

Wednesday, 01/12/2004

I'm afraid there will be no pictures today. I lost my little digital camera, just one of the things that happened that made for my first miserable day in Russia.

But let me start with yesterday, probably the coldest I've experienced at -14 degrees. I went to the hermitage. I paid the extra 100 roubles to take pictures, but frankly gave up after the first one. It wouldn't have made any difference anyway, seeing I ended up losing the camera. The place is just too awe inspiring. You can't capture anything of the splendour of the place, it's just everywhere. From the huge portraits of all the great emperors of Russia, to every possible art form from just about everywhere in the world. There were huge collections from Rubens, Leonardo Da Vinci..... right through to the French impressionists. There were huge Roman sculptures. I have to confess to some affinity with the Romans. They seem to like being naked. Unfortunately many of the items were damaged, and it seems that most of the male statues have had the most important and vulnerable part of the anatomy amputated by voracious female souvenir hunters.

The vastness of the place is breathtaking. The entire winter palace is just one of the four buildings housing the collection. I was disappointed that there were so few places where you could just sit and stare and take it all in, but as one of the ladies there told me, in Summer there are 20,000 visitors per day, and there would really be no room for comfortable couches. Even at this time in winter, their down season, there were a lot of visitors, particularly a lot of school groups that were getting educational tours. I think there are a lot of philosophical questions that come to mind, especially about the value of having so much spectacular art collected just in one place. I doubt if the artists had ever contemplated that their stuff would be hanging in a museum, although I have to say the environmental context of the great palace could not be improved. I'd be in favour of having it duplicated and making it more accessible to everyone. There are at least a dozen or so there that I could easily have hanging in my home, although I'm not much into paintings.

There is really no point in going on about the vastness and magnificence of the palace. You have to see it for yourself. And as I said, you can't capture it on film. I think the best way to see it is by running through it once and then deciding what you want to spend some time studying the next day. Also, I would take a fold up chair with me.

I made the mistake of allowing a youngish lady talk me into a guided tour, which turned out to be a bit more expensive than I had expected. I hired her for two hours, and although she knew her art and her history and was perfect in English and very pleasant, I think I paid too much. My experience here with women in Russia has been a bit scary, so now I avoid them like the plague. They know how to manipulate us old men!

Today has been a disappointing day. It started off with me discovering that I had lost my little digital camera, to which I've become very attached. It may have happened in the big Metro crush last night, when the Metro went down for about half an hour for some sort of maintenance. When the gates re-opened there was pandemonium. The general philosophy seems to be that the harder you push, the quicker people will get through the turn-styles. Or maybe people were just worried about losing their

place in the queue. I asked everywhere I went yesterday about my camera, including the internet café, but had no luck. It is no use to anyone else, since it needs a special connector and software unique to that camera. Never mind, it has preserved for me many very happy memories. I walked into a camera shop today, but then walked out again. The attendants were too busy looking important and shuffling papers to be interested in my needs. I'll see what the duty free has to offer at the airport. This digital camera has been a god-send. Although I much prefer taking pictures with a real camera, when it gets this cold you really don't get too enthusiastic pulling the big camera out of the case, flicking off the lens cap etc, and then not know if you're day's take has been successful, or if you've been taking pictures of your thumb all day. With the digital you can take it home, brighten the dim pictures, increase the contrast, crop and email to friends. Also taking the pictures is much quicker. It's so small you can keep it in your pocket. A few seconds is all it takes, whipping it out of your pocket and getting the data stored before your fingers drop off from the cold.

Today has been sweltering at around 0 degrees. The snow has started to melt and the city is in a mess since all the drains are blocked by brown sludge and there are big puddles of brown water everywhere. My boots got soaked through and I dropped my hat in the mud. I now keep two pairs of pants going at a time, the one for dinner and breakfast and the other for going out. The cuffs get grubby in no time. But my going out pants are now so dirty I really will have to wash them. I do my own washing, and leave a note and some money for the room-keeper to do my ironing. It costs much less than if I use the laundry service which charges 150 roubles per shirt and 250 per pants, and frankly the Russian workers need the money.

I was really looking forward to seeing the military museum today and planned my day accordingly, but to my great disappointment they decided to closed it for technical reasons. So I wandered off for a coffee and something to eat, but they only had black coffee or tea. They had no cool drinks, juice or water. Tea seems to be very popular here. I have a lot of trouble explaining about my need for dilute coffee. I used to say it wrong in Russian "I'd like coffee with milk, little coffee and **big** hot water" But even with the correct version many of the girls don't know what I'm talking about. Milk in coffee is not common here. You have to ask for Amerikanskii coffee, and they don't know much about that. The only girl who eventually got it 100% correct was one at an internet café in Moscow. She even heated the milk for me. Unfortunately by the time she got it completely right I had to leave Moscow. I hope she remembers next time I go back.

I saw a wedding while walking around the P&P fortress. The bride was having her picture taken in front of the ice around the river. Maybe that's why she wore a pink dress. If she'd worn white you would have only seen her head and arms. My immediate reaction was "poor bridegroom – don't do it! It's not worth it." But on quiet reflection, it's a Russian bride!!! Lucky bugger!!!

The women here really are very beautiful and feminine. It's hard to find one that is not attractive, let alone downright ugly. That doesn't mean we western men have a field day here. These are not only very beautiful women, but they are well educated here in Russia too. They come from a gene pool that is aesthetically pleasing, and their male counterparts complement them well. I've been studying them on the incredibly long escalators going up and down into the metro. You see a passing

parade of life going past you in single file in the opposite direction. The men are very energetic, big, slim, clean cut, have aesthetically pleasing features and are real men.... No earrings and no mullets! It is little wonder that marriages between Russian women and western men last so poorly. All we have to offer is an improved lifestyle.

The other interesting thing is that the police don't stand on ceremony here. If anybody looks like an Arab, or a Chechnyan, they stop them anywhere in the street and check their papers. They leave us non-Arabs alone. It might seem particularly racist, but it's just practical, and the Russians seem to be a pretty practical bunch.

I stumbled across the market today, a very sad experience. The main market is housed in a proper building with fresh fruit and vegetables being sold by a very large number of vendors, far more than necessary. I bought pretty good grapes for 30 roubles a kilo, and bananas also at 30 roubles a kilo. You can get everything from kiwi-fruit to avocados. There is also a fresh meat market in the building, where some strong women with big knives will carve the meat right off the corpse for you.

But outside is a huge leaking tent with dozens of tiny stalls a little more than a square meter each. Here people sit in the freezing cold, melting snow water all over the ground, selling everything from tap fittings, shoes, bras and nickers, china, glassware, detergent, toothpaste..... I thought that the people in the subways were badly off, but they live in luxury compared to the people manning these micro stalls. Philosophically it strikes me as such a waste to have these lovely people having to lead such wasted and hard lives. But even they are better off than the very old ladies standing on the side of the steps at the metro, trying to sell a piece of pumpkin and a bottle of pickled onions. One old lady that nearly brought tears to my eyes was trying to sell a few pairs of socks she had knitted.

I asked my interpreter in Voronyesh about this poverty. He rejected it saying they were professional beggars. His proof was that he once saw one of these beggars eating an ice-cream. If they really were poor they would not be able to eat ice-cream. I asked if the government had a program to look after them. He said they didn't. But then I protested, that many of these could be genuinely poor people. He reluctantly said "yes, they could be". But that's how the Russians cope with it. They just look at them as professional beggars. But that's not what you see in their eyes. The little old lady trying to sell a bottle of pickled onions that is gradually getting covered in snow, is not a professional beggar.

In a great philosophical book called "Famine crimes", the author, who's name I forgot, explains that there is today no need for famine and that it's entirely a product of politics. I think the same holds true for poverty in general. People become traders in micro stalls because the political system has decapitated the entrepreneurial management necessary to lead industry. That this beautiful and intelligent nation with so much human talent has to struggle and suffer this much within a country that is also wealthy in natural resources, is such a tragic waste. The Russian people quite obviously have a huge tolerance for enduring privations. Watching them shovel snow it is obvious they work hard and energetically for very little. I really hope that in the future they will prosper the way they deserve.

I asked some people about the economic changes that have taken place since the great political changes came about in the early 90's. They all thought about it for a while and all said "very little has changed. It's just the rich get vastly richer, while the poor have become very much poorer."

While I hate seeing McDonalds in Russia, especially the one facing the Kremlin, I guess they do bring management know-how and a change in attitude to service to the Russians. Their staff operate in a clean and safe environment and they seem to fulfil a need, judging by the overflowing venues. I just hope they are not competing too unfairly with the young girls selling hot-dogs from Coca-Cola sponsored stands out in the freezing snow.

Thursday, 02 December 2004-12-02

Yesterday evening I had a stroganoff in the hotel's biggest restaurant. There was a 6 piece band playing and singing, and just about every piece was wonderfully danceable. They sang almost exclusively classical popular music from days gone by. This was one time I really missed not having a partner. For about Au\$20, including wine, I can't complain and will be coming again tonight, for the last time.

Today has been another ugly day in St.Petersburg. It was very warm at around 0 degrees. Much of the ugly sludge from yesterday has now melted and disappeared. I did a lot of walking today to have one last look over the town. I also decided to post some books back home that appeared to me to be very heavy, but I had no way of weighing them. I know I am considerably over-weight.

I found the post office alright, but had a lot of trouble finding the main entrance. It was actually less traumatic than I had expected, and the girls behind the desk were very considerate and helpful. I sometimes think it's an advantage to be at a disadvantage. They weren't quite as sweet with their Russian colleagues.

After all the trouble it turned out the parcel only weighed 1.7kg. But it was worth doing just for the experience of sending a parcel from a Russian post office with people who don't speak any English.

Friday, 03 December 2004

At the age of 55 I've just discovered the sauna. For the first time in my life I decided to give it a try. Last night I had some time to kill before the band struck up and dinner. The hotel boasts a lovely, clean sauna complex and indoor heated pool. The AU\$10 was well worth the price for this experience. I wrapped myself up in a towel and wasn't sure about whether I was supposed to bring a swimsuit. I was alone in the sauna, when a naked man appeared. I first tried Russian but found he was a German, selling asphalt equipment to the Russians (when he's dressed, that is). He assured me that in the 12 years he'd been coming to the hotel he'd never needed bathers. So I

also scored a skinny dip in the pool which is part of the sauna complex, all included in the price.

At dinner last night I found my double, a bloke that seems to look exactly like me. It's very difficult to tell, of course, because you never really see yourself in profile, and you're not aware of your mannerisms. I've seen him before at a distance, but last night he sat at the table next to me. I didn't really know what to do. What do you say to someone that looks exactly like you? "Hi there, you stole my looks!!" But then, what really freaked me was that when he left, he left behind his mobile phone and the waiter had to run after him. That's pretty scary after I just lost my camera.

I'm on the Lufthansa plane to Frankfurt, full of a glass of wine and a lovely meal, listening to Julio Iglesias on my walkman. I've got three seats to myself, and really happy that I got away with 10kg excess baggage. After Frankfurt there's Manchester and then the flight to Glasgow. I should get there by 20h00.
