

# **A BELGIAN ABROAD**

Travel stories with and  
without headaches,  
motorbikes and covid.

Travels and reflections in New  
Zealand, Georgia, Russia,  
Switzerland, the UK, Italy, Spain,  
Poland, Latvia, Lithuania & China

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Everything you read in this book has really happened. Or hasn't it? I wrote the stories from my point of view. I have changed some of the names of the people, but I haven't invented any. The places, however, are usually pretty accurate as I travelled to them myself.

I apologize for not publishing any maps in this book. As I am a self-publisher I need to keep it as simple and cheap as possible and restrict myself to copyright free maps. But these are often much worse than what you can access on google maps or anything you've got on your phone or laptop. Therefore I deliberately avoided inserting old or out-of-date maps.

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Tourists don't know where they've  
been, travelers don't know where  
they're going.

Paul Theroux





# FOREWORD & THANKS

In the last few years I have written a few books in Dutch. I have many international friends who told me it was a pity they were not able to read my books because of the use of the Dutch language. Therefore I proceeded translating and re-writing my latest book in English. Although I speak English at home with my wife, who is Northern Irish, my written English is not perfect. A word of thanks therefore goes to Kate Connelly, a friend of my wife, for doing the copy editing.

My adventures in Russia and 'Covid'-Europe - here also referred to as 'Coronistan' – are new. As a treat for the reader and especially for the English translation I have re-written and updated some of the best travel stories of my previous books.

Many things have happened in these last few years. UK Brexit and Covid19 turned the world as we knew it upside down. And just as we thought it would stop right there Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. The Russians call it a defensive move on their southern borders. This created – apart from many deaths - soaring energy prices and shortages of foodstuffs, mainly in Europe. I had just about finished the Dutch language version of my Russian travel stories. I have to say that during my Russian travels I never saw big army camps or met hostile people. I was never harassed by the police or anyone else. The people I met were actually very nice. It goes to show that nothing is what it seems.

At this moment of writing and updating the first edition of my book (it was published recently but without any decent visibility), I would even dare to say that the world has become a dangerous place. Things are happening so fast that I can barely keep up with the daily news bulletins: the re-election of Donald Trump in the USA, the war in Gaza and the West Bank in Israel/Palestine, the soaring economic tensions brought on by the American president's decision to impose big import taxes on his trade partners... This all happened after the events in this book. Where will it end? Some prophets of doom already see World War III looming on the horizon. But every year on Remembrance Day, 11<sup>th</sup> November, politicians say: 'Never Again'. Hollow words I'm afraid!

This book doesn't pretend to give answers to life's big questions and problems though. If there is one thing I have learned in this life it is that travelling gives us a broader view on things. Travelling allows us to see our everyday experiences in a bigger perspective. Travelling is discovering. The only thing left after discovering is accepting. Accepting that one has to remain modest, as we're all finally heading for the exit. Rich and poor, famous and little-known. Dust to dust... Rings a bell?

I would specifically like to thank my wife for supporting me and encouraging me to travel and write. I get itchy feet regularly and it is not always easy to live with someone like me, I guess. I would also like to thank my friends and family in Belgium for their remarks and encouragement and my many friends in Britain, the USA, Sweden, New Zealand, Georgia, France and Italy for the many fun experiences we had together. Thanks to the people who gave me tips about layout, cover photos and general

remarks about the book. If I did forget someone then don't be angry: as Rag'n Bone Man sings: 'I'm only human'. It seems that according to the dictionary I am a It seems that according to the dictionary I am a writer. But I wouldn't go quite that far: let's say I am a storyteller. A humble storyteller hoping that his audience will at least pass a pleasant moment reading his stories.

Yours,

Patrick



# TO VACCINATE OR NOT

*'It's a mean old man's world' (song by Dinah Washington)*

A global debate on whether to vaccinate or not has been going on worldwide. As with everything there are supporters and opponents. My American Facebook contacts are deeply divided on the issue based on the 'freedom principle'. I don't want to enter too deeply into the world of the many philosophers who gave their description of freedom so I will restrict my view of freedom to what Franklin Roosevelt talked about in his Four Freedoms Speech of 6th January 1941: The freedom of speech, the freedom of worship, the freedom from want and the freedom from fear. How one perceives and explains these freedoms is a different story altogether. Question one hundred people and you may end up with one hundred different answers. But many people see freedom as 'doing what you want'. And this is not entirely what philosophy says. I see the two main elements of freedom as voluntariness (doing things out of your own free will) and responsibility (accepting the results of your own choices ). You may want to disagree or fine tune this, but it is the view that I subscribe to. 'Doing what you want' often doesn't take into account the results of one's actions and therefore leads to irresponsible behaviour, which is not an element of 'freedom'. Enough philosophy. The freedom to decide out of one's own free will is deeply engrained in American society. The right to carry guns, abort unborn

life, being part of a religion or indeed being vaccinated are about as important as opposing these points. This will in many cases define our position in life and even define who we will vote for in politics. If we want to vote of course - the choice not to do so is not always possible in many countries. Democrats and Republicans in the US seem like big opponents when it comes to an American's view of life and society, but to a European both parties are very similar and would both end up on the political right of the parliamentary seats, one a bit more than the other. Both, however, defend the right to personal freedom. Americans are allergic to anything that could dictate how they need to live and die or how they make and spend their money; thus, they want overall powers such as the federal or state governments to have as little as possible say in their daily lives. Once again, one party a bit less than the other. In Europe this principle of freedom differs greatly according to each country but, in general, a European is more likely to accept decisions taken by a higher worldly authority because they often see the advantages of living in a well-organized society where the government takes care of its people. They even consider this normal since they pay taxes to these governments. Not everyone subscribes to this of course. The French are notorious for not agreeing with their government but at the same time liking the idea of state-funded health systems (very similar in Italy or the United Kingdom) and schools. In days of distress the Europeans turn to their governments to solve the problems they are facing. Although nobody likes to pay too many taxes we can see that at certain moments taxes serve a purpose. Apart from funding infrastructure works such as roads, ports and power stations, the tax money will also take us through difficult financial times like when Covid

closed down restaurants and hotels or when the Russia-Ukraine war made it impossible to pay the energy bills. This can lead to surreal circumstances. The big bank crisis of 2008 caused Iceland's economy to collapse and nearly-bankrupted the entire country. Quite a few Belgians had their 'black' money invested in Icelandic banks via tax-haven Luxemburg. Although they had never paid any taxes to the Belgian government on this money the people who had these accounts demonstrated for their rights and wanted the Belgian State to guarantee them the safety of their investments in Luxemburg. The cheek! Unfortunately, the freedom 'to do what we want' also leads to hotheads breaking and destroying everything during demonstrations in capitals such as Paris or Brussels. Often this destruction is fuelled by people who don't have any interest in the principles or the aim of the demonstrations but are just there to create havoc and break things. Mainly out of frustration or the fun of destruction. Then there are the countries where no form of freedom is tolerated at all and where people aren't even allowed to think for themselves but must think and mainly act according to the 'party' line. North Korea, Venezuela, Turkmenistan, Russia and China... to name but a few that spring to mind. In some way 'freedom' is even linked to the discussion about vaccinations, as might become painfully clear after the presidential election victory of Donald Trump in November 2024 when he might be planning to appoint an anti-vaxxer as Secretary of Health. To vaccinate or not, that is the question. The discussion is often based on emotions rather than scientific facts. If 98% of the people who ended up connected to a ventilator in hospital have not been vaccinated, then the opponents of vaccines will keep silent about this, mentioning only the

2% who were vaccinated and ended up on a ventilator to prove their point. There is a lot of fake information and pseudo-scientific mumbo jumbo going round about vaccinations: pregnant women would not be able to conceive after vaccination, vaccines would cause death by blood clots and vaccines were invented to kill the world's population by some Chinese labs... When an article or post on the internet mentions that 'a person died because of a blood clot after vaccination' that header will be an internet hit and make people wonder if they should still get a jab or not. The fact that somewhere in the same article is mentioned 'maybe 0.001% of vaccinated people might develop a blood clot and 1 % of them might have a severe chance of dying because of it' is never read or even mentioned any more. Probably, this is due to people's short attention spans and the fact that it is easier to believe short statements. If people would all read the small print on a package of aspirin, we would probably never ever take aspirin again! Throwing the baby out with the bathwater, I guess? We love to be 'right' and will use every single scrap of information - right or wrong - to prove it. I am a big believer in Pareto's Law, aka the 80/20 rule which states that 20% of the input is responsible for 80% of the results. So if 20% of the people do not get vaccinated and, as a result, put such a massive strain on the health resources of society that it makes 80% of the people's lives misery because it leads to lockdowns, mask wearing, company closures etc... I think it is clear by now that I am one of the many people who chose to be vaccinated. I did it out of respect for other people's health and safety and to be able to continue to be part of social life. The statistics worldwide about the advantages of being vaccinated took away my fears completely. Meanwhile I got my 4th - or was it my



5th? - jab and I am still alive, without blood clots. The fact that, as a male, I cannot become pregnant already existed before Covid ! I also have yearly vaccinations against the flu and I am still grateful to my parents and the Belgian government vaccinating me against polio and pox.

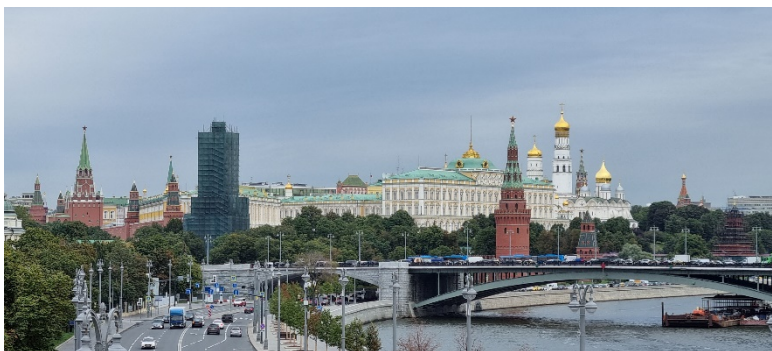
It is much easier to get a jab than to have multiple tests every time you have to do something or go somewhere. It also eases my mind to know that I will put less stress on the hospital system which costs us a fortune and should therefore only be used for important matters. It doesn't mean I am in favour of 'vaccination by law'. People should still be free to choose whether they will do it or not. But those who don't do it should also realise and accept that by not getting vaccinated they will have a different way of participating in daily life. It is not a 'God given right' to go to a restaurant, travel by plane or go to a concert. It remains the concert organisers' prerogative to allow or bar people who have not been vaccinated. I don't need to get a driving license if I don't want to but then I shouldn't complain that I am not allowed to drive a car. There are almost 8 billion people on this mortal coil, and I feel that my own perception of the freedom principle should not endanger the others (part 2 of the freedom principle: responsibility). When we travel to China or Central Africa, we don't object to getting a jab against Yellow Fever or Cholera. If you want to see the world you should accept certain things... and so it should be with Covid19.

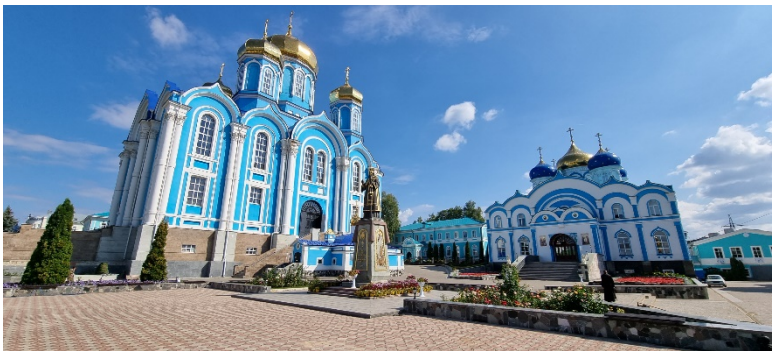
I have seen with my own eyes how in many European countries the rules about Covid had an effect on daily life. One of my recent trips was at the end of 2021 to Russia.

The country had just been opened to tourists again after the pandemic, so I finally got the chance to make a trip that I had had to postpone for almost two years. Very surprising to see how Russians handled masks and vaccinations. Between the first and the second lockdown I travelled on my motorbike through France, Italy, Austria and Germany. The world was still in shock from the first lockdown and governments had only drop-by-drop eased some of the rules about where and how to wear a mask, use hand sanitiser or allow restaurants to be open. Sometimes the rules on the other side of the border were completely different: the restaurant on one side could still be closed whilst their colleague one hundred meters further across that virtual line called a 'border' was open. Or you got food in your hotel room or even had to order takeaway as the hotel restaurant was completely closed. During this time the border crossing was used by hundreds of thousands of people who went to work (remember the food processing factories were a number-one priority) or were transporting food and other important goods from one country to another. Most of the Eastern European truck drivers weren't even vaccinated for the simple reason that the vaccine didn't exist yet. I think I know what I am talking about: I spent 45 years in the European Transport & Logistics industry. The Covid19 virus was travelling around the world with the same speed as the people carrying it. If so many people crossed the borders every day surely one Belgian on a motorcycle wouldn't make any difference?

# RUSSIA







# THE FINAL FRONTIER

*Where better to start in Russia than in  
Moscow. Putin's city (PP)*

*'Take me to the magic of the moment*

*On a glory night*

*Where the children of tomorrow dream  
away the wind of change' (Wind of Change -  
the Scorpions)*

In 2019 I was in Georgia, on the south side of the Caucasus. As we were riding along the border with Russia my curiosity about the 'other' side of the border grew and was undoubtedly fed by an undefinable mix of the unknown, action movies with very bad people (usually the Russians), the cold war, Stalin, vodka and the fall of the Berlin Wall. But also by a number of books I had read about this enormous country just a few miles away where I was not allowed in as I didn't have a visa and the Georgian rental motorbikes weren't supposed to cross the border. I had ridden in the Baltics a few years earlier and the remains of the Soviets in these countries had already aroused my curiosity. But Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia had in the meantime been restyled to a more European level. In Georgia the remnants of the Soviets still littered the land. Empty factory shells that are slowly being reclaimed by nature and typically grey and dull Soviet villages that generated an infinite sadness in me that I would never forget. It was however in these mighty mountains of the



Caucasus that I thought for the first time: 'I need to ride in Russia one day'. Once again, the language proved to be a big hurdle. In a country with so many unknown elements and challenges, I was sure I needed at least some basic knowledge of the Russian language. And Russian just wasn't part of my language skills. (Still isn't ...!). I already had visions of administrative problems, police bribery tactics, corruption, nymphomaniacs in short skirts, Putin adoration and - completely as Hollywood films make us believe – bodybuilder villains straight from the gym pointing a gun at you whilst saying something you don't understand. At that moment you know you are going to die... An old school buddy of mine studied Russian at University, went to the (then) Soviet Union and married twice, both times to a Russian lady. Who can do better? I didn't want put all my trust in Google Translate as the most incredible and incorrect stuff seems to come out of it. Not for a 4000 kilometre road trip anyway. I can usually view these kinds of James Bond stories in their true perspective but I had never had the pleasure of actually trying it on the spot. After the very enjoyable experience in Georgia I chose a small family-type company that rented out motorbikes and organised some tours. The big advantage for me was that for once I didn't have to bother about any practicalities and they also provided me with the necessary paperwork for my entry visa. They would even pick me up at the airport in Moscow and put me on the plane again in Sochi at the Black Sea coast. Having a Russian guide on a motorbike - some would call him a 'fixer' - would also facilitate the communication with the locals. With one and a half year delay due to the Covid pandemic I finally packed my bags and boarded a train to Brussels International Airport. I felt super!

So here I am... My most important stuff is in my shoulder bag, and I am carrying my helmet in a bag over my shoulder as carry-on luggage. After a comfortable 3-hour flight wearing a face mask, Aeroflot deposits me safely at Sheremetyevo, Moscow's International Airport. During the flight the stewards constantly reminded people to wear their face masks properly: over mouth and nose! Most Russians on the plane were balancing the mask somewhere between chin and upper lip. Well... it is a 'mouth' mask, isn't it ? So why wear it over your nose? I expected severe checks. After all Russia only re-opened just over a month ago after having been closed for tourism for a very long time due to the pandemic. The number of foreigners allowed to enter Russia on a tourist visa at this point is very, very limited. So this solo-Belgian is probably going to be good practice material for Putin's Immigration police. Anyone who has entered the US knows how rude immigration officers can be. To my big surprise - and it won't be my first - everything went smoothly. The immigration lady checking my passport whacks a stamp on the 'Russia' visa page so hard that you can still see the imprint four pages further on but at least she doesn't ask any stupid questions. When I flew into Chicago or New York some years ago the officers wanted to know so much about me that I got used to telling my life's story in three minutes! Was the elevator pitch invented in the US? They just wanted to make sure I wasn't going to stay in their country! Which of course I didn't plan to do at all as I had a house, a family, a job and friends in Belgium! Golden Earring's 'When the Lady Smiles' is ringing in my ears when she waves me through with a big grin and a twinkle in her eyes. Oh Nikita I will never know... But just a few minutes later I am already walking



through the sliding doors into the arrival hall of Sheremetyevo. Alex, the owner of Rusmototravel is waiting for me. He arrived a few planes before me from Sochi and used the time to rent a car. It is a KIA and when we hit the road, I can see that the car fleet on the Russian roads is very 'Asiatic'. Lots of Toyota, Kia, Hyundai... and because this is Moscow, of course there are also big 'European' Land & Range Rovers, Mercedes and BMW cars. No American cars though. It takes roughly two hours to get to the centre of Moscow, not because of the distance but because of the legendary traffic jams that paralyse the capital every day. We are going to a restaurant in town where we will meet the other people who will be going along on this trip. Rain is coming down in buckets by the time we arrive and Alex drops me off at the entrance of the restaurant while he tries to find parking space. Not an easy task in Moscow! The restaurant is a traditional Ukrainian eatery. As soon as I open the front door I am welcomed by a man in a traditional Ukrainian dress. He doesn't speak a word of English and as my Russian is non-existent our verbal communication comes to a grinding halt then and there. He decides to offer me a glass of something to break the ice. A Ukrainian kind of kerosene. Not the best stuff I ever drank but I force my face into a smile and thank him. 'Spasiba!' After that we stand around a bit in an uncomfortable silence.

Writing Russian is not possible for me. The Cyrillic language is completely alien to me and even if I could understand, it would still be beyond my typing skills on this western keyboard. Add the confusion about the pronunciation - you don't always pronounce Russian as it is written - and you will understand that I am just writing

Russian words as I pronounce them in English. When Alex comes in, the host suddenly understands why I am in his restaurant and we make our way to the first floor where there are already four people at the table. Artem (pronounce 'Artjom'), Michail (call me Mike) and an American couple from L.A. who will ride two-up on a BMW GSA 1200. Artem is the proud owner of a Triumph 800 Tiger Explorer and will ride his own bike. For me they prepared a BMW 850 GS Adventure. A very small group of three motorbikes, mainly because there are just no foreign tourists around. Mike will drive a pick-up truck with a trailer containing two motorbikes that need to go back to Sochi. Alex, the owner, worked in Moscow in the past and started this motorbike travel company in 2016 mainly because he saw an opportunity to do something nobody else in Russia did. Meanwhile he owns some thirty motorbikes and three cars. He managed to survive the Covid period because the Russians weren't allowed to travel abroad and therefore kept booking trips within their own country. As this is the largest country in the world there are quite a few opportunities to travel and step out of one's comfort zone without having to travel abroad. This way, Alex's fellow countrymen provided the necessary income to keep the company afloat. Yes, he had to sell a few motorcycles, but meantime business was on the up again. So much so that at this point in time they were hiring extra staff to man the office. Alex's wife manages the office but has far too much work to book the hotels and organise the logistics.

Larry and Heather (I didn't get their permission to use their real names, and I don't want to take any risks with Americans) are my age. In their early sixties. He makes

good money buying and renovating property and she just retired from a top job at the Disney Group. They live only a few minutes away from Hollywood and Larry's claim to fame is that he played a pirate in some of the 'Pirates of the Caribbean' films and renovated a bathroom for Johnny Depp. He got the job to be an extra in the films because he accompanied his wife when she was on-site during filming and they needed pirates! He travels roughly six months per year, usually by motorcycle. He has a bike parked in England and one in Australia as well as at home in L.A. His favourite destination is Alaska. The word 'Alaska' will come up regularly in conversations during the trip as he spends about two months a year there. How and when does he work then? I quickly found out: he gets photographs from his technical guy - a Mexican called Manuel - in L.A. via Whatsapp. Then he makes some drawings with a ball pen on a piece of paper, photographs them and sends them back to L.A. Manuel will then do the job and send a photograph when all is done... and Bob's your uncle ! How to get rich for Dummies! Clearly above my financial level but to my surprise they aren't 'big spenders' and we will share the cost for cheap bottles of wine while he eats a lot of fresh salads that cost next to nothing. After this trip he'll stay for a second trip with Rusmototravel to Dagestan and has also registered for an offroad course. I think he is rather brave: he'll be the only non-Russian speaker on the Dagestan trip and the offroad course as his wife wants to return to the US after Sochi. Larry speaks too loud, gives 'facts' without bothering too much about whether they are correct or not and has an opinion about literally everything. At the beginning of our 14-day joint adventure this is all fun and harmless but later in the trip we will see that it isn't always like that. Fortunately he has a big heart and once

you get to know him is fun to travel with. Heather listens and smiles most of the time. You can see her think: 'He's such a boy! Let him be a boy!' I ask her what she is going to do for four thousand kilometres on the back of the motorcycle. 'Listen to podcasts and music, make photographs and little films and have long conversations with Larry via their helmet intercoms'. Artem and Mike both own Triumphs and soon we're talking about our bikes. When they hear that I've got a 1215cc Tiger Explorer at home they promptly seal our new friendship with beer and vodka. I am made a member of the Russian Tiger Riders and get a sticker to put on the bike at home. Mike doesn't always like to drive the backup car. He prefers the motorbike. But driving the car pays the bills and that is equally important. I will soon find out that Mike has travelled the world: the USA, Central Asia (Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and some other 'Stans'), Europe, Scandinavia... He's got a million photographs on his phone and later during the trip he will show me some of them. Artem is younger, I'd say about 25, and is a good friend of Mike's. He has ridden most of his mileage in Russia in the past three years, working for Rusmototravel. It is quite impressive: we're going to ride some 4,000 kilometres from Moscow to the Caucasus and to Sochi but from Moscow to Vladivostok e.g. is 12,000 kilometres. Ten times from my house in Kortrijk, Belgium to the South of France ! And this without motorways. In this vast country people don't mind doing an extra stretch of road and we will experience this life the next days. So here we are in a Ukrainian restaurant in Moscow having big beers and getting ready... I expect that we will have to drink a lot of vodka in the next weeks but Alex makes it clear that there is a 'zero' alcohol tolerance on the roads in Russia for cars, trucks and

motorbikes and that Rusmototravel is not going to challenge that law! This means we're going to take it easy tonight. No more vodka tonight. I want to know what the situation is with these Ukrainian restaurants? Haven't Russia and Ukraine been at war since 2014 about Crimea? (Author's note: The Russians hadn't invaded the Dombas yet, this only happened in February 2022.) Our new Russian friends explain that most decent restaurants in Moscow are Ukrainian or Georgian. They can be traditional or even trendy and hip. It is clear that for your average Russian good food is more important than politics! Our hotel is within walking distance and our two motorbikes are parked just outside the front door. Ready for use! Tomorrow, however, we will not yet ride. We're going to visit Moscow. That's one thing I will be able to tick off my bucket list! The next morning we are ready and eager to start our tour. A young, handsome woman in her early twenties appears and introduces herself as Lisa, our guide. She turns out to be Artem's sister. Family business? Lisa knows a lot about Moscow's history and is also a bit of an artist. Together with her father she makes China dolls, and she shows us some photographs. The dolls are beautiful and are not only 'old' style but also represent politicians, football players and horses! Our hotel is barely a ten-minute walk from the Kremlin. That is good news, because I don't think Larry is the fittest person in the world. The streets in Moscow are super clean, maintained by an army of babushkas with brooms, mops and trolleys with all their cleaning products. It is a very open city with broad lanes and a pretty combination of old and new buildings. I hear that the babushkas don't really make a decent salary but at least they have a job. Although Putin rose to fame in St Petersburg after his KGB assignment in Leipzig, Moscow

is Putin's city, and it is unthinkable that his city would be dirty. I don't see any homeless people on the streets. Lisa says there are 'some'. I wonder if it is dangerous to be homeless in Moscow. Maybe the state provides free 'permanent' housing in their prisons or in the vast emptiness of Siberia? The large number of police cars parked everywhere immediately catches the eye. The sheer number of police officers is eye watering. Most of them stand around chatting whilst others check the paperwork of passing cars. Never a big Land Rover, of course, but the usual suspects in small cars. 'They never stop motorcycles' says Artem. 'I think the police like us'. Actually I don't see many motorcycles on the streets. This is clearly not Paris or Italy. The footage on YouTube of crazy motorcycle riders pulling wheelies and doing mad things is not a Moscow thing, that much is clear. 'In the South they are crazy' says Artem in such a way that I have to believe that he - being from Moscow - is a very disciplined and law abiding motorcycle citizen. Before coming on this trip, I had started reading a short history of Russia by Mark Galeotti. This now proves to have been a good decision because this country has such a complicated and rich history that some basic knowledge helps me understand the country and its citizens a little bit better. Lisa's explanation about Czars, monuments and the backgrounds of the Moscow highlights is much easier to understand that way. For those who don't know anything about Russian history I will try hereunder to summarize more than 1,000 years in a few pages. I'll do it my way and I have to apologize to the history hardline purists: others have done it in a much more detailed and correct way. So forgive me if I am passing over these 1,000 years with a paint roller rather than with a fine painter's

brush. But it will help you to understand the rest of my journey into space.... the space that is Russia !

*The Russian people as such are a melting pot of Vikings and local tribes that go back all the way to the 9th century. The Varangians, basically Vikings, fought a scattering of Slavic tribes. In order to sort out their world a bit they decided to invite a ruler to unite and rule them: Rurik. This prince founded a dynasty that ruled parts of Russia and finally most of this enormous land up to the 17th century. In all fairness: the Vikings had already been in these lands for a long time, using Russian rivers to trade and occasionally plunder and rape and set up trading posts all the way to the south and the rich city of Constantinople (which was then still called Miklagaror). Vikings were real overlanders. They travelled the world, not on their motorbike but mainly on their ships. These ships allowed them to travel everywhere in Europe, Britain, Iceland, America and Russia. Russia wasn't quite the size it would become in the 20th century. The name didn't even exist. 'Rus' comes from an old Norse word meaning 'the men who row'. In the beginning the smattering of Russian principalities lay roughly between the White Sea and what we now know as Finland in the North and the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov in the South. To the West was the empire of the Franks (remember Clodovech and of course Charlemagne) but also Slavic tribes, Turks (Avar) and Servs. To the South was Byzantium or the Byzantine Empire, also known as the East Roman Empire and their capital, Constantinople. That city had claimed rulership over the remains of the Roman Empire after the fall of Rome at the end of the 5th century. To the South of the Byzantine Empire lay the Arabic world that was in full expansion. The clash between Catholicism and Islam has*

*influenced the world until this very day. To the East there wasn't that much, except for some dangerous nomadic tribes such as the Pechenegs (who were basically Turkic tribes that fought as mercenaries in the Byzantine army), the Chazars and dispersed tribes that dissolved in the enormity of the Asian continent, leading further on to the Mongols and even further the Chinese civilisations. The capital of 'Russia' was initially Novgorod, some 200 kilometre south of St Petersburg. Later Kyiv , a city currently in Ukraine that was rich (because of the trade with the Arab world no doubt) became the capital and could be called a real metropolis at the time. (Author's note: interesting stuff to read in the light of current events where Putin claims Kyiv is or has always been a part of Russia). In those times, Moscow was only a small gathering of houses on the river Moskva. Genghis Khan would eventually put a stop to Kyiv's existence by flattening the city completely in 1240. It was all a bit complicated in the Middle Ages in Russia: in the North the principalities were fighting the Swedes, the Poles and some Teutonic orders of knights and the Brothers of the Sword (they would later lead to the German Order). In the South the Mongols were uniting and, under Genghis Khan, became the most powerful and dangerous war machine of the day. They would ransack, flatten, burn and rape anything and anyone in their way between China and Europe. There was simply no way that Novgorod and Kyiv could match this military power. Funnily enough, the Mongols would be in at the start of the importance of Moscow. Until the beginning of the 13th century there had been various wars and skirmishes, but the Mongols weren't really too interested in capturing all these little principalities. Those who submitted to them and paid taxes were left alone and their*



*cities spared. So maybe it wasn't all pillage and rape in those days. There was clearly a lot of diplomacy going on as well. Those who didn't submit, however, experienced the full force of the Mongols and saw their cities destroyed and often most of the population exterminated. Genghis wasn't interested in local architecture. Being from a nomadic background he used a gigantic tent as headquarters when he travelled. I am sure he invented the bulldozer as they did not know a middle-of-the-road solution. All or nothing! It was his grandson Batu Khan who gathered an army of 130,000 fierce fighters on horseback to conquer Europe. On his way to the West he slaughtered some Turcic tribes before burning down Kyiv to the ground. Kyiv didn't want to surrender and that was their final decision. History has it that 48,000 of the 50,000 inhabitants of Kyiv were murdered and their skulls were stacked outside the city gates as macabre pyramids of death. Novgorod, no doubt having seen what happened in Kyiv, bought its continuous existence by offering gold and silver and plenty of other valuables to Batu Khan. The Russian principalities became vassal states of the Mongols and of the Golden Horde that had made Sarai on the river Volga their capital. Sarai was an enormous city of probably 600,000 people and was the capital of an empire that extended from the Donau in the West to the Ural Mountains in the East. In the 14th century their ruler, Uzbek Khan would convert to Islam. It wouldn't spare them from the 'new' Genghis: Timur would burn down the city of the Golden Horde in 1395 when his friend Toktamish turned against him and found refuge in Sarai. Timur proved to be the most fierce and clever Islamic war lord of the time, maybe even of all times. A few years earlier, in 1380, a guy called Mamai, Ruler of the Golden Horde sent a 'small' army of 50,000 soldiers North to bring*

*Moscow back in line with central Sarai rule. Moscow had been the first city that succeeded in rebuilding their economy and their city after the Mongol campaigns. In 1325 Moscow had even become the see of the Christian-Orthodox Church after the decline of Constantinople. Grand Duke Dmitry of Moscow heard of the approaching army and mobilised 30,000 people (quite a success as the Russians usually liked to fight each other rather than someone else). On the banks of the River Don Dmitry defeated Mamai. It was the first time that a Russian army would defeat the Mongol hordes. Mamai escaped but was later killed by his own Genovese mercenaries. 'Italian' Genova was a powerful city state with bridgeheads all the way to the Black Sea. They supported the Golden Horde, who were of prime importance for the safety of the trade on the Silk Road. Toktamish... remember him? He was at that moment in Sarai as ruler of the Golden Horde (in the name of Timur) and heard of the defeat. He came back with a somewhat bigger army and defeated Dmitry and the Russians and brought them back under Sarai control. For more than 100 years Moscow would be indebted to the Mongols. Today the Battle of Kulikova is seen by modern day Russia's rulers as the start of the power of Moscow and the Russian people. I will explain more later in the book when I will be standing on the battlefield myself (without a sword of course)!*

*'So what about Ivan?' I can hear you ask. Especially the sixteenth century was the 'century of the Ivans'. Ivan III defeated the Mongols in 1480 and united the Russian principalities. His son, Ivan IV, unified the Russian territories into a real state. (In Britain the monarch at that moment was Elizabeth I.) Ivan IV wasn't only a brilliant statesman who had himself crowned Czar - which gave him*

*a godly status - but was also a bad humoured hothead who beat his son to death in 1581 after a discussion that got out of hand. He was also the first ruler who installed a reign of terror in Russia. As 90 % of the people who lived in Russia were serfs who actually 'belonged' to the ruling nobility that was not very difficult. 'ruling by fear' would become a habit.*

*Russia would become bigger and bigger under Ivan IV and after a number of successful military campaigns Russia actually started to become important in the world. Ivan the terrible would, however, die as a mad and sick person and when his weak son who succeeded him also died, that was the end of the Ryurik dynasty. Fifteen hard years would follow during which the Polish-Lithuanian state would occupy Moscow and have their own administrative people run Russia. Finally the Zemsky Sobor - the Russian Parliament - would appoint a new Czar: Michail Romanov. Ring the bells and three cheers for the attentive reader ! Yes, the famous Romanov dynasty that would rule Russia until it became the Soviet Union in 1918. Fabergé eggs and Anastasia, the stories of dramatic fairy tales! Russia would become bigger and bigger under the Romanovs and in the 17th and 18th centuries the names that stick out are Peter the Great and Catharine (numbers I and II). They went for a European style rather than the barbarous 'Russian' style and imported European fashion, philosophy and (Italian) architects. Peter would fight battles with the Swedes and the Persians. He broke the nautical power of the Swedes and gave the Russians something to dream of: a navy! On the remains of a Swedish fortress that he had reduced to rubble he built Saint Petersburg. In 1713 he would even make the city the capital of the Russian Empire. Catherine II (The Great) was not a daughter of a Russian Czar but*

*actually a German princess who married Peter III (whom she described as 'daft as a brush' - he played with tin soldiers that he took to bed with him! Catherine would have preferred that he played with her but to no avail). She overthrew her husband and introduced the French philosophy of Voltaire and Diderot to her court. She would make Saint Petersburg the City of Art that it still is today. For the lovers of a good story: Boney M, the German pop band of the seventies sang 'Ra-Ra-Rasputin, lover of the Russian Queen... Yes, apparently the legendary sex-drive of the Czarina is better remembered in popular history than her architectural and philosophical preferences. And it seems that all these stories are real - no fake news in those days ! The Czars would gradually expand Russia to the country it is - more or less - today: all the way to the Pacific, 12,000 kilometres from Moscow. A few years after Catharine II died, my friend Nappie (short for Napoleon) - I followed some of his footsteps in my previous travels - would get the unholy idea to invade Russia. He saw the Austro-Hungarian Empire as his principal enemy and after many battles with them, after some sort of tense peace was established in Europe, he decided the next big threat was Russia. He gathered his 'Grande Armée' and went East. The figures are difficult to grasp: 700,000 soldiers started the campaign with him. Nappie was furious that the Russians didn't want to fight and withdrew more and more towards the East. Czar Alexander I was clever enough not to engage in battle as he would not have lived to tell the tale. He lured Nappie further east, burning crops and thus depriving the Grande Armée of their food. Nappie's logistics didn't work very well and his supply lines were stretched. I guess he didn't have a logistics manager. So by the time he reached Moscow, Alexander I had already left*

*the city with his army. Nappie sulked because there he was, in Moscow, living in the Kremlin, without an enemy to fight while the famous Russian winter decimated his troops. He would return home with only 25,000 soldiers. For me, he has earned his place on the shelf of mass murderers with infamous rulers such as Genghis Khan, Timur, Stalin and Pol Pot... After this debacle Nappie would be sent to Elba for his first period of exile.*

*Mid-19th century and here we go again: the Crimean War when Russia would finally succumb to an alliance of Brits, Ottomans, French and Italians (from Sardinia). A fantastic piece of 19<sup>th</sup>- century politics that would lead me too far astray to explain it here. The Russian army was badly trained, underfed and not properly equipped so it was no match against the technically advanced allies. In those days, Great Britain was the most important power worldwide – Britannia rules the Waves, remember? – a position that was taken over by the US in the 20th century. In the early 20th century there was the Russo-Japanese war and then civil unrest in 1905. The people wanted food, not war. The country was exhausted and although the protests were crushed by the authorities, they provided the foundations for the 1917 revolution. In 1921 a completely new episode in the country's history would start with the official foundation of the Soviet Union. Lenin, Stalin, Khrushchev, Gorbachev, Brezhnev... a story of seventy years of fun under the Soviets until the country imploded in 1991. The second world war, lost by the Germans and their allies in 1945, became the biggest victory of the Soviet state. It wasn't the Americans or the Brits or the French who won the war, but Stalin! Russia has always had a way of rewriting history books in their favour but maybe they have a point. One could say that, if Hitler had never*

*attacked the Soviet Union, he would have had all his military power available in the West and maybe all Europeans would be speaking German now... who knows ? Stalin won but in all fairness he did so because the allies - especially the Americans - delivered massive amounts of chemicals (to make ammunition) and weapons via the Northern Soviet ports as the Russians didn't have the resources to produce their own. Between 20 and 30 million Soviets lost their lives in the 'great patriotic war' . After the war Stalin became very paranoid and sent everyone he distrusted to the Gulags, the infamous work camps in Siberia and the East. From soldiers to generals of the Red Army, party members, writers, teachers and everyone who had a brain and thought for himself... nobody was safe from the KGB. Some 14 million Soviets were sent to the Gulags. In Russia however this part of history is not mentioned any more in the official books. Stalin is once again honoured and hailed as the leader who 'won the war'. In 1991 the Soviet Union imploded under Gorbachev's 'Perestroika' politics. Remember the Scorpions' song 'Wind of Change' which they wrote after their visit to Russia in 1989 (after the Berlin wall fell). Suddenly the lines that Stalin drew on the Soviet Map became the basis for all the new independent states after 1991. Widespread corruption, banditi-ism and large-scale crime would rule the countries for ten years, until in 1999 the last premier appointed by Yeltsin became the leader of Russia: Vladimir Putin. His background in the KGB and the large scale of secret planning by the KGB, who was really running the country, made him the untouchable leader of a nation that is not only the largest in the world but in many ways maybe also the most unpredictable or unreliable... First Putin and his circle of friends made*

*Russia stable again and just when the west thought they had made new friends and allies, Putin showed his real aim: making Russia great again. With the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 as sad proof. And in between these two events came Patrick... remember Patrick ? The guy on the motorbike who wanted to see Russia. Time for a cuppa – or a vodka – to digest this information and carry on reading!*

So, Lisa - you still remember Lisa I hope - takes us on a city walk through Moscow. First, we pass the cathedral of Christ the Saviour. A gigantic building with the typical onion-shaped domes painted in gold. To my surprise it's only 25 years old. The old church that was built after Nappie legged it with his Grande Armée was blown up during Stalin's days in order to build a new building. It was supposed to become the highest and biggest building on earth, but Stalin popped his clogs in 1953 and Khrushchev, his successor, decided to scrap the project. Maybe they ran out of cement because it was replaced by a swimming pool. Lisa's tells us that her mother frequently came here for a swim. It was Borin Yeltsin who finally decided to build a Cathedral here. It is a fantastic building and the golden onion-shaped domes - an inheritance from Constantinople architecture - contrast perfectly with the light grey skies. Looking at the dome from inside the church is breathtaking and the first thing that springs to my mind is that in Russia a pot of gold paint is cheap ! More of these marvels await us so we wander on. From the bridge over the Moskva we get our first good view on the Kremlin. Basically you could say this is 'THE' Kremlin because the word 'Kremlin' is Russian for 'fortified town' and this is definitely the most famous one. The white building with the golden edges and green roofs, the golden domes, the red walls and towers... I

am really happy that I had the chance to see this in real life. Larry and Heather are also impressed. Buildings that go back hundreds and even one thousand years.... for Americans a 'wow' moment. I notice how clean the city is. And it is also very quiet. Lisa tells us that the army of cleaning ladies that keeps Putin's city spic & span is not paid much. It's a way for many people who don't have qualifications to have a job and feel personally valued. Anybody in the West interested in this idea? On the other side of the bridge there is a monument to Peter the Great. A pagoda-shaped tower of ships with a big sailing ship on top on which there is a man. It is a bit of a doomed monument. Mr Tsereteli, the artist, was making a monument for Christopher Columbus. One day he got a phone call that the state urgently needed a statue to commemorate the 350th birthday of the Russian Navy. You may remember that the navy was set up by Peter the Great. The Georgian artist didn't object - something you don't do in Russia when the state asks you something - and sawed off the head of CC and made a new head of Peter I. The monument is 95 meters high and was first presented to Saint Petersburg, Peter's capital and gateway to the Baltic. However they refused it - hearsay has it because it was considered 'ugly' - and it finally got this spot in Moscow, in front of the most famous Russian chocolate factory and next to the Moskva River. Imagine, Peter the Great would have wanted it in his city, but it ended up in Moscow. Two cities that don't really like each other too much. We walk through the flower gardens in front of the Kremlin walls. Lisa explains that they were created by Dutch garden architects. But without tulips! At the entrance we're being checked: face masks on (remember Covid), empty our pockets and put handbags and backpacks on the X-ray machine. Russians have a habit



of taking things rather literally: a mouth mask is worn in front of the mouth, not in front of the nose! Surely it is not a facemask as this would also cover your eyes. The uniformed sentinels don't seem to be too bothered. As long as you don't put a Kalashnikov or a bazooka gun on the conveyor belt it's all fine.

The visit itself is really worth it. The buildings look great, and I suspect that Putin's men have put a lot of money into this symbol of Russian power through the centuries. Image building is one of the strong points of Putin. Visitors in 2017: 3 Million ..... Some modern building for meetings and offices stand shoulder to shoulder with old churches, chapels, bell towers and cathedrals. It seems especially Italian architects from the days of the Renaissance earned their living here. We walk past the belltower of Ivan the Terrible, the Palace of the Patriarch, the Cathedral of the Dormition, the Cathedral of the Annunciation, the Cathedral of the Archangel Michael and the list is endless... the Church of the Twelve Apostles, the Church of the Deposition of the Virgin's Robe... After a while I don't even know any more which church I'm in. After a while, however beautiful churches and cathedrals can be, I get an overdose, and everything starts flowing into one big stream of cultural lava in which I may well drown. How many icons, frescoes, wooden sculptured stairs, statues and silver and gold ornaments can a person take in? In the Cathedral of the Archangel Michael there are about fifty tombs where mainly Czars (from the pre-Saint Petersburg days) are buried. This church was built by another Italian architect, Alevisio Novi. We walk in silence past the tombs of Ivan the Terrible, his son (the one he beat to death) and his successor - the other son (the mad guy). Outside is the 'Czar's Cannon' (The Czar Puchka), a 40 ton bronze

cannon, made in 1586. In front of the cannon lie cannon balls bigger than basket balls. Hearsay has it that these were only added in the 19th century for the tourists. The cannon was never used. it was some kind of weapon of mass destruction that was mainly symbolic and served as a deterrent. So before the atom bomb the Russians already had a deterrent ! The Czar's Bell is also here, and a part seems to be missing. This happened during a fire in 1737 when the people tried to fight the fire with water and the red hot bell just cracked. In 1812, Nappie wanted to take a souvenir back home to his Josephine. Something to put on the mantelpiece. 'Voilà ma chérie, from Russia with love'. But the 201-ton bell was just too much and Nappie had to raid some of the empty palaces and take some minor knick-knacks home. What a disappointment for the Corsican punk. After the overload of churches and history I need coffee. A caffeine addict, I need a dose of real Italian espresso. Despite the large tourist crowd within the Kremlin walls there is no coffee stand. Because of the Covid pandemic? We walk towards the eternal flame of the Unknown Soldier and finally end up at McDonalds. They have a coffee corner where addicts like me can get their fix. I have to admit it is good and it is the size I want. Not the bathtub of dark water, aka coffee, you normally get. (Note: These days it would be difficult to find a McDonalds as the American chain has closed their Russian outlets because of the Ukraine invasion. It appears most entities have continued their existence under a new name: Vkusno I toshka. Doesn't sound quite as sexy!) Unfortunately coffee is still served in a paper cup with a plastic cover. When will they ever learn? In front of McDo there are water features, fountains and statuettes that represent traditional Russian fairy tales. I see a bear with a fish and a wolf, a see a poor

man with a fish, a pretty girl under a plant... and then i think to myself: enough is enough!

We walk on, this time past the History Museum. Marshal Zhukov, the Russian hero general who organized the siege of Stalingrad and thus helped to win the war against Hitler, has a full size statue here, sitting on a remarkably realistic horse. He was one of the few military men who had a career outside the gulags. Stalin relegated him to an insignificant military position. Zhukov was too big to send to the gulags. After Stalin's death in 1953 Zhukov would arrest Beria (head of the KGB) and become Defence Secretary. Just around the corner we see 'point zero' or 'kilometre zero'. All distances in Russia are calculated from this point. Clearly a tourist spot and everyone wants a picture! I need Rubles so I need a bank. Lisa indicates a bank on the 2nd floor of the 'GYM' (pronounced 'gum'), the big department store – in a shopping mall on the other side of Red Square and well known for sales of luxury products even in Soviet times. It has been cleaned up and restored beautifully and is really worth a visit. Or is my perception warped because of all the churches I've seen today? Lenin's mausoleum is closed today. Plenty of men at work to prepare some important Putin speech it seems. We walk on to the very colourful, most photographed cathedral in Russia: Saint Basil's, officially named 'The Cathedral of Vasily the Blessed'. Built in the sixteenth century by our friend Ivan the Terrible, the cathedral has become as much a symbol for Russia as the Kremlin. Larry, Heather and I take turns posing for pictures with the beautiful building in the background. Today is tourist day! On 14 October Russians celebrate the day of the Holy Mother of God. The story goes that in the days of Byzantium she appeared above the believers and protected them with her robe or

veil ('Pokrov' in Russian). In this cathedral there are all small 'churches' and rooms that are connected and in one of them we can see the tomb of Vasily. Basil was actually some sort of Robin Hood who lived during the reign of Ivan the Terrible. He stole from the rich and gave to the poor (so it was said) and even pointed out to Ivan himself that the latter was not a good Christian. Lisa explains that the cathedral consists of nine churches. I think she means 'chapels' but in English the word 'churches' is used here. It is not only a unique building from the outside, with all its colourful domes and turrets, but also inside it is maybe the most impressive church that we have visited today. We have to pay an entrance fee and Lisa tells us to remain silent and look 'Russian' when she buys the tickets. Foreigners pay the double compared to Russians to enter the building. We stand in a circle saying 'da, da' to each other and try to have the 'evasive' expressions on our faces that a lot of Muscovites seem to have. But Lisa's plan doesn't work, and we all have to produce our passports! So we have to pay 1,000 Ruble per person. A fortune for the average Russian for a church visit, apparently, but at €11.50 a doddle for the Western tourist. Not that there are so many... I tell Heather that, meanwhile, I have seen enough churches and if somebody shows me another icon I will set fire to it. It sounds as if Lisa heard me because all of a sudden she asks if we are interested in visiting a beautiful and special 'park' where tourists almost never go. I am immediately enthusiastic and when Larry hears that we will go there on the rather famous metro he is also game. The Moscow metro is already worth the trip. The underground train network is world famous because of its artful decorations and architecture. I have used the metro in many cities like Paris, London, Milan and New York but

none of these has the mythical attraction of the Moscow one. The first line was officially opened in 1935 by the Secretary of Public Works: Nikita Khrushchev, yes, the same guy who was going to be Stalin's successor in 1953. In the following years more stations opened, and the Soviets decorated all the stations with frescoes and statues to educate the Russian people and bring them in-line with the Soviet view of politics and art. Therefore the frescoes in the Kyivskaja station, for instance, are dedicated to the friendship between the Russians and the Ukrainians. Muscular labourers and healthy looking farm girls flanked by heroic looking soldiers dance towards the metro users. (Note: I wonder if Putin asked his Kremlin painters to cover everything after his invasion of Ukraine in 2022. But maybe he will just use this to say the Russians still are friends with the people of Ukraine but not with their 'fascist government'. He does have a way with words...) The paintings are so beautiful that you would almost forget that under Stalin's reign of terror millions of these people would die of famine because of the catastrophic industrial development. In 'Ploščad Revolutsji' (under Revolution Square) we can see 76 bronze statues. It is a magnificent metro station and could be a hall in any museum. The statues represent your average Russian types: labourers, soldiers, a mother with a child, a football player, a border patrol officer with his dog, a sailor... Lisa tells us that the statues were made in Leningrad (Saint Petersburg during Soviet times) to the likeness of real people. Apparently today there are still families who place flowers at their ancestor's statues every year on their birthdays. When the Nazis invaded Russia in June 1941 during Operation Barbarossa these statues were removed and transported to the East, somewhere in Siberia, where they were kept in

safety until they were brought back in 1944 after the German army retreated. It was all very symbolic: Stalin wanted to show to the people that things were going very well for the Soviet Union in the war. One could nearly cry at the sight of so much beauty, knowing how much blood was spilled in this country. The modern timetable screens stand out sharply against all this architectural and cultural beauty. What strikes me is that there is no graffiti anywhere on the metro walls and there is not a single piece of garbage on the ground. There is no urine smell like in Paris or London... 'Moscow has its secrets' I think. Lisa had said: 'The city of Putin cannot be dirty.' I guess anybody taking a leak against a statue or using a spray can on these pristine walls will probably end up in prison or sign his own death warrant. No Banksy here!

We finally end up in one of the outer precincts of the city and the first thing that strikes me when walking outside again is a concrete arch with a rocket at the end that celebrates the first man in space: Yuri Gagarin. On the opposite side at Prospekt Mira 119 there is an exhibition centre where in the glorious Soviet past all the big - mainly agricultural - exhibitions were held: the All Russia Exhibition Centre. It was opened in 1939, and all the Soviet Republics as defined by Stalin on a map had a building here, usually built in the local architectural style of that republic. The Uzbek pavilion, for instance, is built in that typical central Asian 'Mongol' style. The Kazakhstan pavilion is another example. But since the implosion of the Soviet Union many of these republics are not interested in owning or maintaining an expensive building in Moscow anymore, hence the fact that several pavilions are empty and boarded up. Lisa tells us that you can actually rent a complete pavilion to organise an event or exhibition. I will

keep that in mind for the next company Christmas party! The entrance to the park is an opulent gate in the style of the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin. On the top, there are no horses pulling a chariot but, instead, a healthy-looking farm couple, painted in gold and lifting a bushel of hay. The oval shaped road runs past all the buildings and finally ends up at the 'space' pavilion. There are plenty of coffee and food stalls along this path but they remain sadly without customers as there are very few people around today. I feel obliged to bring my caffeine levels up to speed and have some great espressos and even an ice cream. There is a sort of 'general' building behind the gate and in front is the ubiquitous Lenin. He has got a pensive look and scrutinises the visitors as they walk past his statue. Behind the building is a truly beautiful fountain. The 'Fountain of Friendship of the Peoples' (Druzhba Narodov). I am used to the white marble fountains in Italy, but this is completely different. A big round fountain with life size golden ladies in the national dress of each of the Soviet republics they represent - or represented before 1991. The sunlight explodes on the gold statues and the abundant fountains create a sparkling golden spray. I am a bit speechless, something i usually am not! It's one of those 'wow' moments and we take our time for photographs. We walk past Armenia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Karelia and so many other big buildings to arrive finally at the end of the park at the 'Cosmos' pavilion, a big building with displays to celebrate Russia in Space both outside and inside. Cosmonauts are Russian astronauts, something I remember from my early school days, and so, it is true; not everything the priests at school taught me was wrong ! Meanwhile we have reached the end of our tether, we have done so much on foot in this big city that we are knackered. Moscow is a big city! Tomorrow we

are going to ride bikes. No more tourism as we know it. So we decide to return to our hotel and go for a bite in a - how could it not be - a Georgian restaurant! Back in my room I listen to Etta James' 'All I Could Do Was Cry' but somewhere halfway I fall asleep.



# MOSCOW TO SKORNIAKOVO

*Winston Churchill once said: 'Russia is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma: but perhaps there is a key.'*

Our first day of riding. It immediately feels really good. The BMW F850GSA is not unknown to me. At home in Belgium I once owned a 700 GS and in New Zealand I rode an 800 GSA. No-nonsense motorcycles that are not the fastest or the most powerful but are perfectly suited to do some long distance travel on various surfaces. I've got a red bike and immediately feel that the name of this bike should be 'Red October'. 'Red', the colour of the October Revolution and also the submarine commanded by Sea Connery in the film. Although the submarine was probably painted black. Larry says I should call it 'Red Devil' because I am a Belgian and the Belgian Football team is called the 'Red Devils'. But I don't want to do that, I am not a football player of the level of Hazard, De Bruyne or Courtois. Our first stunt is riding through the Moscow morning traffic, together with probably a million car users. We intend to ride to the other side of the Moskva and take some pictures of ourselves against the backdrop of the Kremlin. The Cathedral of Saint Basil looks upon us as we stand next to our bikes and take photographs to dazzle the people at home! One of Putin's unperturbable cleaning gangs is cleaning the place where we want to take the pictures, but it is clear that the babushkas will not be disturbed by some bikers! The head babushka even takes

aim at Artem with her high pressure cleaner when he wants to park his Triumph Explorer 800XC. You need to have patience if you want to take a photo here. About 100 pictures later we start our engines. The aim of this morning is not to lose Artem on a 70 kilometre ride through the Moscow traffic in order to reach the outskirts and the road to the south. We stop halfway at a petrol station. One of the many that we will see during this trip. Surprisingly enough it looks just like any petrol station in Western Europe. But hey... what did I expect? That we would stop next to a herd of camels loaded with jerrycans where a Cossack with shiny boots would siphon some petrol into our bikes? This is a modern country, and the Russians will do anything to show the foreign tourists how civilized and modern they are. Mike joins us in his Mitsubishi L200 support vehicle. In contrast to our shining bikes it looks like it hasn't been washed in the last few years. There is a trailer connected to the support vehicle; as it is the end of the travel season the garage in Moscow had to be emptied and its contents transported to Sochi, where Alex - the owner of Rusmototravel lives. There are two motorbikes in the trailer and in the back, there is just enough space to put our luggage so that we can enjoy the ride without too much weight on the bikes. 'Do bring a set of clothes and some toiletries on your bike, because maybe Mike won't make it to the hotel in the evening and that way you can at least take a shower and change into something dry and clean', Artem had told us. It will however only happen once that Mike is held up in traffic somewhere in the two weeks we're riding. Our first stop is in the middle of the sticks at a Nunnery. The place is covered with scaffolding due to long overdue repairs and when we want to enter the church one of the old and bent nuns tells us the church is not open, but

we are welcome in the other building. We should have known: the other building is a shop where 200-year old nuns sell artefacts and tourist junk. The kind of stuff you definitely don't want to drag around for 4,000 kilometres in your panniers. The place is peaceful, old and nicely painted white but that more or less summarises it. I wish the old ladies a blissful old age and that they may enter the kingdom of heaven gracefully while I put my helmet back on. We are clearly on a touristic route because the next stop is an old fortified little town (a kremlin) that is called Zaraysk Kremlin. It's a nice rectangular kremlin with walls that are built in two kinds of stones: the lower part big granite boulders and the top finished off with reddish bricks. Prince Vasily III built it at the end of the 16th century, and it was very nicely restored in the previous few years. Zaraysk used to be an outside military post that served to protect Moscow against the Crimean Tatars. These were a 'Khanate' - a feudal principality - that was governed by an Islamic 'Khan' (king) and flourished after the implosion of the Mongol Golden Horde. It's a very pretty place but as the local primary school is also there we decide to leave the hustle and bustle behind us and ride on. It has to be said: Russian schools organise many educational school trips to make the children aware of Russian history. I remember mainly school trips to 'De Efteling' (a fairy tale amusement park in The Netherlands) and 'De Meli' (a Belgian amusement park where bees once produced honey). We had to queue and hold each other's hands to wait for the travel coach, at the entrance, and of course for each of the few attractions they had in the sixties. Who is moaning about face masks now in 2021? Queueing has caused me some permanent mental damage, I reckon. The Russian kids are not holding hands but walk

neatly in two rows behind each other through the Zaraysk gate. We ride on, for miles and miles, until we finally arrive in Kulikova. Remember Kulikova ? Where Dmitry Donskoy defeated the Mongol army for the first time ever? Well, the Russians decided that this battle should be the start of the new history of the Russian State as we know it now. They are still building the monument but there is already a hill with lots of stairs. When you climb it, you have a sweaty view of the fields all around. Peaceful, definitely. Bales of hay are drying in the sun and as far as the eye can see there are green pastures and forests, while the Reka Borovets River carves its way through this beautiful landscape. It immediately makes me think of a famous battle that took place in 1302 in my hometown, Kortrijk: The Battle of the Golden Spurs. An army of archers and farmers led by a few famous leaders of the time - in this case: the Flemish - defeated a French army that consisted mainly of knights and professional soldiers. It was of course a relatively small French army, but the Flemish didn't like the French whom they considered arrogant and greedy. They had a point because Flanders was the richest part of the French territory in those days and the French king just wanted the Flemish money! Nothing has changed since those days. Instead of capturing the knights and giving them back against a hefty ransom, as was the habit of the days, the Flemish just beat the shit out of the French and killed quite a number of knights with their 'goedendag' (literally: a 'hello' , which was a hand weapon) or else impaled them on their hay forks. Such uncivilized behaviour in battle had never been seen before and a few years later the French came back with a much bigger army. The Flemish realised that they could not win for a second time and bought their lives and existence with

tax money! The 'golden spurs', which the Flemish had taken from the dead knights in 1302 and hung up in the local church were taken back by the French in 1304. Now this is exactly what happened in Kulikova. Although Dmitry won the battle against the Mongol army led by Mamai in 1380, this was in no way a safeguard for the future. The Mongol 'Golden Horde' came back under Toktamish with a much bigger army in 1382 and erased everything they encountered on their route to Moscow. In August 1382 the city was burned to the ground and never before had so many Muscovites been killed, raped and decapitated. Dmitry accepted the Mongols as their new masters and Moscow would pay taxes to the Mongols for the following 200 years. Oddly enough this was a new start for Moscow, which would later on become the most important city in Russia. Dmitry was a real opportunist. As the great footballer and part-time philosopher Johan Cruyff once said: 'every disadvantage has its advantage'.

After all this history we arrive in Skornyakovo at a renovated 18<sup>th</sup>-century hotel that is composed of several wooden houses. I have to admit it is quite something. Rich Russians come all the way here for a luxury weekend or a wedding party. Ceremonial carriages and plenty of sheep find their place on the vast estate between the wooden luxury hotel rooms. There is also a sign saying that here is the place with the oldest stone age findings in the whole of Russia. Considering the size of Russia this is quite something! In the evening we have dinner on the terrace of the hotel's restaurant. There is one certainty on this earth: mosquitos will bite, wherever you are, causing an annoying itch for days to follow! The stars shine brightly in the Russian sky... Cosmic Blues.... Janis Joplin sings in my ears as I slowly fade into the night.

# SKORNYAKOVO TO VESHENSKAYA

*'I had nothing to offer anybody but my own confusion' (Jack Kerouac – On the Road)*

We ride and ride along small but endless roads and stop in Zadonsk. One of the most important Russian Orthodox Monasteries is our next port of call. The entrance is a minute little door in a side wall which opens onto to a vast courtyard full of churches and chapels. Our motorbikes are parked just outside this entrance, literally two meters from the door. Something you are not able to do at most tourist sights! As we come in a few guys start telling Heather off for not wearing the right clothes so she has to cover herself with a cotton cloak. She is wearing the same motorbike clothes as us and clearly not showing any skin - except her face. But the guards at the entrance insist so off she goes to drape a cloth over her bike outfit. Us men don't have to do anything specific, as usual. We walk along a long row of tables where the locals sell not only religious items but also cages with cats and bracelets. Larry can't stop himself and buys a bracelet. Fortunately not a cat. The most impressive building here is the Church of the Holy Gate, which belongs to the monastery founded by the holy Tichon of Moscow who, therefore, got a statue in the middle of the monastic grounds, much to Lenin's nuisance no doubt. A very old, bearded monk named Nicodemus, wearing a long brown robe, a body warmer and sandals (I kid you not!)