

## Life in a Russian home, from 2013

<https://russianreport.wordpress.com/come-to-russia-get-a-visa/life-in-russian-housing/>

One of the biggest factors in Moscow's high cost of living is the cost of rent, which can easily be anywhere from \$2500 to \$4500 for foreign residents. After the fall of communism many citizens received ownership of their apartments which had formerly been owned by the state or their employer. This allows many Muscovites to live rent free and pay only building maintenance and the utilities.

So, do you really need to pay high rates for rent? No, especially not after becoming acclimated to the area and conversant in the language you'll discover legitimate rentals, just as nice, for half those rates.

The Soviet policy of providing mandatory housing for every citizen and the rapid growth of the city during these times led to the construction of enormous, plain housing blocks. Many of these buildings have been poorly maintained and are fairly unattractive in both style and function.

### Homes/Apartments

See the section on Lodging and Restaurants for excellent sources on apartment rentals. The concept of "single homes" per family is not something easily found in Russia. Under the old Soviet system everyone was housed in apartments that were amazingly similar.

The idea of "personal space" was considered anti-revolutionary and Soviet authorities worked hard to make life to be the same from block to block, city to city. Suffice it to say that most "expats" live, like everyone else, in a large apartment building.



It was not that long ago that it was rare for Westerners to purchase property in Russia. That is changing however, and we'd strongly advise potential buyers to put in a lot of time and energy in research, and to invest in reliable legal counsel.

So, how does the real estate market work in Russia? Most Russians live in apartments, or flats. But of course there are opportunities for foreign residents to purchase a flat, or to buy homes in rural areas, and even weekend dacha cabins, too.

When compared to many homes in the West, Russian apartments can seem to be rather small on the inside. As Russians don't count the kitchen and bath areas as "rooms," it is good to know how apartments are advertised. A two-room apartment, for example, is an apartment with a kitchen, bath area, and two rooms for living/sleeping.

Living rooms/bedrooms

Instead of separate bedrooms and living rooms, most rooms will be multipurpose. Usually the largest room in an apartment is considered to be the living room by day, dining room in evening, and a bedroom at night.

Where do Russians sleep? European style sofa beds are quite comfortable and offer a good rest. Often L-shaped, there are no sagging springs, but instead a solid bottom section pulls out at night to form a very comfortable bed.

Bed linens from North America won't fit on a fold out sofa bed. The top sheets will be too wide (forget about king and queen sizes) and European square pillows do not fit inside North American pillow cases, either. Don't worry, things like linens are easy to purchase here, are of good quality, and generally in designs that are much prettier than available back home. Most European sofas have storage under the seating cushions to store blankets and linens by day.

This is a very typical living room/bedroom. Many homes use a small table (unseen here) which can be folded over from both ends to create a nice size dining room table. This room is also the dining room where the family will gather for a meal and entertain guests in the evenings.

### Kitchens

Kitchens are usually smaller than found in most Western homes, but they can be very functional. Sinks are usually single instead of double, and in older apartments you, or a family member, serve as the dishwasher. Appliances are typically from Europe or Asia.

Generally Eastern Europeans and Asians are great cooks! Most families prepare meals from scratch, or as close to it as possible. Cooking is considered to be an art form, and therefore worthy of the time and effort to prepare meals. Visit our pages on Russian foods—and prepare to be amazed.

Russia is a very modern country and most of the comforts of here are likely sitting on the shelf of a market just around the corner. Prices may be higher, but products are generally the same.

### Bathrooms

Bathrooms are generally split into two very small separate rooms and usually located near the entry and kitchen.

The туалет (“toilet” is the name of the room), is very small and often separated from the bathroom with just enough room for one very necessary appliance.

Next door is the “bathroom” which houses only the sink and the tub or shower. Most showers are handheld while standing in the tub. For ease of plumbing construction and for maintenance, the bathroom, toilet, and kitchen are generally in close proximity.

Tip: Here is one of the rare items you should bring with you. Western shower curtains are usually longer and more convenient (thereby more waterproof) should you decide to take hand showers in your tub.

### Entry/Courtyard areas

Russian entryways can look very rundown yet the apartments inside could be very nice. Often that is done on purpose to foil burglars, etc.

You’d never know that older, yet very nice looking apartments are behind that entry.

So recently we decided to get one of those new electronic locking mechanisms.

They’re a tad expensive at first but no more bulk keys, and since most apartments have either double or triple deadbolts, the keys add up in a hurry!

So far, so good and we’re enjoying the installation on a new door of solid wood and then a metal plate covered by an attractive wood veneer, a standard feature of doors here.

The key to Home Sweet Home is a secure and strong door.

Perhaps you didn’t notice but it is a keyless entry system. Instead of carrying around a bulky key ring you must either carry the combination carefully written somewhere in a wallet or committed to memory.

It even has a feature that shuts the system down if someone attempts to enter with the wrong combination—which is how I locked myself out recently. I nearly panicked until remembering that we had set a 5 minute reset, so I sat on the concrete stairs and waited for some minutes to pass after which time I had remembered the correct sequence for our 9 digit combination.

So, how does it work?

Part of the mystery is that unless you know how to operate the door, you can't even enter a combinations. That can be a minus as well for forgetful folk like me. Okay, it is a multiple deadbolt system made by Samsung. There is battery backup and God knows what will happen someday when both the electricity is off and the batteries dead!

The handle only works after the combination has been entered and verified. The little round button below the "Samsung" name is the doorbell. Press it and the door chimes. Option: Some units can be programmed to call cell phones when somebody rings the doorbell and can patch into the intercom to find out who is ringing the bell when away from home. We didn't take that option but it sounds pretty cool.

Next, on the Samsung unit there is a digital screen, visible only after activation to frustrate unwanted visitors. To activate the digital screen with the keypad for combination entry one must press the little silver bar (almost unseen) located between the word SAMSUNG and the round doorbell button. Once the screen is visible then key in the combination, much like dialing a smartphone, and a series of noises and rings lets occupants inside know that the door is about to open as the lock disengages.

The door locks immediately upon shutting after entry. We could set it to lock after 15 or 30 or 60 seconds but we chose the immediate option. If the door doesn't close properly or is stuck open an alarm sounds. On the door handle you'll notice metal slits and those are speakers for the intercom. There is an eye peephole standard in

the door and in addition to seeing the person ringing, you can use the intercom to find out who is knocking, and why.

The smartest thing I've done is keep the number of the installer hidden in my wallet along with the combination because this is modern technology and at some point, I'll need his help at some weird hour in the middle of the early morning.

Until that time, we're feeling very secure.

### **Heating/Plumbing**

Government regimented heating can be quite frustrating in older buildings. The heat is turned on a set date in the autumn and turned off on a set date in the spring. Individual temperature is impossible to control. An electric heater is vital to control heat within your apartment.

Hot water can also be affected. In the summer, the hot water is turned off for three weeks while they do maintenance on the pipes. Residents are notified in advance, but it is inconvenient. Some people set-up a small electric water boiler or gas-powered water furnace. Modern houses do not undergo these cuts.

### **Electric service**

Electricity throughout Russia is 220 volt/50 hz. The plug is the two-pin thin European standard. Bring your own converter as many places within Russia do not carry them.

### **Water**

Costs associated with water consumption are almost always covered by the landlord.

### **Weather**

весна = spring, "vyes-nah"

лето = summer, "leyh-tah"

осень = autumn, "OH-sen"

зима = winter, "ZEE-mah"

весна = usually arrives in April or if late in May

лето = late June to early September

осень = the shortest season, autumn comes mid September

зима = the first snows can come in late September but usually late October

### **Telephone Service**

To call Russia, the country code is 7. Moscow's area code is 095. To dial Moscow from outside of the country you must dial 7095 and then the individual number. Other area codes within Russia:

If you are within Russia, you must dial 8 and wait for a second dial tone. Then dial 58, the country code, city code and telephone number. For example:

To dial the US: 8 58 1 + Area Code + Telephone Number

To dial England: 8 58 44 + Area Code + Telephone Number

There are public, card-operated phones of the entrance halls of Moscow's Metro stations. The cards are available in cashier windows at the Metro stations or at post offices. The credit left on the cards is shown on the phone's digital display. You may also call from post offices, where an operator will connect you to the required number. It is always cheaper to call on weekends, international holidays, and weekday nights.

Rent – 2500 EUR

These are merely examples as prices vary widely depending on where people live and their individual choices.

**BROKER:** In general, using a broker is a great idea if you are arranging a rental from out-of-town, or have more money than time. A broker is responsible for finding apartments that fit your criteria and making appointments to fit your schedule. They save you the trouble of filing through expired listings, and "ghost" apartments that have been placed simply to entice to working with an expensive broker. For this convenience, the agency will usually take about 10% commission on the annual rent

of the apartment. Rental Agencies work similarly and [forum.expat.ru/phonedir](http://forum.expat.ru/phonedir) offers a list of companies within Moscow.

You can save you thousands to have a good broker so pay attention to reviews by former customers and who recommends a company's service. Ask your friends and family if they have used a broker they could recommend. If you are employed with a company they may have a broker they work with and you may be able to use them by contacting your human resources department to use the broker your company uses.

### The Community Bulletin Board:



LiveJournal abounds and even CraigsList has come to Russia. But one of the easiest ways to look for an advertisement or service is just outside your building's front door. It is the free community bulletin board.

This is the bulletin board located outside the front door of our apartment building.

**ON-LINE LISTING:** There are a variety of on-line forums and community listings in which people will list their places or larger companies offer their apartments. Most searches are free and the selection is massive.

Some examples are:

[moscow.craigslist.org/apa/](http://moscow.craigslist.org/apa/),

[www.apartmentres.com](http://www.apartmentres.com),

[www.apartmentsmoscow.com](http://www.apartmentsmoscow.com),

[www.expat.ru/realestatelist](http://www.expat.ru/realestatelist),



and [real-estate-moscow.com/en/arent/moscow-apartments](http://real-estate-moscow.com/en/arent/moscow-apartments).

**CLASSIFIEDS:** **The Moscow Times** offers both a printed classifieds with rental listings and an on-line site.

**BULLETIN BOARDS:** On college campuses, churches, grocery stores, schools, bus stops and outside community centres there are often boards available for posting local ads. This gives you an idea of the neighbourhood as well as some useful leads on apartments.

A typical one-bedroom apartment is about thirty square meters (323 sq ft), a typical two-bedroom apartment is forty-five square meters (485 sq ft), and a typical three-bedroom apartment is seventy square meters (753 sq ft).

To protect yourself when leasing, it is best to sign a written lease. Always try to read and understand every aspect of the lease because later misunderstandings can be costly. If it is in Russian and your understanding is not clear, get someone to translate the document for you. If your landlord does not provide a lease, here is a **sample letter** for your landlord to sign in the presence of a Russian notary as part of the expatriate visa registration process in Moscow.

Feel free to ask questions like:

- 1) How long is the lease?
- 2) How much is the security deposit?
- 3) Are utilities included in the rent? If not, how much are they?
- 4) Are pets allowed?

### **Communal apartments:**

Most Westerners won't live in one, but it is nice to know about Communal apartments which remain a fixture of Russian life. A communal apartment is just as it sounds, with more than one family living in a single apartment. After the Communist revolution in 1917, the Soviets confiscated large apartments that were owned by Russian

nobility and converted them into **Коммуналка**, communal apartments called “Kommunalkas” to hold multiple families. Today many Russians still live this way, some by choice and some of economic necessity.



Communal neighbors, photo by Aleksandr Hitrov.

In Soviet times apartments were assigned by state authorities in accordance with the standards of living space designed for one individual, regardless of marital status so often 2-3 or even 4 persons ended up living in a

room really meant for one person.

My cousin Gherman and his wife Natasha live in a (**Коммунальная квартира**) communal apartment in the centre of Moscow. Aunt Lyuba lives in a communal, too. Their apartments have big rooms but the common living spaces such as the hallway, kitchen and bathroom are not as spacious as the apartment in the previous video and with just one stove in the kitchen, the 3 families which share Gherman & Natasha’s apartment have kitchen schedules so that each family gets a turn to prepare their own food.



Communal kitchen, photo by Aleksandr Hitrov.

Some things to remember when visiting a communal apartment:

- Be sure to hang your coat or jacket on the correct coat rack. Also, each family may have their own shoe rack for shoes so ask your host where to deposit your shoes when you are given slippers to wear. You'll be given slippers to wear so make sure to take off your shoes. If you'd like, bring your own slippers as it is okay with most hosts.
  
- Not only should you wash up with the host family's soap and dry with their towel, but toilet seats are separate too. Likely your host will have a coloured toilet seat that is different from the other families. It will be hanging on the wall so take it down for use and don't forget to hang it back on the wall when you're finished.
  
- Each door buzzer sounds slightly different so ring the right bell so as to not get your host in hot water with his close neighbors.
  
- When helping in the kitchen be sure to use the correct stove and refrigerator. In some smaller apartments those appliances are shared with neighbors. Cousin

Gherman & Natasha also have a separate refrigerator in their bedroom in addition to the one shelf they are allotted in the communal kitchen fridge.

Perhaps you're wondering about privacy?

You're kidding, right?

Next question is likely about utilities. Who pays what and how is it determined?

Electricity for example can be calculated in several ways. Some communal apartments have one meter and each family pays their "share" based on the number of rooms they have (some families have more than one bedroom) and the number of persons in the family. Most remaining communal apartments have separate meters for each family bedroom and they split the expense of the common areas such as the hallway/entryway, bathroom and kitchen.





Communal shower space, photo by Aleksandr Hitrov.

Most communal bathrooms are split into two very small rooms which allows more than one person to be in the area, yet with maximum privacy. The first half of the bathroom area is the toilet—pretty obvious as to the use. Hardly larger than a telephone booth the only thing in the room is the toilet commode itself. The other half is a small separate but adjoining room called the bathroom, or **Ванная** (van-na-ya). Also small, this room has a sink and a bathtub and that is all. Some older style bathrooms (as seen above) have just a shower and the sink is in a hallway near the bathroom.



Communal living room by day/bedroom by night for one family.

Drop-down menus at the bottom of each video allow you to move to the next short video in the series which is hosted by Professor Ilya Utekhin, an anthropologist from European University in St. Petersburg, who lived in the building for over 30 years. Today he and his family live elsewhere, but one of the rooms in a fifth-floor apartment still belongs to him. Ilya's book, ***Studies in Communal Living***, is the basis for this video tour.