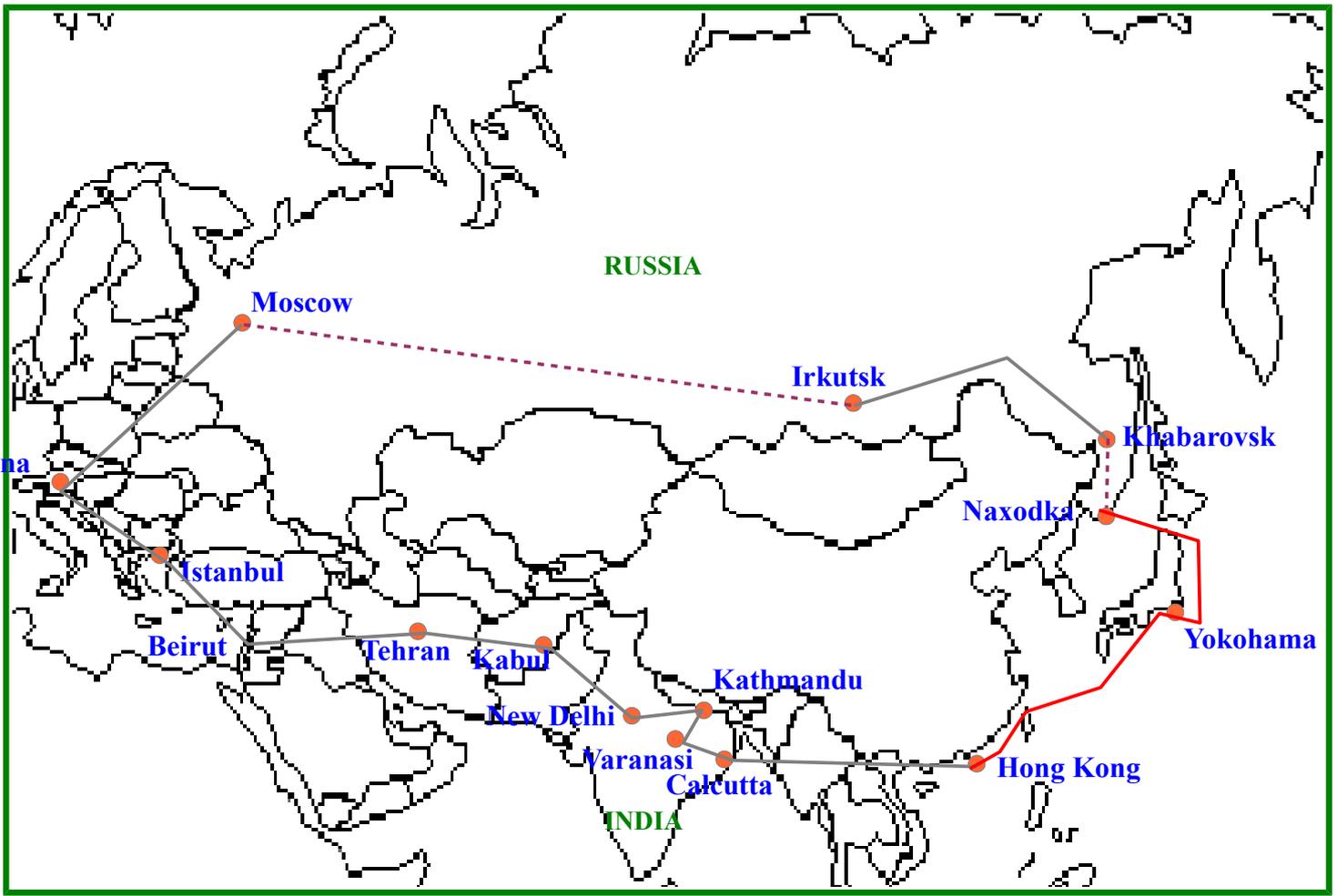


TRIP TO ASIA & THE SOVIET UNION, 1968

Map of Route



By air: ———

By train: - - - - -

By boat: ———

Introduction

In 1968, I travelled in a large circle from Hong Kong to parts of South Asia, the Middle East and to Vienna, thus reaching Europe for the first time. From there I travelled to the Soviet Union (as it was then), returning to Hong Kong via Japan. Even though I have misplaced (or lost) my diary for the trip, the map above of the route I took is accurate. Also, I believe I still have photographs of the trip somewhere though they will be in the form of slides and will have to be converted into digital form so that they they can be used here. In the meantime, I am using photographs from the Internet to illustrate my travels. Even without a diary, I can recall much of the trip in detail. It was a very interesting experience.

The trip took place in my second school summer holidays in Hong Kong and lasted the whole holiday period of about 6 weeks. It was expensive but in those days I was not too worried about saving money. I organised the trip through a travel agent in the Peninsula Hotel (next to the YMCA). The guy I dealt with was a member of the same rugby club as me (Happy Valley Football Club, next to the racecourse).

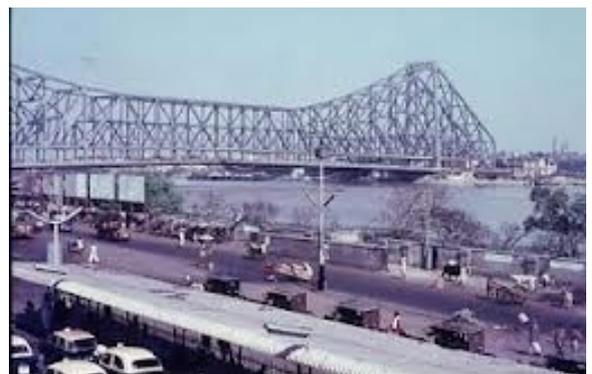
The Soviet Union part of the trip had to go through the Hong Kong office of the Soviet tourist agency “Intourist”. All travel arrangements were made by them and tickets issued - plane, train (with meals) and boats. Also, hotels with breakfasts had to be pre-booked and paid for. The only thing they could not provide was a visa, which they said could be picked up at a Soviet embassy on my route, which, as we shall see below, turned out to be quite a saga!

First stop India: Calcutta

I travelled from Hong Kong to Calcutta (as it was then called) with Cathay Pacific Airways, flying on a Convair 880 (pictured). On arrival, for some reason I cannot recall, I was met by a Cathay representative. He took me into town and helped me find guest house accommodation.



I remember that Calcutta was very hot and humid and dirty! Of note was a large bridge (pictured) across the river. I met a rather elderly chap on the river bank who was bemoaning the state of the country and saying that things were better in British colonial times (which ended when India got independence in 1948).



Then there was the “black market” for exchanging money, which almost invariably in those days meant US dollars. I had always wondered where one found this market. But I needn't have worried, it finds you, in the form of people who approach you and ask if you have any US dollars you want to change. The rate was always better than what was available from banks and occurred in countries that did not allow a free exchange of money. I think I changed money in India but do not recall exactly. I certainly travelled with a wad of US dollars.

Varanasi

From Calcutta, I flew with Indian Airlines in a small jet-prop plane (a F-27 Fokker Friendship, I think - pictured) to the city of Varanasi (formerly known as Benares) about halfway across the country and situated on the banks of the River Ganges. I stayed in a guest house which was not



too bad. It is a sacred Hindu pilgrimage site with many steps along the banks leading into the river for ritual bathing (pictured). There are



also many funeral pyres. The stink was terrible.



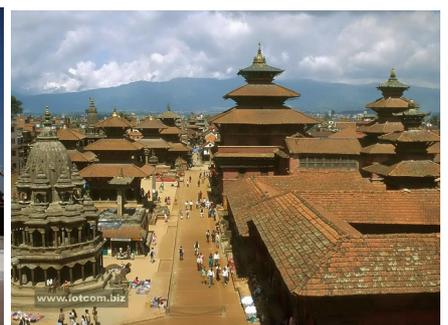
A few miles out of Varanasi is the town of Sarnath where there is (supposedly) the third transplant of a holy tree (pictured) that is a direct descendant of the tree beneath which the Lord Buddha delivered his first lesson there.



From Varanasi, I flew to Kathmandu via Patna, again in an Indian Airlines F-27.

Nepal: Kathmandu

It is hard to describe how unbelievably filthy Kathmandu was. This was the times of the hippies,



many of whom flocked to places such as Nepal. I stayed in a grotty hostel; there was an almost pitch black concrete wash room and shower with a hole for a toilet. The ceiling in the dormitory was so low that one could not stand upright.

Dotted around the city are several stupas. I visited at least one, though am not sure if the one pictured above is the one. Outside the city is a town with many temples - and monkeys everywhere (also pictured above).

Then there are the young *Kumaris* or living goddesses. A girl is taken at a young age and is believed to be the incarnation of a goddess. She has to live in a house (pictured below) and has no normal life. When she reaches puberty, she is replaced by another girl, and becomes a commoner again. From time to time, she would appear at an upper window (also pictured) in the house and I remember seeing her there.



From Kathmandu, I flew to New Delhi on a Royal Nepali Airlines F 27. We had a fabulous view of the Himalayas, though not of Mt Everest, which is in the east of the country. During the flight, the air conditioning system broke down and it gradually became colder and colder, so cold in fact that I could not feel my hands and feet. On landing at New Delhi, we disembarked on the tarmac and walked to the terminal. The temperature was about 45°C! But I remember that never did such extreme heat feel so good, that was, until I thawed out!

New Delhi



Very, very hot! And lots and lots of flies! I remember looking through the famous Red Fort (pictured above left) though what else I saw I cannot remember, even though I was there for a few days. I also cannot recall where I stayed. One day, I went by train for a day trip to Agra, south of New Delhi. to see the Taj Mahal, which I remember vividly. It really is a spectacle that is worth seeing. There is also a Red Fort at Agra which was included in the day trip.

While in New Delhi, the visa saga began. I went to the Soviet embassy but they said they can only issues visas in countries with direct travelling access to the Soviet Union. This did not apply to New Delhi so I could not get a visit there.

I was aware of the ease with which visitors got diarrhoea, the so-called “Delhi belly”. To avoid this, I tried to consume only food and drinks that were sealed. But I still still got it, possibly because even packaged foods and bottled drinks are covered in flies. However, it was not until I reached Kabul that it actually hit me.

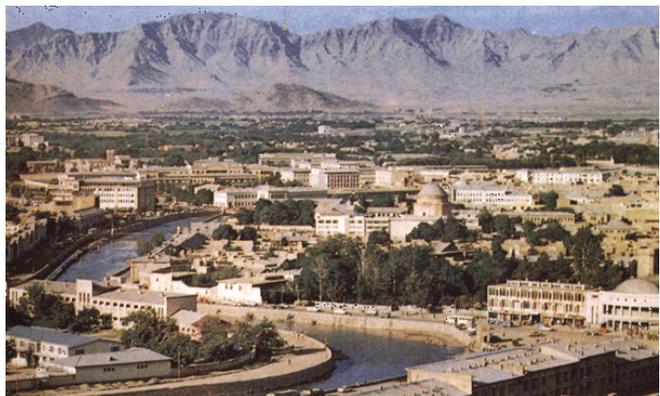
From New Delhi, I flew non-stop to Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, flying across Pakistan which I did not visit (and never have). The flight was again with Indian Airlines but this time in a French-built “Caravelle” (pictured).



Afghanistan: Kabul

My visit to Kabul was before the Soviet invasion of the country, which began in 1979. The picture on the right shows Kabul as it was in the 1960s. I stayed in a low-price guest house, which I can vaguely remember.

Kabul was a nice place in those times, very safe, peaceful and headed for democracy. (Search on the Internet under “Afghanistan 1960s” and you will find many interesting pictures.) I remember seeing the Royal palace (pictured right; the monarchy ended in 1973 and a presidential system was installed).



As mentioned, the diarrhoea hit me in Kabul, almost as soon as I arrived. It resulted in some memorable moments. First, while walking around, I needed a poo urgently. The only place I could see was a park, which was mainly thorny bushes and rocks. Still it had to do. I squatted behind a bush and just at that moment a shepherd happened to come, driving his sheep through the park and naturally all around me. Later the same day, it hit again. This time, the only place that might help happened to be the US embassy. In those days there was no real security and I ran inside and asked for a toilet, which they let me use. After that, I happened to talk to a guy who worked there and he invited me for a swim in the embassy pool, which was possible as I was carrying my swimsuit with me. Although the weather was *very* hot, I remember that the water was very *cold*, probably as the water would come from glacial-fed rivers high in the mountain. Nevertheless, it was an enjoyable time.

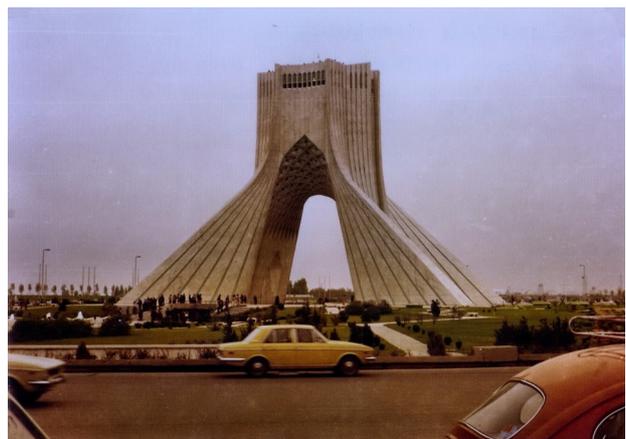
While in Kabul, I visited the Soviet embassy to try to get a visa. Although Kabul was an entry point to USSR, it was not *my* entry point, so I could not get a visa there either! So that meant I would have to get it in Vienna!

From Kabul, I flew to Tehran, the capital of Iran. I flew via Kandahar (airport only) on an Ariana Afghan Airlines Boeing 727 (the picture here shows one such plane and its female cabin crew.)



Iran: Tehran

I spent about two days here. This was before the Islamic revolution, which was also in 1979 and the Shah of Iran was still the ruler. The only sights I remember are a large arch monument (pictured) and a large bazaar. In the bazaar, I bought a set of four Russian language books, which I still have and use. Again, being summer, it was very hot, and most places had no air-conditioning. I remember at the guest house where I was staying, I was able to take the mattress from my bed up onto the roof and sleep there where it was much cooler. I think there were others doing the same. I also met some local chaps in a restaurant and we got talking (they must have spoken English) and they bought me a bottle of beer! Out of politeness I drank a little of it.



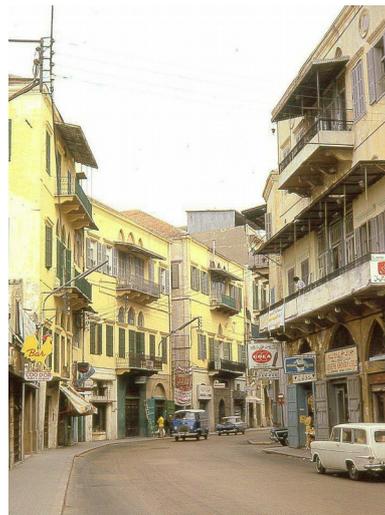
The Lebanon

From Tehran, I flew to Beirut, the capital of the Lebanon on a Swissair Convair 990 (pictured; a slightly larger version of the Cathay Pacific Convair 880). There were many Palestinian refugees from Israel there but my visit was before the PLO influx (1971) after their ejection from Jordan for trying to overthrow the



Jordanian government. It was also before the terrible civil war that began in the 1970s. Beirut was divided into a Western (coastal) zone, which was mainly Muslim, and the Eastern zone, which was predominantly Christian, the civil war being between these two groups.

Ah, the Lebanon! What a wonderful place! Of the many places I have visited, it is probably my favourite place (at least as it was then, not now). As the country was once colonised by the French, many of Beirut's streets were tree-lined and beautiful. The picture shows two typical streets of the 1960s, one tree-lined and the other in old Beirut.



Although there were wonderful beaches, there was not enough time for me to have a swim. As usual when travelling, I would often buy things to eat and drink at shops and markets. At one small shop, I saw bottles of “milk” (similar to that in the picture) so asked for one (using my best French, which many people spoke). The guy looked at me in a strange way so I pointed to the “milk”. He gave me a bottle and then I asked for a straw. He looked at me even more strangely! I opened the bottle, and the straw would not go in easily; I had to push it in! Then it was difficult to suck out the “milk” so I gave an enormous suck and got a mouthful of



“milk! It was *not* milk! Rather, it was unsweetened yoghurt and it tasted awful. That was why

the guy kept looking at me in the strange way. Although I can still vividly picture the scene, I have forgotten if I continued to *eat* the yoghurt - probably not.

I made a number of excursions around the country, most of the time by hitch-hiking. One was across the hills east of Beirut to see the ruins of the ancient Roman city of Baalbek (some of the ruins pictured below, just as I remember them).



Another day, I hitch-hiked up to the mountains to see some of the few remaining 'Cedars of Lebanon'. On the way, I was picked up by a Lebanese-Australian couple (who had lived - and were born? - in Australia). They took me to their place for a cup of tea (lunch?) and then took me to the grove of cedar trees. Interesting.



North of Beirut is the ancient city of Byblos (which means 'book'). I hitch-hiked up to there, for what I am not sure now. Maybe just to see some of its ancient ruins.



I also hitch-hiked south of Beirut; first to the city of Sidon, famous for its off-shore Crusader castle and causeway to the mainland (see picture). Again, very interesting. I then continued south towards Tyre but never reached it. Security forces were turning people back. I think I needed an Israeli visa as Tyre is very close to Israel.



From Beirut, I flew on to Istanbul in Turkey and then to Vienna in Austria. For both these legs, I flew on DC-9s, one operated by SAS

(Scandinavian Airline System) and the other by KLM (Royal Dutch Airlines), though which leg with which airline I don't remember.

Turkey: Istanbul

I only had a very short stay only, perhaps one day, two nights. I stayed at a youth hostel overlooking the sea (and can still picture it as seen from a short distance away). I don't recall much else.

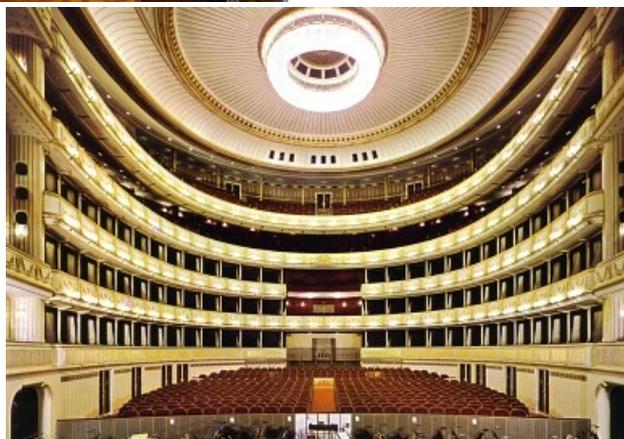


Austria: Vienna

At this time in my life, I had no strong desire to visit Europe, so until 1970, this is as close as I came. I had originally planned to stay just three or four days, but this had to be extended to a week! The reason for this was the visa. for the Soviet Union. Yes, the embassy said, I could get the visas here (relief, I suppose!), but it would take a week. This necessitated a visit to the “Intourist” office, who had to change my plans. I had originally planned to spend a few days in Kiev, the capital of the Ukraine (then part of the USSR) so that had to be cancelled, with the new plan taking me directly to Moscow. I eventually got the visa.



There is a lot to see in Vienna, though I don't remember much of what I saw. I know I looked through the Schonbrunn palace (inside view and the palace grounds pictured above) and



the Vienna Opera House (pictured above left).

I also visited places associated with Beethoven. In one, I saw one of his pianos (above right). I also visited the house in a village on the outskirts of Vienna where he lived. This was followed by a walk up the hills through the Vienna woods and back down into the *other* side of Vienna

At the airport, prior to departing for Moscow, I visited a toilet, not for the usual purpose, but to enable me to smuggle US dollars into Russia in order to change them on the black market. To do this, I stuffed the cash inside the sock in one shoe, so I ended up walking with a limp! I actually remember looking around inside the toilet to see if there were any hidden cameras (inside a toilet? Really!)

The flight to Moscow was on a Tupolev-104 (Tu-104) of Aeroflot, the state-run airline. I remember that the position of the seats and the windows did not match so it was difficult to see out; perhaps that was deliberate, seeing this was the height of the cold war era! After a while, the plane came down very low; you could actually see the animals in the fields, so I thought we were landing. After about 40 minutes of this I had my doubts; I think the pilot was lost and was following landmarks he could see on the ground to find his way!!



Soviet Union

Moscow

On arrival at Moscow airport, I got through customs and immigration all right, even with a limp! On entry, all money brought in had to be declared and foreigners were given a form on which all monetary transactions have to be entered by banks. This form and any remaining cash had to be presented again on departure so that the authorities could check on money exchanges that had been carried out. (More about this later!)

I was met by an Intourist representative who had arranged a car (?taxi) to take me to the hotel in the city. In those days, travel arrangements were made for foreigners travelling alone as they were not allowed to travel by themselves and there was no train from the airport. I was to stay in the Hotel Bucharest (pictured) which was conveniently located just across the Moscow river from the



Kremlin and Red Square. It was very old but clean (but has since upgraded substantially and renamed). Breakfasts were included.

I spent about one week in Moscow and had a great time. At no time did I feel I was being watched or followed and was free to go almost wherever I wanted. People were warned not to take photos of anything that seemed to deal with the military or with communications such as radio towers.

Again, the black market found me, and I changed quite a lot of US dollars into roubles. I needed cash for meals outside the hotel and for entry to places. The black market rate was actually the same as the official rate (1 USD to 1 rouble) which however, was *three* times what a visitor would get from the banks. Locals were desperate to get US dollars, as many of the high-grade overseas goods they wanted were only available at GUM (pronounced 'goom'), the huge state department store in Moscow, and purchases were only possible with dollars. In one such exchange, a guy and I went down a dark alley at night to change some of my dollars into roubles! I think he was more scared of being caught than I was!

One of the first things I couldn't help but notice was that most of the work being done everywhere was by women. The reason was due to a big shortage of men as a result of the huge losses during WWII (even some of the stories in the language books I picked up in Tehran make references to these losses).



The five photographs above show some of what I did in Moscow. Proceeding clockwise from top left:

1. The Moscow metro: This was a very good way to get around. Most of the stations are cathedral-like structures, like the one here. On one occasion I was seated next to a very gruff-looking senior army officer (judged by all the medals, etc). So I decided to speak to him in my very primitive Russian. He immediately lit up and was very friendly.
2. Red Square, The buildings at the back of the picture are part of the Kremlin, with the Kremlin wall in front. In front of the wall is Lenin's mausoleum. I took a guided tour through the Kremlin - very interesting. I also walked through the mausoleum, which is free, and saw Lenin's embalmed body. As I was about to enter, after about an hour or longer waiting in the queue, I had a camera, which apparently is not allowed so I rushed back to the queue where a lady I had been talking to looked after it and gave it back to me after I had been through. When I arrived back at the entrance for the second time, the guards were very surprised that I had no camera!
3. The remains of many heroes of the Soviet Union are housed in the wall of the Kremlin. These include the remains of Yuri Gagarin, the first man in space (see the red - appropriate colour - circle in the picture).
4. The main building of the University of Moscow. Very impressive from the outside, but a bit grotty on the inside. There are about five structures of the same general plan dotted around Moscow, serving different functions, including the university and government offices. Close by the university is the Olympic stadium which I had a peek at.
5. This picture shows part of the "USSR Economic Achievements Exhibition". This is a very interesting place which displays many of the country's achievements. I spent a long time there. In this picture is a Russian rocket and spacecraft and an aircraft.

I also visited a Technical Museum and while there had a good conversation (in English) with a senior chap. I happened to mention about the science books I was writing in Hong Kong and wondered if they had any photos of the Soviet space programme that might be useful. He promised to send some to me, which he did, though I don't think I ever used the pictures in the books. We corresponded briefly. (I still have the photos he sent and his letters.)

As only breakfasts had been pre-paid, I had to buy other food at local food places. I remember going to one restaurant which seemed to serve local workers and had stand-up eating at small circular tables only. While in the queue, I remember that the lady serving the dishes was very gruff, telling the men to hurry up and choose their dishes. I wondered how she would treat me when it was my turn, not speaking much of the language and a foreigner to boot! I needn't have worried. She was very kind and helpful and took her time introducing various dishes, even telling the guys behind me in the queue who were getting a little impatient to be quiet and just wait!

Then there was a visit I made to a church service. Not a Russian Orthodox church but a Baptist "non-conformist" church. I enquired about this church from an official agency

(probably Intourist) and while a little reluctant at first, told me how to find the place and at what times the services were. The place was packed, with a large number of KGB agents there as well. The locals knew who the KGB people were; perhaps they did not sing or pray!! I spoke, in English, to a number of the folks after the service. I remember one young chap he had learnt his English entirely from the English-language bible he had. I also remember that when it came to a prayer time, members of the congregation would write requests on pieces of paper and throw them forward, including from the balcony, for others to pass to the front.

Then there was a classical music concert by the USSR Symphony Orchestra (I think) I attended, which included a Mozart violin concerto played by Igor Oistrakh and conducted by his very famous father David Oistrakh. I also recorded the concert which was not actually allowed!! I still have the tape, though the quality of the sound is not good due to having to keep the recorder



hidden. The hall in the picture could have been the one; I would have been downstairs in the stalls.

Towards the end of my stay in Moscow, I received an urgent message from Intourist saying that I was to take the Trans-Siberian train one day earlier than scheduled. Apparently, if I had stuck to their original departure date, I would not have been able to link up with the boat that was to take me from Russia to Japan!

Trans-Siberian railway

This is a major railway line across the country. In Hong Kong, through Intourist, I had pre-booked a four-berth *male* compartment. But when I got on the train, the compartment had me plus 3 women!! Perhaps this was a result of the change of plans. One was a girl of about 16 years and we spoke in simple Russian and English. The railway is now completely electrified but I think when I did the trip, diesel locomotives were used.



I was in a first class carriage; I think all foreigners had to travel first class. I walked down to have a look at the second class. Rather primitive. People - men and women - just slid into bunks arranged on either side of each carriage. Most people were dressed in a kind of tracksuit which they would wear day and night for the trip.

The first morning, I was awakened by the noise of chopping wood. It turned out to be the guard chopping firewood for the carriage water heater!! Apparently, each carriage got its hot water this way.

There was a dining car with a great menu of about 20 pages of dishes. However, only the dishes on about two of these pages were available and all that food started to run out after about three days. Fortunately, at each stop, and there were *many* of these, there were vendors all along the side of the track selling things to eat and drink. I never needed to buy anything.

On arrival in Irkutsk, there was another change in plans (or, I might have been told about this in Moscow). I had to get off the train (station pictured) and fly to the east coast, in order to make the boat in time. I would have liked to continue on the train as the second half is more scenic with mountains and forests, whereas the first half is flat and not so interesting.



I spent a night in Irkutsk, which is on the shores of Lake Baikal (pictured), the deepest freshwater lake in the world. A tour of the city was arranged for the group of westerners there. I remember that the guide used the word "delicious" in a non-taste context; the first time I had heard such usage. She also said "Have you heard the news?" When we all said "No" she



clammed shut and would not say a thing. It wasn't until I reached Yokohama in Japan that I found why; the Soviet army had just gone into Czechoslovakia and brutally suppressed the "Prague Spring", a democratic movement. This is what the guide knew.

Getting on the plane at Irkutsk was unusual. There was no seat allocation so it first in who got the best seats after a run across the tarmac. No baggage check-in either; take it all on board with you (or, it might have been dumped in the hold prior to getting on the plane). I remember we all boarded at the front of the plane. The plane was a jet-prop aircraft, either an Ilyushin-18 (IL-18) or a Tupolev-118 (Tu-118) (shown in the picture). Probably the latter, as I remember that each of its four engines of the plane had *two* sets of contra-rotating propellers



(rotate in opposite directions), essentially making it an eight-engined plane. (If you look carefully at an engine in the picture, you should notice two sets of propellers.)

The flight was from Irkutsk to Khabarovsk and lasted five or six hours. It was a very dull city. Just an overnight stop then by train to Nahodka, a small port town next to Vladivostok, which took about one day (?and night). The train was for foreigners only as we were not allowed into Vladivostok which was the naval base for the Soviet Far East fleet (though today, I believe, foreigners do enter or leave via Vladivostok and not Naxodka.)

We immediately proceeded through immigration and customs. Now I return to the monetary transaction form given to me on entering the country, but which, because I had been using the black market to change money, was blank! They wanted to know why!!! I thought on my feet and explained that everything (such as hotels, hotel meals, travel) had been pre-paid, which was true (but, as mentioned earlier, in such a case I wouldn't have been able to visit museums, travel around the city, go to concerts, buy things, etc.) They accepted this, which saved me from seven years in a gulag! I also had the unused dollars stuffed in my sock, though the limp was less pronounced now!

On leaving, I also had a small bag of odd coins from various countries which I had forgotten to declare on entering the country, so on departure, I put them right at the bottom of my bag and placed my four "Learning Russian" books (which, remember, I had bought at a market in Tehran) right at the top. The customs officer opened the bag, saw the books and was interested that I was learning Russian. We "chatted" for about a minute or so in Russian and by then he was not interested in going through my bag - exactly as I had planned! Probably would just have had them confiscated anyway but I had promised some kids in Hong Kong I would bring some coins back for them. And so onto the small boat for the two-day (I think) trip to Yokohama.

The boat trips back to Hong Kong

The trip to Yokohama was uneventful and I remember nothing about it. On arrival, the first thing I wanted was to get an English newspaper to find out what the guide in Irkutsk would not tell us. I waited first in line while they set up the ramp then set off. It was raining hard, I remember, and I could not find a newspaper anywhere. On returning, there was a pile of English-language newspapers!! And that is how I learnt of the invasion of Czechoslovakia.

I had to switch to a second, almost identical boat, for the voyage to Hong Kong. The boat was the "Baikal", a picture of which is in another file ("The Early Hong Kong Years 1966-1977", picture taken from the roof of the old YMCA) but I have included it again



here.

This trip was *very* eventful and I do remember it quite well. On the deck there was a large chess board with those large pieces you move around. Once, I played against a crew member. He was rather good, and each time he took one of my pieces, he would guffaw something to the effect of “Russia beating New Zealand”. There were also *two* typhoons that we were trying to avoid. The ocean was *very* rough. I had a cabin with a porthole (as the ship was so small there were no 'inside' cabins). Due to the rolling of the ship, at one moment I would see the clouds and the next I would see only water. I was not sick but was very close. During this time, it was not possible to have meals as nothing would have stayed on the tables in the dining room.

Yes, a very exciting and memorable trip indeed!