

A learning journey – Russia and the 2018 World Cup

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Contact: ianfoster@peopleassured.com

A good friend, Laurie Pellegrino, gave me a book called “Learning Journeys [1]” – a collection of personal stories from thought leaders about learning experiences that had been profound, created an “aha” moment or just plain fun. A number involved travel.

In January 2018, inspired by these stories, I planned a trip to Russia with my recently turned teenage son, to visit some historic cities and experience the 2018 soccer (football) World Cup.

I share a few of our many memorable experiences...and I encourage you to take your own learning journey.

I didn't know much about visiting Russia other than needing a visa.

On Friday January 26th, 2018 I logged onto FIFA.com to learn more about the process for buying world cup tickets <https://www.fifa.com/worldcup/>. They were being sold online in phases by random selection draw (“lottery”) and then first-come-first served. I registered and decided to go-for-broke applying for tickets involving the soccer *giants*: Argentina, Germany and Brazil as well as Russia (the hosts).

Overall, around 2.5 million tickets were for sale – across 64 matches and 11 cities.

I needed to provisionally book accommodation in case I was successful. **That presented a problem.**

Upon visiting multiple hotel-booking websites I saw that Moscow was already 96% sold out with St Petersburg not much better. Many thousands of staff, volunteers, TV crews (let alone players and teams) and hundreds of thousands of fans were descending on each of these cities during June and July – all needing accommodation.

I spent 10 hours researching locations and eventually found a couple of available hotels that allowed free cancellation for the games I'd picked.

At this point I was in a waiting game. I wouldn't know for 6 weeks whether I had been successful in the ticket application.

On March 9th I received an email with the subject line: **“2018 FIFA World Cup Russia™ - Ticket Application Unsuccessful”**

Disappointed, I cancelled my hotel bookings. I later learned there had been almost 5 million ticket applications in the Phase II random draw.

My next opportunity would come on March 13th at 12pm Moscow time (5am US Eastern time). The remaining Phase II sale tickets were being sold online on a first-come-first-served basis.

I went to bed early on March 12th and set my alarm for 4:15am. I was at my desk eating oatmeal (“porridge”) around 4:30am and ready to login to the FIFA website. At 4:55am, I realized I'd forgotten my password! Hurrying, I requested a password reset. The site was running slower with

millions logging in so it took a few minutes. However, by the time I was able to login with a new password it was 5:03am....

The system informed me that my estimated wait time was **5 hours!**

I had a 10am business call. "Let's see how this pans out," I thought.

I waited and waited and waited. At around 9:45am, I was there at the front of the queue. I scanned the list of available group matches taking place in Moscow and St Petersburg – cities I'd always wanted to visit.

Morocco v Iran was available (St Petersburg) on June 15th and Poland v Senegal (Moscow) on June 19th.

Great, I'd buy them both but I needed to be quick as my business meeting started in a few minutes.

I entered my debit card details and hit "purchase."

I saw the message "**Transaction denied.**" I re-entered my details – "**Transaction denied.**"

My business call was about to start. I took the call.

After the call I switched back to the FIFA ticketing application. I had been logged out due to inactivity!

"That might be it," I thought. I logged in again. My estimated wait time was 1 hour. After 50 minutes I was back at the front of the queue.

My lucky day – Morocco v Iran was still available, Portugal v Senegal was not. I kept surfing – nothing in Moscow, nothing in Moscow. Then, suddenly – *Portugal v Morocco*, Moscow, June 20th, limited availability!

Typing quickly, I purchased 2 tickets for each game. We'd get to see Cristiano Ronaldo play. My son would be so excited when he found out.

Having purchased tickets, we could apply for "Fan IDs." These were the photo ID cards available only to ticket holders that would serve as a visa and give access in and out of Russia throughout the tournament.

There was now more accommodation available than in January. Many people must have pre-booked and not got tickets. I reserved my accommodation and flights and the SAPSAN high-speed train that would take us from St. Petersburg to Moscow.

Fast forward to June 11, 2018, departing from JFK.

Part of this cultural experience was flying on airlines I had not experienced before, LOT (Polish airlines) and Aeroflot. It's interesting how we get used to flying on familiar airlines. They were modern fleets with efficient service. We learned our first Polish phrase: "Proszę bardzo" – "You're welcome."

Our world cup journey had begun. New York (JFK) to St. Petersburg (Pulkovo) via Warsaw (Chopin). On the way to JFK we met three friendly 20-somethings from Guadalajara who had tickets for Mexico's group stage games. They wore large sombreros and Mexico team shirts and were in party mood.

We had a decent night's sleep on the plane. Warsaw airport was modern with orange colored walls that reminded me of Amsterdam. It was very organized and functional.

The second flight took 2 hours. We arrived in St Petersburg late afternoon. Passport control gave us our first Russian stamp!

We left the airport with a pre-paid taxi voucher. The driver drove really fast, music blaring. It was our first visual of the outskirts of St Petersburg: Lots of high-rise apartments.

We were staying in a small hotel on Nevsky Prospekt ("Main Street"). I'd had to pay 3-4 times the normal price due to demand and price hiking and I anticipated that the accommodation could be a shock. The entrance looked like a hotel from yesteryear and like it was under serious renovation! After entering, a smiling young face greeted us. We were ushered to an individual room on the ground floor – the room was very modest and a pale comparison of those advertised on the website. I looked at my son. He was subdued, compounded by tiredness from a 20-hour journey and an 8-hour time difference. After some polite negotiation we switched to a double room that was a little brighter. We paid just for that night and went out for a meal in search of vegetarian food. It was late. We found a Turkish style restaurant that served us, salad and soup –and fries. Perhaps we needed a little comfort food. Feeling tired we went back to our room to sleep.

I woke a couple of times – it wasn't dark so I thought I must have still been dozing off. Looking at the clock I saw it was the middle of the night — but it wasn't dark. We were experiencing the "white nights." St Petersburg shares similar latitude to Helsinki, Finland and parts of Alaska. In summer, when the sun is just below the horizon, it's light almost the whole 24 hours. The following morning there was a knock on the door and we were left a breakfast of oatmeal and blueberries, a savory pastry and tea. We felt much better.

After breakfast, we left our room for our first exploration around St Petersburg. I had a printed map and Google Maps open on my phone. We'd read that the #24 bus should take us into the town center. We were heading to the Hermitage Museum.

However, it wasn't straightforward. There was more than one #24 bus – an autobus and a tram and I also wasn't sure which way was *into* town. I don't speak any Russian. I asked a few passers by but none spoke English. "50:50 chance of getting this right," I thought.

We got on the #24 tram and pointed on my map to where we wanted to go. A lot of conversations in Russian, finger pointing and waving followed. A number of locals were trying to help. The bus conductor ushered us to get off, pointing in a particular direction – presumably to where we should catch the #24 bus. We decided to head back to our starting point and try again. I have this visual of the tram driver stopping this 100-foot long vehicle multiple times in the street and finger pointing until we headed in the right direction. She was really helpful.

This time we found the correct number 24. Plain sailing – we were off to the Hermitage Museum, the second-largest art museum in the world.

As we entered the Hermitage and were greeted by a soccer fan from Moroccan who took a photograph for us and gave us some cashew nuts as a gesture of goodwill, one of many that we would see repeated throughout our trip.

One of our favorite exhibitions at The Hermitage was the international coin exhibition that had historic coins. We marveled at seeing a coin from 10th Century England during the reign of King Ethelred and a tiny coin from Turkey that had a detailed engraving of an owl, only visible under a magnifying glass.

The next day we moved hotels. This hotel was brand new. We had gotten lucky! All the furniture was new and we were the first people to shower and sleep in this room. It was surreal. The TV was new, but wasn't working. 10 minutes later hotel staff arrived with another new TV and connected it – just in time to watch Russia play. We noticed that the hot and cold taps had been connected the wrong way round. We just laughed at that.

We slept great and headed for breakfast. Plenty of choice: Russian salad, cheesecake (for breakfast), tea, coffee, eggs, spinach pastry, potato pastry, fruit, oatmeal, cheeses, ...

Our Russian hotel receptionist introduced us to Google Translate. It's amazing that we can now speak our own language into a phone and have it automatically translated into another in both text and sound.

This is how we found out about breakfast, our room number and how to get to the metro.

We decided it would be helpful and fun to learn a few Russian words and came into contact for the first time with the Cyrillic language. It has lots of math symbols like "Lamda" and "Delta", three letter groups like "Zhe" and backwards-Latin letters (e.g. backwards R is pronounced "Ya.") This seemed a tricky language to learn. The Latin alphabet felt much simpler in comparison.

Navigating the metro (subway) was our next port of call. We had been provided with the English (Latin alphabet) version of the metro station names and stops - but the alphabet and all signs were in Cyrillic! A navigating trick we used was to translate 2 or 3 Russian letters of the destination station into English, and find that metro stop on the English map.

The metros cost around 50 Roubles (\$1) per trip and the stations were works of art in themselves. They were deep underground in many cases and full of majestic lighting, mosaics and marble sculptures.

We had learned a few words of introduction: "Good morning" ("Dobroye utro"), "Please" (Pozhaluysta), "Thank you" ("Spasibo"), "Hello" ("Zdravstvuyte"), "Goodbye" ("Proshchay") and "Where is?" ("Gde.")

After the Hermitage Museum we decided to visit the world cup "Fan Zone" in St Petersburg, near the church of the spilled blood.

The World Cup Soccer Fan Zones were a cultural experience in their own right. Fans from all over the world without game tickets would come to a central zone to celebrate and watch each game on giant TV screens. Each hosting city had a fan zone. They had hospitality, games, concessions, opportunities to play 2 v 2 and 3 v 3 soccer games of course lots of food and drink. Our favorite was Russian gingerbread cake.

The next day before our first live world cup game we took a final tour around St. Petersburg: The gilded Admiralty Building and the amazing St Isaac's Cathedral, commissioned by Tsar Alexander I —which has a rooftop walk from which you can see the whole city.

We headed to Zenit arena, (Krestovsky Stadium) one of the world's most expensive soccer stadiums. It has a retractable roof and a capacity of 67,000. Men, women and children from Morocco and Iran were everywhere. The crowds were noisy and friendly.

We showed our Fan IDs and tickets that read: "Morocco v The Islamic Republic of Iran" at the security checkpoint. We were inside – the excitement was building. In fact, it was electric! We looked at each other. We couldn't quite believe we were here – at the World Cup! 62,548 people were cheering enthusiastically. Almost everyone seemed to have a flag - a sea of red, green and white.

Our section of the stadium comprised mostly Moroccan fans and one Iranian family directly in front of us. The game ended 1-0 to Iran - a diving headed own goal in the 5th minute of injury time (overtime). The family in front of us jumped up and down like crazy - everyone else around us was silent.

The following day we took the high speed SAPSAN train from Moskovsky station (St. Petersburg) to Leningradsky station (Moscow) which I had booked a few months prior on the Official website of Russian railways, RZD, (<http://eng.rzd.ru>) with the help of an online language translator. The 700Km (420 mile) journey took just under 4 hours, with the train reaching a top speed of 250Km/h (150mph). The train left precisely on time. There was a Russian movie playing, a really old-wizard of Oz-like movie. We passed through a lot of small towns and villages. This part of Russia was very flat and expansive, with very few people.

On arrival in Moscow, we navigated the Moscow metro – the 2nd busiest in the world, after Tokyo, with about 6.6 million daily passengers. As in St. Petersburg, stations are beautifully decorated.

Our hotel was close to the Rizhskaya metro – and the Rizhsky Railway station. Using Google Maps we circled the Rizhsky railway station (twice) looking for our hotel. There wasn't any signage. Eventually we went inside the railway station, through security, and ask one of the guards if he knew where the hotel was. He pointed out of the station and left. We followed his directions (or so we thought) and returned to him a few minutes later, lost. He repeated his directions in Russian with slower arm movements - directing us inside the railway station further along the platform. Bemused, I followed instructions and then we saw a small kiosk inside the station with a small sign saying "hotel." "Ah, it was the old station hotel, inside he station!"

I provided my documents to the receptionist and was immediately handed the phone. At the other end of the line

Was a translator "Hello sir, welcome to Moscow." "There has been a problem with your booking." "We have a room for you that is cheaper than the one you booked." "Oh, I said" "Yes, it is sharing with a few other people as we are sold out."

I didn't accept the room and explained I was traveling with my son and it wouldn't be appropriate for us to share with other adults – though I didn't know if we would have any immediate alternative.

After 20 minutes of back and forth we were offered a different room. It overlooked the railway station platform so you felt like you were waiting for your train to arrive! A sofa disappeared from our room the afternoon of our stay. I queried it and was told "Yes, that's normal" – it went to another room. After that, I decided that, as Moscow hotels were 100% sold out, I would just focus on enjoying the city and the game ahead.

The following morning after breakfast at a café, we visited Gorky Park. It was a mix of leisure and activity. One of the most interesting places in the park was the Garage museum of contemporary art. It had a really cool exhibition allowing you to touch object and “feel” sound waves.

The next day we queued in the heat for tickets to visit the Kremlin. Once you enter the Kremlin walls there are Russian cathedrals from the 14th Century, including the Assumption, the Archangel, and the Annunciation. Other interesting sights included the Ivan the Great Bell Tower and the Grand Kremlin Palace where heads of state used to live. This “city within a city” preserves monuments of Russian architecture from the 14th – 20th centuries.

The Tsar Bell, completed in 1735 is the largest in the world weighing 201,924 kilograms (445,166 lb.). Made of bronze, it cracked during a fire after being completed and has never been rung! At a height of 6.14 meters (20.1 ft.) it dwarfed us.

In the early evening we headed out to the Moscow Fan Fest at University Metro station (Университет), next to Lomonosov Moscow State University (<https://www.msu.ru/en/>) to watch a couple of world cup games on the big screens, soak up the atmosphere and meet fans from many different countries. This fest held 25,000 people. Russia were playing Egypt that evening so we knew this game would attract many local fans.

My son spotted an inflatable gym in which kids were playing 2 v 2 soccer games – players were restrained by a large elastic waistband to stop them from running into the opposition half. 3 teenagers from Peru came across and invited him to play. He had a blast.

After some fries and a coke from a concession stand he pumped up his soccer ball and began juggling it on his own. A couple of Russian boys came over and asked to join in, then a couple from Poland, then from Senegal and from Egypt, and then Portugal. Within 5 minutes there were 30 or so people in a circle juggling and passing the ball to one another. We had communicated through the international language of soccer (football). This game of “keepy uppy” continued for about 30 minutes. We realized we had to catch our train home. “How are we going to get the ball back dad?” asked my son. Well, I wasn’t sure but as soon I mentioned to one of the guys we had to leave, they immediately passed the ball to us and continued talking with one another. It had been a really great cultural experience.

The next day, June 20, 2018 we headed out for our second and final game, Portugal v Morocco at the Luzhniki Stadium, the national stadium of Russia and one of the largest in Europe. The name *Luzhniki* derives from the flood meadows in the bend of Moskva River where the stadium was built, translating roughly as “The Meadows.”

The atmosphere was amazing – as was the gingerbread cake!

78,0011 people saw Cristiano Ronaldo (CR7) score a diving header in the 4th minute of the game which finished 1-0 to Portugal. The whole experience was surreal. It was almost six months since I’d had the idea to take us on a learning journey to visit Russia to meet the rest of the world at the 2018 World Cup. We had done it!

Bibliography:

[1] Learning journeys – top management experts share hard-earned lessons on becoming great mentors and leaders, Goldsmith, M., Kaye, B., Shelton, K., 2000., Davies-Black Publishing, Palo Alto, California.