

Visiting another country is considered to be an experience, even life changing, and this was what the trip to Russia was about.

Early April 2018 the preparations begun for the project "Exkursion nach Pensa", a one-week trip to the university of Pensa in Russia. Ten students, from the Master's program *Kultur, Sprachen und Medien* at University of Flensburg, were selected for the trip and were joined by Dr. Sibylle Machat and Dr. Jörn Bockmann. The purpose of this project was to participate in various events throughout the week and to hold presentations and lectures for Russian students at the University of Pensa, as well as to represent Germany and particularly our university by giving an overview about living and studying in Germany, and therefore motivate them to come and do a year or a semester abroad here in Germany.

We started by taking part in an intensive Russian language course, which would provide us with some basic skills so we could communicate when we get there. Personally, I found it a difficult language, particularly the letters, it is so confusing that sometimes a letter looks like it would in English and then it turns out you pronounce it completely differently. The funniest part was the moment we arrived there, in Russia, the shop front signs are mostly written with Russian letters, and we kept trying to read what is written on these signs. It was tough but was really fun though. Certainly, learning at least some Russian is an important part of preparation as most people there do not speak any English or German. Apparently, the language course helped us in Russia quite a bit and overall it was fun and interesting to learn a new language.

I have always been passionate about visiting new places and learning about new cultures and Russia particularly has always been on my bucket list. I was looking forward to visiting this country. As a child back in Jordan, one of my uncles is a bibliophile. He was fascinated by the Russian literature, from Dostoyevski to Tolstoy and Gorki, and he used to encourage me to check their work by giving me some of their books to read. Recently, I got two of Tolstoy's most important books, *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*. Unfortunately, I never managed to finish them, I have finished a part of *War and Peace*, but I find it difficult to follow, due to the Russian characters names. I am definitely going to get back to them soon. Moreover, I am a film addict and *Andrei Tarkovsky* is one of my favourite filmmakers ever. Films such as *Solaris 1972*, and particularly *Stalker 1979* made me fall in love with the Russian cinema. Things like these made Russia a very important destination on my bucket list and thanks to our university, I was able to achieve this goal by taking part in this project.

My primary interest was to learn more about the country and its rich culture. We all know Russia is the largest country in the world, and anyone who gets on the train in Moscow and gets off several hours later, may end up in a completely different world and may no longer be in Europe but in Asia. This country that lies in two different continents, has just about everything to offer: from modern metropolis, cottage settlements and infinite birch forests, to the longest railroad in the world.

Russia is a country that needs a lot of time, a good dose of patience and a lot of exploration.

Arriving in Russia:

Stepping off the plane after what seems like a long flight into a country that is nothing like where you live is so liberating, it gave me chills. Our flight landed at Sheremetyevo Airport. Immigration was a bit lengthy. The immigration officer didn't ask many questions but took her time to check the visa. She seemed unsure about the visa and checked with her colleague. After a good 15 mins she stamped and handed over my passport with an immigration slip. Due to the lack of time. We took a cab to Kazansky railway station, where we had to catch our train to Pensa. For some reason that ride is still etched in my memory. It was 45-50 mins long ride. I was looking at the Moscow skyline, extremely wide roads, vehicles while listening to the Russian radio playing in the car. The driver never spoken to us, neither did we. It was cold and gloomy.

Moscow is different by all means; big, crowded and cold. We arrived in Kazanskay and coincidentally, the first language barrier happened to be right there at the train station. I was starving and wanted to get something to eat, so a friend and I went to grab something from Subway, we thought, at least something we're familiar with it. So the decision was easy and didn't take long, since we didn't have much time to try new things. We went in, we were surprised that the menu was entirely in Russian. Nothing in English. The struggle started then, we asked the guy behind the counter if he can speak English, no he answered. We ended up using signs. Anyway, it worked out and was really fun. We kept laughing all the way to Pensa about it.

The night train from Moscow to Pensa:

Ever since I knew that we are taking the train from Moscow to Pensa at night I was so excited about it, I don't know why. Perhaps, it is more adventurous, especially in a country you haven't been to before. It took us around 12 hours starting from around 20:00h until we arrived in Pensa the next day in morning. Even though it was a bit noisy and shaky in the train, it was absolutely amazing.

Next day in the morning, we arrived in Pensa. Our hosts were waiting for us at the train station in Pensa and we were transferred to our dorm by a shuttle and in two hours we had to get ready to go to the University and start our program. Even though we were a bit exhausted from the long trip, we were excited about our program in Pensa, as everything was well organised before.

The president of Pensa University held a speech welcoming us. And on the same day we were honoured to nominate the winners of a Drawing Competition "*We are different, but together*" from the children in Pensa that took place at the university, and I must admit that I was definitely moved by their work.

Moreover, we attended some lectures and seminars of some teachers of the University of Pensa, so we were able to take a look of the teaching process there in Russia, and I must say that it is different comparing to Germany. Students are more involved in the teaching process and they have to do a lot of preparations.

Another day we were invited to a school contest- festival of dancers and singers in foreign language. I found it really interesting and impressive. I remember that night we went back home with a big smile and we kept talking how talented the pupils were. In addition, we were able to choose the winners in this contest too.

We had the opportunity not only to get to know the university Pensa and the educational process there, but also to immerse in the cultural life of Pensa and one important thing that I noticed was, students there speak German at a high level. It was almost unbelievable for me, since most of them never been to Germany before. They are so committed to learn the German language, and most of the time kept asking us to correct them, when they make a mistake.

Overall, Pensa is an ideal place to study or to do a semester abroad I would say. The city is not too big and not too small. The ways to university campus are quite short from the dorm and to the city centre. You don't need to use any means of transport, it's manageable by walking. In the dormitory, there are always women on every floor, who take care of the cleaning and make sure that everything is ok. The rules are quite strict, but nevertheless it is a great opportunity to spend a semester and meet a lot of different and interesting people from all over the world.

Moreover, cost of living in Russia is quite cheap. Activities are more than affordable and food prices in supermarkets or in the cafeteria on campus generally are not expensive.

The last days in Moscow were beautiful. Like Andrei Tarkovsky said "Moscow... chaos, full of life". We spent around 30 hours in this amazing city. There is a lot to do in Moscow; the innumerable sights, museums, theatres, opera houses, restaurants, bars and clubs need a lot of time to explore. But again, even in the capital almost everything is written in Cyrillic letters, therefore speaking Russian, of course, is a great advantage.

The city boasts beautiful architecture, famous paintings and sculptures such as Lenin, Marx etc. In my opinion, it was the highlight of the trip.

We visited the Red Square, St. Basil's Cathedral, Cathedral of Christ the Saviour and saw the Kremlin from outside. One thing I always like to do when I visit new places is to go walking aimlessly to explore. So a friend and I began by crossing a bridge above Moscow canal. We walked for more than two hours not knowing where to go. But everything looks beautiful, and we enjoyed it.

Now it's time to leave Moscow and fly back home, I was a bit sad because there are still many things left that I could not explore, and who knows when I will be back here again. We took a cab to the airport. We arrived in the airport, we ran to immigration counter, and this time too they took their time going through the visa again and again and asking me some irrelevant questions. Finally, the officer handed me my passport and went through the gate.

To sum up, traveling has always broadened my perspective, taught me a lot, and helped me understand more about other cultures. It shaped a bit of who I am today. And going on this trip was one of the best decisions I could have made, and I would recommend anyone who is looking for an experience of a life time to go to Russia, to study, visit or whatever.

This trip provided me with an opportunity to learn a lot from the Russian culture and meet Russian students, as well as learning about various projects that were made and developed by Russian students from different faculties and departments.

And what I learned from this week in Russia is that Russians are welcoming and sociable people. They are always depicted as villains in Hollywood films. But that is not true at all. I feel like they are more humanists like in Tarkovsky's films.

In general, life was different there, but different in the best kind of way. It was full of positivity. And I will definitely go back and visit Russia again. It was truly a once in a lifetime opportunity and a blessing I will never forget. I am still trying to grasp everything I experienced there. It was short, but we did many things during our stay. It was sort of a Russian adventure.

This fantastic opportunity would not have been possible without the generous funding provided by the University of Flensburg, as they covered around 80% from the overall costs, which made it much more affordable and accessible for everyone involved. Thank you!

Many thanks to both universities, and the guides that were responsible for making this trip the success that it was. This experience would not be possible without their continued support.

Thank you to everyone who made this trip an amazing experience!