

# **MOSCOW AND LENINGRAD 1979**

A TWELVE-DAY TOUR IN THE SOVIET UNION



**CHARLES GANNON © 2023**



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This travelogue is about an Intourist ‘White Nights Arts Festival’ trip that I made to the USSR in 1979, staying in Moscow and then in Leningrad (Saint Petersburg).

I have deliberately included some Russian words in the Cyrillic alphabet just to give readers a glimpse of what the Russian language looks like. Following the words are approximate indications of their pronunciation, printed in *italics*, within brackets. The stressed syllable is marked by means of an accent. Finally the translation is given. Hence: Москва (*Maskvá* – Moscow).

Between 1961 and 1991, one Soviet rouble was equal to GB£0.65 (US \$1.35).

Cover photographs: Red Square, Moscow (top) and the Winter Palace, Leningrad (bottom).

The reproductions of famous Russian paintings in certain chapters come from Google and Wikipedia.

My thanks once again to Andrew Robinson, who has kindly proofread this account.

# PART ONE

## MOSCOW



## 1 – ARRIVAL IN MOSCOW

Saturday, 16 June 1979

Far below us, as the plane plunged down through the clouds, a vast area of dark green forest appeared. Here and there the trees gave way to a large lake or an immense field, but on and on they stretched. The plane roared, speeding towards our destination, Moscow: a city that had begun life as a small fortified citadel or *kremlin* some nine hundred years previously.

Concrete and buildings now began to appear as we neared the capital, but still we flew over forest and lakes. Suddenly the plane made an abrupt turn, approached a runway, then bumped down on the tarmac. Once again the engines roared and we began to taxi towards a small airport. A muffled voice from the loudspeakers welcomed us to Moscow in Russian and English. At 7.25 p.m. local time, our long but comfortable journey had come to an end.

My friend Walter and I had set off from Dublin on the previous evening and had arrived in Heathrow airport at about midnight. A car had been sent to fetch us, and we had been driven to the large Post House Hotel, where I had spent a sleepless night. This morning we had left after breakfast and had returned to Heathrow by bus. From there we had travelled by coach to Gatwick airport, where we had collected our tickets from the tour operator and joined a slow-moving queue to the check-in desk. We boarded the plane at 12.40 p.m., but had to wait for an hour as somebody had got lost. At last the plane took off and thus began our two-week stay in the USSR: four days in Moscow and eight days in Leningrad.

This trip had been suggested to me by Walter some time previously; as Walter had put it, he had not managed to find anybody 'mad enough' to accompany him. As I had willingly agreed to go with him, he had started to arrange things. Both of us did some reading before setting off, then exchanged books and notes. I filled a small notebook with information about the places that we planned to visit, and I resumed studying a little of the Russian language, which I had begun some time previously.

When we now stepped out of the plane, a wall of hot sticky air greeted us; although it was misty, the airport was bathed in weak sunshine. The first thing I noticed was the lack of any military presence and the relaxed atmosphere of the place. Relieved, I gazed around; nearby was a line of white Aeroflot jets parked on the tarmac, and in the distance I could just about make out the forest through the mist.

The interior of the old airport building was dark and crowded. We joined a queue for passport control and finally arrived at a booth where a young soldier glared at us, carefully compared our faces to our photographs, pronounced our names in a Russian accent, and stamped our passports and forms under the counter, out of sight. The red tape over, our passports were returned to us, and we were told to turn to the right, where we would find our guides. Once again we formed a queue, this time towards a notice that read 'IML Tours M 18'. At a table sat two women who supplied us with special tickets for the Hotel Ukraina, made a note of our names, and told us where to go in order to collect our luggage. Russian inefficiency then manifested itself in the slow arrival of our luggage. It was a long time before I found my suitcase, for it had

been thrown off the conveyor belt and lay under some others. As soon as we had found our luggage, we joined the people filling customs declaration forms, then queued for the customs check. This was extremely lax and only took a couple of moments.

At the other side of the barrier, we left our cases at the exit marked 'Intourist' and waited to be shown out of the building and on to a bus. Another delay ensued, during which we had time to look around. The small arrivals hall was packed with tourists and Russians. Several of the latter clutched small bouquets of flowers. At our Intourist exit, many Russians tried to force their way through the door, but were hastily shooed away by official Intourist personnel. At last we caught a guide's attention and were brought outside to a waiting coach that looked rather old and battered.

Walter and I sat on the back seat and shortly afterwards one of the guides clambered on board: a small middle-aged woman with grey hair and old-fashioned-looking spectacles. Speaking with a clipped accent into a microphone, she introduced herself to us as Julia. She explained that although six suitcases had not turned up and as we had been delayed as a result of this, it was now time for us to drive to the hotel.

The engine of the coach now spluttered into life and off we drove along a modern highway flanked by advertisements in English. Beyond, on either side, was the ever-present forest. During the journey we tried to listen to the guide, who told us about Moscow above the roar of the engine, which was right behind us. The coach was like an oven.

Outside, the advertisements in English for Russian tractors and industrial goods that we had been passing came to an end, and we drove past a huge ugly monument made from sections of steel, which was dedicated to the 'Feats of the Soviet people during the Second World War'. We then passed many old and dilapidated wooden houses that had at one time been painted in bright colours. Many were quite decorative, though most were in a state of dereliction. Although we were surprised to see such charming old dwellings, Walter and I agreed that they must have been uncomfortable to live in, and also bitterly cold in the winter.

As the old coach roared along, petrol fumes assailed our nostrils. Eventually the wooden houses began to disappear and ugly high rise apartment blocks gradually replaced them. They increased in number until the forest was no longer visible. Most of these buildings seemed to be in a poor state of repair and there was little sign of life in them. However, more traffic had appeared on the road by now: ancient trucks, old grey buses, trolley buses, and official cars. Here and there the roads and pavements were being washed using gallons of water supplied by tanks on the backs of lorries, and old women swept the streets. We could see signs of building everywhere: bricks, mud, planks, and scaffolding.

Suddenly we found ourselves in the city centre, skirting the wide river Moskva. A huge ugly skyscraper appeared; I recognized it as being one of seven identical ones dotted around Moscow. Grim and looking like something out of a nightmare, it towered up to the heavens like a massive cathedral, ending in a spire. Noting the hideous details of its architecture, we swung around to the other side of the building, where I received a shock: in large letters over the entrance were the words Гостиница Украина – Hotel Ukraina. This was where we would be staying!

When Julia had finished giving us instructions, we disembarked and entered the huge foyer through tall doors. As we were quite late by now, we were led up a flight of stairs, down several corridors, then finally downstairs again to a couple of large dining halls. Noisy rock music was being played in the one that we were brought to. Inside was a large group of well-dressed people, and beside us a bride in white and



her husband in black suddenly appeared. We now realized that a jolly wedding party was in full swing. Julia went into the dining room to enquire about our meal. Much to our surprise, we were brought to seats close to where the Russian guests were dining.



*The Hotel Ukraina, Moscow*

So here we were, rubbing shoulders with real Russian people right from the very start! Walter and I were shown to a table right at the top of the hall, just feet from the band, and so we were deafened by the music. The group consisted of four scruffy-looking lads, dressed in jeans and denim jackets, who played drums, electric guitars, and an electric organ. The Russian songs were interspersed with Western pop songs sung in perfect English; Walter identified one of the latter as being a number by Pink Floyd.

Once I had accustomed myself to the noise from the loudspeakers, I began to enjoy the scene all around me. The huge dining hall had galleries around the upper portion, over which people gazed. On the walls were frescoes of a happy-go-lucky Socialist Realism interpretation of peasant life, painted in warm colours on a white background. All around us, people sat at tables laden with food, where they ate, drank, and chatted. Stocky businessmen in their shirtsleeves invited their large wives to dance, joining the young people. There were stocky girls wearing party dresses, all of whom bounced and wriggled in time to the music with the young men, most of whom were slim. Some of the girls were more figure-conscious, though all of them had overdone their application of lipstick and red nail varnish. Here we could observe the Russians letting themselves go: they were laughing, applauding the musicians, clinking glasses of vodka, and embracing each other.

Our meal was a little chaotic; as the service was slow, some of us had to eat our courses out of order. We had a choice of beer, fruit juice or water to drink; the starter consisted of a slice of cold meat with a small helping of cucumber and chives. Soup was then served, then followed by the main course, which consisted of hot meat, fried potatoes and the same cold vegetables. We finished our meal with sticky buns, served with either tea or coffee.

After we had finished our meal, Walter and I rose and ambled outside to take a look at our programme of events, which had been posted beside the restaurant door. On the following day we would be brought on a tour of the Kremlin. On turning away from the notice, I found myself inadvertently gazing at an ample area of exposed bosom. It belonged to a maddeningly good-looking girl in a deep-cut black dress who

flashed her dark eyes at me and, on discovering me staring at her, laughed. As far as I could make out, she began to say something to me in English. However, before I knew what was happening, I was following Walter back up the stairs to the corridor. Behind me I could hear girlish giggles.

Returning to the foyer, we collected our cases and made our way to one of the two lifts that would convey us to the eleventh floor, where our room was. Walter had read somewhere that the lifts in this hotel were inefficient. Eventually the doors opened and we stepped into an old dark lift operated by a large matronly woman, who sat by the door. She understood the word 'eleven' and the other numbers shouted to her, and pressed the appropriate buttons. A Russian person attempted to press one of the buttons, but was hastily pushed aside. 'Don't touch – just ask!' snapped the woman.

As it took some considerable time to ascend to the eleventh floor, we realized that we would need to allow almost a quarter of an hour in future to reach our room.

In the lobby of our floor we encountered another large woman who sat behind a desk and presided over the keys. This was the *dezhurnaya* – a common feature in Russian hotels. The *dezhurnaya* also supplies information when needed, keeps an eye on things in general, and is responsible for her floor in the hotel. Our *dezhurnaya*, a pleasant enough woman, was having an animated conversation with somebody on the telephone. When we handed her a card that we had been given, she gave us a key for room 1112 and indicated the direction that we should take.

Our room was quite cosy and comfortable, and there was an old-world feeling about it. Stucco work adorned the white ceiling, and we had a soft white carpet on the floor. Near the doorway was a black-and-white television set that looked rather antiquated, and on top was a transistor radio that only offered three music stations. On the beds were continental quilts that were folded in an unfamiliar fashion. The bathroom was quite clean and satisfactory.

After we had freshened ourselves up, we decided to go out for a walk, even though it was 11.30 p.m. by now. I wondered what the *dezhurnaya* would think of this. However, she did not question us and so we went down in the lift to the foyer. While we were down there, we decided to double check some times on our programme. Outside the dining hall we looked at the notice beside the door while people from the wedding party, which was still in full swing, milled around us. As we took notes, the ravishing girl in the black dress and some of her companions sidled up to us and sat down. Once again we left hastily.

Outside it was twilight. Having got our bearings, we found our way to Prospekt Kutuzova (Kutuzov Avenue), crossed the Moskva river, and began the long walk down the Prospekt Kalinina towards the Kremlin. This was the most modern and up-to-date street in Moscow. We looked at the tall ultra-modern Comecon building, then passed many skyscrapers and sleek buildings that housed exclusive shops; one of them was the huge *Dom Knigi* (House of Books), which had quite a range of literature on display, including books in English and other European languages. We also passed the large *Oktyabr'* (October) Cinema and a number of tall ministerial buildings. There was definitely an air of prosperity about this street.

As we walked, we passed several people who were ambling along in the gathering dusk, including couples arm in arm. Some tried to hail one of the green taxis that sped down the road at regular intervals. The people in this part of the city looked well dressed and relaxed. Here and there we saw a few policemen, though they looked rather bored and listless. Some were chatting to a group of people.

The street turned out to be longer than we had expected it to be. At one point we passed a small and attractive old Orthodox church perched on top of a grassy knoll; it

looked very much out of place among the glass and steel of the surrounding buildings. We then passed a statue of the revolutionary hero after the which the street had been named: Mikhail Kalinin.

At last, when we began to feel tired, we were rewarded with a familiar sight: the light from a red star and the vague outline of the illuminated Trinity Gate of the Kremlin. We quickened our pace and walked towards this late fifteenth-century structure, which I was very interested to see. This gate, which was used by Napoleon in 1812, is one of the five entrances along the red-bricked crenellated walls that surround the roughly triangular citadel or *kreml*, in which various cathedrals and palaces are located. We were now able to see the glittering gold domes of the Uspensky (Assumption) Cathedral rising above the outer walls; this was where the elaborate coronation ceremonies of the Tsars had once taken place.

When we got closer, we could see the top of the former Arsenal (now government offices) and, to the right, the top of the Palace of Congresses: a modern 'glass box' built in 1961, which looked quite out of place. We now decided to have a look at the famous *Krasnaya Ploshad* or Red Square. Following the west wall, we passed a garden where there were fir trees and then a gateway, where we saw the Eternal Flame, faintly illuminating the Grave of the Unknown Soldier. We then turned a corner and found ourselves looking down the length of Red Square, now bathed in harsh light coming from rows of spotlights. At the opposite end was the famous Saint Basil's Cathedral, which was now completely enveloped in scaffolding.

On our right, the Kremlin wall stretched down the length of the square, lined with rows of fir trees and long concrete platforms arranged in tiers to seat important dignitaries when the square was used for parades. We walked past the Nicholas Tower, which also had an illuminated red star at the top. As no traffic was allowed here, there was a rather uncanny quietness about the place. Only a few people wandered around the vast square.

When we reached the end of the concrete platforms, we joined a group of people who had gathered in front of a small building, which turned out to be Lenin's mausoleum. On each side of the closed entrance stood two soldiers with guns, absolutely immobile. Walter and I had decided not to waste time queuing to see inside this place. While we stopped to gaze at our surroundings, which looked quite surreal, the harsh and unmusical bells of the Spassky (Redeemer) Tower rang the time.

Heading in the direction of Saint Basil's Cathedral, we stopped at Lobnoye Mesto: a circular platform enclosed by a low white wall, where people had been executed in the sixteenth century and from which the Tsars had read official decrees. On the steps of this platform were some young people who were chatting quietly and passing round a bottle of vodka. Although they were drunk, they were not obstreperous. Within the enclosure we found hundreds of copper coins; Walter and I tossed in a couple of pennies for good luck.

Clambering down the steps, we made our way to a couple of large black statues in front of Saint Basil's Cathedral. The statues were of two heroes, Minin and Pozharsky who, in 1612, had led the people against Polish invaders.

At Saint Basil's we looked at what we could see of the cathedral, most of which was hidden behind the planks and poles. A mixture of Byzantine domed and Russian 'tent' churches, it had been built in 1555–60 by Barma and Postnik for Ivan the Terrible, in order to commemorate the capture of Kazan. Ivan had been so delighted with the church, the story goes, that he had ordered the architects' eyes to be gouged out so that they would be unable to build anything more beautiful. However, it certainly was not my idea of beauty, for I had never cared much for the building.



As it was late by now, we decided that it was time to return to the hotel. We walked back along the other side of the square, peering into the windows of the vast GUM shop (*Gosudarstvenny Universalny Magazin* – State Universal Store). The window displays looked rather sparse and drab by our standards.

As we walked quickly along Kalinin Avenue, this time on the opposite side, we were stopped by a couple of hippies with long greasy hair, who incoherently asked us for money for drink. They were either drunk or high on drugs. They spoke firstly in Russian and then in English; we politely refused to give them anything and moved on.

We eventually returned to our hotel at around 1 a.m. and were given a dirty look by our *dezhurnaya*. In our room we washed (Walter had taken a bath plug from the hotel in London, knowing that they were rarely to be found here), settled down to write our diaries, then went to bed, exhausted.