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Driving in Moscow

By Gregory Feifer

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MOSCOW—Since the time I first bought a car in Russia two years ago, I'd been on the lookout for a driving manual to help clear up some of my most frequent questions—such as “Why do there seem to be no traffic regulations, or at least none that I can discern?” I assumed there were no guides to be had—perhaps because such regulations were top secret (like maps of Moscow during the Soviet era). But I'm very happy to report that I finally found a copy of such a manual. It turns out there are rules to the road, after all. For the benefit of the ICWA readership, I'm providing details below:

City of Moscow, Russian Federation State Department for Motor Vehicles Driver's Manual

Driving properly should be the goal of every motorist in the city of Moscow. Each driver should know which rules apply to him or her and which to others. The rules and regulations and other responsibilities you have as a driver are explained in this manual. When driving a vehicle in Moscow, you will be expected to know them.

This information, while necessary for new drivers, can also be helpful for more experienced drivers brushing up on operating rules. Some of the significant responsibilities mentioned include accelerating quickly on ice (as well as coming to a skidding stop), proper blaring of horns, the ability to recognize car-model hierarchy and how your car fits into it, and, of course, how to discreetly pass along bribes to traffic officials.

Please read this manual thoroughly, and always remember the main responsibility on Moscow streets is knowing your place.

Introduction

If your car has traffic-police-exempt license plates or a blue flashing light (especially if it comes with an official-sounding siren), you are exempt from all rules and regulations contained herein. Happy motoring! (Aforementioned plates can be obtained for \$50,000 and flashing lights for \$35,000 through channels which cannot be disclosed here. Remember: If you think you don't have the clout to qualify for them, you probably don't.)

In the event we do test you for a license, exams are conducted in the vehicle you provide. That is, unless you own a late-model Mercedes, BMW or Volvo, in which case you will not be tested. You will, however, be required to pay a sum not exceeding \$500 (a photograph of the vehicle will usually suffice). If you own an American model, you will be required to pay in addition a “traitors” fee not exceeding \$200. Other models vary. Please enquire at your local traffic police station.

In the unfortunate event that you own a Russian vehicle, you should be

familiar with it. Applicants should be able to either release or apply the parking brake (or use blocks), and recognize when the brake has been applied. In the common case that it's not possible to tell whether or not the brake has been applied, it will cost you 50 rubles. You should be able to operate the windshield wipers (and/or know how to quickly jump out at a red light to use a bottle of water and your arm to clean the windshield). You should know how to drive at night without the aid of headlights. You should also be familiar with the technique of flashing the headlights repeatedly while blaring your horn routinely to pass other cars.

In addition, you should be able to keep the car within at least two lanes of traffic while taking your eyes off the road in the event you are: a) talking on a cellular telephone; b) cursing and gesturing at other drivers; c) you just want to take a break. You should be able to gauge the speed of your car to within 10 km/h of your wildly flailing speedometer arrow. You should also know how to drive calmly in the likely event warning lights are randomly flashing on your instrument panel. You should also be able to stop randomly in the middle of the street.

A stolen vehicle may be used for driver's testing if the vehicle has a.) remained unidentified as a stolen vehicle; or b.) you pay a fee not less than \$200.

Under no circumstances may a car that has been insured be used for driver's testing, unless an additional fee has been handed over to the tester. In the event you cannot afford the additional fee, you must cancel your insurance and pay the local traffic police (who rank above insurance companies in the distribution of automobile-related fees).

Getting ready to Drive

Prior to entering the test vehicle, you should have ob-



Know your Lada. If you own a vehicle such as this current production model, make sure you're aware of the kinks. Remember, it takes a couple of months to discover and fix all the problems new cars may have.



A fine example of a car exempting you from having to take a drivers' license test. We know you have the cash. Fork it over.

served nearby parked cars, people or objects that could affect your ability to put the car in motion. Ignore them. Always, however, remember the rules of which cars take precedence. If you are driving a high-end foreign car (Mercedes, BMW, Volvo or any American car), assume you always have the right-of-way. It is the obligation of all other cars, people and objects to get out of your path. Drive accordingly.

Dark tinted windows take precedence over light tints and clear windows. Later model cars take precedence over older cars. Sport-utility vehicles—with the exception of Hyundais—generally take precedence over other cars, unless it seems the other car is willing to risk collision. In that case, it's your call.

Drivers of Russian-made vehicles are expected to fight it out among themselves. Remember: It's your neck! If you hit a vehicle belonging to a member of an organized criminal group, a politician, "businessman," or anyone else with enough bodyguards or clout to threaten severe physical punishment—even if you are not at fault—you're under obligation to pay whatever he or she demands. (Watch out for fake-accident scams!)

All cars take precedence over all pedestrians. Official cars with one or more Mercedes SUV escorts take precedence over non-escorted cars, even if they have blue lights.

Upon entering your vehicle, disregard the seat-belt, or at the very least, just throw it over your shoulder. You should adjust your seat to an angle that pushes you forward in a position in which you are forced to lean over the steering wheel. Your right foot should be able to easily reach the accelerator pedal, which is next to the brake (don't be too concerned if you can't

tell them apart). Don't worry about the clutch.

We expect you to be able to start your vehicle and recognize when it is running. The inspector will not help you push-start your vehicle. Unless you pay a fee.

Losing Your License

If you pass the drivers' test and are issued a license, please remember that it can be revoked for a number of reasons, including: a) you are found driving while under the influence of alcohol or drugs; b) you use a motor vehicle to commit a felony; and c) you fail to comply with traffic-police requests. Of course, you can keep your license in these instances if you pay a fee of not under \$300.

Your vehicle will be required to pass an inspection once a year at an authorized inspection station. It must meet certain requirements, including emission standards. Your car must also have working lights, turn indicators and brakes. Of course, when we say your car must meet these requirements, we really just mean you will have to pay a fee. No Russian car could ever pass an emission test. They don't even have catalytic converters. Most cars are tuned in back yards, for crying out loud. (Note: There have been rare instances in which vehicles have actually passed the rigorous requirements of the traffic police. But that requires the testing equipment to be in working order.)

Rules of the Road

There are traffic rules that say where, when and how

fast you can drive. These rules help keep traffic moving. Rules of the road include traffic devices, right-of-ways and parking rules. Traffic-control devices include traffic signals, signs, and pavement markings. Traffic-control can also be provided by traffic police. You must obey directions from these persons.

Traffic signals are lights that tell you when or where to stop and go. A green light means you can go (unless a car has broken down in front of you, in which case you must curse angrily at the owner). A yellow light means speed up quickly. A red light means all foreign cars not more than four years old and those with blue lights can go. They may also turn left or right on red.

On two-lane roads, all cars must stay on the right-hand side of the road. In case of traffic jams or if traffic is just moving too slowly, cars with traffic-police-exempt license plates and blue lights may turn into the opposite lane and drive into oncoming traffic. Most foreign cars may also do so at their own risk. Russian cars must make way for all vehicles driving in their lane toward them. The regular rules of hierarchy apply to all other vehicles. Always remember that if someone with a more expensive car than yours hits you, it's generally your fault.

Vehicles driving in the city of Moscow may generally not make left-hand turns. (This Stalin-era rule is currently under review, along with the decision to plant poplar trees that annually turn Moscow into a choking sea of white-tufted seed pods.) However, vehicles may make seemingly random u-turns along such main streets as the six-lane Garden Ring Road in the center of the city. At such times, oncoming traffic is required to swerve out of the way.

Speed-limit signs apply to Russian cars and old foreign vehicles. Some traffic police are equipped with radar devices, but most don't know how to use them. Keep an eye on your speedometer so you will be able to contest the randomly-entered figures on the radar digital display in the event you are stopped for speeding. Don't worry too much if you don't—you will most likely be required to pay a fee of not less than 200 rubles in any case.



In situations in which there is little room to pass, under no circumstances should you make way for other vehicles to pass you. Remember, might makes right!

No-passing signs ap-

ply only to Russian cars, as do stop signs, do-not-enter signs, yield signs and lane-control arrows.

Pedestrians

Under no circumstances should a car make way for pedestrians, especially children, who generally need to be taught a lesson, anyway. A driver encountering a pedestrian should mutter under his or her breath about how anyone could dare step on the road. If you see a pedestrian, speed up and steer your vehicle toward him or her. Remember, pedestrians are often as reckless as drivers, so be ready to stay on course if a pedestrian refuses to budge. Cars making turns at intersections must also make sure pedestrians cannot cross in front of them, especially if there is a crosswalk. (Remember, crosswalks are often hard to see because of worn-off paint!)

The Shared Center Lane

On various roadways, the middle lane between opposing lanes of traffic—once reserved for high Communist Party officials—is now reserved for members of organized criminal groups, high-ranking politicians, cars with blue lights, and some foreign cars. To decide which side of the road is eligible to use the middle lane: The car not swerving out of the way at the last minute takes precedence. Russian cars such as Ladas and Volgas do not have the right to use the middle lane.

Turning

When making a right turn, first make a wide swinging turn to the left before turning to the right. Ignore drivers behind you who inevitably think you are turning to the left and speed up on your right.

When making left turns, cut the corner sharply enough so that you run the risk of running into someone approaching from the left. Also, be sure to leave no room for oncoming vehicles to turn left in front of you.

Right-of-Way

Drivers entering a traffic circle or rotary must push their way into the circle as quickly as possible. Drivers already in a traffic circle or rotary must try to obstruct entering cars.

At a four-way stop, the driver moving at the fastest speed generally goes first. If more than one vehicle arrives at the same time and traveling at the same speed, the usual rules of hierarchy apply.

Drivers entering a road from a driveway, alley or side road must turn suddenly into passing traffic. Do not worry about how quickly you accelerate. (The cars behind you will have another chance to test whether their brakes work

very well.) Turning cars may also begin to turn and stop halfway, not sure as to whether to proceed, but blocking at least one lane of traffic.

Drivers must enter intersections as quickly as possible. Do not look at other vehicles. If there is traffic blocking the intersection, by all means try to squeeze in, especially if



Pedestrians, such as those depicted here, often commit suicidal acts. Don't let them get away with it.

the light is about to turn red or has already turned.

You must yield the right-of-way to police vehicles. Ignore ambulances.

Changing Lanes

Change lanes suddenly without using your turn signal. Try to take up two lanes as long as possible by driving between them.

Merging

When one or more lanes moving in one direction are obstructed or end, traffic must merge onto the remaining lane(s). At such times, follow these simple rules: Try as hard as possible to squeeze into the open lane. Do everything to block vehicles from other lanes from getting in front of you, even if it means blocking traffic driving in the opposite direction. This will require some dexterity and often results in dents and sometimes in severe accidents. Remember to stand your ground.

Parking

Cars may generally park anywhere in the city. Often this means you should park your car sideways, blocking pedestrian traffic on the sidewalk while also obstructing other cars on the road. Park on a sidewalk if there is a free spot. Municipal law requires you leave room for pedestrians to pass, but hey, pedestrians can always walk out into



An example of a perfect parking job. Remember to take up as much of the road and sidewalk as possible.

drivers should observe the following driving tips: To begin moving forward from a complete stop, floor the accelerator. If the vehicle's wheels spin out, continue to step on the gas until the car somehow begins to move forward. Once you are moving, drive as quickly as possible. Make sharp turns that cause the vehicle's wheels to skid. Most important, always slam on the brakes when you want to stop. Make sure your car comes to a skidding stop.

Emergencies

Should your car break down or become involved in an accident, always remember to do absolutely nothing about it. Keep your car exactly where it is, especially if it is blocking several lanes of heavy traffic. Find a traffic policeman who will come to the scene and stand looking at it, scratching his head.

the road, right? (You've parked your car already, after all, so no longer belong to the ranks of fuming drivers.)

Federal law bans parking meters and paid parking spots in Russia, but due to the influence of the Moscow mayor, paid parking is emerging all over the city. However, it is still possible to park free in such places by raising your voice to parking attendants and refusing to pay.

Bus and tram stops are reserved for those on official state business and late-model foreign cars.

Immediately get out of the vehicle once you are done parking. Never check traffic before opening the door.

Driving Tips

When driving on Moscow streets, you should generally be accelerating as much as possible or braking suddenly. In addition to making traffic less safe, this will also make your vehicle consume more gasoline. These considerations are nothing compared to your dignity. If you see traffic slowing in front of you, speed up until the last minute, slam on the brakes to narrowly avoid crashing into the car in front of you and act surprised and offended.

Do not look in your rear- and side-view mirrors. Do not scan the road in front and behind you so as to be alert of what is going on around you.

Bad Driving Conditions

In the likely event streets are covered in snow, slush or ice (remember, roads are plowed less frequently each year),

Foreign Drivers

Foreign drivers should be aware of what type of license—if any—they are required to carry. These rules change regularly and are not publicized. In the unlikely event foreign drivers happen to have the correct license required the day they are stopped, the traffic police will not acknowledge this. Be prepared to stand your ground if you don't want your car impounded. Always remember: 500 rubles will usually do the trick.

Increasing Numbers of Cars on the Streets

Remember that each year there are significantly more cars on Moscow streets. This will mean you will have to drive more aggressively if you want to get anywhere, what



Drivers of cars such as this impressive Audi may generally do whatever they like.

with traffic driving on the wrong side of the road and blocking intersections. It all began during the Soviet era, when there were relatively few cars on the streets as citizens waited for years to buy vehicles.¹

At this time, Soviet officials sped around in their middle lanes on ostensibly important business. After the collapse of the Communist state, Russians were free to buy cars, and for many men, owning a car became the chief sign of independence. New-car owners remembered seeing functionaries muscle their way around town and dreaming of some day being able to drive in the same manner. Thus, most Russians today drive as if they are on business of the utmost importance. As a result, Muscovites must wait in ever-more annoying traffic jams, sometimes overnight, as drivers rush to carry out their "important business." This trend will continue, as there is still only one car per nine Russians as opposed to two cars for every three Americans.



Situations such as this traffic jam are only going to get worse. That means you will have to learn to drive more aggressively.

Miscellaneous

It is the duty of the traffic police to ignore most traffic violations occurring right in front of their noses. Rather, they must stand at certain spots divvied up between them and other traffic police. These spots are often where "do-not-switch-lanes" double lines on the road have become completely worn off. The traffic police then pick the most lucrative-looking cars in violation of the former double lines to stop for payment of fees.

If you have any queries, please address them in writing to Major-General Boris Fadeyev, head of the Moscow region traffic police, Lefortovo Prison, 116547 Moscow. (The general will duly ignore them as soon as he is released from arrest for having ordered soldiers under his command to shoot and kill 22 other Russian soldiers in a "friendly-fire" incident last year in Chechnya when he was a commander in the Russian military headquarters.) □



Dealing with traffic police requires a long process of negotiation. Remember to hand over crisp bills tucked discreetly into your car registration documents.

¹ This circumstance led to such tales as:

A man has saved his rubles for twenty years to buy a new car. He goes to the central Lada showroom to choose the model he wants. A salesman writes his name down in a thick notebook and tells him it will take two years for the new car to be delivered. The man thanks the salesman and starts to leave, but pauses and turns back to the salesman. "Do you know which week, two years from now, the new car will arrive?" he asks.

The salesman checks his notes and tells the man that it will be two years to the exact week. The man thanks the salesman another time and starts out, but on reaching the door, he turns back again.

"Could you possibly tell me what day of the week the car will arrive?" The salesman, mildly annoyed, checks his notes again and says that it will be on a Thursday.

"I'm sorry to be so much trouble," the man continues, "but do you know if that will be in the morning or in the afternoon?" Visibly irritated, the salesman flips through his papers yet another time and sharply replies that it will be in the afternoon, two years from now, on Thursday.

"That's a relief!" the man says. "The plumber's coming in the morning!"

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Fellows and their Activities

Shelly Renae Browning (March 2001- 2003) • **AUSTRALIA**

A surgeon specializing in ears and hearing, Dr. Browning is studying the approaches of traditional healers among the Aborigines of Australia to hearing loss and ear problems. She won her B.S. in Chemistry at the University of the South, studied physician/patient relationships in China and Australia on a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship and won her M.D. at Emory University in Atlanta. Before her ICWA fellowship, she was a Fellow in Skull-Base Surgery in Montreal at McGill University's Department of Otolaryngology.

Wendy Call (May 2000 - 2002) • **MEXICO**

A "Healthy Societies" Fellow, Wendy is spending two years in Mexico's Isthmus of Tehuantepec, immersed in contradictory trends: an attempt to industrialize and "develop" land along a proposed Caribbean-to-Pacific containerized railway, and the desire of indigenous peoples to preserve their way of life and some of Mexico's last remaining old-growth forests. With a B.A. in Biology from Oberlin, Wendy has worked as communications coordinator for Grassroots International and national campaign director for Infact, a corporate accountability organization.

Martha Farnelo (April 2001- 2003) • **ARGENTINA**

A Georgetown graduate (major: psychology; minor, Spanish) with a Master's in Public Affairs from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton, Martha is the Institute's Suzanne Ecke McColl Fellow studying gender issues in Argentina. Married to an Argentine economist and mother of a small son, she will be focusing on both genders, which is immensely important in a land of *Italo/Latino machismo*. Martha has been involved with Latin America all her professional life, having worked with Catholic Relief Services and the Inter-American Development Bank in Costa Rica, with Human Rights Watch in Ecuador and the Inter-American Foundation in El Salvador, Uruguay and at the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing.

Gregory Feifer (January 2000 - 2002) • **RUSSIA**

With fluent Russian and a Master's from Harvard, Gregory worked in Moscow as political editor for *Agence France-Presse* and the weekly *Russia Journal* in 1998-9. He sees Russia's latest failures at economic and political reform as a continuation of failed attempts at Westernization that began with Peter the Great — failures that a long succession of behind-the-scenes elites have used to run Russia behind a mythic facade of "strong rulers" for centuries. He plans to assess the continuation of these cultural underpinnings of Russian governance in the wake of the Gorbachev/Yeltsin succession.

Curt Gabrielson (December 2000 - 2002) • **EAST TIMOR**

With a Missouri farm background and an MIT degree in physics, Curt is spending two years in East Timor, watching the new nation create an education system of its own out of the ashes of the Indonesian system. Since finishing MIT in 1993, Curt has focused on delivering inexpensive and culturally relevant hands-on science education to minority and low-income students. Based at the Teacher Institute of the Exploratorium in San Francisco, he has worked with youth and teachers in Beijing, Tibet, and the Mexican-American agricultural town of Watsonville, California.

Peter Keller (March 2000 - 2002) • **CHILE**

Public affairs officer at Redwood National Park and a park planner at Yosemite National Park before his fellowship, Peter holds a B.S. in Recreation Resource Management from the University of Montana and a Masters in Environmental Law from the Vermont Law School. As a John Miller Musser Memorial Forest & Society Fellow, he is spending two years in Chile and Argentina comparing the operations of parks and forest reserves controlled by the Chilean and Argentine governments to those controlled by private persons and non-governmental organizations.

Leena Khan (April 2001-2003) • **PAKISTAN**

A U.S. lawyer previously focused on immigration law, Leena is looking at the wide-ranging strategies adopted by the women's movement in Pakistan, starting from the earliest days in the nationalist struggle for independence, to present. She is exploring the myths and realities of women living under Muslim laws in Pakistan through women's experiences of identity, religion, law and customs, and the implications on activism. Born in Pakistan and immersed in Persian and Urdu literature by her grandfather, she was raised in the States and holds a B.A. from North Carolina State University and a J.D. from the University of San Diego.

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