

Letters

Curse of Russia Is Intourist

A visit to the U.S.S.R. with the opportunity of becoming acquainted with Soviet scientific colleagues should be a pleasant experience. Usually it is not. Nearly all visitors to Russia come under the control of Intourist, the ubiquitous Russian travel agency. The result is generally frustration, irritation, and rage, and all too often this feeling about Intourist becomes transformed into negative feelings about the country as a whole. I have met two people who said they had a satisfactory trip in Russia under Intourist auspices; well over a score of others I have talked to have bitter memories of their experiences.

I give an example of the sort of treatment one encounters. In connection with the Anatomical Congress held in Leningrad in August, 1970, Intourist, well over a year ahead, offered a number of post-Congress excursions. One, a 6-day trip to Samarkand and Bukhara, via Tashkent, sounded particularly attractive to some 48 of us who planned to attend the Congress because the two towns have many extremely interesting Islamic tombs and mosques of medieval days. Some of those who signed up for the trip were given a detailed schedule, with plane times and details set out in full. We were to leave Leningrad on a Sunday afternoon, take the plane to Moscow, and thence the night plane to Tashkent before going on to Samarkand and Bukhara.

Before we started, we were given two unpleasant surprises. Instead of leaving Leningrad in the afternoon, we were routed out of the hotel at 5 a.m. to take an early morning plane to Moscow. Arriving there at 10 a.m., we were set down in a hotel lobby and told to make ourselves comfortable until 10 p.m., when we would leave for the Tashkent plane. Immediately we raised objections. We had been up for 5 or 6 hours, hadn't even had a cup of coffee, and what about breakfast? The answer was

that it wasn't in the schedule. Again, we had had little sleep the night before, would have none the coming night, and how about rooms in the hotel for us to rest in (many of us were fairly advanced in years). Again, the answer was there was no provision for that. We were disturbed and sent a delegation down the street to argue with the headquarters' staff of Intourist. After considerable debate, they finally agreed to give us breakfast. Further, they eventually agreed to give us seven rooms for the 48 of us to rest in. By taking turns, we all got a bit of rest.

Why this snafu? I rather suspect it was lack of coordination between different parts of Intourist; the convention bureau quite surely had forgotten to get in touch with Aeroflot and had made no reservations. Consequently, they had to put us on the only flight with room for us to go to Moscow—which happened to be at the crack of dawn.

The second and more important announcement was that, although the excursion had been planned a year or more ahead, and although we had paid for it, we would *not* be taken to Bukhara. We were being deprived of 50 percent of the interest of our trip by not being able to see this second town. Why? No explanation at all. We protested about this in Moscow and got nowhere. We protested further in Tashkent when we arrived there. The apparent answer was given to us by the head of Intourist in Tashkent. He said that he had never been informed that our group was arriving until 2 days before, and consequently, hotels and planes were fully booked and we could not be accommodated—a further evidence of the chaotic organization of Intourist.

A final irritation came when, after having seen Samarkand, we were being shipped back to Moscow. In the morning a notice was posted that we should have our bags ready at 4 p.m. and be ready for buses at 4:30 p.m. to go to

the airport to take an evening plane to Moscow. Well and good, if we were not going to Bukhara. But at noon, when we returned from sight-seeing, we found a different story. The first group to get back was told by the local head of Intourist that we must all vacate our rooms by 12 noon. Why? Answer: orders from Moscow. This meant that we could sit around the hotel for 4 hours; and since there were only four chairs for the 48 of us to sit in, this would be a bit uncomfortable, to say the least. I arrived somewhat later. As the head of Intourist was absent, I saw the assistant manager. His answer was a different one, namely, to the effect that *of course* everybody knew that hotel rooms must be vacated by 12 noon; this is true, he said, all over the world. If so, they had not known this important fact at 9 a.m. and had only later discovered it.

The net result of the whole experience was that 48 anatomists left Russia cursing Intourist and all its works. Apparently the whole organization is exceedingly sloppily run and badly in need of reformation. For the sake of good international relations, it is to be hoped that such reform may take place.

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Less Paper Work—Better Medicine

With reference to Walsh's article "Medical education: Carnegie panel urges expansion, acceleration (13 Nov., p. 713), I wish to suggest a more effective and much more immediate way to increase the *available medical manpower*. Abbreviating medical education is not the answer. Medical students just cannot see enough disease to obtain an adequate fundamental education in the shorter period of time.

A simpler and more effective way, which will not lower medical standards, is to increase the percent of time that each physician can devote to patient care. This can be done easily by reducing the amount of time which each physician has to devote to (or waste on) paper work. Since these and other medically unnecessary endeavors consume 25 to 50 percent of most physicians' time, their elimination, or drastic reduction, can increase *available medical manpower* by as much as 50 to 100 percent, which might be equivalent to