Moscow Guide
Summer 2012
The Moscow Times

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Summer usually sees a mass exodus from Moscow, as locals flee to their dachas for the weekend. One Saturday a few summers ago, some friends and I even photographed ourselves sitting in the middle of the normally busy thoroughfare Bolshaya Lubyanka with not a single moving vehicle in sight.

A break from the frenetic activity of the city can refresh you like few other things can. I recently skipped town for a friend’s country house in the Yaroslavl region, in what was once called zalesye, a region of plains “beyond the forest” that became a center of early Russian civilization. It doesn’t look terribly different today: Grassy hills undulate into the distance, punctuated by the occasional copse of trees, the vista broken only by the village church spire.

I worked up an appetite for shashlyk as we cleared the plant growth around the house. Sweeping the scythe through the grass with gusto, I envisioned myself as a reaper in one of those 19th-century realist paintings depicting workers in the fields. My reverie was interrupted by my friend, who remarked that I’d better leave the grass out front to him or the locals would soon be laughing that city folks had come and tried to mow a bit.

Within a few hours of coming back to tumultuous Moscow, I was already out enjoying the bustle of city life with dinner, drinks and a concert. Returning to the capital after a brief respite seemed to help me appreciate it in a whole new way, with each turn bringing a sight more welcome than the last as we walked around the city. As the old trope goes, absence makes the heart grow fonder.

So get out of Moscow this summer – our travel article on the “Silver Ring” has a few suggestions where to go – and come back to appreciate the city’s charms anew. This guide will help you do so with a summer music preview, restaurant terrace reviews and an article on outdoor sports and activities. And even if you don’t get a chance to join the exodus, you can still enjoy the city afresh in at least one respect: When everyone goes to the dacha for the weekend, Moscow’s notorious traffic finally lets up for a spell.

Alec Luhn
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Steady Flow of Club Shows

BY ALEC LUHN

Summer always seems to bring a musical drought to Moscow, with only beer-soaked music festivals and internationally touring dinosaurs of rock daring to touch down in the capital. This summer, however, Moscow’s concert clubs aren’t taking a long vacation, but rather hosting an impressive outpouring of foreign and local talent. And while some of the mammoth shows and festivals aren’t to be missed — Picnic Afisha especially — this summer is also about the smaller venues and the hungrier artists trying to fill them.

Royksopp at Gorky Park

Gorky Park is an iconic part of rock history thanks to the eponymous hair-metal band and a name-drop in the Scorpions’ lighter-waving perestroika anthem “Winds of Change.” The park’s outdoor amphitheater, the Zelyony Theater, has also become an iconic concert venue, with Russian songstress Zemfira shooting one of Russia’s first concert films there in 2007. Last summer, gypsy punk band Gogol Bordello drove the crowd into a sweaty fervor of skanking legs and clapping hands at the theater, which was built in 1928.

This year, don’t miss a similar fervor of perspiration-inducing dance when Norwegian electronic duo Royksopp shows the venue a whole new register of bass sounds on June 21, with tickets starting at 1,700 rubles ($50). Although DJs around the world love to spin the band’s club anthems, songs like “What Else Is There” — driven by vocals from Karin Andersson of The Knife — and the cheerful, hypnotic “Eple,” Royksopp hasn’t neglected its own live show. In concert, the band is known for playing to the crowd with hit-packed set lists, remixes of other artists, good-natured stage antics and a revolving wardrobe of outlandish outfits.

After Royksopp, Zelyony Theater will host a string of established Russian artists. Gruff St. Petersburg rockers Leningrad will play what is being billed as the band’s first “large solo, open-air concert in the center of the capital” on July 20, and fellow Russian rock godfathers — frontwoman Diana Arbenina could more correctly be termed a “godmother” — Nochniye Snaipery (“Night Snipers”) will perform on July 27. On August 4 is Korol i Shut, a punk band that in its folkier moments could almost be considered the Russian answer to Celtic punk groups like Pogging Molly.

Hjalmar at Club B2

Another bastion of the local concert scene, B2, will host a July 26 show by reggae band Hjalmar, whose members sing in their native Icelandic. That’s right, reggae in Icelandic. Enough said.

Actually, no, there’s a lot more to be said. These guys may look like a bunch of grungy whalers, but they can hold a groove to rival the Barrett Brothers. Plus, the group’s song arrangements are superb, and the Icelandic lyrics sound surprisingly bluesy. And the trombone! The trombone! Anyway, go see this band when it returns to Moscow in July. Tickets start at 500 rubles.

B2’s roster also includes a variety of other acts throughout the summer, including Belgian indie rockers dEUS on June 22, with tickets starting at 700 rubles. The voice of frontman Tom Barman has just a whiff of Wilco’s Jeff Tweedy, and although dEUS is less sonically adventurous than that Chicago group, its solid, well-constructed songs testify to the group’s creative longevity.

SunSay at Shestnadtsat Tonn

The club Shestnadtsat Tonn, also a staple of the live music scene here, has an especially roosty program planned for the summer. Ukrainian band SunSay will celebrate five years of its reggae-, jazz- and funk-infused indie pop at the club on June 23, with tickets starting at 1,000 rubles. Frontman Andrei Zaporozhets formed the group after singing in the short-lived but seminal duo S’fnaza, which also wore its reggae influences and Slavic-hippie vibe on its sleeve. With SunSay, the stark simplicity of S’fnaza has given way to lush pop orchestrations, but Zaporozhets’ husky yet impudent voice continues to drive the gentle backbeat incessantly forward. American musician John Forté, who worked with The Fugees and has more recently collaborated with SunSay, will perform with the band in Moscow.

On June 27, chanteuse Amy Pieterse will bring her particularly jazzy brand of R&B to Shestnadtsat Tonn. Born in Amsterdam, educated in New York and now a resident of St. Petersburg for more than a decade, Pieterse is a soul diva lost in Russia, purring English lyrics over the groove laid down by her Russian band.

Finally, Moscow musician Delfin will play Shestnadtsat Tonn on July 5. His mix of styles is eclectic while remaining highly palatable, coupling spoken-word passages with plaintive refrains and synthesized beats with acoustic and effects-laden guitars.
It's become a well-established tradition to hold cover-song concerts celebrating the birthday of the late Soviet rocker Viktor Tsoi, who became a cult figure in Russia along the lines of Jim Morrison or Kurt Cobain after his death in a car accident in 1990. This year marks the Kino frontman's 50th birthday. The Viktor Tsoi – 50 show at Milk Moscow on June 22, with tickets starting at 1,000 rubles, is notable in that among the musicians performing the covers are the U.S. band Brazzaville and Frenchman Jean Luc Debouzy. For Brazzaville, this is no one-off: The band, which is led by former Beck collaborator David Brown, did an English version in 2006 of Tsoi’s hit “A Star Called the Sun” that used the same song structure but different lyrics. For anyone looking to cut right to the quick of good Russian rock, the show offers an excellent starting point. Tickets start at 1,700 rubles.

Club Milk Moscow. 9 Ulitsa Makeyeva. +7 (495) 726 0998. milkclub.ru

Other Notables

Hugh Laurie. Sokolniki Exhibition and Convention Center, June 25-26. Tickets start at 5,500 rubles.


Queen + Adam Lambert. Olimpiisky Stadium, July 3. Tickets start at 1,925 rubles.


Buena Vista Social Club. Sad Ermitazh, July 14. Tickets start at 1,000 rubles.

Regina Spektor. Crocus City Hall, July 15. Tickets start at 1,000 rubles.

The Red Hot Chili Peppers with Gogol Bordello and The Vaccines. Luzhniki Olympic Complex, July 22. Tickets start at 1,700 rubles.

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Picnic Afisha Festival

It may not be a club show, but no Moscow summer music preview would be complete without Picnic Afisha, which brings together a lineup of international heavy hitters and rising stars at the former royal estate of Kolomenskoye overlooking the Moskva River. Scottish indie giants Franz Ferdinand will appear at this year’s festival, which takes place July 20 and also features Russian rock stalwarts Akvarium. Among the up-and-comers are The Drums, a rather light-headed yet undeniably summery indie pop group from the United States, and the British electronic duo Fuck Buttons, who mate droning, keening noise with pinging synthesizers and four-on-the-floor beats. Tickets start at 1,500 rubles.

Kolomenskoye park. 39 Prospekt Andropova. +7 (495) 232 6190. picnic.afisha.ru

Franz Ferdinand
Hotel Chefs Discuss the Search for Quality Ingredients and Other Challenges They Face in Pleasing a Demanding Clientele.

BY PETER SPINELLA

Many of Moscow’s culinary innovators work at upscale hotel restaurants, catering to a well-heeled, international set of patrons. The Moscow Times recently asked the head chefs of five hotel restaurants about the challenges of serving such a diverse clientele. The chefs, many of whom brought their culinary skills to Moscow from abroad, talked about the culinary scene here and described some of their latest creations.

Johannes NUDING,
Les Menus par Pierre Gagnaire at Lotte Hotel Moscow (French cuisine)

1. Cooking is an everyday process. Every day there are new, exciting ideas and dishes. We are starting a new a la carte menu. And every two weeks we change our lunch menu, so it is always an exciting process of creating new dishes.

2. Yes, sometimes it’s very hard to find the right ingredients. I try to visit food markets and farms, to talk to people who care about food as much as I do. Cooking good food starts with good products.

3. I have been in Moscow for only two months, so I don’t really know the culinary scene yet.

4. We have a very unique style of cooking, along with very professional service and, for Moscow, an impressive wine list.
5. During my training as a hotel manager I worked in every section, but nothing is as fascinating as cooking. The rush, push, passion, emotion, adrenaline, stress, hot, cold, smell, taste, creativity, inspiration, being real and honest when cooking a dish — all of these you can find only in a kitchen.

6. It is not easy to attract customers to a hotel restaurant. We are very lucky to have a restaurant with a name. That helps a lot in running our restaurant successfully.

7. They are not “so” expensive. Good products have their price, and we only want to work with very good products. In general, private restaurants in the same category are more expensive.

Rajesh THAPLIYAL, Ginkgo by Seiji at The Ritz-Carlton, Moscow (Pan-Asian cuisine)

1. Assorted sprout salad; crispy honey chili lotus stem; tandoori lobster; raw papaya and chicken salad with crispy jasmine rice; assorted tandoori seafood platter; sliced chicken with ginseng and celery sauce.

2. Yes, sometimes an ingredient is hard to find, but having good PR relations with the suppliers, in the end we get it. I get the ingredients that I use from some local suppliers and a few from suppliers who import them from different countries.

3. Moscow is a perfect gourmet city; what is lacking, as far as I understand, is only the use of more local products, meatless products and ingredients.

4. My cuisine is good for Moscow because I use more fresh, natural and organic herbs and spices and many vegetarian ingredients.

5. Being born in the Himalayan Mountain region of India, in my childhood I used to go fishing in the river. Eating the fresh fish with just salt and lemon from our pocket or just barbecuing them developed my interest in cooking in those early days. Later, after high school, I went on vacation to my father’s resort, which used to be open just during the summertime in a mountain valley called Bhojbas. From then onwards, I was interacting with different people from around the world and knowing the ingredients they used to bring with them sometimes, using them at my restaurants with local products. From this moment, cooking became my hobby. After graduation, I did further studies in hotel management for three years and, after that, an apprenticeship at the world-famous, award-winning resort Ananda in the Himalayas, and I worked for many of the best restaurants and hotels.

6. One challenge of running a restaurant in a hotel is that the guest has the highest expectations. Another is to retain skilled cooks because after working for a period of time they get good market value.

7. Prices at Ginkgo are not higher than in some stand-alone restaurants of a similar class in Moscow. It is not always the case that hotel restaurants are so expensive. There are more stand-alone restaurants that have higher prices. But yes, hotel restaurants can be slightly expensive because the quality of ingredients and standard of service are very high, and we hire the best-skilled team of people.

Yoshitaka ENMEI, Megu at Lotte Hotel Moscow (Japanese cuisine)

1. At Megu, I always try to make special dishes, special promotions. From time to time, we get new, rare products to give a new choice to our guests. Now I’m working on a new menu with new dishes. Starting in June, we are going to have a special Japanese-style summer dessert that you can’t try anywhere else.

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BBQ corporate party birthday anniversary wedding conference meeting
in Moscow. It’s Shiratama Zenzai and is made of sweet red anuki beans and sweet rice flour topped with kinako (soybean flour) and served with chocolate truffles, suzu salt ice cream and macha granite. Other new dishes will be available on the menu very soon.

2. At Megu, we use only the finest ingredients from all over the world. That’s why it’s very difficult sometimes to deliver, but we always try to find a way to do that, to satisfy and surprise our guests with something new and unique. A lot of ingredients we bring directly from Japan, like kanzuri (red chili pepper paste), fresh wasabi root, different kinds of miso, special soy sauce, etc.

3. Here in Moscow there are few restaurants that use high-quality ingredients. I think here it’s one of the main problems in the restaurant business. Even going to a fine restaurant, you don’t have a guarantee that all the products are fresh. But during these two years that I’ve been living in Moscow, I’ve noticed that the food culture is getting better and better. For me, food is an art. The best thing for every good chef is when the guest can feel passion eating the food. In Moscow, there are a few places I’ve visited where you can really get this feeling.

4. Japanese cuisine has been very popular in Moscow already for many years. There are a lot of restaurants serving sushi and other dishes in a Japanese style with a regular presentation. Megu Moscow brought Japanese cuisine to a new level. After visiting Megu, a lot of guests are pretty surprised at the level of the food and at dish presentations that are very unique, beautiful and different from other Japanese restaurants.

5. I always liked to eat tasty food and to discover something new for myself. After some time I realized that I don’t only want to explore the dishes, but also to try to cook. I decided to go and work in a restaurant as a chef. The more I worked, the more I understood that cooking is what I really want to do, to make people happy preparing dishes for them. I’ve worked in many places and, after a while, got a proposal from Megu to go to Moscow.

6. Megu Moscow is the first franchise project of the Megu brand, although we are very connected to the hotel and its performance standards. But since we have our own concept and internal rules that are accepted by the hotel, the system works well. Most of our guests are from outside, which is a good sign, because it’s very difficult to pack restaurants and bring them popularity if they’re in a hotel. I think we’re on the right track. Also, we have a lot of hotel guests from all over the world. Many of them already know about Megu and feel at home here. The biggest challenge being in the hotel, I think, is to attract more guests by maintaining the quality and performance.

7. I think luxury hotels with high-level standards, facilities, interior features, a good location, the best restaurants, rooms, etc., have the same level of pricing. In Moscow, everything is very expensive. For instance, at Megu, we get rare ingredients from different parts of the world; we’re using handmade chinaware, unique plates, which you can see only here, and everything is really expensive. But we do it for our guests to give them the best dining experience.

Oleg CHESSNOVO.
Chekhonte at InterContinental Moscow Tverskaya (Russian cuisine)

I’m excited to transform traditional and rustic presentations of Russian cuisine into more personalized ones, juxtaposing flavors and ingredients to surprise and excite guests. The Chekhonte restaurant offers a chef-driven, contemporary take on traditional Russian cuisine, recounting local family traditions and original recipes in a modern-day setting. Among signature dishes as a cold starter, I would mention the traditional Russian trilogy herring salad with violet potatoes, the mimosa roll with cold smoked eel and the Olivier salad with crayfish necks in string beans. As a main course, I would mention curried Baikal freshwater omul baked in rye pastry with vegetable pearls and crayfish sauce, or the stewed Dagestani lamb shank with green-buckwheat tabbouleh and pumpkin with coriander sauce.

2. Yes, it’s not easy to find. We always do a tasting of the products from different suppliers and choose the best one.

3. I would say there is a lack of really professional critics, something like Michelin.

4. Since the beginning of my tenure, I’ve seen my role in creating innovative Russian cuisine to be discovered within the walls of the hotel, utilizing the freshest seasonal ingredients and only local produce. I think it’s a good fit for Moscow, as modern Russian cuisine can be interesting both to hotel guests and to Muscovites.

5. I began my career at the tender age of 18, working in various restaurants in Omsk, Russia. Looking to fulfill my love for the culinary arts, I moved to Moscow for an opportunity to join the Marriott Moscow Grand Hotel. Over four years, I went from a banquet chef at the Samobranka restaurant to demi chef de partie of the Grand Alexander restaurant, which is acclaimed as one of Moscow’s premier French fine-dining venues. I also boast experience at noted culinary programs including La Coline in France and the Michelin-star restaurant La Rive in Holland.

6. The main challenge is that I oversee not only the Chekhonte restaurant; as InterContinental Moscow Tverskaya executive chef, I’m also responsible for the daily culinary operations of the entire hotel, including the banquets facility, P-Square Bar and the hotel’s 24-hour room service.

7. I would not say that the Chekhonte restaurant is expensive. I think the prices totally correspond to the quality of the food and the level of ingredients that we use, the presentation and the excellent service of the five-star hotel InterContinental Moscow Tverskaya.

Vlad VERSLANOV.
Cafe Swiss and Lighthouse at Swissotel Krasnye Holmy (European cuisine)

1. Summer is finally here, and we welcome it with new tastes at our Cafe Swiss restaurant and Lighthouse (the lobby-bar of the Swissotel Krasnye Holmy), as well as room service. For salads we offer a delicious spinach and strawberry salad with smoked turkey. It is flavored with olive oil, apple vinegar and the juice from an orange. As for soups, it is time to introduce cold soups to our guests. Try our new honeydew gazpacho with the finest herbs and lime juice or chilled tomato soup with rhabarb. Poached black codfish with bok choy, pine nuts, tomatoes and olives would be a perfect choice for the main course.

2. Indeed, quality ingredients are not an easy thing to be found, especially if we talk about fresh fruits and vegetables. But we work with reliable providers who supply us with high-quality and certified food products.

3. Though at first sight it might seem that Moscow is a mecca of different cuisines, with a variety of restaurants and cafes, it turns out to be a bit different when you take a closer look. Moscow still lacks good restaurants affordable for the majority of its residents.

4. A lot of foreign guests stay at the Swissotel Krasnye Holmy. Especially in winter, when we receive our first visitors, they seek new “purely Russian” tastes. Due to a great variety of dishes on our menu, they can gain a new, pleasant experience with the local cuisine.

5. Well, though my father was against it, I decided to choose the same profession to which he has devoted 50 years of his life.

6. The main challenge is variety, to combine the different preferences of our guests who come to stay with us from all parts of the world. What could be more of a challenge?

7. Nowadays it is more of a stereotype perception. The situation with pricing is changing. We offer, for example, quite a reasonable price (for a five-star hotel) of 25 euros for our business lunches.

These interviews have been edited for style and clarity.
Perhaps one of the most decadent pleasures available after a Moscow winter is lounging on one of the many restaurant terraces that have opened for the warm season. To get you started, we picked out a few of the capital's best places for basking.

OLIVKOVY PLYAZH

As a recent Time Out magazine cover exclaimed, some local places make you feel “as if you weren’t in Moscow.” Olivkovy Plyazh, a Ginza Project cafe that opened in Gorky Park last year, is one of these establishments. Sunbathing on the shores of the Moskva River between real olive trees, on a patio with a crisp, wooden design concept, it’s easy to feel like you’ve just arrived at a resort in Miami or Saint Tropez. Aside from the view of stacked-up office buildings across the river, there’s little here to ruin this precious fantasy. The experience does come at a price. To rent a deck chair for the day costs 600
rubles ($30), or you can sit at a regular table. Cucumber soup will run you 220 rubles, a shrimp pita 370, and a tuna burger 520. A ginger lemonade costs 290, and beer is around the same price.

While the prime location in Gorky Park and the European-style facilities alone are enough to launch Olivkovy Plyazh onto the list of elite summer terraces, the café also offers an enticing musical program. It regularly features promoters who organize bookings for the club Vanilla Ninja. The music complements the design and location to a tee, and people are guaranteed to be dancing.

Good service is not one of the café’s selling points. To order, we once had to signal we were ready four times to various servers over the course of 30 minutes. While the prime location in Gorky Park and the European-style facilities alone are enough to launch Olivkovy Plyazh onto the list of elite summer terraces, the café also offers an enticing musical program. It regularly features promoters who organize bookings for the club Vanilla Ninja. The music complements the design and location to a tee, and people are guaranteed to be dancing.

Strelska is the favorite of expats, yuppies and the city’s interesting breed of rich hipsters. A bustling rooftop patio nestled inside the former Red October chocolate factory, Strelska is simply a classy locale with massive square-footage spread out over two stories, big enough to support the crowds that have begun to gather to watch the European Football Championship on the jumbo projector screen, seated in rows auditorium-style.

The bartender mixed my friend’s Long Island iced tea with surprising slowness, and the drink came out heavy on sour, light on Coke. However, he was happy to add more of the soda at our request.

If the face control downstairs won’t let you in on a weekend because they say it’s too busy, tell them your friend says the second-floor terrace has room. Strelska has no way to notify its doormen of traffic conditions up there, and why should you miss out on account of this silliness?

Once you do make it inside, be sure to check out the view of the Moskva River and Christ the Savior Cathedral. In fact, Strelska itself is a sight to behold when you cross the bridge over the river. On weekends at Strelska, you can watch the sunrise, a life-affirming experience among the terrace’s bright and modern decor.

Prostiye Veshchi

Just from hearing the name of this café, which means “Simple Things,” you begin to envision an atmosphere promoting a gusto for life and willingness to give. As Kurt Vonnegut put it, “Enjoy the little things in life, for one day you’ll look back and realize they were the big things.”

And if the typical clientele here is a well-heeled set worrying over the big deals of their daily working lives, the gastropub has assumed the task of returning their attention to homely pleasures. Prostiye Veshchi has even managed to open a second location without losing sense of immediately), Strelska is the favorite of expats, yuppies and the city’s interesting breed of rich hipsters. A bustling rooftop patio nestled inside the former Red October chocolate factory, Strelska is simply a classy locale with massive square-footage spread out over two stories, big enough to support the crowds that have begun to gather to watch the European Football Championship on the jumbo projector screen, seated in rows auditorium-style.

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Prostiye Veshchi Prostiye Veshchi
Russia’s Silver and Gold

ANCIENT ‘SILVER RING’ CITIES SHOW A DIFFERENT SIDE OF RUSSIAN HISTORY THAN THE GOLDEN RING.

BY ALEC LUHN

Just as Russian literature has its Golden Age and Silver Age of authors, Russia has its Golden Ring and Silver Ring of historic cities. Although “Silver Ring” is not a widely used phrase, it’s a convenient label for Veliky Novgorod and the ancient cities once under its rule. And just as the authors of the Silver Age are generally not as well-known as Golden Age giants like Gogol, Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, the so-called Silver Ring is also less-known than its counterpart, a route frequented by both Russian and foreign tourists. For the intrepid traveler interested in history, Silver Ring cities like Veliky Novgorod, Pskov and Torzhok offer a fresh alternative to Golden Ring tourist magnets such as Suzdal, Yaroslavl and Vladimir.

Located to the north and west of Moscow, the Silver Ring dates to the same era as the Golden Ring. The history and architecture of these cities, however, contrasts with that of the Golden Ring cities, which were ruled by northeastern principalities based in Rostov, Suzdal and Vladimir.

Tourists should visit the cities of Novgorod Rus because “the history of Russia doesn’t stop with the history of Moscow,” said Tatyana Khmelnik, a journalist who runs the Russian travel and history site regionavtica.ru.

After declaring its dependence from Kiev in 1136, Novgorod became the center of a republic that absorbed the principalities of Pskov and eventually ruled a swath of northern Russia stretching from Estonia to the Urals. In 1478, Ivan the Great annexed the republic to the Grand Duchy of Moscow, which had already become the center of power in what was previously the Vladimir-Suzdal principality.

The separate history of the ancient cities of northern Russia, which had closer political and economic ties to Europe, can be seen today in the buildings that remain, Khmelnik said. “The architecture here is unique. It’s different from the architecture of Moscow” and the Golden Ring, she said.

Northern architecture “is more austere and less cluttered,” she explained. Notable examples include the white lime-

stone walls of the kremlin in Pskov and the Novgorod kremlin’s aspen roofs, which gleamed silver once they had aged.

HEADING NORTH

Although Khmelnik believes that the term “Silver Ring” oversimplifies the separate history of the north, she listed a number of ancient cities once ruled by Novgorod that contain impressive sights, including Ivangoord, Pechory, Porkhov, Pskov, Schlisselburg, Staraya Ladoga, Staraya Russia, Toropets, Torzhok, Veliky Novgorod, Vologda and Vyborg, Staraya Ladoga and Veliky Novgorod, reportedly founded in the eight and ninth centuries, respectively, have long been popular with tourists, but the other cities are lesser known. All of them are usually less touristy than the major Golden Ring cities. “Massive tourist raids take place in our ancestors’ places of glory. Yaroslavl, Vladimir, Rostov, Suzdal, Uglich ... you can go on and on listing the key centers
of Vladimir-Suzdal Rus,” wrote author Yelena Koryolova in a 2009 article on “Around the Country With a Backpack,” a website dedicated to travel in Russia (turfront.ru). “But what about the no-less-ancient cities of Novgorod Rus?”

A visit typically makes for a weekend trip. It takes about seven hours to drive to Veliky Novgorod from Moscow and longer for the cities farther north. The church-filled city of Torzhok, however, is only about 3.5 hours’ drive from Moscow. Khmelnik suggested combining a few cities into a weekend trip and spending the night in Pskov or Veliky Novgorod. These two cities have the best lodging options, although travelers should make bookings in advance, she said. She also recommended basing out of St. Petersburg, which is closer to most of these cities and has better road connections.

Some of the cities are easily accessible by public transport, but the smaller ones often require braving local transportation (a better option is renting a taxi, Khmelnik said). From Moscow, night trains run daily to Pskov and Veliky Novgorod, a train runs almost every day to Torzhok, the daily Lev Tolstoi express train stops in Vyborg, and a multitude of trains bound for the far north stop in Vologda.

VELIKY NOVGOROD AND STARAYA RUSSA

As the center of the Novgorod Republic and one of the largest ancient cities in the Silver Ring, Veliky Novgorod is an obvious place to start exploring this part of Russian history. The city features an impressive number of ancient buildings, including Russia’s oldest existing kremlin and the Cathedral of Saint Sophia, which is one of the oldest stone structures in the nation. Many of the historic buildings in Novgorod, including the kremlin, were constructed with red brick, since the city had no abundant limestone reserves to draw upon.

Early on, Novgorod was the northern center of power in Kievan Rus. Three years after the city was first mentioned in the chronicles in 859, the conflict-prone Slavic tribes here allegedly invited the Viking chieftain Rurik to end the fighting and come rule over them. Rurik founded a dynasty that ruled Kievan Rus, Muscovy and then the Russian tsardom until the 17th century. Novgorod was the seat of power for many early Russian princes besides Rurik, including Alexander Nevsky.

Beginning in the 12th century, a vech, or popular assembly, started to decide questions of governance in what some historians interpret as an early form of democracy. The veche summoned princes to preside over what came to be known as the Novgorod Republic, dismissing them if they fell short of expectations. At about the same time, Novgorod also became the easternmost outpost of the Hanseatic League, supplying furs to a trade network spanning Northern Europe.

A huge archaeological project in Novgorod known as the Troitsky excavation has unearthed more than 20 manor houses constructed between the 10th and 15th centuries, along with numerous artifacts including a book of psalms from the 11th century. Visitors can see the excavation for themselves on a guided tour offered during the summer every day except Mondays at 6 p.m. (5 p.m. on Sundays). The tour starts from the Krasnaya Izba visitor center, which is also a resource for other information about the city.

Visitors to Veliky Novgorod may also want to jump over to Staraya Russa, on the other side of Lake Ilmen. Once a wealthy salt-trading city and later a well-known resort town, Staraya Russa holds architecture dating from several periods of its history. Examples include the 800-year-old Transfiguration Monastery, as well as the Darovoe country estate, where Fyodor Dostoyevsky wrote “The Brothers Karamazov.” The estate is now a museum (darovoe.ru).

PSKOV, PECHORY AND IVANGOROD

Located about 60 kilometers from the Estonian border, Pskov has historically been a gateway to Russia. It’s worth visiting for its unique architecture as well as its proximity to the caves and monastery of Pechory and the border city Ivangorod.

Although Pskov has been attacked and besieged countless times and suffered a destructive Nazi occupation, some of the city’s historic architecture has survived. The kremlin, which dates to the 12th century, still looms majestically above the confluence of the Velikaya and Pskova rivers, with the gleaming white Trinity Cathedral rising within its walls. At one time, the city was encircled in several sets of walls, some sections of which have been restored and opened to visitors. Finally, several ancient churches are scattered throughout the area.

According to chronicles from the time, Pskov was already a city when Rurik came to the area in 862. It gained its independence from the Novgorod Republic in the 12th century. Pskov soon developed a system of governance similar to that of Novgorod, with a vech choosing the state’s princes. In 1397, the vech adopted a legal code that became one of the bases for Russian government’s legal code of 1497. In 1510, Vasily Ill subjugated Pskov to the Grand Duchy of Moscow, dissolving the vech and relocating 300 boyar families to Moscow.

Pechory and the famous caves that give the town its name are a 45-minute drive from Pskov, near the Estonian border. The Pskovo-Pechersky Monastery was founded over the caves, much like the Kiev Pechersk Lavra in the 15th century, but monks had been living underground here long before this. The caves serve as an underground cemetery, and it is said
that more than 10,000 people are buried here. Originally, the monastery doubled as a border fortress.

Pskov can also serve as a launching point to Ivangorod, a border city near the Baltic Sea. The drive up the P60 highway takes about three hours and runs along Pskov Lake through a landscape of dunes and quaint towns and past a ruined fortress. In Ivangorod, visitors will find a large, very-much-intact fortress built by Ivan III, among other sights.

Information: pskovgorod.ru
Lodging: Mini-Hotel Gnezdo.
38 Ulitsa Vladimirskaia.
+7 8112 777 900. hotelpskov.ru

TORZHOK
Those who don’t want to venture as far from Moscow can head to Torzhok, a city dating to the ninth century. Located 3.5 hours up the Moscow-St. Petersburg highway, the city would make a good day trip.

A multitude of pastel-colored historic buildings remain standing here, prompting Khmelnik to describe Torzhok as a “toy city.”

Many of these buildings “aren’t kept up, but there’s a provincial charm,” she said.

Churches and monasteries account for a great number of the historic structures. Most well-known of these is the Borisoglebsky Monastery, with its motley assemblage of soaring towers. One of the oldest in Russia, the monastery was built on the bank of the Tverstsa River starting in the 11th century. On the other bank of the river is the green-roofed Voskresensky Abbey, which dates to at least the 16th century.

Torzhok is also famous as a traditional center of gold embroidery. If you go, keep an eye out for examples of this intricate craft on display or for sale at souvenir stands around the city.

Information: torzhok-adm.ru
By ALEXANDER BRATERSKY

Veteran canoe-racing champion Mikhail Orekhov recalls crying when he wasn't accepted to train in competitive rowing as a boy. “I would have been like those guys in the film about Mark Zuckerberg today,” Orekhov joked, referring to “The Social Network,” which showed the twin brothers who claimed Zuckerberg stole their idea for Facebook rowing crew at an international competition.

Orekhov was able to start sport-canoe training, however, after he was spotted by another passing coach. “It is a sport that I have enjoyed because it has two things: water and nature,” said Orekhov, who came to Moscow’s Krylatskoye rowing canal to watch the Sprint Canoe-Kayak World Cup in early June. He currently coaches canoe athletes.

The combination of water and nature can be enjoyed by amateurs, too. Many schools and bodies of water in Moscow afford opportunities for learning to paddle sport canoes or kayaks, as well as rowing in boats with oars. Water sports are just one of many ways to get outdoors and get active during the summer months.

PADDLING AND ROWING
Hundreds of spectators, many of them with children, watched the races at Krylatskoye. The event featured participants from former Soviet states such as Azerbaijan and Latvia and evoked the glory of the once-powerful Soviet paddling and rowing schools, which won top world competitions.

The Soviet rowing school was where massiveness turned into quality,” said German Prostov, a rowing veteran who lives in Seattle and still practices rowing as a hobby.

Although it takes years to become a professional canoe or kayak racer, those who want to learn the basics of the sport can do so quickly. It takes three months of intensive training to achieve visible results, according to coaches. Participants should be physically fit and have a desire to learn, said Orekhov, who also gives lessons to beginners. Getting started doesn’t require much investment in equipment, since training schools often have on hand old-fashioned boats that are good for training purposes.

One coach said 13 is a good age to start canoeing, and many people paddle in older adulthood to stay fit. Evidence of the fitness benefits of this sport can be found in the appearance of Russian paddlers, including older men, whose lean but muscular physique diverges from the hefty look of many aging Russian men.

Canoeing professionals said that training in this sport improves performance in many other sports, from skiing to soccer, since you develop several muscle groups while paddling.

Those who find it hard to learn sport canoeing or kayaking can get out on the water on a dragon boat, a vessel of Chinese origin that holds about 20 paddlers. Just like in many other countries, dragon boats have become popular among amateur boating enthusiasts here and are often used by companies in sporting competitions for their employees. Oil giant LUKoil is one of several companies that organizes dragon-boat championships among its staff.

If you feel like you are ready to learn to paddle sport canoes or kayaks, you can find training centers at the Krylatskoye rowing canal. Orekhov gives classes there Tuesdays and Wednesdays at 7 p.m. Another option is to take classes with the Moscow City Canoeing and Kayaking Federation, which also teaches amateurs.

Coach Andrei Stramnov teaches every day except Wednesday at Serebryannovinogradny Pond.

Krylatskoye rowing canal
2 Ulitsa Krylatskaya (metro station Krylatskoye). Coach Mikhail Orekhov. +7 985 764 4333.

Serebryannovinogradny Pond
Izmailowskoye Shosse (metro station Partizanskaya). Coach Andrei Stramnov. +7 916 415 4209.

moscanoe.ru

HORSEBACK RIDING
“I love Dictator and he is the best,” reads a message from someone named Nastya on the site of the popular Bitsa Horseback Riding Center. The message isn’t about politics; it refers to a horse at the center, which is well-known for giving riding lessons to horse lovers.

Located in the southwest of Moscow, Bitsa is a place for those who don’t want to just pay for a ride on one of the weary-looking horses that occasionally are brought downtown for tourists, but would rather take actual riding lessons.

The complex, built for the 1980 Olympics in Moscow, is the largest such complex located within a European city.
It offers lessons for beginners as well as for people who want to pursue a career as a rider. A one-hour lesson for a beginner costs $30 on any horse plus an extra $20 if a person wants to select a particular horse. A monthly pass will cost around 28,000 rubles ($840), according to the club's rather complicated price list.

Horseback riding, which former mayor Yuri Luzhkov and his billionaire wife, Yelena Baturina, helped popularize, is on the rise in the capital: Along with Bitsa, more clubs here are offering horseback riding at a reasonable price. One of these is Zolotaya Podkova, a horse club located near metro station Botanichesky Sad. The club not only offers riding classes starting at $30 on weekdays but also trains riders for competitions.

MORE CLUBS ARE OFFERING RIDING LESSONS AT A REASONABLE PRICE.

Bitsa Horseback Riding Center
33 Balalaiikskaya Prospekt (metro station Chertanovskaya). +7 (495) 318 0282.
kz BITSA.ru
Zolotaya Podkova
53 Berezovaya Alleya (metro station Vladykin). +7 (926) 607-01-01.
gold-podkova.ru

BIKE RIDING

Cycling is another sport on the rise in Moscow. Recently, the combination of bike riding and the Battle of Borodino proved a hit, as 1,000 bicyclists took to the streets on June 3 for Moscow Bike Night. Riders listened to a radio broadcast about the historical points along the route, which commemorated the French invasion in 1812 that was stopped by Russian forces at Borodino, outside Moscow.

The event was organized by the city authorities and was clearly intended to draw attention to bike riding in Moscow. The city is seen by many locals and tourists as not very bike-friendly and lacking in roads suitable for cycling. In addition, Moscow motorists, who have never been known for their restraint, are sometimes rude to cyclists on the road.

FUN FOR THE KIDS

As parents root on their team in the European Football Championship this summer, kids can learn to play the beloved sport with the Football Galaxy club, a partner of the soccer team Spartak. The club organizes various camps and training sessions. Weekly lessons take place at the Spartak Stadium field in Sokolniki park on Saturdays and Sundays.

Football Galaxy, 23 Malaya Oleny Pereulok, bldg. 1a. +7 (903) 300 7000. football-galaxy.com

Fencing is a sport worth trying, especially for those who like historical films and adventure stories. The sport also stresses respectful manners, as fencing was once part of the classical training that noble children in Russia, France and Britain underwent. There are many good fencing clubs in Moscow that welcome children, among them Victoria-El, which teaches children from 8 to 13 years old. En Garde fencing club, which has an English language site, also offers classes for children.

Victoria-El, 16 Leningradsky Prospect, bldg. 21 (metro station Prospekt Dimitrova). +7 (495) 226 1951. www.fencingclub.ru
En Garde. 4 Sireneny Bulvar (metro station Cherkiuzeskaya). +7 (499) 166 5341 . club.fencing.ru/cntnt/index_eng.html

Any kid who dreams about being a race-car driver would feel right at home on one of the city’s go-kart tracks. Karting was popular in the Soviet Union, especially in the Baltic states, where the first mass-produced Soviet go-kart was made in 1964. The sport soon grew popular in Russia as well. Whether kids want to take a few spins around the track or race competitively, this thrilling outdoor sport is perfect for the summertime. One place where aspiring karters can learn to drive is the Pilot Russian Karting School, which has the largest karting track in the city. Children from ages 5 to 15 can take classes once a week for 7,500 rubles ($230) per month.

Pilot Russian Karting School. 52 Proezd Shkolskogo. +7 (495) 772 2589. ruskart.ru

If your child loves to climb trees, he or she will probably like rock climbing even more. Try the Dvorets Detskogo Sporta Rock-Climbing Club, where kids can practice climbing on walls up to 16 meters high. Some classes are taught by Salavat Akhmetov, a Soviet and world champion. The club is based at Moscow’s RockZona climbing wall.


In-line skates have caught on in Russia, and several schools teach youngsters how to skate properly. In Moscow, many professional instructors have performed at the international level, such as two-time world champion roller skater Kirill Ryazantsev, who manages his own roller school. The school’s main teaching place is Poklonnaya Gora and its many asphalt paths, although skating professionals can also visit students at their place of residence. A course of 12 one-hour lessons costs 5,500 rubles.

Kirill Ryazantsev Roller School. +7 (916) 671 0543. rekil.ru

The bike-riding situation has prompted city authorities to invite Danish urbanist Jan Gehl to bring his ideas for solving these problems. In the meantime, those who want to join the growing numbers of intrepid cyclists in the capital can easily buy or rent a bike.

One of the best places to rent is the legendary Gorky Park, which has been given a major facelift thanks to the efforts of the head of the city’s culture ministry, Sergei Kapkov. The park has many bike paths, and rental places offer scooters and a wide selection of bikes for adults and children, with prices starting at 200 rubles ($6) an hour. More stylish Electra bikes are available for a higher price. There are also tandem bikes, which rent for 450 rubles ($13) the first hour, and 200 rubles for each additional hour. Those who want to rent must leave their passport and a deposit guarantee of 1,500 rubles ($44) for a children’s bike.

If you want to ride in style like a true president, electric golf carts are available for rent at a rate of 300 rubles for 15 minutes. Golf carts were first introduced to Russia by former president Boris Yeltsin, who received them as a gift from President George H.W. Bush.

Bikes can also be rented at other parks around the capital, including the All-Russia Exhibition Center at metro station VDNKh and Sokolniki Park at metro station Sokolniki, for prices starting at 200 rubles an hour.

Gorky Park bike rental
9 Ulitsa Krymsky Val (metro station Oktjabrskaya). Rental stations located throughout, including near Pionersky Pond.
park-gorkogo.com/sport/bikarent.phtml

All-Russia Exhibition Center
119 Prospekt Mira (metro station VDNKh). Velorenta rental station located to the left of the main entrance. +7 (499) 700 2586, velorenta.ru/4dhtml/vdnh.php

Sokolniki Park
1 Ulitsa Sokolnichesky Val (metro station Sokolniki). Rental stations located throughout. park.sokolniki.com
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