

July, 2000

Russia lived up to its reputation during our two-week river cruise from St. Petersburg to Moscow: bureaucratic and corrupt. It was an interesting trip and we enjoyed learning about the fascinating culture, but we've definitely checked this one off the list; been there, done that, don't ever need to do it again.

The cultural experience began before we even left. To make a long story short, obtaining tourist visas required two attempts, twelve passport photos, 20 man-hours, much stress, a complicated application form, confirmation statements of our tour from the travel agent, a set of letters for each of us in both English and Russian confirming our stays in each hotel and over \$500 in assorted expenses. The costs included an "expediting fee" which I suspect was a bribe for the official at the consulate to assure that no questions were raised about our application. With what they put us through, you'd swear we'd asked for the keys to the Kremlin, but in retrospect, it was a system designed solely to line the pockets of various officials. We later learned that similar situations were taking place with our fellow passengers in both England and South Africa. We applied over a month in advance and received our visas two days before departure. One man in our group got his three hours before his plane left. When he arrived in Russia there was an error in the dates and he was "fined" \$50 to fix it. We suspect that the money ended up with the immigration official. Why would an official government fine be in US dollars and not rubles?

We flew the very efficient German airline of Lufthansa, changing planes in Frankfurt. We had a ten-hour layover, so we took a train to the Rhine valley town of Rudesheim where we had a nap, lunch and a hike in the vineyards between flights. We arrived in St. Petersburg at 11:00 PM and the sun hadn't yet set. The Russians refer to late June as "White Nights". It never got dark on this trip.

We were also ripped off on the transfer from the airport to our hotel in St. Petersburg. Taxis are not allowed into the airport and we were compelled to pay \$58 to the official tourist bureau for what turned out to be a three-mile ride in a twenty-year old car. We suspect that the money got split up amongst several players in that operation. The Russian airline passengers were seen walking about a mile with their baggage to the main road to get transportation. The hotel cost \$150/night plus \$50 booking fee plus \$25 for visa support letters plus 33 rubles to have our visas "certified" (no credit cards accepted). This is in a city where the average worker makes 25 cents/hour. We later learned that several people have tried to open new hotels to compete and perhaps drive down prices, but five prospective hotel operators have been assassinated.

The hotel was interesting in its choice of lobby decorations. It seemed that there were always beautiful young women hanging around the lobby smiling at all the guests as they came and left. There was also an office for "loveme.com": a Russian bride service. They were selling packages including airfare, hotel and introduction parties promising ten beautiful potential fiancées for each foreign man. We saw a few couples getting to know

each other in the city. I'm not sure if the lobby girls were looking for foreign husbands or shorter-term arrangements.

We took the very efficient subway downtown for ten cents each. We visited several sites including numerous old concrete Soviet monuments and apartment buildings which haven't seen much maintenance in recent years, beautiful Russian Orthodox cathedrals with onion-dome roofs, great art museums with incredible collections including the Hermitage, huge palaces, and a performance of the ballet "Giselle". We found another scam when we visited the Summer Palace of Peterhof. Foreigners are typically charged five to ten times as much for things as Russians, and the Russians have turned gouging the tourists into an art form. Admission to the palace for Russians was 20 rubles (75 cents). Foreigners pay 120 rubles. We paid our admission, got two 120 ruble tickets and the ticket-tearing lady quickly took the whole ticket and gave us pre-torn 20 ruble ticket stubs. Only later did we realize that she and the ticket-selling lady were probably pocketing the 100-ruble difference. Similar scenes occurred several more times during the tour. The prime shopping street in St. Petersburg is called Nevsky Prospekt, but Cheryl and I renamed it "Girl Parade". It was clear that many girls had spent much time preparing their hair and makeup and selecting just the right high heels and miniskirt before venturing out onto the Nevsky Prospekt. Transparent sundresses are also OK. Cheryl was disappointed that Russian men do not share this sense of fashion.

We spent 11 nights on our 337-passenger cruise ship, the "Zosima Shashkov". It was named after a former transportation minister. It was about two-thirds full. Rubles were not accepted on the boat, but a large beer was only a dollar. The ship was well maintained, and our cabin was small, but comfortable. We shared a table in the dining room with Jean, a French businessman, and his friend from Moscow, Sasha. Sasha was able to provide many insights into Russian life, and we enjoyed their company very much. The food was decent, but basic. Sasha says that the borscht (beet soup) and Beef Stroganoff were typical. Marina, our gorgeous redheaded waitress served all of our meals on the moving ship in four-inch heels and a miniskirt. Our group of 30 was mostly British. There were only six Americans on board. There were about two dozen similar ships on the route between St. Petersburg and Moscow.

The trip to Moscow is around 1200 miles on a set of rivers, lakes and canals. We passed through 17 locks. We stopped in several small towns and cities along the way including Valaam, Svirstroy, Kizhi, Gobrity, Yaroslavl and Uglich. The countryside looks a lot like Finland which looks a lot like Northern Michigan or Ontario. It was fairly flat with a lot of birch and pine. In each town we were given a tour which usually included the local monastery, cathedral and Kremlin (Russian for fortress). Even the smallest towns had a crumbling monument or two to Lenin, or the Soviet workers or farmers, or sometimes the war heroes. In Svirstroy twelve of us were invited into the home of a retired widow where she served us tea and homemade juice. Our guide translated her stories about her family and life in the small town. She supplements her meager pension with the dollar donation we each left her, but clearly she enjoyed the company. The Russians are very warm in their homes, but if you greet them with a "Dobrii Ootra" (Good Morning) on the street, the response is likely to be an icy stare.

The Bolsheviks and the Soviets didn't kill organized religion in Russia, but it was illegal for three generations, and few Russians appeared to be actively practicing today. The three-hour standing/kneeling services with no pews may have also contributed to the lack of interest. Most monasteries we visited had no monks. Few churches had any worshippers and most were acting more like museums, charging tourists admission to cover maintenance. Outside of Moscow, the religious infrastructure is crumbling badly.

We saw countless vendors selling stacking dolls and wooden boxes. Many people in the country drove motorcycles with sidecars reminiscent of "Hogan's Heroes". The weather was good but variable. Highs were in the 70's. It was sunny most days and rained briefly most days, too. I should have brought a copy of "War and Peace" to read as we sailed along the river. What we didn't see was a lot of public drunkenness. The Russians have a reputation for enjoying their vodka, but we mostly just saw people strolling quietly in the park with a beer.

As we approached Moscow, we saw many large houses, yacht clubs and private planes. We had been told that teachers make \$20/month, doctors and engineers make \$50, so we asked Sasha who could afford such luxuries here. She replied that it wasn't possible for someone working honestly, but the Soviet ethics have left people with the attitude that it's OK to steal from your employer. Getting a good education and working hard will only leave you impoverished. They believe that you need to find some way to scam money on the side. Most Russians are hoping that the new president, Vladimir Putin, can deliver on his campaign promise to end the corruption.

Moscow was much better maintained than the rest of Russia. The wealth is definitely concentrated here. We toured the Kremlin, walked past Lenin's tomb in Red Square, strolled in Gorky Park, visited more museums, and attended the circus. We enjoyed the acrobats and clowns, but the Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals would have been horrified at the "motivational techniques" used on the dancing bears. One fascinating "museum" we visited was the Moscow subway. Many of the stations are elaborately decorated with mosaics, statues and chandeliers. All this, and incredibly efficient transportation, too, for only 4 rubles (14 cents). Moscow has 10 million residents and 7 million will ride the subway on any given day. The bureaucracy was incredible. The doors to each shop are sealed each night with an official paper strip which is signed, stamped and dated by an official. The Russians like to stamp paper. Each page of every menu in every restaurant is stamped and initialed. Cheryl counted eight stamps required on our paperwork as we cleared customs at the airport on the way out.

I'll close with the top ten lessons we learned in Russia:

10. Russians may appear cold on the street, but warm up nicely in their homes.

9. Concrete monuments and apartment buildings crumble after 30 years with little or no maintenance. There were also a lot of twenty-to-thirty year old "Monuments to the

Glory of the Automobile” rusting at the side of the road with their hoods up.

8. The red Soviet flag with a hammer and sickle symbolizing the friendship of workers and farmers is no longer displayed. Now you’ll see the Russian flag with three horizontal bands: white, blue and red.

7. Despite vehement statements that the Russian heat is wetter, Russian banyas really are the same as Finnish saunas.

6. Hot dogs do not taste good at breakfast time.

5. Bring an umbrella in St. Petersburg, even if the day is clear and sunny.

4. Most refrigerators at the street stands are merely acting as decorations and not intended to keep anything cold.

3. The bureaucracy and corruption have kept people from trusting their government. This is in spite of “perestroika” and the end of communism. It’s possible to steal much more efficiently with official rubber stamps than with guns or knives.

2. On our flight home were two families who had just adopted Russian children. Whatever bureaucratic hassles we were subjected to were probably nothing compared to their ordeal.

1. The winner of the “Girl Parade” is the young lady whose skirt is shorter than her heels are high.

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