

A few Russian ideas to take home

It's a cliché for Americans living abroad to write home about the things they miss. As an American living in St. Petersburg, it'd be particularly easy for me. You and I could bond over about how much better life is in America. This is known in the op-ed biz as "pandering to your audience."

But I won't do that. My readers are, after all, far too intelligent and discerning to be pandered to.

Instead, I thought I might share a list of things I've found in Russia that I wish we had in America. Here are my top five:

5) Movie theaters where you can reserve seats. I've seen tons of films over here, and every theater sells tickets in the same way. You tell them which film, day and show time you want, and they present you with a touch screen of the available seats. You pick your spot, and get your ticket. No worries, come to the theater when you want, most modern theaters are stadium seating so there really isn't a bad seat. But if you're picky, many theaters also have differential pricing: Seats off to the side or far back are sold at a discount. Makes sense to me.

4) Better intersections, for both drivers and pedestrians. A green light in St. Petersburg will flash before it turns yellow. This gives drivers and pedestrians more information. How can that be bad?

A light will also turn yellow before it turns green. I'm sure some American traffic engineer somewhere has done a study on why that's a bad idea, despite advance yellow lights being used all over Europe. But there



OPINION

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are a few long lights in the Springs where I'd really like to know when it's going to turn green. It would certainly reduce the obnoxious honk factor of the guy behind me.

St. Petersburg also has timers at pedestrian intersections, both for how long the light will remain green in one direction and how long it will remain red

in the other. These are visible to both drivers and pedestrians. Very convenient if you need to choose which street to cross, or if you'd just like to know how much longer you'll have to wait.

3) The metric system. As a scientist, I can't begin to describe the pleasure of living with measuring units that make sense. If my local forecast is 0 degrees, I know that's when water freezes. I know my weight in kilos, my height in centimeters, my jogging speed for a 5K run, and how they're all related.

American and British units of measurement are just, well, stupid. There, I said it.

We should bite the bullet and endure a painful transition year to switch over. Then we'd never have to worry about it any more.

2) International Women's Day. In Russia, this is a national holiday. Instead of the political sloganeering and PC guiltfest that would probably accompany such a day in the U.S., it is a day when men honor women for their feminine qualities. Heck,

you can't even talk about "feminine qualities" in the U.S. without getting shushed, slapped or sued.

By contrast, one local restaurant advertised a promotion for "The International Day of Tenderness and Adoration of Women." Coke ran a Russian ad featuring men saying "Ladies, congratulations on your day. Your beauty and grace inspire and refresh us. Like Coca-Cola!"

Can you imagine seeing that state-side?

All right, maybe on Spike, but NBC wouldn't go anywhere near it.

On International Women's Day, men give their special lady flowers and gifts, but it's not like Valentine's Day when single women feel left out. Fathers congratulate daughters, sons congratulate mothers. Even the divorced manager of my apartment blushed when I asked about the holiday.

It's a day when a man can wish a bus conductor, a hat check lady, and even an entire aerobics class "Happy Women's Day" (the actual Russian expression is slightly more formal). In return, he can expect to receive nothing more hostile than a smile and a "Thank you." What a great idea.

And finally, my number 1 item on my wish list for America:

Lays "Red Caviar" potato chips and Snickers bars with hazelnuts.

No explanation necessary.

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