

By: Bill Altaffer, Carmel Valley, California

In the afternoon of our second day in Tomsk, we caught a commuter train to connect to the Trans-Sib. Our commuter train ride, lasting about 2 ½ hours, stopped at all the small villages up to the end of the line, delivering students and workers home after their day in Tomsk. We were an unusual experience for the commuters. One man insisted on sharing his beer with us, thrilled to be meeting his very first Americans. For our part, we enjoyed seeing the farms and villages we passed and visiting with some of the locals on the train. We eventually boarded our sleeper car on the Trans-Sib for our overnight trip to Krasnoyarsk, arriving there in the morning where we were joined by our local guide, Olga, and transferred directly to the airport. Olga, who did not speak English, was intense and efficient, facilitating all our experiences over the next few days. Olga's mission was to inform, entertain and educate us, which she did in daily lectures and informal discussions, assisted by Paul's helpful translations. Her first duty was to deal with airport officials. We jumped through several bureaucratic hoops before being allowed to fly on a government jet to Norilsk, high above the Arctic Circle. Though we had all the requisite paperwork giving us permission to visit this semi-closed city, we were not allowed through security until it had been closely examined by several different airport officials. Norilsk, as was true for most of the cities on our trip, was not even noted on old Soviet maps or mentioned in older guidebooks.

Our arrival at the airport outside of Norilsk was marked by additional security and screening. Long after we had dealt with that red tape, we were still waiting for our luggage as it was x-rayed and examined before finally being released to the waiting crowd. As we drove toward the city, the landscape became bleaker and grimmer with each passing minute. Norilsk has been called the most polluted city on the planet. It was built on permafrost for the single purpose of exploiting the rich deposits of nickel, copper and other precious metals that lie under the frozen ground. These ores are mined and processed in huge factories whose smokestacks billow clouds of toxic particles into the air 24 hours a day. There is talk about eventually making these factories more environmentally responsible, but that will not happen any time soon. In the meantime, the air stinks and the acid rain kills all trees and other vegetation in the area. Wildlife, of course, is non-existent. We could not get over the fact that people actually live in such a poisonous environment. The factories spew out over 2 million tons (that's over 4 billion pounds!) of sulfur dioxide each year, contributing to the astonishing fact that Norilsk, though only a tiny spot with a relatively miniscule population in a huge nation, is responsible for 2% of Russia's annual GNP. By the time we arrived at our hotel in the city, we were already convinced that Norilsk is the worst possible place on Earth for people to live. You might expect that statement to be followed by "but other than that..." But there is no "other than that!" We never changed our minds. There can be no city on this planet worse than Norilsk.

Norilsk is located on the 69th parallel. For three months during the winter, it receives no sunlight. Its buildings crumble and sidewalks and streets buckle in their constant battle against the extreme Siberian cold. Even in the summer, it is dreary and unwelcoming due the clouds of pollution that always hover thickly over the city. It was depressing in every way. Don Parrish, a member of our group, said, "Now I know where to come to get volunteers to go to Mars." Olga, who had already brought 8 groups there this year, said that she often returns to her office in Krasnoyarsk asking why they don't issue gas masks for the trip. It is a new benchmark for ugliness and miserable quality of life in a city. We are also sure that our exposure to its environment, even as brief as it was, caused the loss of a large number of our brain cells. We could not understand why people live there until we were told that they are paid considerably better than anywhere else in Russia. I was also told that there is a good thing that there are people living there: others don't have to!

The original inhabitants of Norilsk were prisoners. Some were actual criminals, some were political prisoners, but many were arrested on trumped-up charges in order to provide a workforce for the factories. There are no roads or railroads connecting this area to the rest of Russia. The prisoners were brought up the river in barges, 2,000 people at a time, crammed inhumanely in the holds, standing-room-only, for the 5-day voyage. At arrival, if 500 people had survived the voyage, it was considered successful. When those workers died from exposure, disease, lack of adequate food and shelter, not to mention pollution-caused illnesses, more were hauled in. Many never lived out their sentences. Most that did were forced to stay in Norilsk to continue working in the factories. They had nowhere to go and no way to get there anyway. Even now, when workers retire, they are rarely able to leave. If they do, their pension is cut severely. That and other considerations keep the population stable. Presently, 68% of the population is male. The women we saw, in contrast to all the stylish beauties further south, fit well in their colorless, drab setting. No one in our group ever wants to return to Norilsk, but none of us are sorry we went there. Sometimes there are prices to pay for going where few dare to visit. We feel we experienced something completely unique and will never forget it. But we were very, very happy that we only spent 24 hours there.

As we left Norilsk and drove on one of the few local roads in the area to the town of Dudinka, the countryside gradually became less damaged by pollution. Vegetation grew on the tundra and birds flew in the air. We stopped at one point at a spring to perform a local ritual, making wishes that are guaranteed to come true. Further along, we stopped to take a short walk out onto the tundra. That allowed us to see up close all the many types of plants, tiny flowers and little berries growing there.

After a couple of hours on the road, we arrived at Dudinka, where we boarded our Spartan vessel, the Valery Chkalov, for our 5-day cruise south and up the Yenisei River. The Yenisei, like many Siberian rivers, flows from southern regions to empty into the Arctic Ocean. Having originated in Mongolia, it is the world's 5th longest river, something over 2,550 miles long (sources vary). The Valery Chkalov was built over 60 years ago, when no doubt it was a first-class ship. Today, it is not a tourist vessel. It is owned by the Norilsk Nickel factory. It and a sister ship make regular round-trips during ice-free months between Krasnoyarsk and Dikson on the Arctic Ocean, providing the only affordable transport for factory workers as well as the inhabitants of the small villages located on the river. At most of these villages, the ship did not stop. Rather, it slowed down so that small motorboats could pull up to deliver or retrieve passengers. The ship boasts four levels of service. We were in the first-class cabins, which were very tiny and basic. Our toilet facilities were down the hall and showers (private for

our group) were on the deck below. Olga had the key to a lounge area that was for our exclusive use. There, we could relax, read, listen to Olga's lectures and watch videos of the area. Since there were no electrical outlets in the cabins, this room was where we recharged all our batteries. Fourth-class passengers did not have cabins. They slept wherever they could, on deck or on the two small couches at Reception. Very few of the ship's passengers are able to afford the meals in the dining room, which we usually had to ourselves. The food on board was excellent, well prepared, varied and tasty.

We only made two stops where we were able to disembark briefly. The first was at the town of Igarka, known as the "Continental Gate to the Arctic Ocean," where we made a quick dash to see the only permafrost museum in the world. It was very well-done and fascinating. Considering its remote location, we were surprised to find that it had beaten London's National Portrait Gallery, among others, for commendation in 2002 by the European Museum of the Year Award. The average year-round temperature in Igarka is +15 F. Summer lasts only two to three weeks, creating ideal conditions for a unique permafrost research station and laboratory under 20 feet of frozen ground. Our second stop was even shorter, at a small village where most passengers disembarked in a rush to hurriedly buy assorted foods and goods at tables set up by local entrepreneurs on the shore. Items for sale included buckets of berries, cedar nuts, homemade jams and hot sauces.

During one of Olga's twice-daily lectures and meetings, she informed us that the river was at that point over 6 miles wide (its maximum width is 30 miles). We also passed through its most narrow point, a mere 600 yards wide, where it flows through a deep canyon. On our last full day, Olga took us to the ship's bridge where we were given champagne and certificates as we crossed the Arctic Circle. We also saw the remains of Stalin's hut of exile on the shore. At another point, Olga told us that we were at the closest accessible spot to the 1908 Tunguska Explosion. Scientists and other interested parties could disembark there, then take a 500-mile helicopter ride to the site. Throughout our cruise up the river, we enjoyed spending our free time watching the thickly wooded riverbanks slide by. It was heartening to see so much unexploited wilderness.

After our 5-day cruise covering nearly 1,000 miles, we arrived back in Krasnoyarsk. It was founded by the Cossacks and has a very rich history. We spent one night there in an ultra-modern hotel, notable because all the mini-bar items were free of charge. The following day, we enjoyed a leisurely, very interesting tour of this pleasant city. One of the sites we visited was a monument with connections to California. It marked the spot where a handsome Russian captain had drowned when his horse fell through ice on the river. He was on his way from California to plead with the Russian Orthodox Church to allow him to marry his sweetheart, the 16-year-old daughter of the commandant of a fort in San Francisco. She, in turn, was soliciting the Pope for permission to marry him. With the difficulties of travel and communication in those days, she waited for him for 35 years before learning of his death, at which time she joined a convent. Other locations in the city did not have such tragic stories. The city was charming, with new and modern features alongside older, traditional architecture. We took a twenty-minute drive out of town to a state-of-the-art ski resort, complete with Doppelmeier high-speed quad ski lifts that race up the mountain slopes all year round. The latest snow-making equipment lines the sides of the slopes. That, plus temperatures as low as minus 50, assure a good skiing season. Skiing at 50 degrees below zero? Yesssss!

That night, we flew back to Moscow, gaining four hours and arriving at the Vnukovo Airport at 9:00 PM. The drive from this airport to downtown Moscow is incredible at night. The city appears magically enchanted, very much like a fairy tale, with picturesque buildings and onion-domed churches lit up colorfully and beautifully. It was a truly incredible sight, almost dream-like, and a fitting way to end our trip together.

Russia remains a fascinating place to me. It has such a long, sad, hard history. Its people have suffered through incredibly difficult times, yet they remain warm, welcoming and strong. We all feel a real kinship with the Russian people, a feeling that is only reinforced with each visit. After 12 trips to Russia, starting in 1964, I think that I am finally beginning to understand this multi-faceted nation. It still has closed cities, 236 of them to be exact. It also has very open and engaging people, beautiful countryside, unique architecture in historical cities, excellent food and plenty of attractions to appeal to all tastes and interests. It is changing rapidly in many ways as it joins the modern world. We saw many differences between this visit and what we experienced just a year ago. For example, the women in our group noted that almost all the public toilets now carry toilet paper and have soap and running water. Even a mere year ago, very few of them did. Everywhere, in all cities, there are monuments and fountains that work. Public places are always accented by large plantings of colorful flowers. The people have great pride in their country and their cities, and it shows. As for the people, they are as fashionable and trendy as anywhere else in the world.

So, why would an American want to visit Russia? What seems to age us is our routine. We go to the same places, eat the same foods, think the same thoughts. We tend to become stuck in ruts, going to places that feel familiar and do not threaten us. Russia is invigorating. It is rich in history and is now amplified by a free market. Things are happening there at a very fast pace. You can see it reflected in the people you meet. Now, Russians travel the world and are knowledgeable and informed about events outside of their borders. Cities and towns across the vast landscape host excellent hotels, restaurants and resorts, all with the most modern amenities. Only by going will you know the excitement of experiencing Russia today. You ask, "But is it safe?" Oh, please!

Whether you are making your first visit to Russia and want a "normal" itinerary to the obligatory spots or want to explore some of the innumerable, rarely visited, remote areas of the country, I highly recommend MIR Corporation in Seattle. They know Russia. After traveling there many times, I am finally beginning to know it, too.