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TOURISM, RUSSIAN-STYLE

Story & photos © Frank Kaiser

**It takes more to tour Russia than a taste for adventure,
a tough stomach, and plenty of your own toilet paper**

We'd been warned about daylight muggings, noxious air, transportation woes, undrinkable water, corrupt cops, Spartan toilets, rampant anti-Americanism, and the ubiquitous Russian mafia. But nothing prepared us for the outrageous manner in which Russia treats its tourists.

See for yourself. Come with us now to three Russian cities, five hotels, four airports, 93 meals and more grief per mile than most anywhere you'll ever travel.

We begin this saga in Saratov, a city of 920,000 about 17 hours by train southeast of Moscow. My wife, Carolyn, and I are volunteers teaching marketing and advertising under a USAID project to companies that, until seven years ago, had their production controlled from Moscow and where profits were illegal. Seven years later, most Russian business people still don't understand the concept of "customer" as in "The customer is always right."

And therein lies a basic problem with tourism in Russia.

Our hotel — the premiere \$80-a-night Slovakia — although only 30% filled, tells us that there are no rooms available, citing regulations that lapsed years ago. "Of course," explains Anatoly Selivanov, our helpful 23-year-old USAID-funded keeper, "you must remember that until 1992 Saratov was a 'closed city,' strictly off limits to all foreigners." Situated on the Volga River, this was a major military

aircraft-manufacturing site, the home of the first man in space, Yuri Gagarin, and a vital part of the Soviet space program.

Even now, we draw hostile stares from locals unaccustomed to foreigners.



Hundreds of Russian city parks, squares, churches, and palaces go unvisited, mostly out of a known lack of congeniality by the host nation.

Especially at the hotel, a quintessential monochromatic-bordering-on-ugly building style popular in the Soviet '60s. "Keep in mind" explains Selivanov, "the same people in charge under communism are in charge today." It takes him the entire morning to convince the hotel to give us a room. Even then it is not without further difficulties. No one at the reservation desk speaks English (or Spanish, French, or German, for that matter). At check in, an unsmiling clerk eyes our passports and visas suspiciously, then asks for two weeks payment in advance. As in most places outside of Moscow and St. Petersburg, credit cards are useless. The hotel cashier has no rubles for dollars, forcing us to repair to a bank in town for exchange.

Finally, at 4 p.m. we're led to our room on the eighth floor, then left standing in the hall for 25 minutes while a team of maids works inside, presumably cleaning the place. The room itself? There's no heat although the outside temperature is a frosty 46° Fahrenheit. Like most cities in the former USSR, heat in Saratov is centralized, running through huge pipes from building to building, turned off everywhere across the region on May 1st. We ask for a space heater and finally are provided with extra blankets, but only begrudgingly.

We settle in. A small booklet in Russian and English reassures us, "We offer you rooms with all modern conveniences...selected with great taste interiors." I try to take a shower but to do so without the shower head jumping off its perch, I must have one hand on the shower head and the other on a lever that ensures water flowing to the shower and not the sink.

Water is the color of strong tea and stinks of chemicals. The tub overflow drain hole is not connected; when the tub is filled, not only can you not see the tub's bottom through the dark polluted water, topside water overflows directly to the bathroom floor. Bottled water, not furnished, must be used for drinking and washing hair.

At one point the wood floor is so extravagantly warped that when you step there you actually can lose your balance.

For clothes storage, there's an armoire. But no hangers, no drawers.

The bedding system, used throughout Eastern Europe, consists of a loose sheet lying atop a mattress about two inches thick atop a hard wooden platform. On top is a blanket of sorts inside the top sheet, duvet style. The trick is to keep your feet from sticking out or getting caught in the hole where blanket is inserted. By morning be assured that the bottom sheet is bunched into a ball beneath you.

Pipes bang and clank throughout the night.

On the plus side, there's a small working fridge. And heavy terry cloth robes are furnished. Very scratchy terry cloth.

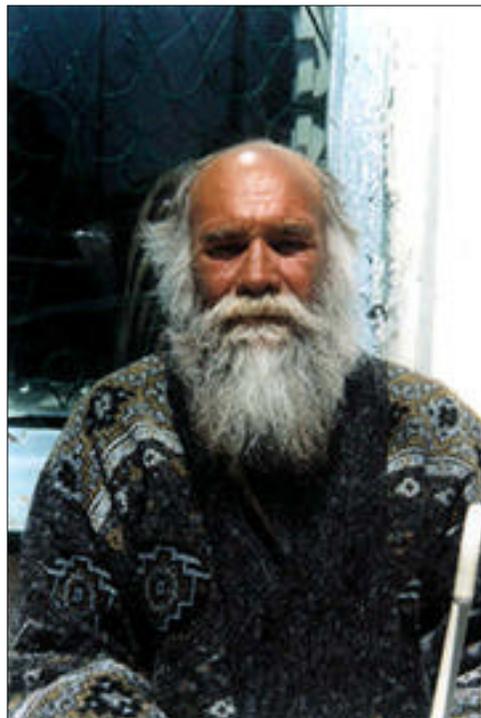
Water not so brown this morning

Breakfast at the Slovakia is served in a large, cheerless room with American rap music blasting. Each morning there's mystery meat or chicken wings, potatoes or sticky rice, tea or instant coffee. In Russia, brewed coffee is as scarce as a smile on a Moscow cop. Everything "served" is literally dropped to the table by cheerless young waitresses in short, black uniforms.

It is at breakfast one morning that we meet the only other American in Saratov so far as we know. He is Charles Rush, a food-aid monitor for the US Department of Agriculture, in Saratov overseeing grain shipments. He says, "I see that the bath water is not so brown this morning." Is he kidding? It's the color of walnut, nothing you'd want to drink, light a match near or, if you didn't have to, bathe in. He tells us that the water used to be far worse before many nearby obsolete industrial plants closed.

Old bureaucratic habits die hard here in Russia. Whenever we want to leave our room, we must give our room key to a floor maid who then issues a pass to use to get by the elevator guard. Upon return, when we find the maid, we exchange pass for key.

Beggars outside the churches must surrender much of their alms to the mafia.



Restaurants in this city of almost a million also ignore tourist needs. Eating out at different places every day, we find only two with menus in a language other than Russian. Most often, it's close your eyes, point and hope. Items listed on menus in Russian seldom match anything in our Lonely Planet Russian Phrasebook. Mystery meat is our staple.

Not for the timid

Two weeks later, our work done, it's check out time at the Slovakia. But the clerks at the front desk won't return our visas and passports. "Give me my passport right now. Or else!" isn't in the phrase book. Finally, in a successful gesture of bureaucratic oneupsmanship, flashing our US press badges gets our documents back. Later, when curiously we inquire about the number of rooms in the hotel, it's a state secret. None of four clerks nor two managers could or would tell us. "You must see Intourist in Moscow for that information."

Don't get me wrong. Like people everywhere, once you get to know them most Russians are charming, hospitable people, eager to help. Considering their current circumstances — most are far worse off than they were under communist rule, many going without pay for months — some grouchiness can be expected.

But multiply our experience times most every mid-priced hotel in Russia — even those in Moscow and St. Petersburg — and you begin to see why traveling in Russia is not for the timid. Add to this exaggerated stories of rampant crime and poverty, with gangster warfare and murders, political and economic upheaval, a telephone system that isn't and public toilets that are seldom more than a hole in the floor (without paper), and there's little appeal left for any would-be pilgrim.

For many, this is truly a frightening country.

Yet of all the routes to prosperity available to Russia, the \$445 billion tourist market is the most obvious. Capitalizing on its novelty, natural beauty, history and

art, according to the Russian business weekly, *Expert*, Russia could easily boast a robust \$50 billion tourist industry. Yet last year Russia was visited by only 1.9 million tourists, fewer than the Czech Republic, spending only \$5.5 billion. The vast majority is in Russia for business purposes. Most, no doubt, under duress.

Sure, for tourists with big bucks there are Moscow's five-star hotels such as the Metropol, Baltshug, National, and Savoi. Pricey French restaurants and even pricier night clubs are plentiful for rich foreigners and New Russians alike. But for the budget traveler, the sightseer seeking national culture and non-threatening adventure, Russia has to be one of the most unfriendly places on the planet.

A poke in the eyes

And it begins the minute you land in Moscow.

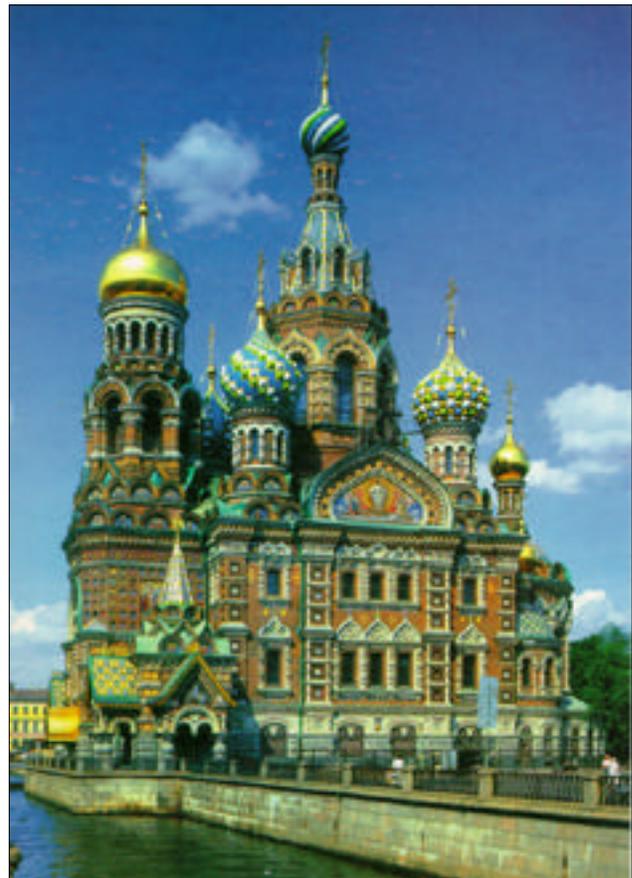
Walking across the tarmac at Moscow's dilapidated Sheremetevo-2 Airport, foul, petrochemically soaked air pokes you in the eyes, an assault that doesn't cease until you leave the capital. Which may explain the gray, rueful look on Muscovite faces. "It's the National Scowl," a Brit living in Moscow tells me. "They may not know it, but they're a sad race of people. While the whole world is trying to become integrated and globalized, Russians want to exist alone, apart from everyone. The Russian idea of the future, right now, is returning to the past."

Maybe you can't blame them. In the bad old days you'd see only the limos of big-shot communists and their police escorts on the wide boulevards of Moscow. Today traffic is arguably the most dangerous in the world. Pedestrians have few rights, none apparent. The mere act of crossing a street is often heroic.

On the plus side, if you want a cab anywhere in Russia you simply hold out your arm to oncoming traffic. Usually the closest car stops, makes the deal and takes you, often at breakneck speed, to your destination. Armed with a map and an idea of what to pay, even tourists take advantage of this convenience.

Flying, though more complicated, is seldom expensive here. It can cost more to get to the airport than to fly from it. Example: Moscow to Saratov, \$14.44. Snacks not included. (A stewardess actually slapped my hand when I reached for a carrot, thinking it was free.) Moscow to St. Petersburg via the most expensive, non-Aeroflot flight, is only \$115. Of course, that doesn't include the customary charge for "overweight" luggage. All foreigners, even those carrying the smallest of bags, invariably pay overweight charges.

Ripping off outlanders is state-sponsored and institutionalized. In St. Petersburg, ballet tickets cost Russians three dollars, foreigners \$75. Top orchestras charge as little as two dollars to locals, \$60 and up to visitors from abroad. At The Kremlin, Moscow's foremost tourist attraction, signs clearly state that admission for non-citizens is 16 times higher than that for Russians. Germans we met were warned by their government that the Russian system of price gouging might force them to pay up to 30 times more than Russians for the same hotel room. We often were forced to pay double or more than posted prices for food bought in small markets once the owner saw that we were Americans. (Easy to spot, we're the ones smiling.)



All around St. Petersburg's ornate Chapel of the Resurrection, scores of gypsy children cream for money, cursing and virtually attacking visitors when turned down.

Cops and robbers

In Russia, even the most delicious experiences often turn bitter. In St. Petersburg, Carolyn and I enjoyed the speed, convenience and personal contact the metro system afforded until I was mugged at the Nevsky Prospect subway station, my Nikon stolen. A few days earlier, two cops stopped the city bus on which we were traveling and for 10 minutes shook down the driver until he gave them an \$8 bribe while 40 passengers sat by stoically silent.

St. Petersburg is an open city of parks and squares and palaces and canals, a city laid out for the enjoyment of all. The people are more Western in their look and behavior. To be there during the Whites Nights of summer when the days never fully darken is an added treat. Return to your three- or four-star hotel, though, and you immediately revert to Russia's dismal side. Checking into the monstrous Hotel Pulkovskaja, clerks couldn't find our reservations, and I was forced to run up a \$43 telephone bill to Moscow to get reconfirmed. Later, without apology, we were locked out of our room when someone mistakably thought we had checked out. At night all night, since it was light out, noisy construction workers shoveled cement just below our window.

After my Nikon was stolen I asked the hotel manager how to get a police report to submit to my insurance company. He thought it a joke. "You want to talk to police about *robbery*? Ha. Ha. Ha." Everyone got a good laugh.

No heroes here

It is finally time to leave Russia. We are at the airport awaiting our flight to our next assignment in Poland, a country that emerged from communism about the same time Russia did, yet now supports a healthy tourism industry in a strong market-based economy.

Why the striking contrast? Many blame Russia's raw, Darwinian Capitalism and its survival of the most corrupt. Within its history, Russia has no true model for success. No heroes.

One thing is certain. The Russians will not treat tourists with respect and courtesy until their leaders treat them that way. And that's not likely as long as kleptomaniacs run the country. As our host in Saratov, Lidia Pronina, told us, "Today's attitude is to wait for the government to do something. Unfortunately, it may take two more generations to find a leader who is as interested in the people as he is in lining his pockets. In the meantime, there's no hope, no future until Russians become individuals, not dependent on government help. I love my country, but God help us."

And God help any tourists visiting this now-devolving nation who expect anything exceeding mediocrity, neglect, even scorn. My best advice: If you're going to Russia, above all don't forget to pack your sense of humor.

SIDEBAR #1

Thank heaven for Holiday Inn

There it was, an ad in *The Russian Journal* for a "Family Weekend Break" — two adults and two kids — for only \$99 at Moscow's Holiday Inn. Although it was two weeks off and we had no kids, we booked immediately. Once confirmed, every time we encountered a tub of brown water or a cup of halfhearted instant coffee, we thought about our future Holiday Inn with its clear hot-water adjustable nozzle shower and rich brewed coffee.

The hotel turned out to be outside of Moscow, in the midst of a town of dachas, quiet and scenic. We were greeted with smiles. English. A helpful bell man carried our luggage and showed us how the a/c – heat system. It was heaven! We were not asked for passports, ate well and often, and always treated with respect.

There were real beds with blankets and sheets, changed daily. Carpets were vacuumed. Toilet paper was without wood chips.

On Sunday a complimentary van drove us into Red Square, picking us up five hours later with courtesy and regard.

American-style hospitality is truly a wonderful thing. We may make fun of cookie-cutter American culture abroad — McDonald's, *Baywatch*, and Holiday Inn come to mind — but until you've been in the trenches, you don't know the joy of a little American R&R. It's lifesaving!

SIDEBAR #2

Getting a Visa: The Beginning of Disillusionment

To travel Russia, you must carry a Russian visa.

But try to get one.

For two days I called the Russian Embassy in Washington (202/939-8907) getting either no answer, a busy signal, or what I think was a music loop from the Russian computer game, Tetris. On the third day, at 10:02 AM, they answered. "No. No. No. No!" I was told. I must call the Consulate at 202/986-1604. Which I did, only to get a recording directing me to call 202/986-1606.

Now we're getting somewhere, I thought. Unfortunately, that number connects with the Belarus Embassy. But they don't tell you that. Thinking I was finally in touch with someone who could help, I asked for visa applications. "Why do you want to go?" they asked, gruffly. As if I have nothing better to do with my time. A few more questions and I had a promise that they'd fax the forms immediately.

Of course, the forms were never faxed, and only by calling the following day do I learn that I'm talking to the Belarus Consulate, not Russian. "Call 202/298-5700." Back to square one, to listening to Tetris.

Frustrated, I called the American State Department. After hearing my story, the clerk called the Russian Embassy for me using the “secret” embassy-to-embassy hotline number: 202/298-5701. “They’re sure nasty over there,” she said when she came back on my line. But she did get vital information: use the Web site <http://www.russianembassy.org/tourist-visa.html>.

Of course! Why didn’t I think of that?

According to the site, to obtain a visa you need 1) a completed visa application, available at the Consulate, travel agencies and visa services; 2) a copy of the personal information pages from your passport; 3) three passport-size photos; 4) a standard tourist confirmation from the authorized hosting Russian Travel Agency, registered with the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs — whatever that means; 5) a cover letter from a US travel agency giving personal and travel information; 6) a stamped self-addressed envelope or prepaid waybill; and 7) a postal money order or cashiers check for visa processing. Fees range from \$70 “for not less than two weeks processing” to \$300 for same day processing. No guarantees. Applications are downloadable in .pdf form.

You say you don’t have access to a computer. Maybe you should count yourself lucky.

But wait! At the bottom of the site there are two more phone numbers. For further information, call the Consulate at 202/939-8913. Considering my luck with official phone numbers, I choose to use the second, the Washington, DC-based visa agency Travel Document Systems, Inc. at 800/874-5100.

Let’s hear it for the private sector.

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Frank Kaiser and his wife teach marketing and advertising to companies in emerging nations for USAID. Kaiser is a frequent contributor to civil-rights, social-justice and poverty-issue publications.