

Between the Continents: American Reality with Russian Eyes

by Anastasia Maslova



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Foreword

In 2004-2005 I studied journalism at Eastern Michigan University, USA. Being an international student, I made observations about American culture and American life that were published weekly in Opinions Column "Between Continents" in Eastern Echo, Michigan. This book is a collection of those articles, adapted and translated into Russian. It's not a factual manual on how to live in America - it's just my perception of American reality from the point of view of a Russian student in the U.S. and a new perception of Russia. It's my path in the life "between continents."

I would like to thank Eastern Echo's staff, especially the newspapers' director Kevin Divine and "the department mentor" Art Brooks, the copy editor from "The Detroit News," who edited my every single article and directed my first steps in the field.

I would like to express special gratitude to Lidia Barinova, my high school teacher in Uzlovaya, Tula region, for support and help in writing this book.

And finally, I want to say thank you to all international and American students, university staff and other people who drop by drop filled the bowl of my observations taken from their lives.

Between the Two Continents

Comparisons are natural for students abroad because they live "between the continents," though involuntary comparisons may cause culture shock and depression.



"Never try to compare if you want to find something new," one of my friends told me. In fact, the first sign of the impending culture shock is when you begin to compare your home country with another one. Moreover, when comparing you seek to prove to yourself that your motherland is better in different ways than the country you've come to. And I thought I was well prepared to cope with it.

The words "treat a foreign culture as it is," became a motto of the orientation I attended for international exchange students in Washington, D.C. It seemed that if somebody woke me up at midnight, I would get out of bed and chant: "America is neither good nor bad - it is just different." Such a non-comparing policy is the key to any problem, I thought, but it turned out to be difficult to follow.

Is it possible for international students not to compare the country they left with the country they came to? International students come to a new country bringing an imprint of their culture and leaving part of them behind. Thus, they are a life contradiction in themselves. When I was in the U.S. I had a feeling that I lived between the two continents. On the one hand, I perceived America with widely open Russian eyes; I made comments sometimes using Russian notions. On the other, I looked back on my country "chewing the gum of the American way of life," as a student from Ukraine said. I had to be careful, however, not to break my teeth, because my heart was in Russia. That's why some comparisons sprang up, whether I wanted them to or not.

For example, my roommate had a boyfriend visiting her every weekend. I had only photos to look at, a teddy bear to hug, a cold phone receiver to touch my cheek, printed words on the screen instead of a dear whisper. It was not homesickness - it was a reality to live in for a year. These are the facts to count with when you step aboard a plane heading for another continent.

Before I came, my friends in Russia kept asking me how I could leave everything in my country. I think for most international students this question has no definite answer. You just leave, no matter what pushes you forward, whether it's a desire to get a different education, to gain new experience or a dream to change the world. But there is a common thing for those who choose to study abroad: the courage to be exposed to a different world and to live in it, preserving their identity.

International students think about what they will get, not about what they leave behind. They look into the future and don't focus on the past. They open America for themselves and for the rest of the world anew. I believe most of those

Columbuses heard a verse like this Freddy Mercury song in their mind while flying over the Atlantic or just crossing the border:

Spread your wings and fly away

Fly away, far away

Spread your little wings and fly away

Fly away, far away

Pull yourself together

'Coz you know you should be better

That's because you are a free man

I do not think it was possible for me to keep away from comparisons. Nevertheless, I was free to choose where these comparisons led me. I got rid of the useless anger and frustration, because "East or West, home is best," but chose the advantage of looking at the world, America and my home country especially from a new perspective. Russia opened America for me and America opened a new Russia.

Stereotyping Traps

Russia in Americans' eyes and America in Russians' eyes are a bit different than the real countries...



Stereotyping is a wall you encircle yourself in to feel comfortable. To feel you know much about the world. It is a sort of label you stick to a product so that you can easily recognize it among other products. It helps with material objects but it doesn't work with people.

The problem is we can not get rid of stereotypes completely when dealing with individuals. I remember the Close-Up performance during Freshman Orientation in the American university I went to. Several students there saw a person with Asian appearance and subconsciously presumed he was from Asia. But it turned out his parents and grandparents had lived in the United States for years and he was totally American.

To understand what diversity is and to respect individuals, we should avoid putting labels on people. I experienced those labels myself when studying in the USA at Eastern Michigan University.

I spent a little more than two weeks in the United States when I clearly saw I must break the wall of my stereotypes as well as those connected with my country. It is the first thing international students do to get adjusted in America.

Every third person I talked to thought it's cold in Russia. "Oh, Michigan's winter will not be a problem for you," they said. But Russia is huge, and winter

there can be very mild, I wanted to shout to everybody. I guess it can be colder in Michigan than in the part where I live.

A 17-year-old American girl I talked to was sure I drink vodka. She was really surprised that I don't. Obviously for her Russia meant vodka, though it's she who had alcohol in the fridge. Then my idea of Americans was shattered. What about underage drinking? I thought *all* Americans obey rules. But, in fact, *all* generalizations often lead to stereotypes.

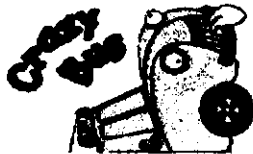
As I flew over the ocean I thought of the ideal America. It is a country of individualists where hard work leads to success. It is a country of great opportunities where you can choose whatever you like to achieve your goal. Everything is made for a person: strong, active, initiative. You have equal rights and you are free to express yourself. There are all kinds of services, automatic machines at your disposal to make life easier, to save time and to save money.

But it turned out that positive stereotypes are as inappropriate as negative ones. America is different, too. I could never imagine that professors could go on strike in the U.S. Strikes are so Russian. Half the students were late for my first class in the American university; they can not be always punctual, I guess. Americans wear high heels and short skirts; they are not that practical. My new friend was very upset the other day because she was going to move but had to wait two weeks for her apartment to be cleaned -- not everybody keeps promises and sticks to deadlines here. You could use a swimming pool any time you wanted and free of charge, but I was not able to do it during its working hours. It was open but there was no lifeguard, so one was not allowed to swim (which was very strange to me with my Russian mentality -- it was in order but I could not use it).

I guess I wanted America to be perfect, but it is human, with its own shortcomings. So let's break stereotypes to pieces, look outside the wall, and keep in mind that *not* always, *not* everywhere, *not* everybody acts as we expect them to.

American Roller-Coasters on Russian Roads

Sometimes in the U.S. I had a feeling I missed something. I had everything at my disposal to enjoy life and still I missed...our crazy Russian reality.



Once in my journalism class in the U.S. we discussed good and bad news. Why is there more bad news than good in the media? Is good news no news at all? One of the students said that Americans are generally attracted to drama. In my mind, interest in dramatic events lies deep in the human nature, and that can't explain the public longing for bad news in the United States. The reason for the interest is that American life lacks excitement and risk.

American people do not get their daily portion of stress. In Russia, you will become stressed just taking a bus. You do not need to go to an amusement park; a

common bus ride is enough. First, you must squeeze into a small space because you are in a hurry, and the bus schedule is not reliable at all. Second, you must watch your purse or it may be stolen. Next, try not to touch a representative of the older generation. You do not need his or her irritation to focus on you. And finally, you are to get off at the right stop. It is not as simple as "stop requested" like on American buses. You fight your way through the crowd. Be careful to do it in advance, but not too early, or you will be carried out before you know where you are. Is that enough stress for a day?

American everyday life is calmer compared to Russian life, at least on the road. In the United States, there is no excessive speeding or breaking the rules compared to Russia. The famous saying "time is money" does not apply to driving. An American driver will slow down at a stop sign, even if there is nobody in front of him or her and it is late at night. This was so amazing for a Russian that I couldn't get used to a car waiting for me to pass before crossing the street. Every time it stopped, I repeated to myself, "Welcome to the U.S." Fortunately, I didn't develop such a habit or I would be run over as soon as I returned to Russia.

Russian roads have become notorious, not only because they always seem to be in need of repair, but also because of crazy driving. No car will wait for me to pass. Instead I have to wait for a stream of cars even though traffic lights tell me to go. Again, save money on amusement parks -- just try to cross the road.

I do not want to say that Russia is full of naughty old men and mad drivers. I exaggerated these points to show that Americans are losing their spirit of adventure, which they had as a nation of pioneers. Conventions and means to make life convenient rub it out.

Let's take canoeing, for example. I went canoeing with the International Students' Association in Michigan and I really enjoyed it, though not enough to satisfy the "mysterious Russian soul." Canoeing in America is a calm river trip for two hours or more. You park your car, rent a canoe, watch tamed ducks and swans, smell the barbeque made on artificial coal, greet passing paddleboats and kayaks and enjoy your meal afterward.

Canoeing in Russia was a tough experience for me, an adventure I will remember for the rest of my life. You are a real pioneer and an explorer of the wild nature, lost villages and old houses where grandfathers' traditions are still preserved. It can require intense strain to go through it when you are wet all over and there is no Wal-Mart to buy a dry pair of pants. There is only a swirling river, a dangerous river, an exciting river, a divine river. Canoeing in Russia is a challenge. You take the challenge and want to succeed because all the team depends on you. The water wants to swallow you, but you are the strongest, the one to survive. If you are able to compete with the elements there on the river, you will achieve any goal in the everyday life. Canoeing in Russia is a life lesson, a spirit workshop.

That's why Russians take everyday risk and stress so easy. You can always dry your wet clothes in the caressing sun after the roaring water. You can smile to encourage a close friend after a stressful bus trip. "The sweet is not as sweet without the sour," as Cameron Crowe's character in "Vanilla Sky" said.

American life sometimes lacks the sour. That's why the sweet is so standard and blurred at times.

International Friend in Need is in Need Indeed

Friends in the U.S. are a bit different. But international students have their own perception of friendship and can tell a real friend from a mere acquaintance.



Striking as it is, a person from another continent can be closer to you than your neighbor. When two people from different countries meet on common land, they have at least one thing in common: the distance that separates them from their roots. They may have different values, represent different cultures or speak different languages, but they are in the same boat. They are miles away from their homeland and they have to make friends.

Making friends in America is not the same as in Russia. The expression "to make friends" in America means to shake hands with an unknown person that someone introduces you to. It means to have a nice talk during lunch and say, "See you," even though you may never see this person again. Americans make friends in line for an ice cream or at a party where they don't know half of their guests. To make friends is part of American culture and, indeed, a rather positive part. I like to meet new people. I think of it as adding a new drop to my knowledge of the world. On the other hand, once you make a stop in the swirling rhythm of life you realize that you do not remember half of the names or that you cannot dial a single number when you need it, even though you have a bunch of your friends' business cards sitting on your desk. In Russia, what Americans call friends, we call "acquaintances."

Friendship in my country is not only a conventional exchange of phrases, "How are you?" and "How is it going?" or the more typical for teenagers, "What's up, man?" because Russians rely on people they call friends. When your friend asks how you are, he doesn't expect you to say a stale "OK," but he is interested in details and wants to listen to you. You can spill your guts to your friend, complain about the person who is a pain in your neck, ask for advice, share your problems and successes, as well as deep sorrow or even boundless happiness. You do it because you trust your friend. This is what I mean by saying people make friends miles away from home on neutral turf. They create a meaningful relationship.

International students especially need someone to rely upon in a new country. They are extracted from their familiar environments and are immersed into a strange culture.

One day I asked a student from Germany, "How are you?" His answer was, "Trying to survive." This phrase perfectly describes the situation in which newcomers find themselves in America.

Many international students feel helpless in the U.S. They don't even have the transportation to go out and explore their new world. You need a car to go out or to buy some toiletries, even in such a small town where I lived. It forces you to be dependent on other people in a country where freedom and independence are supreme values.

No wonder a car is the primary objective for most young Americans. In my public speaking class, we had to deliver a "million dollar speech," where we described the first three things we would spend a million dollars on. Listening to my American classmates, I felt like I was at a car dealership. Nobody forgot to explain the advantages of their dream car. It seems Americans grow up with the idea of a car as an absolute ideal. Car is idol. Car is God.

However, the absence of a car is just a hint of the difficulty international students cope with. Homesickness is also a major problem. It's not when you are sick and tired of domestic chores - that's easy. Homesickness means you are sick because you miss home so much and not only home but everything connected with it (even if it's a cup of tea with jam in a country where coffee is more common). I don't think we can count this feeling in miles, but it makes a difference whether your family is several miles away or across an ocean. My friend told me she once burst into tears in the middle of the class. She wasn't thinking about her grades, she was thinking about her fiancé on the other side of the world.

At such a time nobody wants to hear an acquaintance ask, "How are you?" But a friend's shoulder to cry on is essential because an international friend in need is in need indeed - more so than an American freshman who can drive home every weekend.

Here is another example. An international student from Kyrgyzstan came down with chickenpox at the beginning of the semester. It was Labor Day, an American national holiday, so University Health Center was closed. He had a high fever, no telephone and no roommate nearby. So he went to the president of the International Students' Association. This student woke up in two minutes, without having breakfast and took the sick student to the emergency room with another international student acting as an interpreter. They both stayed in the hospital until evening. That's what real friends do.

Only a friend can sacrifice his time whether it is to take you to the hospital or to help you buy a bathing suit or choose a laptop on the internet. Only a friend can send you homemade cookies to help you forget your loneliness or take you to see

her mother's dogs to lighten your heart. Only a friend can talk with you for an hour about his country if you need it for your class. Miles away from home I make real friends who helped me to cope with disappointing trifles and enormous homesickness. They helped me to survive in a foreign country because an international friend in need is a friend indeed.

Dorm Life - Crazy College or a Box of Rules?

Dorm life in the U.S. and Russia is as different as our mentality. That's why I listened to Americans' complaints with an ironic smile: they wouldn't survive our dorms.



College life is for doing crazy things. However, the word "crazy" can have different colors. Americans love to call things crazy or mad. Let's take "Meijer Madness," for example, when crowds of people rolled their carts along the supermarket in hopes of finding good sales. There were free buses to the supermarket from my university and a rare student would miss an opportunity to grab something on sale or just to walk around in a good company. Or "Midnight Madness," a step show with wild yelling in the dark, was also very popular with students.

"There was something mad in Wise Hall yesterday!" my classmate said, excited, referring to an ice-cream "war" in his dormitory, where they threw ice cream at each other.

American students expect crazy life from college. That's why they may become very disappointed with so many regulations college imposes on them and do not realize what opportunities they have.

A simple everyday life in an American dorm is a tremendous opportunity in itself. But I often heard EMU domestic students complain about campus regulations. An American freshman in my dorm began packing her things right after she moved in.

"Too little space for me," she remarked naughtily. No wonder she was upset, because "me" includes a TV set, a microwave, a toaster, a fridge, an armchair and a computer. Well, with such a luggage there is hardly enough space for two Americans in one room.

In American dorms if you do not have a shower in your room, there is a shower two to three steps away from your door. Having lived in a Russian dorm for three years, I can tell this is very convenient. In Tula I had to go all the way downstairs from the fifth floor just to take a shower. But it is not a problem though, if you manage to take a shower in the end. There is usually a line of five people, if you

are lucky enough. When I did not see anybody, I began to worry. Is the shower out of order? Or did they cut off the hot water?

Water in Russia is like weather in England. In England they say about weather, "If it rains in the morning, it can be sunny in the afternoon, but a splendid morning can turn into a nasty afternoon." In Russia we say about water, "If you enjoy the hot water in the morning, there can be no cold water in the afternoon." Moreover, hurry up and brush your teeth before midnight. There will be neither cold nor hot water afterward. We have a bit different "deadlines" in my country. You can hand in your paper a couple of days later, but you must brush your teeth before midnight while the water is running.

That's why when I heard American students' complaints I suppressed an ironic smile. A day in a Russian dorm would have driven them mad without going to "Midnight Madness."

In American dorms guests could stay overnight in the room three days in a row and six days in a month. "Not bad, not bad," my American roommate commented. It is excellent compared to Russian rules. Only my parents and members of my family were allowed to go into my room but not to stay there.

No wonder Russian students are so inventive as far as rules are concerned. We have not only night watch but also day watch. Dorms in my home city are not big and day watch persons know most students by their faces. That's why students do not always present their ID at the entrance. It makes it easy to get your friends inside. We used to change clothes with our friends, so that they looked like students living in the dorm.

Students who had lost their keys to the front door had to pay a fee, which didn't make them happy. But hearing their grumbling I usually advised them to be happy about having keys to their dorm at all. Keys to the entrance door of the dorm are usually a luxury in a Russian residence hall. My dorm in Tula was closed at 10.30 p.m., and there was no official way to get in after that. Private life became a problem; no guests, no dates late at night were allowed.

Can you imagine a senior student hurrying up from his date to get into his dorm? No? Me either, that's why there were a lot of ways to cheat the night watch person. Students from the second floor found an original way out. They used bed sheets as a rope and acted like Tarzans. Jungle rules lead to jungle solutions on how to live a full college life with those rules.

So EMU regulations were not bad in the end. And I advised American peers to enjoy their college years and get rid of nagging; youth has no place for it. And our Russian students I would wish to be more inventive until the authorities realize that absurd rules won't bring order.

"Freedom is not Free..."

Famous American freedom in education is strictly regulated and hardly anyone will disobey those rules...



If I were to characterize American academic culture in one word, I would choose the word "freedom." However, the sad truth that "Freedom is not free," as cut in stone at Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, DC, can be applied to college students as well. Free behavior in the classroom and the freedom of choice are combined with strict deadlines and detailed regulations and policies in the syllabus.

Freedom is a fundamental American value college students in the U.S. enjoy more than in other countries. First, you can choose your courses and your schedule for yourself. In Russia I was struck with my schedule on September 1, the official day for the school to start. My schedule, "kindly" chosen for me by the Deputy Dean usually left much to be desired and with few opportunities to adjust my life to it. Saturday classes till 4 p.m. were aimed to kill students. There were courses called "elective," but it meant they were chosen by wise professors to fit the "hole" in the schedule and students' education.

Second, food and drinks are often allowed in class in the U.S. A can of Coke or, sometimes, a full breakfast is more common than a pen and a notebook on an American student's desk. In a Russian college students rush to buy a snack in a five-minute break, chew it hurriedly and hide the rest behind the desk in a hope to swallow an inviting piece on the sly. No way to do it; an attentive professor will notice and point at a lawbreaker. I guess a professor wants to see a student's brain working, not jaws.

And there is a point in it. In the USA professors can take their shoe off or stand on a chair to attract students' attention. But still there is at least one student in the class who lies on the desk, half sleeping, or yawns widely and loudly in the front row. Is it freedom or disrespect, I wonder? But not only I - with my Russian mentality - am surprised at American academic culture.

Kris, 22, of the Netherlands said it is rude in his country when students call professors by their first names, speak to their course mates or answer their cell phones in class.

"What was really amazing at first in America," he said, "is that someone got a call on the cell phone and answered it. The student left the room and came back five minutes later, and the professor did not say anything."

In the Netherlands students cannot leave the room without a professor's permission. At the end of the class a teacher is supposed to let students go; nobody rushes out of the room like in the U.S.

In my university in Tula there are bells ringing at the beginning and the end of the class. But the teacher usually says it's for him or her to know when the class is over. Students wait impatiently looking at their watches and pitying the priceless minutes of the break they've already lost.

In Japan the standard of what is rude in class is even higher. Shunsuke, 21, said students never speak in class in Japan. If they have questions they can ask the professor after classes, but nobody will interrupt the lecture. "Debates" in American classrooms surprised him most of all.

Such freedom is a great advantage in the process of education, but it can be deceitful. You can wear pajama pants, eat and express your opinion in class as long as you meet deadlines. Papers lose their value, grades turn into a zero if you miss the deadline; participation percentage slowly drops with every unexcused absence.

I freaked out when I first saw my syllabuses because they seemed to be written for robots. It was stated in the syllabus what questions are considered silly, how many excused absences students might have or that papers were due at 5 p.m. and not a minute later. At once questions sprang up in my mind, not used to strict deadlines in studies. What if you turn the paper you've worked on for weeks at 5:05 p.m. instead of 5 p.m.? What if you fall seriously ill and have more excused absences than it is allowed to have? What if a virus in your computer had spoiled your course paper the day before? There are so many "ifs" in reality that a six-page syllabus cannot take into account. But the merciless policy stands, "Excused absences are limited to two. More than that are counted as unexcused regardless of cause."

My modest experience tells me that cause matters, especially when we talk about people, not about robots. What is the use of freedom, if it lacks a human factor? What is the use of expressing your opinion in class if you involuntarily had to miss the class at the end of the semester with important presentation and may only receive a grade of "incomplete"? I do not think a grade of "incomplete" is fair if a student has been working throughout the semester, though maybe objective.

Deadlines are necessary as far as they make you organized. But blind obsession with deadlines can turn freedom into a myth.

In Russian educational system we have other problems: too much freedom close to permissiveness somewhere and no freedom and free expression at all where it is necessary. So students can miss classes freely till exam time and teachers can give five or four judging by their attitude to students, but not knowledge. Isn't it time to change?

A Drop Worth a Sea/Professors Help Guest Students

Exchange programs are very popular in the U.S. and international students find a warm welcome ...to make Americans aware of other cultures.



The first Americans I met warned me, "Americans care about nothing but America." I am very glad that Eastern Michigan's faculty proves the opposite. By coordinating various exchange programs or just lending a helpful hand to a newcomer when necessary, the EMU staff strives to make the campus multinational.

I hope this will enlarge a bit of students' knowledge of geography because many evidently lack it.

Most Americans knew where Russia is situated. But I had pity for my friend from Tajikistan; she had crammed the vital addition "Central Asia" to the name of her country to give a hint where she is from. Sometimes even the name of the continent didn't help.

A.T. of India told me a funny episode that took place at the international spirit station several years ago. His friends and he organized a little test in geography during the International Week at EMU. Students would pick up a piece of paper with a country's name on it. To get a prize they were to show the country on the world's map or to identify the country's flag. One American girl chose Canada but could not find it on the map, pointing at Mexico instead. Isn't it absurd? Canada's casinos light up Detroit at night from the other bank of the river, which was a 45 minute drive away from Eastern Michigan University.

I also heard from Americans that it is necessary to be at war with a country in order to think of other nations. Once I had a student majoring in History as a lunch "conversation partner." He was interested about what Russians think of Americans. After my short answer I asked him the same question.

"Americans do not think of Russians," he said.

His argument was Americans think of other people outside America only if they are at war with this country.

From such an angle, the reason for educational exchange programs financed by the U.S. Department of State becomes transparent. Otherwise, globalization for Americans would mean condensing the planet to the size of the United States.

Program coordinators in American universities are often people interested in other cultures. One of them had a "cultural mix" in his house. Beside the collection of DVDs on the shelf in his living-room, there stood nice colorful souvenirs from the Ukraine. The Easter eggs with pictures of all seasons and a typical Russian/Ukrainian wooden doll called "matryoshka" revealed his interest in another culture. All were the presents from grateful Ukrainians - high-school

teachers, administrators and teacher trainers, participating in the Democratic Citizenship Education Internship Program.

Another collection of souvenirs from around Eurasia rested on the table belonging to the coordinator of my exchange program. Moreover, notes with Russian words were clipped all over this professor's room.

The Eastern Michigan staff really cared about other cultures and international students representing them at EMU. It was not necessary to coordinate a special program to contribute to EMU diversity. Simple care was enough sometimes to make me a bit happier. That drop of attention from a professor was worth a sea, because international students left their parents far away from Michigan.

EMU professors could play host to an international guest for five weeks or take a bunch of international students to Chicago and provide them with maps. They could lend me an interesting book to read and fall into a profound discussion of an "American soul." Their generosity could go as far as to lend a student an extra car or to invite him or her for a Thanksgiving family dinner. It was like a little bright star in the darkness when somebody returned to the building, because a frustrated newcomer was looking for a telephone to call home. A common e-mail with encouraging words "good things invariably happen to good people" could breathe in great energy to go ahead and storm an American reality.

So I could feel care and support in a foreign country. I don't want to say that Russians lack kindness, hospitality or don't help one another. But sometimes looking around or after worthless waiting in an hour-long queue when the pay desk is being closed in front of my eyes I ask myself a question: "Why do they treat me like that in my home country?" Every person should be treated with respect, at least, with mere politeness that we often lack here.

Car is God, but not Almighty

Car in the U.S. is a lifestyle! But for students it's the best way to open the world around if they pay attention to traffic signs and don't make an idol out of it.



"Car is God. Car is idol," I wrote in my first articles about my perception of the American culture and values with a hint of irony. In two months, however, I came to appreciate the advantages of this vehicle. But I felt pity for those who valued the brand of the car more than the opportunities it gave for traveling and exploring the world.

The car is the cheapest and most convenient way to travel in the U.S. - even taking into consideration rent and parking costs. It is so easy to go and see new places, but many ignore that opportunity. We used to plan your weekend in 10

minutes, grab the wheel and let the highway lead us to Chicago or to the middle of nowhere.

Here, in Russia, students don't travel by car much, as it is more expensive than taking a bus or a train. Train tickets are more common among young people; hiking is the best way to see a lot. There is a special charm in traveling by train as compared to crossing your legs on the back seat of the car. There are no irritating traffic jams, but a merry sound of the train. A train has space and time for a game of cards and warm grandmother's cookies made from real flour, milk and eggs, not from the add-water-and-enjoy standard mix. I believe trains suit the vast Russia better than hectic cars.

Another argument for the popularity of the train in Russia is that our Russian railways are smoother than Russian roads, though I've heard complaints about American roads, too. Taxes or little annoying "30-cent-collectors" blocking the way to Chicago must ensure good quality of the U.S. roads. But roads are not as good as you might expect them to be. In Russia you have jerking on the road free of charge; in America you pay for it. But this doesn't make a car less attractive. That's because a car fits so well with American values.

"We want everything faster and more convenient," I heard from an American peer.

That's what cars are initially made for. But in the rush for time saving, a car can become very inconvenient. In America, more than anywhere else, driving tickets make traveling by car more expensive. Those pieces of paper from a police officer can break any good spirit to pieces and accidents can delay the most fascinating trip forever. And international students are not an exception, but they maybe lucky to come across a U.S. officer's understanding.

Marianne Verstappen, 22, of the Netherlands, is one of those who experienced such a situation, though she was very lucky that time.

Verstappen was driving to Detroit and didn't see the red lights. Something on the dashboard distracted her attention from the road, and she didn't stop the car in time to avoid the accident.

"I hit the brakes, but it was too late," she said.

It was raining, too, which could have prevented the car from a quick enough stop. Verstappen crashed into the car in front of her. That vehicle bumped another car in the front. Fortunately, nobody was injured. When her friend called the police she realized that their trip to Detroit would take much longer.

She told the officer what had happened. After the routine checking procedures, he let her go with a warning.

"I am not going to give you a ticket, but you know you are wrong," he said.

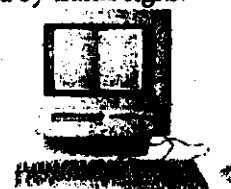
The fact she was international and was driving a rented car made things a bit easier for her. But I wouldn't advise anybody to relax on the road either in the U.S. or in Russia.

Another international student from the Ukraine practically got a ticket for her birthday present. After dropping her friend home, she tried to find her way in the new area and did not pay enough attention to the signs. She didn't realize she was stopped for speeding till the police officer told her about it. Luckily, a ticket didn't darken her birthday; she drove away with a warning since she had a good driving record. It doesn't mean, though, she will get away like this the next time. Officers are polite in America, but they do their job well and nobody will think about bribing one.

The car is God in U.S., but not almighty. It's the driver who counts, not the car. Students in America should use their cars to go and see something new, not to boast in front of their friends. It's not worth making an idol out of it. A cool brand won't add much to personal experience unless one takes advantage of the easiest way to travel in America. That's why my friends and I often got out of the campus in a rented car with a spirit of adventure, though moderated by traffic signs.

PC Invasion - No Place for Books

It's hard to imagine America without computers but books don't seem to be so essential...



American students have tons of facilities to make their college life easier and more efficient. But the scale of facilities outweighs the scale of effort sometimes and draws students down instead of pushing them up.

"It's my first time in the library," my American classmate said after two and a half months of the semester passed. Weren't his classes challenging enough to push open a library door?

Only about half of all American adults read at least one book a year. If this statistic, discussed in my journalism class at Eastern Michigan is startling for Americans, it is easily deduced from the American lifestyle, which leaves little time for reading.

Other international students admitted this fact as well. Kris, 21, of the Netherlands, said in his country he read at least one book a month, but in the U.S. he didn't have time for it. Andrzej, 20, of Poland, said he couldn't finish a book for two months in America.

Another thing about American lifestyle is the sea of e-mails instead of a wide river of book images. American professors get some 50 e-mails every day, and that's not spam but messages from their students, colleagues or friends. It takes an hour even to read them. American professors are easy to reach, but do students make the most of it?

In Russia I had to spend all my breaks between classes examining the schedule, running from one room to another or waiting in front of the faculty's room if I

needed to talk with a professor. After all these ambushes, I could have made a career in the army. But at least the communication was more personal. In America all the faces and voices have the same format, which is the size of your computer screen

"You understand what American lifestyle is," assistant professor of the Department of the English Language and Culture told me when I complained about the lack of personal communication in the U.S.

Computers' "invasion" adds to the lack of motivation to read books, as well. A computer devours your time; books don't fit into the "screenomania" unless they are electronic. I didn't read any book for pleasure during my first semester in the U.S. In Russia I was usually reading five to seven books at the same time

My classes in Tula State Pedagogical University required me to subscribe to a minimum of three libraries at a time, because I needed to find the necessary books. When I had English and American Literature, the search for books became part of life. Renew and check-in dates were inseparable from my schedule, with three items to renew at one library, four to check in at the second and two at the third. The students taking this course were reading during breaks, in cafeterias, in public transport, going home for a weekend, standing in line or watching movies. The greeting phrase changed from "How are you?" to "What are you reading now?" among the students. The second phrase was not about the weather but about the status quo in the list of literature, "Did you start Dreiser's 'American Tragedy' or Thackeray's 'Vanity Fair'?"

I used to carry a book with me everywhere when I came to America, too. But soon I quit this habit. Reading and writing have a new meaning in the U.S. - tête-à-tête with a PC.

In American classes connected with writing, students jump to their computers, do five minutes worth of research and submit a one-page assignment. They don't have to worry about spelling, but about format details, such as font and line spacing instead.

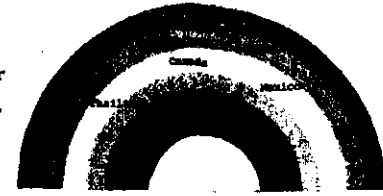
Saving efforts here and there, Americans depend on this tricky device too much. No need to strain your memory to remember some facts; the Internet is your memory day and night. I was astonished and a bit frightened when I realized I forgot how to multiply figures without a calculator. An online calculator is good, but it doesn't mean you must be as smart as a fourth-grader.

And what if a PC is in a bad mood and won't work? Anger? Frustration? Stress? Failure?

Chewing gum, which has become an American habit, won't help to get rid of "screen-stress," but reading an interesting book will probably balance the scales. Facilities are no good without engaging the brain, and the effort scale must be at least an ounce heavier.

The Cultural Rainbow

America for me is a country of diversity as if painted with a magic brush to create the cultural rainbow.



I came to America with a Russian soul, to tell Americans about "the mysterious Russian soul" and began desperately searching for the American soul at Eastern Michigan University. What I found, though, was not a rainbow of all nations, not even a modern desktop color palette, but all the hints and shades of life mixed together.

Cultural and ethnical diversity make this country painted by millions of brushes, and I feel pity for those who do not realize it. But there are people who do not see the beauty of colors, and there are Americans who manage to keep away from the diverse environment.

An international student went to a party for swimmers at EMU with his non-American friend. With a sparkle of irony, he told me afterward he and his friend were the only international students there. There is nothing extraordinary in the fact some Americans keep in touch only with Americans. People are free to choose whom they want to communicate with. But it is shameful some girls at that party asked to touch those poor international students as if they were a wonder or a comet you see once in 200 years. And that happened at the university, where there are about 1000 international students from 54 countries. With all those figures, it's hard to perceive how some American students can create an "iron curtain" around their lives.

In my home university in Russia I saw only a bunch of Chinese students, who hang out together and lived their own Chinese life, staying away from the bulk of Russians. I saw them playing soccer in front of the dorm, hurrying downstairs, hiding their chins in the collars of their jackets. I heard professors complain about their poor Russian and watched staff in the cafeteria irritated at their inability to ask what they wanted. It was more of a look from outside, a drawing by a 3-year-old child with two blots of a different color.

But a rainbow of nations cautiously showed its corner to me at EMU. Before most students arrived, the campus was empty except for international students who usually come in advance. After a pouring rain of emotions and first impressions I found myself playing volleyball with people from all over the world. It was the first time I did activities with somebody from South America or Africa, but I didn't ask to touch them.

I would advise those Americans who don't see anybody except themselves to "touch" a different culture instead of international students, which is very simple in an American university. For example, every year at Eastern Michigan students

organize International Week full of cultural events, such as playing African drums. It's not just an animal skin on a wooden body; it's a magic brush to color American reality with a shade of diversity. And what is most important, anybody could be a wizard.

"Basically, you pick up the sound; it could be very simple, but it adds," said an African drum lover.

Such events help develop a further interest in other cultures. I am glad this was not an exception in my university but rather a rule. There were students at EMU who didn't treat representatives of different countries like comets, messengers from space, but created awareness of other cultures. There were at least 15 international student organizations at EMU; their names were wide spread on the world map, but their goals had much in common. All of them were painters, though they probably didn't go to art school.

During the International Week at EMU the year I was there everybody could become a painter and add a stroke to the rainbow, joining African Drums Circle Celebration or watching a movie or taking part in the international soccer tournament. It's up to students to decide whether to get involved with wide-open eyes or to stay away with curtains firmly drawn together.

I chose picturesque diversity, but somebody can be happy with "iron" monotony. We can paint our life the way we want. Even if you are a fan of black and white, why not try other colors first, especially when America offers all the hints and shades of life mixed together.

Communication Through Time-Zones

International students come to America and leave their dears at home communicating with them on a new "highly technological" level...



Coincidences wash your life with an uncontrollable spring of sorrow, happiness, fear and luck. But it's even more striking when they split the distance, disregarding time zones and making feelings the instant way of communication.

Communication with family and other significant ones left in the home country becomes a very important issue for international students. They start to live in two worlds - real and virtual with wireless or cable internet connection, authorization codes of telephone cards, web cameras and microphones at their PCs.

A young and emotional girl from Tajikistan spent almost \$300 on telephone calls home in the first two weeks of her stay in the United States.

"I called home every night. During the day it was all right, we went out, did a lot of things, but every night I cried," she said.

Other students were more careful with their budget.

"I don't call. I write an e-mail to my mom that I will be home at 4 o'clock, and she calls me," said an exchange student from the Netherlands.

Some buy a telephone card and make regular calls on the weekends, keep track of their minutes and plan the period of time for which to use the card. Others live without phone cards. And whenever they have any, it's all gone in a day after an hours-long talk with all the relatives and friends passing the receiver to one another in the little home-phone "congregation." Veterans abroad, who have spent more years in the United States, use internet calls to exchange a couple of words with their families scattered all around the world.

Words fly here and there. They cross the border, exciting and encouraging, in different languages, in loud and natural rounds of laughter, wise and caring parents' advice, whisper of love vows and friends' chatting.

International friends' faces sparkle with a smile of understanding when you tell them "I called my mom today" or "I chatted with my fiancé." They know what it's like to get news from home, to discuss a new puppy's name or to set a dear image from the Web camera as a screen background. They know what it's like to live a virtual life with the loved ones.

This is when the sixth sense makes you pick up the receiver and dial the longest and most "coded" number you've ever had. Or you feel like writing an e-mail and find the answer before you even ask.

"Sometimes I doubt that coincidences are all coincidental," said one of my friends. "At the same time I sent my parents an e-mail, they sent me one back. There is 10 seconds between the two e-mails. And I sent them an e-mail about my dog, and my mother sent me an e-mail about my dog, too."

Feelings never fail to connect unlike busy telephone lines, "pop-up windows blocked" or "limited or no internet connection." The communication through the heart makes such coincidences happen; the thoughts "co-inside" and bring the significant ones together.

Once I got very frustrated without any evident reason. I just started crying in the street and couldn't get rid of the anguish. The sun was caressing the golden and red leaves in the autumn trees, but it skipped my heart. No logical explanation could account for the sudden pain and longing to be where I wasn't. If somebody had given me a ticket for a flight home at that moment, I would have boarded the plane without any hesitation. I felt like I must be back in Russia. A day later I found out that my fiancé got sick and needed to see me the moment I was wiping tears from my cheeks.

Is it a coincidence or communication on the "higher-technological level"? If so, most international students will at least acquire "highly technological" communication skills while studying abroad.

Sorrow, happiness, fear and luck don't fail to connect when coincidences split the distance disregarding time zones.

Winter "Seasoning"

I always loved winter for its special charm. But Americans driving to work and internationals who had seen snow for the first time in Michigan made me look at it from a different point of view.



I was always fascinated by snow - snow sparkling in the sun, snowflakes creeping to the ground or whirling around in a blizzard. But I never thought snow could be like a natural disaster and literally "freeze" the life of the whole university.

On the first day of winter classes in the U.S., one of my professors counted the students and was very glad, even surprised that 10 out of 13 showed up. It had been snowing that day. And it turned out that snow falling in America is a perfect excuse to skip classes

The next day all the classes were cancelled as faculty, students and staff couldn't come to work because of "severe weather conditions." That was very unusual to me because it wasn't even snowing. Snow ploughs did their work. However, the snow "inches" were an impassable barrier in the pursuit of education. If classes in Russia were cancelled because of the same reason, students would have prolonged winter holidays for a couple of months. It is amazing from a Russian's point of view how snow makes Americans so helpless.

But snow did more than just interrupted the education process. It messed up travelers' plans, too. I remember being stuck in traffic jams during the winter break, with cars creeping at a snail's pace. The trip became longer than expected and drivers became more stressed and worried. The windshield wipers were fighting with the white "killer," the lights of the snow ploughs powerfully cut through the darkness. Buses were cancelled and annoyed travelers crowded in a dingy Greyhound station preparing to attack the ticket counter in a hopeless attempt to get out of the winter wonderland.

No wonder I heard remarks like "I hate winter" so often. If snow only messes up plans and brings cold winds, there is certainly nothing to like about winter. But I think winter has its own beauty, especially for international students.

My acquaintance from Japan changed his attitude toward winter after one day of heavy snowfall. He said Michigan's winter was "beyond his expectations" and put it on the highest level of his "winter-comparison scale."

"It's beautiful; it's the fairytale of the world," he said.

Winter is a perfect time to have fun depending on how you look on it. And for many international students, Michigan winter was a chance to try something new, especially if they didn't have winter at home. Thus, winter for them could be

another factor of the American-Michigan reality to get used to or an opportunity to get a new experience.

The student from Thailand came to like the cold in Michigan when he found ways to enjoy it. He went skiing in America for the first time in his life.

"I must try it once because I am in Michigan," he said.

He felt nervous in the beginning but then excited. In Thailand there are places for indoor skiing but they are not representative to see what skiing is like. He even advised students who had never tried skiing before not to be afraid and explore all "ups and downs" of the Michigan winter.

Other international students did have something to compare American winter with. For example, in Japan winter sports are very popular among young people. Students from Japan told me usually left at midnight to arrive at ski resorts by 3 or 4 a.m., then slept for an hour and went skiing or snowboarding early in the morning.

Well, I didn't drive in the night to go skiing in Russia; I put on my skis in front of the house, and in five minutes I was on the hill or curving between the trees in the park. Sometimes we went skiing to the countryside for two or three days. I don't want to say you can't do it in America, but you have to pay for it. You have to pay for the artificial snow blown out of the snow making machines. You have to pay for freezing minutes in the chair that takes you back atop the hill. You have to pay for winter to enjoy it.

In my city in Russia school children have skiing as a part of their physical education course. Not everybody likes it, but at least parents don't have to pay for skiing lessons to let their children slide in the snow.

But even if one had to pay for snow in America, it was not an excuse to hide from winter behind the four walls and curse the snow outside. It's not the best way to discover the beauty of winter.

A taste of culture in the American shake

Food is an integral part of culture and a way to open a new culture. But for international students in the U.S. it was also the way to make themselves at home.



A simple cup of tea with jam made me happy when I missed Russia. It brought me back to the small dormitory room in my home city, a hot kettle and girls' chat. But a roll of injera, national Ethiopian bread resembling a thin pancake, brought me to another continent.

Once a month International Students Association (ISA) that I entered in my university went out to eat at ethnic restaurants. Thai, Chinese, Japanese, Mediterranean, Indian and Greek food are a few examples of what the Food from

around the World program included. Students from different countries picked out the restaurant for lunch or dinner and went out to try a new cuisine. It was a first-time experience for many students and I was not an exception. Newcomers joined ISA every semester, and there was always a new place to "bite" a piece of another culture.

My first ISA trip "around the world" was to a Chinese restaurant a couple of days after I came to Michigan. Funny Chinese hieroglyphs, unusually cooked vegetables, the first careful and suspicious piece of spicy chicken and awkward thrusting of the fingers between the chopsticks drew a different picture of China for me.

Tetyana Sydorenko, 22, from Ukraine, found Food From Around the World interesting and exciting. She liked to cook and wasn't afraid to try something new. That's why ethnic restaurants interested her. When visiting an Indian restaurant, her friend from India told her how the food is cooked and shared some family traditions with her.

"You can learn about a new culture without leaving the U.S.," Sydorenko said, recalling Indian food she tried with ISA.

So it's not just about food; it's about culture.

When I entered the Ethiopian restaurant Red Sea, I found a little Africa there. A national white dress with red ornament on the wall, traditional textiles telling its own story and original hand-made African tables called "mosobe" described a different way of life.

Music "from back home" made Biniam Yohannes, the president of International Students Association, smile. He started to go to this restaurant almost every week; the food there was very close to Eritrean, his national cuisine. The interior details were part of his culture, too. The pictures decorating the walls showed how the food was cooked. The native woman was making injera, the national bread.

The injera is very important because it accompanies every dish. All the food is served on a big round plate and a piece of injera. Pieces of injera are used instead of spoons and forks. "I felt cozy because you actually forget about formalities when you eat with hands," Sydorenko said.

The owner of the restaurant explained to me it takes two to three days to make the dough for injera. Three people were in charge of Red Sea, and they worked hard to make the authentic food. They tried to stick to cooking traditions, even if it didn't fit in with the American "fast" pace of life.

The crazy pace ruling in the street slowed down reflecting the Ethiopian culture, in which people value the taste, not the time. Even coffee takes a couple of hours, Yohannes said. A cup of coffee in Eritrean culture is not a mix of a sweetener, cream and Regular or Decaf liquid from a coffee machine. It is a ceremony when friends and family gather to talk. Women roast coffee beans and

take them around for everybody to smell the aroma. This is also a sort of superstition: the smell of freshly roasted coffee beans takes the evil spirits away. Then they grain the beans without any electronic device and brew coffee in hand-made clay pots called "gebena." Coffee is very strong; it is served in small cups, and they have it in rounds or "stages." There are four rounds; each has a specific name. After every round the water is added to the pot.

It is hard to imagine anything like that in the U.S. culture. That's why coffee ceremonies at the Ethiopian restaurant were just another piece of the mosaic that brought a foreign culture to the U.S. diversity. Ethnic food was an interesting and tasty way for me to get to know this foreign culture.

Ethiopian or Indian restaurants opened a new culture for me. But for some students they were like my cup of tea with strawberry jam - a way to feel at home in an American cultural shake. We were in this shake together, that's why I tried to learn more about its other ingredients.

Life by a planner

Tons of activities and crazy pace turn life in the U.S. into a busy-line page of a planner. Even wedding ceremony can take place without bride and groom leaving their car.



Stop. Watch. Listen. The birds are singing, though not as loud as the car engine. The sun rays are breaking through the clouds, though not into the classroom; there were no windows in my classrooms in America. The raindrops are making tiny circles in the puddles, but they are unseen.

Only one thing is noticed every day, is paid attention to and is referred to in the busy schedule: an appointment in the planner.

Thick and leather-bound, small with sweet teddy bears, huge in a black folder, lined in pink ink, green and white with University's logo - a planner is essential to keep up with the crazy American pace of life.

I heard Americans say they put shower time into the planner, too. Ridiculous as it is, every step seemed planned to keep up the pace.

The Russian exchange student I talked with recalled the first thing her supervisor advised to buy in America was a planner. She showed me a thick brown notebook, all the pages written-out in small letters, all "busy" with important meetings, assignments and "things to do" that direct the life and take every minute of it. In fact, those "things to do" take the life itself from you or at least the feeling of being alive.

"People live by their planners," said my friend, complaining about the lack of spontaneity in the American way of life. "They have to plan time to spend with their families; they have to plan time to be together."

There is so little time left after jobs, classes, appointments, basketball games, hanging out and answering e-mails that if you don't plan your time to spend with significant others, you may not have it.

Snap. Snap. Snap. My professor tried to imitate the American reality. I saw this gesture, the snap of fingers, denoting the quick pace in America for the first time. After that I didn't have time to notice unusual new gestures: the life "snapped," leaving no time for observation.

In this context, drive-thru wedding chapels or drive-thru funerals are not very surprising.

"We have wrong priorities," said one of my American classmates when we discussed American culture in my Language and Culture class.

The other American girl said an American's day is so packed that they would rather drive through a wedding quickly to see a baseball game afterward.

The idea of driving through a wedding chapel seemed unbelievable, and I decided to check. Indeed, for \$25 couples can use "the popular Drive-Up Wedding Window," get the wedding music and a ceremony, plus gratuity to a minister in Las Vegas, as stated at www.aspecialmemory.com. I wonder what kind of special memory you will get without even leaving a car to get married.

In Tajikistan, a wedding ceremony can last five days or longer, depending on the family, Nargis Nabieva, 19, said.

Before the wedding the groom's family comes to ask the bride's parents' permission to give away their daughter. They bring seven big dishes; each has a different kind of national food. If the bride agrees, her family takes the gift and cooks for the groom's family the national food "palav," made of rice, beef or mutton, vegetables and spices. After that they have "safedi," or "white day," when both families gather to discuss the wedding and exchange small white gifts such as handkerchiefs or scarves.

The wedding starts at 3 or 4 a.m. when men come to the groom's house to cut carrots for national palav. On the second day after the registration of the marriage, about 500-1,000 guests gather for a banquet. The bride is wearing a white wedding dress. There is also a traditional wedding for fewer close people (usually 50 to 100) when the bride is wearing traditional national clothes showing her wealthy dowry.

After the wedding the wife is not supposed to leave the house for 40 days when it gets dark. This is quite enough time to enjoy the new status and enjoy life as well.

I bet people don't feel like robots in Tajikistan; they feel alive. They have more than a planner to live by.

America has more than a planner, too, but to notice that it is necessary to slow down the pace a little. Stop. Watch. Listen. There are stars at night (further from campus and big cities) and clouds in the sky (if skyscrapers don't scrape it too much) that don't have a line in the planner.

Programmed to be healthy

American life doesn't allow one to be sick. That's why Americans take pills and go to work or to class.



I thought it didn't make much difference in what part of the world you are in to be sick. I thought it was no good anywhere. But when I woke up with a fever in my dorm room, miles away from home, I realized it matters.

The American way of life doesn't allow you to be sick. For example, there are assignments in courses that students can't make up for if they miss the class. There are assignments that push them to get up (ignoring high temperature and a headache), take some drugs to keep them walking and go. Maybe I am talking about responsible students, but I bet not many Americans ever missed a group presentation.

My friend cursed group projects that stole her weekend's sleep and fun but woke up at 7 a.m. on Saturdays and Sundays and dragged herself to group meetings.

"Those group meetings last forever," was another comment I heard from an international student.

However individualistic American culture might seem, group work makes you forget about individual needs, even if those needs are crucial for your health.

More pressure points to getting well are job and money, for sure. To be sick means to lose working hours and that is to lose money. So, it is not unusual to force the poor body to follow the "money" psychology.

"Everybody is sick," said my boss when I told him I had a fever on the weekend.

I saw students in the classroom with warm scarves around their necks, hoarse voices and tissue packets. I heard other students complain about their sore throat, while taking part in group discussions about components of the speech act. But it is normal; that's what surprised me most. I am not saying it's normal to be sick. But it is usual in American culture to struggle through the illness and go to work or to class. People become robots that have been programmed to do the task, and they will strive to do it despite damaging themselves.

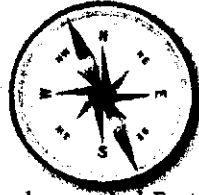
When I didn't feel well in Russia and came to class, my course mates and professors advised me to go home and stay in bed. In the U.S. somebody offered me drugs for cold; one student suggested I should take the whole bottle of some medicine with a complicated name. But my body is not a machine in need of lubrication or a car that ran out of gas and needs refilling. I don't want to live "from pharmacy to pharmacy" like a car lives from gas station to gas station.

Russian-speaking international students, though, didn't advise any drugs but hot tea, milk, more sleep and rest, eating lemon and drinking more liquids. In Russia, many prefer natural "grandmother's" methods to drugs, or at least use both in combination. I remember mother reading to me while I counted minutes under mustard plasters or cupping glasses when I was a child. I held my feet in hot water with mustard and inhaled hot steam from just-boiled potatoes when in kindergarten. And there was always a caring look and a cup of hot milk with honey when I went to bed.

I could have at least a cup of hot milk before sleep, I thought, walking along the hall to the microwave. Suddenly a door of one of the rooms opened, and a tall guy raced out of it. My milk made a picturesque zigzag in the air; the empty plastic cup rested on the carpet. He was really sorry; I know he didn't mean it. But he did more than just spilled the milk. He showed me there is no place for "grandmother's" slow time-consuming methods in the rush of the American reality. And I went to bed sipping apple-and-cinnamon anti-flu powder with hot water, dreaming about the caring look and hot milk in the other part of the world.

Reserved North and Careless South

South and North always opposing each other still differentiate Americans and define their habits.



Welcome to the North. The cold Michigan wind and grey sky greeted Eastern Michigan students on the first day of school after the break, making it harder to dive into the routine of work and classes. Especially if they spent that break among the palm trees under the caressing sun of Florida.

I heard a lot about the differences between the American North and South, but I could never think it is actually as big as it can be between the two opposite sides of the world, though belonging to one country. Reading Fitzgerald's short stories, I saw careless young people driving to the beach in the South and the tragedy of a southern girl in "The Ice Palace" of the North. But only when I bathed in the calmness and warmness of the South did I realize what the great American writer wanted to say.

It's not only the sun opposed to the Michigan winds. It's the relaxed laid-back life, with people who lose their car and house keys or lock themselves out and ask their skinny elderly neighbors to get into the house through a small window. Southern carefree and friendly style surprised me when people gave the keys to their house to somebody they saw for the first time. Southern recklessness and informality made me smile when a man stopped our car driving out of the yard to ask about the weather in Michigan. He heard my friends and I had come from the

North the night before and showed interest in our plans and asked whether we knew how to get to the right place, as if he knew us for ages.

People are closer and more open in the South; that's why you begin to feel as if you have known them for ages. The police officer will show you the way to the house at night; the waitress at a restaurant will bring you a traditional dish to try if you are not sure what it is. Even a dog won't bark at you to prove the Southern hospitality.

Southern slow pace took away all the troubles out of my mind when we played the game of dominos with southern "inhabitants" or waited for the burgers to get ready on the grill. The waitresses in restaurants took their time, but I didn't see any impatient gesture or face. Impatience is not a southern guest; people take their time to enjoy food, conversation and flow of life, which is a great enjoyment in itself.

"The smell is different," said Shunsuke Ito, 21, an Eastern Michigan student from Japan, describing his impression of the South.

Ito went to Miami and New Orleans for the break, running away from the Michigan winter like many other international students I know.

On the way back, Ito crossed the U.S. from south to north in the plane. He said he was looking out of the window all the time, and Michigan was the only place where winter was ruling.

"Oh, why I am here? It's the only place where it is snowing," Ito said, recalling his feelings upon arrival to Michigan after four sunny days in the south.

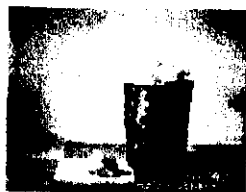
This short period was enough for him, nevertheless, to feel the difference of Southern people and Southern atmosphere. He said people in the south are very friendly and easy-going; they don't care about anything. I guess they do, but they are definitely not in a hurry to solve the immediate problems and don't let trouble frown their faces and steal joy from their lives. If freezing Michigan wind makes you pull the scarf to your nose and shiver under the thick coat, the warm soft Florida wind blows worrying thoughts away.

But this breeze won't bring good grades or knowledge and won't help pass final exams. Though it was difficult to come back, Ito admitted Michigan is good for studying because there are no distractions such as inviting beaches or the fairy tale of the Magic Kingdom. When he came to Los Angeles to study English some years ago, he couldn't study hard; there were too many things to see.

Well, students could not blame grey Michigan sky and cold wind for distracting them from studies; at least this was to Michigan's advantage. Welcome to the North, with more cautious people, with more serious attitude to life.

The "wasting" attitude

Crazy wasting in America strikes you at first, especially in student buffet-style cafeterias.



A big country brings forward big demands, the ravenous appetite and crazy wasting. But it's rather the attitude than the size that accounts for so much wasting in America. After all, I was raised in Russia, the largest country in the world, and never came across such wasting.

Piles of clothes are on the floor in the outlets during big sales; people grab as fast as they can and don't care if while taking one item they leave three on the floor. The clothes are cheap. Piles of paper are in the waste basket; students print out everything and don't care if the material's only way is to the trash. The printing service is free. Trays full of food move smoothly to the trash in the campus cafeteria; it's a buffet, all-you-can-eat style.

Yes, it's all-you-can-eat but not all-you-can-carry-on-your-tray, though students seem to prefer the latter.

Tara Wiedbusch, 19, a student supervisor in Dining Commons One (DC One) in Eastern Michigan University, said the food is wasted because of the buffet style.

"A lot of people take more than they want," she said. "It's a cafeteria style. Every one sees everything and then realizes they are not going to eat it all."

Wiedbusch's duties include making sure everything is good on the line, everything is full, there is no problem anywhere. Overseeing the process, she came to think that if students didn't take more than they can eat, there would be no wasting.

Ebonia Williams, 24, who had worked in DC One for two years, said the only solution is to regulate how much people take but it is impossible because it's a buffet.

"Probably, because there is so much, you come in, you are so hungry, and you take a bit of everything," Williams said.

Can't students regulate themselves? Why do they take three platefuls knowing they won't finish it all? I can understand newcomers who don't know what the food tastes like at first. International students may have a problem adjusting to the foreign food. It's unfamiliar; it looks different, and names scribbled with a marker in a foreign language leave many without a clue what the dish is like. I watched a poor German girl try bravely to finish her waffle with a Mexican-type sauce instead of marmalade she hoped for. I don't blame her for being unable to put the strange mixture into her mouth. I remember my Tajik friend's emotional story when somebody talked her into trying sushi with a spicy greenish sauce. She still gets mad when I remind her about the incident. But she didn't take it anymore because she knew she was not going to eat it.

After some time students know what is what, but still full plates go into the tray area.

Other internationals were also surprised seeing such a "wasting" attitude. One of the exchange students from England last semester was indignant about food wasting in the U.S. Once he was sitting in the cafeteria in the library. He told me he was very hungry, and the staff person threw buns and some other left-outs into the trash bin in front of him. It is cruel, he said, explaining what made him so angry. He said he even sent a letter of complaint to the cafeteria staff.

Well, that may seem a bit too much, but this is an illustrative example of wasting in America. I don't want to say that food is always thrown away. In DC One the food left in warmers is donated to the food bank, Williams said. But I saw my Tajik friend pick up the piece of bread from the floor, not because she was hungry though.

It is considered one of the worst things in Tajikistan to throw the bread away. It is almost equal to a sin. That's why she was very upset seeing bread on the floor or anything similar to bread, for instance, cookies.

I was brought up with an idea of respecting bread, too. In the Russian language, one of the meanings of the word "bread" is equal to food. I remember films, books and stories about 900-day siege of Leningrad in 1941-44 during World War II. (Leningrad is a former name of St. Petersburg.) Then, a piece of bread was a treasure, more than that - it meant life. I remember the pleasure of tasting bread after 12 days of backpacking in the mountains. We had only dried bread with us, and I was happy to break soft fresh bread and put a desirable piece into my mouth. After that I won't ever throw bread away.

It's just a different attitude. Having much allows wasting much. A big country allows crazy wasting, but it doesn't mean people should throw the food away.

Patriotism differs...

I was interested in the USA if Americans really love their country. But it turned out not many could answer an honest "yes."



I've always thought patriotism can be instilled. In the USA I saw it can be promoted and advertised without being felt.

National flags for interior design of American houses are as popular as colorful rubber bracelets in a college environment. The national anthem is an essential attribute of every sporting event. There is definitely something to be proud of in the U.S., but is there something to love?

When I asked Americans of different ages if they love America, I was amazed how many people cannot say that. Some thought for a second and answered a

hasty "no;" others went on to speak about their political views and how they are unhappy about Bush's presidency and policy in Iraq. Some students explained to me that people are very liberal at Eastern Michigan, and that's why I won't get "yes" often in my mini-investigation. Hey, what does love have to do with politics or political views?

The most common answer to my question was, "I like living here" and, "I like the freedom we have," but this is not the same as "I love my country."

I got some positive answers to my question, though. The first was from an EMU sophomore who crossed his index and middle fingers to illustrate his close connection with his country and his devotion to it. But doing this, he noticed that love is "too strong" a word. Why it is too strong? That's what patriotism is – love of and devotion to one's country. If love is "too strong" a description, then there is no patriotism.

– "Most of us here in America are very, very spoiled and don't appreciate all we have, which is awfully sad," said a person who was born in the U.S. and has lived there for more than 50 years.

I sometimes heard in Russia that young Russians should learn how to love their country from Americans. I'll keep away from it. I won't ever hesitate to say – no, to shout – that I love Russia simply because I was born here and because it is my country. I love the rustle of the green leaves and slim birch trunks mounting on the hill. I love the reflection of the night city lights in the wet autumn roads. I love the evolving images of the city behind the bus window and conductors' tired voices waking me up from daydreaming. I love Russia with all the shortcomings it has, with all its sometimes rather stupid rules I have to obey, with all the daily stress I get. I love it with all my heart.

And I don't need a national flag to express my devotion. I didn't have my national flag until I had to leave for America, and I had troubles finding the place to buy it in my home city. You won't find Russians decorating their homes with white, blue and red flag's colors.

You won't see national flags in Germany either, Mike Veldink, 29, an exchange student from Germany, said. When he was 10, his mother, who has Dutch roots, took off a small German flag from his "parka," a popular winter army jacket. He is not sure why she did this; he only added that they had never had a German flag at home and children were never taught a national anthem. Only in high school did he learn the anthem's story.

The anthem was cut to the third verse after the war.

"The other ones (verses) seemed to be too patriotic," Veldink said.

"Das Lied der Deutschen" ("The Song of Germans") was written before World War II, when the desire for a strong united Germany was a healthy patriotic goal. After the military aggression and nationalist usurpation of 1933-45, the words "Deutschland, Deutschland über alles," ("Germany, Germany above all") rang as a

reminder of the nationalist past. Now the first verses are never sung. Even the third verse, which is the official anthem, is not often sung, Veldink said.

"In Germany you can't show your feelings for your country at all," said my friend from Germany.

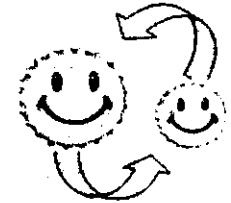
"It is considered inappropriate to say loudly that you love your country," Veldink said, adding that the situation is different in his fraternity, which tries to bring back "healthy patriotism."

Young Americans have the freedom of speech that they like so much about their country, but they still can't say they love their Motherland. They hang national flags in their houses or make vain statements that America is a world power and has the right to interfere into other countries' policies.

Only this power doesn't make them love their country for simply being theirs – for being their Motherland.

Every end is a token of new beginning

In a foreign country tiny episodes of kindness can be priceless and will be remembered for long or for ever.



"Everything that has a beginning has an end," my friend used to tell me so many times that this stuck in my head. Moreover, this phrase jumped out every time something came to an end.

Millions of faces swirl in my mind when I try to sum up my experience between the continents. When I was thinking how to finish this book, somebody advised me to write about everything I found in America and to mention all the people I met. But this is the same as to count snowflakes in the snowstorm and describe them. It is impossible but when one snowflake drops out of the struggle and rests onto your eyelashes or lips, you feel it melting – and smile.

So I felt every snowflake, every drop of warmth that the wind pulled out of the whirlpool of the new culture. So I remember those who watched my first steps into the new world but I cannot describe them.

My "big mama" met a group of tired students in the Detroit airport after the delayed flight and drove them to Eastern Michigan University. I was among them. It was the first ride in the car I had in America. Afterward I learned by heart the phone numbers of my friends who had cars – the wise thing to do for international students in the U.S. They saved me a couple times, picking me up from the closed bus station on a winter night or taking me to the pharmacy when I was sick.

My "foreign father" found my first book in the library catalogue and bought my first thing online. The four phone numbers I would blurt out half-asleep were my parents', my fiancé's, my high school teacher's and his. I often called him for

support, no matter if I was lost in downtown New York City or just wanted to watch a movie.

My new found Tajik "sister" frightened me for real for the first time in America when she fell sick all of a sudden and refused to go to the hospital. Afterward she was with me in every crazy trip I could think of. She listened to me when I missed my fiancé and pulled tiny details of our love story out of my memory.

My Dutch "brother" opened the beauty of the Russian cinematography for me and shared my first impression of French impressionists' masterpieces in Chicago Art Museum. He is lazy when it comes to writing emails, but often our talk would give me energy and inspiration to do my endless writing during the second semester.

A nice Canadian girl gave me simple instructions for the first cheesecake I've ever made. I couldn't wait till it froze to try. A cup of tea and a heart-to-heart talk would bring me back from melancholy to the joy of life not once.

A healthy-food-focused American freshman made me try my first smoothie. I sacrificed my whole dinner for that smoothie several times afterward.

A nice family from Canton treated me to the first home-cooked dinner in the U.S. Well, not everybody eats fast food here.

The first Russian-speaking American I met...

...my first Frisbee throw...my first Christmas show...my first racquetball court...my first task from boss...

...my first driving crawl...my first shopping mall...my first Northern Lights...my first rollercoaster ride...

It is a whirlpool; it is not a one-direction vacuum cleaner's swallow-up jaws. This warmth and help is rotating like energy or water in a circle.

It was my pleasure to show the newcomer how to use the phone card and where the telephone was. Probably, it was her first call home from Eastern Michigan's campus.

It was my pleasure to hear the African child learn her first English words in the preschool for children from low-income families. She could hardly understand English when she got there, but after some time she pointed to the apple and sun and repeated those words after me, resting on my arms.

Warmth and help go from one form to another and give us energy to live. Only conservation laws say energy cannot be created or destroyed. Warmth and kindness can be created.

That's why I won't repeat my friend's words any more. No more "everything that has a beginning has an end."

I would rather say every end is a token of the beginning - new experience, new life, new drops of warmth in the snowstorm of reality.

Afterword

Feedback is a dream of every writer. When the Director of Student Media and Editor in Chief said they liked my columns, I was glad. When my friends told me they felt the "power of the pen" reading my articles, I was excited. But when I got an e-mail from an unknown person expressing gratitude for all international students, I was happy.

Here are some comments I got in the U.S.

"I read your article from today ("Patriotism differs...") and I must say I really enjoyed it.

To me, I love the country not for what it is, but for what it may one day be...loving one's country is comparable to loving nature; you have to love the cold, snowy, harsh days as well as the warm and breezy summer afternoons. People here get so caught up in politics and religions that they lose sight of what this country is.

To love the U.S., one must love the world because someone from every walk of life can be found on any American street."

American student from Eastern Michigan University

"I read with interest your piece in the Eastern Echo of 8 April, 2005 ("Patriotism differs..."), and found it fascinating in its perspective of one from beyond our borders. When you say that Americans don't actually "love" the U.S., I would have to say you're right. Most of us probably don't.

America doesn't really lend itself to thoughts of a "Motherland," as does your "Mother Russia." I suspect we are too new. I am the 6th generation of my family born here, but I don't think of America as a "Motherland."

Sometimes I feel that the United States is less a country than it is a (sometimes) convenient partnership between fifty independent nations. Wherever the truth may lie, I appreciate the thoughts of one such as yourself who tells it as she sees it and gives us something to consider."

Allen Curry, American free-lance writer from Ypsilanti, MI

"I think the main point here is that your articles spur such discussions with different people - it means that they read them, think, and write :) - that's probably what every journalist or writer hopes for!"

American citizen with Russian roots

"I just wanted you to know how much I've enjoyed reading your columns this year in the ECHO. You give a new, fresh perspective to things that we either are too busy to notice or take for granted. You have genuinely touched a lot of people here and that we are all better for having met you."

Sue Shipley, Grant Accounting

"I just read your article at Eastern Echo and I must say that it was very-well done. As an international student, I am so happy to read a piece that expressed for all international students which they face every single day.

By the way, I am from Turkey. Even though I have been living in the states for almost six years, I still have problems adjusting myself in making "friends" who are from the U.S. and the other countries. Anyway, thank you very much for expressing yourself as an international student in a way that I felt like I was reading my own thoughts."

International student from Turkey