

Wednesday, 24/11/2004

In a little over an hour, at 4 o'clock, I'm meeting with Andrey, Olga and Leubov for dinner at the Kolbasoff restaurant. It will only take a few minutes to get there with the Metro, being just one stop away at Marksistskaya.

It's been a difficult day today. At the concert last night Leubov and Ludmila were very concerned that I would not find the restaurant in this big city. I told them that I knew the address, but Ludmila was still worried. I told them I had a map and a compass, and although Ludmila was not happy, she gave in. But she said I would need Leubov anyway as there is no way I would be able to buy a ticket to Voronyesh on my own. I told them that it would not be a problem for me to buy a ticket. They both raised their eyebrows. Ludmila said she wanted to see the ticket, because Vladimir would have to pick me up from the station and would have to know the carriage number and time.

Well, it was a bit more difficult than I thought, but I got by with just my bit of Russian anyway. The first problem is that Moscow does not seem to have a single main railstation. The station that takes the train to St.Petersburg is not the same as the one to Voronyesh. But a very helpful assistant at the station I thought was the main station, wrote down the name of the Metro and rail station I needed to go to. Another very helpful lady helped decipher the "running writing" that I am not yet familiar with (I can only read print).

At the station there was fortunately an intelligent and helpful lady at the desk. When she asked me something I didn't understand, I just said that I didn't understand and that it didn't matter. I just want to get to Voronyesh and get back the next evening. She got the important stuff down and understood that the rest was unimportant. She smiled sweetly, shook her head and gave me the tickets. She's obviously not used to the easy going nature of us Australians. So when I meet Ludmila and Leubov this evening, I'm going to have to pretend it was all very easy.

I missed going to the Kremlin Museum today, but will go tomorrow instead.

Thursday, 25/11/2004

It took me a little longer to get to the Kalbasaff restaurant than I thought. Although they catered more for the exotic taste, I found something that I was comfortable eating, and again I was not disappointed with the food. Just as with all employees in Russia, the waiter did not seem very happy. Leubev was supposed to be there just for social reasons, but she put in a huge effort with translating. We tried to nut out some of the problems we're facing internally.



I paid Leubev for this evening too. She is really struggling with bringing up a single child on her own and a sick mother to look after, and keeping down a steady job, though she won't tell me what she actually does. I know she earns around US\$4,000 per year.

Tonight I'm taking the train to Voronyesh to meet Vladimir Buteyko, Konstantin's son, and Vladimir's wife Marina Buteyko.

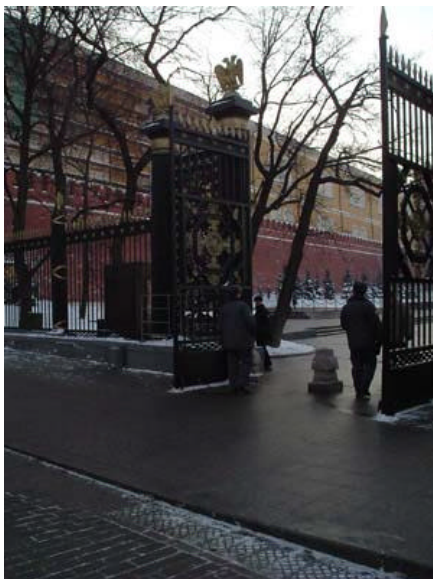
Afternoon:

My God it's cold out there. I thought I'd better come back to warm up and check that my genitals haven't frozen off and dropped onto the ice somewhere along the streets of Moscow.

I tried to get in to see the Kremlin Museum, but the lady told me they were only open on Friday, and tomorrow I won't be here. But I took some pictures along the way, next to the Kremlin.



You might be able to see the two soldiers standing out there in the freezing cold at the flame of remembrance. As you can see, they are not close enough to the flame to benefit from its warmth. I measure the air temperature while I was there. It was -15 degrees. I had to shoot these pictures really quickly before my fingers dropped off.



I won't send you the picture facing this park, with the Golden arches of McDonald's in a small shop under the bridge, one of several such branches I've seen. I can't understand how they can export their crap successfully to Russia when the Russians have got such great food of their own.

Just one other thing I wanted to mention that is quite interesting. You will see a set of toilets in the accompanying picture. One of these is the office of the person looking after the toilets. They appear around town in clusters of 4 to 6, and if there is an attendant, they will be available for hire for 7 roubles.(about 30c) , otherwise they are padlocked. There are not many toilets around, but the government toilets cost 10 roubles, so you can save yourself 20c by going to the private toilet contractor. That's private enterprise gone completely mad.



I now want to get out there before the sun loses its power, and see the other side of the river. It is a beautiful day out there, with the sun shining. Most of the snow in Moscow has gone. It has not melted, it's actually all been carted away. The temperature has never gone high enough to melt snow.

Sunday, 28/11/2004

Thursday evening I got to the train station about 90 minutes early, just in case I got stuck! I went back to the rail hall and tried to figure out where the trains were. There are no information desks, no big “i” displayed anywhere. Nobody official looking walks around. The girls behind the security screens at the cash registers will rip off your head if you make a mistake, so you don’t want to stand in a queue and ask them for help.

I eventually did get help, but when I got to the hall I was told to go to, there was nothing written anywhere about the Poyesd (train) to Voronyesh. I read through every information table, I went from line to line reading all of them, but nothing on Voronyesh. I went to another hall, and this time the cleaning lady was very helpful and told me to go back to the hall I had just come from. Another half hour had passed, but this time my train’s destination did appear on one of the line boards. I knelt down and kissed the ground.

As it happened, the coupe that I thought I had ordered, was actually a four berth coupe. I had hoped to get a coupe on my own, but the train was very full. I was a bit stressed by this stage, partly because I was worried how I was going to cope the whole of the next day and the trip home, without having a shower. I was also worried about who might be sharing the coupe with me. I was also worried because I had forgotten to ask the booking lady for a non-smoking compartment. No way I was I going to cope with a smoker. I had heard that they don’t worry about mixing the sexes on Russian trains, which turned out to be true. But there were very few women around, so my chances of having to share with a Russian bloke was pretty high. There were two women on our carriage. But the long leggy blonde who immediately changed into hot pants once she got onboard, was awarded to the guys in cabin no 5. I bet they bribed the girl at the ticket office.

The Russian men are big. They are very big. The coupe was not designed for such big men. But I was lucky. The two guys I was sharing with were mates and not very big. They were also quite chatty. They were probably not quite as obsessive about this shower thing as I am, but the non-smoking sign in the carriage at least put my mind at ease about that. I must admit that I freaked a bit when they got their dinner out.... Two pounds of cheese, stacks of bread and a two foot salami. I know it was salami because it looked like salami and by the next morning I could still smell the salami. They had no problem demolishing it, after all, they still had most of their teeth.

I sweated all night worrying about my shower. I woke up several times feeling my skin covered in muck, even though I had just had a shower a few hours earlier. The ventilation started off well, but I think they close it down at around 4 in the morning to save electricity. That’s when the snoring starts down the carriages. Buteyko is quite firm about lots of fresh air to stop hyperventilation.

Vladimir Buteyko stood at the door of the carriage waiting for me. He was friendly, led me to a waiting car with engine running and told me he had booked me into a hotel room for the duration of the day so I could have a shower “or whatever” before we start talking. In fact, he had paid for the room too, and to my total embarrassment and in spite of my protestations, refused to take money for this room. The interpreter introduced himself as a linguist from the local university and told me his fee was 300 roubles, around US\$10.00 per hour. I have to say he was worth every penny of twice that amount. We had agreed that I would be responsible for paying for his services before I left for Voronyesh.

Before we started talking I gave him my Buteyko booklets, and he mentioned that my name was very familiar to him. After the shower, we had a long talk, and the Interpreter was pushed really hard with some of the technical stuff, but he coped with it extremely well.

I mentioned that I would like to meet his wife Marina Buteyko, and invite them for lunch. He said she wasn't much interested in food, but we eventually all ended up in a delightful little restaurant and enjoyed a splendid meal for a fraction of the cost of what we would pay in Moscow. Marina even joined me in sharing a half a bottle of wine, although she didn't normally drink alcohol.

After 9 hours all up, we decided we'd all had enough. They brought me back to the hotel, and I took a taxi back to the station later on. I was 90 minutes early at the station, just in case! But I only got onto the train with about 15 minutes to spare, when Vladimir and his son popped out of the cabin. They had been waiting for me there to make sure I had gotten on board safely.

Vladimir was just so friendly and expressed a strong interest in maintaining contact. He also thanked me profusely for taking the trouble to come and visit them in Vornonyesh. It turned out he could speak some English, and his son gave him some help. I think I've succeeded in building that bridge, which was one of the prime objectives of my visit to Russia.

The return trip was interesting. I had been standing for about an hour in the station building, before boarding. I had been worrying all along about who I was going to have to share with. As I looked over the crowd, I became more and more worried. There were one or two Russian ladies in the crowd that I would have paid good money to share with, but for the most part I was worried.

The two guys who were waiting in the cabin when I arrived were very pleasant and kept very much to their own space. But shortly before take off we were joined by a third character, who turned out to be very friendly. In fact he was just too friendly. He was one of those touchee-feely latin types that has to touch you when he speaks to you. I'd been cowering in the corner of my bench, and he came and sat right down in my half, to be nice and close. I quickly demonstrated in my best Russian that I needed a bit of space around me, something he didn't quite understand.

He was a chatty type. He pulled out a bottle of Vodka and offered to share it all round, but none of us were interested in his Vodka. I was hoping the others would help him with it. I didn't fancy being locked in a cabin with a touchee-feely type containing a bottle of Vodka. Anyway, he finished the bottle over an hour or so, and as it disappeared he became even more talkative, louder, and even more touchee-feely. I figured I'd best keep out of his way and stood out in the passage waiting for him to go to sleep, until the carriage supervising lady put out the lights.

I had been a bit worried that he might not be able to hold onto all that alcohol and worried about all the stuff I learnt in medical school, how you bring up your whole stomach lining when you've had too much. I swapped places with one of the other guys and took the upstairs bunk so he wouldn't spew all over me. But I needn't have feared. Russians can hold their alcohol very well

Fortunately while the rest of us were packing and getting ready to go, he was still fast asleep and didn't wake up till the train arrived at the station.

Sunday 28/11/2004

I'm on the train to St Petersburg.

Young Olga, whom I met here about two weeks ago, came up for dinner, which I had promised her a while back. I haven't seen her for quite a while. It's her Birthday today, so I promised her a dinner. She arrived an hour early. I wanted to take her to the sumptuous restaurant where I have breakfast, but it was quite a nightmare with all the security at the hotel. The Restaurant is up on the 21st floor. First she had to go through the metal detector and baggage searchers that are now in place at every entrance to the hotel. This is relatively new and came about since I've been there, but I'm sure I had nothing to do with it. The place is just crawling with police everywhere. Then the security guy guarding access to the lifts didn't let her get into the lift because she didn't have a hotel pass, not even as my guest. We had to go around the outside of the hotel to the other entrance, get a security pass and present it to the lift watchman. He date and time stamped the pass, took a copy and after a lot of bureaucracy he let us up.

The view from up there is quite amazing, right into the Kremlin and overlooking St Basil's cathedral and the red square. The meal was quite expensive for what it was. It cost us twice as much for the two of us as it did for the four of us in Voronyesh. After dinner I couldn't send her off to the Metro, so that was another taxi fare!

I don't think Olga was very happy. She asked if I missed her and if I bought her a birthday present. The answer was "No" on both counts. I told her the dinner was her present. I'm not sure what these young girls are thinking. Why would she expect to get a present? Just because she's young and beautiful? That beauty is not going to last long anyway with all that chain-smoking she does. Not only does she smoke between courses, she actually smokes during the meal!

I caused a minor security scare at the rail station. I stood about 5 meters away from my suitcases and was studying the big board, trying to work out some of the meanings of words on my electronic dictionary, when I looked up and saw my suitcases surrounded by police. I jumped up and said they were mine. They swore at me (I think) in Russian, and I got quite a bit of abuse from the locals too.

The train is magic. I discovered that this is a business class carriage that has been booked for me, and is full of young business women. I'm sitting next to a very young magazine publisher. She speaks perfect English. We've had great food, wine and a chocolate. The train is very comfortable with lots of space and great service. They keep coming around asking if we want more food or tea, like on an air flight.

We have another two hours to go to St.Petersburg.

Tuesday, 30 November

The Pulkovskaya Hotel is very big and very modern, an architecturally attractive building south of the city. It's just a five minute walk to the Metro station, which is right next to McDonalds, probably the busiest shop in town. No, I didn't go inside,

you can tell from the outside by looking through the windows. Unlike the Coca-Cola signs hanging over every hot dog stand, “McDonalds” has been translated into Cyrillic: “МЭДОНАЛДС”



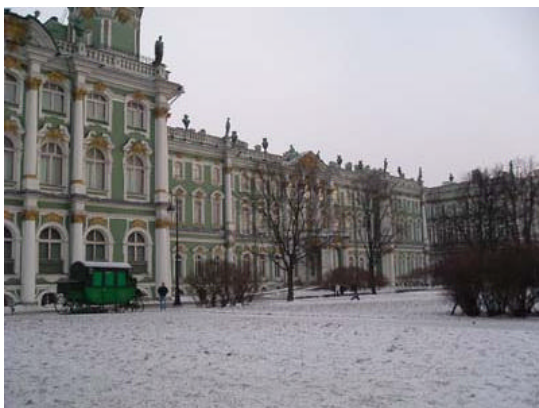
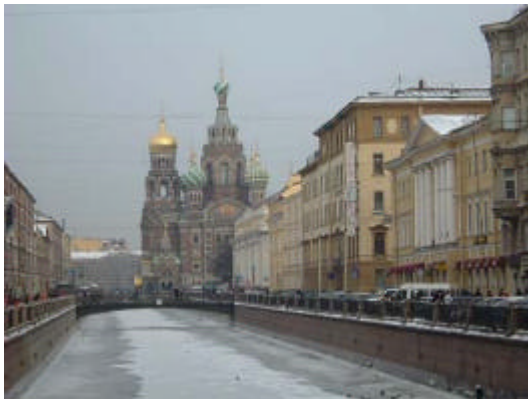
Pulkovskaya - Foyer



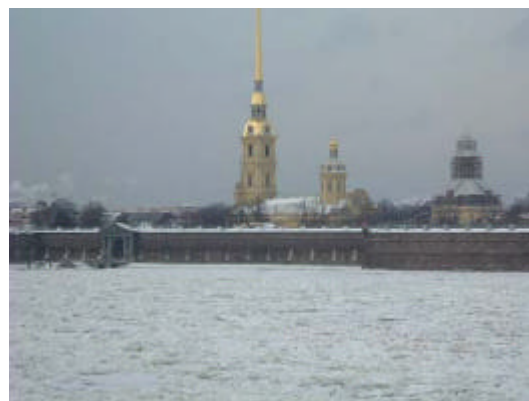
Breakfast Room

I think the only downer at this hotel is that the water really is only luke warm, and it takes forever to get there. Again everything is spotlessly clean. The breakfast room is great with very friendly staff, and they even serve cakes for breakfast.

Yesterday I only woke up at 9h30, but spent the rest of the day exploring the city. That compass has come in incredibly useful, especially because of my dreadful sense of direction. I get some funny stares, but then hey, who cares. I was thinking maybe I should ditch the little Farnell thermometer I have hanging from the zip on my ski jacket, but then how would I know how cold I am?



Back of Winter Palace – Now Hermitage



Peter & Paul Fortress across Neva River



The wall across the frozen river in the picture on the bottom right (above) is part of the Peter and Paul fortress. It was originally built in the 1700's out of wood and mud, but then was modified, rebuilt with clay bricks and re-engineered many times over. It is still undergoing restoration. The cathedral in the same picture, and to the left, is in the fortress and is called the Peter and Paul cathedral. The remains of Tsar Nicholas, his wife, three of the children and some servants and a doctor were buried inside the cathedral in tombs in 1998. I went to have a look inside the cathedral, and as expected, it was quite awe inspiring.

I got up really early this morning, as I want to go the Hermitage and don't want to miss a minute. I only have four days here in St.Petersburg.
