Ask Moscow office managers what they hate most, and chances are you’ll hear the same complaint: Finding a space for MICE: meetings, incentives, conferences and events. Scott Antel, a partner in the Moscow law office of DLA Piper, has heard this complaint for years. “Historically, Moscow — a capital city and major business center — didn’t have many facilities for more than 100-150 people,” he said in a recent interview. “Companies couldn’t find space for an event of 300-400 people. Large multinational corporations couldn’t find a venue for a holiday party. There has been a huge demand for meeting space.”

Moscow hotels have been listening. This spring, the Radisson Royal Hotel opened an enormous meeting and events center called Congress Park. The halls, created during a restoration of the outdoor environment of the hotel, have a total of 2,300 square meters of space (almost 25,000 square feet), with a 1,682-square-meter main hall (over 18,000 square feet) that comfortably holds up to 2,500 people.

The Park’s large, technically sophisticated meeting spaces have been in high demand since it opened. “We immediately got deluged with bookings — both for business events and for large banquets,” said Regina Apakina of the Radisson Royal Hotel.

Although the main clients for meetings and events centers have been visiting corporate executives and local businesses, in recent years the client base has included a new demographic. The increasingly affluent middle- and upper-class is looking for venues to hold weddings, anniversaries, birthdays, cocktail parties and other milestone events. Like the business community, they need attractive, flexible rooms and superb catering. But their additional requirements — flowers, décor, special tableware, music, and styled areas for photo ops — have spurred the creation of a mini event industry in the city’s top hotels.

The Swissôtel has also reoriented its events facilities and services to accommodate wedding and other private event clients along with their core business base. Maria Chupik of the hotel public relations office said, “We are a business hotel, and most of our guests are foreign business representatives and managers. Our 18 conference halls and conference center, which has almost 1,400 square meters of flexible space (about 15,000 square feet), are very popular with the business community. But we are also positioning ourselves as a wedding hotel. We have facilities to have a wedding and banquet in one place — even on the rooftop with a view of the city.”
When it comes to hotels, there are two kinds of travelers: those who want a room in a brand-name hotel, where everything is familiar down to the desk lamp and bath gel; and those who want a hotel with something new and unexpected. There are a lot of business travelers in Russia and tourists who place aesthetics above certainty. They are willing to take a risk for something new. For many years, the majority of travelers to Russia have fallen into the first category. When in doubt, they reason, go with what you know. But in recent years, service and conditions in hotels in the major cities in Russia have dispelled any lingering concerns about quality, and visitors are ready to try hotels that are privately owned and run. In these hotels, the décor and design are not just a pleasant background — they take center stage.

**A Boutique Apple**

Yulia Polinova of Golden Apple Hotel, one of the first and most successful private hotels in Moscow, said in a recent interview, “A boutique hotel is a small hotel that positions itself as especially stylish, luxurious, and exclusive. It’s often designed in a very particular style and is the embodiment of cut-price design.” This is certainly true of the Golden Apple, which opened in 2004. On the street, the late 19th century building blends in with the structures around it, but inside it’s a striking mix of luxury, minimalism and avant-garde style. Designed by Canadian architect Ra-vel Shafir, each floor hallway is painted a different hue, which is echoed in pops of color in the sleek guest rooms. The minimal lines are softened by rich materials: natural wood, marble and stone. The guest rooms are elegant and functional, but they aren’t anyone’s idea of standard hotel rooms.

**BRAND-NAME HOTELS ARE ATTRACTIVE TO RUSSIAN BUSINESS TRAVELERS**

Not surprisingly, the hotel attracts, Polinova says, non-standard guests. “Our guests include celebrities among the business community, performers, musicians, and stars of show business.” It is a place where “every guest feels special and a part of high society,” she added.

**Grand Brand Designs**

The InterContinental Hotel Group (IHG) has been operating in Russian since 1999. Its first hotels were in Moscow and St. Petersburg, but it is now actively expanding to regional cities. The group’s flagship InterContinental Moscow Tverskaya is in the center of the northern capital, and its wall murals reflect the Summer Garden, foundry metal works, and river embankment nearby. Beyond the façade, supported by atlantes and caryatids, the interior is bright and modern, with a soaring glass-roofed atrium that lets in the light. The response to the new hotel has been positive with both Russian and foreign business travelers and tourists.

**Brand Boutiques**

This spring InterContinental launched its first hotel under the Indigo brand in Russia. Indigo hotels are a mix of brand and boutique hotels. Each hotel is unique, designed for the site, reflecting the culture, architecture, and history of the city and country where it is located. But each hotel is part of IHG, which provides a guarantee of quality and service.

Hotel Indigo St. Petersburg is in the center of the northern capital, and its wall murals reflect the Summer Garden and river embankment nearby. The floor-to-ceiling glass atrium that lets in the light. The response to the new hotel has been positive with both Russian and foreign business travelers and tourists.

**And the Future Is …**

International and Russian hotel chains now have the experience and local partners to expand throughout Russia. Brand-name hotels are attractive to Russian business travelers, who make up nearly a half of all business travelers in the country. But the Golden Apple’s Yulia Polinova is cautiously optimistic. “There are really only a few boutique hotels in the country. This is a relatively new direction in the hotel business, more fitting for fully developed markets, where there are lots of tourists. But there’s no question — Moscow has great potential for this segment.”
Azimut Takes Moscow

In April 2014, the Russian chain Azimut launched the Moscow Olympic hotel, formerly known as the Renais-
sance Moscow Olympic Hotel. The company also acquired the Belgrade Hotel, a three-star, 20-story, 212-room hotel near the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The hotel, built in 1975, will be remodeled and expanded. It is expected to reopen in 2016. Azimut has over 20 hotels in Russia, Germany and Austria.

Hilton in Samara

This spring Hilton opened its first property in Samara, the Hampton by Hilton, a 126-room hotel in the old city near the Volga embankment. The city site was chosen not only for business and other travelers, but in expectation of the 2018 World Cup, which will be held in Samara. The hotel was the ninth hotel in the Hilton Worldwide brand in Russia, opened just after the five-star Hilton Garden Inn Moscow New Riga opened its doors to guests in Kostrovo, about 30 kilometers west of the capital.

Tourists in Towns

At an Italian-Russian conference on small towns and tourism held in March in Moscow, Yelena Kaneva, director of the Association of Small Tourist Towns in Russia, announced that in the past six years, tourism to these small cities has grown by 65 percent. Each year more than 1.5 million tourists visit towns such as Suzdal, Myshkin, and Uglich. Conference participants attributed the influx of tourists to major investments in tourism infrastructure and the attraction of new or revived regular events, such as winter fairs, summer food festivals, and cultural exhibitions.

Paramount

Paramount Hotels & Resorts, a company owned by a group of investors from the U.S., UK, Russia, and Middle East, announced in the first quarter of 2014 plans to build up to 50 Hollywood-themed luxury hotels around the world. The hotels will be part of resorts, theme parks or casinos, and have a California lifestyle decor — as well as screening rooms available for guests to watch films from the Paramount library. Negotia-
tions are ongoing for a venue in Russia.

Soviet Hotel Chic

In the 1950s post-war building boom, the Soviet Union built three monumental hotels in the capital. The Leningradskaya and Ukraina ho-
tels were two of the seven high-rises — known in the West as the Seven Sisters — that were commissioned by Joseph Stalin and partly inspired by New York skyscrapers. The smaller Hotel Sovietskaya was conceived as a residence for visiting foreign diplomatic and trade delegations. At first these hotels were technical and architectural wonders, but over the decades their technical wizardry became obsolete and the buildings, service and clientele degraded.

But all three hotels have been me-
ticulously restored and updated for modern travelers. Today they are the best of an unexpected brand: Soviet hotel chic.

The Hotel Sovietskaya, the smallest of the three, had the most unusual origins. It was built around the famous Yar restaurant, which had been part of a structure built in 1911. Stalin commissioned a group of architects to turn the building into a hotel in the empire style suitable for visiting diplomatic and trade delegations without much alteration of the footprint of the structure or the décor of the Yar. Their work on the exterior and interior — down to the beds posts, door handles, and light fixtures — was a triumph of architec-
tural and industrial ingenuity.

That triumph is, in part, what the young hotel staff finds so inspiring.

Preservation was also key for the largest of the three grand dames of Soviet hotels, the Ukraina, now the Radisson Royal Moscow. It is the sec-
ond tallest of the Stalinist skyscrapers and one of the most iconic with its prominent position on the Moscow River. Like its other two sisters, years of exploitation without major repairs had worn down the building. Regina Aqulina of the hotel’s press service said, “You could see significant wear and tear everywhere, and of course the technical base was hopelessly out-
dated.” Restoration was conducted from 2007 to 2010 in a complicated dual process of modernization and pres-
ervation. The original marble, bronze and crystal of the lobby and public spaces were restored along with more than 1,200 Soviet-era paintings and sculptures. Modernization also includ-
ed the addition of services essential to today’s traveler, like a spa, fitness club and 50-meter (164 foot) pool.

The Leningradskaya, completed in 1934, is a mere 136 meters tall (446 feet), but architecturally it is perhaps the most complex of the seven high-
rises. Konstantin Goraiinov, the gen-
eral manager of what is now the Hilton Moscow Leningradskaya, noted that, “The façade and interior of the Lening-
radskaya combine motifs of three ar-
chitectural styles: Neo-Russian baroque, Gothic, and ancient wooden Russian architecture.” Nearly three years of careful restoration has brought back to life the massive bronze chandeliers, bas reliefs of Russian historical fig-
ures, and ornamentation that recalls the term of pre-Petrine Russia. This “whimsical” interior, Goraiinov says, is the charm of the hotel. “To stay here is like living in a museum — but living in comfort.”
As the weather warms up in Moscow, the criteria for after-work dinner spots change. Diners want something light, something delicious, and preferably something served outdoors.

Luckily for hungry Muscovites, most restaurants have already switched to summer menus, and terraces are open for business.

The Conservatory Bar & Lounge on the top floor of the Ararat Park Hyatt Hotel has already fired up its charcoal grill for outdoor dining overlooking the Kremlin. You can go European with grilled sea bass or duck, or choose Armenian with shashlyk and kabobs served with piquant sauces. You can go light with European and Armenian salads and starters. Or you can celebrate with caviar and champagne. Whatever you choose, the view is delicious. (4 Neglinnaya Ulitsa, 495-783-1234)

Just down the street, the Hotel Metropol opens their Summer Terrace at the end of May. Chef Andrei Shmakov is launching a summer menu filled with fresh and piquant combinations, like a salad of glazed sea scallops, raspberry, pine nuts, and tomatoes with cider syrup. On a hot night, cool down with a dessert Kir Royal—a sorbet of black currents with champagne foam—while enjoying views of Revolution Square. (2 Teatralny Proyezd, 499-501-7800)

Across the river, the Baltschug Kempinski is having a white sale—white asparagus, that is. Until the end of June, chef Holger Jackisch at the Grill is serving up delectable white asparagus in risotto, in salads, and in soups—or alone, in all its springtime glory. If you don’t like white, until the end of August you can explore some sinfully good, black and red specials that are part of the thought-provoking Angels-Demons art exhibition in the hotel lobby. Or if you prefer green and other bright summer colors, head outside to the summer terrace of the Café Kranzler for light fare with a view of the Kremlin and Red Square. (1 Ulitsa Balchug, 495-287-2000)

Not far away, at the Acapella Restaurant in the Swissôtel Krasnye Holmy, chef Ivan Tishkin is celebrating ecologically clean, Russian or locally grown produce in his innovative summer menu. For a savory treat, try a tartar of Sakhalin scallops with sturgeon caviar and radish dressed with a honey citrus sauce, or be surprised by tender young goat under a sweet and sour sauce. For lovers of all things sweet, the chef is making jam every month from whatever berries are at peak. First up: field strawberry and rhubarb jam in June. (52 Kosmodamianskaya Naberezhnaya, Bldg. 6, 495-221-5358)

Pre-heat the oven to 180 degrees C. Marinate the duck breast in orange juice, vinegar, soy sauce, cinnamon and pepper for at least three hours. Sauté the duck fillet in a hot pan without oil until crisp on both sides, and then finish in the oven for about 12 minutes until done.

For the glaze: simmer the broth, wine, and honey; add the cooked duck fillet and let it simmer for another five minutes until thick. Take off the heat and let the fillet rest for five minutes, then slice and serve hot.

For the garnish: make a basket of the dough, deep fry until crisp, fill with fresh berries and mixed greens, and garnish with fresh mint.

Bon appetit!