



*Guest Senior Correspondent LLMacB, Seattle WA:* When today's seasoned citizens were young, the Soviet Union was our enemy. Almost daily, it threatened to blow us all to hell with atom bombs, unless of course, we wiped them out first.

We who did wartime duty in Korea and/or Vietnam in the 50s, 60s and 70s, often faced Russian weapons. They were used to shoot at our planes, ships and GIs. In those Cold War times, not many of us had any wish to peacefully visit Russia. I shook off my reluctance last year and sailed with my spouse on a Scandinavian cruise that docked two days in St. Petersburg (formerly Leningrad). After the surprisingly pleasant experience, I have suggestions for other seniors who plan to visit Russia.

Take personal health and hygiene articles, 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 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 out in public. Be alert 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 cap, it would be OK if they invite you 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.

Some Russians we met seemed to want to trade almost any item with us. I took home a surplus Russian Navy officer's hat that cost me a pair of blue jeans. Street vendors also want American dollars, so you can do some heavy bargaining with them to 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.

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 forget the past, and respect and admire you. Of course, that goes both ways for we senior Cold Warriors.