

## Exploring East Russia – a trip that changed my life

In the spring of 1991, about twenty passengers, including myself, flew into Alaska to board an AN24, a small Russian fixed wing aircraft that was to take us from Anchorage to Sakhalin Island. The passengers were a combination of businessmen, some governmental types who would not say who they represented or what their reasons were to go to Russia and some would be investors. At the airport we waited anxiously while the organizer of the trip was in touch by phone with Russia. At about 5:00pm we were advised that the flight would not arrive until the next morning. The next day, one must say to our surprise and delight, it did arrive. Having never really seen a Russian plane before, we were entirely astonished. This was what we would be flying on? There were about 30 seats, side by side in a plane that looked to be blunt, past its time. The seats themselves were thin and utterly uncomfortable. There was no space for our luggage, other than the back of the plane. The toilet was unspeakably filthy. And yet, we were excited! That tells you what happens to people who love adventure in all shapes and forms. There was no kitchen, but there were cookies and sandwiches for the first leg which would take us to Magadan. The seats folded down and since there were not a whole lot of us, we spread out. And after some ridiculously long scrutiny of paperwork, there we went. Because the plane was small and it could not take fuel in the US (the type of fuel used in Russia at the time was different), we had to stop in Anadyr. We had been cautioned not to be overly curious but ask that of a crowd who thought all of this was terribly exciting. We were surrounded by soldiers, who seemed entirely too young for this duty, wearing stiff long green coats who were not overly friendly. We tried to step out of the plane but that was nixed immediately. However instead of taking this as a negative, it gave us more energy, knowing that what we would experience would certainly be different.

Magadan appeared only a few hours later, still nestled in layers of snow. We were supposed to take on a new crew and go through customs and immigration. We were cautioned again not to be overly friendly and to put cigarettes and chocolate on top of the clothing in our suitcases, just in case, a small gift was necessary to ease passing through. We filed in as serious as we could be to face immigration and customs. They were friendly and we did not have any problems with them. However, they told us the crew was not there even though they had tried to get a hold of them. We were told to wait and that we did, hour after hour. The evening turned into night and there we were all twenty of us, trying to sleep on wooden benches as well as the floor in a small barely heated room. We really got to know each other intimately, right there and then. The morning brought our missing flight crew, where they had been no one knew, or perhaps they did not want us to know. We boarded the plane and this time flew right on to Sakhalin Island, our destination.

We were welcomed by the governor's representative who took us in a small bus, which obviously had been used often on Sakhalin's rough roads, to our hotel. While others went on to meet with the governor, one of the women on the plane, who had expressed an interest in tourism development and I were dropped off at our hotel which was called "Lada". The hotel, we would later realize, was typical Russian. Largely build of brick, with one elevator, which was not working at the time, it offered small rooms with a TV and a bathroom with a large bath but no hot water. My window looked out on the nearby park, which at that time featured snow laden trees and meandering paths surrounding a small frozen lake.

Others went to a meeting with the governor, one of the big deals being discussed the building of a potential ski resort in the nearby mountains, in the vicinity of the center of town. Sakhalin had previously been used as the training ground for Olympic skiers. A company from Colorado had sent their representative along to investigate the opportunity. It is interesting to note that now almost twenty years later no progress has been made to building any type of facility yet. When they returned, we all went down to dinner in the restaurant which was full of people to enjoy our first Russian meal. As usual, I was the most difficult one to please, because I do not eat meat and so I ended up with a plate full of delicious tomatoes covered with doles of mayonnaise and eggs and a red cabbage salad. Others tried mostly Russian potato dumplings with meat. The coffee was absolutely terrible so we decided to just drink tea. That evening out of curiosity I went downstairs as I heard pounding music and watched the restaurant come to life. Everyone was dancing, so I gave it a try as well as I was totally enchanted. I stayed not long though because we had not slept well over the last few days and I could barely keep my eyes open. While leaving a man spoke to me in English and asked me how I liked the music, I said it was great and realized later on I was talking to the governor.

The next morning I walked into the park, and not surprisingly it was snowing again. And even more astonishing, I saw a man streak by, dressed only in his tiny swim suit racing along the lake. This was something, I observed often in the next couple of years. Even skiers when the sun is out, wear only the European types of swim suits covering only the most essential part of their bodies, leaving less to the imagination.

Finally we would be shown the city of Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk. Not much to write home about except for the market place with which I have always been fascinated. Here the woman selling wonderful, polished fruit and vegetables were Korean. They sold it mostly out of empty baby carriages in which they displayed their food products beautifully. All vegetables and fruit at that time were mostly grown around dachas, and tasted great, specifically the tomatoes. This I was told because they did not use pesticides in Russia.

I had noticed a large number of Korean people on the streets and in the market place as well, and had asked about it. It appeared that during the war between Russia and Japan, Korean

people were brought to Sakhalin, to work as slaves for the Japanese people who were in power at that time on Sakhalin Island. After the war they were not allowed to return to Korea. Now free citizens of Russia, they were still not allowed to go back to their country and as a matter of fact, they were somewhat discriminated against by having to carry special driver's license. Nowadays there is constant traffic between Sakhalin and Korea and a great majority of the Koreans, bring back Korean products to sell on the local market and in local stores.

Everything in the market was dirt cheap. But there were few choices. Something that would change dramatically as time went on. Nowadays, every product from the US or from Europe can be bought locally in super markets and specialty stores. There was meat but not a lot. But the home made pastries were absolutely delicious. . After we left downtown, we went to Korsakov, a small town located towards the southern part of the island. In the coming years I would spend a lot of time in Korsakov, meeting both small and large ships and the travelers they carried. There were three different ports in Korsakov at that time, military, trading and fishing ports, all serving different purposes. With the oil development on the island, the ports have changed considerably and are now facilitating the loading and unloading of very large ships. At the time we visited, the roads were mainly dirt and the houses seemed to be mostly occupied by farmers. We also found out while at the port, that there was actually a ferry going to some of the Kurile Islands, but the schedule was erratic, the tickets difficult to get, the regulations to be able to go there, were to say the least, entirely impossible and the itinerary absolutely unsure. Nevertheless we would use that ferry often in the next couple of years to both do our research and to assure that our partners on the island would give our clients the quality of services that we needed.

One day we took the train from Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, the city where we were staying to Kholmsk another port city to the west. The train was a special train for would be travelers operated by a travel company, Eurasia, that mainly catered to Japanese tourists. As the island had been occupied by the Japanese, many Japanese families with roots on Sakhalin would visit the island which offered them a glimpse on how they had lived there in the past. There are many reminders on Sakhalin Island of the Japanese occupation, the major one being the National History museum. This museum, even when we first went there, offers one of the best introductions to both, the natural environment as well as the history of Sakhalin Island and the Kuriles. Regretfully everything is still labeled in Russian, so to really understand what is being shown, you need to use an English speaking guide. However, even if you do not speak or read Russian it is not that difficult to get an idea of what happened on Sakhalin, as the displays are offered in such a way that visual recognition of certain phases of history are abundantly clear. While Russian museums can be kind of boring, this one clearly isn't if you are open to having information presented in the Russian way. I always make it a point to go there every time I visit Sakhalin, just to get an indication of what has changed.

Kholmsk was a different city from Korsakov, much more Russian with dilapidated Soviet apartment buildings and not many individual houses. There was only one port, one that I immediately observed was not easy to get into as it was closed off like a box with just one small opening. What was interesting though was the road to Kholmsk which meandered through a beautifully mountainous area dotted with small villages of dachas. The Dacha's are private little houses which were offered at that time, by large employers to their employees as a benefit. Of course, this has all changed, there are still dachas, but they are more elaborate and they are now private properties on private land. At the time we saw them, they were small houses but each individually crafted, they were the first indication of individuality, I saw in Russia. Usually the gardens are full of flowers and vegetables. Dacha's are the pride and joy of Russians, it is the ultimate act of hospitality to be invited to visit someone dacha's.

The plans for the trip included a side trip to Vladivostok, but we were told as Vladivostok was still a closed city, we were not allowed to go, but that we would make a trip to Khabarovsk. And so we did. This time our plane was again an AN-24, but it was a freight plane with seats only on the side. No matter, we were happy. We arrived in Khabarovsk which at the time of our arrival was a dark, ominous city. Surprisingly Khabarovsk presently is one of the most hospitable, inviting and architecturally rich cities in East Russia, a far cry from the city we visited in the early 1990's. However, while the city appeared dark and ominous, it was offset by the charming young woman who met us, who exuded warmth and hospitality. Our hotel for the next two nights showed communist charm and rooms populated by small dark creatures rustling in the middle of the night.

Over the next two days we explored the city. When I compare it with Khabarovsk today, it is difficult to envision that what we saw that day has turned into the charming cosmopolitan town Khabarovsk is today. Those two days, people were scarce on the street and they wore dark clothing and looked right ahead of themselves. Now the city sidewalks are full of open cafes, at any time of the day the city bustles with hordes of people on cell phones chattering away and the air full of laughter.

What really has not changed is the local market we visited that day. While the products today are more Chinese, even in the vegetable markets, and the flowers are not the ones that come from the dachas, the atmosphere remains the same. It is here that the older generation buys its daily food as the products in the supermarkets of today are no longer affordable. There are the people that selling kittens and dogs, out of cartons, everyone stopping to see how cute they are. And then there are the older folks from the dacha, selling their flowers, their berries and vegetables, their only means of survival. Nothing has changed there at all!

Another thing that has never changed was our cruise on the Amur River, the mightiest river in the world. We joined a cruise that was leaving from the port right in the middle of town, the

boat was full, and we could barely find seats. However, this was not a cruise to see what was happening on the river, everything was happening on the ship. The television blared, everyone was walking and eating. Music was played somewhere else and couples were dancing. We were amazed it was like entering family space in someone's home. This still happens today. I take most of my groups when they are small on a regular cruise so that they have the opportunity to embrace what Russian culture is all about, it is sharing with family and friends, having plenty to eat and drink, laugh and sing and dance.

We also visited a government sponsored souvenir store where local artists could display their wares for free and earn some money when something was sold. From then till now, it is as if creativity sprung a well that is never going to run out. Then there were scant items of very low quality. Now stores are brimming with fabulous outputs of creativity in paintings, in jewelry, in normal day to day house wares and furniture. And, it never seems to stop every year; there are new avenues of creativity that I come across.

Food in Khabarovsk was similar to that we enjoyed on Sakhalin Island, except that perhaps the attitude of serving was far worse than before. Most of us spoke haltingly Russian, but even that could not coach a helping attitude. We were treated as nuisances, no more, no less.

In my brief time though with Antonina, our smiling hostess in Khabarovsk, I learned a lot about the city, herself and the tourism company she managed. They were the first independent company offering tourism services in the city, besides, of course, the all mighty Intourist.

Right before our departure, we were advised that the Governor of Sakhalin was going to fly back with us to the US to discuss business matters both in Alaska, Seattle and Washington D.C. This time we only had a short layover in Magadan before we returned to Anchorage.

This particular trip changed my life. I was totally entranced by Russia, its people and its opportunities. Most of all, I felt at home there, memories crossing my mind about growing up in a rural part of the Netherlands. This trip was the beginning of more than a hundred trips in the past 18 or so years that took me all over East Russia and Siberia. Some Russians even now, lament that I know more about Russia than they do themselves.

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