



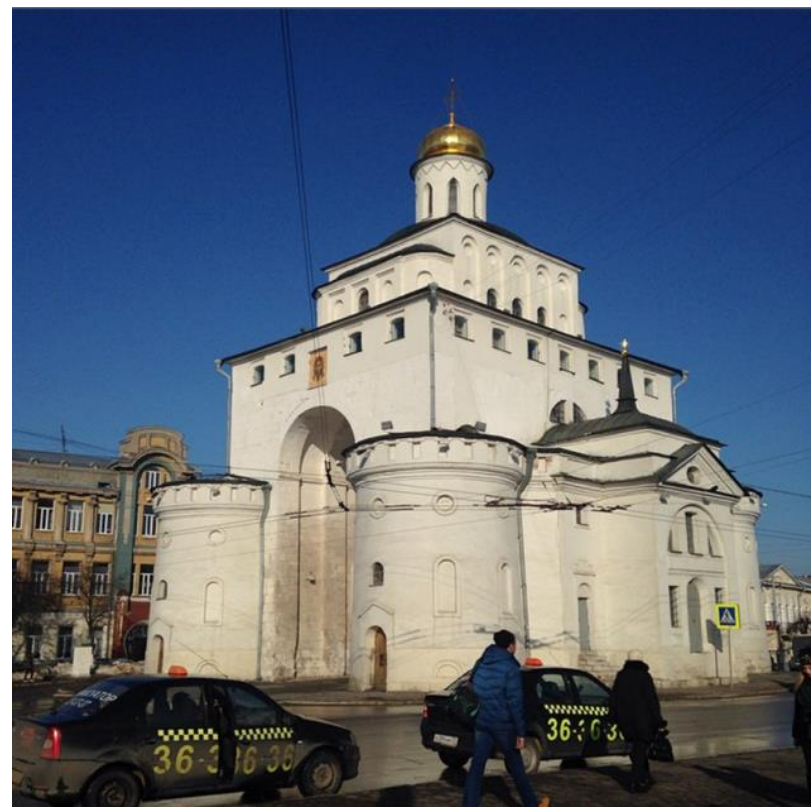
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Study abroad is all about placing yourself in a completely new environment. Unfamiliar surroundings, languages, and food must become the new normal. Perhaps the most daunting (and exciting!) part of this transformation is interacting with the people. The sheer amount that you can learn about culture, attitudes, perspective, and the mysteries of life from your new community is immense. It's an experience that simply should not be missed.

Here at the Higher School of Economics, I work as a teaching assistant, an English language tutor, and a consultant at the Merrill Lynch Writing Center. The nature of my internship often puts me in one-on-one situations with Russian students, and while it is my duty to help these students learn, they often end up teaching me quite a bit, whether they realize it or not! Each student is different, and each has their own favorite topics to discuss and viewpoints on the world, but one thing that they all share is their drive to challenge themselves and improve. In the class I TA for, the professor always prepares lectures that are meant to provoke discussions, and not only are the students up to the task, but they often ask questions that inspire the professor to elevate the level of discussion even further. It is in learning environments such as these that great minds are developed for the future.



My weekend trip to Vladimir and Suzdal in February





I like to skate and watch hockey games. We go to watch hockey with other international students from HSE.

Work is only one part of the travelling abroad experience. How and with whom you spend your free time can be just as enlightening. I live in an international dorm, so I get to meet and talk with students from all over the world who are here on various different programs. The Russian students are often more than happy to show off their city and bring foreign students to places that might be inaccessible with the language barrier or perhaps just too cool to be well known (as is the case with some of the best anti-cafes and bars in Moscow). International students, almost as a rule, are more adventurous than average, and together they rush headlong into the unfamiliar; taking trips to distant cities and going to events and museums to see things that can only be seen here in Russia. There is a kind of comradery that they share, as they are all newcomers, and this allows them to celebrate their differences. My personal favorite way that this is manifested are the weekly dinners where each student contributes his or her culinary skills.

As in any community, an international student must interact with strangers, such as cashiers and store attendants, on a regular basis. In general, there is no reason to fear these situations. While Russians have a reputation of not being as friendly to strangers as people from other countries, I have found that they are almost always willing to work with me in case we have some problems in our communication. Also, it is not uncommon for people on the street to ask for directions or other simple questions about the area. The first few times I had to answer such questions, I was very nervous, but once I was able to say something, the other people were very appreciative. Over time, my confidence grew and these interactions became much more pleasant experiences.



Monument by Vera Mukhina at VDNKha at night.

Overall, I believe the most rewarding part of study abroad is being able to form relationships with a new set of people who lead lives that are at the same time very similar and very different to my own. While we all come from different places, we are all human, and by learning from each other, we learn more about ourselves.