

Our Russian Experience Will Be Remembered Forever

Five retired teachers from four states returned from Russia on October 31st after spending a month with Jim Tolbert working with teachers and students in both Moscow and Novgorod. Because of the exchange Jim established four years ago to help Russian students become more fluent in English, 102 American adults have experienced the friendliness of many teachers, their students, and their families.

After changing planes in Helsinki, Finland, we arrived in Moscow. We were met by smiling faces that were very glad to see Jim and his new group of Americans. It wasn't long until we were in our hosts' homes. My host family agreed to house an American because the 15 year old daughter, Alena, wanted to speak better English. Neither of her parents spoke English so Alena was in charge of everything. She spoke very good English and had many questions about America and my interests. Soon after my arrival she asked me if I would like to go to the Moscow circus with her. Near the end of our stay her wish came true. Every day was a joy with Alena.



Mary Ann teaching Russian students the Jack-O-Lantern song, just before Halloween

The Moscow students anticipated our group and when we arrived at their school we saw a welcome banner inside the front door. The very first day students began saying "Hello" to us when we saw them in the corridors. The response to a smile touched our hearts. In the classrooms we were greeted by very attentive students that willingly responded to any lessons we brought with us. After class each day we met the other Americans, and our guide, to tour the many historical areas of Moscow to see their beautiful architecture as we learned about Russian history. Red Square and the Kremlin were most interesting. Three of us had a great trip with 30 students on a bus trip to visit the ancient city of Vladimir, one of Russia's oldest cities. Our farewell party followed a round table discussion about stereotypes of Russians and Americans. We were also treated to a wonderful musical program of Russian music and dancing by adults and students. Our new friendships had been cemented and it seemed our time was too short in Moscow.

We rode the train from the Leningradski Station to St. Petersburg where we were met by the Friendship Force staff of this beautiful city. This city of numerous canals and 101 islands was fascinating. Seeing St. Petersburg just one year after it's 300th Anniversary meant that everything was glistening in the sun. Yes, we were very fortunate to have sun during most of our stay. The ages of the Russian buildings and how well they were preserved was amazing. Each beautiful site kept us in admiration of the preservation efforts of the Russian people. Our English speaking guide was very interactive with us as we toured such notables as St. Issac's Cathedral, Catherine's Palace, Yusupoff Palace, the Church of Spilled Blood, and the Hermitage. We also experienced a huge open market and ate in Russian restaurants.

A public bus took the six of us from St. Petersburg to Novgorod where we stayed with our host family for two weeks. My host family, the Volkova's, could not have been more perfect. We already had communicated by e-mail, so we began my stay with some knowledge of each other. The day after arrival I began to attend Natalia's classroom with students from ages 11 through 17 years old. Getting to know the students so well over a two week period gave a lot of time for bonding. Natalia is not only interested in her students improving their pronunciation and using conversational English, but she also wants them to have the opportunity to learn more about America and our people. Each break during the school day she let two or three students ask me questions that interested them. The students are very much like our U.S. students. They dress about the same, they like fast music and sing their favorite pop songs. I even attended a school disco with flashing stobe lights. During class they are very respectful of their teacher, whom they call Natalia Volkova.

During our afternoon sightseeing we visited the Kremlin with Tatiana Rybtskaya as our English guide. Her pleasing personality and her wealth of knowledge about the history of Novgorod gave us a thorough background. I especially enjoyed her explanation of the statues of the monument to the "Russian Millennium" built in 1862 of bronze and granite. Later she also guided us around the Museum of Wooden Architecture, which housed old buildings as far back as 1539.

We were also taken to many concerts during our evenings. The very old instruments were a special treat.
Our farewell party in Novgorod was a "barrel of laughs". By then we all knew each other so well that I hated to see our stay come to an end. Very sincere tributes were given to Jim Tolbert for his continued efforts to bridge the miles between Russia and America. His Friendship Force exchange programs gives people a chance to hold hands across the oceans.

The six of us agree that the generation in school now will make a big difference in the growth of Russia. Life has been especially difficult for Russia in the past. The older generation still finds it hard to be independent. One of our American ladies began going to Russia 20 years ago. Her insights about the many changes was most interesting.

If you are intrigued by Russia and enjoy being with students, this is a travel experience to put on your list of travel destinations. Just e-mail Jim at jimtolbert@comcast.net. I'm sure glad I contacted him.