

EXPAT TALES

Sebastian FitzLyon is Australia's honorary consul for north-west Russia.

WI'VE been in St Petersburg for 15 years, one of a handful of expats to have stayed here so long. I was drawn by a tremendous desire to break out of the Western corporate world and move to a country set for massive change.

When I first considered opening a business, the Soviet Union had just collapsed and commercial activity had been illegal until then so the built-in attitude of the bureaucracy was totally negative, but is now somewhat improved.

My first seven years in this beautiful city were extraordinary and exhausting. At that time the country just couldn't get its act together, with virtually no banking system, no building activity, no infrastructure and hardly any state revenues.

This changed when Putin came to power in 2000 and confidence flowed back, aided by oil and gas sales.

Aussies in law, audit, real estate and finance have plenty of opportunities here and in



Sebastian FitzLyon runs a real-estate consultancy firm in St Petersburg.

Moscow. Civil and mining engineers are in demand in these two cities and also in some of the further-flung corners of Russia where comfort conditions are lacking.

If you want to work here, simply come and spend time in a few expat haunts and ask for leads.

While there are few Aussie self-starters in Russia, I believe the Australian attitude to business and rugged conditions make many Australians especially suitable for setting up in many areas of activity ranging from education to farming, manufac-

turing and the service sector.

Work permits take a long time to procure for first-timers and require tedious annual medicals; other permits and also banking are complicated but improving — like many aspects of life here. But if you persist, you always get what you want — particularly if you can speak some Russian.

Medical care is good if you are well insured, but difficult to access if you're in a remote area. As for driving — we have traffic jams, poor manners, bad roads and unreasonable police.

Expat employers still look at Russia as a hardship posting and

it is not easy to get staff to work here, so pay rates are quite high, probably 150 per cent of what you'd expect back home; tax is a mere 13 per cent.

Living costs for expats are very high, including foreign schooling, but you can manage if you go native in some aspects. A single Aussie can pay from \$750 to \$4000 a month for a unit in St Pete's (but a lot more in Moscow); a beer can set you back from \$3 to \$10, depending on which bars you frequent.

In St Petersburg, Moscow and the island of Sakhalin off Japan, there are small Aussie communities that do get together. Nearly all Australians work for non-Australian international employers so we each have to create our own network.

Social life is extremely well developed as Russians are gregarious and outgoing. Spare time in St Petersburg is never boring with plenty of culture, sport, restaurants, bars, social life and parks.

I like to spend my weekends at my country house in neighbouring Finland three hours away by car. But, like many other expats, I quickly yearn to get back to Russia: it's called the Russian Disease — you can't get rid of it.

Interview by
PAUL EDWARDS

Do you know an expat with an interesting story? Please contact paul.edwards@westnet.com.au

MyCareer

Any questions Stewart Snooks,

director, Solutions for Success



I think I'm addicted to checking emails, what can I do?

Many of us have developed an addiction to checking email, voicemail, text messages, social and other networks. However, the cumulative impact of such interruptions, plus the time taken to recover concentration, is staggering. Recent research by Intel shows, on average, we can expect three minutes of uninterrupted work before being interrupted. Most of these interruptions are attended to immediately. The result is that we average 11 minutes on any one project before switching to another.

This results in severe time loss. Productivity research company Basex estimates as much as 28 per cent of the work day is unproductive due to such interruptions.

Training people to be more effective in the way they handle email, I teach two key strategies. Firstly, eliminate email as an interruption. There is a great temptation to check email for the short-term gratification of answering it rather than sticking with the more important task we were already doing. It's rare any particular email is so urgent it needs an immediate response. Pressing messages should use a more appropriate tool of communication such as phone or SMS.

The second key is learning how to handle each message only once. The aim of going to the inbox should be to make a decision about each message. Some are deleted, others filed, some seen to immediately, others converted to a task or calendar item for later action. Without email interruptions and, instead, checking messages at scheduled times, we'll be more capable of making quality decisions about each, rather than rushed ones that often see us revisiting the same email.