Hidden in the backstreets of Dongdaemun, you will find an area that feels more 1980s Moscow than contemporary Seoul. But Little Russia has never been a major tourist drawcard, nor was it ever intended to be. It is simply, as its name suggests, a slice of Russia in the heart of the city, and a delicious one at that.

Little Russia first appeared in the early 1990s, when a wave of immigrants made their way from the former Soviet Bloc to seek the opportunities of the booming Korean economy. Many of them were clothing traders attracted to the bustling markets of the Dongdaemun neighborhood. At its peak, the area played host to an estimated 70,000 people from former Soviet countries, but many of the traders have since moved on.

Today the area is still thriving with life, especially restaurants and bars from Russia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Mongolia. They offer a variety of food you wouldn’t easily find elsewhere in Korea, not to mention drinks late into the night. Here is just a small taste of what’s on offer.

A popular restaurant serving both Uzbek and Russian food goes by the name of My Friend & Ala Too. Appetizers start at about USD 3, for which you will receive a steaming-hot and crispy pastry (samsa) filled with a flavorful mix of lamb and onions. Entrees include old Russian favorites like beef stroganoff. And though the English menu may be dauntingly large, the helpful staff will make sure you know what you’re ordering and leave five kilograms heavier.

Just across the street from My Friend & Ala Too is a small bakery/grocery store called Megobuk. Megobuk offers an endless variety of Central Asian candies and snacks – and an even larger variety of vodka! What really makes Megobuk worth your time and money though is their cakes. They range from large to very large, and from scrumptious to even more scrumptious. And while you will probably spend 15 minutes with one of the infinitely sweet and patient sales clerks trying to work out which cake to buy (before realizing you should just buy them all), there could not possibly be a better way to spend your time.

Wandering deeper into the neighborhood, you will find that many places have overlapping menus, with borscht (a Ukrainian beet soup) and manty (similar in both name and taste to Korea’s mandu, or dumplings) being favorites. But every restaurant has its own ambience and recipes, and Little Russia will never get old.

Getting There
Another great thing about Little Russia is that it is right in the middle of Seoul and accessible by any form of transport. The subway would be your easiest option, as the neighborhood is a two-minute walk from Dongdaemun History and Culture Park Station (on the junctions of subway lines 2, 4 and 5). From exit eight, head south and take the first right. A couple minutes, and you will find yourself in the heart of Little Russia.

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