Of the legion of Western entrepreneurs who came to Russia in the early 1990s in search of opportunities, many came here guided not just by greed, but by a quest for adventure. A fair number came with a missionary zeal for spreading Western business practices and values to the “Communist land.” Some were drawn by family connections, others felt they could do here what they would never be allowed to do in their home countries. And there were many whose motivation combined all of the above and more.

But there were few who had become infatuated with Russian culture and, once the country opened up, saw a chance to deepen and broaden their knowledge, to learn first hand from personal relationships. They built their businesses as a cultural matchmaking of sorts. They had the inquisitive minds and open hearts of cultural interpreters, which helped push their projects in the land, where, as one such person, Frederick R. Andresen put it, “everything is difficult—and everything is possible.”

Andresen, who lived in Russia from 1992 to 1998 and currently runs his Russian telecom business out of California, has put his insightful observations into a tenderly written, concise book, which is neither an academic study, nor a memoir; neither a business manual, nor a cultural history. Yet it somehow manages to serve all these purposes and can be recommended as an easy and highly educational read for aspiring Russia scholars and people preparing for a tour of duty in Russia.

Essentially, it is a collection of essays, although one part of the book is structured in chapters on Russian geography, demography, culture, business and politics, while the other is simply called “An Essay Collection.” These pages bear an openly Chekhovian description of a weekend spent at the dacha with an extended Russian family next to a carefully worded account of the role of crime and corruption in business practices and how they can be worked around; a tribute to Boris Pasternak next to a report about the October 1993 revolt and the shelling of parliament from an unusual perspective of a businessman whose operation was headquartered in the Comecon building at the very center of those dramatic events.

The author analyzes the role of the Orthodox Church in shaping the Russian psyche and identity, and categorizes Russian women in types which would make some of them blush. What brings these essays together is a transpiring love for both the strengths and weaknesses of this country and its people.

Andresen was clearly intrigued by the “Russian soul” and made an unpretentious and humorous contribution to unwrapping the “mystery inside the enigma.” It rings true even to a skeptical Russian reader instinctively ready to catch factual or contextual flaws in a “naive foreigner’s” reflection on his country.

One of the book’s high points is the account of how the author applied Dostoyevsky’s “The Grand Inquisitor” chapter to business management. Three things are generic to the traditional Russian character, Andresen wrote, referring to Dostoyevsky: “the idea that good, if any, will come from some unexpected outside source (miracle); that man is not ordained to be responsible for his own welfare and progress (mystery); and that guidance and protection come only from constant dependence on and obedience to someone else (authority). There is a reversion to this in today’s Russian government. That situation is pressing to be changed by the young, but it seems always there under the surface.”

For business people without a background in Russian studies embarking on a Russia-related project, Andresen gives a short reading list: “The Icon and the Ax” by James Billington, “The Brothers Karamazov” by Fyodor Dostoyevsky and “The Castle” by Franz Kafka. “Walking on Ice” would certainly complement the list—it can be consumed in one trans-Atlantic flight.