

## Travel Vignettes

It was the American author, Nobel Laureate Sinclair Lewis, who wrote “there is nothing more broadening than travel,” in his book “The Man Who Knew Coolidge.” One of the chapters in Lewis’ book is titled “Travel is so Broadening.”

Broadening can be interpreted in several ways. Having done a bit of traveling, Val and I have had our horizons broadened, as far as meeting unusual characters or having a memorable experience. Take our latest trip, to Poland. The most sacred icon in devoutly Catholic Poland is the Black Madonna of Czestochowa. The Madonna is in a chapel at the Jasna Gora monastery, overlooking the town. Among her many miracles, the Madonna is credited with rallying the Poles during an invasion by the Swedes. We had arranged a tour of the monastery in advance, prior to leaving Ohio. Imagine the surprise when it turns out that our guide was a Pauline monk by the name of Fr. Simon. (Their order is not named after St. Paul from the New Testament, as one might initially think, but St. Paul the Hermit, who is considered the first Christian hermit.) Having been a monk for 51 years and living in the monastery for decades, Fr. Simon knew his way around. He could probably conduct the tour blindfolded. He was a fountain of information, even demonstrated his Tagalog speaking skills when we told him I was Filipino. He had traveled extensively, going to the Philippines several times. He was not your usual, cloistered monk. Among his Philippine stops was the seminary in the city of San Pablo (St. Paul), outside of Manila. As small worlds go, I knew about this seminary, having an aunt who lives in San Pablo. On one of my visits, I actually met some professors and seminarians who were visiting my retired medical doctor aunt, a solid supporter of the seminary. The occasion was the feast day of St. Paul, on Jan. 15. So if anyone is going to visit Czestochowa and Jasna Gora, ask for Fr. Simon to conduct your tour.

In Madrid, Spain a year ago, we were going around the Almudena Cathedral. Officially Santa María la Real de La Almudena, it is the home church of the Archbishop of Madrid. A petite middle aged Spaniard called to me and started speaking. I know enough Spanish to understand what she was saying, that the Archbishop, Cardinal Carlos Osoro, was coming out of the church. Turning around, I saw this solemn looking man in unmistakable Cardinal clothing of black cassock, scarlet sash and scarlet zucchetto (which I call the Catholic yarmulke). I took Val’s hand, approached the Cardinal, boldly asking for his blessing. We bowed our heads and Cardinal Osoro proceeded to bless us. We kissed his ring, gave thanks, and went on our way. I returned to the lady, engaging her in a brief conversation. It turns out that she was not a Madrileña, but was visiting from Extremadura, a region to the west, bordering Portugal. Why she picked me out from the crowd (the area is always crowded), an obvious tourist with a big camera, perhaps not even Catholic, I’ll never know. But we are thankful to the señora.

On the opposite end of the character scale, there was this bear of a man we met at our hotel in Tallinn, Estonia. We were with a tour group, but breakfast is usually unstructured. Go to breakfast if you wish, when you can. Just show up for the next guided tour at the appointed time and place. The restaurant was crowded, but I spotted a table with a lone man sitting quietly. I asked if we could share his table and he nodded yes. I noticed that he wasn’t having the usual breakfast. He was drinking that Russian elixir called vodka, then munching on pickles. The

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breakfast of champions, no doubt. He admitted “drinking heavily” the night before, so he was taking the hair of the dog cure. The man was tall, solidly built, with an ample midsection, dressed all in black - pants, turtleneck and jacket. He wore dark aviator glasses which he never took off. He said he was from Finland, and his job was to help train the Estonian army. Shortly afterwards, a young woman, tall and blonde (they all seem to be tall and blonde in this part of the world), joined us at the table. Looking half his age, she was introduced as his “friend.” He had her fetch vodka after vodka, offering me some and proposing toasts. This was before 8:00 am! I took a couple of sips, with Val kicking me under the table, as if to signal, stop it and let’s get out of here. We finished breakfast and got up to leave. He also got up, smiled, offered his bear paw hands and boomed “Ohio, Ohio, have a good time!” Later on, I searched for a connection between the armies of Finland and Estonia. It turns out that Estonia does purchase a significant amount of military hardware from Finland.

We were in Moscow for a river cruise up the Volga, to Saint Petersburg. Our ship Tikii Don was docked on the Moscow River, on the outskirts of the city. At this location, the river was quite broad, much broader than the Ohio. Across the river was the hulk of what looked like a submarine. One of the fellow travelers on our ship was a former U.S. Navy officer. He was interested in checking out the submarine. Unfortunately, the only way to get to the other side was to take the subway all the way to downtown Moscow, change trains for a couple of stops, then change trains again. We were making a gigantic U. It would have been much shorter and quicker if we could have commandeered a motorboat.

There were four of us intrepid travelers, whose Russian language was limited to the usual *dobryy den*, *spasibo*, *do svidaniya*, etc. But a couple of us had memorized the Cyrillic alphabet and could read the subway signs, figuring out the stops and transfers. We got instructions from our Russian tour director Natasha, on which subway line and stops to make. Here goes - take the red line to Сокольники, get off, take green line to Пушкинская, finally on purple line to Белорусская. (Not the real sequence, but you get the drift. Those stops translate to Sokolniki, Pushkinskaya and Belorusskaya.) Incidentally, the Moscow subway, constructed during the Stalin era, is a marvel of beauty and efficiency. The stations are a work of art, with marble columns, sculpture and murals on the walls and ceiling. There was no graffiti. Exile to Siberia is a big deterrent to vandals.

We made it to the final stop and got off. We had a city map, but nothing looked familiar. Natasha had told us to call if we were in distress, “just ask any Russian and borrow their cell phone.” We did ask a couple of people for directions but they didn’t seem to understand what we were saying. Finally, a tall, well groomed, smartly dressed man stopped to talk to us. His English was impeccable. We were informed that we should have gotten off at the previous stop. (Thanks Natasha!) He proceeded to offer us a ride. One of the guys was skeptical, but I said there were four of us old guys vs. one young Russian. Surely we could handle him. There are a lot of clunkers on Russian roads, but he drove a like new Skoda (made in the Czech Republic), driving us to the submarine. He refused to take any payment. We shook hands and parted

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company. The tour of the Soviet submarine was worth it. The subway ride back to the ship was uneventful.

I joked that this fellow was a KGB agent, and someday, he might call. I can imagine the conversation thus:

Russian: *Hallo, this is Vladimir. Remember? I gave you a ride back in Moscow, to the Russian submarine museum. You Amerikanskiy were hopelessly lost, easy prey for the Russian Mafia.*

Mario: *Da, da. Spasibo. Kak dela?*

Russian: *I heard you were going to Poland. I need you to take a package. When you arrive in Warsaw, someone will contact you.*

It has been more than two years, but so far, no Russian has called.

A number of years ago, we were on our very first European river cruise. This was a two week cruise, starting in Amsterdam and ending up in Vienna, sailing the Rhine, Main and Danube rivers. This cruise became possible starting in 1993, upon completion of the Rhine-Main-Danube Canal. With the RMD canal you could sail from the North Sea all the way to the Black Sea. One of the stops was near Heidelberg, a beautiful town with a university that goes back to the late 14th century. It is so pretty, the Philippine national hero, Dr. Jose Rizal, wrote a poem in 1886 titled "To the Flowers of Heidelberg." (He originally wrote in Spanish, "A Las Flores de Heidelberg.") A plaque at the university commemorates Rizal's days in Heidelberg, where he trained as an eye surgeon.

After touring the town, we returned to our two buses, but one bus had broken down. All the old folks (the demographics of European river cruises tend to the senior side) wanted to return to the ship, so there was a mad rush for every seat on the working bus. I volunteered to stay, while Val went on. There were about 15 of us left, and our tour director Martin took us to a brewery cum restaurant. Martin said everything was on the house, so the beer started flowing. No one really cared about dinner, just keep the beer coming. Even after a new bus came, we didn't want to leave the brewery. Back at the ship, the dining room manager had our tables ready and the food warm. We all came staggering in from the bus, not really interested in dinner. Val said we were loud and I was the loudest. But she was mad that she had waited instead of having dinner. This incident must have helped develop negative karma for me. Within the last few years, I somehow developed an allergy to anything with alcohol. My primary care physician can't explain it. Perhaps I can write a poem, a la Rizal, "To the Beers of Heidelberg."

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September 17, 2015