

BfR's 2007 Culture/Eco-Ag Tour

Director/Tour leader's comment: We were fortunate this year to travel with Joe Jedeikin, a San Francisco attorney we had met through the Russian Center (see www.russiancentersf.org), and that he was able to record his impressions and share them with us! You are invited to follow our route not only in words but in pictures; see Joe's site at www.babcockjedeikin.com/albums/JoeVisitsRussia07/. I've added my comments here and there for clarification purposes.

Joe's Travel Diary

July 8, 2007: Leave SFO on early morning flight to LaGuardia via Chicago O'Hare. Shuttle to JFK and then shuttle to Holiday Inn.

July 9th: Well-rested and off to JFK for 4 p.m. Delta flight to Moscow. Meet my travel companions Tamara Kowalski and Carol Vesecky at the gate. (Carol barely makes it as she had only one hour to transfer from the Delta Domestic terminal to the International terminal. Unfortunately her luggage did not.) Good seats, but it was a long and tiring nine hours to Moscow, arriving 10:45 a.m. local time on July 10th. Met by Sasha Avrorin, a very nice, friendly man who speaks good English. He helps us arrange for a taxi to our hotel. The cabdriver seems wild, driving in and out of lanes, at times driving on the shoulder to pass other cars. I am thinking: We are not in America. We arrive at our hotel, the Turist, which is located at a development that looks like a college campus. We first go to one building where the hotel lobby is apparently identified, shlepping our bags, only to be told that we are to be housed in another building several hundred feet away. We finally check in and after freshening up, have lunch at the hotel, our first taste of Russian food, i.e. open faced sandwiches with sausages, and then head off to the Moscow River, where we take a boat trip seeing the great sights of Moscow. Tatiana Perova is our guide who speaks good English and identifies all historical sights for us. We see billboards, a sign of capitalism, old and new buildings, the Kremlin and of course those remarkable churches in the Kremlin with those great golden domes.

July 11th: Early rise and subway to Red Square for a one-hour tour of the famous Armory museum with audio guide through that impressive display of early Russian armaments and equipment. Then lunch at a food mart where all waiters and waitresses are attired in neat blue uniforms. I ate a chicken sandwich served by an attractive Asian waitress. I am impressed how clean that place is and how well we are served. Next we tour St. Basil's cathedral, which was built by Czar Ivan the Terrible in the 16th Century. It is a very impressive and colorful building almost 500 years old. We walk up a circular stairway to the top. Then we tour GUM Department store. I had been there 20 years before and then there was nothing to buy and the place had a bad smell. Now it was completely remodeled and housed all the big name designers: Gucci, Hermes, Louis Vuitton, you name it. I didn't feel I was in Moscow anymore. Back to the hotel, very tired.

July 12th: After breakfast, Tamara and I took the beautiful Russian subway back to Red Square to stand in line for the Lenin mausoleum. We got there at 9:30 and the line was already quite long. We were told it would open at 10 but we were in line 45 minutes before the line started moving. We had to check our cameras before entry. It was quite dark inside and there were soldiers all along making sure that no one lingered too long. Lenin was fully dressed in a suit, white shirt and tie in a lit-up glass enclosure. His face white, mustache gray and I wondered at the amazing fact that this man had lain there for over 70 years. Certainly a view of history and the tremendous changes in Russia at the time of the Revolution came to mind. It was of special interest to me since my own uncle had met this man and had been so mesmerized by him as to be persuaded to join Lenin's cause. My uncle was a young man and idealist only to be disillusioned later when he became a victim of Stalin's purges. Then we saw behind the mausoleum the memorial plaques to other Russian leaders, including (surprisingly) Stalin.

Next stop was the original Tretyakov Gallery, which houses a remarkable collection of paintings, period furniture and icons. Good lunch of borsht & piroshki, some of my favorite Russian food. In the evening we caught a most exciting show at the Kosmos Hotel theatre, the National Russian Dance Show by the Kostroma National Ballet Company, a great performance with very lively Russian music, colorful costumes and wonderful dances. They also had a wonderful baritone and his rendition of "Katyusha" was superb. It was truly an enchanting show. Later that evening we rode in a large van to the town of Novo-Sin'kovo (near Dmitrov) and to the Educational Methods Center of the Russian Ministry of Education and Science, our home for the next 3 days. Our genial host was English-speaking Yevgeny Shmelev, Director of the Foreign Relations Department.

July 13th: After breakfast we started another day of sightseeing. We had a van with driver and were also joined now by Shoshana Billik, a graduate student at the University of Washington; Professor Melissa Caldwell from UC Santa Cruz; Danielle Berman from the University of Wisconsin; and Volodya Loginov, a very helpful old Russian friend of Carol and Shoshana. The passenger seat next to the driver was vacant so I decided to sit there; however the seatbelt was inoperable and I soon returned to the back of the van. What surprised me, however, was that the driver was not a bit concerned about the non-functioning seatbelt. I am assuming that fastening seat belts is not mandatory in Russia.

Carol's note: Wearing seat belts is mandatory in Russia, but the law is not enforced.

Our first stop was the town of Sergiev Posad within Moscow's so-called Golden Ring area, home to the famous monastery, where we visited and saw the exteriors & interiors of old churches. We also enjoyed the beautifully maintained grounds with gardens, churches and residences for the monks.

We drove from there to the famous Abramtsevo Estate and residence grounds founded by Sergei Aksakov who later sold the estate to the Mamontov family. Many late 19th-century artists lived and worked there as guests of the Mamontovs. Outside the estate was a long line of tables with all kinds of goods for sale, from ice cream to jewelry to

souvenirs & trinkets. When we left for home in the late afternoon, our sunny day turned cloudy and we experienced a sudden heavy rainstorm.

July 14th: We drove to Rostov Velikii (not to be confused with the well-known city of Rostov-on-Don). This Rostov (on Lake Nero), Suzdal, and other cities, are within the Golden Ring area and were built at the time of the Grand Duchy of Vladimir of Kiev long before the city of Moscow came into existence. This entire area is now maintained as a museum visited by thousands daily. We saw the famous Rostov Kremlin, the home and fortress of the early czars. Though very old (the buildings and perimeter walls were built in the 11th century), they were in remarkably good condition, though of course they have been restored on more than one occasion. We learned that in the 14th century, these buildings were repeatedly damaged and destroyed during the Tatar attacks. We also visited the Rostov monastery. There were many churches with golden domes and some with blue and even dark green cupolas. We saw several of these churches both from the outside and inside, the largest being the Resurrection Church. On the inside we saw murals and frescoes in the Assumption Cathedral in remarkably good condition. There was a rule enforced that all women had to wear skirts before being admitted. The women in our group were wearing pants or shorts, but in any event they were furnished at the entrance with wrap-around skirts which apparently satisfied the requirements. (I thought the pants would cover more nudity than skirts, but then what do I know). On the outside of the museum we also had the opportunity to buy souvenirs, etc.

On our way home we stopped at a “tank memorial” dedicated to the designer of the famous T-24 tank, the most powerful tank during WWII, which is reputed to have saved Moscow from capture by the Nazis.

Carol: Joe describes above a day when the group traveled by van to Rostov the Great and toured its onion-domed churches and monasteries. Guest ecotourists were anthropology and sociology scholars Prof. Melissa Caldwell of UCSC and Danielle Berman, a PhD candidate at the Univ. of Wisconsin. Both took time away from their research in the Moscow area to join the group for sightseeing. As for myself, I stayed behind in Novo-Sin'kovo to catch up with my planning work.

While on my own that day, I shopped in the local open-air market in an attempt to replace clothes in my baggage that had been diverted by Delta Airlines. In a store with four walls and a roof, I bought a small teapot of Gzhel (see <http://www.artrusse.ca/gzhel.htm>) from a charming saleswoman. I visited Evgeny Shmelev, our chief host at the Educational Methods Center, and his wife Tatyana in the brick home they had built together. The decorative garden in front is lovely, with several varieties of low-growing junipers. The back and side gardens look phenomenally productive, with row after row of vegetables, grains, and blooming lilies and other flowers surrounded by fruit trees and berry vines. It is probably 2000 square feet in area.

Evgeny organized a brief visit with Vladimir I. Antiushin, the new director of the Educational Methods Center. We agreed that Evgeny and I should work toward securing funding for a workshop in the coming year at the Center. The workshop will be taught by

Steve Moore, now teaching at North Carolina State University, as a sequel to the one he taught at the Center in 2002.

July 15th: In the morning we were invited to a farewell breakfast very nicely presented by our host Yevgeny Shmelev and his staff. We then bid them farewell. Together with Volodya and Tamara, I went by bus and subway to visit Bukovo, a suburb to the south of Moscow, in an effort to find the burial place of my uncle, German Bitker, who fell during the Stalin purges. After decades of denial by the KGB, Bukovo had only recently been “discovered” as the place where some 35,000 victims of Stalin were shot and buried. I am indebted to our tour leader Carol Vesecky who enabled me to travel with our Russian guide Volodya. We found the Bukovo fields on which there is a Russian Orthodox church and talked with the principal priest. However, my uncle's name was not contained in the list that is maintained there. We returned to downtown for a farewell dinner with our Moscow friends and guides Tatiana Perova, Sasha and Larissa Avrorin and their grandson Sasha. We then boarded our train for the overnight trip to Bryansk. I was assigned to a sleeping compartment with my three women travel companions Tamara, Carol and Shoshana, a somewhat unusual experience for me. I found the Russian trains to be quite punctual and efficient. Each car has a samovar and each guest is entitled to receive “gariachi chai” – hot tea in a glass.

July 16th: After sleeping on and off during the night, we arrived in Bryansk at 6 a.m. and were met by Dr. Igor Prokofiev, who I found to be exceptionally knowledgeable, as well as fluent in English. He was very helpful to us throughout our stay in Bryansk and Smolensk. We took a taxi to our hotel but were told that they were out of hot water. We then moved on to the nearby Hotel Chernigov, which I found to be our best accommodation so far. (It started to improve even more from then on.) After breakfast we went to an arboretum which adjoins an Alexander Tolstoy Memorial park. We met with the faculty of the local Forest Academy and were given a lecture and tour of the entire site. We then toured the Tolstoy park and had lunch at a downtown cafeteria.

We also met with Biointensive for Russia’s local partners: Dr. Ludmila Zhirina, who co-directs the “Viola” nonprofit organization, and Oleg Zavarzin, a school principal. We visited a monastery and a WWII memorial site, ending up with a Borsht dinner at Ludmila’s apartment. We were amazed that she was willing to entertain us, given the fact that she had to pack and get ready to leave the next morning on a 24-hour train ride to a 2-week vacation in the Crimea.

July 17th: Joined by Oleg Zavarzin, we visited the home of two sisters who had developed in their large garden an impressive display of the Biointensive method for many diverse vegetables and plants. After lunch we took the trolley to the city’s largest three-story department store, the Univermag, a store that sold everything from men’s and women’s clothes to food, appliances and “you name it.” I bought a battery for my Skaden wristwatch, which had suddenly stopped running, together with a pair of pajamas. We relaxed in the late afternoon and for dinner went next door to our hotel to an Italian cafe that had an Internet connection.

Carol's note: Ludmila Zhirina, Igor Prokofiev, Oleg Zavarzin, Natalya Karyagina (mentioned below), and Ludmila Kuzenkova (our hostess in the above-mentioned garden) all have taught Biointensive at their schools and universities since 1999, when Albie Miles of the University of California at Santa Cruz presented a workshop at the pedagogical university in Bryansk.)

July 18th: We had a van with a driver for the 3 1/2-hour drive to historic Smolensk. There was a large crack on the windshield of the van, which I was fearful would widen or break each time we went over a bump in the road. Fortunately, this did not happen, but I could not help reflecting that a van in such condition would not have been permitted to be rented out in the USA. Half-way to our destination the driver pulled up to the side of the road in a woodsy area and all who wanted to exit for a toilet break were told: "Men to the left, women to the right." That was our toilet break.

Before reaching Smolensk we stopped at a park-like enclosure called Talashkino where the artist Princess Maria Tenisheva, at the turn of the 18th/19th century directed an art colony and school for artisans that produced many art pieces and period furniture. Exhibits were on display in several rustic small structures, including a church. This was an interesting break and we were told that the Princess had many friends among the luminaries of the art and music world of her day, such as Repin, Shalyapin and Stravinsky. We then drove to the center of Smolensk and witnessed the old fortress and long wall built to defend the city against many attackers. Smolensk was where the famous Russian General Kutuzov was born and we found a memorial to him. This venerable general had fought in many wars against Russia's enemies, notably the Turks and Napoleon. We saw a cathedral, a World War II memorial and many other sights. Our visit was too short and we could not see everything, notably the Katyn Forest where some 10,000 captured Polish officers were shot and buried in 1940 under Stalin's orders, men who only a year later could have been very useful in fighting the Germans after their attack on Russia.

July 19th: Today we visited the Domashevo School where Natalya Kariagina is principal. As we arrived at the school we saw two teenaged students, a girl and a boy, in traditional native dress stand in front of the school awaiting our arrival. As we approached them, they offered us bread and salt in the traditional Russian welcome greeting. We then entered the school and were entertained by a group of some 10 students who sang and danced for us to the music of an accordion played by a teacher.

We then drove to Natalya's dacha, where Oleg and Igor prepared a delicious shashlik (barbeque) lunch. We bid our hosts a warm adieu, as well as to Volodya, who left our group to return to his home in southern Russia. We were then driven to the Bryansk train station where we boarded the night train for Kiev. I tried to sleep but was twice awakened, the first time at the Russian border where the Russian officers stamped our passports for "exit" and two hours later when the Ukrainians stamped our passports for "entry" to Ukraine.

We arrived in Kiev very early in the morning and were immediately met by our Kiev driver, also named Volodya, who helped us with our luggage and took us to our hotel Turist, a high-rise hotel which was of first rank. My first act was to exchange all my rubles for Ukrainian currency. Then to bed for a short sleep.

July 20th: Sightseeing in Kiev, a truly beautiful city. It was sunny and we spent the entire day on foot taking in the many sights and sounds of the city. There were many parks and especially many churches and, like in Russia, of similar architecture with cupolas in a variety of colors. We saw St. Andrew's Church, St. Sophia's Cathedral, with its green domes, St. Volodymyr's cathedral with its blue cupolas, the National Opera House and St. Michael's monastery. We saw the famous Kreschatik street, the wide, main street of Kiev where in World War II the German Army occupied the buildings and found out too late that they had been mined when they blew up with many Germans trapped inside. I was surprised that cars on Kreschatik Street were allowed to drive on to and park on the wide sidewalks.

We saw the famous monument to independence and the square where thousands of Kievans stood for days at the time of the Orange Revolution less than three years ago. We saw the great park where the State Museum of the History of the Great Patriotic War is located, filled with sculptures of soldiers in action. We saw the most impressive St. Dormition Lavra with its many golden cupolas and nearby we found a steep street filled with vendors selling a variety of objects, where we must have stayed over an hour looking and shopping. We saw the Ukrainian President's House, where a couple was getting married outside and we also saw a synagogue, which for all of the Soviet years had been used as a library and only restored as a synagogue after Ukraine gained its independence.

July 21st: My last day with the tour. In the morning, our guide Inna took us to the Babii Yar ravine where 35,000 Kievan Jews were murdered over a three-day period in 1941. Just as we approached it, it started to rain and a thunderstorm erupted so that we sought refuge in Inna's nearby apartment. Fortunately, the rain stopped in half an hour and we returned to Babi Yar and took photos of the sculptures and memorial plaques. These had only been erected since the end of the Soviet State. It should be noted that throughout the existence of Soviet Russia, the murderous event of Babii Yar was only mentioned and commemorated as the place where 35,000 Soviet citizens were murdered. The fact that they were killed only because they were Jews was never permitted to be mentioned. Surprisingly, I found one plaque erected by the Jewish community of San Francisco.

We returned to downtown and in the afternoon visited the Turbins House, the famous writer Michael Bulgakov's Memorial Museum. We had an English-speaking guide who took us through each room of the house in which Bulgakov lived and grew up. We also used the Kiev subway and I was surprised how deep it was underground. In one station we had to take two long, fast-moving escalators to reach the train platform.

July 22nd: My time with the group ended as I left the group to fly to Latvia to visit a relative.

Carol: On July 22, Shoshana, Tamara, Inna Gavriluk, her two charming children, and I were driven to the Museum of Folk Architecture and Life, south of Kiev at Pirogovo. There we spent much of the day with another family, friends of the Gavriluks, strolling its restored villages and countryside. This remarkable "museum under the open sky" is the largest of its kind in the world and well worth the visit. We enjoyed lunch together and browsed the crafts fair, returning to Kiev with wooden flutes, a dove of peace, and corn dollies bought from the vendors there.

July 23rd: *Shoshana and Tamara stayed another week in Ukraine, visiting Odessa and the Crimea, while I hastened back to California to begin the home sale and moving process. Perhaps partly due to the small numbers, we all enjoyed ourselves tremendously on this tour, but we do look forward to future visits with the same hosts and more ecotourists. Since our homecoming, Bryansk host/school principal Oleg Zavarzin has paid us a return visit, attending the Ecology Action 3-Day Workshop in Willits, CA (see separate account). We toured Los Angeles, Ojai Valley, Palo Alto, Santa Cruz, and San Francisco together and made several short presentations, including to the Kiwanis Club of Palo Alto, which co-sponsored his visit. We invite you to join us to help enable our exchanges to continue by becoming a member and/or being added to our free email list!*