

# Being sent to Siberia was a good thing

By Donna Lunsford

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The Natural Gas Jazz Band poses outside a window advertising their performance. Courtesy of Donna Lunsford ( Donna Lunsford )

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Trip of a Lifetime features stories from readers about their travel adventures.

The year 1989 was the winter of Glasnost, and it was the winter we went to Siberia, where nobody, it seemed, had ever met an American.

My husband, Carl, was part of an American jazz band, Marin's Natural Gas Jazz Band, and we spent three weeks in what was then the Soviet Union as part of a cultural exchange program. Our first stop was Leningrad, stunning with its colorful buildings designed by Italian architects.

After a short stay, we took an overnight train ride to Moscow, a full moon lighting the way across newly fallen snow. I was reminded of scenes from "Doctor Zhivago."



A group of Soviet youths crowd into a roadhouse. Courtesy of Donna Lunsford ( Donna Lunsford )

St. Basil's Cathedral was awe-inspiring, and the art in the subways was almost as wonderful as what we had seen in our limited tour of the State Hermitage Museum.

Our visit to Georgia was canceled "due to political unrest," so we went to Yaroslavl instead. We never really knew where we would be from day to day.

The band presented concerts in each city, joined by the Leningrad Dixieland Jazz Band. In the major cities, folks really enjoyed hearing traditional American jazz. One bearded old gent followed the band with his trumpet, longing to play. We learned that he had been imprisoned during the Stalin regime for 20 years -- for declaring that he liked Louis Armstrong, he said. I shall never forget his face.

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Then they sent us to Siberia. After a four-hour flight, we landed on a darkened airstrip at 1 a.m. There were no runway lights, just a lone man waving a flashlight in subzero temperatures to guide the ex-fighter pilot in with maneuvers I hope never to experience again.

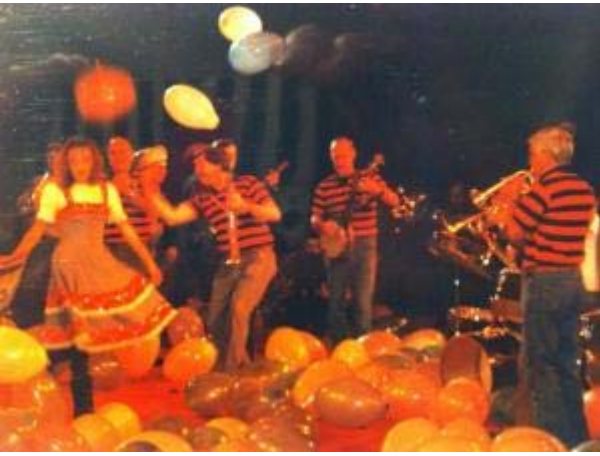
Miss Siberia presented everyone with carnations as we disembarked, and it all seemed surreal.

The food they served us was their best, but one can eat only so many canned peas and unidentifiable cuts of meat before it all gets to be too much. Once in Barnaul, near the foothills of the Altai Mountains, it was different.

One day we were driven by bus to a Siberian collective farm. We were greeted by lovely women in native garb, bearing warm loaves of bread with hollowed-out tops filled with salt, one of their most precious commodities. They served the bread with homemade berry jam; it was the best thing we had tasted in weeks.

When the band entered the hall to perform, we looked out the window at the people waiting and witnessed a sea of solemn faces and fur hats. Nobody was talking, nor did they appear happy. I really don't think they understood jazz, but once inside, they clapped in unison and no doubt will remember it always. I know I will. Dinner in Siberia took place in sort of a roadhouse. Children outside ran up to touch us, and our translator told us that they could not believe we were

Americans, because we looked like they did.



At the end of their trip, the musicians and their families were taken to an empty circus arena where they performed and danced in the center ring with circus performers. Courtesy of Donna Lunsford ( Donna Lunsford )

**They had been taught that we were the wolves and they were the lambs. Remnants of banners with three-headed snakes hissing anti-American slogans and statues of Vladimir Lenin were everywhere.**

Once inside, we were seated at long tables. The owner made an emotional speech about how they had waited 70 years to see an American, and now they were being allowed to sit and eat with us. The waitresses sang to us, and vodka flowed freely. I have no idea what we ate, but it was plentiful and tasty.

We experienced many other remarkable events while in Siberia. We saw men chop a hole in the ice on the Ob River and jump into the freezing water. Some of the group went to the bath houses and were "whipped" with birch branches afterward, which was supposed to be healing.

We also attended a serious celebration of the return of veterans from their war in Afghanistan. We were ushered into a vintage 1930s boiler factory filled with empty-faced men who did not seem to understand the music at all.

Once back in Moscow, we were taken to an empty circus arena after a midnight performance. We all danced in the center ring with the circus performers while a Soviet film crew captured it by swinging from the trapeze ropes.

Our affiliation with Marin's Natural Gas Jazz Band took us all over the world, but this trip was my most memorable journey -- truly a trip of a lifetime.

Do you have a trip of a lifetime to share? Send it to Joan

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