

A Good Night's Rest for \$18 or Less

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June 20, 2011



Bear Hostels owner Daniil Mishin, 18, opened his first hostel when he was 13 years old. **Igor Tabakov** Scotsman Aly Hogg enjoys defying convention.

He has zigzagged from continent to continent with only a backpack on his shoulders. His next mission is a bike trek from Irkutsk to India. So when the young man flew in for a one-day stopover in Moscow, naturally the only place he considered staying was where few Russians dare to go — a hostel.

Up to 24 new hostels have opened up in Moscow in the past two years. The biggest hostel, with 153 beds, is scheduled to open on Stoleshnikov Pereulok by the end of this year.

The city's tourism committee estimates that there are now 45 hostels and a total of 2,300 hostel beds in Moscow.

For a modest 500 rubles per night, an adventurous traveler can enjoy the conveniences of staying in the city center, a metal bunk bed and sometimes even a steaming bowl

of porridge.

Bear Hostels owner Daniil Mishin, 18, opened his first hostel when he was 13 years old. He plans to open five more hostels in Moscow by the end of this year, bringing his total to eight.

The son of an English teacher and a security guard, Mishin's love affair with hostels started after his family missed a train while on their first trip to Europe. Their last 50 euros was enough to get three beds in a cheap hostel in the center of Berlin.

"We checked in and absolutely fell in love with that place," Mishin said. "It was beautiful — nice people from all over the world, people from different cultures, different religions, different perspectives."

After the trip, Mishin convinced his parents to convert an old Soviet apartment that his grandmother had left them in Sevastopol into a hostel.

He gave food and alcohol to local soldiers in exchange for their building him bunk beds. The family ordered second-hand linen from Turkey and carted in electronics from their home.

The hostel was fully booked for the summer so the Mishins regained their investment within a month. By 15, Mishin had four hostels in Sevastopol and was ready to conquer the Russian capital.

Moscow was just starting to ride the hostel wave.

Richard Lines, co-owner of Napoleon Hostel, had backpacked around the world and was surprised to discover that there were no hostels in Russia. He opened his hostel in Moscow in 2007 when there was only one other competitor in the city.

But even as more hostels appeared in Moscow, they were different from the ones Lines stayed in while in Europe. A hostel in London can host up to 600 people, but in Eastern Europe they tend to have a maximum of 50 beds, Lines said.

Moscow hostels tend to be small because they are usually located in old apartments or offices that have been rented out from private owners or through banks.

Experts maintain, however, that the quality of the hostels in Europe and Russia is comparable.

"These are quite European-quality hostels," Mikhail Dubrovsky, director of Moscow's tourism committee's press office, wrote in an e-mail to The Moscow Times. "Almost all of them are in the center of the city, clean, friendly. Their staff speaks English."

Inventing Their Own Rules

Zaur Yaliyev opened the Green ManGO Hostel with two friends at the end of May. They wanted to open the hostel in the beginning of the month but the process took longer than expected, he said.

It took the friends half a year to find a space to rent since many people refused to have their

apartment converted into a hostel. Yaliyev spent another two months getting all the necessary approvals from the fire, sanitation and tax authorities.

The process was frustrating.

"I hate standing in line," Yaliyev said.

Mishin said it takes a long time to start a hostel from scratch because the information on how to complete the process is thrown across different city departments. There is also no legal definition of what a hostel is so owners struggle to understand what they need to do to run the business.

"For hostels, it is very difficult to maintain absolute legality," Mishin said. "We have to invent for ourselves some kind of formal explanations of what we're doing."

Complying with fire regulations is an especially sore point for owners.

Hostels are usually legally registered as apartments that give out their rooms for rent and rarely meet the requirement for the minimum number of fire exits. Being registered as hotels is also not an option since hotels follow even harsher safety standards, Mishin said.

Hostel owners have asked Moscow authorities to create separate rules for their industry. A Hostels Union was formed a month ago to mediate between the sector and the city. It now has 14 members.

The city's tourism committee is already working on changing the normative regulations around hostels, Dubrovsky wrote. The committee also plans to help emerging entrepreneurs find locations for their businesses.

Dubrovsky emphasized that current city officials are eager to support the growing industry.

"Hostels increase the opportunities that youth and individual tourists have to find economical accommodations in the city, and this makes the city more attractive to guests," he wrote.

The Quest for Russian Souls

Foreigners don't need to be told of the benefits of staying in Moscow for 500 rubles (\$18) per night. An average hotel unit in the city would have cost them 6,596 rubles in 2010, according to findings by Cushman & Wakefield.

But the favorable calculation is still not making a big impression on Russian tourists.

Most of the summer customers in hostels are foreigners. Only 20 percent of guests at the Bulgakov Mini-Hostel are Russian. Napoleon Hostel has almost no Russian guests.

The concept of staying in a hostel is too alien for many Russians. Few domestic tourists know what a hostel is, and the ones that do are mostly those who have been abroad, said Ivan Ksenofontov, Hostels Union chairman.

Some Russians associate hostels with Soviet-style student housing. Others are just scared.

"For Russians, we just call it a mini-hotel so as not to scare them away," Yaliyev said. "Not every person understands the word 'hostel' and some even, when you say 'hostel,' remember 'Hostel' the horror movie and think it is something horrible."

But the culture shock of hostels is starting to wear off as more Russians get accustomed to the idea.

"Mostly people came to the hostel not knowing what it was," said Ksenia Gerasemenko, administrator at Artel Artistic Hostel. "They expected to get a regular suite and when they saw six more people there, they had this culture shock. Now people ... realize it's cheap and comfortable."

Ksenofontov estimates that locals now make up as much as 50 percent of guests in some hostels.

Hostel owners are using Russian social media sites, guidebooks and magazines to address the domestic market.

"We're trying to implant in the Russian mind the concept of a hostel," said Olga Nidorezova, Bulgakov Mini-Hostel director.

Bear Hostels has promoters in different regions that target students who plan to visit Moscow. Mishin said he already saw a huge increase in the number of Russians coming to his hostel. Several have even stayed for more than a year.

Mishin is in talks to open hostels in Nizhny Novgorod and Yekaterinburg. He also wants to open hostels in Kiev and Kazakhstan.

"I believe this is what people need, not only in Russia, but ex-Soviet Union countries," he said. "Hostels are not very developed, and I believe that the young people — the most traveling audience in the world — they need cheap but good-quality accommodation."

Original url: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/06/20/a-good-nights-rest-for-18-or-less-a7715>