
Volga road trip : Back in the USSR

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The BBC's Rupert Wingfield-Hayes is travelling in a Volga car along the Volga river to take a snapshot of life in Vladimir Putin's Russia, as the presidential election looms. This is his third piece, from the city of Ulyanovsk.

For those peculiar individuals who still mourn the loss of the Soviet Union: I have good news.

In this remote city on the edge of European Russia something of the USSR lives on.

The first sign I had entered a time warp came as I tried to check in to my hotel. A very severe-looking woman in large spectacles and heavy make-up demanded to see my passport, visa and police registration.

This is normal in Russia. What came next is not, or is not supposed to be.

"Mr Wingfield, may I ask what is the purpose of your visit to Ulyanovsk?" the lady asked me.

"I'm a journalist," I said.

From her expression this was clearly tantamount to admitting I work for MI6.

"Who are you planning to meet while in Ulyanovsk?" she demanded. I wanted to tell her it was none of her business, but I knew that would only make things worse.

"The governor's office," I blurted.

Then came the question that really floored me: "Mr Wingfield, exactly how many years have you been a journalist?"

I began to giggle. "Is this for real?" I asked.

My new friend did not see the joke.

Lenin museum Perhaps I should not have been surprised, after all, Ulyanovsk is the birthplace of a certain Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. The city is named after his family.

And in Ulyanovsk there is no escape from him.

Stepping out of my hotel, I crossed Soviet Street towards the vast edifice that is the Vladimir Lenin Museum.

It stands high on a bluff overlooking the Volga river, a huge lump of brutalist white marble. It was built in 1970 to mark the 100th anniversary of the great man's birth.

Inside, I walked past hundreds of glass cases stuffed with Lenin memorabilia, past a Lenin library, and a Lenin conference hall. At the centre of the museum stands the very house in which Lenin was born - dismantled and rebuilt here.

But the most striking feature of the whole complex is the cloak room. Apart from my black down jacket, its hundreds and hundreds of coat hooks were entirely empty.

"We still get 15,000 visitors a year," the elderly lady showing me around told me. There was little sign of them today.

Street fun Another sign of Ulyanovsk's reluctance to throw off its Soviet past is in its street names.

In Moscow and St Petersburg, many of the old Soviet names have been dumped and replaced with pre-revolutionary ones. Not so here.

Walk down Soviet Street and you soon arrive in Karl Marx Street. Further on there is Lenin Street (naturally) and Communist Street.

But it is out of the centre the real fun begins.

Driving to do an interview, I suddenly found myself on Ho Chi Minh Street.

Turning a corner, I was into 19th Party Congress Street and, finally, my absolute personal favourite, 40th Anniversary of the Founding of the Communist Youth League Street.

'So far, so good' Now before I end this entry I have an admission to make.

I am feeling a bit guilty. In my last entry I was less than complimentary about my old Volga car.

Well, on Wednesday I drove 500km (300 miles) from Nizhniy Novgorod to Ulyanovsk without a hitch, and in snow and freezing temperatures.

When I left Nizhniy the thermometer was hovering around minus 5C. As I rolled into Ulyanovsk, nine hours later, it had plunged to minus 17C.

On either side of the road the tall silver birch trees looked like giant white candyfloss.

The car rattled and shook as I bumped along the terrible rutted, broken Russian roads. My back ached.

The windscreen wipers all but packed in, and at anything over 60mph (100km/h) the car began to weave and bounce alarmingly.

But I made it, safe and sound, both me and the car in one piece. So far, so good.

Send us your comments and questions about Rupert Wingfield-Hayes' Volga road trip using the form below. He will answer your questions in one of his later pieces.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/europe/7226848.stm>
