Student Dispatch: A Note from St. Petersburg

White Nights, river cruises, and strolls through the recently renovated Letnii Sad (Summer Garden) make the city of St. Petersburg a pleasant place to study during the summer months. As a FLAS recipient for the summer of 2012, I spent my days in the classroom at St. Petersburg State University, but enjoyed practicing my Russian language skills outside of the classroom as well.

As many visitors will attest, however, many of the inhabitants of St. Petersburg speak English quite fluently, and are not hesitant to speak English with foreigners, whether or not those foreigners might prefer to speak Russian. I attempted to combat this problem by frequently venturing outside of the former capital to learn about nearby towns and their histories. The places I visited were all accessible by train or car and could be explored in one day.

One of the unique, and particularly useful, aspects of tourism in Russia is that many palaces, museums, and other places of interest require tourists to take a tour with a tour guide, rather than wandering about on their own. While some might find this burdensome, I found that this was one of the most useful ways to practice my listening skills. Many smaller tourist locations do not even offer tours in English, though this is truer outside of Moscow and St. Petersburg. I certainly found this to be true on my first trips outside of St. Petersburg to the sleepy towns of Gachina and Vyborg.

Vyborg, a city located close to the Finnish border, was formerly the property of Sweden. Besides touring the old Kremlin and watching a demonstration on medieval torture methods, I explored modern Vyborg with a trip to a restaurant famous in all of Leningrad oblast for its incomparable chiburekki, a deep fried sandwich consisting of a piece of dough folded into a half-moon shape and filled with meat or cheese. The dish is attributed to the Crimean Tatars and is common fare in several Central Asian countries, though it is also hugely popular in Russia today.

Velikii Novgorod, one of the oldest cities in Russia, also presented a unique linguistic experience. While aimlessly wandering about the monument to the Millennium of Russia, my friends and I were approached by an elderly man describing himself as a local professor who freelanced on the weekends as a cash-only tour guide. He said he had recently written a book on the monument, and would be happy to explain to us, in Russian, of course, exactly what we were looking at. After inquiring about his price, we agreed, and spent the next hour walking with him around the monument, detailing the highlights of the making of Russia, beginning with a statue to Rurik. More than 120 individual statues compose the monument, including those to such important figures as Alexander Nevsky, Peter the Great, Mikhail Lomonosov, Nikolai Karamzin, Catherine the Great, Alexander Pushkin, and Mikhail Glinka.

Besides venturing out of St. Petersburg, I found that a very effective way of practicing my Russian
skills was by volunteering. I first experienced what valuable linguistic and cultural experience could be gained by part-time volunteer work during the fall of 2011, when I volunteered with an NGO called Project Innovation, which provides both material and emotional support to the underserved communities of St. Petersburg, including the homeless, orphans, underfunded hospitals, and drug and alcohol assistance programs. The staff at Innovation placed me for one month in a kindergarten for children diagnosed with HIV, and one month in an infectious diseases hospital, for children who were being treated for closed tuberculosis. Both of these experiences were priceless for the cultural insights they provided, but also for the linguistic situations they presented. During the summer of 2012 I was able to volunteer for one month at the State Hermitage Museum, one of the former homes of the royal Russian family (then known as the Winter Palace). I arranged this directly through the museum’s Volunteer Service organization. Though I was often called upon to help English-speaking visitors to the museum, I often found myself speaking Russian to Russian tourists who had come from all over the country to explore one of the most famous museums in the world. Many of these visitors had never previously met an American. Needless to say, I encountered many situations at the Hermitage which stretched all aspects of my Russian skills, and added immensely to my active vocabulary.

Nellie Manis is in her last year as an MA student. She is interested in Russian, East European, and Eurasian sociology and law, with a particular interest in the minority experience and the rights of underserved communities. She received a BA in History and a BA in International Studies from Penn State University in 2008. After completing her MA in 2013, she hopes to pursue a career in the international sphere while continuing to study Russian, French, and Ukrainian.