



Patrice Bain and Jessica Barranco at a press conference for Fulbright-Hays Group Project Abroad participants and their hosts at the American Home in Vladimir, Russia

Teacher Thankful for Fulbright-Hays Experience in Russia

Social studies teachers visit Moscow, Vladimir, St. Petersburg, return with treasure trove of new perspectives to share with students

by [Jessica Barranco](#)

I was one of fourteen extremely fortunate American social studies teachers who traveled to Russia on a four-week seminar in summer 2004 that focused on [Understanding Russia through Everyday Life](#). Supported by a generous Fulbright-Hays grant, our program was the result of a unique collaborative effort on the part of the Russian, East European and Eurasian Center (REEEC) at the University of Illinois and the American Home in Vladimir, Russia. We were promised an in-depth look at everyday life in Russia, and the program delivered that and much more. The richness of our personal and professional experiences exceeded our expectations in every way.

We began our adventure in mid-June with an outstanding five-day pre-departure workshop under the direction of Lynda Park, Assistant Director of REEEC. Seated around a conference table, we put names to the faces of our fellow travelers. The workshop covered a wide range of subjects, including geography, the reigns of Peter and Catherine the Great, Dostoevsky for adolescents, Stalinism, daily life during the Cold War, Russia's transition to a market economy, contemporary politics, and an introduction to Russian language and customs. Each lecture was accompanied by carefully chosen readings, many of which we are now using in our own classrooms. We were impressed by the scholarship and unique perspectives of the presenters, and each lecture was typically followed by lively discussion. In the evenings we gathered in the dorm to debrief and watch Russian films. After countless trips to stores for last-minute must-have items, we said good-bye to Lynda and other Center staff members who had cared for us so well. We were on our way.

Led by Ron Pope, professor of politics and government at Illinois State University and founder of the [American Home in Vladimir](#), our group then spent the next four weeks in Russia. Our journey from Chicago to Moscow turned out to be a mini-adventure in itself, featuring a missed connection and misplaced luggage, but nothing managed to quell our excitement. We finally arrived in Vladimir, a provincial city located 118 miles east of Moscow in the heart of central Russia, with an astonishing array of architectural and cultural sites.

Under the talented and spirited direction of the American Home's Alexei and Galia Altonen, our adventure began in earnest. Our home stays in Vladimir and Murom, a smaller but historic city 85 miles southeast of Vladimir, provided the most memorable experiences for many of us. We made real connections and established genuine friendships. How generously our host families treated us! We dined on delicious home-cooked meals, traveled to family dachas where we feasted on shashlik and chocolate and invigorated ourselves in traditional wooden banyas. We walked the streets of the city until it got dark. We drank tea and vodka. We yelled "Davai! Davai!" at soccer games. We sang "Moroz, Moroz" and "Katyusha" at all hours of the day and night. And we loved it! We didn't observe everyday life in Russia, we lived it.

Our family home-stays were complemented by the full and varied educational programs arranged by the American Home in Vladimir and the dedicated staff of the Murom Institute. Every morning we heard from experts on subjects such as religion, gender issues, education, foreign policy, the regional economy, and the legal/judicial system. Our afternoon excursions gave us the opportunity to speak directly with government officials, teachers, police officers, attorneys, religious leaders, journalists and community activists. Their candor, initiative and dedication truly inspired us. In many of these people, such as Elena Rogacheva, Olga Goncharova, Natalya Zhilenko and Valentina Spiridonova, we saw individuals wholly committed to building a Russian society based on democratic principles. We can honestly say that we experienced the changing face of Russia firsthand.

From Murom, we toured the beautiful cities of St. Petersburg and Moscow. We visited many breathtaking and moving sites, notably the Winter Palace and the Siege of Leningrad Memorial in St. Petersburg, and the Kremlin and the recently opened Cathedral of Christ the Redeemer in Moscow. As teachers, we especially appreciated the outstanding tour of the [State Russian Museum](#) led by art historian Aleksei Kurbanovskii and the fascinating bus tour of sites of the Russian Revolution led by Professor Boris Kolonitskii of the European University. What a privilege it was to listen to these two experts. Particularly memorable from our stay in Moscow was our visit with Militia General Boris Gavrilov who spoke with us at length about the challenges confronting law enforcement officers in today's Russia.

No doubt many of our classrooms at home are now adorned with Russian maps, [matryoshkas](#) and posters of the [Cyrillic alphabet](#). Some of our students are reading Russian fairytales, Pushkin's "[The Bronze Horseman](#)," and Tolstoy's [Hadji Murad](#) for the first time. Some of them are making lacquer boxes, and some are corresponding with their Russian counterparts on a regular basis. Our ability to teach periods such as World War II, the Cold War, and the dissolution of the USSR has been enriched by the conversations we had with Russians who remember and lived through them. As we watch events unfold in Russia, we have a newfound compassion and perspective. We thank REEEC, the American Home and the [Fulbright-Hays Group Projects Abroad Program](#) for the remarkable opportunity they gave us. Thanks to their collective effort, there are students seated in fourteen different classrooms from California to New Jersey who are now reaping the benefits of their teachers' new insights and personal experiences.

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