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Cold as ice... Why it's now hip to be Russian

Russia is having a moment. Well, to be precise, Imperial Russia is having a moment. Sometimes the world of fashion, which dominates many a West London existence, picks up elements of our most lavish residents and thrusts them into the zeitgeist. Hearing a Russian accent in the swankier corners of West and Central London is hardly anything new – Oligarchs are two a penny in Belgravia and Knightsbridge – but from being derided in the late nineties and early noughties, our Russian brethren have turned a corner.

West London's Russian community have become newly stealth chic. Evidence is clear when you see it seeping over into wider culture. From gushing over James Norton's dashing Prince Andrei Bolkonsky, to wondering how to perfect Gillian Anderson's imperial haughtiness in the lavish BBC adaptation of *War and Peace*, then wishing we had been Joanna Lumley's travel companion as she completed the Trans-Siberian railway, through to examining Catherine the Great with TV historian Lucy Worsley, our winter small screens have been dominated by a collective cultural lust for the Russia of Tolstoy.

On the fashion front, look to St Petersburg native David Koma – one of the brightest young London Fashion Week stars – who, having been given an early blessing by Harrods, via dressing Kylie and Beyoncé, has gone on to become Creative Director of Thierry Mugler. Notting Hill's very own Alice Temperley has Babushka folkloric detail in her DNA, and London Collection's Men saw Casley-Hayford laying Imperial

Russian inspired military frogging over streetwear. You can bet that, in a few months, every smart Knightsbridge watering-hole will be packed with Balmain's gilded officer's coats. There's no escaping it, we'll all be channeling the Romanoffs.

In preparation to adorn myself as if a walking Fabergé egg, I tracked down one of Mother Russia's oldest invigorating beauty treatments. The exclusive South Kensington Club holds a Banya beneath its cool Ralph Lauren-esque interiors, one of only two Banyas in London and very much the most glamorous. For the uninitiated, a Banya is a form of Russian baths that is a smorgasbord of steam, sauna and cold pools in the same vein of a Hammam or Turkish Baths. What one might not be prepared for, however, is to be beaten

whilst sweating it out by a burly Russian, all in the name of health. Using soaked bundles of oak and eucalyptus branches (a 'parenje'), Eugene my 'banshik' (beater-upper-in-chief) scooped hot air from the top of the sauna, beating it into my body for about ten minutes. Scolding is an understatement.

Healthily chastised, I was then maneuvered under a wooden bucket, and waterboarded with freezing water. Post a quick massage with crushed ice whilst floating in the cold bath, then wrapped up like a Tutankhamen-in-towels, I drifted off into a restorative nap. Refreshed (well, practically baptized) in the Sicilian salt pool (yes, actual Sicilian sea water), it felt as if every last toxin had been vigorously exorcised. Of course, I then decided to retox that very night with copious vodka at neighbouring Ramusake...

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The BBC's *War and Peace* adaptation is just the tip of the Russian iceberg