On my first visit to Russia in 1989 I was arrested by the Leningrad police, but not without good reason: I forgot to turn off the burglar alarm at the apartment where I was staying, and the device automatically summoned an officer of the law. To complicate matters, my landlady-host, the sole person who could vouch for my right-of-entry, was away at her cottage in the country, and thus, unreachable by telephone. The policeman naturally took me back to the station, where other detainees managed to teach me a number of colorful Russian expressions I’d never dreamed of. I was thus not altogether unhappy that it took the authorities some four hours to verify my identity and non-criminal status.

I count myself lucky to have avoided arrest entirely during my most recent visit to Moscow, Russia’s other capital city, this past summer, but recent experiences there proved no less memorable. While walking back to my Moscow State University dorm room one night, I happened upon a thousand-ruble note lying on the sidewalk, worth more than forty U.S. dollars at recent exchange rates. Not being inclined to turn my nose up at supplemental income, whatever the currency, I picked up the bill and inwardly celebrated my good fortune. A minute or so later, four young men appeared out of the shadows. One asked me if I’d found anything. Seeing his look of surprise when I immediately handed him the thousand-ruble note and walked away was worth the loss of my unexpected gain, but I’d been warned. In an orientation manual provided by the American Council of Teachers of Russian, the organization arranging my trip, it was explained that petty con artists in Russia’s big cities occasionally attempt to enmesh foreigners in disagreements over money deliberately left in the street.

Enlisting the help of “reliable false-witnesses” – to use a timeless phrase coined by the
great nineteenth-century Russian satirist Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin – the ringleader claims that the money was stolen and threatens to summon the police in order to extort a bribe. In some cases, the con artists are said to collude with friends on the police force. Given that the extraordinary concentration of wealth among Russia’s expanding class of millionaires has left ordinary civil servants and policemen behind, they are indeed vulnerable to temptation, as I was repeatedly told during my stay. While bemoaning the ubiquity of petty corruption, today’s Moscovites tend to trumpet the success of Vladimir Putin’s government in drastically reducing levels of violent crime. Even when confronted by the antics of the flim-flammers accosting me, I felt much safer in Moscow at night than I do on the streets of large American cities.

I would never have been able to travel to Russia this past summer had I not been awarded a U.S. Department of Education Fulbright-Hays Fellowship for six weeks of intensive study at Moscow State University in June and July. With twelve other American college and university Russian-language teachers, I attended daily seminars devoted to such topics as the Russian language today, the teaching of Russian as a foreign language, contemporary Russian literature, Russian folklore, Russian painting, and the history of Russian music. While the primary purpose of my trip was to refresh and refine my knowledge of Russian and of Russian culture, it was also beneficial for me to compare teaching notes with American and Russian colleagues similarly engaged in the teaching Russian as a foreign language. Our dialogues prompted me to write an article in Russian on the use of feature films with beginning-language students which will be published in a Moscow State University collection later this fall.

It is sometimes suggested that because the Russian Federation spans eleven time-
zones, Russian internet media have been called to exert a greater centralizing role in cultural development than websites devoted to the world’s other countries and languages. Teachers and students of Russian in the United States can keep abreast of the latest trends and opinions in Russian everyday life, politics, literature and the arts through regular correspondence with online communities and virtual pen pals or daily visits to the unusually sophisticated websites of Russian radio stations and newspapers. I am happy that because of the University of Georgia’s significant investment in computer equipment, our students and faculty are well positioned to take advantage of Russia’s compelling diversity of internet materials. Yet our goals of comprehensive language proficiency and cultural understanding continue to necessitate extended periods of residence within the Russian Federation. UGA undergraduates can choose from a wide range of accredited academic programs in Russia. My recent trip will help me to advise students making their choices.