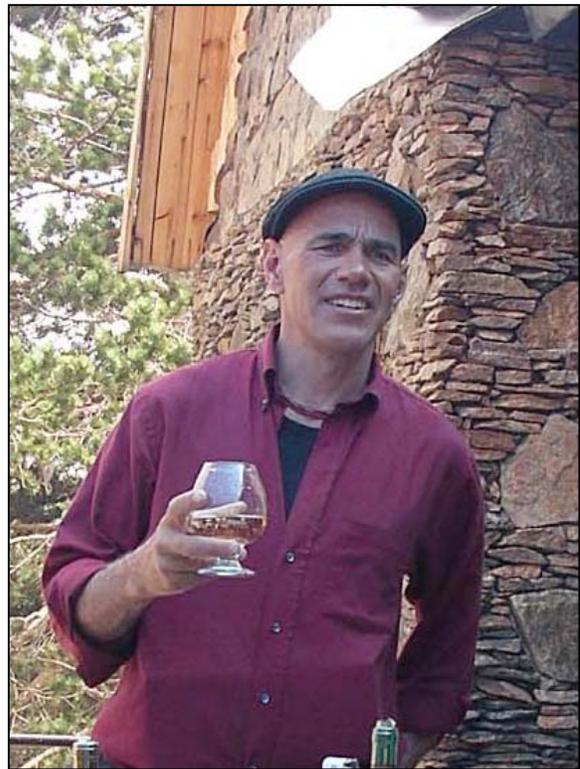


# From Russia with Love

## I. The Artists' Necropolis

Luxuriating in the many comforts of business class, we chomped on cashews (not peanuts) and washed them down with Lufthansa cordials (not Cokes) that we found oh so soothing. My son, Adam – the computer expert, had somehow figured out a complex but legal way to get free upgrades from our coach fares. As he proudly related his on-line stratagems, I drifted off to sleep. No better sleeping aid than interminable monologues about navigating the bowels of the World Wide Web.

Landing at St. Petersburg's airport, we were met by our climbing guide, Vern Tejas. He would lead us – we hoped – to the top of Mt. Elbrus, the highest mountain in Europe and therefore one of the infamous "Seven Summits" (the highest mountain on each continent). Vern is one of the world's truly great climbers. Not only has he scaled Mt. Everest seven times, he is legendary for the first solo winter climb of Mt. McKinley (Denali) and the first solo ascent of Mt. Vinson in Antarctica.



Lead Guide Vern Tejas

Although he was as short as I, his muscles bulged. When he shook my hands, I tried not to wince at the firmness of his grip. I also noticed Vern's probing eyes doing a quick scan, assessing my chances of staying out of trouble on the climb.

We checked in at our hotel, and had a few days to tour St. Petersburg and see the sights. These included the usual visits to cathedrals, landmarks and museums. It was late July, the height of the tourist season, but we stoically jostled through the crowds and frenzied tour groups telling ourselves it was good conditioning for the climb.

One of our sightseeing stops was the Hermitage. The famed museum has no air conditioning, and I couldn't help but wonder about the effects of the open windows on the priceless artworks on display. Moreover, I was amazed by the lack of security. So it was not surprising to me when the next day's news included a report about a major theft of artwork from the Hermitage.

On our last day in St. Petersburg, Adam and I decided to take an early morning jog. Not a good idea. Pollution from Communist-era Skodas made the air oppressive and heavy, and negotiating through the teeming throngs on their way to work was pretty much impossible. We were relieved to see ahead of us a park that offered a respite from this asphalt jungle. But it wasn't a park. It turned out to be "The Artists' Necropolis," the last resting place for some of Russia's greatest musicians, artists and literary heroes. As we walked along the cemetery's winding paths, the early-morning fog started to rise, revealing a large monument. There before us was a bust of Fyodor Dostoevsky.

Gazing on Dostoevsky's countenance, memories of the Russian literature course I took in college flooded my mind. It seemed like I spent half of the course trying to figure out the plot points of *The Brothers Karamazov*, the Dostoevsky novel Sigmund Freud described as "the most magnificent novel ever written." Sadly, all I could remember about the novel was a desperate but futile attempt on my part to make sense of the Grand Inquisitor's seemingly endless and indecipherable monologue.



**Tchaikovsky's Gravesite**

Just across from Dostoevsky's grave site, I noticed an imposing sculpture towering over the rest. Inspecting it revealed a bust of Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky. Behind him, an angel supported a cross while also inexplicably holding a sword. A second angel, poised in front of the master, appeared to be studying one of his scores.

Adam and I sat on a nearby bench and gazed on Tchaikovsky's gravesite. Suddenly, remembering I had my iPod with me, I scanned my music library to find the "Violin Concerto in D Major." I listened to the somber and evocative notes, with Tchaikovsky as my neighbor, and fell into a contemplative mood. As my thoughts were molded and given special nuance by Tchaikovsky's music, I was reminded of a quote from one of my favorite travel writers, Pico Iyer: "All the great journeys are, like love, about being carried out of yourself."

## II. Aeroflot

It wasn't long after my reverie in "The Artists' Necropolis" that I was reminded of the rest of Iyer's quote: "... journeys are... about being carried out of yourself and deposited in the midst of terror and wonder." The terror and wonder in our case was flying the unfriendly skies of Aeroflot.

We knew our flight from St. Petersburg to Mineral Vody in the southern-most reaches of the Caucasus Mountain range would not be ordinary as soon as we entered the plane. As steam wafted along the floor, I was reminded of a scene out of "The Towering Inferno" when an office worker asks, "Do you smell smoke?"

Our concerns about whether the haze came from steam or smoke were quickly forgotten when we realized that the unairconditioned plane was insanely hot. Sweat poured off us as the plane sat on the tarmac with the sun beating down on its metal hull. I was reminded of a book I once read about ancient torture devices that described how victims who were forced into a huge hollow, metal bull met their demise. As the sun baked the poor souls inside, their cries could be heard coming through the tips of the metal horns to the delight I imagine of some sadistic potentate. Sitting inside that plane, I felt a new-found sympathy for those wretched creatures that I now considered kindred spirits.

Making our imprisonment even worse were the giant horseflies that buzzed around inside the plane, evidently hitching a ride to the Mineral Vody. Attendants passed around fly swatters to deal with the problem.

Finally, as the engines fired up, the plane shuddered with a mind-shattering vibration. I fumbled with inoperable seat belts, eventually giving up when I noticed that some people were standing as we started to take off.

I've read and heard that all living creatures are endowed with some kind of adrenaline-related, mind-numbing pain killer. Maybe that's why, in my disoriented state, I didn't feel any more pain when an Aeroflot flight attendant asked in halting English, "Would you like creamed fish sandwich?"

### **III. Nikolai**

We met our local climbing ace, Nikolai, as our van deposited us near the base of Mt. Elbrus in the Baksun Valley. Nikolai was a short, bow-legged man of about 70 years old with a weathered countenance and amazingly muscled arms and legs. Our team captain, Vern, had warned us not to be put-off by Nikolai's brusque manner and told us how lucky we were to have such an experienced Russian climber as part of the team. So as we lumbered out of the van, we were not too startled at hearing Nikolai shouting orders like some overbearing drill sergeant. His English consisted of only a few words, but he got his point across by pointing and shouting commands like "Carry here... Not there, HERE!... Take this... Not that, THIS!... MOVE, MOVE, MOVE!"

Having never served in the military, Nikolai's command and control demeanor was particularly disconcerting to me. But after a few practice climbs, I grew to respect his leadership and incredible climbing ability. On one climb designed to help us with rescue techniques and cutting traverses in deep snow on steep inclines, I marveled as Ni-

Nikolai led the way charging through knee-deep snow on what looked like a 50-degree slope. Although he really isn't that much older than I, I began to look up to Nikolai not unlike the way I idolized and feared one of my coaches in high school.



**Nikolai**

At a higher camp, I had a real shock when I couldn't find one of my gators – a protective “sleeve” that wraps around one's ankles and keeps your boots dry – essential equipment, especially higher up. But my panic was more directly related to what Nikolai would do to me when he became aware of my ineptitude. My relief was palpable when I found the missing gator Velcroed to my backpack.

As we slogged upward seven hours one day from an altitude of 12,000 feet to 15,000 feet, we all started to complain about the weight of our packs. That seemed to set Nikolai off. He yelled at us, “You Americans bunch of babies. You bring much water, drink all day, pee all day. You carry heavy packs and fancy stuff and complain. No wonder we Russians win war for you.”

A teammate of ours, Dave McCrane, had a great rejoinder to that one: “Yea, Nikolai, but didn't we win the Cold War because of all that fancy equipment?”

To Nikolai's credit, he laughed heartily and said, “Ya, Ya, you right!”

#### IV. The Barrels and Latrines

As opposed to other campsites where we pitched our tents, our campsite at 13,000 feet offered the luxury of living inside one of several large fuel tanks. Lined up side-by-side and secured together by heavy cables, the tanks formed a “residential development” commonly referred to as “The Barrels.” The expression evoked in me memories of a scene from one of my favorite novels by Steinbeck, *Sweet*



**The Barrels**

*Thursday*, a sequel of sorts to *Canary Row*.

In *Sweet Thursday*, the character Suzie takes up lodging in an old, unused and empty boiler. The advantages Suzie explained for living there mirrored the benefits I perceived from bunking in The Barrels: “... it is absolutely rain proof; it is cozy; and it has wonderful ventilation. By adjusting the damper and fire door you can have as much ventilation as you like.”

The only drawback at the Barrels was the camp latrine. First off, technical climbing skills were needed to get there. The path included one particularly steep, rocky stretch that brought to mind photos I’ve seen of the “Hillary Step,” the last tough barrier before reaching the peak of Mt. Everest.



**The Infamous Camp Latrine**

As if the trip to the latrine wasn't bad enough, even more disconcerting were the multi-sensory experiences that awaited us there. The latrine jutted halfway off the edge of a cliff. In addition to instilling a fear of tipping off the edge of

the mountain, it created a rather repugnant sort of "ventilation." Adam warned me that after he disposed of his toilet paper, an updraft blew it right back at him. Maybe that's why used toilet paper was strewn all over the floor.

But that's not all that was on the floor. One of my teammates came back from the latrine to report, "Hey, mates, watch out in there. There's a steaming turd on the floor." Instead of the usual round hole, there was a narrow slit – a Russian innovation to help keep the smell from rising. Unfortunately, it was evident that many people miss the slit and...

On my first late-night trip to the latrine, I attached my headlamp and made my way up the "Hillary Step." A guy in line ahead of me paused before proceeding into the latrine, and in a barely audible voice, it sounded at first like he was saying a prayer. Actually, he was a member of a British climbing team, and he was reciting aloud a stanza from Tennyson's *Charge of the Light Brigade*:

Their's not to reason why,  
Their's but to do and die:  
Into the valley of Death  
Rode the six hundred.

When it was my turn, I headed in, completed the business at hand as quickly and expeditiously as I could, and then turned to unlatch the latrine door. To my utter horror, I couldn't open the latch. Frantically, I juggled and jostled the latch but couldn't make it open. I was LOCKED IN! In spite of the bitter cold, I immediately started sweating bullets. While it was probably only a minute or so, it seemed like I was locked in for hours. Whatever time it actually took, it was undoubtedly the most terrifying moment of my life.

When that latch finally seemed to magically open, I recalled another stanza from Tennyson's poem:

They that had fought so well  
Came thro' the jaws of Death  
Back from the mouth of Hell...

## **V. Summit Day**

By the time summit day arrived, gastro-intestinal problems had hit most of us. Several of our team members suffered so severely that they had to abandon the climb. The rest of the "From Russia with Love" team (name given to identify our cybercasts) started for the summit at 3:30 a.m.. The skies were clear, but 40-knot winds lashed against our faces.

The first hurdle on our quest for the summit was putting on our crampons so we could climb what seemed like a near-vertical ice face. We then hit a long and steep trav-

erse at about the 17,000-foot mark. The traverse turned into “the flats” as we entered the “saddle” between the upper and lower twin peaks of Mt. Elbrus.

Still lurking ahead of us was the most dangerous part of the climb: a long and very steep ledge only about one foot wide. Any slip off that ledge would prove deadly. It was too steep to self-arrest with an ax, and a free-fall would result in landing atop the massive, jagged rocks that awaited at the bottom of the wall. Too exhausted to face this new danger, several teammates gave up and started their trek back down the mountain. I, too, felt spent. Adam eyed me dubiously. Vern was obviously worried about me. He looked me closely in the eye and said, “You’ve done good, so it’s okay if you want to head down. Only go up if you feel strong enough.”

As I soaked in his words, I realized that our rest break seemed to be giving me a second wind. Moreover, we were able to cache the heavy stuff we wouldn’t need on the final 500-foot push to the 18,510-foot summit, so our packs were blissfully lighter. For me, it was a go. While the wind remained brutal, the thin air was crystal clear. I could see every inch of that one-foot ledge as I firmly and carefully planted my crampons with each step forward on this “nearer my God to thee” portion of the climb. I don’t recall being scared on that ledge. Maybe I’d run out of fear. More likely, I had faced down my fear by focusing all my mental and physical energies on getting to the top of the ridge-line, and each carefully planted step got me closer.

We finally arrived at the summit at around 11:00 a.m.. Unlike most peaks, Mt. Elbrus has an obvious summit at the top of a small hill. As I stepped onto the top of that hill, Nikolai was there to greet me. He said, “Ya, Jim, you did good, you did good.”

Savoring the moment, I realized that was the first time Nikolai addressed me by my name.



**Adam and Me at the Summit. Note the Red Nose Guard.**

On the summit, we took photos and celebrated with members of a British climbing team. Planting the Chapman flag that I had taken up to the top of Mt. Aconcagua, I felt tired, yes, but I also felt resilient. I felt giddy, but I also felt reflective. The words of a great

marathoner, John J. Kelley, came to my mind – words that served as my mantra during tough marathons: “The things we do should consume us. If they don’t, our lives won’t have any meaning.”

On the way down the mountain, I was feeling rather pleased with myself. It was a mood that proved short-lived. Just before reaching camp, a very tall and very pretty Russian climber approached our team. She bypassed my teammates and to my surprise headed straight toward me. She stopped squarely in front of me and pointed to the red circular guard protecting my nose from the sun. With a heavy Russian accent she said, “You funny – look like Bozo.” That’s odd, I thought, as her remark shot me off my perch. I didn’t realize the Russians knew about Bozo.

My mood was dampened further when we were served the usual mush rather than a special celebratory dinner that is often the norm after a successful summit attempt. Even Adam was off his high. As a mixture of beets, beans and unidentifiable meat fragments was ladled into our waiting bowls, Adam whispered to me, “Oh, no, not more of that goulash crap.”

But later in the evening terrible news arrived that made us realize how fortunate we were to be back at camp safe and sound. We learned four members of a Ukrainian climbing team had perished by falling off the same ledge we negotiated earlier that day. They made a catastrophic mistake of climbing roped together, so when one of the climbers slipped, the rest of the team was dragged down. No one could self-arrest given the speed they must have fallen.

## **VI. Fatima**

We descended to a ski village in the resort town of Azau, located in the beautiful Baskan Valley, an area that combines the cultures of Turkish, Georgian, Azerbaydzhani and Russian people. It was here our team celebrated our safe return with lunch at one of the local bars that serve barbecued meat. As we were seated, I noticed a goat being slaughtered near a wood-burning barbecue. That

### **Shashlyk** (Spicy Grilled Goat Kebabs)

In a large bowl, combine:

- 2 lbs. trimmed boneless goat meat\*  
cut into 1-1/2" cubes
- 1 cup white wine
- 1/2 cup vegetable oil
- 1/3 cup white vinegar
- 2 tsp. salt
- 1 tsp. crushed chile flakes
- 1 tsp. freshly ground black pepper
- 6 whole cloves
- 4 finely chopped large cloves garlic
- 2 dried crumbled bay leaves

Toss to coat meat well. Cover the bowl with plastic wrap and refrigerate for 24 hours.

Build a medium-hot fire in an outdoor grill. Impale the goat cubes (along with any marinade that clings to them) on 6 long metal skewers, leaving only a slight space between the cubes. Discard any remaining marinade. Grill the kebabs over the fire, turning them occasionally, until cooked through, tender and lightly charred all over, about 14 minutes. Serves 4 to 6.

\* Lamb or pork can be substituted, but it won't be real shashlyk.

goat, after being cubed, slathered in oil and garlic and impaled on a metal skewer, proved to be our main course in a dish known to the locals as shashlyk (see accompanying recipe).

The night before, over another goulash dinner, our team had argued over which franchise has the best hamburger. Turned out that hamburgers are a regional kind of thing. Adam and I pushed “Carl’s Jr.”, but the Texans were adamant about their “What-a-Burger” chain. The Floridians countered with their favorite son: “Cheeburger, Cheeburger.”

Maybe it was the endless rounds of goulash, or maybe we were beginning to get homesick. Whatever it was, we all seemed to crave meat that actually looked like meat. Barbecued goat fit the bill. We dined on mass quantities of the stuff and all suffered later from our over indulgence. But it was worth it. That shashlyk made it one of the best meals I can recall. What makes that even more remarkable is that the Russian wine that accompanied our meal was about the worst wine I’ve ever had.

The rest of our time in Azau was spent hiking through beautiful meadows and canyons near the Chechyian border and going to homemade saunas that some of the Russian farmers devised in their barns to attract the tourists. A sharper contrast of this experience with the spa services offered by places like the “St. Regis” could not be made.

We also shopped around the many stalls in the local markets where peasants hawked their wares, particularly the fine knitting that seemed to be an Azau specialty. One stall displayed what appeared to be the best of the lot. Behind the many hats, scarves and sweaters on display, I noticed a middle-aged woman with rosy red cheeks

that complemented her red hair. When I asked her a few questions, she called over her teenage son who spoke English. The prices of the beautiful work were so low that I didn't haggle, even though I consider myself one of the more accomplished hagglers around. I then described what I imagined in my dreams to be a perfect ski cap – one that was cardinal and gray (Chapman University colors), with ear flaps, a long tail and Cyrillic letters spelling out “Mt. Elbrus” knitted into the front. Through her son, she said she would knit one for me, but it would take some time. Since our bus was leaving the next day at 5:00 p.m., I pressed her on her ability to get it done before our departure. She assured me she would.

The next day, I periodically dropped by her stall to check on her progress. She'd look up at me, smile, and then return to work to work on my hat. Every so often she would get up and wrap her hands around my head to check my hat size. Finally, at 4:30 p.m., she finished the cap. It was the most beautiful ski cap I ever imagined. She tenderly placed it on my head and carefully inspected it. Like an artist completing a masterpiece, she nodded to herself in a way that indicated her pleasure.

When I asked her how much I owed her, she said, “200 rubles” (\$8). I happily gave her a 1000 ruble note and gestured for her to keep it all. At first, she seemed confused, but then she realized I was giving her a “tip.” She called her son over and asked him to explain to me that 200 rubles was fine. I argued for her to take the 1000 rubles. As we haggled back and forth, I realized that this was the first time I ever used my haggling prowess to pay more than the stated price. I finally gave up when it came to mind that paying more might be perceived by her as charity, or maybe it was something a true

artist could not accept. Then we talked, mostly about our families. She laughed and hugged me when I proudly told her about my newly born first grandchild, Parker. Then she told me her name. It was Fatima.



**Fatima**

As our team later filed into the waiting bus, I saw Fatima running toward us. She tenderly handed me a little red sweater and said, “For baby, for baby.” She blew kisses at us as the bus drove away. As I gazed at her smiling face through the window, I knew I would never see Fatima again. I also knew I wouldn’t forget her.

## **VII. Lenin’s Tomb**

Before leaving Russia, we were able to spend a few days in Moscow to see the sights. We stayed at the Hotel Ukraina, a monument to Soviet classicism built by German slave labor after WWII. From the derelict looks of



**Hotel Ukraina**

the place, it appeared that not much has been done since the Germans left.

On our first day, a tour guide arrived and gave us a brief review of the churches, museums and tourist traps in store for us. Having already visited these places, I repeated the same question I asked the last time I was in Moscow: “Will we get to see Lenin’s tomb?”

I received the same response I got back then: “No, you don’t want to go there. There’s a two-hour wait, and there’s no way to get around it.”

But Adam and I had seen all the churches and museums we could take. So we decided to bail on the group tour and see Lenin or bust.

We questioned the wisdom of that decision when a sudden downpour hit just as we moved to the end of a seemingly endless line of people, all waiting to see the supposedly lifelike remains of the Father of Communism. Hawkers on the sidelines sold umbrellas at inflated prices. I gladly paid the market premium, reveling in the fact that so many budding Russian entrepreneurs were visible evidence that Lenin’s legacy was rapidly diminishing. I sought to personally reinforce that message. Catching sight of the familiar McDonald’s golden arches not too far away, I asked Adam to go get a sack full of hamburgers and “Super Size” the fries.

When he got back, we went up and down the line exuberantly handing out hamburgers and fries to anxiously waiting hands. As everyone chomped away, I felt satisfied that this ubiquitous symbol of capitalism’s global outreach was reaching full flower right near Lenin’s tomb in Red Square. I didn’t think my actions were too disrespectful to Lenin, since breaking bread together helped create a communal spirit. As we continued

our wait, several women behind us told me they lived in Iran, and after their Moscow visit, they were going to California to visit a relative living in Placentia. They, along with others, broke through the language barrier by demonstrating the many features of their camera equipment, PDAs, iPods and other techie devices.

Our longest discussion took place with David Shimabukuro, an Asian graduate student working on his Ph.D. in earth and planetary science at U.C. Berkeley. David's dissertation topic involved studying the geological formation of the Southern Italian region of Calabria and Basilicata. Since my father was born in Basilicata, I found the theory David was testing of particular interest. His analysis of sedimentary rock, which he explained in some detail, suggests that Southern Italy was at one time attached to Northern Europe, while Northern Italy was once part of Africa.

How amazing but also emblematic of a new global order that I was in Red Square talking with an Asian student from California doing research in an area of Italy that was the home of my ancestors.

David then helped to resolve what had been a rather heated debate amongst members of our climbing team. The controversy involved whether Mt. Kosciusko, the highest mountain in Australia, is really one of the Seven Summits. Some contended that Mt. Kosciusko is on the same tectonic plate as the higher Carstensz Pyramid, located in Indonesia. The difference is not trivial. While Kosciusko, at only 7,308 feet, is a walk-up, Carstensz Pyramid, at 16,023 feet, is a technical climb. Even worse, it's surrounded by militant rebels not known to be friendly to visiting climbers.

Good news! David told Adam and me that Australia is on a separate plate and therefore Mt. Kosciusko is definitely one of the Seven Summits. But before he could thoroughly defend that position, a Red Square guard told us it was time to enter Lenin's tomb. I looked at my watch and saw that we had been in line exactly two hours.

To my amazement, I realized I'd rather continue waiting in line and carrying on with interesting banter than move on to see Communism's great leader. But move on we did.

And what did I think of



**Lenin's Tomb**

Lenin? His glass-enclosed tomb looks very much like Snow White's tomb in Disney's animated classic. But unlike Snow White, Lenin is definitely dead.