch when I visit, the ground-floor dining room includes families with small children who, to my surprise, are given children's menus. Upstairs, in a more elegant library room that is lined with faded leather books and serves more elaborate meals, it's hard to imagine that this restaurant wasn't really built in the 19th century.

While Dellos is constructing his empire by way of history, restaurateur Arkady Novikov and his Novikov Restaurant Group—which now totals 48 Moscow restaurants and a startling 14,000 employees—is aiming for the latest international trends, particularly in interior design. Nedalni Vostok, or "Not Far East," is Novikov's newest restaurant. It was designed by Noriyoshi Muramatsu of Tokyo-based Super Potato, the same designer who created the very fashionable Zuma in London. Literally right across the street from Turandot on Tverskoi, the ultramodern restaurant serves fresh seafood with a Japanese accent, shows off its fish and open kitchen, and is sure to become the latest hangout for the city's hip new Russians with money to burn.

Top and below: From the stylish new Nedalni Vostok (Not Far East), two signs of Moscow's expanding restaurant culture.

Without any stretch of imagination, every Novikov hot spot I visited—including the fashionable Aist, Vogue Café and GQ Bar—relied on clean modern geometry, cool music and a vibe that could just as easily place it in London or New York rather than Moscow. Yes, you'll find borscht on the menus and a small selection of other Russian food, but the restaurants aim for a diverse yet familiar international cuisine that takes advantage of the newfound ability to import fresh ingredients and prepare dishes with a light touch.

They also aim to employ young, attractive employees who are unburdened by the Soviet-era mindset—and then train this new generation how to provide good service. "Russians are very open to learning new things," says Lada Samodumskaya, sales director for The Ritz-Carlton, Moscow. Yet she recalls back in 1995 when she first worked for a foreign hotel. "At first, when I was smiling so much, my whole body ached," she says between bites of sashimi at Turandot. In those days, restaurant work—not to mention visiting a fine restaurant or nightclub—was still typically seen as a form of capitalist decadence. These days Samodumskaya's smiles come easily.

STEPPING THROUGH THE DOOR

Suddenly, not only is there an expanding pool of service workers, but also a new breed of entrepreneurial consultants and marketers to help rich Russians and foreigners navigate the fluid nighttime reality. On a long night of club-hopping, Leonid Sablin and Natasha Bure of the consulting company 108 Concept provide smooth movement past the crowds waiting to enter these exclusive clubs, hoping they can pass the establishments' often fierce system of *feis kontrol*. They mapped the hot spots—most of which are less than a year old—and work their relationships to ensure access. For Sablin, who was a club manager back in the mid-'90s and remembers a more violent environment, the current, more sophisticated scene is welcome relief. "I am happy to be alive, and still have everything working," he says.

We start at Novikov's Galereya (gallery), its walls lined with glamorous black-and-white photography, its tables filled with young and beautiful people, the air filled with music, smoke and plenty of talk. We stop off at Bar 30/7, known for having the best cocktails in Moscow and a bartender named Denny from Nottingham, England (who tells me with wry amusement that he's still trying to make sense of Moscow-style accounting). We continue at the sweaty-packed Bar 7, where a crowd of Mercedes, Bentleys and Porsches jostle for space outside, everyone seems to be famous, girls are dancing on tables, and festive Roman candles are passed around and lit; and the Tundra Bar, with red brick walls and a massive window looking out to the street where, at this moment, a white stallion is walking along the narrow sidewalk.

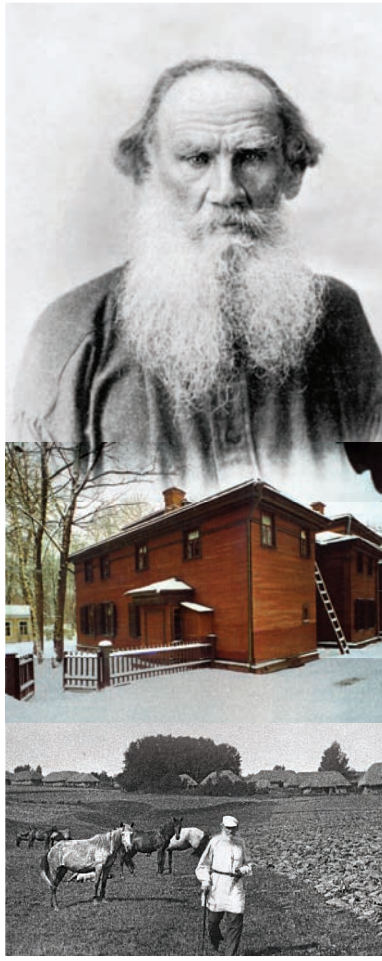
Oh, there are several more, including one in a converted warehouse with dancing on a huge rooftop terrace overlooking the Moscow River and a sparkling new collection of skyscrapers under construction. But by the time we say goodnight, there is little doubt that Moscow nightlife only ends when the sun rises, money can buy you anything and there's a lively elite enjoying its fruits.

PAINT ME A SCENE

If restaurateurs and club owners are the city's current rock stars, most fine artists are still straining to connect to a marketplace in transition. Some long for the relative comforts of the Soviet system and remain entrenched in the old way of thinking. "I don't make art that is connected to consumption," says Igor Terekhov, an abstract artist in his 50s who houses his large canvases in a church. "I grew up when there was no consumer society."

Yet others are taking advantage of the new tools and fresh inspiration that the changed world offers. "I realized that everything is possible," says 37-year-old Andrei Shevchenko, who shows me his work on an enormous high-definition monitor. "I play with the images of the past." His talented work, which incorporates painting,

the last station



In 1909, 81-year-old Leo Tolstoy, then the most famous writer in the world, left Moscow for the last time. It was the final year of his life, one that would end with his demise in a railway station after he committed himself to the life of a wandering ascetic.

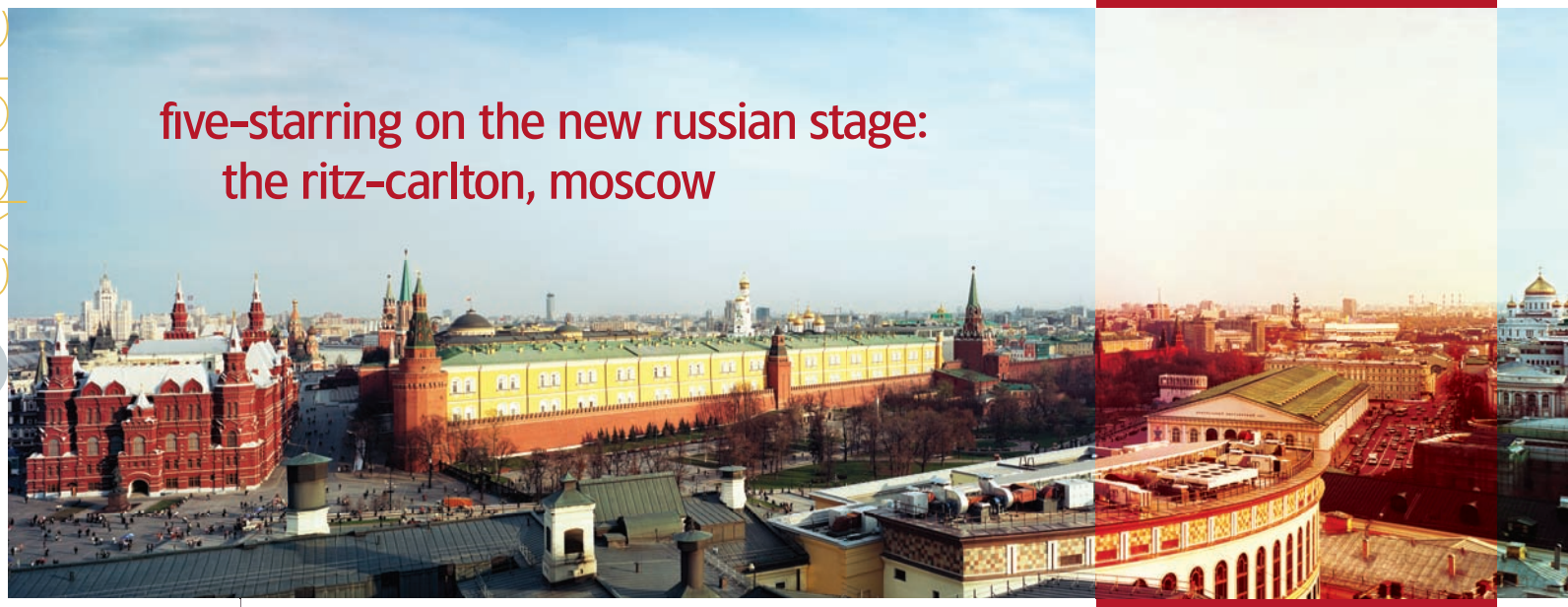
That was a long way from Tolstoy's earlier Moscow years as a Russian nobleman and voracious bon vivant. Born into a wealthy family, he took full advantage of the city's opulent literary soirées, palace parties, music, theater and intellectual life. "Moscow was the center of his world," notes Jay Parini, author of *The Last Station*, a historical novel that focuses on the last year of Tolstoy's life and "the battle for his soul." The book is slated for filming later this year with Anthony Hopkins, Meryl Streep and Paul Giamatti.

By the time Tolstoy purchased a 16-room home in Moscow in 1882, he had already written many of the works that would ensure his extraordinary fame, including *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*. The wooden building, one of the few to survive the invasion of Napoleon, provided a winter retreat for Tolstoy, his wife, Sofia, and their 13 children.

Now a museum, the well-maintained house is filled with the Tolstoy family's belongings: the dining table set for soup, Leo and Sofia's narrow bed, Sofia's finely stitched and often-used party dresses, the bicycle that Leo learned to ride when he was 67, the black leather boots he cobbled himself and the wooden desk chair he shortened so his failing eyes would be closer to his manuscripts.

Unlike many of the interesting urban museums of Russia's beloved writers—Chekhov, Pushkin, Gorky, Mayakovsky—this 19th-century home on the outskirts of the city center has a country feel, transporting visitors back to a time when Moscow moved a little slower. ▪ S.B.

five-starring on the new russian stage: the ritz-carlton, moscow



Here is a prediction: The rooftop bar at The Ritz-Carlton in Moscow is going to be a very hot spot. In a city increasingly packed with hot spots, that's no small deal.

But then, the arrival of The Ritz-Carlton here, built at a cost of nearly $350 million on the site where the Soviet-era Intourist Hotel used to stand, is a milestone for the city—the latest sign that Moscow is emerging as a world-class destination capable of providing five-star luxury and service for five-star luxury travelers.

Built in classic Russian style with a rich 19th-century imperial interior that incorporates some 1,800 antique pieces, the 11-story, 334-room property with fabulous views and fine amenities will be a powerful magnet. Among them: the largest guest rooms in the city accented with red cherry wood and marble from Portugal; a 22,000-square-foot spa operated by ESPA from London with 14 treatment rooms and an indoor swimming pool; plasma-screen televisions and electronic touch panels to operate lighting, curtains, air-conditioning and music without having to leave your bed; boutiques from fur and jewelry designer Helen Yarmak and stylish watchmaker IceLink; and a fine dining experience from the famed Michelin three-star chef Heinz Winkler, whose innovative *cuisine vitale* focuses on nutritional well-being for the body and senses.

But 02 Lounge, the ultramodern rooftop bar, is another story. Not only is it aiming for a youthful, cutting-edge elite—with polished black tile, sleek red and white leather furniture, music with a cool, global ambience and a first-class sushi bar with fresh fish imported daily from the Far East—but guests also will have the chance to gaze at the city below.

And that's where the opening prediction seems like a sure bet. It's a spectacular sight, one that allows you to take in a 360-degree panorama of Russian history: from the main commercial street of Tverskaya to Red Square, St. Basil's Cathedral and the Kremlin to the statue of Peter the Great, one of Stalin's gothic Seven Sister skyscrapers and the post-Soviet, reconstructed Cathedral of Christ the Savior. Yes, you can leave the building and walk in a few minutes to Red Square and the Kremlin, the Bolshoi Theatre and the city's finest shopping—or you can sit back, relaxed, a drink in hand, and enjoy Moscow at your feet. • S.B.

Top: Taking in the city's historical panorama from the new rooftop bar at The Ritz-Carlton, Moscow. Left: The newly built hotel, in keeping with the Russian classic style, was the sight of the Paris Hotel in the 19th century and, more recently, the Intourist Hotel.

within walking distance of the ritz-carlton, moscow

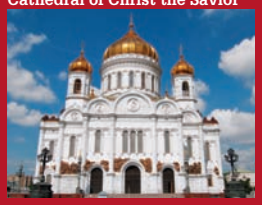
Bolshoi Theatre

Lenin's Tomb

St. Basil's Cathedral

The Kremlin

Cathedral of Christ the Savior



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Set at the edge of Red Square, the beautifully renovated GUM, a stylish collection of shops and boutiques inside a 19th-century arcade, shows off the city's pre-Revolutionary splendor.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRANK HERFORT

sculpting, photography and digital manipulation, benefits from a strong sense of humor and poetry. Among his titles: "Fried Eggs Fly to Mars," "Commas in Love" and "The Diamond Is Laying in the Mud."

I was introduced to Shevchenko by Pavel Ananienko, a banker and art supporter who has helped mount exhibitions for Shevchenko and other artists. While Shevchenko sells to private individuals and corporate clients and also takes commission work (one amusing painting of Putin was said to be commissioned by the president's relatives), he is still aiming to connect to the expanding pool of wealthier collectors. "Top-level Russian corporate people are looking to build a better image of themselves," says Ananienko. "Sometimes they are genuinely interested in art."

One approach to connecting artists and collectors, critics and curators can be found on the grounds of an old industrial brewery and winery. The old Moscow factory's red-brick buildings, which briefly served as a site for making buttons and gravestones, are being converted into a lively complex of art galleries, studios, concept shops and cafés called Winzavod. This emerging art center hosted more than 20,000 visitors earlier this year for Moscow's 2nd Biennale of Art, with an exhibition titled "I Believe." A number of the top galleries for new contemporary art, such as Pobeda, Aidin, Guelman and XL, are relocating to its larger spaces as a sign of the growing professionalism of the Russian art market and the belief in an emerging class of collectors. "In the '90s, it was just making fast money," says Nikolay Palazhchenko, Winzavod's artistic director. "Now there's a new bourgeois that can collect and support art. They have a cultural interest in participating in the contemporary art market and the process."

A FAST-MOVING LIFE

Throughout Russia, there is strong public fascination with the exclusive world of Russia's new rich and their enormous appetite for the finer things in life. That may explain the success of thirtysomething Oksana Robski, who turned her own experience as the widow of an oligarch (reportedly killed in a contract hit) and a member of the most exclusive Russian elite into a best-selling novel called *Casual* (and later, a restaurant by the same name). Her latest commercial venture: a parody guidebook on how to marry a millionaire. "I believe that it's not only for Moscow and Russia, but for people all over the world," she tells me. "People are attracted to power and money."

Robski is a resident of Rublyovka, the ultra-affluent, high-gated area a half-hour from Moscow where lots sell for $5 million and up—and where Lenin died, Stalin lived and Putin now keeps his home (twice a day, traffic stops to let him pass). The Mercury Group's new "Luxury Village" offers Rublyovka's inhabitants well-guarded shopping for Dolce & Gabbana, Prada, Ferrari and other exclusive brands, the ride into the city no longer necessary. Robski prefers living in the forested enclave over Moscow proper, she says, because she likes to live in a house and "be nice and quiet. It's hard to have stability." These days, "things are developing so fast."

On my final morning in Moscow, I take a last chance to see how fast things are developing. I go to Yeliseev's Food Hall on Tverskaya Street. A late-18th-century mansion bought in 1898 by St. Petersburg merchant Grigory Yeliseev, the hall has a spectacularly ornate marble interior with stained-glass windows, gilt-edged mirrors and gorgeous chandeliers. During the Soviet time, it was called Gastronome No. 1 and, even in the early '90s, the shelves were only haphazardly stocked with a limited array of goods. Today it is a true food emporium, a real delicatessen, with glass cases lined with prepared salads and meats and fish managed by an attentive staff; shelves loaded with freshly polished fruits and everyday foods from around the world; and a full bakery with brioches, croissants and multigrain loaves.

As I marvel over this cornucopia of food, I notice a woman at least 70, her head wrapped in a scarf, carrying a basket of eggs, cheese and bread. The prices these days are high at Yeliseev's, not exactly the best option for someone on a limited budget. But I learn later that this is the place that she's always shopped. Life is moving fast in Moscow, an increasingly international world of expanding variety, but thankfully some things are destined to remain the same.

a land of riches

A visit to the Kremlin illustrates the vastness of Russia's priceless treasures and lavish imperial heritage. On display at the State Diamond Fund: the world's largest sapphire and an inestimable menagerie of diamonds, including the 190-carat Orlov Diamond, a gift by Count Grigory Orlov to Catherine the Great. At the Armoury, Russia's oldest museum, visitors can view nearly a dozen Fabergé eggs and an extraordinary collection of Russian thrones, crowns, coronation dresses and gilt-laden carriages, including this classic Russian crown from Czar Peter the Great rimmed in sable.