

December 9, 2007

LUXURY DESTINATION | MOSCOW

From Russia With Luxe

By SETH SHERWOOD

Corrections Appended

PRINCE ALBERT of [Monaco](#) was still eagerly expected, but already a thick throng of [Moscow](#)'s clubbing elite and dolled-up wannabes was trying to claw its way into the [Dyagilev Project](#) nightclub. Dressed as if fresh from a Dolce & Gabbana year-end sale, the crowd pushed, pleaded and shouted the name of the doorman — “Pasha! Spasiba, Pasha!” — in hopes of entering.

For those lucky enough — or lovely enough, or loaded enough — to be allowed inside, the reward was a teeming, Moulin Rouge-like fantasyland of gilt, velvet and spectacle. On a catwalk positioned just over the heads of the dancing crowd, a strange glittering being in a purple robe did tai chi movements with a glowing sword. It was replaced by a creepy harlequin in an “Eyes Wide Shut” mask, who performed a vaudevillian soft-shoe. By the time the bikini-clad robots battled one another with flashing lights on cords, the crowd was gyrating on the banquettes of the \$1,000-a-night tables and ricocheting around the \$20,000 V.I.P. boxes like superheated, Champagne-fueled molecules.

Sitting in his backstage office, the club's artistic director, Sinisha Lazarevich, enumerated the list of the boldface names who had graced the belle époque-style interiors in the past: Shakira, Elizabeth Hurley, Naomi Campbell, Vincent Cassel, the Black Eyed Peas.

“Last night in the club we had [Christina Aguilera](#), Tokio Hotel and the Pussycat Dolls,” he went on, as a dance troupe in black fetish wear ran about in anxious preparation for its set. “We make clubs for people who don't want to be out of date, who are always buying the new collections, the new cars, who are always getting the new girls, and who want new emotions.”

It's not only Dyagilev. Throughout the formerly gray and workaday streets, Moscow is renewing itself with a vigor and opulence seen in few other places on the planet. Everywhere, Socialist-era edifices, former state stores and even onetime academic institutes are being purged of their pasts and transformed into hot spots glimmering with Italian furniture, French chefs, European fashions and D.J.-spun [music](#).

Few cities have sloughed off as much leaden history to reinvent themselves. Only 16 years ago, the Soviet Union, the grandest political experiment of the 20th century, sputtered and drew its final breath. Even in the late 1990s, the idea of Moscow as a fast-money style center would have seemed like the twisted punch line to a Yakov Smirnoff joke. The anemic ruble was on the verge of collapse, and the erratic [Boris Yeltsin](#) seemed equally rickety. When the cosmic jalopy known as space station Mir began falling to pieces, its woes seemed an apt metaphor for those of the nation.

But a decade on, the oil boom has helped remake the former global headquarters of Communism and

cold-war politics. Now the world's most expensive city for expatriates, Moscow is home to 30-odd resident billionaires, the greatest concentration anywhere outside of [New York City](#). And while a walk along Tverskaya Street, Moscow's Cyrillic-lined Broadway, reveals plenty of people and places untouched by the city's new fortunes — low-paid police officers in green uniforms, stubbly cabbies driving beat-up Brezhnev-era Ladas, stooped babushkas, ashen concrete apartment blocks — 21st-century Moscow is nonetheless a much more diverse, energetic and multidimensional place than ever before.

“Moscow is one of the fastest-growing cities in terms of opening restaurants, cafes, bars and so on,” said Konstantin Chernozatonsky, former editor of the Russian editions of Playboy and Premiere magazines, as he sipped a mojito in a lounge whose name translates as the Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie. “And it's the same with luxury, the same with cars, the same with real estate. Everything is booming.”

AS a summer sun arcs slowly over [Red Square](#), a hum of activity echoes throughout the city's heart. Behind a high scaffolding hung with a massive Rolex billboard, grinding power tools herald the construction of a Four Seasons hotel. Not to be outdone, work teams across the street hustle to complete an enormous Ritz-Carlton hotel in time for its inauguration gala.

Inside the majestic 19th-century Manege exhibition hall, a cologned and perfumed crowd in its best prêt-à-porter is eagerly browsing the thousands of masterworks on display for the fourth annual Moscow World Fine [Art Fair](#). Valued at over \$1 billion, the collection of old master canvases, Impressionist oils and abundant antiques wouldn't look out of place in the [Louvre](#). But as the quietly fingered credit cards and checkbooks remind, the fair is the city's most sophisticated home décor sale. It's also a top gala on Moscow's expanding social calendar, a kind of cultural counterpoint to the annual Millionaire Fair, which caters more toward demand for diamond-encrusted cellphones, gold coffee pots and private islands.

In the stall for Moscow's Marat Guelman Gallery, the burly owner holds forth on Moscow contemporary art to some bespectacled academics who peer at four small coffins containing child-size statues of [Andy Warhol](#). Just next door, in the XL Gallery's expo space, visitors try to decipher a red L.E.D. ticker whose corporate stock quotes suddenly morph into phrases from “Hamlet.” Both of the galleries are in the hottest new address for art in Moscow, a factory-turned-cultural-complex called [Vinzavod](#).

Surveying the scene, one transplanted New York gallery owner waxes effervescent about her recent decision to try her luck in Moscow. “The first exhibition that we had, we sold over 80 percent of the show in the first two weeks,” says Luba Mosionzhnik, a veteran Park Avenue dealer who earlier this year moved to Moscow and opened the Gallery Shkola. “I thought if we sold a work or two I'd already be ahead of the game.”

Nearby, some Champagne-sippers mull her gallery's offerings, which include paintings by [Picasso](#) and Renoir. If she's homesick for Manhattan, she's not showing it.

“There is more service here than anywhere else in the world that I've been,” she says of her adopted city. “With money, you can get anything you want.”

The dinner hour at [Turandot](#) brings further proof that the Russian taste for Old World opulence didn't perish with the Romanovs. Led by hostesses in 18th-century-style silk gowns, businessmen in suits and deep-pocketed couples make their way across the grand marble courtyard and into a domed and colonnaded dining room that looks airlifted from [Versailles](#). Adding to the ambience, a harpist and harpsichordist

conjure classical melodies, which mingle with the delicate clatter of Arthur Price silverware on Bauscher porcelain.

Opened last year, Turandot took six years and \$50 million to build, and a multicourse meal among its chandeliers and scrolled fireplaces can take almost as long to pay off. As statues of Chinese wise men and monkey musicians look down from the cupola, waiters dressed in elegant frock coats and buckled shoes ease between the richly set wooden tables and lay down dim sum, fried rice, wasabi prawns, foie gras with tuna sauce and large colorful spreads of sushi. (Muscovites, tremendous sushi fans, seem to be emptying the world's oceans almost single-handedly.) In lieu of 200-year-old Heritage Marie Domain Cognac, a few diners complete their meal with a trip to the on-site Gianmaria Buccellati jewelry boutique. In one glass case, a cute elephant made from a plum-sized pearl and 245 diamonds beckons with a million-euro price tag.

The chic 30-somethings who have flocked to [Bon](#), another restaurant from Moscow's excellent 2006 vintage, are greeted by the much more sinister sight of openly displayed firearms. From every corner of the black dining room gleam Beretta pistols, Kalashnikov machine guns and assault rifles.

Curiously, the designer-clad crowds remain unfazed by the arsenal, and some folks even nod appreciatively at the weapons between bites of risotto. Perhaps the garish gold paint that covers them is a tip-off that they are merely decorative reproductions. Bristling with mafia-kitsch details — pornographic murals, couches upholstered with fabric bearing prisoners' tattoos, stuffed [birds](#) sporting expensive jewelry — Bon suggests a gangster's dream home as imagined by [Philippe Starck](#). Which is precisely what it is.

"I wanted to evoke the kind of craziness that animated [Russia](#) and Moscow some years back," Mr. Starck explained, referring to the heady 1990s, when post-Soviet greed and lawlessness were at their peak. He created the interior as a kind of "film set" for an imaginary movie. "The scenario is simple," he said. "A band of hoodlums and thieves and bandits rob a museum and hide everything that they have stolen — furniture, paintings, artistic pieces — in a warehouse, where they meet up one evening for dinner and a sex party."

"It's a bit of nostalgia," he said. "Today, thankfully, Moscow is much more cleaned up."

SPEND a few days hanging around art openings and boho-chic cafes, and you'll probably notice at least a few folks wearing one of the hot Moscow fashion items of the moment: a T-shirt depicting the face of President [Vladimir V. Putin](#) framed by a rectangle of colorful embroidered flowers.

If the wearers don't look like types who typically cheer on Putin, the conservative K.G.B.-agent-turned-political-strongman — they look like avant-garde artists, experimental filmmakers, fashion insiders — a close reading of the design may offer an explanation. At first the shirt appears to be a hagiography: the face of the national leader bedecked with a floral offering. But the longer you stare at the cloying sewn-on petals, the more garish they seem. Are these flowers, in fact, intentionally exaggerated, as if to make a sarcastic comment on Russia's Putin worship? Or are they something else again — perhaps a funeral wreath?

Ambiguous, multiple and competing meanings are the calling cards of the fast-rising trickster of Russian fashion, [Denis Simachev](#). To track down the boutique-restaurant-bar bearing his name, follow the taillights of the chauffeured black Bentleys to the fashionable Stolesnikov Perulok [shopping](#) street and trail one of the

high-heeled power shoppers in Chanel sunglasses as she struts past the majestic czarist-era storefronts. Just after the Hermès and Dior shops you should start to feel something burning your retina. The source of this discomfort — the incongruous building painted in psychedelic swirling red and yellow patterns — is your destination.

A playful disregard for convention and good taste is on display everywhere in Mr. Simachev's sartorial fun house. Downstairs, against the backdrop of an erotic Japanese anime mosaic, the lunchtime crowd chats over pancakes in booths designed like bathroom stalls and outfitted with toilet pull-chains. In the upstairs lounge, couples ogle jewelry and T-shirts embossed with characters lifted from Soviet-era propaganda cartoons and symbols appropriated from the controversial, boycotted 1980 Olympics in Moscow.

Mr. Simachev's clever appropriations of Russian personalities and styles — from czarist naval uniforms to Mr. Putin's face — have done much to enliven the city's two main fashion events, Fashion Week in Moscow and Russian Fashion Week. They have also helped make him a regular invitee to the [Milan](#) shows. But they have not endeared him to everyone.

“People were shocked, and they're still shocked” by the audacious building and store, says the mustachioed and tattooed Mr. Simachev, joining the Friday regulars in the restaurant. “And that was the result we planned.”

“I'm using Russian elements that no other designer is using, because they are afraid to use these elements,” he says. “I want to destroy traditions.”

Hummers. Lamborghinis. Porsches. Saturday midnight rolls around, and the intersection of Petrovka Street and Strastnoi Boulevard becomes a [Beverly Hills](#)-like pageant of six-figure autos cruising to nearby party dens.

Within a sultry red-lighted lounge called Bar 30/7, a D.J. spins funk and soul to expatriate executives and public relations girls in bright lip gloss. When an unaccompanied Frenchman arrives and tries to coax the doorman into admitting him — in Moscow, these specialists are known as “face patrol” — he is sized up and briskly sent packing.

It's a scene repeated all over town. Those who fret for Russian democracy in the Putin era need only point to the door criteria at Moscow night spots. Admittance is not a question of your billfold (there's often no cover charge) or even of your bloodstock (a cousin of [Prince Charles](#) was once turned away from Dyagilev). Rather, success is all about appearances. Unless you're judged attractive and well-dressed enough, you'll receive a “nyet.” Welcome to the beautocracy.

Back inside Dyagilev, the officially approved beautiful people show no signs of flagging as dawn rises outside. Waiters still rush about to deliver huge smoldering shisha pipes, platters of fruit and buckets of Cristal Champagne. Seven-foot-tall drag queens and trapeze artists grace the stage. Smoke clouds erupt. Confetti explodes. Over and over, showers of fat gold flakes fall from the ceiling and swirl like an El Dorado snowstorm.

When the club at last closes, the crowds stumble into the daylight, and the shiny yellow rectangles fall from their clothing and hair. Wafted by the morning breeze, they flutter downward and settle on the cracked gray

pavement, coating the old Moscow street in a shimmering layer of gilt.

Instead of Ladas and Vodka, It's Hummers and Champagne

GETTING THERE

Aeroflot offers nonstop flights from Kennedy Airport to Shermeteyevo Airport in [Moscow](#). A recent online search found fares for mid-January that started at around \$600. Other airlines (Delta and American, among others) require a change of flights, and sometimes airlines, in [Europe](#). Airport transfers can be reserved through Go-To.Ru (7-495-780-4216; www.english.go-to.ru). Rates for a private car start at \$49 (airport to city) or \$43 (city to airport).

GETTING AROUND

The extensive, efficient and cheap metro system is the best bet for most destinations (17 rubles a ticket, or just 70 cents at 25 rubles to the dollar, but fares are to rise 10 to 15 percent next month). For harder-to-reach places and off-hours trips, many Muscovites hitchhike. (Taxis are somewhat scarce, rarely metered and notorious for overcharging tourists.) It is best to ask your hotel to call a cab. If the hotel offers its own car, it's better to insist on a cab, because hotel cars are usually very expensive.

WHERE TO STAY

The most opulent hotel in town is the 334-room [Ritz-Carlton Moscow](#) (Tverskaya Ulitsa 3-5; 7-495-225-8888; www.ritzcarlton.com), which opened in July. The three-starred Michelin chef Heinz Winkler helms the Jeroboam restaurant, while Seiji Kusano whips up tuna and Beluga caviar rolls amid the D.J.-spun [music](#) in the O2 lounge. Doubles from 18,000 rubles (about \$720) in January.

[Madonna](#), [Christina Aguilera](#), Pamela Anderson and other famous blondes have stayed at the four-year-old [Ararat Park Hyatt](#) (Neglinnaya Ulitsa 4; 7-495-783-1234; www.moscow.park.hyatt.com), located steps from Red Square. Double rooms in January from 560 euros, about \$640 at \$1.50 to the euro.

The [Golden Apple](#) (Malaya Dmitrovka Ulitsa 11; 7-495-980-7000; www.goldenapple.ru) is a Moscow rarity: an independent design-oriented boutique hotel. The 92 rooms, D.J. lounge and restaurant have angular contemporary furnishings enlivened with funky candy colors. There is an online Christmas and New Year's rate of 4,999 rubles for a double, but the standard rate for doubles starts at 9,260 rubles.

WHERE TO EAT

Unless otherwise noted, prices reflect a three-course meal for two people without wine. Reservations are recommended, especially on weekends.

In a minimalist Zen interior 22 floors above the city, the sleek Sky Lounge (Russian Academy of Sciences building, Leninsky Prospekt 32; 7-495-938-5775; www.skylounge.ru) serves Euro-Asian fusion dishes like gazpacho with beet sorbet, miso-marinated salmon, and deer cutlet with Roquefort cheese. About 4,200 rubles.

Moscow's most talked-about restaurant is certainly Turandot (Tverskoy Boulevard 26/5; 7-495-739-0011),

an astonishingly recreated 18th-century European gilt palace, complete with chamber music and servers in period dress. The vast pan-Asian menu includes foie gras with tuna sauce, rack of lamb in coffee sauce, wasabi prawns and a long, pricey wine selection. Around 5,000 rubles.

With gun-shaped lamps and couches upholstered with patterns based on prisoner tattoos, the mafia-kitsch palace called Bon (Yakimanskaya Embankment 4, Building 1; 7-495-737-8008) bears the hand of the French designer [Philippe Starck](#). Italian and international specialties like beef carpaccio, grilled Chilean sea bass and spaghetti with lobster comprise the menu. About 5,500 rubles.

[Nedalny Vostok](#) (Tverskoy Boulevard 15, Building 2; 7-495-694-0154) is also outfitted by a boldface international design group, [Japan's Superpotato](#). In a glimmering smooth wood dining room enhanced by quiet D.J.-spun electronic music, servers bring the likes of tuna tartare with green tea noodles and Kamchatka crab with sake dressing to Moscow's moneyed hipsters. About 5,000 rubles.

WHERE TO PARTY

Follow the Bentleys and Ferraris to the preparty scene at the elegant living-room-like GQ (Ulitsa Baltshug 5; 7-495-956-7775) and grab yourself a Champagne and pomegranate juice cocktail (680 rubles) or glass of Moët & Chandon bubbly (1,100 rubles).

Then head to the recreated belle époque fantasy world of Dyagilev Project (Hermitage [Gardens](#); 7-495-790-7400), where international celebrities, corporate heavies and Moscow's self-appointed beautiful people chug 500-ruble mojitos and \$1,000 bottles of Cristal Champagne.

While there is rarely a cover charge at these Moscow night spots, getting in can be extremely difficult owing to the strict "face control" policies at the door. If you have deep pockets and want to take a precaution against disappointment while enjoying a V.I.P. night on the town, Concept 108 (7-985-761-4136; www.concept108.ru) can provide luxury transportation, book tables at top Moscow restaurants and assure entry to the above places and other elite and strictly regulated nightclubs. Prices on request.

WHERE TO SHOP

Whether you want to dine on beet-root carpaccio, sip Dom Perignon rosé, dance to club music or clad yourself in Russian retro-kitsch fashions from the nation's most famous designer, the new resto-boutique of Denis Simachev (Stoleshnikov Pereulok 12, Building 2; 7-495-629-8085; www.denissimachev.com) has it all.

[Le Form](#) (Dmitrovski Pereulok 7; 7-495-660-0280; www.leform.ru) is a concept store with offerings from several Russian fashion labels. Art Deco fans will appreciate the 1930s-style classic silk dresses from Nina Donis, while modern-day Audrey Hepburns should like the 1950s-style movie-star gowns from Biryukov.

Housed in a former wine factory, Vinzavod (Fourth Syromyatnichesky Lane 1; 7-495-917-3436; www.winzavod.com) is a new complex containing several top contemporary art galleries, notably XL and Murat Guelman. It also houses Cara & Company, a store specializing in Australian and European fashion, accessories, art books and wine.

SETH SHERWOOD, based in Paris, is a frequent contributor to the Travel section.

Correction: December 9, 2007

Because of an editing error, an article in the Travel section today about Moscow as a new luxury destination misstates the cost of creating Turandot, a lavish restaurant that opened last year. It was \$50 million, not \$50.

Correction: December 23, 2007

An article on Dec. 9 about Moscow as a new luxury destination misstated the cost of a ticket on the city's metro system in United States currency. The ticket, at 17 rubles, is about 70 cents, at the exchange rate of 25 rubles to the dollar; it is not 7 cents. A picture caption also misidentified the location of a Rolex billboard. It is in the plaza leading to Red Square; it is not in Red Square.

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