

GORBACHEV'S USSR – © Ian D. Richardson

I recently came across these reports of my three BBC World Service work visits to Moscow in 1988 for the summit meeting between Mikhail Gorbachev, president of the Soviet Union, and Ronald Reagan, president of the United States. At the time I was the World Service News Intake Co-ordinator (in plain English, newsgathering team leader). It was my job to make things happen while the clever stuff was done by the broadcasters and producers. It is interesting to look back at a time in Moscow before Vladimir Putin.

Here's what I wrote back then:

February 16, 1988

There was beautiful, Spring-like weather as I left London's Heathrow Airport, spot on time at 0950. I got a clear view of Windsor Castle and London's northern suburbs as we headed across Essex and out to sea. By the time we had reached the Dutch coast, the landscape was obscured by cloud, a situation that continued for much of the way to Moscow, a flight of three and-a-half hours. Occasional breaks in the cloud showed the countryside covered in snow.

For various reasons, I had to fly Club Class at a return fare of £723. This was a real rip-off. With a bit of shopping around and a little inconvenience I could have flown to Australia and back Economy Class for roughly the same price and received almost identical service.

Moscow Airport was relatively modern but extraordinarily gloomy. The windowless terminal was lit by a sprinkling of low-powered globes. I went through Immigration and Customs slowly but without any difficulty. My luggage was waved through without inspection. The atmosphere seemed much less tense than what I remember when Rosemary and I visited Moscow in October/November 1968.

The terminal was so gloomy that I almost failed to recognise the BBC correspondent, Kevin Ruane, who had come to meet me.

The temperature was an acceptable zero-Celsius -- a considerable improvement on recent temperatures that had been down to minus-25. It was almost dark, and the street lights weren't on, giving the city a very depressing atmosphere.

My hotel, the Ukraine, is a towering pile that had an appearance that is something of a cross between a cathedral and a fairy tale castle. The front doors were massive -- about four metres high and very thick. My room had twin beds with unpolished wooden floors, a colour TV set, an amazingly old-fashioned radio monitor speaker and a refrigerator that rattled and huffed and puffed so much that I had to switch it off. (Not that it actually froze anything, as I later discovered). The bath was massive,

and unlike our last visit, had a plug and soap. But there was no plug in the basin. The water from the taps was undrinkable.



Ian Richardson outside the Hotel Ukraine, Moscow, February 1988

After settling in, Kevin Ruane took me out to dinner at an Indian restaurant run jointly by the Soviet Government and a private Indian company. The food and service were very good and reasonably priced. The waiters spoke only best BBC English, something that surprised us. There was a floorshow of traditional Indian music and dancing put on by Russians dressed as Indians.

We were driven to the restaurant in a large official government car that was being used by the driver after hours to earn a few extra bucks. Kevin reckoned it was one of the cars used by members of the Politburo. He said that the unauthorised use of official vehicles for private gain was a fairly common practice, but he hadn't seen a government driver operating in such a blatant way before.

By the time we came to return to the hotel a thaw was really taking effect and the gutters were blocked by heaps of slushy, dirty snow. Kevin nicely described it as looking like mashed potato and gravy.

February 17

I awoke about 8am after a good night's sleep to find light snow falling. I had a nice view from my window across a park to the Moscow River.

I had breakfast at a buffet on my floor. It was pretty basic fare: boiled eggs, stale white or black bread, a variety of cold sausages and large cups of tea. I opted for hard-boiled eggs, some white bread, some sliced sausage and two cups of tea. The

cost was about £1.50 (or \$A4). It was quick and filling, but not much more. It was interesting to see an abacus being used by the cashier in the buffet.

Kevin Ruane wasn't feeling so well and went back to bed for the morning. Without him there was not much I could do about preparing for the Summit. I needed him to make the arrangements because he speaks fluent Russian and knows Moscow like the back of his hand. So I took the opportunity to do some preparatory paper work and to pop outside for a short walk to take some colour pictures for our TV Stills Department.

I decided to try the hotel restaurant for lunch. The menu was in English as well as Russian but gave few details. The waiters appeared not to know any English. Eventually I blundered my way through and ordered a pleasant meal of cold smoked fish and bread, followed by minced chicken in a breadcrumb casing, accompanied by deep-fried onions and matchstick-thin potato chips and what seemed to be a pickled pear.

After lunch I ventured out on my own to the BBC office across town. It was a bit nerve-wracking, not knowing any Russian or being able to read the Russian alphabet. All I had was the address written out in Russian for me by Kevin. Anyway, I made it there and back without any problems, apart from having one of the taxi drivers try to rip me off and entice me into some illegal currency deals.

This afternoon, in between sorting out a few things, I visited the Berioska (foreign currency) shop in the hotel and bought myself a Russian hat and some small gifts. I didn't go for the big furry hats, mainly because they cost a minimum of £65 (\$A150). This seemed a bit excessive.

Technically, the Russians are very much behind the times, particularly in the field of computers. In the hotel foyer, there are three big computer games for the guests. The games are very simple, and I would reckon, about 15 years behind developments in this area in the west.

In the evening, Kevin joined me for dinner in the hotel restaurant. His knowledge of Russian made things easier. Afterwards we watched the main evening news, with Kevin giving me a running commentary. It contained little of what we in the West expect of a news bulletin. But Kevin says the bulletins are much more interesting in these days of Glasnost, with officials often being challenged by reporters to explain their management deficiencies.

February 18

It was still snowing steadily when I got up this morning. The temperature was minus three, and as a result the snow was considerably less slushy.

Breakfast was another pretty basic meal of one hard-boiled egg, some very unattractive and almost tasteless sliced sausage, more stale bread and a couple of large cups of tea. I forgot to order butter, but couldn't be bothered going through another game of charades to get it.

After a few phone calls to make some appointments, I had a few hours spare, so I went for a walk in the park beside the hotel. To keep out the cold, I wore two pairs of socks, some long johns, a heavy overcoat and scarf, and my newly purchased Russian hat. The snow was about nine inches deep, so it was difficult to keep it out of my shoes. A few children were playing with their mothers in the park, and I think I got some quite nice pictures of them. The snow was no problem with the camera because it could be easily brushed off like dust. The stretch of Moscow River near the hotel was frozen over in parts, though I don't imagine it was thick enough for skating.

As I still had some time up my sleeve, I caught a taxi to the Kremlin for a look around. I looked pretty much the same as I remember it from 20 years ago, but it was still interesting. I took some more pictures for the BBC TV Stills Department before heading back to the hotel.

I then went to the BBC office and residence for lunch with the BBC Moscow correspondent, Jeremy Harris. (Kevin Ruane was on a short-term visit to Moscow, although he used to be resident here some years back.) Jeremy's wife, Susan, put on a wonderful lunch, complete with fruit, which I haven't had since I arrived here. They were complaining how difficult it was to get so many things in Moscow. They bought most of their goods in shops that accepted only hard currencies, such as pounds and dollars, but they said many of these had closed without explanation. And they said that regardless of whether a shop was open, it was impossible to predict what goods would be available on any given day.

My second appointment of the day was at Gosteleradio, headquarters of the State Committee for Broadcasting. I went there to look at the studios they were offering the BBC for special Moscow Week programmes next month and for the Summit. It was a massive, grey concrete complex on both sides of the road. The TV studios, with their towering transmitter, were on one side, while the radio studios were on the other. I was accompanied by a translator who introduced me to several senior officials. Everyone was very helpful, but the studios were very basic by our standards. It looks as though we will have to ship in a considerable amount of supplementary equipment for the Summit. God only know what it is going to cost us, because, among other things, we are going to require round-the-clock broadcast lines between Moscow and London.

Apart from the drabness and shortages, the other thing that is most striking about life in Moscow is the bureaucracy. Everything takes an eternity because of all the paperwork and the need to refer even relatively simple decisions to all sorts of senior

officials. It is no wonder that so little seems to get done in the Soviet Union. But improvements are clearly being made, particularly in the area of Glasnost. Quite vigorous debates involving ordinary members of the public take place on TV almost daily -- something that would have been unheard of a year or two back.

Despite the cold in Moscow, it is quite warm indoors and in taxis and public transport. Most of the heating and hot water comes from the central public boiler houses, much in the same way that electricity is provided by power stations.

This evening Kevin and I returned to the Indian restaurant for a meal but it was terrible. All the food was dry and not very hot. I wouldn't have minded if it hadn't been so bloody expensive, about £35 (or about \$A85).

There were no taxis handy when we came to return to the hotel, so Kevin hailed one of the many private, un-metered vehicles cruising the city for business. Kevin asked him why he took us the long way to the hotel. He explained that he was doing so to avoid the police. He said that the car had been damaged in an accident and the police had warned him that he would be fined if he didn't get it repaired. Kevin asked: "Well why don't you?" "I will," replied the driver, "but there is a waiting list of about nine months".

I have just had a phone call from Rosemary, as she can direct-dial my room without having to go through the hotel switchboard. It used to be possible to direct-dial out of Moscow to the West, but this was stopped except for a handful of numbers a few years back, presumably because it allowed dissidents to make untraceable calls abroad.

February 19

Still snowing when I got up to another boring breakfast in the buffet. I suppose I could have gone downstairs to the restaurant, but the service is slow and most time-consuming. Besides, there is no guarantee that the food will be all that much better. I suspect that a fair amount of fiddling goes on in the buffet because the staff don't ring up the money they receive from me.

This morning I succeeded in picking up the BBC, though the quality was rather poor. The Russians have stopped jamming us, but the reception in Moscow is never that good anyway. I think our Russian-language transmissions do a little better. Most of the time I must make do with Moscow World Service that the Russians have modelled on the BBC World Service. It is pretty boring stuff, with lots of stories about the heroic achievements of socialist workers around the world. Occasionally, they show an interest in what I would call a "real" story, but it is quite often grossly slanted towards the Soviet view of the world.

In between making phone calls and arranging meetings, I took a few hours off to go on a familiarisation of Moscow. It is important that I get a reasonable feel of the city in time for the Summit. So I arranged an Intourist driver and guide. The driver's name was Boris (I guess it had to be!) while my guide bore an equally traditional Russian name of Nadia. Nadia spoke excellent English and once we got to know each other a bit she stopped bombarding me with endless figures and dates, as is the wont of guides around the world. After a rather formal beginning, she turned out to be quite charming and we were able to chat about all but the most sensitive issues.

An early discovery from the tour was that the Metropol Hotel, in which Rosemary and I stayed in 1968, was closed for extensive re-building by a Finnish construction firm.

Among the places we visited was an Underground (or Metro) station, which was very interesting. There were beautiful mosaics on the vaulted ceiling. The cost of trip anywhere on the Metro is five kopecs (about 5p, or 12 Aussie cents). If I get a chance tomorrow, I will venture into the Metro myself to have a good look around. Every station is said to be different. I was quite surprised to be able to take photographs underground. This was most certainly not permitted pre-Gorbachev.

I really love the architecture of the old part of Moscow. The avenues are very wide (between eight and ten lanes and are lined with beautiful buildings, often painted in lemon. The Kremlin is, of course, a most impressive complex, with its gold-encrusted onion domes, capped with snow. And in other parts of old Moscow there were a variety of most attractive Russian Orthodox churches, most of them now converted into museums.

Soon after the tour began, the snow stopped falling and the sun shone rather weakly through the haze. Although it was still cold, it was not unpleasant.

At one point during our trip Nadia spotted a street stall selling oranges, so we stopped to buy some. They cost about £2 (more than \$A5) for a kilo. They were imported from Egypt and were rather small and of variable quality. Nonetheless, they were very sweet and enjoyable. It was the first fresh fruit I had eaten since arriving here.

After the tour I called in at a food shop. Everyone had to queue at least twice -- once to pay and once for each type of food. The choice of foods was very limited and would have put a Western supermarket out of business within days.

When I got back to the hotel, I had a much-needed cup of tea in the buffet. The girl who served me was very cheerful and seemed anxious to try out her English. We had a conversation of sorts during which she told me how much she admired my green sweater. She wondered if she could buy it from me. I said it wasn't possible because it had been given to me by my wife, but I did give her a good quality BBC gift pen and a BBC badge. She was so overwhelmed that she had received a gift from

someone in the BBC that she insisted I take four blocks of Russian chocolate off the rather depleted buffet shelves. It was rather embarrassing because the BBC pens are produced as giveaways and do not usually attract exchange gifts.

In the evening Kevin and I went out for dinner with Robin Lodge of Reuters. Robin is a former BBC colleague. First stop was not a restaurant but the Australian Embassy to visit the Down Under Club (I guess it just had to be called that.). It is open each Friday night to any foreigner who wishes to crowd themselves into a small room drinking Fosters from a can! Not my idea of civilised drinking – or of the image Australia should be projecting abroad. After a short while there, Robin took us to a relatively recent innovation, a co-operative restaurant. This is run not by the State but by a group of private citizens. They are not licensed, so a discreet policy of bring-your-own is operated. It was very pleasant, and unlike the State-run restaurants or hotels, had found a supply of fresh vegetables for salads. It was quite a treat to be eating a fresh salad. The main dish was pretty oily, but nevertheless, they were actually trying to please the customer.

February 20

Back to London this evening. But first another dreary breakfast in the buffet. Although the food was the same, there was a small improvement in that there seemed to be enough knives to go around. On previous days I have had to ask for a knife.

By mid-morning the sun was shining weakly as the snow ploughs, accompanied by trucks, turned up to clear the roads around the hotel. It was a very efficient operation. The ploughs operated rather like harvesters, sweeping up the snow then blowing it out a chute at the top into the accompanying trucks. As each truck was filled, it moved off, to be immediately replaced by another in the queue. The trucks dumped the snow in the river.

The temperature was several degrees below zero, but as there was no wind, it was quite pleasant. I went for a walk to get the feel of moving about the streets then ventured into the Metro. The station was quite beautiful and amazingly clean. I travelled just one station closer to my hotel and walked back through a street market and some blocks of residential flats to the hotel. There were several flower sellers, but they each had only one sort of flower and only a few bunches at that.

Back at the hotel, Kevin and I had a dreadful lunch of warm chicken and bread before making a visit to Reuters news agency on our way to the airport. Our taxi was a real wreck. Third gear made the most appalling noise, the motor sounded as though it was about to expire, and the petrol and exhaust fumes were so strong that we had to travel with a window open. Kevin only half-jokingly said he was frightened to light up a cigarette in case we all exploded in flames. On the way to the airport, we saw a lake covered in ice and snow with people fishing through holes in the ice.

At the airport we went through all the procedures slowly but without any problems. In Russia, foreigners are required to go through Customs when leaving as well as arriving. The Russians are mainly checking to see that you aren't smuggling out Icons and the like or Soviet Currency. They also check to see that you aren't leaving with more money than when you arrived. If you do, they want to know where you got it. I think it is mainly intended to stop people using the black market.

It was great to get on the British Airways plane and head back to London, if only because we would get a proper meal. I don't think I have ever looked forward so much to an airline meal. And it was wonderful to see Heathrow Airport again. It was so bright and cheerful after Moscow Airport.

MOSCOW TRIP, APRIL 9-14, 1988

This trip was a follow-up to the one made in February to prepare for the BBC's covering of the Reagan/Gorbachev Summit on May 29 to June 2.

The weather was markedly less cold. Indeed, it was 7-degrees Farenheit warmer in Moscow than it was in London, and most of the snow had melted. The trouble with this was that the streets were very dirty with all the muck that had been brought down with the five months of snow. The street sweepers were busy cleaning the place up.

In addition to warmer weather, the days are considerably longer, with the result that Sheremetyava Airport terminal was somewhat less gloomy than on my earlier visit. It took me quite a while to get a taxi. There were few official ones around, while the unofficial ones were trying some classic rip-offs. One guy said he'd drive me to the hotel for 40 roubles (the actual fare was R6.50 and when I laughingly dismissed this less-than-enticing offer, he offered to do the trip for a carton of Marlboro cigarettes or a bottle of Scotch whisky. I felt I would sooner wait a little longer for a vehicle with a meter. When I got one, I found its brakes were somewhat short of being in top condition. Every time the driver applied the brakes, the whole vehicle shuddered before the wheels were locked into a skid.

There was no hotel room available for me for the first two days (two of the biggest hotels have been closed for renovations), so I was put up in the BBC-TV correspondent's flat, which was temporarily vacant while he [Brian Hanrahan] and his wife were in London on leave. The flat was quite spacious and comfortable, but I felt a bit uncomfortable blundering around someone else's flat in their absence.

I was warned by our acting radio correspondent in Moscow, Martin Sixsmith, to keep in mind that the flat was well and truly bugged. Furthermore, so were the three BBC cars and, of course, the BBC office. All the office staff, other than the journalists, have to be recruited locally, with little choice being offered. One of the BBC drivers is a KGB officer, and it has to be assumed that the rest of the staff from typists to maids do, at the very least, a bit of part-time spying.

The food shortages are quite serious. Martin Sixsmith and I went to the Berioska (a hard currency shop for foreigners) to stock up on food, but there was only one type of unidentified meat available and no eggs. There were very few vegetables and the only fruit on offer were some very unattractive apples. Martin said the situation was much worse in the shops open to the ordinary Russians.

I had my meals in Martin's flat. He was "batching" as his wife was in Warsaw where he is normally based. Martin cooked the first few meals, then I called on my almost forgotten culinary skills to cook a stew of sorts. The meat couldn't be identified and looked almost bloodless, so I emptied some curry and two packet soups I had brought from London into it to give it a little body and taste. The only vegetables we had were some onions and a jar of pickled gherkins – so they went in too. The only rice available was some pudding rice which was a

bit gooey. But the dish was voted a success by Martin and by Erik De Mauny, the BBC's first-ever Moscow Correspondent, who was visiting his old stamping ground. It was helped by being washed down with some Georgian red.

By Monday, I was found accommodation in the Cosmos Hotel where the BBC hopes to be based during the Summit. It is a massive, curved, 24-floor structure, and I was given a room on the top floor with a beautiful view of Moscow. The hotel was a rather strange place. The approach to the entrance was unimposing and the foyer was like a massive railway station. The rooms were fine, though a bit on the shabby side.

The hotel was built by the French who ran it for a while, but since the Russians took it over, it has started to go downhill. It had a bowling alley, a large swimming pool, a sauna and a massage parlour (where you got a real non-dodgy massage!). There were several bars and restaurants, but they were often not open and had run out of things. One lunch time we were unable to get either a cup of coffee or tea because the hotel had run out.

A constant thought throughout the visit was to wonder how the Soviet Union could be the second most powerful nation in the world, yet did everything so badly.

I was joined on Monday evening by two colleagues from BBC domestic radio, the Foreign News Editor, Chris Wyld, and the Chief News Engineer, Colin Vaines. They were good company and we worked as a good team setting up the various arrangements.

Setting up meetings in Moscow is always a laborious task that requires considerable, but polite, persistence. You always begin with a negative response, but you just have to keep gently hammering away at the problem until something is done. Usually you end up on good terms with the Russians telling you cheerfully "Neh problem" (no problem). But you have to take all this with a grain of salt and assume that nothing much will be done until you go back to them to check that progress is being made. I think the Russians don't regard you as being serious until you have nagged them a few times.

As an example of the sort of thing that happens, let me tell you about my meeting with Intourist. This required two days of on-and-off persistence with various underlings until I finally got a meeting out of the blue at 5pm with the Chief of the Accommodation Department, Peter Ugrin. But I had considerable trouble getting a taxi – and when I did, it broke down. When it got going again it was stopped by a traffic cop for making an incorrect turn. The cop took the driver's licence away and ordered the taxi to be parked around the corner. The driver then went to the police box about half a block away and left me with his taxi with the keys still in the ignition. There was nothing I could do but wait until the driver returned 15 minutes later. He then took me to the wrong place. Eventually I arrived for my meeting much flustered and half-an-hour late.

I was escorted past the guard into a reception area, then after a short wait, into a rather elegant conference room. Three gentlemen entered – one an archetypal Russian heavy who eventually identified himself as the Chief of Protocol, Mr Alexander Simchenko, and the other two being Mr Ugrin and a colleague who did a simultaneous translation. They all sat on one side of the table and I sat on the other, rather like a Geneva negotiating meeting.

Mr Simchenko (who turned out to be a very important man indeed) spoke good English and was a very efficient negotiator as we haggled over whether the BBC Summit team should stay at our preferred hotel, the Cosmos, or at the Rossya, the unattractive hotel set aside for the visiting foreign press.

Eventually he agreed that he would make a real effort to have our request fulfilled, despite the fact that it was "irregular". As we said our good-byes and I repeated my apologies for being late, Mr Simchenko revealed that he had learned his English of the BBC World Service. This, no doubt, explained why he had decided to take over the negotiations.

We were quite successful with our negotiations for studios run by the State Broadcasting Committee, Gosteleradio. We will be given two studios plus two 24-hour broadcast lines to London. But the studios, although said to be among their best ones, are quite dreadful. The acoustics were breathtakingly bad and the sound-proofing was almost non-existent. Still, we had to be grateful for what we could get.

The bureaucracy in Russia is mind-boggling and Kafkaesque. The day after moving into my hotel I found myself in an extraordinary situation when I went to recover my passport from the registration office. I was asked why I had not checked into the hotel when I arrived in Moscow. I explained that the hotel was full and that I had stayed in BBC accommodation. I was told that it was not possible that the hotel was full on Saturday and that I must tell them where I had been staying. So I explained again, and again. I was told that it was not possible for the hotel to be full and that I must tell them where I had been staying. And so it went on until I couldn't be bothered arguing any further. I simply offered profuse apologies for being a naughty boy and promised not to do it again.

Earlier, when I had arrived at the hotel, I had been told by a woman clerk that there was no booking for me and no rooms available, even though the BBC translator had made the phone booking just an hour before. Eventually, she agreed to ring our translator. After some discussion, she burst out laughing and confessed that she had actually taken the booking herself and had forgotten about it.

A classic example of the waste of human and material resources was when Chris Wyld and I decided to have a swim. This cost an extortionate R2.50 (about. \$A6) and resulted in us having to go to the Service Bureau for our tickets. The clerk filled out the forms in triplicate, using tattered old carbon paper, then sent us to the Cash Desk about 100 metres away to pay for the swim. The forms were put through the cash register in duplicate, and we then headed back in the other direction to have our swim.

Despite the USSR's puritanical image, our hotel was awash with high-class prostitutes from about 10.30pm at night. They all looked as though they had stepped out of "Dallas" or "Dynasty", though I don't suppose they had seen either. They are all strictly hard-currency girls, so to speak. Definitely no roubles accepted! It would have been interesting to know what the going rate was.

Although the Soviet Union has very few AIDS cases, there are other dangers from the prostitutes – especially for journalists. Despite attempts to liberalise the regime, Moscow is still Set-up City for Journalists. Any dabbling in extra-marital sex or the black market could well result in a visit from the KGB, inviting you to assist the freedom-loving Soviet people in exchange for promises not to let unsavory photographs fall into "the wrong hands". Only last year a journalist about to leave Moscow was presented with an embarrassing personal photo album.

I spent much of my second day in Moscow walking around the Kremlin and Red Square to familiarise myself with the area and to take some more photographs for BBC-TV's Stills Department. I also went for a trip on the Metro as a test run from the hotel where most of the Summit briefings will take place to the Cosmos Hotel.

I did a bit of driving in Moscow, using one of the BBC Volvos. Like the rest of mainland Europe, the Russians drive on the right-hand side of the road, but they have some very peculiar rules about right and left hand turns. And at night the cars must be driven with only their parking lights on. The only vehicles allowed to drive with their headlights are the cars of bigwigs who get waved through all the intersections.

As the street lighting leaves a little to be desired, it is hard to see where you are going some of the time. Also, most of the white lines on the roads have been worn away. However, I survived without doing anything terribly wrong or scaring my passengers witless.

The smell of petrol fumes in Moscow is terrible. This is because all the cars run on two-star petrol and the engines are extremely inefficient. Most of the vehicles appear to be extremely poorly serviced.

In an attempt to understand just a little of what goes on around me in Moscow, I have been learning some Russian – so far with insubstantial progress. I find the biggest problem is breaking through the alphabet barrier. The Russians use the Cyrillic alphabet, and all I can say is that St Cyril has a lot to answer for! It would be better in many ways if the alphabet were entirely different from the Latin one, but it isn't. Some letters are the same – such as K O M E T and A – but you then come up against P being pronounced as R, C as S, B as V, H as N, and so on. And on top of that there are several characters entirely peculiar to the Cyrillic alphabet. Nonetheless, I have learned to say "hello", "goodbye" and "thank you" in Russian, and to be able to read some of the signs. I feel it is worth demonstrating to the Russians that you have made an effort, no matter how pathetic.

On my flight back to London I found myself sitting next to Retired American Air Force Colonel Barney Oldfield who still works in journalism and public relations, though he is in his 80s. He had spent some time in Australia, but more interestingly, he said he used to be Ronald Reagan's PR man at the Warner Brothers studio. He said they became good friends and still keep in touch, mainly providing him with one-liner jokes for his speeches. At first it seemed rather far-fetched, but the guy was able to show me some of his articles from "Variety" with his by-line and a shifty peep at his passport showed that he was definitely who he said he was. He sure could talk, but he was very entertaining with some great jokes. I asked him to get in touch next time he passed through London. There might be a BBC feature in him, and in any case, he said he was interested in doing a story for "Variety" on the effort and money involved in covering events such as the Moscow Summit.

Reflections on coverage of the Moscow Summit (Presidents Reagan and Gorbachev – May 29-June 2, 1988)

Anyone who fancies a trip to Moscow may do so for several good reasons, but one of them is certainly not the cuisine; nor is it likely to be a desire to pick up a tip or two from the Russians about modern broadcasting technology.

Throughout the Summit these less-than-attractive aspects of Soviet life became a major pre-occupation of both the World Service and domestic radio teams incarcerated for much of each day at the bleak headquarters of Gosteleradio (the State Broadcasting Committee) at Ostankino in Moscow's northern suburbs.

And my careful choice of the word "incarcerated" raises another of our Summit pre-occupations: rigid security restrictions, a Soviet priority that remains obsessive, quite untouched by any nonsense about glasnost or perestroika.

But back to the cuisine. Imagine, if you can bear it, a daily diet beginning with an eccentric breakfast of fish or meat, tomato, cucumber and dry bread, followed for the next 12-16 hours by little other than coffee, instant "Cup-a-Soup", biscuits, peanuts and sardines. Plus the very occasional treat of a shared tin of stewed fruit.

It is true that Gosteleradio had a number of restaurants and canteens, but finding one with an edible meal was no small achievement - - partly because of the need to have a "minder" to escort foreign broadcasters around most parts of the building and partly because the eating places had a habit of closing just as one wanted a meal. Even the restaurant in Gosteleradio's specially-established International Electronic Media Centre had the infuriating practice of displaying a "Closed for Lunch" sign.

Those more fortunate souls whose commitments allowed a relatively early evening departure from Gulag Ostankino were able to indulge themselves with visits to The Delhi, an admirable joint-enterprise restaurant serving, not surprisingly, Indian food. But it is not everyone who fancies curry day after day, and the attractions of The Delhi tended to fade fairly quickly.

Amateur Moscow-watchers, such as myself, who had detected a significant and encouraging relaxation in Soviet society as a result of glasnost, were perhaps lulled into a false sense of optimism on the matter of security arrangements for our visit. We had been given unqualified promises that BBC teams covering the Summit would be given freedom of movement in and out of Gosteleradio, but these were very quickly proven to be empty words.

Not only did we need two passes to get around the building, but for the most part, we required a "minder" whenever we moved outside the inner security cordon set up around the studios used by foreign radio stations. Infuriately, we discovered that we were not even permitted to leave the building unless escorted to the front door by a "minder" – and not just any "minder", but one specifically assigned to the BBC. The only Soviet concession was to allow us to go unaccompanied to the toilet that was outside the inner security cordon.

It should come as no surprise that most of us found it simpler to spend most of the day within the confines of Gosteleradio. And it was best not to dwell on the glorious weather outside or on the popular outdoor swimming pool nearby.

As for the equipment at Gostel. Ah well. Where do we start? The studios, we were assured, were among their best – despite the fact that they had no sound-proofing and the worst acoustics to be found outside a British Rail toilet. The Hungarian-made studio equipment would have had put Marconi into what an American might describe as “a grave-spinning situation”. The tape recorders had open-top reels, the cubicle console looked as though it had been designed by someone keen on puzzle games, some of the patchcords were unscreened and picked up transmissions from neighbouring studios, and the studio self-op microphone console had to be replaced twice. Additionally, the power supply to the studio and cubicle was so finely poised that when I plugged in our electric jug it tripped the circuit-breaker and put us off the air.



BBC World Service broadcast from Gostelradio studios, Moscow, on Gorbachev-Reagan summit, June 1988
Left-to-right: Malcolm Haslett, John Bamber, Tim Cabral, Deran Maghreblian, Mark Brayne

Our accommodation in Moscow was a bind. We had made strong representations to be put in the Cosmos, a mile away from Gosteleradio, but we were instead put in the Rossiya, a massive and hideous pile with 6,000 rooms that has been built on what was, according to all accounts, one of the prettiest parts of Old Moscow. It had 300 rooms on each floor, with very few lifts. Our rooms were at least a five-minute walk from a lift.

The Rossiya’s only redeeming feature was its close proximity to the Kremlin. Those at the front of the building had a magnificent view of St Basil’s Cathedral and the eastern side of the Kremlin. Not surprisingly, most of those rooms were taken over by the visiting television networks, so that they could have a nice backdrop for their reporters. The TV networks shipped in many tons of equipment to convert the rooms into temporary studios, editing suites and switching centres. Such was the pressure of space that teleprinters were often set up in bathrooms and toilets. At the front of the hotel, three massive satellite dishes were set up. The BBC-TV dish alone cost £50,000 to transport to Moscow – nearly half as much again as the entire World Service budget for the Summit.

Getting to and from Gosteleradio was a nuisance, taking about 30-minutes in each direction in my battered Lada hire car. The traffic in Moscow is chaotic. There are very few white lines on the roads, except on the route Reagan took, with the result that the drivers career all over the place. I became quite adept at driving in Moscow, and while it was hardly a relaxing experience, it was certainly preferable to the usual hair-raising journey in a taxi.

All this is hardly an advertisement for a professional visit to Moscow, but it would be unjust not to give the other side of the story. Such as the flawless service provided by the Gostel engineers. In a society in which inefficiency is a deeply-engrained way of life, the engineers showed speed and efficiency that would be difficult to surpass anywhere in the world. And, whatismore, they did so with unfailing courtesy and good humour.

Another uplifting side of a visit to Moscow is to be given confirmation of the massive audiences for the BBC's broadcasts in English and Russian. The status of the BBC remains high among an amazingly-varied cross-section of Soviet society. Even those who might have reason to treat our activities with suspicion or outright hostility are prepared in private moments to admit that they listen to the BBC with a grudging respect for the output.



Members of BBC team covering Reagan-Gorbachev summit in May-June 1988, Red Square, Moscow.
L-to-R: Robin Brittan, Lesley Sixsmith, Ian Richardson, John Bamber, Malcolm Haslett,
Jean-Michelle Duffrene

Glasnost, perestroika and Gorbachev have arguably turned the Soviet Union into the most exciting news story of the 1980s. Even for someone like myself whose grasp of the Russian language extends little further than the words for thank you and cheerio, it was impossible not to feel a witness to the making of history. This sense of involvement was strongly reinforced by my most unforgettable experience of the Summit – a midnight stroll in the stunningly illuminated Red Square to watch the Changing of the Guard at Lenin's Mausoleum. With a memory such as that, the traumas of the previous 16 hours seemed of little consequence.

ENDS/idr