

When most senior travelers today were young, the Soviet Union was our enemy. It threatened to blow us all to hell with atomic bombs, unless of course, we wiped them out first. Those of us who did wartime duty in Korea and/or Vietnam in the 50s, 60s and 70s, were familiar with Russian weapons. They were used to shoot down our planes and kill our GIs. In those days of the Cold War, not many of us had any wish to visit Russia.



So, we took it with great skepticism when the Soviet Union, Ronald Reagan's "Evil Empire", collapsed in 1991. Since then, relations have become a bit warmer, and now tourism beckons Americans. Somehow, I can't quite sign up for a tour of Saigon ... now Ho Chi Minh City ... and see the museum of destroyed American aircraft and abused GI POWs. However, I did shake off my reluctance last year and sail on a Scandinavian cruise that docked two days in St. Petersburg (formerly Leningrad) in Russia.

I'll save details on that trip for a later story, and dedicate this essay to some simple suggestions on how to enjoy, or at least endure, a visit to Russia. A rule of thumb is to expect the economy in Russia, except maybe for business corruption, to be about a generation behind the economics and sophistication of the USA.

First, as an American traveling there, don't do the annoying flashy tourist routine. Especially if you'll be roaming away from the big cities, dress modestly. Don't call attention to yourself with lots of skin showing and brightly-colored clothing or hats and sweatshirts. Don't strut around with inappropriate or obscene slogans on clothing. In some smaller towns, especially where religion is a major influence, woman tourists may fit in better if they wear head scarves.

Take personal health and hygiene articles with you, because you may not find the right type you're used to having at home. For instance, except for our hotel, we found most toilets had nothing resembling our toilet paper. More like the old Sears Roebuck catalog pages that were in every 19th Century rural American outhouse.

Although Russia isn't the worst crime scene for American tourists, it's essential to protect your belongings at all times when you're out in public, especially at street markets, sports events and fairs. Carry wallets in safe inside pockets, and handbags strapped tightly under an elbow. Most Russians are very friendly to Americans these days.

For instance, if you run into a group of Russian war veterans who see you're wearing a US Navy or Army hat, it would be OK to have a couple of drinks with them. Russians drink vodka like tea, and often believe it's their duty to drink foreign visitors under the table. Just accept one drink, pay for a second round, say *spasiba* and get away quickly.

Russians love to trade almost any item with tourists. I took home a surplus Russian Navy officer's hat that cost me a pair of blue jeans and a pack of American cigarettes. Street vendors also want American dollars, so you can do some heavy bargaining with them for lower prices.

Take all the photos and video you want, but be sensitive to people's feelings, especially the very old, who may resent it. Before you wander around Russian retail areas, go to American Express and exchange a bunch of dollars for rubles. Learn the comparative values, and when you purchase food, souvenirs and other items, use Russian money. Some street vendors and cabbies are notorious for hiking prices for clueless tourists paying with US dollars without realizing they're being ripped off.

The simple rule of traveling in Russia and anywhere else, is to treat people as you'd want to be treated when they're in your country. Courtesy and consideration go a long way with the sentimental Russians, and you'll enjoy yourself much more if you give them reasons to respect and admire you.