

OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

Alan and I were in the Russian Federation in May this year, forty years exactly since we had driven up to Moscow from London in 1966 in a London taxi. Somewhat unfortunately this trip clashed with the Buick Nationals but we had planned to go in May and that was that.

We had spent a few days sightseeing in Moscow and then caught the midnight train to St Petersburg. It felt very James Bondish sitting in the red velvet couches in the dining car at 1 a.m. eating red caviar and knocking back the usual 100 ml glass of vodka.

St Petersburg was a planned city and must rank as one of the most beautiful cities in the world, situated on the Gulf of Finland.

One day after visiting the Hermitage Museum and the cathedral where the Romanovs are now buried (according to DNA evidence, young Alexei and Anastasia are missing), we felt we had been inundated with culture and we wanted to see something else. We had developed the ABC syndrome - "another bloody church".

Fortunately Dr Mikhail Kalashnikov had turned 85 this year and there was an exhibition honouring him at the Museum of Artillery, Engineering and Signals. We were dropped off at this museum and the rest of our tour group, with noses to the bus windows, wondering at our audacity, drove off to see a floral clock or something of that ilk.

The Museum must have dated from Russian imperial times and was probably a military barracks at some time. The forecourt was covered in tank and missile type hardware but you could easily imagine Russian cavalry drilling here.

We didn't have enough roubles on us for the entrance fee and they didn't take foreign currency, but typical of the Russian people (a bit like Aussies actually), we were waved through anyway.

It is almost impossible to describe the museum, being vast and dating back to the 17th century Imperial times up to the modern day. The paintings of battles were often 8 metres x 5 metres and were fascinating to look at. Unfortunately for us all the notices and labelling were in Cyrillic script but at least you could get the gist of it.

We proceeded through room after enormous room. Luckily we came across a tea room complete with samovar and had a refreshing cup of tea to revive us.

We had to drag ourselves away from the WWII exhibition which was amazing and went on forever. Some Russian dads were there with their sons - I bet there were some stories to tell here. Time was running out and we still hadn't reached the Kalashnikov exhibition. We promised ourselves that one day we would return and devote more time here.



Red Army Hardware in front of the Museum

At last we found the exhibition. The old woman sitting at the door at the exhibition looked like Colonel Ilsa Kleb out of "From Russia With Love" - the one that had the spikes in her shoes. I couldn't help but give her shoes a quick once over.

The NRA had also honoured Dr Kalashnikov for his contribution to gun design and there was a huge plaque on display. From the photos I think he had made a trip to the US to receive his plaque from Charlton Heston!

Kalashnikov had been seriously wounded in 1941 and while in hospital he listened to the complaints of his fellow patients about the inferiority of Russian rifles. In response to this he designed the Avtomat Kalashnikova - the AK47. He had originally just wanted to design a reliable gun which would fire after being in water, mud and snow and would protect Russian soldiers from guns jamming and blowing up.

Apparently he played the violin very well and it is still a passion with him. The guns on display included the first model and every model since. He had been quoted as being appalled that his gun design was a worldwide success which had never been his intention. Some 50 million AK47s are used worldwide -- no doubt the Russian government is thrilled to bits with its financial success.

When leaving St Petersburg, we visited the duty free shop at the airport and you could buy (if you wanted to spend about \$A400) a glass Kalashnikov filled with vodka. We were somewhat tempted but decided it was too bulky to carry, never mind the expense. I doubt you would get it on a plane now. If bottles of shampoo are suspect, imagine the look on a security officer's face to turn up with a glass Kalashnikov!

L Haime (WA Buicks).