

Glassnost

I have only ever once travelled first class by air, and that wasn't really what you could call first class by modern day or Western standards. It was 1982, I was travelling home to London after some years spent in Africa and I was accompanied by a girlfriend who would subsequently become my wife for a while. The Soviet airline Aeroflot had by far the cheapest flights available and we had boarded the plane in Zambia in stifling 35 degree heat. The first stop on our journey home was a brief landing at Luanda airport in Angola where we could hear shelling from the civil war currently raging just outside the airport environs. It was from this point on we were bumped up to first class, and once airborne when I peeked through the curtain into the standard class section I could see why.

The rear section was crammed full of so-called Soviet military observers, and a more tough-looking and well-armed bunch of commando type thugs I have only ever since seen in the movies, some even had machine guns and grenade launchers on their laps there being no further room in the overhead racks. After a few hours of flying, the next stop was for fuel at Budapest in Hungary, still at that time a Soviet satellite state, and although we were allowed to leave the plane and stretch our legs we were surrounded by armed soldiers and amazed at the number of Soviet jet fighters stationed at the airfield. And then we landed in Moscow.

In those cold-war days, part of the pleasure of travelling with Aeroflot was a compulsory two night stay in Moscow to appreciate the wonders of communism in action, and to hopefully be converted and want to turn our backs on the capitalist horror that had spawned us. It was mid-winter when we arrived for our indoctrination and -10 degrees which was a massive shock to the system, especially as we were only wearing jeans and t-shirts, not having needed or owned a coat for many years.

Allowing ourselves to be directed by non-English speaking officials and not speaking a single word of Russian ourselves we eventually ended up at a barrack like dormitory of a hotel in central Moscow, and were herded Gulag style into a large room

along with fifty or so other weary looking western travellers to hear some anti-everything that wasn't Russian speeches, and to partake of some what they assumed was 'western style' food which was grim to say the least. Worst of all in this land where we assumed vodka flowed like water there wasn't a bar and there didn't seem to be any way to order drinks with the meal.

Not to be outdone by the red menace, the following morning we left the hotel early. I was on a mission to find an off licence.

Moscow has a lot to offer with some fascinating history and famous not to be missed monuments which include the Kremlin with its red star topped spires, Lenin's mausoleum in Red Square and St. Basil's cathedral with the candy-stripe minarets. All of this we saw at high speed as we were frozen to the marrow and despite the treacherous icy conditions under foot, ran everywhere. This was not too helpful for the secret agent who attached himself to us as we left the hotel and whose job it was to follow us everywhere, and we lost him within the first five minutes. We also got to travel on the famous metro system because it was nice and warm, and although we had no idea where we were going, the stations themselves with their beautiful stonework and art deco design were a wonderfully refreshing alternative to London's tired looking advertising-poster clad underground system. To say we must have stood out as foreigners and lost souls is probably an understatement, but what really upset me was that despite what we had heard, no-one approached us and offered us a fantastic amount of Rubles for our western clothes and my watch, so having come straight from Africa we really must have looked like shit!

By some miracle we managed to find our way back to our starting point off Red Square and locate the massive GUM department store nearby. With a grand facade somewhat similar to Harrods in London, the equally grand and massive doors of GUM opened onto a chaos of people queuing for whatever was on offer. It looked a bit like the first day of the sales in a bargain basement store back home except that all the women were wearing expensive looking jewellery, dressed in fur coats and high heels and looking far more capitalist than we had ever done, but somehow (probably some sixth sense kicked in) I managed to find the department selling wine and bought what looked to be a bottle of dry white and at what seemed a reasonable price – success.

That evening at dinner time in the camp canteen I summoned over the stern faced akela before she commenced her haranguing of us guests, and asked her if it would be possible for my wine to be opened for me, it not having been possible to make my wishes understood by any other of the staff. All I can assume from her hostile reaction is that having wine with one's meal was not highly thought of in communist Russia, but eventually the deed was done and she eyed me scornfully as I poured myself a glass, gave her my best 'this is how we do things in England' look, and took my first and only sip of the most disgustingly sweet 'dancing-teeth' sherry I have ever tasted in my life. Not daring to reveal my dilemma for fear of being sent to the Siberian salt mines I had to deliberately spill the rest of the bottle on the table.

The next time I met some Russians was also round a drink soaked table but actually in Brighton, at the five star Metropole hotel next to my mother's apartment. I was there with my wife to help a rather portly IT salesman I had met at a conference in Hong Kong, entertain a dozen senior members of the Soviet shipping industry who were visiting the UK to learn about some new computer technology. These Russians really were very high ranking as demonstrated by the fact they were trusted to leave the confines of the Soviet Union in the first place. There were a dozen in all, all men barring one woman who could easily have passed for a man when the lights dimmed. Each represented a different region of this vast communist empire from completely remote and diverse ports such as Murmansk on the Barents Sea within the Arctic Circle, to Odessa on the Black Sea 1500 miles to the south, and Vladivostok opposite Japan some 3500 miles to the east. They also all looked as different from each other as would a table of twelve different African tribesmen. Until later in the evening however, we only ever saw eleven at any one time as one of their member would take his turn to guard the van they had parked outside the hotel behind their coach, and which was full of 'to them' priceless treasures to take back home such as televisions, Western jeans, Scotch whiskey and girlie magazines.

The format for the evening was simply a grand buffet dinner with little else planned as none of the Russians admitted to speaking any English, neither my portly friend or my wife or I spoke a word of Russian, the planned interpreter had failed to materialise and we were relying on our jovial attitude and lots of nodding to make the evening a success. It started well with my friend making sure a large glass of Smirnoff Vodka was placed in front of each guest, and then making a brief speech of welcome which

of course they didn't understand but loved, and then we all stood and drained our glasses, slamming them back down on the table in fine Cossack style, we somehow collectively understanding it would have been bad form to smash them against the restaurant wall. Their self-appointed leader, a massive giant of a man from Odessa with an immense black beard covering almost his entire face, then stood and made a similar speech in a deep booming voice, and brought out from somewhere hidden within his copious jacket and passed around a bottle of local vodka from his region for us all to toast with. After three more of these shipping industry magnates had similarly passed around vodka local to their region and made speeches we thought it might be safer to get some food inside us and so the feast commenced.

I have little recollection as to the order of events as the meal progressed but a few things stand out:-

- Wine not being relevant to this particular party, the Metropole wine waiter was sent away to put on ice all the Smirnoff vodka they had in stock.
- Both my wife and I had deep and meaningful conversations with most of the Russians despite the language barrier, and were invited to tour Russia and stay in every port represented – I do so wish we had followed up on this.
- With every speech made more 'special bottles' of vodka appeared from inside coat pockets as if by magic, and glasses were liberally filled by the Russians.
- I made a number of speeches myself, but as my short term memory banks had become restricted to no more than two to three minutes it seems I made the same speech quite a few times.
- At some stage in the evening all the Russians suddenly spoke passable English and admitted to have understood every word we had spoken.
- When the hotel eventually ran dry of vodka we had to move on to Napoleon brandy.
- At one stage, despite the hotel restaurant being full with perhaps twenty or more other busy tables and showing no regard to the protestations of the timid waiters, Blackbeard went over to the sweet buffet, picked up the enormous and heavy cheese board with all its contents and brought it back to our table. He then single-handedly demolished the entire platter.

- There was singing accompanied by swaying in our seats and a waving of knives.
- I somehow managed to get to my feet and make the same speech yet again, and my wife and I attempted to play chopsticks on the nearby grand piano whilst the Russians beat out the tune on the table with their fists.
- One of the Russians who was the spitting image of the French heartthrob singer Sacha Distel made a pass at my wife and then passed out.
- I seem to recall the female Russian punching somebody.

At this stage perhaps because things were getting a little out of hand (and possibly because of the number of complaints) the maitre d' decided we might want to partake of coffee and liquors in the hotel lounge to where we decamped, making ourselves comfortable in a number of sofas positioned around a large glass topped table.

I had been remarkably impressed at how competently my portly friend had managed to stay in control of himself up to this point, perhaps his bulk helped him to cope with the volume of alcohol being consumed, but now it seemed he needed some fresh air. As he stood, walked towards a set of French windows, forced them open and walked outside through the net curtains I remember abstractedly thinking to myself, 'surely they don't lead to the outside balcony, but open instead to a sheer drop to the basement patio two floors below'.

It took perhaps thirty minutes for us all properly to register that our ample host was no longer with us and we decided to instigate a search. With everyone being completely blotto and laughing maniacally like a load of asylum inmates, this included searching beneath chairs, behind lamp stands as if my friend had been three inches wide, and even under cushions as if he had been a set of keys. And then a different set of French windows burst open, our host made a grand entrance but as if in a trance, tottered robotically towards where most of us were still sitting, stood rocking slightly for a second or two and then fell through the glass topped table.

It was a most fitting finale to a wonderful evening and the rapturous applause lasted well past the ambulance people arriving.