

TRAVEL

Friendly Russians adjust to Western ways

BY HUGH GALLAGHER
STAFF WRITER

Arnold Krieger was 12 when his family left Budapest, Hungary, to emigrate to Canada. The year was 1955, one year before a Hungarian revolution was crushed by Soviet tanks.

This year Krieger, a seasoned world traveler, visited Russia for the first time and was able to see the effects of Russia's own internal revolution away from communism.

"It was an exciting trip," Krieger said. "I've always been intrigued by Russia, drawn by the culture, history and its impact on the world."

Krieger, managing director of Baker, Wittus and Co. accountants in Southfield and a Birmingham resident, has traveled extensively throughout Europe, including several trips back to his native Budapest, but he had never had an opportunity to visit Russia until an auction at the Society Club. He was actually asked, but the winning bidder visited a trip to Paris instead, so Krieger was called to buy the Russian trip.

"Hungary's more central Europe culturally, it has allied itself with Austria rather than with the East," Krieger said. "I found Russian culture totally different with its orthodox influences. And, I've always loved the music, Tchaikovsky."

Krieger and his traveling companion arrived in Moscow on July 4.

"Many people commented on the fact that it was a national holiday and congratulated us on July Fourth. They were very aware of the fact. They know more about the U.S. than we know about them," Krieger said.

The trip featured three days in Moscow, an overnight train trip and three nights in St. Petersburg. The day would usually feature a bus tour or museum tour in the morning and then free afternoons and evenings.

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"We never felt threatened," Krieger said. "We went to the arbat, which is a nightlife section, and walked until well past midnight and still felt safe."

Krieger said they made contact with the average Russian people when riding on the metro system (and trying to decipher Cyrillic alphabet) or exploring the flea markets on a Saturday afternoon. He said the Russians are just beginning to understand how to live in a market economy.

"Russians have always been highly educated," he said. "They've achieved a tremendous success in the science and the arts. It will be a bumpy road, but they have a bright future."

He said it was especially upsetting to see the older people who are having the hardest time adjusting. He said they've lost their safety net provided by a state economy and aren't happy about it. For the young, he said, the changes are a challenge that they seem to welcome.

"I was surprised by the American influence. The American dollar was widely traded. A lot of baseball caps and blue jeans are evident," he said.

The highlight of Moscow was the Kremlin. Krieger said the government buildings and GUM, the giant department store, are here in the famous "fortress" which encircles Red Square.

The more westernized St. Petersburg was a contrast for Krieger.

"Moscow is very big and disconnected," he said. "St. Petersburg is smaller, a beautiful city, called the Venice of the north because of its canals. The architecture is harmonious and the government is spending lots of



Ornate shopping: Arnold Krieger stands before the elaborately decorated GUM department store in Moscow.

money to rebuild."

Krieger said he was surprised to find he was in the land of the midnight sun. During the period he was there, St. Petersburg was dark for only three hours a day.

The high point in St. Petersburg was the Hermitage, the famous museum in the former Winter Palace. Krieger said they spent a day at the Hermitage but could have easily spent a week.

"But we didn't want to spend

all three days doing one thing," he said. "We took a boat on the canals. We did a lot of walking and spent time at the cafes, drank vodka and ate caviar."

Krieger and his companion took in the usual cultural activities. In Moscow they attended the Moscow Circus and in Saint Petersburg they saw a Kirov Ballet production of "Swan Lake."

Not everything about Russia met with Krieger's approval. He said the food was not up to the standards of other European countries. And many people in

Russia are poor by any standards.

"There was a huge apartment complex, built along the shore of the North Sea during the Stalinist era, that seemed to go for miles and they were all boarded in. The balconies have been boarded to create extra rooms because housing space is so limited," Krieger said.

Krieger's next trip, scheduled for late August, was to be a bicycle trip through Provence, similar to a trip he took to Tuscany a couple years ago.

Though Russia is far from the

sunny ambiance of those two places, Krieger said he enjoyed the trip very much and found the Russian people very friendly.

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