

Trying to Stay Calm in a Russian Supermarket

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Влететь в копейчку: to cost a pretty penny

While I was swanning through the produce section of a supermarket the other day, humming a little food tune as I contemplated dinner, a price tag suddenly stopped me dead in my tracks. Cauliflower was selling for 760 rubles a kilogram. I've been watching prices double in recent weeks, but cauliflower?! Plain old, grown-everywhere, easy-to-store cauliflower?! 760 rubles a kilogram! Boy, are we in trouble.

The first thing I did was race home to brush up my ability to describe outrageously skyrocketing prices.

Let's start with how to ask about a price. There's the simple *сколько стоит* (how much), or *почём, по какой цене* (how much, often used for things that have a unit cost).

Replies come with several different verbs. Платье стоит 12,000 рублей. (The dress costs 12,000 rubles.) Машина вам обойдётся в 2 миллиона рублей. (The car will run you 2 million rubles.) Ремонт встанет тебе больше 10,000 рублей. (The repairs will cost you more than 10,000 rubles.) Sometimes people use a phrase with an exact English equivalent: Эта квартира легко уйдёт за миллион баксов. (That apartment will easily go for a million bucks.)

Then you need a nice selection of adjectives to appropriately describe the price (цена). Высокая (high) just doesn't cut it. Я была на рынке, и цены ... (I was at the market and the prices were ...): адские (hellish), аховые (yikes!), астрономические (astronomical) or бешеные (insane, literally "rabid").

When I'm sputtering over a price I like to use the word баснословный (fabulous), from the word басня (fable or legend). The idea is the prices are the stuff of legends, but not in a good way. Овощи теперь стоят баснословных денег. (Vegetables these days cost an arm and a leg.) Да, съездили в якобы дешёвый магазин. А там всё баснословно дорого. (Yes, we went to the so-called cheap store. Even there everything was jaw-droppingly expensive).

In the old days — that is, a few months ago — usually people, advice, recommendations and the like were worth на вес золота (their weight in gold). Его информация ценилась на вес золота. (His information was worth its weight in gold.) But now, in the new era, anything can cost as much as a gold necklace. Охлаждённая рыба, которая лежит на льду, просто на вес золота. (Chilled fish on ice is just worth its weight in gold.)

Sometimes things are so expensive you can't even touch them. А сыр — к сырам приступу нет (As far as cheese goes — you can't even touch it. Literally, "you can't approach it.") Or you can't touch it because the high prices bite. Как вкусно! Но цены кусаются. (It's really delicious! But the prices take a real bite out of your budget.) Or they burn: В этом году цены жгутся. Первичный приём у врача — 3,500 рублей. (This year prices are off the charts. The first doctor's visit is 3,500 rubles.)

In English, very expensive things cost a pretty penny. In Russian, they cost a fine little копек. You have a choice of verbs: влетать/влететь (to fly); вставать/встать (to rise); выходить/выйти (to come out); обходиться/обойтись (to cost) — all of which end with the phrase в копеечку (a fine копек).

Утка обойдётся в копеечку. (The duck is going to cost you a pretty penny.) Строительство влетит в копеечку. (Construction costs are going to go through the roof.)

Stay tuned! Next week: ways to express poverty.

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