

ONE PERFECT DAY

# THE MOTHER OF ALL CITIES

**James Jeffrey** rediscovers a Moscow of opulence, chaos and timeless excess

**E**VERY Russian, write Tolstoy, finds in Moscow the mother of their soul. I found something similar: like that slightly psychotic, irrational, mood-swinging mother you keep loving because, hey, she's your mother.

Moscow is never an easy love — not even for those who've more or less handed their souls over to her — but somewhere safely beneath the emotional waxing and waning is the knowledge that there is nowhere as maddening and magical as this.

Anyone visiting now after an absence of even just a few years is bound to go into convulsions. The old Western image of Moscow — drab, oppressive and populated by lumpen masses queuing for the burger all on the shelves — is proving impressively resistant to change even though there's now everything from bistrottes of neon and Mercedes cars, to — and I'm not making this up — Australian semi-dried tomatoes in at least some of the supermarkets. Russia's capital is booming.

Once the convulsions have passed, the natural reaction is to conclude that after seven and a half decades of communism, the city's making up for lost time. But Moscow, for those with cash, at least, was an over-the-top place long before Lenin and his mates moved in and ended the party.

When Peter the Great shifted the court to the new capital of St Petersburg in the early 1700s, many nobles who focused on their bellies and their heirs more than their careers stayed in Moscow to party on unsupervised. This was a city of excess, of 14-course dinners and parties that struggled to find an end.

When St Petersburg issued an edict early in the 18th century banning live music after 4am, Moscow's festive nobles responded with an outraged petition. St Petersburg responded by ignoring the petition and Moscow responded by ignoring the edict and carrying on with the food of love. And the love of food, for that matter.

So these days, with so many of the streets reverting to their pre-revolutionary names, it seems only fitting that the city is, in a way, reverting to pre-revolutionary habits.

This is a frenetic city of brown and outrageously swirling colours, a sprawling explosion of domes and vampiric skyscrapers, boulevards as broad as rivers and secret laneways and sidestreets dancing behind the looming blocks, all built in a series of concentric rings with the Moskva River meandering through them like a tiny snake. It feels as if it's part circus, part asylum, part casino, part village run wild, all encompassing 10 million people. Moscow overbites and thwarts at first, but eventually yields its nooks and crannies.

**Best building:** Let's get this over and done with — St Basil's Cathedral, with its insane domes of LSD-faded ice cream (or so it appears) in the clichéd image of Moscow and Russia. That doesn't take away from its unblinking brilliance. Commissioned in 1552 by Ivan the Terrible to celebrate the defeat of the Tartars, St Basil's is actually a collection of separate chapels — one for each big battle. Its setting on Red Square only heightens the sense of occasion and, like Uluru, you can see it a million times in two dimensions and still swoon when you first see it in three.

**Best reconstruction:** The elephantine



Maddening and magical: Moscow, a sprawling explosion of domes and vampiric skyscrapers

Picture: Australian Picture Library



Party pooper: Monument to the ruler who shunned Moscow, Peter the Great. Picture: James Jeffrey

**IT'S PART CIRCUS, PART ASYLUM, PART CASINO, PART VILLAGE RUN WILD, ALL ENCOMPASSING 10 MILLION PEOPLE**



**RUSSIAN FEDERATION**  
Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, which was brought back to life in the 1990s. The original used to take up a big chunk of the skyline just near the Kremlin until Stalin had it obliterated in 1931. The Palace of the Soviets that was to have replaced it would have been the world's tallest building, topped with an aluminium Lenin bigger than the Statue of Liberty, pointing a finger housing the world's biggest telescope at the heavens. But when the foundations kept sinking, the Palace of the Soviets was quietly abandoned and replaced with a heated outdoor pool (not the world's biggest).  
**Biggest present-day vandal:** Mayor Yuri Luzhkov, who seems to be on a mission to wipe out a lot of grand old buildings and replace them with, at best, replicas. Not many mourned when he knocked off the Insoult Hotel — a dark '70s edifice that looked like a decaying

## BEST BEDS: METROPOL HOTEL

AMONG Moscow's spread of five-star hotels, the sentimental favourite would have to be the Metropol. Completed in 1903, the William Walcott-designed hotel is a striking example of style moderne. Even in its dramatic setting — by the medieval walls of Kitay Gorod near the Bolshoi Theatre — the Metropol still stands out. This is partly thanks to *The Princess of Dreams*, a large-scale ceramic panel by symbolist artist Mikhail Vrubel that dominates the north wall.



over the decades has included Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Shalyapin, Sergei Rachmaninov, George Bernard Shaw, Bertolt Brecht and Michael Jackson. In

keeping with the exterior, all rooms are decorated with furniture and assorted objets d'art from the early 20th century. Singles from \$US354 (\$485) and doubles from \$US413. There's always the presidential suite for \$US2360, but if the opulence gets too much, guests can always go and genuflect before the nearby statue of Karl Marx, whose stone alter ego stares so intensely at the Bolshoi that it looks as though his beard is about to ignite.  
More: 0011 7 095 927 6000; www.metropol-moscow.ru.

tooth on Tverskaya St — but when he blitzed the Moskva Hotel, the building on Slokhchnaya label, he'd clearly gone too far. His wife is high up in a lot of construction companies, but that's probably just coincidence.

**Wierdest monument:** The Kim statue of Peter the Great, erected by Luzhkov's pet sculptor Zurb Tsereteli on the Moskva River west of the Kremlin, is as popular with locals as a dead goat in the panch-bowl. There is a certain symmetry in this, as Peter felt the same way about Moscow.

**Best convent:** The Novodevichy Convent is a gorgeous, placid corner on a bend of the river near the Sportivnaya metro station. But this is Russia, where beauty and cruelty often sit side by side. The convent was a popular place for nobles to dump unwanted wives. Peter the Great (re-arranged his sister Sofia there for her role in a conspiracy against him and, as the

finishing touch, had some of her co-conspirators hanged outside her window. Nearby, Novodevichy Cemetery is the burial place for many of Russia's elite, from Anton Chekhov and Nikolai Gogol to Nikita Khrushchev and Raisa Gorbachev.

**Biggest concentration of opulence:** The Kremlin itself is a remarkable experience, a city within a city with a multitude of golden-domed churches, palaces, royal burial spots and a theatre all wedged in behind its lower-studded, crenellated red walls. Even in this environment, the collection of jewels and whatnot inside the Armoury is a stunner — there is enough wealth concentrated here to blow Donald Trump's toupee right off his bonce.

**Lushiest theatre:** The Bolshoi, bar none.

**Best dining:** Even the most ardent lover of borsch, dumplings and sour cream would have to concede that it's ultimately

best to yield to Moscow's proliferation of Georgian, Uzbek and Azeri cuisine. It's lighter, spicier and unlikely to clog your arteries. The Georgians make glorious wine, too. That said, if it's a restaurant with a view that's in demand, the restaurant on the 21st floor of the Hotel Rossiya, which looks down across Red Square, the Kremlin and a great swathe of inner Moscow, knocks everything else into a small fry hat.

**Best gallery:** While nothing quite compares to the galactic scale of the Hermitage in St Petersburg, Moscow still packs enough to keep the art lover going for at least a couple of centuries. It's probably a toss up between the Pushkin Museum and the Tretyakov Gallery for top of the heap. Better to be on the safe side and gorge on both.

**Best transport:** For Russian speakers, the simplest way to get around is to stand

at the side of the road, hold out a hand and negotiate a price with the driver of the first car that comes skidding and veering to a halt. But then there's the metro — Moscow's subway always seemed like an anomaly in Soviet Russia. It was — and is — both beautiful and efficient. Many of the stations have chandeliers, mosaics, sculptures. It's also cheap and, during peak periods, the longest you'll wait for a train is about a minute. For people from cities with rail systems like, say, Sydney's, the Moscow metro can be an emotional experience.

**Best driving tip:** Don't. You'll never learn the road rules, no one here seems entirely clear on the matter, either.

**Best literary moment:** Sitting under the linden trees by the Patriarch Ponds while the opening scenes of Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* unfold. There's always a faint chance the devil will appear. If something less surreal is desired, a pilgrimage to Boris Pasternak's home at Peredelkino — a short ride on a suburban train from Kiev station — fills the bill nicely.

**Best avoided literary moment:** Across the street from Leo Tolstoy's former city residence is a video game and netting centre called, wait for it, *War and Peace*. James Jeffrey travelled to Moscow as a guest of The Travel Directors and Cathay Pacific.

### Checklist

The Travel Directors offer several tours with a significant Moscow component each year. Cathay Pacific has regular flights between Moscow and main Australian cities via Hong Kong.  
► www.thetraveldirectors.com.au  
► www.cathaypacific.com.au

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## BLUE HEAVEN

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Brachi, the activity centre of Croatia's islands and Ivanisevic's summer home, it's the biggest of all.

A large, oval island, Brač combines an arid, inhospitable interior with a pine-fringed coast. Bol, on the southern shore, is the focal point for the island's fun. Every May, the town's tennis centre hosts a World Tennis Association tournament. At other times, anybody can hire one of its 22 clay courts. Centre court costs \$15 an hour and 2000 new friends will cheer from the stands.

Bol is also a major windsurfing centre. Reliable winds mean Brač attracts windsurfers from across Europe: four-day courses cost \$170; www.orca-sport.com. Diving, too, is popular (www.nautic-center-bol.com).

Brač is the highest island in the Croatian Adriatic and a two-hour climb takes walkers to the Vidova Gora peak for stunning views south over Hvar. Mountain biking is also excellent — a rough track hugs the shoreline west of Bol. Between olive groves and vineyards there are coves and shingle beaches perfect for cooling off.

No cove, though, competes with the postcard perfect Zlatni Rat, 1km from Bol's centre. A double-triangle wedge of trees and pebble beach, the spit juts out into the sea like a curving horn. It's packed in summer but is the place to relax.

**Staying:** The Kaštel has lovely rooms, all with sea views, and doubles from \$90; www.kaštel.hr. To reserve private rooms, from \$20 per person, try Bol Tours; www.boltours.com.

**Getting there and moving on:** Daily ferry direct from Split to Bol at 4pm (returns 6.30am). Nine ferries daily between Split and Supetar (60 minutes); buses connect for Bol.

To Hvar, fast ferry direct from Bol to Jelsa (daily 5.10pm, returns 6am).

**Hvar: the flashy island**

HVAR (pronounced Huh-var) smells of lavender. This is where the rich and beautiful come to play and the rest of the world comes to watch. Approaching from the water, Hvar is like a long

and creamed cake, its spine a sequence of rippled hills. Travelling across, the colours hit — most of the year, Hvar is verdant green, all heathers and firs. In spring and early summer, these give way to the purple lavender for which the island is famous.

With beauty comes success. In, and increasingly out, of high summer, Hvar Town, a renaissance settlement that is easily the island's most attractive, is packed. That, though, is its appeal: deep lanes and dark shades of the off-duty movie star. Every other woman is in tight bikini and bandana. In the centre of town there's even a mooring — a catwalk really — for the super-yachts. Their cleats twinkle seductively.

The best beaches are on the Pakleni Otoci islands just offshore. Those without their own clipper can either take a water taxi (\$8) or hire a small motor boat (\$85 a day).

**Staying:** On Palmižana, just offshore, Meneghelo Guesthouse has lovely stone cottages for \$60 per person; www.palmizana.hr. A water taxi shuttles to Hvar Town for the nightlife. On Hvar itself, private rooms are best. Try Happy Hvar; www.happyhvar.com.

**Getting there and moving on:** From Split, Jadrolinija daily fast ferries to Hvar Town and return. On to Korčula, there is a daily ferry from Stari Grad to Korčula Town at 9am (return times vary around lunchtime).

**Korčula: the romantic island**

LOCALS claim Marco Polo came from their island. It's rubbish: had the explorer been born on Korčula (pronounced Core-eh-wal) he would never have left.

Forty kilometres long but never more than 8km wide, Korčula is of a similar size to Hvar, yet their temperaments could not be more different. People



go to Hvar to party and show off; couples choose Korčula as a hideaway.

The island is one to fall in love with... and on Korčula Town, with its Venetian streets all leading to the cathedral that tops the town, is splendid; a mini-Dubrovnik of towers, bells and city walls. Approaching from the sea, it's love at first sight.

Outside town, two features mark Korčula apart: the hills and valleys of the interior, and the coast. The southern coast has more indentations than a magician's saw.

There are sandy beaches at Lombarda on the island's eastern tip. For lovers, though, a better option is to hire a scooter (\$45 a day) and head for

one of the secluded bays. Pupnatska Luka, a horseshoe-shaped bay backed by forests and cliffs, is as romantic as Croatia gets.

**Staying:** Hotel Korčula has doubles from \$140 to \$200 and gets evening sun; www.korcula.net.

**Getting there and moving on:** For connections with Hvar, see above. Korčula is roughly midway between Split and Dubrovnik. Ferries run from Split at 7am daily (return 12.30pm) and from Dubrovnik at 9am (return daily but times vary). For Mjet, negotiate one-way passage (about \$25) from a trip boat from Korčula to Perlemog.

### Mjet: the untouched island

Mjet (pronounced Me-yet) is an island for the senses — it looks green and sounds beautiful and feels like one of the most tranquil places on earth. Two thirds forested, Mjet is the greenest of all the Croatian islands. It's also the least developed of those I've covered here: most roads are dirt tracks and tourism is a minor industry.

Its most attractive area is the national park encompassing the western flank of the island. There, in the midst of a hilly forest, are two saltwater lakes, Malo and Veliko Jezero. In the middle of Veliko is a tiny island within an island, site of a 12th-century Benedictine monastery. Like Russian dolls, Mjet is one delight after another.

The island is hardly silent, however: the summer creaking of cicadas is inescapable. And the scent of pine is so strong you miss it returning from the forests to the sea.

Most people visit Mjet on a day trip from Dubrovnik or Korčula. That's time for a taste of the island — a day's jaunt across to the monastery or a cycle around the lakes (an hour or either) but to really appreciate Mjet it's worth staying at least one night.

**Staying:** Mjet's only hotel is the friendly Hotel Odisje (\$70 to \$100) in Pomena which overlooks a beautiful bay; www.hotelodise.hr. Or try one of the guesthouses in Pomena or Polace. Pension Kiko has lovely rooms for \$20 per person.

**Getting there and moving on:** To reach Mjet from Korčula, see above. To go the other way, take the return leg of one of the day-trip boats (most leave 4pm, 8pm).

From Dubrovnik, the 90-minute catamaran service leaves daily at 9am (returns 6.30pm). All ferry times are according to summer timetables (June-September). More: www.jadrolinija.com.

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