

MOTHER RUSSIA



'Glasnost' doesn't prompt more travel to USSR

By Iris Sanderson Jones
special writer

Q: Have people expressed more interest in traveling to the Soviet Union since Gorbachev visited America and "glasnost" came on the scene?

D.F.
Garden City

A: Good question. I have been on a merry chase trying to answer it. As far as I can determine, the answer is this: There is increased interest nationwide, but not much action going on in the Detroit area.

I started by trying to reach Intourist, the Soviet government travel office, because all applications to travel in the Soviet Union must be processed through Intourist, whether booked individually or through a travel agent. I called their New York City office 700 times (well, I might be exaggerating a little), but the line was always busy.

MY NEXT call was to Mac Lacey at the National Tour Association, which represents tour operators in the United States. Mac sent me to Kansas-based Maupintour, one of the country's big tour operators and the first to take groups into the Soviet Union after World War II. You can buy their tours through travel agents nationwide.

Paul Kerstetter of Maupintour told me that interest in Soviet tours began growing about a year ago, when the word "glasnost" entered our vocabulary. "Our 1987 bookings to the Soviet Union were up, and that area will be one of the hot ones in 1988," he said. "I would say the growth is about 20 percent."

MAUPINTOUR STARTED in 1951 and has been leading tours to the Soviet Union for more than 30 years. It still operates that same tour, Russia by Motorcoach, but now it is one of six tours to the area. Some just go to the Soviet Union; some include other countries. One is to the great cities of central Asia.

"It was a gradual growth over the years, with peaks and valleys depending on what was happening in the world," Kerstetter said. "Gorbachev is the most personable Russian we have ever seen, and that makes the Russian people seem more personable to the traveling public."

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— Paul Kerstetter,
Maupintour

"THE SOVIET people haven't changed. They have always been a country of good hosts. But our perception of them has changed. Relations are getting better, and more Americans are getting curious about the Russians."

Most overseas tours have more 50-year-olds than 35-year-olds, because more older people have the time and money to travel. The Soviet Union does draw younger travelers, but because it is a difficult country to explore alone, Kerstetter said.

"It is easy to get a visa and travel around France by yourself or with a friend, but the travel logistics are not that easy in the Soviet Union. Most people travel with groups."

Maupintour tours usually run about three weeks and cost anywhere from \$2,600 to \$3,900, including air fare and land costs.

HOW GOOD is Maupintour?

"Travel:Holiday" magazine regularly polls its readers on what they consider the best airline, tour group, etc. Maupintour regularly wins first place in the category of overseas tours.

So far, so good. Except I couldn't find anybody in our area who had noticed the same interest. Diana Kravak, manager of travel sales and promotion for the Automobile Club of Michigan, did a minisurvey of her agents for us.

"We don't find any surge; in fact we don't find any interest," she said. "I got the same answer from several other travel agents in the Detroit area. My last, best chance was Annette Langwald, owner of Elkin Tours, which has

several offices in our area. Langwald is president of the Michigan chapter of American Society of Travel Agents.

"As a travel agent, I have not seen any increased interest in the Soviet Union," she said. "As president of ASTA, I have heard other agents talk about an increase."

IF AT FIRST you don't succeed . . . I decided to explore the issue across the river in Canada. L. Hamlyn Hobden of Montreal represents Intourist in Canada, and he said "there is a real boom in both U.S. and Canadian interest in the Soviet Union."

"Finnair and five wholesalers have just bought an eight-page ad in 'City and Country Home' magazine here in Canada because of that interest," Hobden said. "People have always been interested in the romance of Samarkand and the trans-Siberian railroad, but Gorbachev's visit really started the new interest in the Soviet Union."

That sounded logical, so I asked Norma Meyers of Meconl Travel in Windsor if she had seen any increased interest in the Soviet Union, and she said "none."

"It may be the wrong time of year, because new brochures and air fares for summer travel don't come out until March," she explained.

I asked Dorothy Souilliere of the Canadian Automobile Association the same question, and she said, "I haven't really noticed any interest here."

BOTH CANADIANS recommend package tours wholesaled by Canadian Travel Abroad and Exotik Tours, which can be bought through any Canadian travel agent. The value of the U.S. dollar has dropped, but it is still worth \$1.29 in Canadian money, so tour costs of \$3,000 to \$4,000 Canadian might still be a good buy.

And so, the answer to your question is yes and no. There is a national surge of interest in the Soviet Union, but so far it hasn't hit Michigan.

If you want to go anyway, call your travel agent call Pan American Airways, which flies out of Detroit, or Finnair, which flies out of Montreal or New York.

General Tours of New York is a major tour operator to the Soviet Union as is the Russian Travel Bureau.

Also, check your library for the December issue of "Travel and Leisure" magazine and its story, "The Rush to Russia."