

Network Russia Explorer Belt Visit to Russia 2010

In August 2010, twenty three Leaders and Explorer Scouts went to Russia with the expressed aim of allowing the Explorer Scouts to attain their Explorer Belt. In the later stages, we would be joined by Bill Turnbull who would present the belts in Red Square, Moscow.

Planning for the trip started in 2009. From the start we knew that there would be some difficulties with this trip due to the very nature of organising an Explorer Belt Expedition within the body of an orphanage visit. As it happens, this was further complicated later on due to the heat, fires and smog which affected most of the south and south-east of the Russian Federation. In fact, one week before we were due to fly out we were advised not to go to one of the venues due to the prevailing conditions. Not a good time to re-organise the visit!



However, back in 2009, fires and smog were not a problem. Language was however! It was soon realised that we could not achieve the Explorer Belt Award without some help from our Russian friends, so contact was made with Sergey Sirotkin in Moscow (International Commissioner for ARNSO Scouts) who put us in touch with one of the Russian Orthodox group Scouts, Boris Chernovol. Boris would help us plan the Moscow end of the visit and also arrange for additional Russian Scouts to accompany us and the Explorer Scouts so that we could overcome the language barrier.



Additionally, some of the projects associated with the Explorer Belt Award were carried out here in the U.K. so that the Explorer Scouts could identify with the Russian culture and geography. These continued right up to departure time which, as it happens, was a week after St. Petersburg Scouts left North Wales so it was possible to make late arrangements with Natasha and Ed (St. Petersburg leaders) for what would be the last part visit in St. Petersburg.

Other than having to meet up at Manchester Airport at 3.00 a.m. The outward trip went OK with no delays. This time we flew KLM from Manchester to Amsterdam and then on to Moscow. During the flight, the Explorer Scouts groups were given an envelope which contain projects they would need to complete whilst in Russia.



First surprise on the trip was a new terminal at Moscow's Sheremetyevo airport opened one week earlier. Very clean and very bright. Second surprise was that two bags didn't arrive on our flight. Normally this would not have been too much of a problem, but we were moving on so even if they came in on the next day's flight we would be well on our way south. However,



we couldn't wait in Moscow so we managed and two days later the bags turned up at the post office in a small village just south of Tula.

Due to the fires and smog, we had had to change our arrangements so that we could not visit Kolumna and Kolichev. This made things difficult from an Explorer Belt point of view, so the Leaders in charge of the Explorer Belt projects re-engineered the requirements to suit the conditions and the Explorer Scouts commenced on their various projects during the week that we spent at Pyatnitski, just south of Tula. They will tell you stories of how they travelled, who they met and their visit to the fire station in Tula! Each group of Explorer Scouts provided a Russian evening at some stage during the visit.

Last time we were at Pyatnitski orphanage was in 2007 and some Leaders might remember white paint falling off ceilings, green and pink paint and the now famed, lilac paint. Well I'm glad to report that the white paint is still on the ceilings, the green and pink paint is as good as new, and the lilac paint is still fresh and the same shade of lilac!! This time we decorated the area between the dining hall and the toilets. In the school building, we undertook a major decoration of the stair wells made all the more difficult by having to keep at least one staircase open to traffic. Graham Hall did the now usual daily run into Tula for supplies, accompanied by various people to do the food shopping. One huge plus was that we could use the potatoes, vegetables and apples grown at the orphanage.

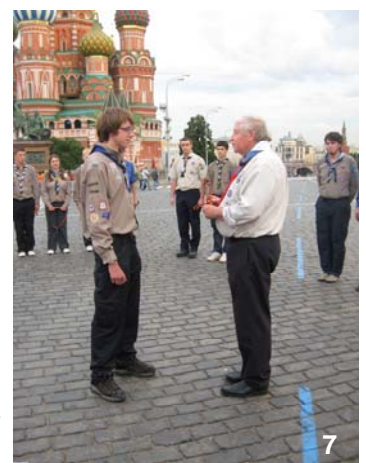


During the week we arranged to visit Yasnaya Polyana, the home of Lev Tolstoy (War and Peace etc.) and by chance met up with his great, great granddaughter and last living direct relative. Something to remember and savour. The Tolstoy family were having a family reunion there and we were lucky enough to be there at the right time and be able to talk to them.

Close to the end of the visit to the orphanage, Andrey, one of the Russian Scouts staying with us, arranged for his family to come to visit us from Moscow and they put on a traditional Russian musical evening which everybody took part in and also baked some Russian style cookies.

Having accomplished everything in the Tula region, we coached back to Moscow and met up with Bill Turnbull who flew into Moscow as we arrived. Well planned! Even better planned was Bill's pickup at Moscow's Domodedovo airport by Max Federov and his wife. Max has visited the UK under the Camp Staff Exchange Programme and looked after Bill until we arrived in Moscow. Well done Max.

Now we had been trying to save money and had requested that we stay the one night in Moscow at the local Scout Headquarters. Not a problem according to Boris and it was difficult to find hostels or hotels close to the HQ anyway. Anyway, suddenly the coach stopped, reversed and went up a cobbled road to a set of gates behind which was what looked like a monastery. We all thought-



that we had taken a wrong turn and that the coach would reverse out of it. Not a chance. Right up to the gates, stop and then telephone for the gates to be opened. A Russian Orthodox priest appears, telephones someone and the gates open, the coach drives through and we are in a medieval monastery courtyard close to a building with gold 'onion domes' on top, all five of them. The priest turns out to be 'Dimitri' who speaks very good English and helps to run the Scout group which Boris and his friends belong to, and is an exceptionally nice person.

So we take our bags up the flight of steps to the church and deposit them inside for safe keeping. The church is of the Orthodox type with gold embellishments and icons throughout. 'Where are we going to sleep?' we ask. Right here is the response! It is probably the first time that any of us have slept overnight inside a Russian Orthodox church! What an experience.

The following day, Bill, Paul and Graham have to visit the Russia Today television studios in Central Moscow for a 'news conference' which had been pre-arranged through Boris and Dimitri. Three hours later they return, stow baggage and board the coach and off for the Moscow City tour complete with guide. Later in the evening, we arrange to present Explorer Belts to those taking part. This is managed by Bill Turnbull in front of St. Basil's in Red Square. Hopefully, they will all remember what happened to them in Red Square in years to come!

Later we end up at Moscow's Leningradsky station to board the overnight sleeper train to St. Petersburg. Many trains have been re-furbished or have new rolling stock. A further surprise was that sheets etc are now included in the ticket price. Also, the car attendant's speak English! and every now and again, an attendant walks the corridors selling wine, vodka etc.!

Eight hours later we arrive in St. Petersburg, this time at the station we expect to arrive at. No surprises as the one we had in 2007 when we arrived at a different station! However, when we got to the front of the station, no coach for transfer! Many telephone calls and two hours later, a coach arrives and we get to the hostel that we will be staying at for three days. Everybody is let loose in St. Petersburg to do their own sightseeing. We all meet up for breakfast and dinner at pre-arranged restaurants organised by Natasha and everything works out fine.

On the second day, we organise a visit to the Catherine Palace at Pushkin and the weather holds. People marvel at the re-construction and opulence, and take home some memories of the past with them.

During the visit to St. Petersburg, we also visit the ballet, this time to see 'Spartacus', and some go on the river to see the bridges open, not exactly White Nights, but close.

Then off to the airport and home. Returning via Amsterdam and Manchester, everybody is still smiling at Manchester especially as we have not lost any baggage on the return trip.

A visit to remember, full of pre-visit problems, many overcome with the assistance of ASLA, but all part of the fun of organising foreign visits. Russia seems far away when you are organising visits and it is a huge country and you don't need anything to go wrong whilst you are there, however, it is always comforting to know that you have friends over there that can help you out of the many problems that do arise and hopefully, others on the trip don't always see the 'on the hoof' arrangements

that are sometimes needed to keep things running smoothly. Our thanks go to everyone concerned, especially, Hazel and Robert at ASLA, Natasha and Ed in St. Petersburg, Boris, Alexander and Andrey in Moscow and to Vladimir at the orphanage.

