

IN KIEV WITH INTOURIST

The notorious Soviet travel agency is now a private company. But has its ethos changed?

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In the autumn of 1970, a distinguished art collector and his wife made a trip to the Soviet Union with the state travel agency Intourist. Moscow and Leningrad were enjoyable enough, but Kiev was marred by a guide who made constant comparisons between the gangster-ridden West and her own ‘crime-free’ city. Only when her charges had been pick-pocketed and taken to look at hundreds of mugshots at the local police station was she reduced to silence.

That evening, while the three were having dinner, the guide went off to telephone her headquarters. She returned looking much relieved, with an official explanation of the day’s events. There had, she said, been a sudden outbreak of cholera in Odessa, with the result that the few criminals who normally resided there had relocated to Kiev, creating an unfortunate but purely temporary nuisance for travellers.

Anyone who visited the USSR before its collapse will recognise the ingenuity of this disinformation. Intourist was a travel agency dedicated not just to bringing visitors to Russia, but to showing them a quasi-Utopia. It enjoyed a monopoly, and it worked hand-in-leather-glove with the KGB to control every aspect of your visit – where you went, what you saw, whom you met.

So closely was it allied to the Communist regime that I assumed it to have long disappeared. But a few months ago I stumbled upon a brochure which told me that, amazingly, it was still operating, with branches in London, Manchester and Glasgow. Further enquiries revealed that it had been privatised in 1992, and was now owned by one of Russia’s richest men,

Vladimir Yevtushenkov – though the inclusion of Prague in its ‘Musical Russia’ package suggested that the propagandists lived on. Intrigued, I decided to pay them a visit.

At first glance, the Notting Hill office seems to have changed not a jot since the days when Intourist was synonymous with barrack-like hotels denuded of soap and bathplugs. A stiff metal door in a narrow shopfront opens into a tiny, drab room decorated with kitsch landscapes and *matroshka* dolls. But the staff prove to be multi-national, cheerful and efficient, and perfectly willing to organise custom-made holidays as well as off-the-peg tours. Shorn of the Asiatic republics, Intourist’s territory is now Russia, Ukraine and the Baltic states, with a handful of cruises and two epic train journeys (the Trans-Siberian and the Trans-Mongolian) for good measure. Most of the packages cost between £400 and £1,000, though visas and excursions can add a fair amount to that.

Asked to suggest a weekend break for a party already familiar with Moscow and St Petersburg, my consultant came up with Kiev, only three hours’ flight away. It certainly looked promising, with its elegant, pastel-stucco buildings perched on a series of hills overlooking the River Dniepr. But, I wondered as I packed for early summer in northern Ukraine, was Intourist the best company to be going with? Does the snow leopard ever really change its spots?

I dropped a bar of soap into my bag just in case.

Intourist was created in 1929, under Stalin, to deal with both domestic and overseas tourists. Presenting an idealised view of Soviet life was part of its remit from the outset: George Bernard Shaw, visiting Russia in 1931, was successfully duped into reporting that the country had achieved full employment. (Malcolm Muggeridge was more acute, observing that

unemployment had been ‘liquidated’ by liquidating the unemployed, and that Intourist’s work included selling passports for huge sums to Russians desperate to leave the country.)

An early advertisement aimed at the American market declared disingenuously, ‘You decide where you want to go, what you want to see...Special offerings for 1932 include ice-breaker cruises skirting the North Pole, de luxe express trains over the Golden Road to Samarkand, Bokhara, Tashkent, big game hunts where there is big game left.’ In 1938, with spectacularly bad timing, Intourist opened its first office in London; the same year saw the agency secretly incorporated into one of the KGB’s predecessors, the NKVD.

After the War, Intourist became a behemoth. It didn’t just make travel arrangements: it owned hotels, restaurants and campsites, and fleets of cars and buses. To begin with its overseas clientele came mainly from the Eastern Bloc – via agencies that sprang up in imitation, such as Cedok in Czechoslovakia and Orbis in Poland – but in time Western tourists came to be recognised as an important source of hard currency. By the mid-Seventies, three million foreigners were visiting each year. Intourist acquired banks, bureaux de change and Beryozkas (hard-currency shops selling luxury goods such as caviar); its workforce rose to 130,000, making it probably the largest travel organisation in the world.

Nor was it simply dealing with holidaymakers. Business travellers had to use it; so did the American astronauts on the joint Apollo/Soyuz mission of 1975; so, indeed, did politicians, including Harold Wilson and Richard Nixon. And whoever came, for whatever reason, was assigned an Intourist guide.

In 1981 the journalist Christine Sutherland managed to gain access to one of the institutes where these guides were trained. It was, she says, highly

competitive: just to get in, a qualification from a university or language school was required, along with impeccable political credentials. Students were expected to work six days a week with few holidays, knowing that only 20 per cent of them would pass the final exam. The reward was a well-paid job with special privileges, including the obvious one of contact with Westerners – though their history lessons probably failed to mention that, for this very reason, many of the first guides had become victims of Stalin's purges.

The classes included psychology and crowd control, the art of deflecting awkward questions, and surveillance. Those who graduated were required to complete two official forms: an employment contract, and an agreement to co-operate with the KGB.

According to John Barron's *KGB – The Secret Work of Soviet Agents*, the KGB's internal-security directorate included six sections entirely devoted to tourists. One of these dealt with 'observation points at facilities used by tourists and foreigners'. Finnish builders who worked on a hotel in Tallinn reported that the walls were hollowed out to accommodate wiring for surveillance equipment.

Those who signed up for an Intourist holiday would immediately have their names and passport details checked by KGB computers to see whether they might be of special interest. When a group arrived at a hotel, a KGB agent would be there to look them over; bags were often secretly searched, and letters home intercepted. Guides were instructed to report on their clients each day, identifying any who acted suspiciously – and any who might be useful to the Communist cause. 'Because I speak Russian, I knew that when my guide was on the telephone she was talking about me,' says Christine Sutherland. 'I laughed and said, "I'm afraid you won't have anything very interesting to tell them." She was very embarrassed.'

Few tourists were aware of how closely they were being watched. What they *were* aware of was being bored stupid. Not only did they have to follow a mercilessly regimented itinerary, including industrial facilities and People's Cultural Palaces, but they had to listen to a mind-numbing Party-approved commentary on everything they looked at. The low point of my first visit to Russia was being dragged around the world's most tedious theme park, the Display of Soviet Achievements, by a humourless apparatchik who bombarded us with coal-production figures.

But in that year, 1988, glasnost was taking hold, and there were signs that the tourist's lot was about to improve. Our guide in Leningrad was of a new breed: full of energy and enterprise and so openly critical of the government that I took him at first for an agent provocateur. Today he is probably the owner of an English football team.

Arriving in Kiev this April, I found Intourist's recommended hotel, the Rus, another useful barometer of change. A 19-floor, 3-star, Seventies-designed monolith, it is hardly a thing of beauty, but it has been given a decent facelift. The rooms have inoffensive furniture and hessian-effect wallpaper, and while cat-swinging is not recommended, the bathrooms are clean and boast a full complement of plugs. The staff are friendly and switched on, and you can even order room service.

You don't have to spend long in the city to realise the advantages of an organised tour. The fact that almost all the signs are in Cyrillic, and few people even at the major tourist attractions speak English, makes it very difficult for an independent traveller to get around. Our driver was particularly helpful, with no trace of the old Soviet can't-do mentality: when we asked to see the Fine Arts Museum, he parked obligingly on the front steps.

The museum is a neglected building, but it gives an instant sense of the city's tumultuous past. Here are splendid icons from its early Christian period (the entire population converted in 988, and was baptised en masse in the Dniepr); hearty portraits of the Cossacks who rose against the Poles and Turks; bold Bolshevik posters. One section is devoted to the Monumentalists, a local art movement which sprang up in the 1920s. What became of its members? 'They were denounced as formalists and shot.'

Twentieth-century Kiev was that kind of place. It suffered revolution, civil war, Stalinist purges, famine, Nazi occupation and genocide, and finally nuclear disaster. (Chernobyl, popular with ghoulish tourists, is 60 miles away.) How it manages to look as beautiful as it does – and its inhabitants as cheerful – is a mystery. Yes, there are massed tower blocks on the outskirts, and brash monuments left over from the Communist era; but the streets are wide and spotlessly clean, gilded domes blaze in the sunshine, and the whole city is implausibly green and leafy. To embark on a boat trip on the broad Dniepr, with sandy beaches on one side and a promenadeful of fishermen on the other, and gaze up at the many cupolas of the Kievo-Pechersky Lavra Monastery nestled in the woods above you, is to forget within minutes that you are in a city of three million people.

Kiev's sacred buildings are its greatest glory. In addition to the Lavra, with its famous catacombs and Baroque churches, there are two fascinating cathedrals: St Sophia's, rich with Byzantine mosaics and charming faded frescoes, and the fantastically ornate St Vladimir's, where you can scarcely move for icons and candelabra. St Kyril's Church has beautiful modern icons by Mikhail Vrubel; St Mikail's Monastery of the Golden Domes, totally demolished under Stalin and rebuilt three years ago, is a moving testament to the resilience of faith.

My favourite, though, was Rastrelli's exquisite St Andrei's Church, with its delicate turrets and deep green domes, perched above the steep, cobbled market street called Andreyevsky Spusk. (A few doors down is the house where Mikhail Bulgakov lived, and which is now an unusually imaginative museum.) Runner-up was one of the charming wooden churches at the Museum of Folk Architecture and Life, an idiosyncratic 300-acre park in which rustic buildings from across the Ukraine have been rounded up and corralled together, and whose restaurant serves a better chicken Kiev than the five-star Palace Hotel.

What, though, of our guides? They were surprisingly flexible when we asked for changes to our itinerary, and did not appear to be weighing our potential as a sleeper cell. But their commentaries still carried echoes of the Soviet era: the Second World War, we were told, began in 1941, and our suggestion that the Cossacks might have been fond of a drink met with outraged insistence that these were sober, peace-loving people who had been traduced by American films.

To be fair to the head of Intourist's British operation, Nikolay Chernov, he is aware of these shortcomings, and is endeavouring to correct them. He knows, too, that his company has an image problem, and admits that a change of name has been discussed. (For Russians visiting Britain it has already been rebranded as CHARM – an acronym for Culture, History, Adventure, Romance, Mystery.) But with over 40 companies now competing to send Britons to Moscow and St Petersburg, and Intourist's share of the market eroded to 15 per cent, he believes that 75 years of experience is not a selling point to be jettisoned lightly.

The paradox is that, in the old days, the gruesomeness of the Intourist experience was one of the best reasons for going to the USSR. You couldn't call yourself a seasoned traveller if you hadn't been reprimanded by the boot-

faced *dezhurnaya* keeping watch on your hotel corridor, or held your breath as a Red Army officer marched through your plane counting heads before take-off. For the new Intourist to succeed, it needs to persuade Westerners that it can still offer an extraordinary holiday, but without the old discomforts. One of its initiatives – a new, de luxe Trans-Siberian train starting next year – seems a step in the right direction, and the Kiev city break is certainly to be recommended. If those old KGB listening posts can be commandeered to create some extra room space, there's no reason why it shouldn't develop a triumphant five-year plan.