

Ten years later...

I can speak and write confidently in Russian. I also have a smartphone, which definitely would have eased my trip on the TranSib, and I wouldn't have had to buy paper maps of each city I visited, but then, I wouldn't have such great souvenirs from my trip. Would I have gained so much self-confidence in myself and skill in Russian had I had a smartphone back then? I don't think so. When I returned to the US to finish my final year of college, I took part in a one-day study-abroad conference, where students from different colleges in the area shared their experiences in different countries. We also explored the emotions we felt when returning from abroad, including "reverse" culture shock. For some reason, I still remember one participant's story. They had studied in Great Britain and got lost in some village in the middle of nowhere. I listened with interest, waiting for the story to continue, as I had had a similar experience on the way to the hostel near Baikal and with my bank card in Khabarovsk. However, it turned out that this person's incident was quite different from my own. They continued telling how they used their smartphone to understand where they were and how to get to where they needed to be. I've recalled this story over the years. I'm rather humble, but sometimes allow myself moments of pride and this is one of those moments. I didn't have a smartphone and I wasn't in an English-speaking country, but I managed to solve my problems, without using a word of English! I remind myself of that when I encounter difficult situations in my life. I can always find a solution to a problem.

Returning to the topic of culture shock, I didn't experience it when I came to Russia. I think this is connected with the fact that I wanted to go there and study everything about the country and about those who live there. I was ready for anything, just to have the chance to speak Russian and better understand Russia. As odd as it sounds, cultural shock found me on my return to the US. I lived in a different country for a year, immersing myself in the life of that country. I also traveled to other countries (Finland, France, and Lithuania) and saw life outside the borders of my native country. I felt different when I came back to the US, especially back to my hometown, Washington, Illinois with its population of 20,000. In August 2012 I really felt as if I had come to a different world. It was hard for me to find a connection with people who didn't share my experience. I sincerely missed Russia and St. Petersburg in particular, and, of course, my girlfriend, Masha. I knew then that I wanted to return and live in Russia.

Two movies helped me work with my feelings. "The Last Samurai" (with Tom Cruise) and "John Carter" (with Taylor Kitsch). Both films are about people who stopped feeling a part of the culture where they were born. They found themselves in other cultures. I am not comparing myself 100% to the characters in these movies because they are both shown as "saviors" of the cultures they found. I in no way believe that I saved or am saving Russia or Russians. Nonetheless, the feeling of belonging to another culture and to the people of that culture is something that I felt and continue to feel. The next year moved slowly for me, but I

found a way to return to Russia, and in August 2013, I returned to St. Petersburg. I lived there for a month and then went to the Republic of Tuva, where I taught English at the local university through the Fulbright program, but that's a story for another time.