



TRAVEL BLOG

MY MOSCOW PHOTO ALBUM

Enrico Arbarello

Dear Enrico, many thanks for sharing your photos and other memories ! Was it a difficult decision for you to come spend time in Moscow ? Have you been to Russia before ?

Igor Krichever had talked to me about [Skoltech](#) on several occasions when we met in New York, suggesting that I spend a period of time there every year in the next several years. While I taught at Sapienza in Rome, this was difficult to arrange, especially because my time was always split between Rome and New York; but when I retired and could be based more in New York, then it made sense. The project seemed very interesting from the start and I was enthusiastic to have an opportunity to go. I've been to Russia, and Moscow in particular, on a few occasions: the first one was in 1989, right before the fall of the Berlin wall. From that period, I remember that there was a feeling of uncertainty, but at the same time the thrill of the expectation that things were changing. The city itself was grimy, dark, and uninviting. But the people were warm and incredibly hospitable. I remember dinners in small kitchens, with many people crammed together, where the scantiness of the food was forgotten in the midst of brilliant conversations, and what appeared to be the tip of the iceberg of a tumultuous intellectual vitality. At the time, my mathematical reference points were Igor and Boris Dubrovin.



I rediscovered Natalia Goncharova (1881-1962), a truly amazing painter, who is almost nowhere in the West. ↑ Self-portrait with yellow lilies 1907

↖ Yuri Pimenov (1903-1977) New Moscow. 1937, still current today

← The 20th century building of the Tretyakov gallery houses both paintings. A truly outstanding museum

Over twenty years went by, before my next visit in the early-2010s. I was there for just a few days and saw both the city and the society transformed. The number of Bentleys parked in front of fancy restaurants in the center of town sparked mixed feelings. But notwithstanding this new glamorous varnish, the humanity of the people I met was the same, and it was a pleasure to be there.

Then in May-June 2018 I spent a month at Skoltech, and also went to a conference in St. Petersburg. Given my previous experiences, it was completely natural to decide to go, accepting Igor's long-standing invitation. I then returned, as part of the same invitation, for two months in the fall of 2019. The visa process was extremely complex the first time, but with the competent staff at Skoltech following me every step of the way, I eventually obtained a 5-year work visa, which made the second visa much easier to obtain.

Where were you staying ? Did you like the neighborhood ? Was it difficult for you to navigate life in Moscow ?

My first time I lived in a hotel for a month. The hotel was fine, but living in a hotel never gives you a sense of belonging to a place. So the second year I found online a small apartment conveniently situated between the river and the Novokutzevskaya metro station. As everyone knows, the Moscow subway system is a jewel of efficiency and beauty, so being close to a station was particularly convenient. I never had to wait for a train, anywhere in Moscow, for more than 50 seconds. The neighborhood was wonderful: quiet, yet with enough supermarkets (small and big), coffee shops, and small restaurants to be lively and pleasant to live in. I mostly cooked at home, but I also went out a number of times and always had nice dinners. In fact, if I have the occasion to return to Moscow, I will certainly try to reserve that same apartment.



my building ↙ and nearby streets



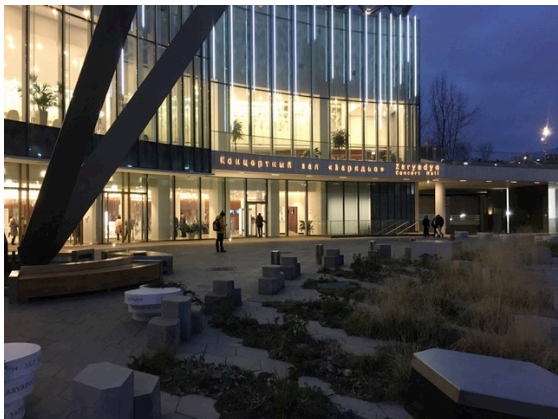
I learned a few words of Russian, although far from enough to have even a rudimentary conversation. But whenever I needed something, like directions or information in a store, the people I met were always extremely helpful even if they spoke no English or Italian. In any case, since both Russians and Italians speak the universal language of gesturing (and are not shy about it!) communicating was never a problem. Moreover, it was extremely helpful to learn the Cyrillic alphabet so that even not knowing the meaning of the words, I could guess the general idea if they had Latin or foreign roots, and in any case I could recognize the sound.



my neighborhood at night ↑

What were you favorite things to do in Moscow ? Did you find some places or activities that you like ?

The Moscow I found in these past two years has been yet again transformed. Everything is clean, renovated, and well maintained, but perhaps to the detriment of authenticity. The stone sidewalks everywhere in the center are very luxurious and very pleasant to walk on. One feels safe even at night, and I walked many miles to explore the city even in its less known corners, where I found less sparkle but a greater sense of history. Perhaps this is the aspect I most miss in Moscow: a certain chaotic vitality, characteristic of large cities everywhere - I am thinking of Chennai, Naples, Brooklyn, Hong Kong -- visible in a myriad of small shops and places of commerce, where people are buzzing, hustling, making deals, buying and selling, painting on the sidewalks, and in so doing creating culture. And yes, it was thrilling to go to concerts at the Tchaikovsky Concert Hall, or to the Zaryadye Concert Hall. Moscow's official cultural life is fantastically rich and remarkably available, and the audience seem to be very sophisticated: it was pure pleasure to take part in it. But before it gets codified and processed and standardized into a canon, culture starts in small improvised theaters, in the back of old bars with a quartet jamming at 3 am, on a warehouse wall as a graffiti that explodes in shapes and color you never knew could exist. It seems to me that this messiness and chaos has been somehow sanitized out of the Moscow that I saw ... but maybe I did not know where to look.



↑ At the Musical Academy with my wife Alessandra

↖ Moscow Conservatory, with Igor Krichever in front

← Zaryadye Concert Hall

What lecture course did you give in Moscow ? What did you think of the students ?

In my last visit I taught a course at the Higher School of Economics (HSE) in algebraic geometry, and especially in the theory of K3 surfaces and curves lying on them, both from a classical point of view and from the point of view of Bridgeland theory. It was a thirty-hour course, with a rather low attendance. In speaking with the students, I realized that the scheduling was not ideal, in that it conflicted with some mandatory courses for their degree program. Since my course was optional, some of them who might have been interested could not attend. Perhaps I could suggest to work out a schedule where these conflicts are minimized. Also helpful, would be an exchange prior to visits from abroad such as mine about the content of the course, the prerequisites, and the actual interest in a specific topic. I tried to do that before my last visit, but maybe I did not pursue it sufficiently. The few students who attended were extremely good, and a couple of them were truly brilliant. I would say that their level is comparable to that of the students of the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa. The class was always lively because the students really participated, asking questions and making remarks.

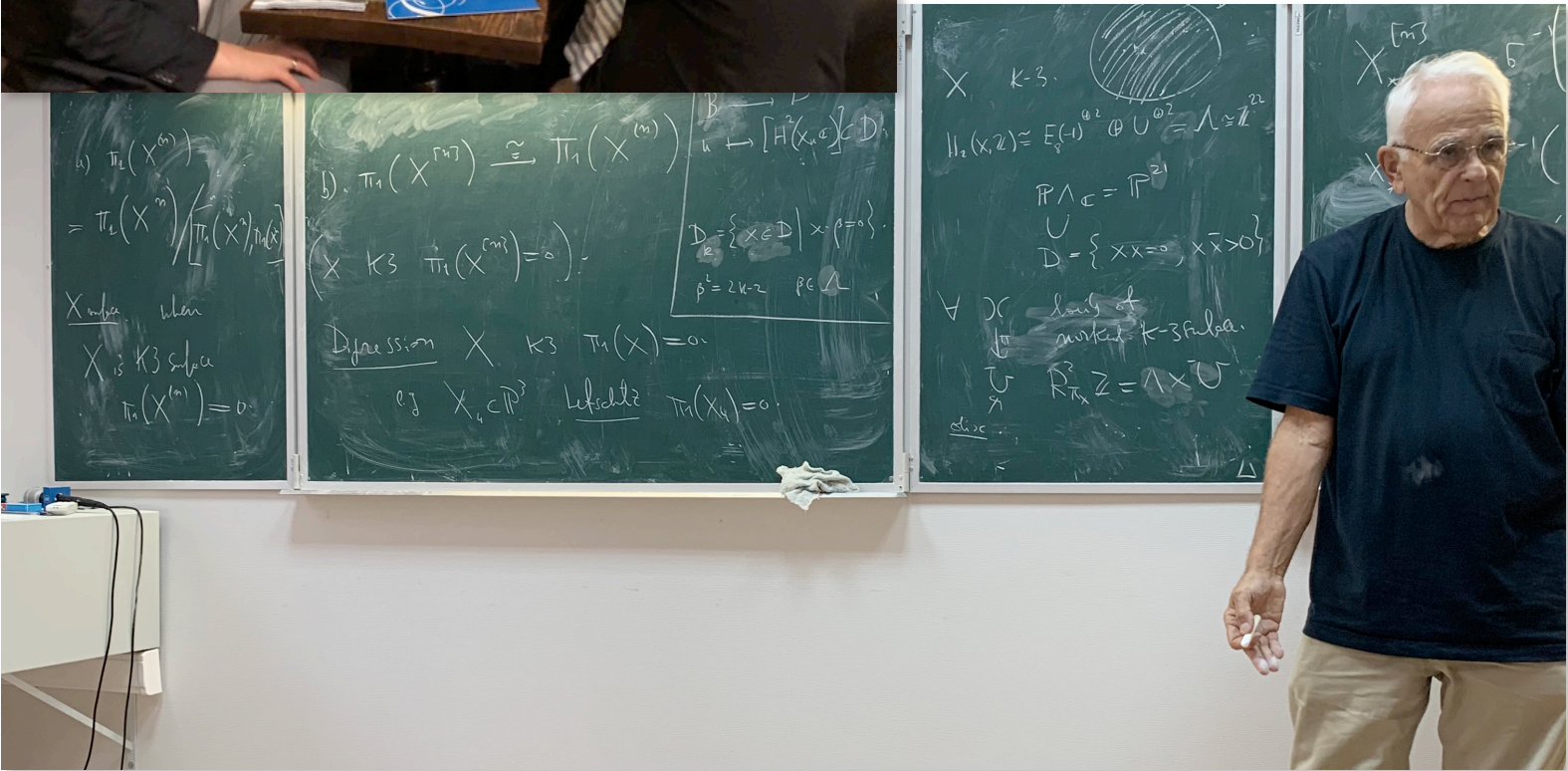
Did you attend many seminars while in Moscow ? Did the "Russian" math seminars meet your expectations ?

I regularly followed the algebraic geometry seminars at HSE, and a number of seminars at Skoletch that were all extremely interesting and very well attended. On those occasions I had fruitful mathematical interactions with colleagues such as I. Krichever, M. Verbitsky, D. Kaledin, and A. Kuznetsov. The Moscow mathematical community is superb, and certainly one of the best in the world.

I was always attracted by the Russian School of Algebraic Geometry that revived and profoundly developed many of the themes pursued by classical Italian geometers using modern language and beautiful new ideas.



← A fun gathering in a restaurant at night
↓ teaching my course



Was it difficult to get around ?

Getting from my apartment to HSE was extremely convenient thanks to the subway, and took no more than a half hour. But reaching the Skoltech campus was more challenging. The campus itself is magnificent and continuously and rapidly growing into a world-class facility. The administrative staff is not only extremely efficient, but also kind and patient. I always felt welcome and taken care of. All practical matters were solved immediately, from opening a bank account to interacting with the visa office. Perhaps in the future they will be able to organize a clearer system of shuttle buses to navigate the grounds. I know they already exist, but could never quite figure out their routes or schedules. Since taxis are not allowed into the gates, each time I had to disturb a staff member to call the gate attendant to let us in or, on the way back, to call a taxi for me explaining where to meet me. It will all probably get much easier once the train is up and running.*



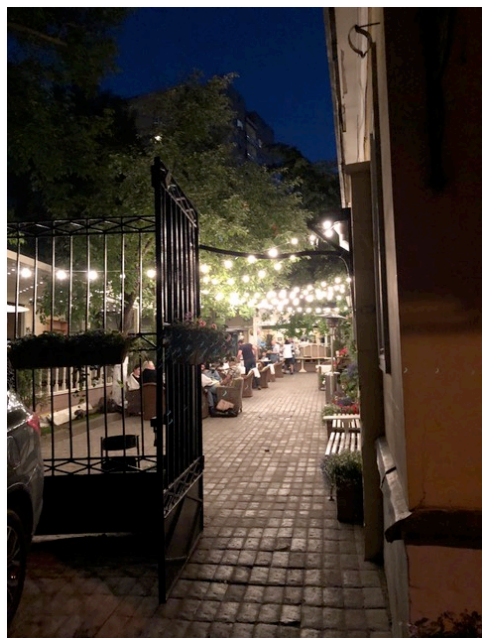
← It's very pleasant to ride on these trams
↙Walking to HSE ↓The beautiful subway



* Moscow central diameter, in operation since November 2019, takes passengers from Skolkovo to city center in 17 minutes. Skolkovo gates open automatically for Yandex taxis, which is the dominant taxi aggregator in Moscow.

What did you think of food in Moscow ? Or is a picture worth a 1000 words ?

(1) a nice café for breakfast, (2) with Ira Kaufman and Igor Krichever on the veranda of "Дом 12", (3) a Georgian restaurant with an outdoor garden, (4) "Дом 12", (5) Cafe Pushkin, (6) excellent wine selection in a very small supermarket



Do you have any advice for foreign mathematicians visiting Russia ?

To colleagues who might also accept an invitation to spend time at Skoltech or HSE, I would recommend taking the time to read not merely some guidebooks, but some actual Russian literature before going, to get acquainted with the immense breadth and depth of its culture, so different from the Western one we are used to, especially starting from the mid XIX century. I personally benefited also from reading some history of Russia, and in particular *Natasha's Dance*, by Orlando Figes, which is a cultural history of Russia. Some young and hyper-critical Russian friends dismissed this book as too superficial, but I still found it very useful.



← ↑ *Hidden gems* ↘ *Preparing for Christmas*

