

A BRIEF IMPRESSIONS OF RUSSIA

On the very far Eastern side of Russia is an archipelago of islands known as the Kuril Group. They are located North of Japan and near the sinister land of Siberia. The main Island in this group is called Sakhalin Island.



I sat waiting for the plane to take me from the city of Sapporo in Japan over to the Russian city Yuzno Sakhalinsk on Sakhalin Island. As I waited two smartly dressed gentlemen approached me. They were senior executives of a major oil exploration company and would be flying across with me.

Sapporo is at the very Northern end of Japan on the island Hokkaido. This is the very end of the line for Western airlines, it is not a tourist area and it's rare indeed to see any nationality other than Japanese in that city. So there was little problem for them to identify me.

I had maintenance work to do and had sent ahead several boxes of equipment I would require. The airport reception had informed me that every thing had arrived safe and sound and at that moment was being loaded onto my chartered plane. The plane, a Cessna Citation executive jet, was the same plane I'd travelled over on, on five previous visits.

I settled back into my comfortable leather seat along side the two important oilmen. Just the three of us in this really plush and beautiful executive plane.



The engines roared, the little plane gobbled up the runway and we were off, rocketing up to the sky like a jet fighter plane. I watched the digital altimeter as it clicked over rapidly until we finally levelled off at 38,000 feet. I felt like a V.I.P. sitting snugly engulfed in the leather seat. I was feeling very self important, and was proudly savouring a glass of beer when a pilots voice crackled over the loud speaker. "Look out the window and see if you can see anything," he said "we've just picked up a Japanese radio message to say they have sent up some fighter planes because their radar has identified some Russian Migs intruding over Japanese territory."

My heart skipped a few beats, as I was well aware that this was near the area where the Russians had shot down a Korean airliner just a few years ago.

I sat on the edge of my seat and searched the skies through the window. Away down below us I saw a Jumbo Jet whizzing along, in the opposite direction to us. Thank goodness there were no fighter planes to be seen.

The excitement had begun already; I was back to earth, I'm no VIP and swilled the beer down. The real VIP's seemed unconcerned. Suddenly the little jet went into a steep dive. The altimeter rapidly ticked over; 38, 37, 36, 35,000 feet. My heart began to hammer as we continued to plummet down 24, 23, 22, 21,000 feet. At 20,000 feet I felt an indescribable glow of relief as I sensed the plane beginning to pull out of the dive. The altimeter stopped at 18,000 feet and I breathed again. A new announcement came over the intercom:-
"Sorry about that" crackled the pilots voice, "we have just come into Russian air space and they want us to fly at this 18,000 feet level. 'Is that all it was' I thought as my heart beat steadied. Half an hour later I breathed a sigh of relief as we taxied down the airstrip on Russian soil.



Although I'd done this trip 5 times before some how it always seemed to be exhilarating and exciting and inevitably there was some sort of drama. On a previous trip I'd taken several gallons of oil-based paint in my luggage. I didn't know at the time, but this is strictly very illegal! Paint is inflammable and could explode and burn the plane. When the pilot had seen it being unloaded he called me over and gave me a real dressing down. "Oil based paint is absolutely prohibited on aeroplanes!" he chastised. "It is a very serious offence and we should report you to the authorities!"

He didn't; but I was not popular. But I didn't know! I was on the plane too and if there was a disaster I would have gone down with the plane too! Believe me, I'm definitely not into suicide!

On this trip I'd been asked to take over more paint; so this time I did my homework carefully before putting anything onto the plane. I visited the aviation dangerous goods people in Wellington and asked them to check

everything I was taking over. “What about acrylic paint?” I’d asked them. “That’s OK it won’t burn.” So I packed in a carton holding four one-gallon tins of paint, and they signed a clearance note for me. I stepped out of the plane just as the ground crew were opening the baggage hatch.

A thick sticky white liquid was dribbling from the plane and out onto the tarmac. The ground crew called the pilot “What is this?”

The moment I saw it I knew exactly what it was! And as I walked from the plane I looked into the hold to confirm my worst fears. My carton of paint was hanging upside down in a cargo net with white acrylic paint still dripping from it. The altitude and probably the sudden dive to 18,000 feet had popped the lids off three of the four tins of paint. What made matters worse was that someone had chucked the carton upside down into the net and the whole three gallons had leaked into the hold.

It was not funny and I was not popular!

If anyone here ever gets to go to the Yusno Sakhalinsk International airport, and sees a big white patch on the tarmac - think of me; it’s my paint!

For some reason that was the last time I was asked to come to the Island to do their service work!

I watched as the two executives collected their suitcases. The ground crew had washed them down with a fire hose and they were still wet and now sported a sort of rag rolled effect. I consoled myself by thinking that these frequent flying high powered executive decision-makers would have no trouble in future identifying their unique marbled looking suitcases at the baggage carousels as they globe trotted their way around the world.

I slunk into the customs area and my paint sodden cartons and bags followed on a trolley leaving a trail of white blobs from the still dripping paint tins. I was the last to check through customs.

The customs people had a wonderful new toy; a giant x-ray machine, and they used it to examine every thing. The paint dribbled all over their machine but undeterred by the mess they continued to examine each and every box, carton, container and suitcase.

I had all manner of things packed away in those boxes. There were parts for the boilers, a control panel for the security system, bits for the toilets and all my hand tools. They all came up on the screen. Odd shaped lumps with protruding wires, mysterious looking gadgets flashed past my eyes as the scanner spied through the contents.

Although I’d packed every thing I couldn’t for the life of me work out what most of those bits and pieces were and if I didn’t know better I could well have suspected they were the makings of an Atomic bomb.

“What’s this?” demanded the officer as he pointed at some thing with wires hanging from it. I shrugged my shoulders. “And this - and that” he pointed out more unidentifiable objects. I held my open palms towards him. “I don’t know.”

He scowled. With his military looking greatcoat and peaked hat with red band he looked like one of the evil ones in a James Bond movie. “Open it and look” I suggested, obviously looking very worried.

The lady interpreter sidled along side and gave me a friendly nudge. “Don’t look so worried” she whispered with a wink “there is no problem.”

The officer scowled and shrugged his shoulders. “Money?” he demanded as he tossed me a form. It was written in Russian and I had to record details of any currency I was taking into Russia. I filled it in; he stamped it and pointed to a door. I had no idea of what to expect through that door and I cautiously peeped through. Standing right there was my old friend and driver Volodya with a huge beaming smile. I was in Russia again.

The roads were just the same, or maybe even worse than on my previous visit, at this time of year they are camouflaged; all covered with fallen autumn leaves. But beneath the leafy carpet I could feel the potholes as we drove over the leaves.

In the winter it is the snow that camouflages the roads, but I have seen the roads without any cover and know they are have many potholes, not to mention the most remarkable assortment of empty beer cans and vodka bottles. But now I was relaxed and sat happily watching and observing everything as we drove on into the town.

In spite of having very limited money spend, and difficulty getting any fashionable clothes, the women folk always seem to be able to dress very smartly whenever they go out. On this day it had been raining very heavily and although the rain had now stopped, all the street gutters, that appear to have few, if any drains, were now full of water and overflowing onto the street and foot path. All the motor vehicles appear to be driven exclusively by men and when they find a gutter awash with water they just seem to just love it! They all appear to strive to out do each other in what appears to me to be a national pastime; ‘Soak the pedestrians.’ They make a game of racing through the big puddles creating a huge bow wake that over flows onto the footpath effectively swamping the poor pedestrians with the wake. I must add that most of the pedestrians appear to be women who always seem to be dressed up in their Sunday best going out clothes.

It may be great fun; for the drivers! But I think it must not be quite so hilarious for the poor pedestrians.

Soon we had to stop at the traffic lights where a big group of pedestrians stood waiting patiently by the kerb for the lights to change. I noticed

Volodya had avoided a very large puddle near the footpath. “He’s losing his touch” I observed to myself and shook my head and was about to make a smart comment when another car, quick to take the advantage roared up the inside. As he did so Volodya gave me a nudge and pointed at the car. “Look” he commanded. The car was spraying water all over the footpath in a most spectacular manner and the pedestrians were scattering everywhere.

Beneath the water must have been the biggest pothole in the world, for as I watched the little car suddenly pitched forward then lurched up and stopped dead and Water surged halfway up the cars’ door. The car then stalled. After some time the driver managed to coax the engine back to life and the little car struggled up to road level where it stopped again. Volodya was laughing uproariously! It was obvious that he knew that there was huge pothole on that corner. It seems that the only thing that will score more points than spraying a foot path crowded with nicely dressed women is to out smart another driver.

I watched as the driver threw the door open and climbed under the car, checking out the wheels, undercarriage and making sure the differential was still attached.

As we drove away Volodya just couldn’t stop laughing.



The roads and the open markets

A bit about the Hotel:

I arrived at my hotel. It was like a second home to me now. Had it changed from the first visit? I wondered. Yes it had changed quite significantly.

The very first time I visited I’d been advised in NZ that the price at the hotel was \$15 per day. Quite reasonable I’d thought at the time. But when

I arrived I learned inflation had taken the price from \$15.00 to \$55.00 per night that is US\$55.00 or NZ\$100.00.

I recalled the dingy and dark foyer where a hideous old woman sat behind an abacus like a character from a Charles Dickens novel. With a scowl she had advised me that before she would let me in I must pay in advance. That was no problem and I offered her a fist full of US dollars. To my complete surprise she refused them and demanded roubles. I offered \$NZ, \$AUS or Yen. But no! She remained adamant; she wanted payment now! And she wanted it paid in Russian roubles. Roubles can only be purchased in Russia and by now all the banks were all closed - so I had a problem. The interpreter from the Oil company then arrived to rescue me, but even with assurances from an official representative of the third largest company in the world it still took another half hour for her to admit me.

'Yes', I admitted to my self, the service had certainly improved, but it was still different to home, but that was fun in itself and now I happily accepted things as they were. The main thing, and possibly the only one thing that I could never, ever have accepted had been corrected:- Toilet paper!

About toilet paper:

On my first visit six inch squares of grease proof paper had been scattered on the floor beside the toilet. This was the Russian idea of toilet paper. These nasty little squares that had smeared rather than wiped had now been replaced with real stuff, on a roll, soft paper that actually wiped. I'll say no more about that!

About Culture shock; and Money!

If I have given the impression that the standard of living over there is poor I have conveyed the message correctly, those folks enjoy a very poor standard of living. The rouble continues to be hard hit by inflation and I saw Volodya receive his pay packed in a big paper bag. Large wads of notes with a total value of less than \$100. Since that time they have taken three zeros off the value of a Rouble, so now 1000 roubles is reduced to one Rouble. Now that is what I call inflation! Not to mention paydays; the last time I was there the schoolteachers had not been paid for several months. The coal miners, stirrers that they are, they went on strike, and just because they had not received any pay for the last couple of - years!! But let's not confuse the standard of living with the quality of living; because I think their quality of living is brilliant! Skiing and ice skating is on the doorstep in the winter months.

And the wilderness! The forests are full of edible wild berries and mushrooms and are the home to exciting animals like bears.

In season the rivers are full of salmon and the seas and lakes have all manner of fish, huge delicious crabs, shrimps, scallops and wild ducks. In

the winter when the seas and lakes freeze over there is great fishing to be had, fishing through holes drilled through the ice.

People in more affluent countries would work all year to have a couple of weeks holiday doing just what these folks do all year round!

Life can be hard, but there is a wonderful sense of excitement and satisfaction in challenging nature to gather food from the wilderness.

About Fishing:

A new manager for the Oil company arrived, David, a Scotsman. I soon quickly discovered he was a very keen fisherman as he boasted about the wonderful fish he was going to catch while serving his contract on the Island. In the garage he had an assortment of fishing rods and reels that would rival the stocks held in most fishing shops at home, and as I admired his equipment I asked him what he fished for back home.

“Salmon!” he said. “I’m a keen Salmon fisherman.”

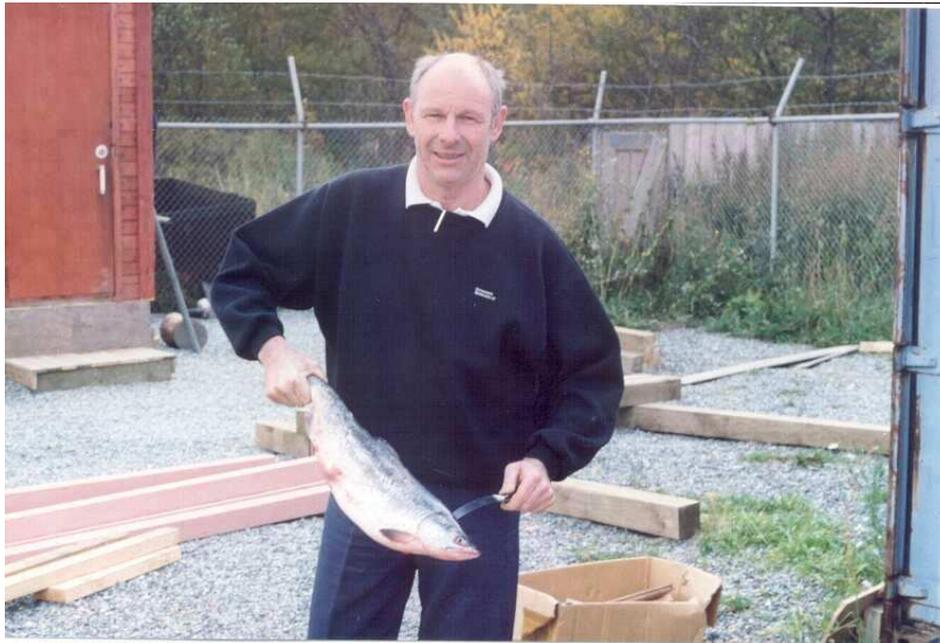
I was impressed, and as I had never caught a salmon asked how many he had caught in Scotland.

“Oh” he said “I’ve never actually caught one but I’ve spent a lot of time fishing for them.”

I enjoy fishing, and I’m fascinated with all things that live underwater and although I had never caught a salmon had to smile at his enthusiasm!

I returned to the job six months later and innocently asked, “Caught any Sakhalin salmon yet David?”

He beckoned me over to his freezer; it was one of those huge bench type things. He opened the lid revealing it was brimming over with beautiful big salmon. This time I smiled in amazement. I certainly was impressed.



A salmon for dinner.

Several times while I was at Sakhalin in the Autumn Volodya took me to some wild rivers to fish. The salmon swim up stream in giant schools and at the river mouth seals congregated to snap up any unwary ones as they patiently wait their turn to run the river gauntlet.

I can vividly remember my first salmon fishing expedition. Volodya had offered to take me and on the way he stopped and bought a couple of large bottles of Vodka. That was a bit scary! There were only three of us and I was well aware that that stuff is like rocket fuel. I bit my tongue and said nothing and soon after we arrived at a big set of gates by a river. Volodya bashed on the gate until a couple of fierce looking guards dressed in camouflaged military gear fronted up. Volodya waved the bottles of Vodka; the gates creaked open and we were welcomed in.



This was a State run fish trap that trapped all the salmon as they attempted to swim up the river. Once offered the Vodka the guards were really very friendly and I accepted a long rod and a set of thigh high waders they offered me. The waders leaked, and the water was unbelievably cold, but the salmon were everywhere. Unbeknown to me at the time we were fishing for a smaller variety of salmon on this trip. There are at least 4 different species of salmon, and the big ones swimming up river had only one thing on their minds - to get well up river, make love or what ever it is they do, spawn and then die.

I guess you would have to call it the ultimate orgasm.

We used salmon eggs for bait. They are about the same size and colour as red currants and to put them onto the hook about five or six of them are

wrapped in a piece of nylon stocking and tied in a little bunch. This is carefully put onto the hook without puncturing the eggs. The Russians call these baits tampons.

I had no trouble remembering the name - but for some reason was not altogether comfortable with it! Maybe I'm old fashioned but the idea of using tampons for bait just doesn't seem right to me.



Rob with Victor, the incredible Healer and Hypnotist.

A bit about - Bears:

As I innocently wandered up the river, allowing my float and tampon bait drift along the deep edges of the bank, one of the watching guards indicated to me that I should be very careful as I went around the next bend up river? "Why?" I asked, "What is up there?" He shrugged his shoulders and in part English part Russian and a hand waving charade he effectively indicated a message that meant:- "Maybe nothing – or maybe big black bear could be up there looking for salmon."

I did see a stuffed bear in one of the Japanese airports as I passed through, and those bears are BIG. I went around that bend in the river very cautiously. And I'm happy to report there was no bear there.

Party!

At the end of the expedition we were obliged to assist the guards to drink the vodka Volodya had brought for them.

I'd been warned about its potency and sipped it very quietly. One of the guards removed the cap by slapping the bottom of the bottles with the heel of his hand and the cap popped off. He slapped a little Vodka under his arms like perfume then proceeded to pour the remainder into an array of cracked cups and chipped tumblers. The others had spread out

tomatoes, bread and sausage on the rickety table and it all tasted wonderful. Soon everyone was singing and dancing. Cossack dances and songs with charades of sword waving and the crossed arm, bent kneed dances that the Cossacks do. The whole adventure was just brilliant and they loved watching my version of the haka that I invented on the spot to show them.



Victor, Hypnotist and healer:

A bit More about Bears:

One day while on the way to work Volodya silenced me as a news report came over the car radio.

“Two people who were in the forest collecting berries were killed by a bear last night.” he translated.

I ran a finger across my throat. “Killed?”

He shrugged. “It was away up the Island” he said waving his hand and dismissing the whole thing as a non event. “Not here!”

We were due to go fishing on the following weekend. Volodyas wife Lena and some of their friends had prepared a picnic and we travelled in two vans away up into the wilderness. After wending our way for miles through narrow tortuous rough metal roads we eventually arrived at a river away up in the dark mountains. Here we found hundreds, if not thousands of salmon swimming up the river. The banks were littered with dead and rotting bodies and a smell of death was everywhere in the air, but in spite of that the area was very beautiful and I took up my camera to capture the moment on film. As I set out I warily asked about the bears in this area.

“No problem! Bears asleep now.” Said Volodya and he laid his hands as if in prayer alongside one cheek and tipped his head onto them.

“So the bears here are asleep now?” I asked just to confirm I’d understood.

“Da! (*yes*) Asleep now!”

I wandered up the meandering river through quite dense scrub. It was very pretty. The river bubbled along and the autumn leaves were red and gold, and the world was at perfect peace. I discovered a little tributary and noticed a very a big salmon had got lost and was swimming alone up into the shallows. I put the camera down on the bank and paddled up the creek in pursuit. The water depth fluctuated and in places was quite deep. But I chased that salmon until I had it corralled into a shallow corner where I was able to pounce into the water and grab it. Dripping wet but proudly carrying my flapping fish I made my way back to the picnic area where the women folk made a great fuss. They much admired such a fine fish and expressed amazement at my skill, strength and cunning to catch such a fine specimen without the aid of a fishing line or a spear. My chest swelled out with pride.

The men soon returned without any fish. The women folk showed them my wonderful catch. Volodya picked my prize from the grass and ran his fingers down the sleek lean sides. “Very big” he said, and then nonchalantly tossed it back into the river.

“No good for eat,” he said “too skinny!”

Open mouthed I watched it drift down stream in the current. I felt quite deflated.

I later learned that salmon swim up the rivers to breed. They lay their eggs and then they die! So my beautiful salmon was almost dead when I grabbed it.

Bears and interpreters:

The men set up a Barbeque and as the evening darkened the flames were warm and the evening peaceful, vodka flowed and there was a fine feeling of camaraderie. From the other side of the river I detected a noise; something was disturbing the peace, crunching through the forest and grunting. I pointed to the other side of the river, made a grunting noise and asked, “Pig?”

Volodya looked up from the Barbeque, “Nyett (*not*) pig’ he scoffed; “Bear!”

“But I thought you said the bears were all asleep.”

Volodya just shrugged he shoulders;

“Maybe some; maybe some not.” He said.

A bear had killed two people earlier in the week, my God if I had known they were still hunting through the forest awake and hungry I certainly would not have been wandering through the bush taking photos and wading up a stream chasing after after salmon.

“Have you ever seen a bear?” I asked as we sat to eat the barbeque.

“Oh yes!” he replied. “Many, many.”

“What do you do if you see one? do you run away?”

“No” he said “No problem, OK, they don’t take any notice of you. I pat small ones.”

I wondered about this and later checked the information out with David.

“As I understand it” he said “they are usually not aggressive but can get belligerent if you approach too close when they have a kill and are eating, and the females can get really nasty if you get close to them when they have cubs.”

So the little ones Volodya spoke of would be cubs! And if you messed with her cubs Big Momma Bear would quite likely take to you.

A little advise to any who may communicate with people who speak another language; - be very wary for even trained interpreters often get the true meaning completely wrong.

On my very first visit to the Island an attractive young interpreter accompanied me to the hotel. Lerrissa was her name. We chatted along the way and when we arrived and had booked into the hotel she said to me “It is such a privilege and a pleasure to speak with such a handsome and intelligent man.”

No woman in New Zealand has ever said anything even remotely like that to me!

I looked behind me to make sure there was no-one else with us, then, most flattered said “Oh you do tell such bloody lies!” The subtlety of course escaped her as I meant “do tell me more, flattery will get you every where.”

But she interpreted this literally as “You are a Bloody great Liar!” and from that moment on she could hardly bring herself to speak to me and happily stuffed up any messages she was obliged to relay to me.

So I am now very mindful of the dangers of my words being translated into another language, but I still can occasionally manage to get myself into trouble.

At a BBQ one day I met a 68-year-old Russian lady, she held a very senior position with the Moscow Circus that had got into financial trouble in New Zealand. In the middle of all these problems her husband had died in Russia and she couldn’t even get home for his funeral. So needless to say she was really very stressed. After enjoying a couple of glasses of vodka she had relaxed a little and we were joking with each other. I laughingly told her she was a cheeky wench. There was a dead silence as a professional translator interpreted this message so I asked “How did you translate that?”

“I just told her you said she was ‘an obnoxious witch’.”

“You said what?” I asked in horror.

“Cheeky is obnoxious” she explained, “and a witch is an evil old woman.”

I was horrified and insisted she get her Russian / English dictionary to correct that as quickly as I could. I tried to explain “Cheeky is like a fun loving child, and I said wench, not witch. A Wench is a young maiden who is attractive to men. Not a witch!”

Fortunately in Russian the word witch is described as a wise woman; a woman skilled in herbs and natural remedies, so the witch interpretation caused no offence.

Speaking of which, I must say my observations of some of the women’s knowledge of wild herbs, berries, mushrooms and fungi they gathered from the forests is most impressive. They use many things gathered from the forest for curing all manner of illnesses.

About Shopping;

I must say a few words about the shopping. In the shops the system seems to be designed to provide the maximum inconvenience to the shoppers.

When, or should I say; if, you see something you want to buy you must first go to the purchase office and tell them what it is and how much it costs. You then pay them and they will fill out a docket. You must then go back to the counter and attract a sales person, (which is some times very difficult), present her (it is usually a woman) with the docket. If you have done it all correctly they will give you the goods.

It is all very complicated, difficult and time consuming, and if you can’t speak the language it becomes almost impossible!

Volodya volunteered to go and buy us food for lunch, bread, butter tomatoes etc. He would leave at 9.00 and was never back before 1.30 pm. Then again there is so very little available to buy. For example I went looking for a film for my 35mm camera. In the whole city I could only find three films; and they were black and white.

Then I wanted a tape for my video camera and when I eventually tracked one down I took Volodya to help me to buy it. He soon discovered that if I wanted the tape, I would have to buy the video camera as well!

There was also some sort of strange need *not* to take cash for items of high price. They want a cheque! The washing machine broke down one day and Volodya spent the whole day searching the town for a new one. He located 3 in the city – they were all different makes, and the shops would not take cash, and we had to wait several days until the cheque had cleared before he could take the washing machine home.

The open markets are easier places to shop and you can buy all manner of things. I was very interested to see the things caught or collected from the sea, the rivers or the forests. Fish, crabs, shrimps, and many types of mushroom and berries were available from these stalls.

As I've already mentioned the women's knowledge of medicine and foods gathered from the forests is quite remarkable. At the market there was one particular berry, small and white in colour and every time we saw some for sale Volodya or Lena would take a couple from the container and give them to me to eat. They were very bitter, and I'm sure if I were starving in the forest I would have thought them to be poisonous.

"Lemoneque berries" they said as they gave them to me "Very good for the man" Volodya said as he clenched his fist and flexing his arm, "Very, very good for the man" And it was quite obvious it was not my biceps that these berries were going to be so very, very good for!

I don't know why he thought I needed something that was "very good for the man" after all my wife was at home in NZ and although all the women I had met were very charming and nice to me, none of them were exactly attempting to seduce and or ravage me!

Anyhow these berries were quite bitter and there were many nicer things to eat so I can't report on whether or not they worked.

However, once I arrived home I wished that I had tested them, as I told a few people about them and there could have been a fortune to be made if they really did work. But the opportunity has now passed, since then someone invented Viagra.

One day we went collecting our own berries and mushrooms and I followed Volodya into the beech forest wearing thongs. The weather was cool and a little damp underfoot and when he noticed I was only wearing the thongs he insisted I go back to the car and change into boots. I flexed my muscles "very strong" I said "I'm OK".

With his fingers and thumb he mimicked something biting me on the ankle, and again told me to go and put boots on. From his hand motions it didn't look to be a very big or fierce animal, certainly not a bear nor a mountain lion but to humour him I took his advice and was quickly quite pleased I had done so, as within about five minutes of resuming my search for food I almost stepped on a snake!

I was amazed. The temperatures in those mountains will drop to well below minus 40 degrees in the wintertime. I thought snakes lived in the tropics! Who knew snakes can survive in minus 40 degree C temperatures?

“Are they poisonous?” I asked. Volodya looked at me as if I were a bit stupid. “Oh yes, of course.” He said adding, “but maybe take an hour or so to die!”

See it’s like I told you, life over there is just one great Adventure.

Winter:

One spring I arrived just before the snow thawed. In some bays surface of the ocean was frozen up to one meter deep and Volodya took me ice fishing.

We set off very early in the morning and on the way were stopped several times by the police at roadblocks. They were warning us about the conditions. It would appear that about two weeks previous a blizzard had come up and many people out fishing on the ice had not been able to find their way back to their cars. Three people had frozen to death and the police wanted to be sure every one was taking adequate precautions.

We arrived at the beach before dawn and warmed up with a couple of stiff cognac drinks and some coffee. When the dawn broke in a beautiful golden sunrise we dressed in quilted suits before walking out over the frozen sea for a mile or so.

Volodya drilled several holes in the ice with a sort of giant auger and we were soon fishing through them. The ice was about two feet (600mm) thick and we lowered the lines to the bottom about twenty feet (six metres) down. The lines were attached to short rods and we jiggled with about 6 or 7 hooks baited with green wool. I believe We caught about 600 fish that day.

By mid morning twenty or thirty people had arrived out on the ice and I walked around to see what they were catching. As soon as they discovered I was a foreigner they all offered me Vodka or Cognac and it was very difficult to turn down all their kind offers. But I did find a way. I said “Nyett Spa Seebär” that is “No thank you” then grasped my head in my hands and said “Vodka BOOM Chernobyl!” It stopped them every time, and they thought it was a most wonderful joke.

I was very interested in this type of fishing and spoke to many people about it. Some one told me a sad tale about a couple of guys who had illegally set a plug of dynamite to blow a good sized hole in the ice in a river. He first shot a small hole in the ice with a shot gun, then stuck a plug of dynamite into it and lit it. But his dog grabbed the fizzing dynamite and was happily fetching it back to the fishermen. They fled in terror and climbed a tree on the edge of the river. The dog ran over and dropped the dynamite at the base of the tree where it went off, bringing down the tree into the frozen river which cracked the ice and one of the fishermen froze to death in the river.

Ice fishing certainly has its risks. When I arrived home someone sent me a newspaper article telling of how a great chunk of ice broke away and drifted out to sea - carrying 82 ice fishermen with it. They were all rescued by helicopter, but it does make you wonder what would have happened in the days before helicopters.

Walking on ice is a skill. On the frozen sea it was smooth and surprisingly not very slippery, unlike the trodden packed snow in the city streets.



Guess who! Surprisingly it get very hot out there on the ice





In the city I noticed everyone seemed to hold hands or link arms. It was all very friendly and any ladies I happened to be with like Volodyas wife, daughter or who ever; would take my hand or arm whenever we were going anywhere. It was great I loved it, and they're all very attractive too! But I soon learned why, and it wasn't that they fancied me. The snow on the streets had become trodden into hard packed ice ruts that were treacherously slippery and when I walked through the market place alone I found I was slithering all over the place. Little old ladies, half blind and using walking sticks managed to wend their way safely through the ice, while I slithered my way along. Inevitably it had to happen, in the middle of a market place packed full of people my feet slid from under me and I ended up on my arse in an icy rut with ice water trickling around me.

The normally quiet crowd found the whole thing incredibly amusing and everyone disintegrated in laughter. I found it very embarrassing - and very wet and bloody cold!

Cold:

Diving is my magnificent obsession in life, and it may surprise some people to learn that when I was offered the opportunity to dive in the ice filled sea I was delighted and couldn't wait to get into it.

It was a young, and I may add very attractive young lady who arranged this dive for me, Lira was her name. Lira and her boy friend Alex collected me and took me to the ice and snow covered coast.

We stopped on a hillside overlooking a white beach. Alex cut steps in the snow-covered cliffs so we could clamber down to the beach and the sea. They had brought along a dry suit for me to wear. It was made of a very thick and spongy rubber. I began to dress in layers of underwear and thick woollies that they had brought along and as I started Lira took some pains to politely explain that I should "pass water" before dressing because

once immersed in the ice cold water there is always a desire to go - to “pass water.” I had to agree, it would not be very polite to piss, into some ones water proof suit and underwear!

So standing behind the car I discovered the meaning of the saying “piss holes in the snow.” I left my signature indelibly engraved in the snow.

And yes it was in my own handwriting!

When kitted up Lira came to me most apologetic and upset to admit that they had forgotten to bring one of the SCUBA regulators, and as per the rules of diving you should never dive alone. But I do - all the time - and I had to use all my powers of persuasion to get them to allow me to go in that icy sea alone.

“OK” they finally agreed “but we will follow you around in the little rubber boat.” They pulled a bag from the boot of the car and proceeded to blow up an inflatable dingy.

“Don’t worry about that” I told them, “I’ll be OK.” But they argued!

“In this cold water the regulator will sometimes freeze up and the air will stop coming through ” Lira explained.

“Follow my bubbles in the rubber boat” I quickly agreed.

I loved that dive! There wasn’t a lot of fish to be seen; plenty of anemones, sea weed, starfish and shellfish. But it was cold! So cold! Why was I surprised? After about 15 minutes my fingers and toes, although encased in thick rubber gloves were freezing. Each breath of air was super cooled and my lips, which were exposed in the water swelled up until they felt like balloons and hurt like hell! But I would not have missed that dive for any thing.





Money

And so it was time to leave Russia again. At the airport several people came to see me off and as we sat in the airport terminal I emptied my wallet to count any money I had left so the authorities would know I was not taking out more than I had taken in. All my supporters were very interested to study the international currency I had spread out and inspected notes, US dollars, Australian dollars, Japanese Yen and NZ dollars. The plastic money intrigued them the most, at that time they had never seen the Gold card Visa etc.

Then the call came for me to board and I stuffed the shuffled notes in disarray back into my wallet and walked into the Customs. I passed over my Passport and the declaration of money. I watched as the people in front of me were having every cent counted.

The officer stamped my passport and looked at my declaration, “Money” he demanded. I emptied the crumpled shuffled mass of currencies out of my wallet and onto the counter. The officer looked at it and pushed it back towards me. “OK” he said.

Had I beaten them? I smiled. Maybe; just this one time.

