

How to Survive a Russian Heat Wave

The Word's Worth

[Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth](#)

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Denis Grishkin / Moskva News Agency

Пекло: scorcher

We'll have to take a break in my study of the niceties of summit-talk because, well, it's just too damn hot. Moscow did its Moscow thing and went from cool to sweltering in as long as it takes to say, "А где мои босоножки?" (Where are my sandals?) The last time it was this hot was 11 years ago, when the heat wave lasted for over a month and set off smoky peat fires so bad that you couldn't see across Red Square. Propriety went out the window. By the end of it I was going to the store wearing what in normal times I wouldn't wear outside my bedroom. And no one cared — they were dressed the same way.

We can't change the weather, but at least we can moan about it.

And so here I am — moaner-in-chief at your service.

First of all, what do we call a heat wave? Some Russians have taken to a literal translation — волна жары — but formally people say период сильной жары (a period of very hot weather) or аномальная жара (unusually hot temperatures). Mostly it's simply жара (hot weather, heat).

But before we get into more hot talk, we should pause to recall that жара, жаркий (heat, hot) are mostly used to describe the high temperature of the air, while горячий (hot) is mostly used to describe the high temperature of things. Of course, it's not 100% the case, but most of the exceptions are rather dated or fairly uncommon. Someone might say жаркая печь (the stove is hot). But basically, when we speak about погода (weather) in Russian, it's жаркая, not горячая.

Now back to our misery. In Russian жара “stands”: В Москве стояла жара ☒ сорок градусов в тени (It was hot in Moscow — 40 degrees in the shade). And then it falls away: Хорошо в сентябре ☒ жара спадает (It's nice in September when the temperature drops). You can also just say: О какая жаркая погода! (What hot weather!)

When the heat is really bad, you add the suffix -ища — signifying something big — and moan Жарища! And then you have only one remedy — dress like a sit-com guy: Жарища была страшная и я, по-американски, был в шортах, в сандалиях, в маечке (It was a sizzler, so I dressed like an American in shorts, sandals, and a t-shirt). Actually, it's not so American these days. Pretty much all the men at my dacha supermarket look like this.

Another word for intense heat is зной. Зной здесь, у реки, был сухой, неподвижный, сжигающий, как в большой печке (The heat here by the river was dry, stagnant, and blistering, like we were in an enormous oven). You can also use the adverb знойно: Я предполагала, что во второй половине июля в Калифорнии достаточно знойно, но такой кошмар мне даже не снился (I expected the second half of July in California to be pretty hot, but I couldn't have imagined what a nightmare it would be).

And, like other words for heat, знойно can also mean hot-blooded, passionately: Вы привыкли, чтобы все писатели знойно любили вас (You've gotten used to all the writers falling madly in love with you).

In Russian, and therefore in Russia, heat and stuffiness go together. The noun for stuffiness is духота, but in English we tend to put make it an adjective: It's stuffy. Of course, it can be stuffy in cold places, too: Ужасно было: холод, темнота, теснота и духота (It was awful: cold, dark, cramped and stuffy.) But on miserably hot days it feels like: Нечем дышать! (There isn't enough air to breath). You can, of course, put the -ища ending on духота to make it more intense: Вон зной какой стоит! Духотища адова! (It's so bloody hot out! Hellishly stuffy!) And you can double up: Такая жаро-ища, духотища! (It's so hot and muggy!)

This is like being in a steam bath: Воздух парит перед грозой (It's muggy before a thunderstorm). In fact, you can skip the imagery and just call it what it is: На улице баня! (It's like a steam room outside!) Or simply name the hottest city you know: -Как на улице? - Ташкент. (“What's it like outside?” “Tashkent.”)

If the sun is beating down on you, you can use the noun пекло, which is from the verb печь

(to bake). Днём, в самое пекло, мы пошли гулять по городу (In the worst heat of the day we went out to walk around the city). But pay attention to context — пекло can also mean the worst part of a battle: Он всегда оказывался в самом пекле сражений, не раз был ранен (He always found himself in the thick of battle and was wounded several times).

Now that you know what to call it, you should know what a heat wave does to you. Nothing good, I'm afraid. It makes you stupid, for one thing. Жара стояла такая, что трудно соображать (It was so hot out that it was hard to think). In fact: От жары я делаюсь идиотом (The heat turns me into a blithering idiot). It makes you slow moving: Стояла жарища, сонная одурь (In the blistering heat I fell into a sleepy stupor).

Everything is affected by the heat: Пекло стояло действительно дикое, всё вокруг плавилось (Everything was melting under the brutal heat).

And you must remember: it's not healthy to drink anything hot: Я, конечно, отказался: пить кофе в такое пекло?! (I, of course, refused: how could anyone drink coffee in this heat?!) And it's certainly not good to have a big meal: Нельзя так наесться в полдень на жарище! (You should not have a big meal at noon in this heat!)

So what is a poor nine-to-fiver (or ten-to-sixer) to do? I'm not sure this will work, but I suppose you could try telling your boss that you simply can't work because you're in a stupor, can't think, can't breathe and are falling asleep from lack of coffee.

And if that doesn't do it, try wearing your pajamas to work.

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