Stephanie Ford: Study Abroad in Saint Petersburg, Russia with AIFS

A trip to Russia as an American exchange student. To some, a once-in-a-lifetime experience and to others, a dangerous journey. What do I think about the five weeks I spent in Russia? Well, I believe it was one of the most highly-organized and convenient trips I have ever taken. I do not regret a dime that I spent. All the employees at AIFS were very helpful and I had little stress. I knew the steps I needed to take to apply for the program, apply for my Russian visa and prepare for the trip. I am a German Literature major and I have concentrated much of my free time since January 2015 on studying German. I actually spent ten weeks abroad summer 2016—first I was in Mannheim, Germany studying German at a language school, then I returned to the States for about a week. I first flew to London, where I met up with the other American students in my Russian Study Abroad Program before we flew together to Saint Petersburg. My German language skills were developing at that point and it was a big transition to travel to Russia and begin learning Russian. Every museum we visited and almost every detail down to the food that we eat was amazing and worth the money. Studying abroad for five weeks in Saint Petersburg, Russia was both nerve-wracking and experience-rich.

I think my decision to study in Russia was very personal. I had met a couple Russian people and had slowly developed interests for Russian culture, for Russian language and I wanted to study in Russia. Russia is a unique place, and I felt a little nervous about studying there by myself… just showing up to Russia alone without plans. I picked a top-of-the-line trip with AIFS. At that time, Russian language was offered at Georgia State, but I had only skyped with a teacher for a few months, and I had a pretty personal student-teacher relationship with her. She had to go around my routine; I got to see her family; I had to go around her routine. It was not quite the same as being in a traditional classroom. Skyping a teacher on top of taking an
additional four hours of German instruction each week and being enrolled in sixteen hours of courses at GSU didn’t allow me to get a comfortable feeling speaking and understanding Russian as I only had limited time to practice. It was a completely new language and I started from scratch. I could read the alphabet, and I could say a few things, but I could not communicate. I could not say what I wanted to; I could not ask for things. I also could not understand much.

For some reason, even at the very beginning of the trip, everything felt very intimidating... even riding in the subway, or just walking along the streets. It felt very, very intimidating. The people had a serious nature—withdrawn, melancholic. Another thing was that the other American students, who were with me on the trip, were from different cities, different states, and they developed friendships at the beginning. I did have some good friends and some nice times with them, but I didn’t feel like I developed a very deep, close friendship with anyone. Therefore, I felt alone there.

It was this double-impact of being alone and being foreign that weighed down my daily mood. I became sad. Although I may have been a little sad before I left, I thought that my trip to Russia would be inspiring and would improve my mood and view of the world. I had a crush, and no relationship with Russia yet. I was expecting love back, but it was unrequited. In some ways, I was disappointed with myself and with Russia. But as far as the trip goes and the experiences I collected, I was not disappointed. Part of me still wants to go back when I learn more. I do acknowledge (almost a year later) that my Russian has improved—my listening, and maybe my pronunciation a little bit.

I am able to spend more time learning Russian in comparison to when I first started learning Russian and my first homework assignment was very hard. While doing my first homework assignment in March of 2016, I thought “Oh my goodness, what have I gotten myself
into?” Slowly, I can read children’s stores written in simple language; I watch Russian movies; I listen to podcasts only in Russian. I do enjoy learning the Russian language, but I still do not enjoy using the language. In other words, I enjoy receiving input of the language, but I do not enjoy speaking it or exchanging messages with native Russian speakers yet. Maybe I am just unconfident, or it is the same intimidation I experienced in Russia.

2016 was also a transition point in my life (as there are many transition points in your college years and twenties in general.) I think part of the whole college journey is figuring out: what you want to study, where you belong, and who are your friends… are you really the person you say you are. Discovering what I wanted to study all continued in one direction and led to new things. I put a lot of importance into learning a second language—being able to speak it and understand it and interacting with a foreign culture. I don’t know if I had a longing, or if learning foreign languages was a way to put meaning on my life and have a hobby. Learning foreign languages has been very important for me. A lot of it has happened naturally.

As a current senior at Georgia State, I have started considering whether making your passion a career is the best option. Or is it better to have your passions and hobbies separate from winning your bread? You can have a job that you enjoy without it being what you live for. I find that it is hard being critiqued on something I care a lot about. Could it be better to keep work and passions separate? If a professional opportunity comes around that deals with Russian language, I will not turn it down because doing something I love allows me to show who I really am. But, I do not feel like I am missing out if a professional opportunity never arises due to my study abroad in Russia. Since my summer trip to Russia, I have not been in any situations where I have had to interview with Russian companies, and I do not want to be a professional translator or interpreter English to Russian/Russian to English. I want to stay away from doing anything
political in terms of American and Russian relations. I feel content with keeping Russian a hobby and continuing my plans of teaching English in Germany.

Academically, my trip to Russia has impacted me in several ways. I studied at an international university in Saint Petersburg, and it was not a typical routine for Russian students who study in Russian since all my classes were with the other students in my travel group. Even though the classes were small and untraditional, I still noticed some differences in American and Russian higher education. All my professors were Russians and they instructed the class in English. I loved all my Russian lessons and lectures on Contemporary Russian Life and Russian Art History. I had moments where I would be sitting in Russian class and I felt like I had experienced it before—déjà vu moments. I thought “I have learned this before” and it felt deep. I started writing in Russia. I wanted to start writing a book about my life.

I was very glad to have the Russian language course because I learned to write Russian cursive. Having a way to write words quickly and neatly allowed me to make progress in learning Russian since I could write down words correctly. I also enjoyed the other two courses, but I was slightly disappointed with one of them. He (my professor of Contemporary Russian Life) gave us a study guide at the beginning of the course. It consisted of a bunch of facts such as: which countries were in the Soviet Union? When was Chernobyl? It should have been quite logical to remember these things, but I have never had a talent for acing history tests, and in American higher education, it is more common that the professor deviates from the textbook and basic facts. The professor introduces their take on the subject and allows students to analyze the material themselves; however, in Russia, students memorize textbooks and pass exams by knowing the facts they memorized. I like to learn about history which is why I felt disappointed
when I realized I had not prepared for the test, which covered the study guide instead of the lectures.

The other part of my grade was an essay I wrote about Russian culture. I enjoyed writing the essay and I put a lot of effort into it. The professor found my essay interesting and funny. My Russian Art class was also fascinating. We only had it once a week. One time, she let us skip class to visit the Russian Art Museum. But I had already made plans with a Russian friend I had met. I was not that happy to go out in the rain and see the museum again (I visited with a friend before the art teacher told us about our excursion.) Other than being upset about not doing well on the final exam in the Contemporary Life course, my courses were great. The cafeteria food was great. My accommodations in a dorm were fine. It was convenient. Everything was close together. I was not mind-blown trying to figure out a new campus in a foreign country.

What did my trip to Russia mean to me? “The grass isn’t always greener on the other side” but also “it depends on how you look at it.” It is still an open question. Should it be part of my life to travel to Russia again? I will continue learning Russian and German. I want to study abroad again. Maybe I will even teach English in Russia or meet Russians in the United States. I’d like to learn even more foreign languages when my to-do list clears up a bit. My trip was brilliant, but not perfect. I am very introverted and also quite shy. Therefore, other students may have a totally different experience than me. The intimidation I felt could have only been in my head. Maybe I should have been more outgoing and reached out for friendships. I also realized how I could have better prepared myself for Russian exams. Nonetheless, I think every American college student should have the opportunity to study abroad. You must take a lot of risks, but you gain a new perspective on yourself, your native language, your home country and the other parts of the world.