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My CIEE Story

Anyone who studies abroad is going to have a variety of defining experiences, in quiet museums and in loud bars. But the one story that stick with me the most happened at a most unexpected place and time.

It was a Sunday in late March and the weather was fantastic. My host mother had been encouraging me to visit the pedestrian-only park of Yelagin Island for some time, but on this day she insisted that such good weather must not be wasted. Of course, good weather at this point meant that the temperature was barely above freezing and it wasn't snowing. My friends and I were going to a play later that evening, so I figured most of them would be spending the afternoon finishing their homework, so I went alone.

The island was, in a word, brown. No leaves on the trees, no grass on the ground. So the old woman in a bright purple jacket caught my eye. I followed her through winding trails until she met up with friends near Yelagin Palace. I headed off toward the palace, but didn't get far. Before I could snap a single picture, a military band started playing behind me. I headed back toward the music to find a seemingly impromptu party taking place by the palace's stables.

Elderly couples were dancing and filled the plaza. Due to a lack of elderly men in Russia, most of the women ended up dancing with each other. The music, familiar to everyone but me, had them laughing, spinning, and dipping each other. I saw more Russian smiles at that time than I had seen all winter. I watched and clapped and tried to inconspicuously take pictures. The woman in the purple coat was dancing there as well, with a tiny old woman who kept stepping on her feet.

After a few songs, I left them to their party and continued around the island. Sure enough, the weather soon turned bad, with blinding snow blowing in off the Gulf of Finland. But I could still hear the honking tubas and banging bass drum keeping the party going. You really never know what kind of amazing things you can find when you just take that very first step outside of your comfort zone.