

FFWM May 2020 Newsletter

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President's Message

Since we aren't traveling right now, this Newsletter contains stories about three Journeys from the past. We can reminisce about these Journeys, or travel virtually (Isn't that what we are doing a lot of these days?) with those that made the trip! Looking forward to seeing you soon! Jerry

FF Western Michigan visits FF Aichi and FF Hiroshima

October 2017

By Jerry Potratz

Have you ever traveled internationally while on crutches? Have you ever knowingly arrived at your destination one day before a typhoon? I almost backed out of my first Friendship Force Journey, but I was encouraged to give it a go and I arrived in Japan as a one-legged ambassador, with forearm crutches and a scooter.

We survived the typhoon in Tokyo and traveled to Aichi Prefecture on a bullet train. What an experience! Unlike Amtrak, the bullet train system is fully

synchronized. Once the train pulls up to your gate, everybody has about 15 seconds to load. My FFWM helpers were like a NASCAR pit crew. I had my crutches and someone would grab my scooter and away we went, luggage and all, in impressive time.

The FF club in Aichi did a marvelous job of immersing us in Japanese home life and culture. Haruko Takano was our host and Louise and I now recognize that this is the true advantage of traveling with Friendship Force. We visited the Toyota tourist center. Mr. Toyada (we heard that the D was replaced with a T years later) made his fortune in weaving equipment and a good portion of the visitor center was dedicated to his many fiber making innovations. Our hosts had previously lived in Michigan and California as expatriates for Toyota. Louise and I were able to meet some of their neighbors and their son and daughter-in-law and grandchildren.



When we arrived in Hiroshima, my reputation as a handicapped person had preceded me. Our hosts had been instructed to help me. While going up steps to the welcome reception, I was assisted by a man on each side of me and two men pushing, respectively, my left and right buttocks from behind. I know the Japanese are friendly people, butt really? The sight was cause for a good laugh and it certainly helped break the ice for our welcome dinner!

Our visit to Hiroshima was highlighted by a most somber and meaningful tour of the Peace Park, which was ground zero for the atomic bomb in 1945. We listened to poems and memoirs written by survivors and read to us by some of their descendants... a very moving experience. Our host, Chieko Utsumi,

taught English part-time, her husband worked for the Postal System, and their children and grandchildren all lived just a few houses away. We slept on tatami mats in a room of rice paper walls. Every night was a culinary adventure. We made our own sushi, we had tokoyaki (octopus) prepared in the middle of the table, and sukiyaki. The entire family would join us for dinner. Louise was taught origami by a four-year-old!

In both Aichi and Hiroshima we saw many beautiful temples and palaces with unbelievably manicured gardens. The Japanese people displayed the thoughtful and respectful personality for which their country is best known, but through Friendship Force we also experienced the warmth and charm and good nature that is usually reserved for family. What a rich and memorable experience!



We finished our three weeks in Japan with a trip to Kyoto, the former capitol city of Japan. Kyoto has many beautiful cultural and historical sights and is a must-see for Japan visitors. The moss garden was especially breathtaking, a photographer's dream. Louise still encourages me to let the moss take over my lawn, but I know that my moss can't compare with hundreds of shades and ground cover variations seen in Kyoto!

Bottom line is that, for Louise and I, our first FF trip was a resounding success. It hooked us on what traveling with FF is all about... getting to know real people, appreciating their culture, making new friends, getting a chance to be ambassadors for the USA, and building a global network of FF members dedicated to multi-cultural understanding and a more peaceful world. Huge

thanks go to our host families, who opened up their homes to us and made our visit so special. Special thanks also go to Bill Hoover and Lyn Hargreave, who were Journey Coordinators for this trip. Bill was fluent in Japanese and had made many trips to Japan. Lyn, the consummate organizer, was very well connected to our host clubs and facilitated the fabulous success of our home stays!

I'm looking forward to the day when our FFWM club can begin traveling again. I want each club member to be able to enjoy an FF Journey and experience the true value of international friendship!

FF of SW FL and FF of Sarasota visit FF of Banjarmasin and FF of Malang, Indonesia

April 2019

By Marcia Ellis



On March 26, 2019 13 members of 2 Florida Friendship Force clubs (Southwest Florida and Sarasota), and 3 members of FF Western Michigan club landed in Singapore where we spent a couple of days seeing the sights and catching up on sleep. Then we all flew on to the Indonesia Archipelago made up of over 17,000 islands. Jakarta is the capital and we only spent one night in this sprawling, sinking city.



Participating in indigenous dance, making masks, the zoo and Karaoke!

FF Malang

Malang is located on the eastern part of the island of Java. My hosts were a wonderful couple, Rein (a business woman and writer) and Bambang (a professor of agriculture at a local university). Their large home was built around a central outdoor courtyard. Indonesia is a predominantly Muslim country and we heard the call to prayer several times during the day and night. Many homes had a special prayer room, some with running water. The weather was extremely humid (!) and when it rained in the afternoons, water flooded down steps and through the streets. We enjoyed a week of many cultural experiences including being assigned children to escort through a zoo. Karaoke was alive and well and we joined right in!



Q&A with University students of English
Playing in an unusual orchestra
TV set

Proboscis monkey
Karaoke
Making Sasirangan

FF Banjarmasin

My hosts were Poppy and Darwin Prenggono. Darwin is a physician (hematology and oncology) and Poppy helps run his clinic. She also is a wonderful karaoke performer!

We learned how Sasirangan is made. It is a very sophisticated tie-dye! So many beautiful patterns! We visited an island where we observed proboscis monkeys in the wild. One morning we visited a university where we sat on a stage and fielded questions from students in the English department. We visited a mosque and met with the Imam for a question and answer session. Our group was interviewed and filmed for a local TV news show. We visited an indigenous community lodge where we participated in a welcome ceremony with drums, music and dancing entertainment.

Our last stop in Indonesia was a visit to the island of Bali, predominantly Hindu. Such a contrast!! It was like being in two different countries!!

On April 13th Darwin emailed to ask how we were doing during this pandemic!

Global Exchange to FF Korolev, Russia

September 2015

By Cathy Dopp

On my birthday, Tuesday, September 15th 2015, I woke up as a 54 year old. But even crazier was the fact I was in Russia and having such an incredible adventure! Pinch yourself woman - is this for real? When I was young I dreamed of going to Germany or France - but never dared to dream of visiting Russia. All the movies and scary news reports made it seem like a dark country that only existed in black and white and nobody ever laughed. My short stint in the U.S. Naval Reserve only added to that stereotype. Yet here I am with some of the warmest people I've ever met having so much fun. If getting older means you get to break past years of media and stereotypes and meet real people like this, I'm in!

My hosts were Marianna and Artul. Marianna is cooking another massive and delicious breakfast. I am still full from the amazing dinner of blinis and chicken that Vera and her mother made for us the night before (Oh, was that caviar ever good - now I see why people get excited about it!) But I happily eat more again. I listened to the audiobook "Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking - a Memoir of Food and Longing" by Anya Von Bremzen before the trip and was so excited to taste so many of the foods the book described. Marianna made more of those amazing spiced porkchops and pasta. I'm not used to pork chops and pickles with breakfast, but it was so good!

Artul packs us up and we head to the Korolev Hotel to meet the group. I want to setup Artul for the Friendship Force Nascar Exchange in Carolina. After seeing how this man navigates the traffic in Moscow. I know he'd clean up the track in the U.S.!

While waiting we wander around the WWII Memorial across the street. Brian (another ambassador) notices all the engravings with the same last name - so many families must have been decimated. And someone tells us that many soldiers simply never returned. I can't fathom what it would be like if my son was "Missing in Action". We have monuments and memorials to veterans in our town in the US, but not as many and not so "real". It makes me realize how blessed we've been in the US to have so few wars on our own soil.



Finally we arrive in Pereslavl-Zalessky, one of Russia's "Golden Ring" cities. It's particularly fascinating for me because I listened to several audiobooks on Russian History before the trip and they spoke of Alexander Nevsky and Tartars and Mongols and the "Golden Horde". The entire trip kept reminding me on what a narrow view of history many of us were taught in school. And to think these buildings were around since the 13th century! In the US we think something that's over 100 years old is a treasured antique.

Then we're off to the Nikitsky monastery. As the ladies and I don our skirts and headscarves, Galina, from the Korolev club, explains the conversion, martyrdom and sainthood of Nikita. It still chills me to see open worship in amazing places like these after being thwarted and persecuted for 72 years under communism.

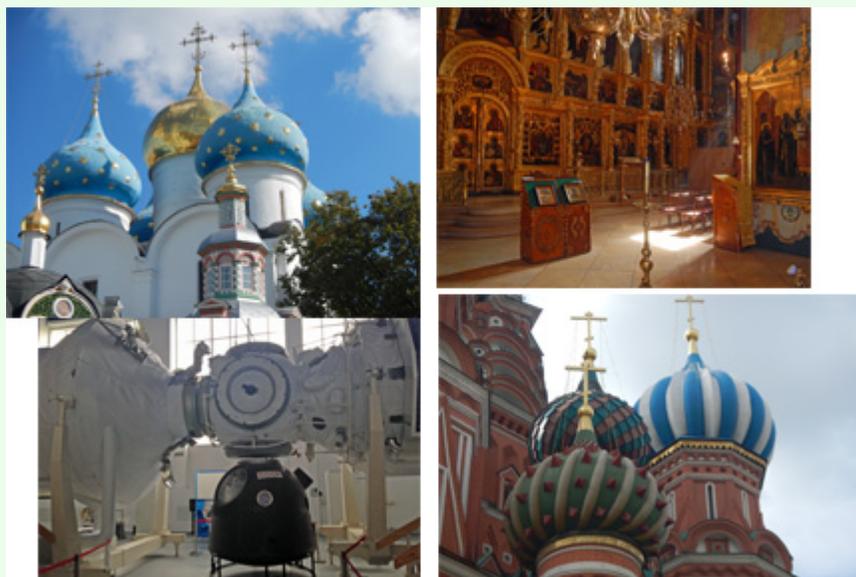
Next we go to the Tsar Berendei Palace. None of us knew what to expect - especially Brian! First we were greeted with the traditional bread and salt offered to travelers. Then we were instructed on how to properly act around a czar - which is serious stuff because if he doesn't like you it's trouble. Once we met with the czar's approval it was announced there was to be a wedding. It didn't take long to find a bride, but even in Russia the men balk at marriage. Many people were calling for Paul, a fellow ambassador, to be the groom, but somehow he managed to steer Brian into the position - he must have started planning that maneuver months ago. I got to be a flower girl and wear quite a colorful frock, and several of the guys looked rather dapper in the traditional caftans.

Here's where the vodka seems to have started blurring the details. I think some money changed hands, but I'm not sure if Brian was paying the ransom for the bride or if it was for good luck (maybe both). I also recall the "winding of the hair" which marked the bride as "no longer available". The first person to step towards the future would rule the house - Brian lost again. The next youngest lady would be the next bride. There was a sheet covering the couple for some time - I'm not sure if it was so they couldn't see us or we couldn't see them. I do

remember their hands were bound together at one point to symbolize they were one team. Another interesting part was when they had to hammer down a nail as a team to practice working together.

After this, much dancing ensued. We did some fun traditional Russian dances - and a pretty serious dance off as well. I'm not sure where the chicken dance came into Russian Wedding Dances, but some oddities transcend all cultures. As we frolicked, more and more food started to appear on the banquet tables. And vodka. And more vodka. And yet more vodka!

This is where I'm both glad and sad I didn't have my camera to record some of the toasts made for peace and posterity. As an Ambassador for the Friendship Force, I did feel compelled to do every shot offered and offer a few extras to play it safe. As Alex taught me "One bottle of vodka is too much, three is not enough". The vodka did help me overcome my stage fright. I even attempted some oddly phrased but apparently comprehensible Russian. So much fun... As the evening approached we jumped on the bus and headed to Lake Pleshcheyevo. As we watched the sunset over the lake someone explained that this is the very lake where Peter the Great built his first ship. Thus it's often called "The Birthplace of the Russian Navy". I suddenly remembered watching a scene from a "Peter the Great" Mini Series that opened with Peter building a ship on this lake. That Mini-Series was filmed in 1984. I never would have thought I'd get to see the actual site over 30 years later...



On the ride home I sat with with Alex and Diana. I learned that in order to prove your love to a Siberian Woman you must wander into the Siberian forest and kill a bear with only a stake. As a child Alex watched an array of the same television shows my children loved - including "Transformers" and "Pokemon" - while in Siberia Diana was watching Brazilian Soap Operas translated into

Russian. We talked about our country's mutual political BS, the NBA, Diana's love for Kobe Bryant, and compared military experience (apparently in Russia you do push-ups on your knuckles). Oleg filled me in on his music career and love for Creedance Clearwater Revival. And Natalia gave me a CD of her husband's music which I really love.

So, that was my first day at the tender age of 54. I know I haven't had that much fun on a birthday since I turned 21. And most notably, I will never have another birthday where I won't remember the amazing day our Russian hosts (Marianna, Paul, Artul, Anna, Natalia, Galina, Vera and so many more wonderful people) created for us.

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