

Title:

Siberia, Russia Part 4 - Airport Follies and a Stern Lecture

Word Count:

810

Summary:

In this continuing series, we cover my decision to move from San Diego to Chita, Siberia to be a professor at Chita State Technical University. We pick up the story aboard the flight from Anchorage to Khabarovsk, Russia.

Keywords:

sibera, russia, travel, travelogue

Article Body:

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Day 3 [Still]

As I lounged in my huge Aeroflot seat, the stewardess announced that we would be arriving in Khabarovsk in the next 30 minutes. Khabarovsk is located in the deep south of the far east of Russia on the border with China. It is the home of the Far East Military of Russia and is the largest city east of Lake Baikal. I was primarily interested in how hard it would be to find a hot shower.

Well, this was it, the first day of my year in Siberia. I had my phrase book, electric blanket, traveler's checks and a solid rush of adrenaline. Of course, I had never actually taught a class before, but I would deal with that later.

We descended out of the clouds into a rainstorm. The view was still incredible. We were flying into a flat valley surrounded by snow-capped mountains. Everything was a deep green. A few cabins could be seen on the ground.

There was a very clear view of the airport as we banked through the valley to approach from the West. Umm, aren't airports usually lit up? This one looked like a ghost town. The runways looked fine, but there were no lights in the buildings. There appeared to be a dearth of activity on the ground. I had never backpacked from a plane to the airport, but maybe this was the way it was done. When in Rome...

Finishing off an incredible flight, our Russian pilot set us down with a light touch. As we taxied up to the airport, I could only think that if the rest of Russia was as good as the flight, it was going to be a great year.

Blink, blink, blink...lights started coming on in the terminal! Despite being no more than 50 feet from it, we were herded onto a transport. We started, did a wide u-turn and stopped at the gate. All I could think of was "The Gods Must Be Crazy."

"The Gods Must Be Crazy" was a hilarious movie released in the eighties [no jokes about my age]. The first scenes of the movie are biting satires of our modern way of life versus the indigenous tribes of Africa. In one scene, a woman gets into her car, backs down to the end of her driveway and puts a letter in the mailbox. Ah, progress! The journey from the plane to the airport couldn't have been much longer.

The airport terminal was pretty industrial. That is to say, no effort was made to sell you fast food, booze, ice cream, "Khabarovsk Hard Rock Café" shirts or duty-free crap you really didn't need. Frankly, it was a relief.

Russian customs worked pretty much the same way as customs at any airport. You grabbed your bags, bummed pens off of strangers to fill out forms and stood in long line with other tired travelers. Eventually, you got to the front of the line and tried to see how the person standing eight feet in front of you did it.

Unfortunately, my turn was also my first chance to experience the Russian language. I passed my passport, custom forms and visa through the little window. I also tried an innocent smile, which worked about as well as smiling at an IRS agent. Everything went smoothly until the customs agent started speaking rapidly and pointing at my customs form. Something was wrong, but I hadn't a clue as to what. I turned to Grae with a quizzical look and he came forward to interpret.

All international travelers quickly learn a fundamental rule. The "wait here" line at customs is sacred. To prematurely cross the line is to commit an act of war. Russian customs was no different. Grae was loudly instructed to get behind the line and wait his turn. The customs agent then gave me a stern lecture. To this day, I can't tell you if he was discussing my forms or the weather, but the tone was definitely stern. The lecture was capped by the universal customs agent expression known as "stupid foreigner...why did I take this job...I really wanted to be a painter..."

Eventually, the issue with the form was resolved. I would like to tell you that

I took an active role in this, but I basically stood there while the agent grumbled and aggressively stamped the documents. I did actively pray that the stamp wouldn't explode, but that was about it. Grae moved through customs without incident and we walked out into the cool, wet air of Khabarovsk, Russia.

To be continued...