

# Redbark in Russia

By Tom Pfaeffle

The small white taxi sped along the deserted streets of St. Petersburg in the pre-dawn hours of a cold, drizzly, October night. The dark driver squinted into the fog and the glare of the occasional oncoming headlights. On the narrow back seat, the still youthful North American Pipe Smoking Champion and his attractive companion gripped each other's hands as the taxi accelerated past the closed-up shops and finally crossed the Dvortsovy Most drawbridge over the inky Neva River. They gazed deeply into each other's eyes and melted into a deep sigh. Had they not made it in time, the drawbridge would have opened, causing them to miss their flight to the West and consigning them to another day in Russia.

However, one last surprise awaited: from around a blind corner, a cement truck suddenly lurched into the path of the little white taxi. It veered sharply to the left of the great, wheeled basilisk, then sharply to the right, skidding to a halt in the middle of the darkened street.

The dark driver bent over the steering wheel and panted for breath. He muttered a prayer of thanksgiving into his thick moustache and genuflected. The attractive companion sat blanched and frozen in her seat. The still youthful North American Pipe Smoking Champion was unfazed. Had he not learned to drive in Lower Manhattan? He continued gazing from the window as the taxi regained the street and continued to the airport.

Such was the passing of Redbark from Russia.

This adventure began, as so many madcap international adventures do, at the annual Pipe and Tobacciana Show in Chicago the previous May. I had been a regular exhibitor at the show for about ten years. It's always a great opportunity to see old friends from around the world and add to my ever increasing collection of Dunhill Redbarks. It's only the past two years that I've been entering their pipe smoking contests. This year, I entered the competition on a lark and won in a daze. I was presented with a Dunhill Einstein pipe, a trophy nearly as tall as I am, and the whimsical title, "North American Pipe Smoking Champion".

I was fantasizing about my picture with pipe and trophy on thousands of American breakfast tables, smiling out from so many boxes of Wheaties. The fortune I would make from all the product endorsements! Big cars! Yachts! Ralph Lauren suits! But then, Vernon Vig, president of the United Pipe Clubs of America interrupted my reverie by saying something about being qualified to compete in the International World Cup Pipe Smoking Championship in St. Petersburg in October. He was not referring to the bikini-strewn beaches of Florida, either. "Sure, I'm going to spend twenty plus hours shoe-horned into a plane seat, flying half a world away from San Francisco just to smoke a pipe," I thought, and promptly dismissed the possibility from my mind.

The months flew by. In August, Vernon called to ask if I had given any thought to going to the competition. I gently informed him that it was too far to go, for too short a time, and I had too many obligations at work. But I had also told my friends, co-workers, and fellow pipe collectors about the offer and the competition. They told me I was a fool not to go.

My friend Renee was especially enthusiastic, and importuned, goaded, and practically nagged me to go. She even offered to accompany me. She thought she could use the information about the competition, and pipe smoking in general, for the next edition of her book (see [www.darwinawards.com](http://www.darwinawards.com)). She also harbored designs on bringing home at least one, perhaps two

Siberian kittens to replace one that had run away. Finally, with just under four weeks before the competition, I relented. Renee and I would go to Petersburg.

The process of traveling to Russia is not a walk in the park. First, you need an official invitation from a host organization, in this case the Russian Pipe Club. Then you need an official confirmation of the hotel reservation, the airline reservation into the country, and most importantly, the airline reservation out. And these requirements need to be in place -before- you can apply for a visa. The Russian visa application itself is a long, exhaustive document that requires you to answer to questions about educational, work, and travel history, social and professional affiliations, and marital and criminal history. It does not go so far as to ask details about your personal anatomy, but it does request photocopies.

Now, Renee and I were both trained as scientists. We approached these hurdles, and all of the other preparations for the trip, as an intellectual exercise, demonstrating that the human mind in all its grandeur can overcome any obstacle, endure any hardship. We treated them as steps of an experiment that would naturally culminate in a predictable, foregone conclusion. The reality of the conclusion, however, didn't hit either of us until the wheels of the Lufthansa 767 gave the tarmac at SFO one final slap goodbye: "We're going WHERE?!?!".

Twenty-two hours later, we were slouched in the back of a taxi, inching our way through the wet, crowded streets of St. Petersburg. The sights were reminiscent of a Wild West boomtown. There was road construction everywhere and traffic was surprisingly heavy. Practically every block sheltered buildings that were in various stages of renovation, restoration, or repair. Neon signs blazoned over displays of the latest fashions and luxurious toys from Western Europe. Sidewalks filled with bustling pedestrians who probably could not afford the goods in the shops.

We passed the Winter Palace and crossed the Dvortsovy Most drawbridge to that quarter of Petersburg that lies on Vassilevsky Island. The road transformed into a broad avenue flanked by luxurious, modern apartment buildings. After an unimpeded drive to the eastern end of the island, we finally arrived at our hotel: the Hotel Pribaltiyskaya or "Park Inn" for short, on the banks of the Baltic Sea.

As we stood at the reception desk, I thought I recognized someone. It was Romeo Domenico, "Mimmo", the pipemaker and briar cutter from Italy! I was so overjoyed at seeing a familiar face that we fell into animated conversation, "When did you arrive?", "Who else is here from Italy?", "Have you seen Vernon or the Tarlers yet?". The excitement and adrenaline flow that characterizes a pipe show had begun! As we talked of people and pipes and briar, I had this vague sensation of the hair on the back of my head beginning to singe. I turned to see Renee, leaning against the reception desk and glaring at me from beneath swollen, heavily lidded eyes. "You handle the check-in; I'm going to sit over there," she growled, pointing to a row of chairs across the lobby.

Sleep was impossible that night due to the jet lag and the time change. We did not awake on Friday morning, but rather rolled out of bed at about 8 AM. We were so far north that the sun was only beginning to rise. It revealed a cold, overcast, rainy day. The weather was to stay like that throughout our entire visit.

After breakfast, we used the hotel shuttle to go into the city center. The shuttle was full of Australian tourists who gave us no end of suggestions on what to do or what to see. We started by walking through the Kazan Cathedral. Then, a short walk down the Nevsky Prospect took us to the Winter Palace (or "Hermitage"). The first sight of the Winter Palace, with the Palace Square and the Alexander column in the foreground is breathtaking. But it is an overly ornate, heavy-handed, almost oppressive opulence. It was if the architects sought to recall Louis XIV, but succeeded in invoking Wilhelm II.

We signed up for a three-hour tour that took us through many of the formal state rooms and perhaps one-third of the art collection. After a snack at the palace coffee shop, we struck out to explore the palace on our own. Renee and I had originally met through ballroom dancing, so we had these fantasies of waltzing in one of the palace ballrooms: "Dancing with the Tsars", as she put it. The guide explained earlier that the main ballroom was closed for an exhibition, but there was this smaller "music room" that we might try. After negotiating our way thorough a maze of corridors we eventually found it. It was, again, a very ornately decorated room with a beautiful, inlaid hardwood floor, but it looked like there was some kind of a tomb, or at least a catafalque up against the far wall. We were not to be deterred by some departed boyar, so we synched-up our iPods, donned our earbuds, and proceeded to waltz around the room to the long version of the "Congress of Vienna". Part way through the waltz, a small party of Japanese tourists entered and politely tried not to notice us. When we finished, one of the tourists was so deeply touched that he threw propriety to the wind and applauded.

### ***Painted Corridor to the Palace Theater***

It was getting late, so we left the Palace and rushed back down the Nevsky Prospect to catch the shuttle back to the hotel. Renee went up to the room as I remained in the hotel lounge to filter through some e-mails on my Blackberry. When I returned to the room, Renee was not there; neither was my bag full of high-grade Danish and American pipes. The cold sweat of panic broke out from every pore in my body. I won't admit whether the absence of the pipe bag or Renee troubled me more, but I will confess that in those few moments I did come to a peculiar realization about myself.

I left the room in search of Renee and found her in the hotel bar, my pipe bag open before her, and surrounded by a gaggle of Swedish pipe smokers. Although she has never been to a pipe show before in here life, she instinctively found the guaranteed way to become the center of attention: show up in the bar with a bag of high-grade pipes. There were a few familiar faces among the Swedes, including Bengt Carlson, and the brothers Vollmer and Nielsen. I joined the group and we spent the evening renewing old acquaintances, as Renee took videos of the scene on her MacBook.

We had dinner delivered to our room. Much to Renee's annoyance, the Beef Stroganoff was not served with the potatoes as advertised on the menu. But worse, much worse, instead of the bottle of French Merlot wine she ordered, room service delivered a bottle of generic South African red. During the course of our stay, we had to contend with a number of deficiencies with the hotel: an abrupt and uncooperative staff (their standard reply to even small requests was "im-POSS-ee-blai"), blown out light bulbs, an over-heated room, empty soap bottles that were not replenished, and laundered but unfolded clothes. But I think it was the South African wine that caused Renee's opinion of the hotel, Russia, and all things Russian to suffer a fatal and ultimately irredeemable reversal.

Set up for the Pipe Show began early on Saturday morning in one of the hotel meeting rooms. There were about forty tables—the same number that might be seen at a mid-sized American show. We ran into Craig and Patty Tarler of Cornell and Diehl as they set out hundreds of sample packets of their tobaccos. It's always a delight to see Craig and Patty, and I was happy to see that they successfully weathered the long flight from North Carolina. It was a real coup for them when their "Heritage" blend was selected as the contest tobacco instead of the traditional white cube-cut burley.

I was surprised to see so many people that I knew from the annual Chicago shows had tables: Mimmo, Luigi Viprati and Gabriel Dal Fiume from Italy, Tarek Manadily from Switzerland, Vollmer and Nielsen, Nana Iversson, and her father Lars from Scandinavia. Russian retailers and pipemakers took the other tables. The retailers had a marvelous selection of pipes by the major

European pipe manufacturers as well as the high-grade artisan pipemakers. They even offered a small supply of estate pipes. The works of the young Russian pipemakers demonstrated fine craftsmanship and an evolving sense of design.

Besides Craig Tarler and me, the only other Americans at the show were Rick Newcombe and Vernon Vig. Rick arrived late the previous night and divided his time between Vollmer and Nielsen's table and Nana and Lars Iversson's table. Vernon Vig was supposed to man the Chicagoland Pipe Club's table but was detained in a daylong CIPC (Comite International des Pipe Clubs) meeting.

The show room filled quickly when it opened to the public at 10 AM. Unlike so many American pipe shows where the crowd thins after a few hours, the room was crowded for the entire day. Since Vernon was engaged with the CIPC, I spent a few hours working the Chicago table. I distributed scores of Chicago Pipe Show flyers to attendees who spoke no English but indicated through exclamations and hand gestures that they had heard of the it. There is a lot of enthusiasm for pipes and pipe smoking in Petersburg.

After a few hours at the show I was ready for a nap, so I picked up something that resembled cheesecake with strawberry Jell-O topping at the hotel bar and headed back to the room. I have no idea what it really was, but was not cheesecake. Renee had spent the better part of the day in bed, still feeling the effects of jet lag and the 11-hour time change.

The Gala Welcoming Dinner for the competitors that evening was beyond anything I could have imagined. (Frank Burla, take note.) Over three hundred guests in the ornate Hotel ballroom sat down to a banquet of salmon mousse and asparagus paste for starters, crown rack of lamb for the main course, and crème brulee with coffee ice cream for desert. Each table had several bottles of wine, brandy and vodka. If the dinner was not enough, there was entertainment: three or four separate segments of Russian folk dancing, a segment of balalaika players who sadly could not be heard over the din of the diners, and a three-piece band played music for dancing after dinner.

Renee and I sat with Vernon Vig and his wife Susan. Vernon seems to know everyone—a steady stream of people came by the table to say hello. Before dinner was served, Barney Suzuki stopped by to present Vernon with a ceremonial sake cup in appreciation for his work in bringing the US into the competitive pipe smoking world. To my surprise, I was also presented with a sake cup in honor of being the North American Pipe Smoking Champion.

After dinner, tables full people who had eaten and drunk well spontaneously erupted into song. When they were done, another song in another language would break forth from another table. Over this cacophony, the three-piece band was playing American-style dance music. Renee and I don't know the bossa nova or the fox trot, so I went up to the bandleader and asked if they could play a slow waltz. He responded with a curt, "No!". Renee and I are not so easily discouraged, so we once again donned our iPods yet again and waltzed and schottischted around the other dancers. The party broke up at about 11 P.M. and we left anticipating the excitement of the following day.

### ***One of the Singing Tables***

I walked down to the Baltic Sea before breakfast. Like all of the other days, it was cold, gray, wet, and dreary. Come to think of it, it's not so different from San Francisco in January. No one was out except for an old pensioner dressed in thick woolens doing calisthenics. A pack of stray dogs roamed along the waterfront, playing chicken with the few cars that passed along the road.

### ***The Gray Baltic Coast***

A little later that morning, I was in the hotel lobby when a large group of very attractive young women suddenly appeared and sat down around me. These were the people who were going to be monitoring the pipe smoking contest. Evidently, they were hired just for that occasion, because they were joined by one of the contest organizers who I had met earlier at the show. He read the 25 or so rules governing the contest, then pulled out his pipe and proceeded to give them a demonstration of what is allowed, and not allowed behavior. At a smoking competition, it is up to the table monitor to ensure that competitors aren't hiding extra matches up their sleeves, sneaking extra tobacco into their pipes, or dousing their opponents with lighter fluid. Other serious infractions include removing the pipe from your mouth to tamp it, fanning or blowing into the embers, and drooling saliva or other liquid into the stem. I'd like to know, or rather -not- know, how they would check for that.

Well, most of the ladies listened to him with puzzled expressions, as if he was speaking Greek instead of Russian. It was obvious that they were wondering when they were going to get their rubles so they could go back home to cook dinner. One lady, however, seemed very interested and asked very detailed questions. I silently hoped that she would not be monitoring my table.

I went back up to the show—although it was about two hours before the competition, the various pipe clubs and teams were gathering. The uniforms many of the competitors wore were fascinating and impressive. These were people who took their pipe contests seriously. One of the German teams wore powder blue shirts with their club name imprinted on it. One of the Danish teams wore black hats and suits; red velvet bibs with a silver medallion hung around their shoulders. Our little American group, Vernon, Craig, Rick, and I looked underdressed as well as outmatched. Nonetheless, the four of us, accompanied by Patty, repaired to the hotel restaurant where we planned our strategy over a late lunch.

The competition was held in the same ballroom that hosted our Gala Dinner the previous night. There were some 296 competitors and over 100 spectators. Television cameras and news reporters dotted the floor. Renee joined us to take pictures and videos of the event. We quickly took our places at our assigned table and waited for the contest to begin. I had the good luck to be sitting across from Craig. We were having so much fun joking and laughing ourselves silly that Vernon leaned over a few times to scold us. "Be serious!", "Concentrate!", and "Get in the zone!" he kept telling us. Good grief! I just flew half way around the world to smoke a pipe in a crowded hotel room with three hundred other people and chase after Siberian kittens, and now some guy expects me to be serious?

Finally the pipes, the tobacco, and the requisite two matches were distributed. The proctor at the front of the room gave the signal and three hundred pipes were lit at once. Thick clouds of smoke drifted up from the multitudes to the ceiling. After the second match, we settled back to the task at hand—keeping the tobacco burning as long as possible. This was done in silence and the utmost concentration except for when some poor soul's pipe went out. As each vanquished competitor rose and left the room, his efforts were congratulated with the deafening clatter of three hundred wooden tampers rapping the tabletops.

Despite our collective anxiety, our little American group had a promising start. We lasted through the ten-, the twenty-, then the thirty-minute marks. We nervously observed that we all seemed to be smoking too fast. As we approached the thirty-five minute mark, the look of concern, then panic, began to appear on our faces. One by one, our pipes began to go out. First Craig, then Vernon, then Rick. Just like Chicago the previous May, I was the last American left. My lonely solitude did not last long, however. Soon I began to detect the unmistakable sensation that no smoke was entering my mouth. I sucked harder and harder—nothing! No smoke rose from the bowl. All that was left was to enter my time on the contest entry form, sign it, and hand it to the table monitor. Before I left the room, I emptied my pipe into the ashtray. No dottle, just a fine gray ash was left. I had indeed burned through my entire supply of tobacco in just over

forty-one minutes. Later in the afternoon, I learned that I had finished 185th out of 296, the American team finished 62 out of 67 and the winner of the contest finally went out at just under three hours.

During our stay in Russia, I learned that a lot of the old bureaucracy and red tape has survived from the old regime. Consider this Kafka-esque example: after burning out of the competition, I went down to the concierge desk to arrange a city tour for the following morning. Since I was going to pay by credit card and not charge it to the room, the concierge told me to pay for it at the reception desk. I walked ten feet up the desk to reception. When I appeared before the reception lady, she wanted to know what I was doing there. I explained that I wanted to pay for a city tour I had just arranged through the concierge. "I need the receipt," she said. I asked whether she could just punch it up in the computer or if she could just get it from the concierge as I pointed to the lady standing not ten feet away from her. "No, no, no," she said, ignoring my finger, "I need you to bring me the receipt". So, I walk ten feet down the desk back to the concierge and ask for a receipt. She prints one off the computer, stamps it a couple of times and gives it to me. I walk ten feet back up the desk to reception and hand the receipt and my credit card to the reception lady. She runs the card, stamps the receipt a few times and hands it back to me.

### ***The Old KGB Building***

That evening I went out to dinner in St. Petersburg with Geert, the president of the CIPC, his wife Frieda, two Danish couples, and a Swiss guy. Renee was going to accompany us but was on the losing end of a confrontation with a glass door and put a nasty gash in her head. She decided to stay at the hotel.

We had the unforgettable experience of taking a public bus (actually it was a crowded van the size of a Ford Econoline) through town that let us off on the Petersburg side of the Dvortsovy Most drawbridge, a couple of blocks from the restaurant. We then had to run across four lanes of traffic to the other side of the road. The reward, however, was that we were able to walk around the outside of the Winter Palace lit up for night, through the Palace Square, then past the old military offices to the restaurant nearby.

I spent most of the dinner talking with Geert. Over the wild mushroom salads and Pohazsy cutlets we came to the conclusion that we were really twins separated at birth: both of our fathers were butchers, we both love the choral music of Bach, and we both collect fountain pens. I tried to order an apple strudel to bring back to Renee, but the waitress heckled me with the standard reply of "im-POSS-ee-blai!". Maybe the concept of "take-out" hasn't reached Petersburg yet.

Back at the hotel, I spent some more time talking with my new European friends. The attitudes in Europe toward smoking, especially pipe smoking, are far different from the bigotry that surrounds us in California. For example, the guy from Switzerland told me that his local pipe club has a booth at the annual town fair where they actively solicit monetary contributions and new members.

The next morning, our last full day in Russia, Renee and I met our guide and driver for a four-hour city tour. It began with a drive along the spit on Vassilevsky Island. We had a wonderful view of the Winter Palace and the Fortress of Peter and Paul from across the Neva. We stopped for pictures of the unique red lighthouses adorned with sculptures of Poseidon and other mythical sea gods. We also stopped outside the battleship Aurora--the first Imperial Navy ship to go over the Revolution, Tsar Paul's Palace, the Field of Mars, the Church of Our Savior on Spilled Blood, and finally we had a tour of St. Isaacs Cathedral.

Due to the nightly raising of the drawbridges, we were told at the reception desk that we had to meet our taxi to the airport at 1 AM in order to make our 6 AM flight. However, after a couple of calls back to reception, they relented and said we didn't have to meet it until 3:30. Another example of getting what you want, depending on who you talk to and how persistent you are.

This is where my story began.

I could go on to describe meeting up with the Tarlers and the Newcombes at the airport, finally getting my Russian cheesecake, and our mad rush into town on the metro during our seven-hour layover in Frankfurt. I'm happy we didn't have to tote around a couple of Siberian kittens. On the flight from Frankfurt to San Francisco, Renee was so overjoyed to be out of Russia she was bouncing off the fuselage. At one point, she couldn't open her bag of airline snacks, so she turned to me and said "Tom, take out your BIG KNIFE!", "TAKE OUT YOUR BIG KNIFE!!!" But I won't describe that either. I will simply close with saying that the World Cup Competition and the St. Petersburg adventure was an unforgettable experience.

I'd like to extend my sincere thanks to Vernon Vig and Alexey Shekhovtsov, president of the St. Petersburg Pipe Club. Without their help and patience, we would not have been able to complete our travel arrangements on such short notice. Thanks also to Alexey for all of his hard work in organizing a marvelous show and taking such good care of us all.