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There is a bar in Helsinki called "Moscow" owned by filmmaker Aki Kaurismaki, where slices of stale black bread topped with dry cheese are served, accompanied by Soviet pop hits from the 1970s rattling from the loudspeakers. The bar also has an authentic Soviet instruction sheet on water rationing in the toilet adorning the restroom, and a sign saying "In Lenin we trust, others pay cash" hanging on the wall. So much for a nation that, some Russians believe, lacks a sense of humor.

"Helsinki has a strange atmosphere about it, presumably because it was founded on ancient rocks that produce radiation," said Sammi Hyrskylähti, a Finnish photographer who has lived in St. Petersburg for nine years. "St. Petersburg was founded on swamps, and that could also be the reason why most of the city's inhabitants are a bit crazy, in the good sense of the word." Hyrskylähti said it is this absent-minded inner freedom and a European touch that makes St. Petersburg very different from the rest of Russia. "I don't live in Russia, I live in St. Petersburg," he said. "I do hope that the Russian capital is never going to be returned to St. Petersburg," Hyrskylähti added.



This is the first in a series of special features to be published in *The St. Petersburg Times*. *Northern Neighbors* will focus on economic and cultural relations between Russia and neighboring nations, for example, Scandinavia and the Baltic Sea nations.

"Even though St. Petersburg is the most European of all Russian cities, you can still sense Russia in its every



Students sharing a light moment in downtown Helsinki. Most Finns hide a sense of humor behind their Scandinavian reserve.

domestic attitude about everything, sometimes I feel there is nothing sacred for them," Konttinen said. Finns go more by the book, he added.

"Finns are sensible, calm and reserved, but they surely know how to have fun," Artyom Semyonov, press spokesman at the Russian Embassy in Helsinki said. "They have developed an excellent infrastructure. In this small country with just five million residents, you will find a Russian-speaking employee at nearly every hotel," he added.

"Some people think Finland is boring, but that is only a first impression. One should try to learn more about this place, to get to know it, and then one will feel envious of how many cultural events are taking place around here," Semyonov said. "Sting is coming this week."

Finland is ideal for a vacation, or if one wants to be left in peace and live alone, Hyrskylähti said. In St. Petersburg, he said, you can talk about almost anything with strangers — in Finland, that would be a challenge.

"One of the main reasons why we

visited to work for Nokia, wrote in her on-line diary. Smirnova's neighbors in St. Petersburg had been waking her up with the national anthem playing on their radio every morning at six, and her other neighbors were continuously renovating their apartment deep into the night. In Finland, Smirnova wrote, no one can disturb the neighbors between 10 p.m. and 7 a.m., otherwise violators can be thrown out of the apartment after a neighbor complains to the police three times.

Konttinen has lived in St. Petersburg for one and a half years, and said he attempts to learn to become as free-spirited as the Russians, but preserve his Finnish love for efficiency.

"Russians and Finns are a lot like Oblomov and Stolz," Hyrskylähti said, referring to the famous novel by nineteenth-century Russian writer Ivan Goncharov, depicting a mellow Russian aristocrat whom his German friend always found thinking in bed whenever he stopped in to see him.

"A Finnish friend of mine, an Inter-

cottage in the woods and called a number of people for a party," Hyrskylähti said. "When the party was over, the host asked

**"Some people think Finland is boring, but that is only a first impression," one Russian diplomat said.**

each of the guests to leave 15 or 20 euros behind to compensate for what he had spent on food," he said. In Hyrskylähti's view, this extreme efficiency, which no Russian would understand, is outweighed by the apparent Russian lack of logic. "If something goes wrong, and you ask Russians to explain what happened, they will tell you anything, even about aliens from space, but not the real reason. Russian explanations come out as totally psychedelic," he said.

Finns come to Russia to

is like the Theater of the Absurd," he said. The unpleasant thing about being here is street violence, he added.

If you slowly approach an unregulated street crossing in rural Finland, wait for a group of cars and suddenly jump forward, you are guaranteed to hear the breaks squeak as all of the drivers let you pass, Smirnova wrote. She suggested that "real men who love taking risks" try opening a door for a Finnish female while in Finland. Smirnova warned that one should not be surprised to see the female stare at him, since she will assume he has just declared his undying love for her. Meanwhile, Smirnova wrote, opening a door for a woman — a must for a Russian gentleman — may make her Finnish boyfriend very angry. It is quite symbolic that Finnish has one word for both "he" and "she," both are called *hän*, Hyrskylähti said.

Other than men opening doors, Smirnova said she really missed the St. Petersburg round-the-clock stores that sell groceries and alcohol. In Finland, she cannot buy anything after hours, to say nothing of alcohol, which can only be purchased from the country's monopoly, the Alko chain. When asked what he misses most about Finland, Hyrskylähti said it is the rocks.

Many Finns still cannot forgive Russia for the Winter War, but there are fewer and fewer of such Finns left, Konttinen said. "Unfortunately, few young people have contacts with Russia. Most Finns have been to Stockholm and Tallinn, but not St. Petersburg," Konttinen added. Ville Haapasalo, a Finnish actor who played a part in the popular Russian comedy film called "The Peculiarities of the Russian National Hunt," definitely contributed a lot to the development of relations between the two peoples, Hyrskylähti said.

No matter their differences, Russians and Finns have much in common — the most famous things being vodka and the sauna, said Konttinen. "Russians and Finns have a similar blues mentality," Russian magazine *Ogonyok* quoted filmmaker Mika Kaurismaki (Aki's brother) as saying late last year. Both Russians and Finns have a special affection for sadness and contemplation, Kaurismaki said. And when it