

# THE TSARS COME OUT TO PLAY

It's blinis, not strawberries and cream at Wimbledon these days, as wealthy Russians turn 'the season' into the seasonski. Christine Toomey reports. Portraits: Kevin Davies



For wealthy Russians, the buzz begins three or four months in advance. Those who normally live in London are soaking up the sun in Barbados, the Christmas destination they tend to favour over all others. Here, under the swaying palms, Sasha Ratiu and her friends start planning their diaries round the social calendar we know as "the season".

The start of the season pulls toffs, aspiring toffs and pretty much everyone else to the banks of the Thames for the Oxford and Cambridge Boat Race at the end of March or beginning of April – the theory is that they stay in their finery for a glittering sporting and cultural programme that stretches through to Cowes Week in August.

On her return from Barbados, as soon as the spring's collections slip onto the rails of Bond Street's most exclusive stores, Ratiu begins her search for the perfect outfit for the royal enclosure at Ascot. There follows ➡➡➡

**Above: morning dress and elaborate headgear at Royal Ascot, now annexed by the Russians. Right: Sasha Ratiu visits Philip Treacy's Belgravia shop to choose the perfectly understated hat for the royal enclosure**





a round of lunches, at which she checks that none of her friends will be wearing anything similar. "That would be a disaster!" the 45-year-old jeweller says, her deep-blue eyes wide, and hands in the air. She laughs at the suggestion that her preparations sound like planning the small annexation of a minor neighbouring republic. But when you come from a country where the highlight of the year used to be waving a flag in Red Square as armoured tanks and rocket-propelled grenade launchers trundled across the cobbles on May Day, getting the season right is a serious matter.

Snobbish types, she says, have long grumbled that home-grown riffraff, with their penchant for Tia Maria-and-coke, and nouveaux riches from abroad have taken the sparkle out of the season. But astute observers acknowledge that it was on the verge of extinction before foreign interest injected it with new life – and money.

Lady Celestria Noel, the daughter of the Earl of Gainsborough, former editor of Jennifer's Diary in Harper's & Queen and author of Debrett's Guide to the Season, believes this decline in interest at home is partly to do with embarrassment. "With their emphasis on everything casual, the British now hate the idea of dressing up for events like this," she says. "But foreigners love it. They like going to see and be seen. Far from being an unwelcome intrusion, they have become its lifeblood. Traditions like the season mean more to them now than they do to us."

Ratiu and her British-based compatriots talk about the season with great rapture. Sitting in the gracious surroundings of her home in St John's Wood, northwest London, she recalls the first time she attended Royal Ascot as if it were "a scene from an novel" – Anna Karenina, to be precise. "I felt like Anna in 19th-century Russia, in the time of the tsars: people gathering in wonderful clothes, drinking and talking as horses rush by. I felt great nostalgia for all the beautiful events that were banished during the Soviet era. For me, Royal Ascot is the most magical of times."

Ratiu, who arrived in this country 15 years ago, says she is far less sociable now that she has two young children. Nevertheless, she also intends to go to the Chelsea Flower



## SASHA RATIU, JEWELLER

The London socialite came to Britain 15 years ago and has taught at Oxford University. She thinks Royal Ascot is like a scene from Anna Karenina and plans to attend Wimbledon, Henley and the Proms this 'seasonski'



## VLADLENA BERNARDONI-BELOLIPSKAIA, POLO PLAYER

A member of the Royal Berkshire club, she also plays in her own team, the Vladi-Moscow Polo Club. The season's polo events, of which the Cartier International Day (attended by the Queen, above) is the most glamorous, are part of a year-round circuit from Switzerland to Argentina – although the UK, says Belolipskaia (left), is currently the fashionable spot



While Brits might be a little weary of all the pomp, the Russian set adore the Last Night of the Proms

Show, Wimbledon, Henley Royal Regatta and the Last Night of the Proms – though as the last falls after the start of partridge-shooting at the beginning of September, it belongs more to what is sometimes called the "little season".

The key to fitting in, Ratiu stresses, is "understatement". So she does not step close to the paddocks at Ascot wearing £250,000 diamond dragonfly appliqués on the heels of her shoes (she designed a similar motif for Sharon Stone to attach to her Jimmy Choo stilettos at the 2002 Oscars ceremony). "Still, we Russians do tend to stand out sometimes, because we are quite a noisy lot," she says, noting that some of her friends like to make a break with tradition at Ascot by ordering blinis with caviar and vodka, rather than scones with strawberry jam and Pimm's.

Elena Ragozhina, the editor of the London-based Russian-language magazine New Style, and another devotee of the season, bemoans the stereotype of the sort of Russians living in London who follow the season as "having too much money, knowing nothing and being obsessed with status". "Most are very well educated and appreciate the finer things in life in this country, particularly its history and tradition, since so many of our own traditions were destroyed in the Russian revolution."

Ragozhina and her husband formerly worked in a Soviet scientific institute. They set up their own private bank in Moscow before expanding into the publishing market in London five years ago. Ratiu has a PhD in linguistics and taught at Oxford University before moving to London, marrying her half-English, half-Romanian property-developer husband and training as a jeweller. Her ➤➤➤

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clientele includes many of the richest Russians living in London, but she admits that those whose fortunes are “a little vulnerable” are less likely to attend the high-profile meetings of the season. The authorities in Moscow in search of those wanted for questioning about the source of their sudden wealth might spot them on one of a rash of programmes made for Russian TV about wealthy expatriates. Two Russian documentaries were filmed at Royal Ascot last year.

It's not just the Russian public who are agog at the lifestyles of those who have made the UK home. Ever since Roman Abramovich, the billionaire oil tycoon, moved to London, lavishing over £200m on turning Chelsea Football Club into Chelski, other holders of vast Russian fortunes have attracted interest here. (Abramovich's wife, Irina, is also a significant social player in her own right.)

The fact that Abramovich's one-time mentor Boris Berezovsky was granted political asylum in Britain after the Russian authorities accused him of fraud, has cemented the view that many millionaire Russians living here are opportunists who got rich quick after plundering their nation's natural resources. During the Soviet era, Berezovsky was a mathematician based at a Russian university. He did not own a car until he was 40, but he has since amassed £1.5 billion from the sale of Russian oil assets.

While Abramovich has yet to be spotted anywhere near Royal Ascot, Berezovsky has attended the flat-race meeting in great style as a guest of the Duke of Devonshire, sitting in the comfort of the duke's private box. And Abramovich's purchase of the 424-acre Fyning Hill estate in West Sussex, once owned by King Hussein of Jordan, with its own equestrian centre, two polo fields and stabling for 100 horses, has led some to speculate that the 39-year-old tycoon might soon be seen as a guest at one of the season's glitziest gatherings: the Cartier International Day at the Guards Polo Club in Windsor Great Park, on the last Sunday in July.

The footballer Alexei Smertin, bought for nearly £4m from Bordeaux by Abramovich on contract to Chelski – and the only Russian player in the Premier League – says he hopes to attend Cartier day this year. Smertin, who has been on loan to Charlton Athletic, says: “I enjoy getting dressed up, and polo is both a noble and dynamic sport. I am very curious and sociable and would appreciate the skill of the players.” The 30-year-old, who was born in Siberia, says his love of horses stems from his childhood, when he would ride across the steppe with his older brother. In his home town of Barnaul, a manufacturing centre about 2,500 miles east of Moscow, Smertin says there was little to social life other than local bars and football.

Vladlena Bernardoni-Belolipskaia, who is a professional player for the Royal Berkshire Polo Club, has set up her own team here called the Vladi-Moscow Polo Club, in which two of her Russian girlfriends also play. For Belolipskaia, the season's polo events, of which the Cartier day is regarded as the most glamorous, are part of an all-year-round international circuit of events stretching from Switzerland to Argentina. “But what is special about Cartier is that everything happens in one day. You get to see all your international friends, who you maybe only see otherwise in Gstaad or St Moritz. Russians like to stick together, you know, and now the place in vogue is the UK.”

According to some estimates, there are now around a quarter of a million Russians living in London alone. While before the collapse of communism the small number who came were dissidents or seeking political asylum, many of



## ELENA RAGOZHINA, MAGAZINE EDITOR

**She once worked in a Soviet scientific institute, then set up a Moscow bank with her husband before turning to the UK publishing market. Ragozhina is now an informed observer of the ‘seasonski’ and has Ascot and Wimbledon marked in her 2006 diary**

**Henley is a must for many Russian expatriates, although entry relies on knowing the right people**



those who come now are among the wealthiest former communist-era apparatchiks, who made good in the post-Soviet privatisation scramble. One recent report by the US-based Boston Consulting Group calculated that Russia's private wealth is the fastest-growing in the world, with more billionaires per head of population than any other country on Earth. And of the more than 80,000 millionaires created in the country over the past 15 years, over 1,000 are understood to have moved to the UK.

This new Russian affluence has led some to call London “Moscow-on-Thames” or “Londongrad”. Many are attracted by the capital's relative closeness to Moscow – a mere three-hour flight, even less by Learjet. Favourable tax laws for offshore investments are another incentive. As are public schools, such as Harrow, Roedean and Millfield – to the extent that the Moscow-London route is now so full of children, that air crew refer to it as “the school bus”. Security experts also regard London as being safer than other European capitals from the point of view of kidnapping – a serious concern for businessmen fleeing the Russian mafia.

In addition to snapping up properties in the most exclusive parts of London, as wealthy Arabs did in the 1980s, followed by the Japanese in the 1990s, growing ➤

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## SERGEI KOLUSHEV, ENTREPRENEUR

**His grandparents worked in Stalin's labour camps; now he heads the Canary Wharf-based company that hosts the Russian Economic Forum. Kolushev came to Britain in 1989. His calendar always includes Royal Ascot and the Cartier International Day**

numbers of Russians are complementing their homes in the capital with country properties. Castles and sporting estates in Scotland are popular. Just before Christmas, for instance, Vladimir Lisin paid £6.8m for the 16th-century Aberuchill Castle, a 3,300-acre grouse-shooting, deer-stalking and game-fishing estate overlooking Loch Earn, near Comrie, Perthshire.

But Ratiu and Ragozhina insist this country's rich history and traditions are its primary attraction. Some social gatherings, such as Henley Royal Regatta – described by Debrett's as the “third great set-piece event of the season after Ascot and Wimbledon” – are more difficult for those without the right connections. Admission to the coveted stewards' enclosure often operates on an old-school-tie basis. But Russians with money have no difficulty getting tickets for Wimbledon, one of the season's more popular venues for them since the rise of tennis stars such as Anna Kournikova and, more recently, Maria Sharapova.

Before the revolution, well-to-do Russians favoured Paris and the south of France. Apparently, those in search of refinement now prefer the UK. “More dubious elements still head to the French Riviera and Marbella, cruising offshore and entertaining lavishly in their grand yachts,” says John Rendall, a PR consultant and former social editor of Hello! magazine. “So the idea of dodgy oligarchs wandering around this country with suitcases full of cash looking for properties to snap up is rather exaggerated. Many of the young Russians here now were educated in our public schools; they are multilingual and very astute.”

But the “dodgy” image can be hard to shake off, admits Sergei Kolushev, the managing director of a Canary Wharf-based company that hosts the annual Russian Economic



**The Russians are now a notable presence at events such as the Goodwood Festival of Speed (top) and Wimbledon (above), where even they can't stop the rain**

Forum, the largest gathering of Russian business leaders outside Moscow. “If you are Russian and wealthy in London, people quite often ask questions about where you made your money, with a look in their eye as if you must have made it in dubious dealings with crooks or the mafia.”

Kolushev's grandparents were sent to Stalin's work camps in Siberia, and the 39-year-old businessman arrived in this country in 1989 with little more than an old Russian samovar in his luggage. But he has built up a business that also organises cultural get-togethers such as the annual Russian Winter Festival, and regularly attends both Royal Ascot and polo meetings such as Cartier International Day.

“Russians love to show off, and find those sorts of events very appealing,” says Kolushev, who estimates that nearly 200 Russians attended the Cartier day alone last year, with so many more wanting to do so. “They would have filled another 20 marquees. But then, I doubt anyone would want to see it turned into a Russian event.”

In the past, Lady Celestria Noel stresses, the attendance of foreigners at the season's big days was vital: “Foreigners coming to court was a lot of what royal courts were originally about, after all, and in this country this was then transformed into foreigners coming to the events of the season. Certainly if you look at Royal Ascot as being the most totemic event, in the days when getting into the royal enclosure was more restricted for the British, foreigners were always encouraged to apply for admission through their embassies.”

Queen Anne inaugurated racing at Ascot in 1711, after her uncle, Charles II, had put racing at Newmarket on the royal calendar. Nowadays, however, as the season has become more commercialised, some of the events are only attended by minor royals. Corporate hospitality and raising money for charity are now an integral part of much of their success and survival, and it is this that has opened the door to rich Russians. “In a way, it is a misconception to think you can buy your way into a certain level of society,” says John Rendall. “But no one is going to turn his or her nose up at someone who generously underwrites a charity event. And rich Russians have taken over from wealthy Arabs who chose to make Britain their home.”

Certainly Ragozhina, whose magazine is targeted at Russians living in this country with a net annual household income of over £100,000, concedes that charitable donations “open doors”. “Charity is a new concept for many Russians. In Soviet society the state was expected to provide for everybody,” she says. “But before that, there was a noble tradition of charitable giving in Russia, and we are trying to revive that. The generosity of many Russians is greatly appreciated, I think.” Despite this, the sort of snobbery Kolushev complains of lies just below the surface. Since the appearance of so many arrivistes, the season is said to have lost its appeal for some of its traditional patrons, says Clive Aslet, a former editor of Country Life. “Most of the real old families rather look down on that world now. They see it as rather pretentious.”

Those members of the old guard who do still attend insist that the newly moneyed are simply the invisible. When asked her views on the growing number of Russians enjoying the season, Clare Milford Haven, a marchioness and social editor of Tatler, said she had not noticed they were. “Except perhaps for quite a lot of eastern European and Russian girls – you know what I mean.” And Kolushev's estimate that hundreds of Russians attended the Cartier day alone last year? “Well,” said the marchioness, “they must have been in the Chinawhite tent.” ■

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