



THE SUNDAY TIMES

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23 December 2007
[The Sunday Times](#)

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Chandeliers? On the metro? Paul Croughton rides in style across the Russian capital

Moscow's metro is not the biggest in the world -with about 9m users per day, it's Europe's most popular, but it comes second to Tokyo's system of sprawling networks. It is a long way short of being the oldest -the London Underground (and specifically the Metropolitan Line) beats it by 72 years (and four months). But if you're a tourist, it is the one most likely to make you say "Sorry".

You will, you see, get off the train and stand dumbstruck at the sparkling splendour of the underground palace you've stumbled into. And then a heavily wrapped Russian will plough into the back of you, and the sorrys will start.

But, to be fair, a number of the stations are spectacular -more like the ballrooms of fin de siecle stately homes than chambers designed to house the daily commuter waltz.

Moscow's first line opened on May 15, 1935, with 12 stations. There are now 173, spread across 12 lines, with 9,915 trains on more than 155 miles of track.

The start: Komsomolskaya station, to the northeast of the city centre, was opened as part of the first wave in 1935. Its atrium is one of the most beautiful: luxuriously decorated with heavy chandeliers, arches made from three types of marble, and granite floors.

On the ceiling and walls are depictions of Russian leaders and civilians, the former heroically leading forces into battle on horseback, the latter with sleeves rolled and backs breaking in honest toil.

Second stop: head west to Prospekt Mira, one stop on the Koltsevaya line that circles the city centre. There's a lovely story, impossible to verify, that Stalin himself was the architect for this ring route: when engineers showed their leader the plans for the metro, he slammed his empty coffee cup down on the paper in disgust. The planners realised the brown circular stain could be the solution to the congested lines that were already in place, which is why the ring line is brown on most maps.

Each pillar at Prospekt Mira is topped with a ceramic scene of daily life such as a mother teaching her child, or fruit-pickers at work in the fields. There's a propagandist theme here: the prosperity and vigour of Mother Russia and her indefatigable people appear to have been the singular source of inspiration for those tasked with the metro's decoration.

Third stop: head west to Belorusskaya (also worth a poke around) and then take the Zamoskvoretskaya line south one stop to Mayakovskaya, opened in 1938. Look up.

Thirty-three mosaics on the ceiling revel in Russia's aerial history. Walking underneath, you get a flick-book effect of images -planes, parachutists, a balloon, a zeppelin - glorifying mastery of the skies.

Give your neck a rub and head south two stops to Teatralnaya. Having covered the top of the city while underground, come up for air here, by the Bolshoi Theatre.

Head across the square, and behind the bright lights of the GUM shopping arcade is Ploshchad Revolyutsii station (named after Revolution Square) and a chance to refuel. Facing the M (for metro) sign, turn left and at the end of the street is a small, nondescript restaurant. Ask for pelmeny, doughy but nicely spiced dumplings (90p), grab a beer (65p) and watch Moscow life come and go.

Suitably refreshed, duck down into the station, and take in the 76 life-size bronze statues that greet you on the platform, paying attention to the animals.

Allegedly, some are lucky talismans -a dog's nose and a cockerel's beak are shiny, clearly the favourites. One local told me that it works better if you write your wish on a small note and stick it on the statue. Until you see a picture of me in the paper, giddily holding a lottery cheque, I wouldn't put too much faith in either.

Last stop: Arbatskaya, on the Arbatsko-Pokrovskaya line, is one of those designed to double as a bomb shelter, should the worst happen. It's still lavishly turned out, with chandeliers everywhere and floral detailing. Take the long escalator up to the surface and you're around the corner from another, more well-known, architectural beauty, the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, just that little bit less exciting for being up here, in the open air.

*Paul Croughton travelled as a guest of **MaMaison Pokrovka Suite Hotel** (www.pokrovka-moscow.com)

Getting there: fly direct from Heathrow, with [British Airways](http://www.britishairways.com) (0870 850 9850, www.ba.com), BMI (0870 607 0555, www.flybmi.com) or Aeroflot (020 7355 2233, www.aeroflot.co.uk). Fares start from about Pounds 180.