If you are like most travelers, probably the only time you stayed at an airport hotel was when a flight was delayed or cancelled — and the hotel was the sad end of a miserable day. First you and several thousand other stranded souls milled about the airport, hoping for good news. Then, when it was certain that the typhoon/blizzard/volcanic ash cloud was there to stay, you spent another several hours fighting the airline’s refusal to pay for a hotel. By the time you gave up and got to the only hotel near the airport with an available room, it was after midnight. Room service stopped delivering five minutes before you called. The lobby bar was closed. You sat on a lumpy bed, eating stale pretzels from the mini-bar washed down with beer, and tried to channel surf over the sound of an energetically amorous couple in the next room. It was not a happy experience.

Flash forward to Moscow, 2014. Forget everything you thought you knew about airport hotels. A hub of hotels near and in Moscow’s Sheremetyevo Airport is providing a completely different level of service, convenience and comfort. First of all, they are located near businesses in the north of the city and an easy 30-minute trip on the Air Express to central Moscow. They all provide a variety of meeting rooms so you can fly in, meet with partners, and fly out in a day or two. And they de-stress departures from traffic-jammed, blizzard-prone, eternally under-construction Moscow: Start your vacation early by checking in the night before you fly out.

The newest of the batch is the sleek and futuristic Radisson Blu, which is directly connected to the terminals and has almost 400 rooms with every amenity, a plethora of meeting rooms, plus a fitness center, sauna and hammam for relaxation. Coolest convenience: three-hour laundry service. For more information, see www.radissonblu.com/hotel-sheremetyevo-moscow.

Nearby is the oldest of the group — Novotel, built 1992 as Accor’s first Accor hotel in Russia, but recently completely renovated and updated. The terminals can be reached on foot over a pedestrian crosswalk or by free hotel shuttle. There are plenty of meeting rooms, if you can bear to leave the pool, sauna, hammam, fitness club and billiard room. Coolest convenience: children are free and have special play areas. For more information, see www.novotel.com/gb/hotel-1349-novotel-moscow-sheremetyevo-airport.

The Park Inn by Radisson is also a very short walk to terminals D, E, and F, although most travelers prefer the free hotel shuttle. It offers cheerful rooms, a large choice of meeting venues, free Wi-Fi and 24-hour room service at a cost that’s easy on the wallet. Coolest convenience: a day rate to refresh and regroup between flights. For more information, see www.parkinn.com/airport-hotel-moscow.

A bit further away is the Sheraton Moscow Sheremetyevo, a striking red, white and blue building in a park-like setting. It’s a quick five to 15 minutes to the airport terminals by free shuttle. Here you can choose between traditional meeting rooms or an outdoor tent for your event. A pool, hamman, sauna, Jacuzzi, fitness center and healthy menu help travelers keep up with their fitness goals. Coolest convenience: absolutely soundproof rooms. For more information, see www.sheratonmoscowairport.com

If you need a place to crash for a couple of hours, try the V Express Capsule Hotel. It has two pods of capsules in the airport buildings — one on the fifth floor of the Air Express terminal and the other in the transit zone of Terminal E — where you can sleep, shower, watch TV and surf the Internet from four to 24 hours in clean, simple rooms with or without windows. Coolest convenience: it’s steps away. For more information, see www.eng.v-exp.ru.

With options like these, you might look forward to a good blizzard.
The worsening economic situation in Russia is bad news for everyone, but it has been particularly hard on hotels, which depend on business travelers more than tourists.

But as both English and Russian proverbs have it: Nothing is so bad as not to be good for something. To attract more and different guests, hotels are lowering rates, particularly on the weekends, and devising a variety of special offers. With savings from the favorable currency exchange rates, a weekend getaway at a posh hotel in St. Petersburg is suddenly affordable.

First things first: Getting there. The easiest and cheapest way is by train, either in less than four hours on the high-speed Sapsan train (about $120-160 round trip) or overnight on the Red Arrow (about $120-210 round trip, depending on which of three class you travel). Arrival at Moscow Station in St. Petersburg puts you right on Nevsky Prospekt.

Air travel is also cheap, with flights on five carriers from Vnukovo, Domodedovo and Sheremetyevo airports to Pulkovo airport several times a day, ranging in price from about $210 to $300 round trip. The flight is a little over an hour, but the time spent in airport transfers and security procedures add up.

Next up: Choosing where to stay. Here is a wish list of newly built or renovated hotels in St. Petersburg to try for an indulgent getaway weekend.

- **Crowne Plaza Ligovsky Hotel**: This new construction, 4-star hotel is a quick ten-minute walk from Moscow Train Station and a minute or two from Nevsky Prospekt. Inside are contemporary interiors with a nod to style moderne, restaurant and bar, and a fitness center if you need to work off the breakfast pastries. The Crowne Plaza is serious about sleep: you’ll be cocooned in a quiet zone (no annoying housekeeping noises) and provided with an aromatherapy kit to drift off and stay in dreamland. Specials are under $100 a night. For more information, see www.ihg.com/crowneplaza/hotels/us/en/st-petersburg/ledly/hotel-detail.

- **Corinthia Hotel St. Petersburg**: This just finished a €90 million euro renovation of two 19th century buildings on Nevsky Prospekt. The rooms are modern, but the service is old-fashioned in a really good way: a glass of champagne at check-in, blinis and red caviar for breakfast, 24-hour room service, fitness club, sauna and nearby spa. The hotel is offering several specials for about $115 a night. For more information, see: www.corinthia.com/ru/hotels/st-petersburg.

- **Trezzini Palace Hotel**: This small special hotel deals with fabulous exchange rates lure travelers to the Northern capital, Peterhof, where Russia’s imperial families went for weekend – or seasonal – getaways. The hotel was built in 1723 by and for Domenico Trezzini, the chief architect of the state buildings on Vasilievsky Island. Some of the hotel’s 21 rooms have spectacular views of St. Isaac’s Cathedral across the Neva. If you are bored with your view, you can order a massage or room service, or even ask for a helicopter tour of the city. Some of the many weekend specials bring the rate down to about $210 per night. For more information, see: http://trezzininaplace.com.

- **Four Seasons Hotel Lion Palace**: A luxuriously restored 19th century apartment house next to St. Isaac’s Cathedral that was originally designed by the same architect, Auguste de Montferrand. Two playful lions guard the entrance. The opulent public areas have been restored, and almost 200 rooms and suites have been created – many with spectacular views. The fitness club, sauna, steam bath and 4th-floor pool under a glass ceiling vie with the spa for your attention. Remember to venture out into the city. With special offers, rooms are about $230 a night. For more information, see: www.fourseasons.com/stpetersburg.

Spend an afternoon in the Hermitage on a weekend jaunt to St. Petersburg.


**NEWS IN BRIEF**

**It’s the Economy**

Russia’s various economic woes have hurt the top category of hotels in
Russia. In Moscow, five-star hotels reported a decrease in income of about 15 percent as compared to last year. The occupancy rate in the capital’s highest-rated hotels from January to September was at about 65 percent, as compared to 66 percent in the same period in the previous year. Four-star hotels showed even worse figures, but two- and three-star hotels managed to maintain their clients with occupancy rates of about 70 percent.

**New Hotels and Brands Opening**

Despite the economic downturn, major international brands are pushing ahead with new openings. In Moscow, the Four Seasons has opened their first hotel in the Russia capital — the Four Season Hotel Moscow opened its doors as the rebuilt Hotel Moskva right off Red Square. In the north of the city on Leningradsky Shosse, Doubletree by Hilton opened its first Russian hotel. Voronezh is home to the first Holiday Inn Express, a 145-room hotel that is part of an agreement between IHG and Regional Hotel Chain. And the Carlson Rezidor Hotel Group opened its second hotel at Moscow Sheremetyevo Airport, the Radisson Blu Hotel, which is directly connected to the terminal buildings. This is the company’s seventh hotel in Moscow.

**New Clients, New Services**

With traditional clientele from Western Europe likely to be at lower levels for the near future, Russia’s hotels have been tweaking their services to appeal more to different client bases. Moscow’s Aemotor Hotel is the first hotel in Moscow to be certified as a “Halal Hotel” by the Islamic Council of Russia. The hotel has special kitchen facilities for storage and preparation of halal products, prayer rooms for men and women, and room features for Muslim guests. The draw of marketing, Lyubov Shuyan, said that nearly 15 percent of their guests are from Muslim countries and this will make their stay at the hotel more comfortable.

The Moscow Times

When guests walk into a hotel, they want everything to be functional, clean, and convenient. They notice the décor and have an opinion – about the restaurant. They know exactly what they want in a business center and have preferences for the gym. Travelers think about everything in a hotel, but they almost never think about how the hotel came into being. There’s a story behind it, and if the hotel is in Russia, chances are it’s a long story.

So it is with Moscow’s new Doubletree by Hilton. It opened in September 2014, but the idea for the hotel appeared almost a decade ago. The idea came to a group of investors, including Anton Dolotin, one of the co-founders and owners of the Royal Yacht Club and Vodny, conceived the project as a great site for a hotel. He was charged with overseeing the project. By the time the project was ready to go, it was right after the 2008 crisis. In an interview to The Moscow Times, Dolotin said, “We knew that according to company rules, European managers had to stay in four-star hotels, so we wanted a four-star brand. And there were a lot of brands to choose from. We talked with every one, but each brand already had their own image in Moscow. We wanted something new.”

In the end, the investors chose Doubletree by Hilton, in part because it was new to the Russian market. “With this brand we had more freedom,” Dolotin said. “I knew that I could be creative.”

The original design for the land parcel — an L-shaped main building surrounded two oval structures — was done by the British architectural firm Fox Linton and then fully articulated by a group of young architects in the Russian firm, Front Architecture. The shape of the buildings and their placement tie together the hotel with the Royal Yacht Club and Vodny Stadion and create an unexpected mini-park and waterfront right off one of Moscow’s main highways, Leningradsky Khvoye Shosse.

The other draw of the Doubletree brand for Dolotin and his group of investors was using Russian materials and furnishings whenever possible, which turned out to be “cheaper and faster — and besides, it was nice to do something for the homeland.”

It was, however, difficult identifying Russian companies that could do the work. For beds, we went around to small production houses — the kind that made kitchen corner units. We gave one company the design and good fabric, and they were able to do a great job.” The trick is getting everything just right was simple. “We were very hands-on,” Dolotin said. “For five years we had a design meeting every week. It was an important event — we discussed everything. What kind of lamps should be in the rooms? Where could they be produced? In the end, about 70 percent of the hotel’s furnishings were made here in Russia.”

But the hardest part of the project had nothing to do with creative decision-making. Dolotin explained, “When Mayor Yuri Luzhkov left, the city did a review of all the open contracts, and it took forever. For three years we had to wrestle with permits and documents. The bureaucracy was awful.”

The result of the team’s 10 years of persistence and personal involvement is a warm and inviting hotel that you can enjoy your check-in chocolate chip cookie by the lobby fireplace — with nearly 300 rooms, a full-service business center, a 24-hour fitness center and pool. A spa with hammam and sauna is set to open early next year. Off the lobby is the Art Hotel restaurant, designed by the prominent English architect Martin Round. Roman Tomyshev serves an international menu. The hotel also offers over 14,000 square feet of flexible meeting and event space, including a pillar-less ballroom and an outdoor piazza.

Even though the hotel was designed to serve Moscow’s business community, Dolotin has a different dream. With the Royal Yacht Club, Beach Club swim center and Vodny Stadion in sight, Dolotin would like the hotel to draw local families for the weekend. “It’s on the Khimki Reservoir, and that’s where we do all our details — people can come for the weekend, rent a bike, go to the beach. I’d like it to be a country resort in the middle of the city.”
True Hospitality

By Michele A. Berdy

On a rainy afternoon in September, dozens of children gathered in the Renaissance Moscow Monarch Hotel to watch their peers perform, join together in creative workshops, and then Chow down a feast that included mini-hamburgers and tiny pizzas. Hotel guests probably didn’t notice anything unusual about the kids, but this wasn’t a typical Moscow play date. Some of the children were with their parents, and the rest were from an orphanage.

A few weeks later, travelers rushing through the rain to one of the train stations on Komsomolskaya ploshchad might have stopped to gape at a strange sight: the usually staid Hilton Leningradskaya Hotel was illuminated a bright pink. Inside, celebrities mingled among a crowd of predominately women, everyone sipping champagne and nibbling on canapes. It looked like any cocktail party – except that everyone wore a pink ribbon, and among the chatter were some serious conversations about breast cancer.

And on another evening, well-dressed patrons of the arts enjoyed an evening of romantic music sung by Oleg Alexandrov in the Penthouse Suite of the Swissotel Krasnye Holm. It was a rather typical cultural evening – except that all the proceeds went to the children’s aid charity Life Line.

Throughout Moscow and Russia, hotels are providing support to myriad charitable organizations, not only by making their venues available for activities, but through a variety of innovative and interactive programs.

Spreading the Love

In 1998, Dubliner Debbie Dreagan came to the Horatlova orphanage in Western Russia to adopt a child and found her life’s work. Her foundation, “To Russia With Love,” has worked to change the lives of the children in Russian orphanages for the better – by improving their living conditions, helping them make relationships with families, providing them assistance and support as they leave their orphanages and go out into the world. About five years ago, Dreagan established a relationship with Bert Fol, then the manager of the Marriott Aurora Hotel. “He sat down with me and said that he wanted to know what they could do that would genuinely benefit the children. He was adamant that he didn’t want a PR stunt for the hotel. Initially their help was tangible: donations of half-used bottles of shampoo, sheets and towels. Then they did a renovation and the wardrobe, carpets, and furniture came to us.”

But over time the hotel’s assistance became more meaningful and involved. “They brought the children in to meet with the kitchen staff, to work with porters, managers, housekeepers. Children were exposed to every kind of employment in the hotel, and the staff really got involved.” Later the Marriott hotels put cash boxes in the lobby and envelopes in the rooms to gather funds for the Irish-registered charity.

Today the Renaissance Monarch Center Hotel, part of the Marriott group, is continuing and expanding the relationship with “To Russia With Love.” General Manager Armin Eberhard said in a recent interview that they would continue to bring children to the hotel for master classes in various aspects of hotel work, but also for parties and opportunities to form deeper relationships with the staff and others.

“What these kids crave most, especially the young ones, is attention,” he said. “It’s tough because you get emotionally attached to them, and there are tears when they leave.” He was pleased with how successful their Saturday afternoon family day was.

“We saw kids and families interacting. It takes away the fear of contact – parents can talk with them, it’s comfortable for them.” And we raised 56,000 rubles for the charity that day. We want to do much more.”

HOTEL AID TO CHARITIES IS INVALUABLE

For Russian charities, the assistance provided by hotels is not just helpful – it’s invaluable. As Roza said recently, “We couldn’t do what we do without the help of hotels. We hold big events with a lot of people, mostly with disabilities, and on our limited budgets we couldn’t do anything without hotel discounts and free services.”

Access for All

Sometimes the greatest gifts a hotel can provide are simply meeting space and rooms that are accessible to their guests. Denise Roza, director of Perspektiva, an organization that provides support and advocacy for people with disabilities, recalls the days when they had to take the doors off bathrooms so that people in wheelchairs could attend events at Moscow hotels. Today Perspektiva has relationships with a number of Moscow hotels, both international brands like the Ritz-Carlton, Holiday Inn and Marriott hotels, and Russian brands, like the Hotel Alpha – places where rooms are accessible and fees are discounted.

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speaking about the unspeakable

In 1992, Evelyn H. Lauder began a mission to defeat breast cancer through research and public awareness campaigns. She launched her first October awareness campaign with a pink ribbon, now recognized around the world as a symbol of breast health. The Estee Lauder companies have worked to improve knowledge about breast cancer in Russia, too. This year Moscow joined the movement when the Hilton Leningradskaya lit their iconic building with bright pink lights and held an event to draw attention to the cause. Some of the guests were there to provide moral support, but a few were there to accept it. One woman, who wished not to be identified, said she was there with her mother “because we’ve had breast cancer in the family. With other diseases you can talk about it. But with breast cancer – you’re alone. Events like this may make it easier for society to talk about it.”

Hotel general manager Francois Morvan said he was pleased to support “such a great cause.”

But this is not the hotel’s only charitable activity. The Hilton Leningradskaya has been working for many years with several orphanages in the Moscow region, providing financial and material aid as well as bringing children to the hotel for master classes, parties and cultural events in the city. Staff members also volunteer to help the children adjust to life and work after they graduate from school and leave their orphanages.

November 2014

The Estee Lauder Companies’ Breast Cancer Awareness Campaign.

The Hilton Leningradskaya lit pink as part of the Estee Lauder Companies’ Breast Cancer Awareness Campaign.

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