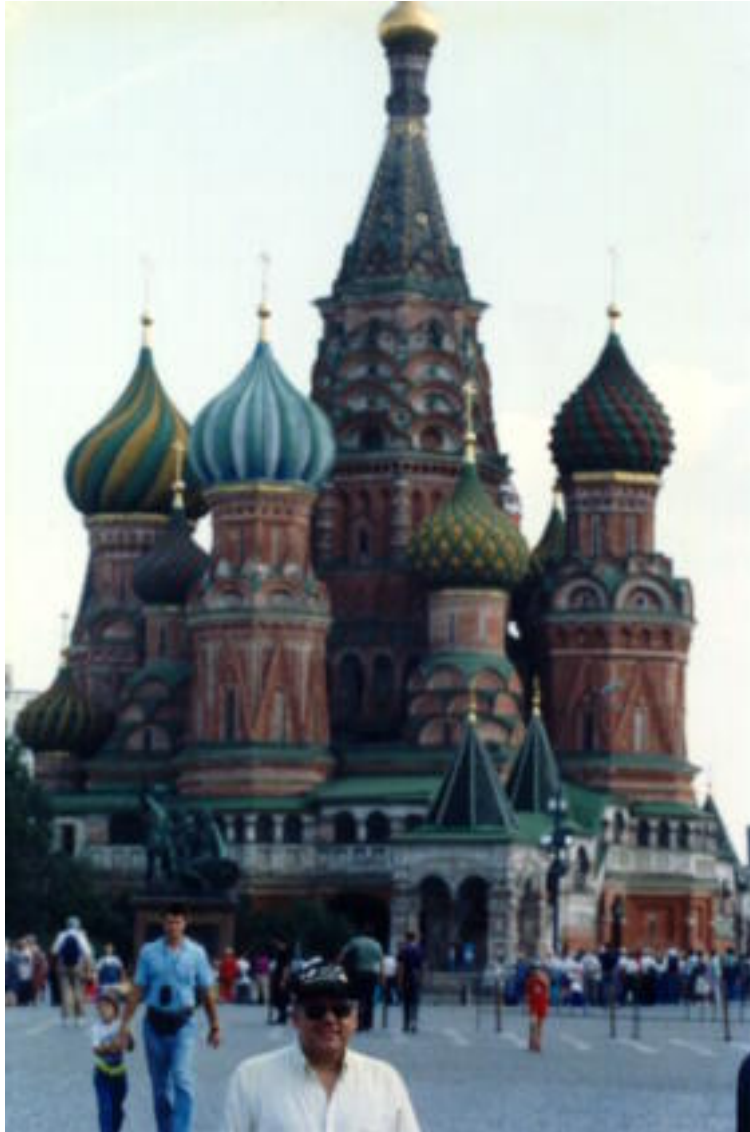


Moscow and St. Petersburg

by

Matthew A. Nelson



Moscow and St. Petersburg, July, 1992

Matthew A. Nelson**(March, 2000)**

In July of 1992, I traveled with a group of twenty-four people called “Aerospace Ambassadors” to see the launch of Soyuz TM-15 at the Baikonur Cosmodrone in Kazakhstan, formerly of the Soviet Union. This story is about seeing the sights of Moscow and St. Petersburg, before and after the launch. It is the compliment of my other story, “Launch of Soyuz TM-15 and Tour of Soviet/Russian Space Facilities”. This story starts with our Finnair flight from JFK Airport in New York City to Helsinki, Finland, enroute to Moscow.

Natasha sat in the aisle seat of the new MD-11, and I sat next to the window. Nobody sat in the middle seat, so we weren’t quite as crowded as the rest of the passengers. She had grown up in Russia, but became an American Citizen, after marrying a physicist who worked at Bell Labs. During the seven hours of the flight we had several small conversations. Both of us had grown up during the Cold War, and both of us were forty-six years old. She told me that when she was fourteen she realized the government had been lying to the people when word of the purges by Stalin began to surface. She was devastated. She asked me, “How would you feel if you learned that the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence had been based on lies, and written solely to deceive the American people?”

In another conversation, I made the comment that I thought the Russian government was corrupt, but the Russian people had high morals. Bitterly, she disagreed with me. She said in America children are taught to be honest by their parents, but in Russia, if a person returned extra change from a store

clerk, he would be criticized for being foolish. Then, more light-heartedly, Natasha said that in American she has nothing to do. In Moscow, she stood in line an average of four hours a day. In America, she drives to the grocery store once a week, has an electric can opener, a microwave oven, an electric dishwasher, a garbage disposal, a vacuum cleaner, and appliances for washing and drying her clothes. Laughing, she asked me, "So, what is there for me to do?".

Our flight was late arriving in Helsinki, and our flight to Moscow was ready to board. Natasha requested that I help her carry several bags she had brought onboard to our next plane. She was taking blue jeans and other items of clothing and food for her family that still lived in Moscow. To make matters worse, we were sitting towards the back of the plane, the crew couldn't open the door for a few minutes because it was jammed, and Natasha wanted to let the passengers sitting behind us out first. I purposely had traveled light, only to be burdened down like a desert camel. Finally, we were off the plane, ran to the gate for the Moscow flight, where we were immediately loaded onto a bus to transport us to the next aircraft. I wasn't in Finland long enough to even use the restroom!

Customs and immigration personnel in any country are intimidating. They were even more so at Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport. During the four hour and thirty second wait (or perhaps only thirty seconds) it took the bored young official to check my passport and visa through a computer, I hoped the hidden cameras and the KGB guys saw just another relaxed American tourist,

not this sponge full of Jell-O masquerading as Matt Nelson. Nothing to it! Just as I was waved through, the man standing in line behind me rudely asked the official why it took so long to clear customs. Not daring to even look back, I walked over to the friendly faces of our group, all smugly spinning webs of bravado while waiting for luggage. A few seconds later I gathered up enough courage to sneak a look back at the immigration booth, and was astounded that the guy making the rude remarks had completely disappeared. So, the KGB must have been watching him, and not me!

Soon, we were riding a bus into MOCKBA (Moscow), where Tanya, our guide, pointed out where the World War II German army had finally been stopped, just a few kilometers away from the city. Guilt set in early, for upon arriving at the Intourist Hotel, we were swarmed by beggars of all ages. We followed Tanya's example of giving five Rubles to an old woman, but ignored a woman carrying two dirty children on her back. Tanya said that the old woman could not work, while the woman with the children could. We knew that whatever we gave was not enough, but only served to perpetuate the system. How does one balance the dilemma of being a rich tourist (by their standards) and perpetuating a system which we don't agree with, but at the same time soothe our own conscious?

Butch Head and I shared the same room in the Intourist Hotel, which had two single beds lined up in tandem along the wall. The room had no air conditioning and the windows opened very little. The bathroom had a high tub, but there was no shower curtain to prevent the flexible shower hose from

spraying water all over the walls and the floor. There was a refrigerator in the room that kept our drinks cold, but needed defrosting badly.

Our bodies were telling us that it was 3 AM, but how could we resist Tanya's offer to show us Red Square? To go to Red Square from the hotel, we had to pass through an underground walkway. One could write a book just on the people in this walkway. Of all the beggars, vendors, and street musicians we encountered, the one I remember the most is a solo saxophonist playing an old Beetle's song. Quoting Rick Vargo, an engineer from the Kennedy Space Center, "Echoes of 'Hey, Jude' drifted through the rafters".



Red Square

I have often wondered who looks upon whom with awe - natives or tourists. To those selling stacking dolls, lacquer boxes, post cards, watches, and fur hats, there could be no doubt whom were the tourists. Did I stand out because of my South Pole baseball cap, my cowboy boots, my Hawaiian shirt, my blue jeans, or my camera with a foot-long lens? I guess I will never know!

The soldiers performing the Changing of the Guard at Lenin's Tomb at midnight did not seem quite as sharp as those whom are in (or out) of focus in the hundreds of cameras clicking away at 4 PM. Guarding the entrance of a dead man's tomb for an hour during the heat of July is an honor I can do without. Cold shivers ran up my spine as I stood within a few feet of where the Kremlin leaders stood as they reviewed May Day troops and missiles during the Cold War.

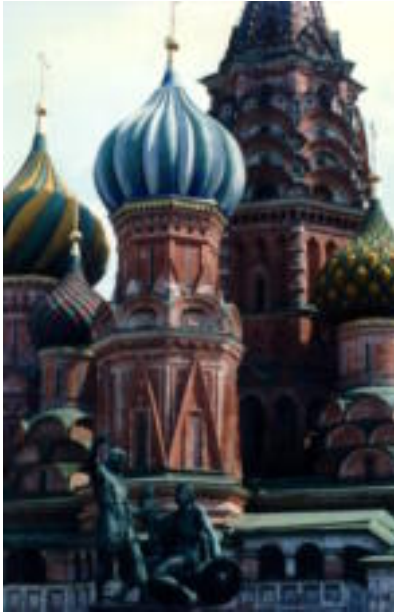


Guards at Lenin's Tomb



Impressive as the walls of the Kremlin were, the mystic softened upon seeing the flag of the Russian Republic. What had happened to the threatening yellow hammer and sickle on the solid red banner? Is there any coincidence that the new flag now has three colors - red, white, and blue? After growing up during the Cold War, it is difficult to think of Russians as citizens of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and not the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (CCCP).

Over the years I have traveled the world over, and have developed an attitude that "A city is a city...", etc. Seeing St. Basil's Cathedral (often mistaken



St. Basil's Cathedral

for the Kremlin) for the first time is when the idea I actually was in Moscow really sunk in. Commissioned by Ivan the Terrible in 1551, the architecture of this cathedral is absolutely beautiful. Each of the four outer domes is painted in different colors; the golden center dome glistens in the sunlight. Inside, we were forbidden to take flash photographs, but even so, I managed to take a good photograph of a painting of the Holy Family, which I used for a Christmas card this same year. This cathedral which glorifies the Birth of Christ has been standing six times longer than the reign of Communism lasted.

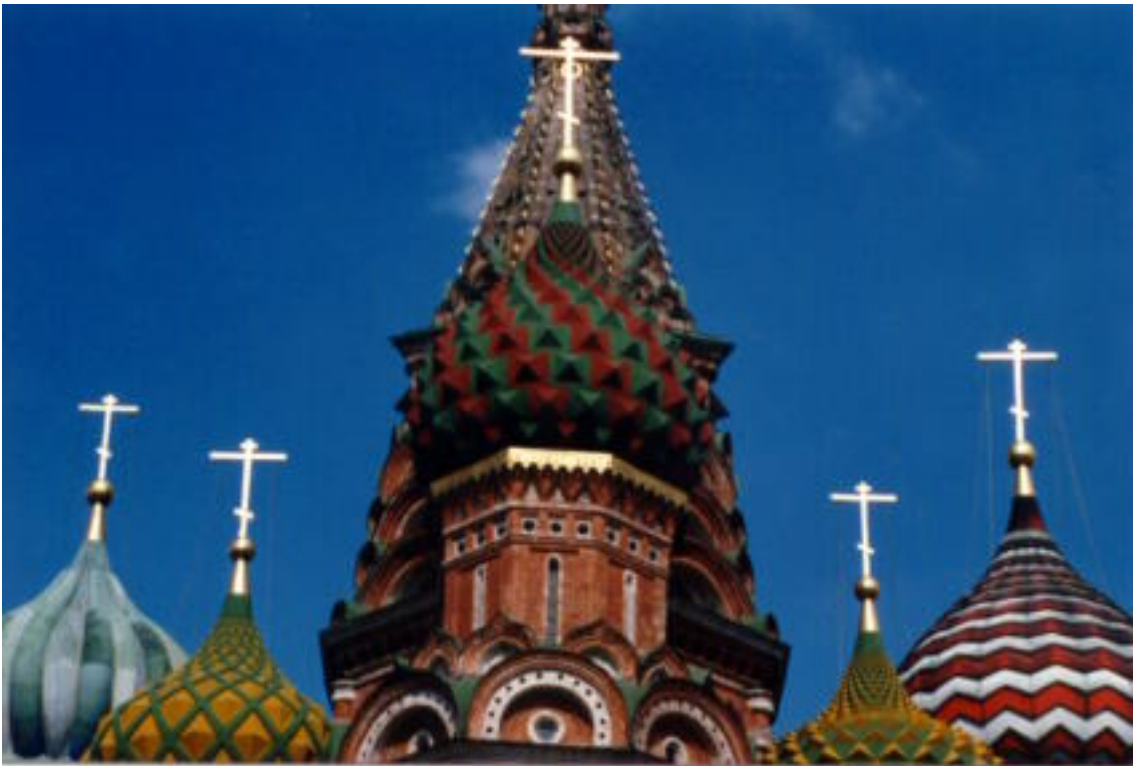


Right photo by Ed Cameron





Painting of Jesus, Joseph, and Mary, inside St. Basil's Cathedral, and Crosses on the cathedral



Later, that evening, we all met for dinner in the hotel. Waiters brought out four or five courses, but most of us had filled up on salami slices with dime-size globules of fat that we sandwiched between pieces of dark Russian bread before the main meal of cabbage soup, mystery meat, and barley arrived.

Our thirst never seemed to be quenched on the entire trip during the meals. A small bottle of orange or lemon Fanta was meant to be shared by four people. Cokes could be bought outside at the hotel's entrance for about forty cents, so it amazed me that some of the group had waiters bring them Cokes for two dollars. Several people tested their endurance of vodka, but I had never had any before, so I wasn't about to take that challenge.

At breakfast the next morning, while eating eggs cooked in fish oil, we were told that our flight scheduled for the following day to Baikonur had been delayed by one day. Fighting was reported to have broken out between the soldiers of the Russian Republic and Kazakhstan. The air space had been closed by Kazakhstan. "Don't worry", we were told. Right! So, while wondering if we were going to be caught up in some international incident, we then proceeded to tour the city. Since then, I have often heard that the Russians will keep Westerners in suspense, and then come through at the last minute. We still had to wait another day, though.

Tanya expertly recited the history of Moscow as we rode in the red Intourist bus around the Kremlin, the American Embassy, the wrecked streetcar which had been damaged during the 1991 "Revolution", the KGB

Headquarters, the Bolshevi Theater, and the Cemetery of the Convent of the Three Nuns.

Lower Left: Grave of Nikita Khrushchev, photo by Ed Cameron

Lower Right: Grave of Cosmonaut Pavel Belyayev

Right: Grave of Andrei Tupolev, Aircraft Designer

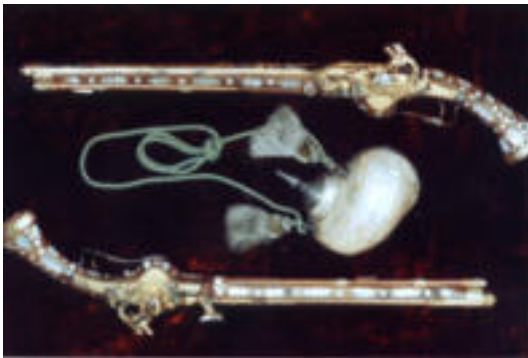


This was the most interesting cemetery that I have ever seen. Tanya said that the Convent had at one time been growing vegetables, but the Nuns realized that they could make more money by selling their land to the rich for gravesides. Beautiful sculptures adorned most of the graves. Cosmonaut Pavel Ivanovich Belyayev is buried here, as well as the famous Russian writer, Frank Kafka. Falling from grace after the Cuban Missile Crisis, Nikita Khrushchev and his wife Nita lay here, instead of inside the Kremlin wall.



After we left the cemetery, we traveled past the Olympic Stadium to a place that overlooked Moscow. This is a place that is popular with newly weds. Young brides still wearing white wedding gowns smiled at us. Street vendors and beggars know the tour bus routes; most speak English well enough to tug the guilt strings: “What’s two dollars to a rich American? Come on, mister, I have a hungry grandmother to support.”

American currency was legal to use, or at least was the currency of choice. Rubles were begrudgingly accepted. A friend had requested that I bring him back a fur hat. So, I thought a silver rabbit hat was worth ten dollars, and was pleased with my purchase until it stunk so badly that I gave it to Butch to warm his feet during those Indianapolis Winters.

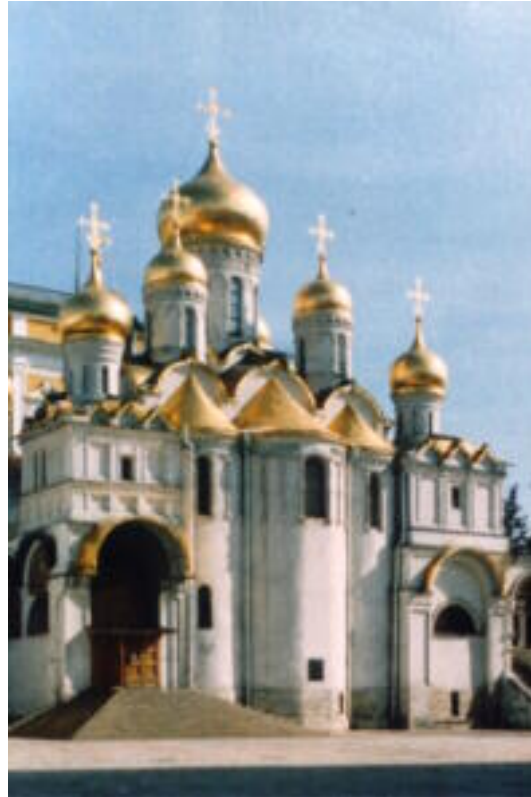


Ornate pistols and rifles inside Kremlin Museum



For lunch, I ate the best beef stroganoff I have ever tasted at the Intourist Hotel. That afternoon, Tanya guided us through a museum located within the walls of the Kremlin. Artifacts of Peter the Great, including exquisite golden carriages that could only have been built for Cinderella captured my attention. A weapons case containing the most exotic ivory-handled pistols and jeweled-sheath swords is where I could have easily spent the rest of the afternoon. I

must proudly admit that while walking inside the museum within the Kremlin walls, I passed gas. Not just a SBD, but a full tuba sound that harmonized with the staccato sound of a machine gun, reverberating between the marble walls!



Upper Left: Kremlin

Upper Right: Cathedral inside Kremlin Walls (bought slide)

Center Left: Cathedral inside Kremlin Walls by Matt Nelson

Bottom Left: Painting of Jesus inside the Cathedral (bought slide)

Bottom Right: Paintings adorning the walls of the Cathedral; used as a stable during Napoleon's time (bought slide)

Next, Tanya toured us through the Kremlin Cathedral whose golden domes are visible from the banks of the Volga River. This ancient cathedral had

only been open to the public for two years. Beautiful religious paintings that were centuries old once hung above the soldiers of Napoleon, who used the cathedral as a stable. On second thought, perhaps that shouldn't be surprising - Christ the Lord was born in a stable. I wonder, during times of international tensions, if Kremlin leaders secretly sneaked into this cathedral to pray.

That evening, all of us were awe-struck by the performance of the Moscow Circus. All of the circus acts are performed in one ring. At the beginning, the cast descended a huge staircase, which made me think of a performance I once saw of "The Man From La Mancha", where Don Quixote was lowered into the dungeon. Classical music from the orchestra accompanied the magnificent feats of endurance of the performers, and the bears brought smiles to the entire audience.

Moscow, as viewed from the bus and the sidewalk in front of the Intourist Hotel, gave little insight to the lifestyle of the people, but one cannot visit such a city without forming some impressions. Streetcars and street vendors are everywhere, as is the odor of strong Russian cigarettes, smelling like the Brafra (spelling?) cigarettes of Turkey. People concerned with making it through the day ignore the sores of fallen plaster on what once had been beautiful buildings with splendid architecture.

Old women wearing colorful dresses and white socks still swept the streets with homemade straw brooms. Most of the women carried shopping bags that obviously were home made and designed for years of use. I was reminded of Lara, from the movie "Dr. Zhivago", upon seeing many women

wearing scarves in the style she wore. Western-style clothes such as jeans and shorts had caught on with many of the younger women. One policeman smiled at me as I drew in my breath when a very pretty woman walked by. There are many beautiful women in Moscow; others fit the stereotype of peasant ladies with thick legs, often pushing babies in prams with large wheels.



Moscow women

Soldiers were everywhere, but I never felt any fear. One thing that I had not expected to see surprised me: Thousands of cars and huge traffic jams. The smell of exhaust fumes filled the air. Lines for food didn't appear too long, but then who am I to judge? Open market vendors sold just about anything. I particularly remember one old woman standing by a subway entrance holding a plucked chicken by the neck.

Peter, one of our translators, took several of us on a ride through the Moscow subways. For the price of one Ruble, the cost to ride anywhere, the Moscow Subway / Art Gallery is the best bargain I have ever encountered. No graffiti contaminated the marble walls; beautiful stained glass windows, mosaics, and sculptures are spaced about twenty feet apart in the stations. Some of the sculptures gave strong emphasis on the 1917 Revolution, that I didn't care for, but doubt that they will be removed for my benefit. As we rode the subways, Art Schoeters, one of the tour members from Belgium, started happily and loudly singing "Galenka, Galenka,..." . Nobody seemed to care, and in fact, I think some of Russians enjoyed it.



Moscow Subway / Art Gallery

Searing an image into my brain that I never will forget, the sight of an old peasant woman on the subway is as poignant today as the night I saw her. Her knarled and twisted knuckles and unsmiling lips that permanently pointed down betrayed her harsh life. There was a classic beauty to her, one that I wanted very much to capture on film. Her blue eyes defiantly dared me to take her photograph, but for me to have pointed my camera at her would have robbed her of her dignity, trespassed upon her soul.



KGB Headquarters

Often, while riding on the bus in Moscow, we drove by the infamous KGB headquarters. In front of it stood an empty pedestal, upon which the statue of Felix Dzerzhinsky (the KGB founder) had stood, until the 1991 Revolution. The only image of Lenin that I really remember seeing in Moscow was that of a stone carving on the top of a building. Unfortunately, I was not quick enough with my camera to snap off a shot before the bus turned a corner.

At the Monino Air Museum (described in more detail in the Soyuz TM-15 Launch story) I spotted a small gift shop. While the director talked about early airplanes and their engines, I realized that we would not have much time to shop once the tour was over. The exchange rate at the time was about 160 Rubles to the dollar. For one Ruble I bought a history of Russian aviation

(written in Cyrillic) that had many black and white photos, and a lapel pin. So I then splurged and bought five or six more books for souvenirs. Dumb me – I gave them all away after I came back home. Seeing she had a spending customer, the shy young clerk showed me stacking dolls, and a hand-carved wooden box. I must have spent eighty to one hundred Rubles there!

The stacking dolls, called *matryoshka*, are hollow wooden dolls shaped sort of like bowling pins. Each doll except for the smallest one is made with two pieces. The smallest doll fits into the next largest size, and that doll fits into another one a size larger. One set may contain up to twelve individual dolls. Usually, these pieces are highly lacquered, but the ones I bought at the air museum did not have the lacquer applied. While the majority of stacking dolls are made to look like little girls, the most interesting sets are of the Russian leaders. The first doll had the image of President Boris Yeltsin; Mikhail Gorbachev is the inner doll. Some of the older sets had Gorbachev as the outer doll. Khrushchev and Stalin are five or six sizes smaller than Yeltsin. (Today, Yeltsin would be the second doll, and Putin the first.) I now wish I had bought two sets, one of Yeltsin, and the other of Gorbachev. However, I later found a set here in Houston of some of the Russian space activities, which I did buy.

On the way back to Moscow we passed several small houses in the country, each with ornate carvings on the wooden corner posts. The tenants worked in small gardens, children played, and life seemed much as it does in rural areas around the world. Concrete apartment buildings dominated the outer edges of Moscow; brightly colored quilts and laundry hung over balconies

to dry. At one point on the bus route we passed two satellite tracking antennas, which I sure would have liked to have visited.



Left: Typical home
Right: Satellite tracking antennas

During the afternoon, we visited a flea market that appeared to cater to foreigners, as there were many stands selling the same tourist type of items being sold in Red Square. I bought two books of Soviet space stamps for myself, and several lacquer boxes, wooden eggs, and stacking dolls for gifts.

That evening at the hotel we were all given a plastic bag with a photo of St. Basil's Cathedral on the side. Inside each bag were hard boiled eggs, salami slices, and dried bread for us to snack on the next day on our trip to Baikonur. We were told to take only enough personal gear for three days, and to leave our luggage at the Intourist Hotel. I had only been in the country three days but had enough souvenirs to open my own shop. Butch helped me cram all this junk into my one suitcase.

American currency is much in demand. While I was at the official exchange booth in the hotel, a black marketeer offered to exchange Rubles for a rate much better than the hotel's rate. I took a chance, but only wanted to

change ten dollars, but the lowest size bill I had was twenty dollars. The black marketeer said, “No problem”, and took a wad of American dollars from his pocket. He must have had over two thousand dollars in fifty and one hundred dollar bills, along with smaller currency. I was impressed!

One of the things that made me uneasy is that our passports were taken from us when we checked into the hotel. We didn't receive them back until we left the country. This is the first time I have ever given up my passport, which made me very uncomfortable, especially in this country. However, I felt better upon seeing everybody's passport handed over for inspection the next day when we at the airport waiting for our departure to Baikonur. The details of the flight and the next couple of days in Baikonur are written in the Soyuz TM-15 launch story.

After seeing the launch, touring Baikonur, and flying back to Moscow, our Western appetites desired something more than barley and fatty salami. I guess we could have chosen to eat back at the Intourist Hotel, but McDonalds or Pizza Hut appealed to most of us. I like pizza less than McDonalds, and my curiosity of a Russian McDonalds demanded fulfillment. While traveling overseas I generally shy away from American fast food places, but made an exception in this case. I am not sure that one can ever call the food at McDonalds “Good”, but this food actually tasted almost good. They even knew how to make a great hot fudge sundae.

On Wednesday, the next day, we watched the docking of the Soyuz TM-15 with the Mir spacecraft and toured other space related sites. That night we had

dinner and live entertainment on one of the tour boats that travel around Moscow on the Volga river. I don't remember what we ate, but my notes say that the food was good. Russian folk dancers and two women with a life-size puppet (that talked and sang songs) entertained us. On board the boat were two guests that I suspect were there to keep tabs on us. Sasha said he worked as a translator in the Kremlin, but, "that was another life ago", and Alexia told me that he had been with Omar Kaddafi in Libya at the time the Americans bombed his tent in 1986. These guys were laughing and drinking vodka and being very friendly, but somehow, I never did feel like I wanted to share any of my life story with them. It was after this boat ride that we sing "Galenka" in the subway.

Once we arrived at the subway station near the Intourist Hotel, Ed Cameron, Ron Caswell, and I decided to go back to Red Square. We saw the changing of the guard at Lenin's tomb again, and met a Russian woman by the name of Helen. She sold the lacquer boxes with religious images on them, and that led to a discussion of religion. (Unfortunately, I didn't write the words down, and have forgotten them now.) As she wrote her address down to give to Ed, somebody stole Ron's 2X converter for his camera. A pickpocket tried to steal Ed's tobacco pouch, probably thinking it was his wallet. Ed grabbed the guy's hand hard enough to make him wince, and "encouraged" the guy to leave, which he did. Helen started to cry, saying she didn't want any trouble, because she was trying to go to America to see her ex-husband. I suspect that Helen and these guys may have been working together, but I may be wrong.

Shortly afterwards, we met Sergei, who was selling post cards. He showed us a business card from someone on the White House staff whom had bought 40 cans of caviar from him. He said that as a school boy, he was called a “Pioneer”, which meant that he had received top grades, and as a reward, had the honor of visiting Lenin’s tomb.

On the following night, Butch Head and I shared a compartment on the overnight train to St. Petersburg. The bunks were on opposite walls, with a small table between them. After the excitement of seeing all the space stuff over the past several days, neither one of could sleep much. We started the “Remember When...?” stories that night that continue to this day. During the bus ride to the hotel the next morning we passed a wall that warmly welcomed us with a spray-painted sign: “I love Americans and you”.



Hermitage (left) and Pushkin’s Apartment (right photo, left side)

St. Petersburg is a city that had been designed by European architects. It is a wonderful place to visit. We visited the usual tourist spots, such as St. Issac’s Cathedral, drove on the road next to the canal where the great Russian poet Pushkin lived, and spent several hours in the Hermitage. Magnificent art works adorned the walls, including the first original Van Gogh painting I had ever seen (next page). This was of special significance to me, because I had

written a term paper on him when I attended Casper College. A two-hour walk through one of the world's greatest art museums is definitely not enough time.



Our dinner that evening was at a very fancy hotel. In fact, it was so fancy that I couldn't resist sliding down a marble banister! On our way there we drove by a cathedral covered with blue mosaics. Until two years earlier, this convent had been used as a warehouse. This date was July 31, 1992, my twentieth wedding anniversary. With great difficulty and a very bad connection, I managed to talk to Karoline. Left: Van Gogh painting, photo by Ed Cameron

Our last full day in Russia was spent at Peter the Great's Summer Palace on the Bay of Finland. Once again, the exquisite art and artifacts covered in gold intrigued me.



Peter the Great's
Summer Palace
photo by Butch Head

At the scheduled time for the bus departure we were told that the bus had broken down, and asked if we would like to ride a hydrofoil back to St. Petersburg. Most of us were thrilled with the idea. However, what should have been a forty-five minute boat ride lasted approximately two hours. But it was a nice sunny day, and an enjoyable ride. We passed sail boats and missile boats along the way back.



Hydrofoil to St. Petersburg; Missile boat



As a special treat for our last evening in Russia, we watched the Russian Army Men's Choir perform, along with several pretty women dancers. They put on quite a show.



Russian Men's Army Band and women dancers



While riding on the bus back to the hotel, we passed a cathedral undergoing restoration. I asked if we could stop and take photos. A mosaic image of an artist's rendition of how Christ may have looked caught my eye; it

must have had a strong emotional appeal to a solitary woman, who gazed at it while she quietly smoked a cigarette.



Cathedral in St. Petersburg; with woman looking at it



As much as I enjoyed St. Petersburg, I felt somewhat cheated by the advertisement for this trip in Aviation Week and Space Technology. It said we would be going to Alma Alta, in Kazakhstan, which is the same country Baikonur is located. We each paid \$5000.00 for the trip, and it was well worth it. However, the next trip that Aerospace Ambassadors offered a few months later eliminated St. Petersburg, and only charged \$3800. So effectively, we spent \$600 a day in St. Petersburg. I would have much rather gone to Alma Alta than St. Petersburg. Aerospace Ambassadors is no longer in business.

While not going to Alma Alta was a disappointment, the rest of the trip is still remembered today as one of my best trips. I saw so much of the Soviet/Russian space program that I had never expected to see, made some very good friends, whom I still stay in contact, and gained an insight to the Russian people, their history, customs, and their rich culture.