

Formidable: Jan Mccoy

The train journey from Helsinki to St. Petersburg is slow and laborious and my fellow passengers and I were surprised when, at the border, the train was still stationary twenty minutes after we'd pulled in.

People became uneasy, shuffling around in their seats, peering out windows, several getting up to look out the locked doors. No-one could leave the train or even step out for a breath of fresh air or to stretch their legs.

Clanging of doors and gruff voices heralded the arrival of customs officers. Four men, dressed in army gear, shoulders supporting rifles, appeared more like soldiers at war than border security. The heavy weapons were threatening ... intimidating ... formidable. The chief, a tall broad-shouldered individual with a black, bushy moustache, shouted.

"Passports". His face was stern, with dark brown skin wrinkled around his jowly cheeks. People hurriedly delved into bags and produced their documents. Each was scrutinised carefully, pages turned, photographs aligned with heads, then a long close stare at each individual's face to verify authenticity. It was frightening. Each passport was then handed to his colleague who placed it in a black, leather briefcase. The situation became one of intensity and foreboding.

One passenger asked, "Why are you taking our passports?" To which came an officious reply, "They will be returned to you in due course."

The apprehension level rose again when the group left the carriage with the briefcase. We endured an hour of anxious waiting before they were returned, discussing how abominable it was that in 2004 passports could be confiscated in such a way. Formidable.

Standing in Moscow's Red Square, one is astounded by its colossal size. Surely the biggest square in the world. A formidable sight.

The walls of the Kremlin are seven metres thick and run for two and a half kilometres in a triangular shape, huge battlements along each side, fortified towers on each corner. Above the dark red walls can be seen hundreds of glittering golden cupolas.

Inside the Kremlin, strict rules for tourists: *Stay with the group. Don't wander off.* No chance. On every corner stands a sentry guard with the rifle. Not just foreboding ... formidable.

Russia's cathedrals and palaces exhibit cupolas of pure gold and, inside, salons filled with gold artefacts, brilliantly decorated walls, ceilings and floors. One is dazzled by their beauty and can only say ... formidable.

Jan Mccoy © 2024