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To Young, a Russian Enclave Is Too Much the Old Country

By SABRINA TAVERNISE

For New Yorkers, Brighton Beach is a charming curiosity, a little bit of Russia in their own backyard. They go to shop for food, mill among the stout old-timers and hear the exotic language. Even the occasional financial swindle in the news is regarded, at least by those who are not prosecutors, as more cultural quirk than grave crime.

But lately Brighton Beach is a tourist attraction for another group of people -- more recent immigrants who have come to America from a transformed Russia, where Moscow sparkles with shopping options for the affluent, where malls have sprung up in suburbs, and where sushi bars are more popular than McDonald's. To them, Brighton Beach, in the eastern part of Brooklyn's Coney Island peninsula, is a place frozen in time -- a Brezhnev-era closed world, one full of sour looks, suspicion, and hopelessly outdated fashion.

Like the American-born tourists, they come to visit, not to stay. But while Americans smile, they, well, wince.

"We're sightseeing," said Alexander Morozov, 30, a graduate student at Rockefeller University in Manhattan, who comes to Brighton Beach occasionally to sample the food. "I might buy a loaf of black bread. I could never live here."

In the traditional arc of the immigrant experience, the first ethnic outposts, like Little Italy or the Lower East Side, can often become anachronisms, resembling, at least to later arrivals, an exaggerated version of home that has become badly dated.

In New York, Russians have been settling in places other than Brighton Beach for more than a decade now. Bensonhurst in Brooklyn and suburban New Jersey are popular destinations. But with each year, and each new move into other parts of the city and region by young people from a newly capitalist Russia, Brighton Beach seems ever more foreign.

"It's very much like I have gone back in a time machine, and I'm looking out into the 1970's and 1980's," said Maxim Stoklytsky, 30, an M.B.A. student at Georgetown in Washington, D.C., and a native Muscovite, who was visiting Brighton Beach for the first time. "It's strange for me. I'm in the United States, the most powerful and progressive country in the world. And here I am back in
"Only the old people remain," he said, while he sliced worn heels off old shoes. "There are fewer and fewer new young people here. Brighton Beach can't find a common language with our young people anymore. What is there for them to do here?"

A wave of Russian immigrants in the late 1970's settled in Brighton Beach. The predominantly Jewish migration defined the boundaries of what became known as New York's classic Russian neighborhood.

Immigration from the former Soviet Union surged again in 1991, the year of that nation's breakup, and more people poured into Brighton Beach. But by the late-1990's, the flow of Russians, in smaller numbers and with greater range, began moving and settling farther north in Brooklyn, away from their immigrant roots, according to the city's Department of City Planning.

"The early flows in the early 1990's were primarily to southern Brooklyn, but now they are moving north," said Peter Lobo, deputy director of the population division at the department. "It gained momentum as the decade wore on."

A new Brooklyn-based market research company called Press Release Group, which studies the Russian consumer market, recently found Brooklyn slipping as a magnet for Russian immigrants in the New York City area. Of those who came to the area more than 10 years ago, 7 percent live in Manhattan and 56 percent live in Brooklyn. Among those who immigrated in the past two years, however, 14 percent live in Manhattan and 49 percent live in Brooklyn.

There were 236,163 Russian-born immigrants living in the New York City area in 2000, said Professor Andrew A. Beveridge of Queens College.

But throughout the shifting migrations, Brighton Beach was a place of plenty for Russians visiting their American relatives. They returned home with giant bags of goods -- often food -- during long years of bare shelves and shortages of basic consumer goods in the Soviet Union. Locals referred to these visitors sardonically as "vacuum cleaners" and pitied their frantic scrambling.

Now, though, those who arrive from Russia, who visit Brighton Beach but settle in other parts of the region, view the old neighborhood less lovingly.

"It's like an amusement park," said Alexander Grant, a journalist at Novoye Russkoye Slovo, a Russian language daily in New York. "People go there to look but not live. It reminds them of their background. New people who come from today's Moscow -- everything is done with a grand flourish there. They see this as provincial."
Ilya Merenzon, 27, a student at the New School for Social Research, lives in the East Village. He keeps his connection to the Russian community by working at a Russian-language radio station in Brooklyn.

"Brighton Beach is a cartoon of Russia," said Mr. Merenzon. "The stores are too Russian. You can't find them in Russia anymore. It hasn't changed since the 1970's. It's like a museum."

Denis Ossipov-Grodsky, 28, lived for five years in Brooklyn Heights and Manhattan before going to graduate school at Georgetown. He rarely traveled to Brighton Beach. When he craved Russian-style food, he went to Veselka, the fashionable Ukrainian-Polish diner in the East Village. He celebrated his wedding in Brighton Beach, but only so that his elderly in-laws could make it.

In spitting rain on Saturday, shoppers crowded into Brighton Beach's food stores. At International Foods, one of the most popular stores, women in aprons marched behind glass counters piled high with smoked fish and sausage. Shoppers fingered black bread in bins near the bakery counter. Marina Lagev, 28, from Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, waited while her meat was sliced. "It's unpleasant here," she said, surveying the store with a disapproving look. "In Moscow, young people are really alive. There is so much happening. I don't like coming here."

But Brighton Beach's charms can survive even such harsh disdain. It can still give comfort.

Mr. Ossipov-Grodsky, the student in Washington, said the bakeries and restaurants in Brighton Beach prepare Russian food according to old recipes he remembered tasting in childhood. "We smelled freshly baked bread," said Mr. Stoklytsky, in a suede jacket and rimless glasses. "It reminded me of school days."

And there are still some who choose to live in Brighton Beach. Oksana Khmelnitskaya, 32, came to the United States from Belarus, a country that even today, under President Alexandre Lukashenko, can resemble a Soviet state. She recalled her delight at the food stores and bustling feel of the neighborhood, so different from her home.

Ms. Khmelnitskaya, sipping a soda in an upstairs cafe of a local grocery store, smiles fondly when she talks of the elderly Brighton Beach ladies in their furs, or the saleswomen who promote fake designer merchandise as stuff as real as Armani or Gucci.

Still, Mr. Stoklytsky, the student at Georgetown, just shook his head. "Moscow is power, it's money, it's change," he said. "Like Manhattan. Not Brooklyn."

Photos: Maxim Stoklytsky, 30, left, and Denis Ossipov-Grodsky, 28, live in Washington now. Mr. Stoklytsky said of his visit to the shops in Brighton Beach, "It's very much like I have gone back in a time machine." (Photo by Michael Nagle for The New York Times)(pg. B8); International Foods, one of the popular spots in Brighton Beach. (Photo by Michael Nagle for The New York Times)(pg. A1)