

Lost in Moscow: A Brat in the USSR
By Kirsten Koza
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Some writers are famous for writing love poetry—Pablo Neruda, for instance. Others, like Scott Adams, have managed to pin to the page the preposterousness of corporate America. Rohinton Mistry is known for his poignant portraits of Mumbai city; Sir Arthur Conan Doyle changed the face of detective novels by creating Sherlock Holmes. But no one can describe an unfamiliar bathroom quite like Kirsten Koza.

The door of one of the toilets had swung open. There was no toilet at all. There was a hole in the ground with two orange metal foot-pads with a turd on one of them. People were lined up in front of the cubicles. The doors on the cubicles were unbelievable too. They only covered the person's body, not their face. So the lady going to the bathroom was staring straight into the eyes of the people in the lineup.

...I tried not to make eye contact with the woman who was going in front of me. It was too bizarre to look in the eyes of someone who was having a poop. When my cat Muzik went poo, his eyes went out of focus. I noticed it was like that for people too.

Lost in Moscow: A Brat in the USSR is about the (mis)adventures of Kirsten Koza as an 11-year-old away at summer camp in communist Russia. In 1977, her parents decided to send their high-spirited daughter to Moscow with some other Canadian kids and a pair of chaperones. Her knapsack laden with treasures: C\$50, some clothes and some Cadbury's Crunchie bars, Kirsten boards the Aeroflot flight on which they serve vodka instead of milk! And that's where the culture shock begins.

First off, several members of the Canadian delegation (including one of the chaperones) are self-declared communists. This creates a somewhat uncomfortable split in the group, where Kirsten and a couple of the other 'capitalist' kids are not allowed to criticise anything about the Soviet way. This is particularly hard at mealtimes because the food is so far removed from the processed fare that they're used to.

For breakfast, there's a porridge called 'kasha', which Kirsten describes as 'eating black, Holland Marsh topsoil'; lunch might mean boiled fish, with the eyes still intact, or 'whole (cow) tongues just sitting on the table, no vegetables even. Just whole tongues, skin on, taste buds on and bleeding. Holy gross me out.'

But Russian cuisine and toilets are only a tiny part of the huge adjustment Kirsten must make. This begins to dawn on her while she and her friend, Rhonda are being pursued by the Russian Army after having walked diagonally across Red Square instead of following its periphery (as everyone else is doing). Her inability to follow orders 'just because' paired with a mild flu land her in all sorts of zany and hair-raising situations—from radiation treatments and an unsafe and unauthorised parachute jump to having the windows of their dorm room nailed shut.

Fittingly enough, the story behind the story i.e. why Kirsten Koza wrote this memoir in the first place, is equally laugh-out-loud. During a brief sojourn in Canada before returning to acting school in the UK, Kirsten managed to have her car—with her passport and all her immigration documents in it—stolen and burnt to a cinder. She was informed by Canadian immigration that if she left Canada, she would not be allowed back in!

Now homeless—she'd rented her apartment to friends—she suddenly discovered she was also out of work because the Artistic Director of the theatre that was going to stage a play she'd written had died of a massive heart attack. The theatre committee had consequently cancelled all the premieres for the following season. So, in addition to the fact that it was too late to send her play out to other theatres for the current season, she lost money on the stock market, had severe bronchitis from England, and as the final straw, had the screen on her laptop destroyed by her dogs.

And then, her mother showed up with a box. It contained the scrapbook she'd maintained while she was in the USSR, including a speech she'd written called 'Lost in Moscow'. Koza sifted through the pages and photos (some of which are included in the book) and something clicked. It took Koza less than a year to write the book, and Canadian immigration (as she likes to joke) two years to give her her visa back.

Lost in Moscow: A brat in the USSR is an excellent read. Touted by its publishers as 'a book about children, but certainly not *for* children', it is light, uproariously funny and will leave you feeling ten years younger. From Russia, with love—and lots of laughter!