

If It Weren't For Bad Luck, I'd Have No Luck At All

I planned our Russian brown bear hunt for 2 years. What I didn't know was by the time we finally got there, the communist régime would be fallen. The policing authority in Russia has been the KGB for over 100 years. That is a government run organization. Since the government has collapsed, there is no policing power. Crime went unchecked for over a year. This could play an exciting part of our hunt.

After many faxes and phone calls to Russia, all the plans were made and our invitations were received. Now all I needed was our visas. All Government departments were almost non-existent. The Russian Consulate never answered any of my calls on any of the five numbers I had. I over-nighted our forms requesting visas along with a copy of our invitations. I also included a fee and a self addressed pre-paid overnight envelope. I continued to phone the Russian Consultant everyday with no luck when much to my relief, I received our visas in the mail.

I began to tune the two bows I planned to take and in the process I cracked open a knuckle to the bone and needed about five stitches. Being the stubborn person that I am, I cleaned the wound and closed the gash with a tightly pulled bandage. After a week of doctoring, I gave in and went to a real doctor.

My hand was swollen to twice its normal size and ached terribly. The doctor said that in addition to the gash, I had cracked the same knuckle as I had cracked as a teenager and the gash was dangerously infected. After trying to talk me out of going to the remote outbacks of Russia, he decided to prescribe some very potent antibiotics and began to explain how important it was to soak the knuckle in hot salt water three times a day. He succeeded in convincing me how dangerous it was and impressed me with the importance of keeping it cleaned, soaked, and covered with Neosporin.

Unfortunately, my hands were so swollen and sore that I could no longer grip my release and pull back my bow, let alone, shoot it accurately. I bought a different release and rigged one of my bows a different way that required less of a fist grip than my normal way of shooting. This new way still hurt but it was tolerable enough to pull

back my bow and shoot it accurately. After all, if you are going to throw an arrow at a brown bear, it better be accurately thrown.

After tuning two different bows I began to run out of time so I decided to set my pins after I got to Russia. I packed my bags and was off to Atlanta, where I caught my flight. I was reminded once I got to the airport, that the Olympics were still in town as it took an hour to get to the terminal after I got to the airport. A police officer directed me over to curbside baggage care.

I noticed in retrospect, that a line of five tow trucks were parked on the other side in a parallel line to the line of taxis. As I was asked the normal questions, did you pack your own bags, did anyone ask you to carry their bags, can I see your passport, etc., my car was being towed with three of my bags still in it. One of which had all my money in it.

The police told me to go to the police office of the airport for instructions on how to get my vehicle back. There they gave me a copy of instructions on how to get to the Towing Company so I could get all my registrations out of the glove box of my car so I could go back to the airport police station to pay my fine. I took a cab uptown to my car, broke into the towing company compound to get my bags and money. I then took a cab back to the airport just in time to make my flight. There wasn't time to pay the ticket, nor to move the car to a proper parking spot, so I left it in the compound.

Back to the airport I went to finish checking in. Buzz Howell, one of my hunting partners, met me at the gate. Noel Feather, the other partner, was meeting us in Anchorage AK. The flight through Seattle to Anchorage was uneventful except for a bomb threat at the Seattle airport which threw all flights about 1 hour off schedule.

We had an overnight layover in Anchorage so we got about 5 hours of sleep. I realized I hadn't packed my quiver, so we went to Brown Bear Archery on our way to the airport in Anchorage to buy one. The quiver mounts on both my bows were for a quiver which the archery shop did not have. I went ahead and bought a PSE quiver and I had to figure a way of mounting it to my bow.

The limo driver was very nice, but he let us off at the International Terminal in Anchorage since after all, we were flying to Russia. After he left and we made several trips from the curbside to the terminal with all our bags, we found that since we were flying on Alaskan Air, we should have gone to the domestic terminal, go figure.

We caught another shuttle bus and finally got to the right terminal only to find a very long line at Alaskan air. Buzz talked to all the people ahead of us and got their permission to get ahead of them.

We checked our bags, and were charge for excess, and found that the flight had been delayed for at least an hour. This helped out since we were running about 45 minutes behind schedule. Finally, my luck had changed for the better, so I thought. The one hour delay turned into two and before we knew it our connecting flight in Khabarovsk , Russia to Okhost was in jeopardy.

I was wearing a light yellow pair of pants and green deer shirt. I call it that because it has a deer embroider over the left pocket. Less than one hour into this 8 hour flight, a man hit my arm while I was drinking a cup of coffee. The coffee went all over the left side of my light yellow pants. The stewardess got me some club soda and a cloth napkin and for over an hour I worked on my pants, heck it gave me something to do to pass time.

This flight had one stop in Magadan before we reach Khabaeovsk. We decided to deplane for this brief layover so Buzz and Noel could get a quick sneak-peak of what we were in for while we were in Russia. We rode in a very cold noisy truck from the plane to the airport building and back. The airport was just as all the other Russian airports I had been to; old looking buildings, planes and helicopters everywhere. We were all thankful for the Alaskan Airplane we were riding, even if it was small.



Small Airport in Russia

One hour after take off, the stewardess brought me some more club soda to get the coffee stain left by another spill on the left leg of my pants. It became a big joke on the plane how everything served to me ended up on my lap. I wasn't about to tell anyone how I had earlier spilled the hot, salt water on my lap that I was soaking my knuckle in.

As predicted our plane was 2 ½ hours late landing in Khabarovsk. After the traditional hassle through baggage search, we missed the last two planes to Okhost. We had to spend the night and catch the next plane out which left at 12 noon the next day.

The next day we finally made it through the domestic Russian baggage security, but then realized Buzz had forgotten to get his passport and visa back from the hotel front desk where they had taken it to register him. When you stay in a hotel in Russia, for some reason they keep your passport and visa. Buzz couldn't board the plane without it.

Dmitri, our interpreter, phoned the hotel and for \$20, they sent a man to bring Buzz his documents. Because we were so late, we had to load our bags ourselves on the plane. To do so we had to load our

bags on a shuttle and take it from the terminal to the plane and then unload them onto the plane. Finally we were aboard.



Shuttle from terminal to airplane in Russia

Once in Okhost we caught a plane to Nicolias. We finally arrived in Nicolias but not a moment too soon. After several trips from the plane to the truck we were off to the boat.

To get to the middle of nowhere in Siberia Russia, we took the Alaskan Air commercial jet over to Russia. Then we took two puddle jumpers to a small Island where we boarded a huge hovercraft water Taxi. It had hundreds of people aboard. It took us to an even smaller Island where a tug boat with four jet boats roped to it awaited us.

It had taken us two and a half days to get to the tug boat. Just to make sure we didn't get stranded, there were several 55 gallon drums filled with diesel fuel on board.

At the half way point of this part of our journey, in the middle of the night (3 A.M.) , while still on the boat, I found out why the crew took shifts staying awake. We had several 55 gallon drums of diesel fuel on board so we could get back to civilization. In Russia, heck anywhere in the world, but especially in Russia, this was worth a lot of money.

While we were asleep under the bow of the boat in rope hammocks, in the pitch dark of the night, some Russian pirates tried to board our boat by quietly paddling to it as we were anchored for the night. The night crewman was up in the crows nest on guard with his AR 15. The captain was asleep in the cabin of the boat where the steering wheel was. I am sure there is a name for that compartment, but not being a sailor, I haven't a clue what it is?

Anyway, the crewman had dozed off and had no clue that the pirates had boarded the ship. They went into the captain's cabin and held a gun to his head and made him walk outside. We were all asleep in the bow of the boat when suddenly we were abruptly awakened by the sounds of rapid rifle fire. Dmitri ran up top to see what was going on. He told us to stay put in the bow. After what seemed like an eternity, he came back down to say all was safe. When we all came top side, there was no sign of the pirates. All that was left was some blood on the deck which the crewman had missed when he was washing it up before we were allowed to surface.

It took two days by tug boat and when the water got too shallow, another half day by jet boats, to get to the pristine camp that wasn't set until we got there to set it. The guides did most of the work putting up camp while we put our bows together and fine-tuned our sights.

By the time we had finished our bows and opened all our bags to organize our gear, the guides had a late lunch prepared for us. When we first got there they had set out a gill net in the murky water. Our lunch consisted of boiled fish and whole potatoes in the form of a soup. After lunch we prepared our gear and loaded up for the first hunt.

My guide, Nickoli, and I drove by boat for about 45 minutes to where the lake got very shallow. Nickoli got out of the boat and pulled it, with me in it, for over 1,000 yards until we came to the mouth of a small stream about 6" deep and it was full of salmon. There were several sets of moose tracks going to and from the lake coming from the forest. More impressive than that were the six sets of bear tracks, two of which looked to be monsters, probably made by the same bear. We sat down on the ground, behind some grass, 15 yards from the mouth of the stream.

It was 6:00 P.M. when we were set up, and by 10:00 P.M. it was too dark to see. We had seen the backs of several salmon as they tried to swim further upstream, but no game. I had gotten some

dirt in my right eye at 5:30 P.M. and by now I had a tremendous headache. When we got back to camp, I ate supper; fish soup, noodles and hash and went straight to bed.

My bed consisted of a homemade sleeping bag on top of a bed of crushed rocks. The sleeping bag was made from a tanned caribou hide. The tent was homemade from scrap bed spreads. I sure hope it doesn't rain! The mosquitoes in Russia must wear goose down jump suits because it got close to freezing that night and they still bombarded the three of us all night long.



Home made tent

The next morning we had hash and rice for breakfast but the coffee was good, and I don't like coffee.

On the second evening's hunt, my guide built an elevated stand by pulling the tops of several trees together and tying them off with a rope. It formed a nest like effect about 10 feet off the ground. At 7:15 pm my guide decided I need more cover. He got down and sawed some trees and brush and began putting it around me. At 7:30pm, while he was still working on hiding me, I heard a bear grunt. I looked behind me to see a 150 pound cub running in the opposite direction about 30 yards away. The cub had spotted Nickoli and spooked off. Needless to say we didn't see anything else that evening.

When we got back to camp, Noel had an interesting story. They were stalking the woods when a sow and cub came out within 60 yards of them. The sow saw them and stood on her hind legs to get a better look. Noel's guide began shooting his rifle, which just about caused Noel to jump out of his skin. After 3 or more shots, the sow was dead and Noel was dumbfounded. Noel had no clue what just happened? Back at camp he told the interpreter, Dimitri, who scolded the guide. Buzz hadn't seen any bears but he did see a roe deer.

Several days went by without seeing anymore game at all. We had been eating fish soup, potatoes, rice, or noodles at every meal. We also had hot tea and coffee or Vodka at every meal. I don't drink Vodka. On the 6th day of the hunt, Buzz killed a goose with his bow so that night we had goose soup.

The next day, I accidentally dry fired my bow, which sent my peep sight into never-never land. I made a replacement one from the cap of my ink pen. It looked great but didn't work well at all. I had trouble getting it to stay tied in the string.

I think our camp cook was the Russian version of Bubba in the Forest Gump movie except his thing was fish soup instead of shrimp. We've had fish soup three times a day everyday since we reached camp except for the goose night.



Pot of Fish Soup

The next day, we were stalking up a creek most of the day. The creek was 10 yards wide and at times as high as the top of our hip waders. The creek wound around and around in both directions. Salmon were everywhere. The funnel gave the effect of a topless tunnel. It was very eerie, especially when rounding a bend.

When it got too dark to see, we decided to head back. While we were wading back, my guide startled a large salmon that jumped out of the water and caught me in the crouch. It knocked me on my back and under the water. The fish frightened me so bad that after I got out of my wet clothes, my pants had an extra pleat in it right in the butt area. Unfortunately, during the entire creek stalk we didn't see any game.

We had been talking about hunting the morning hunt and how to get to where I wanted to hunt before day light without disturbing the bears. My guide said he had a plan. He decided to hike to the location now, right after super; spend the night at the stand and be in position at first light. As fate would have it, it rained most of the night. We didn't see anything during the night nor the morning hunt, so we decided to scout and stalk the rest of the day.

I had brought my climbing tree stand to Russia with me and I hunted out of it on my previous hunt. The next day I decided to move my tree stand about 1,000 yards from its original spot, to a spot I found while stalking the creek. It had a better vantage point and it had some trails close by with half eaten salmon in them every 100 yards or so.

On that evenings hunt, I saw a 150 pound cub. According to my range finder, he was 123 yards away and back into the woods. I saw him about 40 minutes before pitch dark.

I was hunting this area alone, although my guide was waiting for me back at the boat. I had to wade the creek back to the lake some two or three miles or so. It was a very exhilarating feeling to say the least. Wading a thigh deep creek, in the dark, with spawning salmon constantly jumping and swimming into your body; all the while, you know there are bears in the creek too looking to kill and eat these salmon! Maybe exhilarating isn't the right word!

Picture in your mind, a winding stream with 8 to 10 feet deep banks with another six feet of grass and shrubs all along the banks, visible only by the light of a mini-mag flashlight gripped between my teeth. You're alone and in brown bear country! Talk about exhilarating! The adrenaline will flow and every nerve in your body comes alive.

You're aware of every sound, every splash, and every movement. You must keep your wit and not panic. It will definitely seem as though it is taking much longer to wade back than it did to wade in there during daylight hours. In fact when it seems you've walked twice too far; you begin to wonder if you started up stream instead of down stream. If you don't stop and think and check the direction of the water flow, you might turn around and start back tracking.

Panic will try to overwhelm you. Just before it does, you see an opening just ahead. You're breathing very heavily by now and you begin wading much faster as hope begins to rise from the pit of your stomach. Another 100 yards and your there, alive, with keen awareness. Another 1,000 yards along the shore of the lake and you're to the boat telling your guide of the cub bear you saw but, don't mention the feelings you had while walking back because you don't want to look like a whimp! It wouldn't matter anyway, because I don't speak Russian. He hasn't understood a word I have said.

Back in camp spirits were getting low. No one was seeing any game. There was talk of moving camp to another spot about three hours away, or just calling it quits and going home. That night the guides shot a cow moose. Hopefully now, no more fish soup! Buzz, Noel, and I explained how we wanted the next meal to be battered and fried moose tenderloin. The cook's feelings were hurt! But I will not soon forget that meal!

By the end of the seventh day of the hunt, Buzz had seen three roe deer, Noel had seen the sow and cub and I had seen the same cub twice. The guides had killed a cow moose for camp meat and Noel's sow and that was the extent of the game seen while on our hunt. We decided to pick up camp and move to another place. It took all day but we lived through it.

Two hours before dark on the eighth day, the new camp was ready. After another meal of welcome moose meat, we took off for the hunt. I didn't know and did not prepare for an all nighter but that's what she was. We got back to camp right at daylight and met Noel and his guide as we arrived. Buzz was already asleep in the tent. No one had seen anything.

We were all frustrated and decided to call it quits. On the 9th day of the hunt, the 14th day after we had left Alabama, we were ready to go home! I was feeling better now. I had had my first semi solid stool and by 1:00 pm we had finally convinced Dmitri, our interpreter, to tell the guides we were ready to leave. We debated for hours with him while he tried to change our minds. Our minds were made up and finally he was convinced.

We had already packed 99% of our gear, so by 1:45 P.M. we were completely packed and ready to go. Two guides stayed behind to finish breaking up camp. We left 1 jet boat for them. We loaded the other three jet boats and we were off. We decided to ride these boats to the closest village, Tearz, and catch a hydro boat to Nickolias.

On the way to Tearz, one of the small boats quit working. After we spent about 45 minutes trying to fix it, we loaded all the gear out of the broken boat into the remaining two boats and continued to Tearz leaving a guide with the broken boat. That left two guides to help us load our gear, Nickoli and Valari.

We caught the hydroplane to Tearz. While waiting for the boat, we ran into a group of students who were also waiting for the boat. These students were fascinated to meet Americans and to hear them talk. They crowded around Buzz, Noel and I for over an hour, listening to us talk and practicing their English.

On our boat, I befriended a 13 year old boy named Vladimir and his 13 year old girlfriend named Nina. I taught them to say, "What is

your name?” and “What time is it now?” They had a blast and so did I. The 2 ½ hour boat ride flew by. When we got to Nickolias, we went to the only hotel in town. It was not fit to sleep in.



Terrible Russian Hotel

We decided to stay at Valari’s apartment for the night. His wife cooked our dinner and breakfast. Dinner wasn’t much but breakfast was a complete bacon omelet with fresh veggies. Both meals were delicious after eating mostly fish for nine days in the bush. Buzz and Noel said I was still the fly eating king but now I was also the mosquito king. (Inside joke having to do with the flies and mosquitoes landing in the bowl of fish soup everyday, Long story.)

Thursday morning (8/15/96), Dmitri, our interpreter, had to go to the airport to arrange our early flight because they wouldn’t allow you to do this over the phone due to terrorist security. It took Dmitri three hours to arrange everything. Valari’s daughter, Lonari, sang and played the piano for us while we waited. She was actually pretty good. At 3:30pm we caught a flight from Nickolia to Khabarovsk. Once in Khabarovsk we checked on flights to Anchorage.

That day was Thursday and we found that Alaskan Air only flew from Khabarovsk to Anchorage on Friday and Wednesday. Boy, were we lucky to get seats on Friday's flight! We couldn't arrange it at the Khabarovsk Airport though because Alaskan Air only had employees working on days they had flights and then only during the hours of service.

I called my wife, Tami, only to find out that it was the wee hours of the morning in Alabama. I asked her to arrange the change of all our tickets and I would call her in 8 hours. Then began our taxi ordeal.

All the taxis at the Airport were small compact cars. The drivers wanted us to load all of our bags in one car and have all of us load into another car to go to the airport. Violent arguments began, in Russian of course, between our interpreter and the cab drivers. After the discussion, Dmitri began to look for an independent driver who had a van.

In Russia it is very common for individuals to pick up people as cab drivers do, and take them wherever they want to go for a reasonable fee. Dmitri found a person with a large new van who agreed to take us to the airport. As we were loading our bags into his van, five or six taxi drivers came over and began to yell loudly at the van driver and Dmitri. The van driver quickly unloaded the two bags we had managed to load into the van and he drove off.

Dmitri began his discussion again with the cab drivers. After about 45 minutes it was settled. Three-fourths of our bags and Dmitri would ride in one car, and the rest of our bags, Noel, Buzz, and I, would ride in another.

Dmitri later explained how the taxi drivers were trying to scam us by stealing our luggage and he wouldn't let them. When they refused to take bags and passengers both in two cars, he found an independent driver. He explained how, as we were loading the bags into the van, the taxi drivers began to threaten the van driver and threatened to puncture his tires. The van driver unloaded the 2 bags and fled prior to any tire puncturing.

By the time we got checked into the hotel and loaded all our bags into the room, it was 9:15 p.m. We caught a ride by an independent driver for \$4 to a restaurant that Dmitri had eaten at before. The meat was very good but the proportions weren't very large. By the time we got back to the hotel it was 12:30 A.M.. I called

Tami at 2 A.M. our time, which was some time in the afternoon for her. She gave me our new flight arrangements.

Dmitri and I were sharing a room and there was no air conditioning. After my telephone conversation with Tami, Dmitri talked to his wife four different times trying to set up business meetings in Moscow. I am not sure of the exact arrangements because they were speaking in Russian.

Finally, Dmitri began to pack and rearrange his bags for his flight. I tried to sleep but with the lights and television on, but I couldn't. At 4:15 A.M. he finally finished. All too soon the 7 A.M. alarm clock was ringing. I called Buzz and Noel and woke them and then took a shower. By the time we got all the bags loaded and to the Airport, it was 10:30 A.M.

Alaskan Air had no record of the flight changes that Tami had made. Fortunately, there were seats available, except for the Seattle to Atlanta leg, for which they put us on stand-by. They charged us \$125 to change the tickets and \$108 for each excess bag.

As we tried to go through customs, we found out that there was a \$30 fee to use the airport facilities. We waited in line to pay this service fee only to find out that they wouldn't accept US dollars. We then had to wait in another line at the foreign exchange center to get Rubles. Then back to the airport facilities service fees line long before the standard hassle through customs.

Now Buzz and Noel realized why I insisted on leaving the hotel 3 ½ hours before departure time, even though the airport was only 10 minutes away. We made the flight with 10 minutes to spare. We had a very quick cup of coffee to keep us awake. During the 7 hour flight to Anchorage, which included a short stop, we had a snack and a meal. Both of these meals, even though they were your typical airplane meals, were better than most of the meals we had had since we landed in Khabarovsk two weeks earlier. It sure felt good to be on our way home!

The customs in Anchorage took longer than usual which caused us to miss our connection. They rerouted us on stand-by through Seattle. In Seattle we got bumped and I was re-routed to Salt Lake, again, on stand-by. Buzz was re-routed to Cincinnati. In Salt Lake I got bumped and put on another stand-by flight and finally confirmed a seat on a much later flight, which I finally caught to Atlanta.

My bags had made it to Atlanta 24 hours ahead of me so it took me over an hour to locate them at the Delta Baggage area. Now I had to deal with my car issue and the towing. I had called my brother the day we arrived in Russia and asked him to pay my fine and do all the paperwork and try to get my car out of the impound lot. I told him if he were successful, to park my car in a secret location, of which I explained to him how to get there. I would tell you where that was, but then I would have to shoot you.

He and I had not spoke since, so I wasn't sure if the car was going to be there or not. I hoped that my brother had been able to get it from the impound lot. Thank God, the car was right were I had asked him to park it! I made the three hour drive home in the rain, believe it or not, without another incident. Boy is it good to be home! I love America. God Bless America!!!!