

The Russian Scientific Study Tour 2007

In June-July 2007, five Year 12 students from all around Australia were given a once in a lifetime opportunity to travel to Russia for a scientific study tour hosted by the All-Russian Youth Aerospace Society, following their participation in the National Youth Science Forum (NYSF) in January. The tour combined a week trekking near Kununurra in Northern Western Australia and two weeks exploring Russia.

The purpose of the tour was to represent Australia, experience a country and culture totally different to our own, and observe the science and technology behind the space program of a major world player. There was also a major emphasis on developing leadership, teamwork and time management skills. Being placed into an environment outside our comfort zones, we were all tested individually, resulting in us, ultimately, becoming a stronger group within Australia's aspiring future scientists and leaders.

We were all given the task of fundraising \$5,500 as a contribution to our travels, and we each had to juggle our already hectic Year 12 lives in order to do so. Despite very stressful and sometimes difficult moments for both us and our families, we all managed to reach this target. Our success would not have been possible were it not for the help and support of our fantastic families, schools, sponsors, individual mentors and the Rotary Clubs of Australia.



The Group in front of a Boab Tree at Kununurra.

The Russian Scientific Study Tour Report – Alexander Rogan

The 15th of June marked the start of an unbelievable three week adventure of surprise, excitement, rich history, a different dialect and even a bit of hard work!, for five young Australians from all over the country; Chloe Georgiou (from Vic), Hayden Coutts and Janine Villanueva (from WA) and Samuel Humbert and myself (from Qld). After meeting up with everyone (besides Chloe who had missed her connecting flights due to a three hour delay on her first flight!) at Darwin airport we all jumped into a tiny eight seater plane and took the two hour flight to Kununurra (in Northern WA) to start the first week of our trip (a 30km trek through the Doon Doon region). This trek for all of us was by no means easy, but it was one of the best feelings in the world each day achieving our goals, showing us that when the going got tough, the tough got going (and that the 'tough' actually included us!). For me though it was great to sit around at night and look at the stars you don't get to see in the city, and having our talks around our campfire each night to reflect on the day and see if we had achieved our personal and group goals of becoming better leaders. While also getting the chance to see the utterly amazing scenery around us, we also got time to reflect, not only on our trek, but on our lives which caused some rather deep realisations for some of us. It can also be seen that our group was rather 'lucky', as on the final two days of our trek it began to rain! Which apparently is a one in fifty year occurrence in the dry season, which was truly amazing (even if we did get a bit wet).



Conquering our Kununurra mountain.

After we got back to Doon Doon very much dirty, we got the chance to go to the local aboriginal school which was a definite highlight of the whole experience. Where we got the opportunity to read stories with the younger children (some of which had been written by themselves!), and then be taught a thing or two about bush tucker by the older class! It was amazing to see a group of children so enthusiastic about their learning and see a totally different side of Australia. We then said goodbye to Sandra Meek from the NYSF office who had accompanied us



Sascha, with his wife (Olga) and the grandmother (Nina).

to Kununurra at the Darwin airport and saw the group travelling to South Africa, briefly. We then, feeling slightly more alone, had over a days worth of travelling through Darwin, Perth, Dubai and then finally to Domodedovo airport in Russia.

When I first was told I was going to Russia, I thought I was going to freeze, but when we touched down to a temperature close to 30°C you could say I was wrong. Then lay the hour and a half journey in the 'Boris Bus' (an old VW van), as it was called, to get into the centre of Moscow where the apartment we were staying at was located. On our way there we were all amazed by the amount of traffic around (with Moscow having a population of 9 million),

the large advertising signs in the Cyrillic alphabet and our guide Sascha (who is an ex-engineer and now works in the education side of the All-Russian Youth Aerospace Society). One of the biggest problems for us

was the language barrier. On the plane we had been all practicing our hello's, thankyou's, nice to meet you's, etc., but no where near enough to have a proper conversation. Sascha could speak broken English and his daughter (along with most of the younger generation) could speak English rather well, but still it was rather hard to get our message across in the first few days. But as the days went by we all learnt to speak slower and use our body expression a lot more, as having been in an English speaking country all my life I usually assume I can get my message across, but Russia has changed this, and made me a better communicator I think.

On our days in Moscow we set to exploring as much of the massive city as we possibly could. Seeing the Red Square, St. Basil's Cathedral, The Kremlin, the whole Red Square, the main street and the Cathedral of Christ our Saviour on the first day. It was then on this day that it really struck us how much rich culture and history there was all around us, with statues of heroes everywhere (including Valentina Tereshkova and Yuri Gagarin, the first woman and man in space) and beautiful historic buildings, showing us something we could never experience in Australia (one day we actually saw a tree three times the age of white settlement in Australia!). Learning and seeing some of the troubled past of Russia also showed me how lucky we have it in Australia and to really appreciate what we do have.

One of the greatest things that we did in Russia was actually just getting to know the Russians, as even though they look similar to us, they have a completely different culture which we all found exciting and exhilarating to experience each day. I also found that Russians are completely different to what they are portrayed as. When I first thought about Russia I thought I would meet rather 'cold' people, but I could not be more wrong, finding a society of people who were warm, welcoming, always out for a laugh and in general friendly (especially in the younger generations). So as people Russians are rather similar to Australians beside our differences in culture, which was a very pleasant surprise. This has definitely taught me never to judge a book by its cover, which I believe is done all too often about Russia, as we all grew to love it so much, even if it wasn't even the tiniest bit like what we expected. It also showed me the importance of friends, as without them I think it would have been almost impossible to adjust and together we were able to get past the stereotype of Russia and see the true beauty.



Myself, Janine, Sascha, Chloe, Sam and Hayden in front of St Basil's.



Sam, Chloe, Hayden, Janine and
Myself in front of Mission Control!

We were privileged to attend a debate of some of Russia's and the Soviet Nation's top students about the voting system within Russia. Even though it was in another language, the sections of what Sascha translated for us definitely showed me that Russia is continuing with its rapid change, with a number of speeches about electronic and compulsory voting. We also got the chance to visit the Mission Control Centre and see the progress of two Russian cosmonauts and an American Astronaut across the sky in the international space station. The following day we got to visit the secret territory of Star City, which is where the cosmonauts train. We saw the biggest centrifuge in the world (with a radius of 18m and able to attain 30G's of force!) and two cosmonauts actually training. This along with also living with Sascha (who worked in this field) gave us all an insight into the science and technology behind Russia's space program which was incredibly interesting and definitely showed me how incredible it is we are actually able to even get into space.

St. Petersburg was the next stop for us all. This is definitely the most beautiful area I saw in Russia, appearing much older than Moscow, but in fact being less than half its age. We saw many of the beautiful sights of this city, including a Ballet of "Swan Lake" (which was unbelievable as I'd never before seen a ballet), The Hermitage, the opening of the bridge on a white light (where the sun never truly sets, leaving an eerie blue sky) and the Peterhof which for me was a truly unforgettable experience in such a beautiful area of Russia.

Whilst I was in Moscow, I was given the opportunity to meet with an old boy of my current school from 1984, Peter Burnie, an accountant for Deloitte, who is working and living in Moscow. Over a dinner of Serbian and Arctic cuisine (as I was told) I got to see another side of Moscow and the impressions of someone who had lived in Australia which was invaluable for me to actually hear his impressions of a country myself and the rest of the group had grown to love so much. But needless to say we all boarded the plane back to Perth in Australia after two magical weeks (and been able to say 'goodbye' to Moscow at 3am in the morning at Bowen Hill!) rather sad of leaving this unbelievable culture and that our journey was nearly at an end. We all parted our different ways after a 5 hour stay over at Perth (which was invaluable for us all as we were more than just friends now, we were a sort of mini family).

As with any trip of this calibre there are a large number of very generous people that need to be thanked for their unbelievable contribution and dedication to making this trip of a life time possible for myself and my companions. My sincerest thanks go to Mr Paul Merry (for his invaluable advice and help as my tutor), Mr Kerry Barker and his family (for his guidance and help with my Trivia night), Mr Peter Hauser (my headmaster) and all of the lovely companies and individuals who all sponsored or donated towards making this trip even possible for me. To Mrs Sandra Meek and Mr Geoff Burchfield from the National Youth Science Forum for making this trip possible for us all, and especially Sandra for having to put up with us at Kununurra. Then finally to Sam, Janine, Chloe and Hayden for firstly being four of the most awesome people I have ever met and experiencing this journey with me. To all of these people, without you I would not be who I am today and my gratitude of this is beyond measure, thank you.

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