

From RUSSIA with LOVE

When your best chance of a pregnancy is through egg donation, your treatment may start with an airline ticket

Cathy Scott recounts her own experiences



Every week, planes arrive at St. Petersburg's international airport containing patients heading for the AVA-Peter fertility clinic in the centre of the city. And every week, the same planes depart again for destinations all across Europe, often containing more people than are stated on the boarding cards. With a pregnancy rate of 60% for egg donation, this Russian clinic is responsible for a lot of extra, very tiny, unseen passengers. In fact, one of them was my own child, conceived with the help of a Russian egg donor.

It's not actually surprising that an increasing number of infertile couples are seeking egg donation abroad. Within Ireland itself, egg donors are so scarce that Irish clinics often have to send the male partner's frozen sperm to Eastern European countries where it is used to fertilise eggs from local donors. The resultant embryos are then frozen and sent back to Ireland before they can be

transferred to the would-be mother. However, freezing embryos at any stage reduces the chances of success. And with prices of up to €12,000 for egg donation treatment (plus additional costs for tests and consultations), Irish couples are finding they can often save thousands of Euros and achieve a higher chance of success by going directly to a foreign clinic.

So how do you choose the right one? It's a huge investment, not just financially but also in terms of hopes and dreams, so my husband and I researched the options. We decided not to go to Spain as we wanted a donor who resembled us (we're both blond with blue eyes), and didn't want to 'share' the eggs with other people as this would reduce our chances. We also looked at Cyprus, but found it extremely difficult to communicate with the staff at the clinic as few of them spoke English and the doctors who did often forgot to phone me back. The UK was a non-starter due to long waiting lists, sky-high prices and the use of frozen embryos from foreign egg donors. And then we tried Russia. Simply by googling, we came up



With the tsarina in the garden

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with AVA-Peter (www.avapeter.com).

The first big surprise was that after e-mailing the clinic, the consultant herself called me to answer my questions in perfect English. This cut out all the usual communication problems when having a three-way conversation via translators and medically untrained receptionists. The second was that there was no waiting list: as the clinic maintains a large bank of medically and psychologically pre-screened donors, we could start as soon as I was ready. All the donors had proven

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fertility (i.e. at least one child of their own), were aged under 30 (very important as younger donors have higher success rates), and would donate anonymously under Russian law. Dr. Olga Zaytseff, or Dr. Olga as we called her, was very clear about every aspect of the procedure, and the costs were much lower than elsewhere.

So we booked our flight. At the initial appointment, we had blood tests, a semen test, a smear test, an endometrial scan and a frank discussion with Dr. Zaytseff in a clinic that was so clean, we could have eaten our lunch off the floor. As AVA-Peter has its own laboratory, the results were available just a few hours later. They were okay, so Dr. Zaytseff offered us a donor with the same hair colour, eye colour and blood group as myself, and started me on a course of medication the very same day. Just six weeks later, after a second visit to St. Petersburg to fertilise the eggs and have two embryos transferred, I was pregnant with my daughter.

After 8 years of unsuccessfully trying for a child and 7 failed IVF attempts, it was incredible to finally pass my first pregnancy test at the ripe old age of 45. Getting on that plane to Russia was the best thing we ever did. ■