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# THE KREMLIN MARCH

On a walking tour of Moscow's iconic seat of power, Ananya Bahl discovers that the city seamlessly blends its glorious past with a glitzy present

It's a glorious, sunny morning in early July. I am standing in the busy Red Square, waiting for Anastasia, my guide in Moscow. She isn't late, it's just that I'm early, in my eagerness to soak in this iconic city's vibes – its political reverberations, romanticism and contemporary surge. I want a few moments alone with Moscow before Anastasia arrives. So, here I am, soaking up the sun.

As I look around, taking in the panoramic view of the majestic buildings circling the vast cobblestone plaza, my mind just begins to meander backwards in time, when someone taps me on the shoulder. "Ananya? I see you are here early!" says a gorgeous woman. If there's something you should know about Russian women, it is that they take their appearance and sartorial choices very seriously, even for mundane activities like grocery shopping! Anastasia is no exception and I make a mental note to ask her to take me shopping later. When a friend had suggested that I tour the city with Anastasia, I had readily agreed, even though my trip was short. This is because the Cyrillic alphabet confounds me and also, the idea of touring the city with someone who grew up in the Soviet era was admittedly exciting. And it helped that she was fluent in English.

As we walk around now, Anastasia tells me how it's often thought that the square's name is inspired by Communism or the rust colour of its buildings. "It is, in fact, a derivation of the word 'krasnyi', meaning 'beautiful' in old Russian," she explains. Beautiful it is, for sure. I ask if there are displays of military strength held here today like the iconic victory parade after the defeat of the Nazis in June 1945. She laughs it off, saying that the square is a popular venue for fashion shows, concerts, street parties and festivals these days. Something tells me that this juxtaposition is the first of many that I will encounter in Moscow.

We begin our exploration of the Kremlin, the seat of Russia's government and a collection of buildings that are both magnificent and historic. The word 'kremlin' means 'a fortress within a city', and if you were to have a bird's-eye view of the sprawling complex, it would look just like that.

Saint Basil's  
Cathedral  
in Red  
Square at  
sunrise



The beauty of St Basil's Cathedral is heightened by its picture-perfect onion-shaped domes in every colour imaginable, designed to look like rising flames

First on our agenda is the colourful St Basil's Cathedral, built by Tsar Ivan IV in the 16th century and probably the most photographed site in Moscow. I am awestruck. The cathedral's beauty is difficult to describe - picture-perfect onion-shaped domes in every colour imaginable, designed to look like rising flames.

Next, we walk to the stately Grand Kremlin Palace, which exudes antiquity from every corner. From the tsars and Soviet heads of state to being the home of the current President of the Russian Federation - it has been part of every important chapter in Russia's history. We spend time at the Armoury Chamber taking in the sheer vastness of the Tsarist collection, which ranges from the eccentric to the flamboyant, before making our way to Lenin's Mausoleum.

By noon, hunger comes calling. We head to Stolovaya 57, a Soviet-style diner, to up the nostalgic ante. It's located in the GUM (pronounced "goom"; GUM are the initials for the Russian words for State Department Store) shopping mall at Red Square. Anastasia orders for us. "In my younger days, we had simple meals sans frills, and this restaurant offers a slightly modern take on food from the Soviet era," she explains as she orders the Russian signature pickled herring with beetroot, meat cutlets and stroganoff. This cafeteria, sandwiched between designer boutiques, reiterates Moscow's play of contrasts! After lunch, we head to Alexander Garden - one of the first urban public parks in Moscow.

Made up of three gardens, this green oasis is punctuated by colourful flower beds and awe-inspiring views of the Kremlin. It's buzzing with locals and tourists, and we blend in, as Anastasia fills me in on the park's history. "For centuries, the Neglinnaya river flowed here and served as a natural barrier for the Kremlin. But in 1812, when Moscow was being reconstructed after Napoleon's invasion, architect Osip Bove diverted the river into an underground metal tube and a park was developed in its place," she says.

Here, we take in monuments like the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and the Eternal Flame, dedicated





1. Bosco Café and Red Square

2. An honour guard from the Kremlin regime performs Kremlin Step-marching during the change of guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier



## The ceremonial changing of the guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Alexander Garden is a popular attraction

to fallen soldiers – a rather humbling walk. Another attraction here is the hourly changing of the guard.

Our walk ends at the Cathedral of the Annunciation, originally built as a private church for Russian royalty. This iconic structure's glistening golden domes stand out – almost like glittery icing on an ivory cake! Housed within its walls is a vast collection of Russian icon paintings, including those by Andrei Rublev, undisputedly one of the most renowned icon painters in the world. As soon as we enter, we're greeted by Simon Ushakov's Image of Edessa icon. The cathedral's main vault displays a large iconostasis, which is a wall with

religious icon paintings created by various artists between the 14th and the 19th centuries.

After dissecting as many icons as possible, we decide to call it a day and cool off at the stylish Bar BQ Café that faces Red Square. As I dig into my American-style burger and Japanese sushi, I wonder if I could have eaten this had I been a tourist here during Soviet times. I keep glancing at Red Square and then back at my meal and marvel at Moscow's contrasts, yet again.

*The author is a travel writer and the views expressed in the article are her own*