

Day 29 and beyond – Russia

Another trip that wasn't at all like I expected. The cruise ship that was supposed to take us from Moscow to St Petersburg over 8 days never made it to St Petersburg. Never got within 240 kms of it. But in the end I thought it a great experience and something I will chuckle about for years. It's on a par with a 12 hour night paddle in Banks Strait.

We flew from Hawaii to Sydney taking about 13 hours, stayed overnight in Sydney and then the next day flew to Moscow via Dubai – about 14 hours to Dubai and another 7 to Moscow. We had a 2 hour stop and change of plane in Dubai.

I was not at all impressed with Emirates to Dubai. At Dubai the plane parked way out in the middle of what seemed to be a thousand acre parking area and went down steps to two waiting buses. It was not at all clear which bus to get on and the staff didn't bother to check people's tickets and direct them. We got the wrong one and ended up in the wrong terminal after about a ten minute journey in a bus with no seats. Now I know what cattle feel like when they are shipped in a semi-trailer. Fortunately there was a small 30 seater bus to take people like us that got the wrong bus and it took us to the correct terminal, another 10 minute trip but at least this had seats.

When we went out through the boarding gate for the next flight we boarded another seat-less bus and had a trip weaving around numerous planes to find ours way out there somewhere. This was 'Fly Dubai' and a much smaller plane where we all had three seats to ourselves and most people lay down and slept. This was a pleasant flight and good staff.

After getting through customs and passport control we were faced with getting into Moscow. Gina found out there were buses and trains and we were also approached by a Yellow Cab driver who quoted \$70 for the trip. We continued walking towards the public transport when the 'manager' of the airport Uber taxis approached us with the same offer. We kept walking and he eventually came down to \$40 which we accepted. The trouble with public transport would have been that we would end up in Moscow not having any idea where, and which way to go to our hotel. We had landed in the early morning so copped peak traffic and took about an hour and a quarter to get to the hotel. The driver was great in changing lanes all the time for a faster run into the city.

The Arbat House Hotel was great - \$115 a night. When I asked about nearby shops etc the reception staff directed us to a street for people, not cars. It was less than a ten minute walk and was a mall nearly a km long. It was chockers with souvenir shops and places to eat – a hell of a lot of them hamburger places. I got some chips (French fries) and a pint of coke for under \$3. After the boat cruise finished we were coming back to this same hotel so put off buying souvenirs till then.

The next day we had to join the cruise boat and despite this next bit of information from their brochure they told me there was no transport available and to get a taxi. At

this stage I decided to get a bit adventurous and go by the Metro, the huge underground rail system.

Moscow: You will be met at the airport or train station by one of our drivers and taken by a comfortable car to the river port where you will board your cruise ship (transfer is optional). Over the next few days you will have a chance to explore Moscow and learn about its riveting history. You will be taken on a city tour where you will see Moscow's most interesting sights and learn about this amazing city's past and present. You will also have a chance to do some light shopping and there will be time to relax aboard the ship in the evenings.

I did find out later that if you did get a “transfer” it wasn’t free – you paid big-time for it.

When I was in the hotel with Wi-Fi I could use Google maps to work out the route and then save it so I could refer to it offline – this was a lifesaver and without it I wouldn’t have attempted it. The directions were basically walk 10 minutes to the nearest station, go one stop and then get off and walk 3 minutes to a different station and go 9 stops – then a final 12 minute walk to the pier. I was only carrying a day backpack and Gina had one of those small wheeled carry-on luggage cases and a very large bag and a couple of smaller ones. – but it was pretty easy to manage all this.

Because it wasn’t a ‘live’ GPS it wasn’t always obvious which direction to walk in. But the second station was easy to locate and as we started to go underground we found we were in a three level shopping mall so wandered round that for a while. We had hours to get to the cruise boat. At the last station the 12 minute walk wasn’t at all obvious. The saved map indicated a SW direction so after looking for the sun and knowing it was south at midday, and double checking with my compass, we were spot on in getting to the pier.



I took a USB stick with passwords etc on it to use in Hawaii when I bought the new 8” tablet but because it was so small thought it would be easily misplaced so attached a big key ring to it which just happened to have a compass on it.

We found out much later that the other passengers were advised not to use the Metro to get to the ship. Incidentally the ticket from the centre of Moscow to the ship was about a dollar and you could keep using that ticket all day if you chose to. There's a lot to be said for communism.

The boat had three decks and we were on the first one. The passengers were put into groups (lots of different nationalities) and we were in Group 8 which was one of the English speaking groups. There were round about 24 in it. Our group leader (Andrey) was a young Russian born Vietnamese male who spoke several languages. He wasn't quite as organised as he made out to be, but on the whole did a reasonable job. I pointed out in the first hour or so there was no plug for our bathroom basin which made washing socks and undies more difficult than need be. He said he'd look into it but that was the last I heard of it and no plug ever turned up. And then later in the evening we had no information about the daily programme or what time meals were etc and had to go looking for him. He'd forgotten our room.



There were several tables allocated to group 8 for dinner and we were told that whatever seat we picked the first night we had to stick to for the whole voyage. Fortunately our table of 6 consisted of Gina and myself, a lady (Cathryn) from Ballarat with her daughter (Rebecca) from Darwin, and a fairly young couple from Vietnam. This pleased Gina no end as she could talk Vietnamese to them, as well as to Andrey. But it didn't mean they were bosom buddies.

Food!!!! Don't talk to me about the food. Vegetables, vegetables, and more vegetables. Each night we were given a sheet with tomorrow night's choices and to tick our seat numbers on our selection. The last three nights I didn't tick anything which the waitress had trouble understanding, and was concerned. Breakfasts were good, fresh fruit salad, eggs and bacon most mornings, good bread rolls and cheese and ham. It was buffet so you could keep going back for more. Lunch was also buffet but the selection wasn't always great – but I generally found something edible. One lunch time they had mini chocolate éclairs for dessert and I ended up having 25 of them. That evening when I hadn't ordered anything Rebecca told the waitress (Alexandra) that I wanted chocolate éclairs for my main dish. She went away and then came back a few minutes later and apologised there weren't any more chocolate éclairs (I wonder why?) and brought me a plate of 6 other small cakes. And did so for the next couple of nights.



The other very amusing meal was the second day. The first night they'd come round to ask everyone if they had any allergies and I said vegetables, and then Gina explained that I mainly like potatoes. The boat stayed at the pier in Moscow and we had a bus trip into Moscow the next day and then a walking tour of the Kremlin and Red Square. One of the buildings in the Kremlin was where Putin's office was but we were kept well away from that by the guards. We went to a posh hotel for lunch which the boat paid for. The meals were already on the table and it was easy to find my spot. Incidentally to get into this hotel we had to go through an airport type security check – taking everything out of our pockets.



As a matter of fact this was one of the nicest meals I had the whole time I was in Russia, somehow the potato cubes had been dipped in egg and it was delicious – I wish I knew how they did it. Needless to say my diet was a source of amusement to the rest of the table. Another day we had a few hours ashore and I searched a supermarket for mini chocolate éclairs but could only find mini cream puffs. I ate the lot of them as my main course that evening.



The cruise:

The first day we stayed put as already mentioned and went into a couple of cathedrals where we got endless information on dozens of murals from our English speaking Russian guide – it was just an overload and I don't remember one thing she told us. Incidentally it rained every day of the trip and every one had umbrellas except Gina and I. I was in my normal shorts and short sleeved shirt and as I got on the first bus the guide said that Russians pride themselves on being tough but even they wouldn't dress like that. In a voice that could be heard down the bus I announced that "Russians were soft". Her English was pretty fair but she talked very fast for several hours and impossible to remember. Of course the spires and domes were spectacular as most people are aware of.



Our group about to enter the Kremlin.

The next day we had three hours ashore with a different guide and went into more churches, and another Kremlin. Apparently Kremlin is the word for a walled city.

The next day we stopped at a village of 300 people and were bussed a few km to a monastery but I chose not to go and wandered around the village for a while.

The boat had Wi-Fi but really only up in the only lounge/bar at the front of the second deck. Sometimes when we were out in the wilderness a bit it didn't work. I booked the fast train to Moscow while on-board but they wanted all our passport details before I could book. Then I was emailed the ticket in PDF format and instructed to print it out. This was on the new tablet I'd bought in Honolulu. After a bit of playing around I found I could transfer it onto the USB stick and then the girl at boat reception put it into her computer and printed it for me

On previous trips overseas I have mingled with the local population and got to know a bit about life in that country. In Japan in 1982 we would quite often be invited to sleep in a Japanese house, and not be able to say a word to the family, but they were extremely hospitable. In Fiji in 1984 we slept in Fijian villages – a family would turn out of their Bure and give it to us for the night. We were fed by them, and even had a big meal with a local chief. In Denmark in 2013 I went to birthday parties and christenings and paddled with the local sea kayak club. I enjoy seeing the way other people live but this Russian trip was just all about cathedrals and Peter the Great, and

Russian history in general. I can look all that up on the Internet if I'm interested, but was more interested in seeing life in Russia for the normal Russian.

We went through about 20 locks between Moscow and St Petersburg. We stayed 24 hours at one place because we were about to enter the second largest lake in Europe and the waves were predicted to be between 2 to 3 metres and we were not authorised to go out in that. We did cross that lake the next day in waves of less than half a metre and then back into the narrow shallow river till just before the next big lake and there we stopped because of the weather again.

A seven o'clock start the next morning to have a 5 hour bus trip into St Petersburg to see more museums and churches and hear more info about Peter the Great and why St Petersburg was built in the first place. One almost got the feeling that our group leader really doesn't like St Petersburg because it represents the last great folly of the last tsar before the whole family was killed.

We bused back to the boat, arriving about 11pm when they served dinner. There were quite a few empty seats.

The last day we had to have our packed luggage outside our cabin doors at 5am, ready for a 6am bus trip back into St Petersburg to the pier where the boat should have been. I had again worked out a route to our hotel by bus and train but Andrey wouldn't even hear of me using a bus. St Petersburg buses are not reliable – he said. The day before he had been telling everyone he would organise taxis for them and was fairly upset when I said we were going to use public transport. I'm pretty sure he was on a commission for every fare he could get.

But my plans were foiled because Cathryn and Rebecca had taken overnight stuff with them and stayed in St Petersburg overnight instead of returning to the boat. They asked if we could bring their luggage in the next day and they would pick it up from our hotel – they had already packed it before leaving the ship. They had two big cases on wheels and another large duffel bag and a laptop type bag. When I went to get it from their cabin next morning I was told by the reception that Andrey had organised everything. After breakfast I walked back past their room on the 3rd level and there were only three items outside their cabin. I insisted on having their key and found the laptop bag still inside. So much for Andrey's organisation.

Of course buses and trains were out of the question now so we let Andrey do the taxi bit after the 4 hour trip to the pier (Saturday – not so much traffic). It took him an hour and a half to get us one. The first one turned up and took one look at all the luggage and obviously refused to take it all. Long haranguing session between Andrey and the driver and he closed his boot and drove off. When we finally got one Andrey must have just given him the address but not the name of the hotel because where he pulled up and indicated we were there I couldn't see the hotel and refused to get out. A long tirade in Russian and then a young Russian couple stopped and asked (in English of course) if they could help so we unloaded the luggage and paid the very angry driver and off he went. The young lady looked at my booking information and then rang the hotel – then said to follow her. After about 30 metres I could then see the very small

hotel sign. She then asked if we needed help with the luggage but we didn't. Very helpful young couple.

The Kristoff Hotel just had a single door and then stairs (no lift) to reception on the first floor. A very efficient young lady booked us in and a young strong man brought the heavy luggage up. We got her to book a taxi for us at 6 the next morning to get the Bullet train (Sapsan) back to Moscow and she said they'd provide lunch boxes as we were going to miss out on the breakfast. Booking in we had received vouchers for a free drink downstairs in the café but when I went to use mine it was only with a meal. I ordered a hamburger and fries (hold the vegetables) and got a light beer. It was an excellent hamburger.



Gina and I wandered around the nearby streets. There were women selling fruit and vegetables on the sidewalks, but also a huge undercover market. I bought some donuts at a nearby "bakery"?



Trams and trolley buses are still used.



Not sure if this is still rated road-worthy. Right rear tyre was dead flat.



At 6 in the morning the young lady was sitting in the dark at reception with our lunch boxes and handed me a slip of paper that said the Skoda taxi number 347 was waiting outside and the fare would be 450 rubles. Like I said, very efficient.

Another airport type security check at the station and then an official checking our tickets and passports before we got on our carriage.



The Sapsan.



Food carriage. There was also a proper dining carriage.



Part of the menu.



Back in Moscow about 4 ½ hours later we got the Metro back to our hotel and then went down to the big tourist mall and bought various souvenirs and gifts to take back to Australia.

I couldn't resist these.









Quite a few sketch artists in the mall.

The efficient hotel staff had a taxi for us at 5 the next morning and we found that the fare was about \$17. And we'd thought getting one in from the airport when we first arrived for \$40 was good.

Crowded flight back to Dubai where we had a 7 hour stop-over and then a crowded flight for the 14 hours to Sydney.

Glad that is over. But as I said, it was an experience on a par with a night paddle in Banks Strait – not to be missed, and we are so much better prepared in the unlikely event we ever go back to Russia. We stayed at the Arbat House Hotel in Moscow twice, and the Kristoff Hotel in St Petersburg and would use them again.