

Suzie's Perspective on Russia 2010



Suzie in Red Square

A year ago I always thought that Russia was a very cold country with little to offer. How wrong I was! When I arrived in Moscow on the 12th August it was 38°C and it had been around that for over a month. As for the nothing to offer - well I was so wrong.

The aim of the trip was to complete the Explorer Belt Award. Our group consisted of thirteen Explorer and Network Scouts from Llangollen District. We also travelled with eight Network Russia members who did a lot of work behind the scenes organising our visas and flights etc. Then there was Gerry, our DESC, and his wife.

The aim of the Explorer Belt is to complete a range of challenges in a foreign country while learning about different cultures and meeting new people. But for us something even more important

was to have fun!

Before we left, as a group, we came up with 5 challenges of our own which were-

- To successfully use the public transport in Moscow
- Visit attractions- research about them before hand then write up what we learnt
- Cook a traditional meal for the Russian scouts out there
- Learn welsh folk songs and sing them to the Russians
- Research the history then visit the ballet in St Petersburg

I personally also wanted to learn some Russian and use it when we were out there.

The second lot of challenges that we had to complete were chosen by Gerry and Paul (Network Russia) and only revealed when we arrived in Moscow. These ranged from visiting a Russian church to speaking to locals about the differences between Russia's communist era and now.

Just days before we left our plans had to be changed due to the extreme heat and fires. Our two days in Moscow was reduced to just one and our travel was affected due to limitations because of smog and fires. Also the plan to separate in groups and go to two orphanages had to change to all of us going to the one orphanage, in Tula. But we just hoped for the best and were happy that we could still go.

The trip did not start extremely well for me as mine and Steff's (another Explorer Scout on the trip) luggage was lost on the way to Moscow. But being scouts we carried on like everything was normal instead of acting like we'd been wearing the same clothes for 3 days. We did eventually get them back on the second day.

Our first night was unlike a normal scouting night as it was spent in the largest hotel in Moscow, the Cosmos. When we arrived in Moscow we met up with Boris, a young scout leader from the Russian Orthodox Scouts based in Moscow, who took us to a nice little cafe and then to Red Square. We were very lucky because it had rained that day, clearing the air of smog, which meant we had a clear view of the whole square from the State Museum to St Basil's cathedral.

The next day we met two other scouts, this time Pathfinder Scouts, Alex and Andre. Together with Boris they successfully bought train tickets for all of us and we made our way to the platform. It became clear that tourists don't often use public transport in Russia because we got some odd looks as we sat next to locals on the train.

When we arrived in Tula we were met by Vladimir, the orphanage director.

We had chosen our main project of the Explorer Belt to be linked with an orphanage near Tula where we would spend the majority of our trip. When we eventually arrived at the orphanage, after a

journey none of us would like to repeat (involving 26 people in a 20 seater minibus), we were all shocked. The main building used to be a manor house for a rich family but is now the home of forty children. Whilst we were working, there were no children there and Vladimir explained that during the summer the children either go to their parents



26 into 20 does go!

.....*Suzie's Perspective on Russia*

(who are mainly alcoholics) another orphanage or to a 'summer camp'.

It felt like we had stepped back in time by a century or two. The local village consisted of three houses next to the orphanage, a shed which could have been their toilet and the local wash place which was the nearest lake/pond. Luckily the orphanage had showers that had been installed only a few years earlier. The toilets had no doors on the cubicles so we hung sheets from the roof for a little privacy.

Vladimir would be responsible for deciding what our main project would consist of and when we asked him what he wanted us to do he said that the main thing that needed doing was- painting. Well, we were quite happy with that as we could see the place needed a good lick of paint. But it was not as easy as we'd first imagined. It turned out that Vladimir was very picky when it comes to paint and he loves brown! Paint and all the tools would also be supplied by us!



One of the stairwells

We were split into three groups and it was in these groups that we would complete our challenges. I was in 'The A-Team' with Lucy, Les and Gavin.M. Lucy and I started our project by mixing a pot of green paint for the back room, which took us over an hour, only to find out that Vladimir wanted it painting brown!

During the time we were there more and more things kept going wrong regarding paint. Firstly when the other group started painting a stairway the plaster just started falling off the wall. Then we spent ages painting the doors a nice light blue for Vladimir to decide he wanted them brown too! It seemed like a painting nightmare. But by the end of the week we had successfully managed to paint two of the back rooms in brown, two stairways in

two different shades of blue/green, the porch room in blue, the outside walls in white, the stairs in dark brown, the dining room walls in light brown, the stairway doors in brown, and then with the leftover paint- the gym equipment in a variety of bright colours and the wooden shelter in green! So all in all a job well done!

I am happy to say that when we left, the place did look much nicer.

During our time at the orphanage we had some days away to try and complete some challenges. My team was the first to leave to go to Tula. Our first challenge of the day was to do the shopping for the other group who were cooking their traditional meal that night. The hardest thing was to get custard because the packages are all in Russian and the pictures are of no use. Then after that we were told to make our way back to the orphanage (which is about a 45 minute drive away) and be back before dinner. So, with the help of Alex, we found the bus station and worked out how long we had to explore Tula. With the last bus at 10 to 5 we had just over 2 hours. Our first stop was the Tula Kremlin (meaning fortress in Russian). Today it protects just two cathedrals within its tall walls but in the past it was used as protection against invasion. Tula is quite a large industrial city made famous for its mass production of machine guns. This meant we had to have special permits to enter. After a quick look around the Kremlin we went across the road to the 'Church of All the Saints'. Both Lucy and I had to cover our heads with our neckers before we entered. It was so different to any church I have ever seen in the UK. There was gold everywhere and huge paintings covering the walls. Plus no seats! Its seems strange but over there it is the norm- everyone stands and the priest either stands at the top of a few steps or on a small raised platform in the centre of the room (which would make it a cathedral).

The bus ride to Obidimo was almost worse than the journey to the orphanage. There were around thirty people seated plus over twenty people standing! There was no more free space- or so I thought. People still got on at the next few stops with not many people getting off! From Obidimo we had an hour's walk back to the orphanage in the blistering heat. We did eventually make it back but with many blisters. The journey was fun though as it gave us an opportunity to ask Alex questions about himself. Plus we didn't starve as there were many apple trees along the way.

We spent a lot of our free time at the orphanage with our Russian friends. We chatted about the differences between Russian and British Scouting, which I found very interesting as there are so many. For example, the head of the Russian Orthodox Scouts in Moscow is a priest and many scout groups are linked to a church. Also the Russians always have the same type of uniform and move up the sections by experience rather than age. Then when they do progress, their necker colour changes.



We meet with Tolstoy's Great, Great Granddaughter!

.....*Suzie's Perspective on Russia*

We also spent quite a bit of time singing or listening to the Russians sing and play the guitar. Then at night we played many wide games that were set up by the Russians. Most of them would probably have been banned in this country but there seems to be a lack of health and safety in Russia. One game involved protecting our group flag using sticks as swords and hiding in the shadows so we could jump out in front of the other team and scare them. Even though many of us ended up slightly bruised, we had a lot of fun and learnt a lot too.



Because of the heat it was very easy to walk to the lake with nothing but the clothes on your back, swim, then dry out during the walk back. So that's what we did!

When it was time to leave the orphanage we said our thanks and farewells to Vladimir and then headed back to Moscow. That night we were warned we would be slumming it in Boris' Scout HQ but when we arrived we were in for a shock. Dimitri, the priest from the church next to the Scout HQ came to meet us. Then he told us we would be spending the night in the church! Now this is not just a church, it's a Russian Orthodox cathedral. So when we walked in all we could see was paintings, gold and more paintings. It felt wrong to be sleeping in there but a huge honour.

After a few tours around Moscow we finished off at Red Square once more. It



was there that we became the first people ever to be presented with an Explorer Belt in Russia. As we had completed the majority of our challenges, and promised we would complete the rest plus do a presentation, Bill Turnbull MBE, president of Network Russia, presented us all with our Belts - right there in one of the most famous squares in the world. It was such a proud moment. Not only were we all proud of ourselves, but we were proud of our team members. We had all become like a family.

This trip was such a great experience. Not only did I learn loads about Russia and its Scouting but I feel like our team helped out in a place where volunteering is a rare thing, and whilst doing all of our challenges- had fun! If anyone is given the opportunity to get involved in an Explorer Belt expedition- take it! Thanks to everyone involved in making our trip such a huge success!

By Suzie Gregory,
Explorer Scout from Llangollen Dragons ESU, Young Leader and YSP.
(A cut down version of this article also appeared in Scouting Magazine, February Issue)

During our time at the orphanage we had a day trip to Yasnaya Polyana, Leo Tolstoy's estate. It was a great opportunity to learn about the writer and have a look around his estate. After a tour of his house and gardens we made our way to the gift shop. I saw some of the leaders talking to a group of people and when someone got a camera out I jumped into the picture with them. It was only afterwards that I realised who the people were. They were descendants of Tolstoy himself! They explained that they were there commemorating the anniversary of Tolstoy's death. Probably the closest relative we met was his great great granddaughter!

As it is very normal for the locals to visit the local lakes/ponds it was something we had to do.



That night we got the overnight sleeper train to Saint Petersburg. It was there we spent the next few days relaxing with some sight-seeing. Our hostel was right in the centre of the city and we were just minutes away from most of the major destinations- The