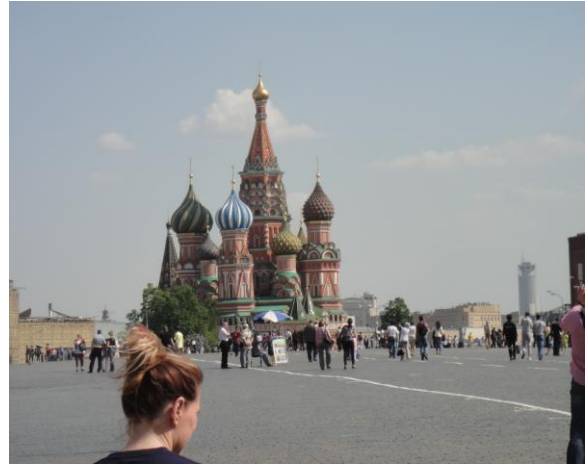


From Russia With Love.

Wednesday 16th . May 2012

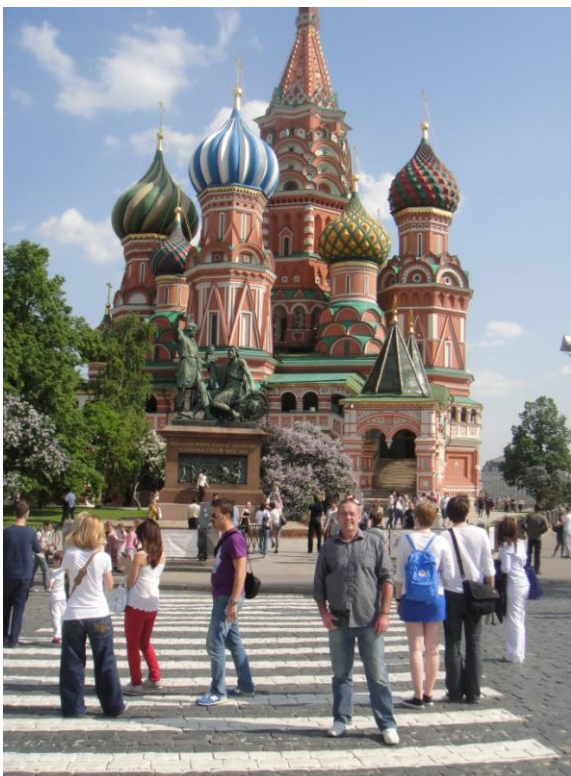
Excitement builds, as I prepare to leave my house in Folkestone at four pm, for the forty five minute drive to Sittingbourne. There, I am to meet up with Martin Clarke (BSF Chairman), John Clarke (BSF National Coach), Bradley Belsey (u68kg Sport Sombo competitor) and Peter Wise (Team Press Officer). We take John's car across the A249 and onto the M20, hoping that the traffic gods will be kind to us, and that the rush hour traffic on the M25 will be light! Our prayers are answered, as we pull up outside terminal one of Heathrow airport, approximately one hour after leaving Sittingbourne. Having pre-arranged a "meet and greet" service, the parking attendant is there to meet us, and no sooner than he has whisked John's car away, we are inside the airport, searching for which check-in desk to use, and keeping an eye out for the rest of our travelling companions who have arranged to meet us inside. Already there, is Julia Halstead (u68kg Ladies Sport Sombo) from Oxford, and we are soon joined by the remaining two members of our party, Tom Richardson (U82kg Sport Sombo & Combat Sombo) and David Wellsman (Team co-ordinator). Tom, at twenty years old, is the youngest of the group and the only competitor entered into both the Sport Sombo and the Combat Sombo events.



St. Basil's Cathedral, seen from the entrance to Red Square

Once again, some-one seemed to be smiling down upon us, as we sped through check-in then through security with no problems. Horror stories of lengthy delays and spending ages queuing up proved mercifully unfounded.

As there was nowhere else to sit, the bar seemed the obvious choice to settle down and wait for our flight. With refreshment in hand, talk soon turned to absent team members and the nightmare scenario of trying to get a Russian visa. Bradley's brother Casey, was to fight in the under 62kg Sport Sombo, but was refused his



Colin in front of the cathedral

visa because his British passport was damaged. Barry Gibson, from the North East of England, had been booked in for the u100kg Combat Sombo, but despite paying a premium price for a priority application, did not get his passport back from The Russian Embassy in time. Two other members of The British Sombo Federation, President Robin Hislop and fellow Scot, John Sharpe were also refused visas, as their invitations from the tournament organisers did not arrive.

Time passed, and we were soon at the gate and boarding The British Midland International flight, bound for Moscow and scheduled to take off at thirty five minutes past ten. Everything seemed to be running on time, we took our seats and that was it, I was asleep before take-off! During the three hour flight, I was probably awake for no more than forty-five minutes. I was awoken on three separate occasions, once for refreshments, once for the in-flight meal and once for a post meal cup of tea! The

last thing that woke me up was the screech of rubber on tarmac as we landed safely at Domodedova airport.

Thursday 17th . May 2012

Five o'clock in the morning. I am standing in front of security, inside the airport terminal. After a three hour flight, I find myself being scrutinised by a good looking, blonde. Unfortunately for me, she is not looking at me in anything but a professional way, and I have come across my first piece of Russian officialdom on this trip. After passing my passport and visa through scanners several times, she alternates between looking at me and looking at my photograph for several minutes. Then comes a question, was this my first visit to Russia? I am slightly taken aback, as clearly I have visited the country before, as there is an earlier, expired visa in my passport, along with the current one. (I attended The World Championships in St. Petersburg a couple of years ago.) Was this a trick question? I answered honestly, and was finally let through. The whole process took about five minutes, a good three to four times longer than any of my travelling colleagues!

Through customs, and we're all together in arrivals, looking for the representative from The European Sambo Federation, who was to take us to our hotel. He arrived after about fifteen minutes, and escorted us to his waiting mini bus. The drive to the hotel should take about forty five minutes we were told. Having passed through wooded country side, it was not long before we were on the outskirts of Moscow. Tower blocks loomed in all directions and the traffic increased. We watched in trepidation, as Moscow's finest motorists competed with each other, to see who could change driving lane the quickest, or who could squeeze into the smallest gap!

08.00 am. We're now in reception in the Hotel Aerostar. Other countries representatives and competitors are milling about, even at this early hour. Accreditation is not until ten o'clock, but we take our chance and ask reception if we can have our rooms. To my amazement, they say yes, and even tell us that we can go for breakfast in the floor. Thank heavens for hanging around the hungry, for most of the

Suitcases unpacked, fed downstairs at ten, to try get the competitors of us our passes for the I queue at one desk and Tom in for the along the line to queue in every-one else. Our table, is in a second our badges. Before we we arrange to meet up we're all going to visit



GUM Department store

restaurant on the fourth that, I had visions of hotel foyer, tired and morning.

and watered, we meet and beat the queues and booked in, and the rest next four days. John and book Bradley, Julia and competition, then move again, this time to book-third visit to an officials room, where we collect go our separate ways, again at one o'clock as Moscow city centre.

Every-one's ready, apart from Martin, who has to stay behind, He has two meetings to attend, one at four o'clock, a coaches information meeting, and a secondly a meeting of congress at five. Reception have told us that the best and cheapest method of transport is The Metro. Four stops and twenty six Roubles (50 pence) later, we are five hundred yards away from Red Square. As the day is unbelievably hot, about twenty five degrees Centigrade, we decide to stop and have our first beer. Disappointingly, we are served with Stella, when I was looking forward to something more Russian. Refreshed, we move on and become tourists for the next two hours or so. Red Square, St. Basil's Cathedral, The Kremlin wall, and GUM (Gosudarstvenny Universalny Magazin) department store, amongst many other buildings, are all the subjects of photographs taken from all angles with various groups or individuals posing in front of them.

The challenge before we left England, was to have vodka in Red Square. We achieved this in a fancy restaurant beneath the GUM department store. A Russian beer inside and a vodka whilst standing on the pavement – mission accomplished!

Walking in the sunshine in the surrounding area, we came across a couple of restaurants with outdoor seating. The opportunity to sit for a while, was too good to miss, so we parked ourselves at an outside table and ordered a litre of beer each. What arrived was a somewhat off putting, cloudy version of lager beer that tasted about as good as it looked! Feeling

slightly peckish, we all decided we could do with something solid inside us, to soak up this unfiltered brew. How could we resist smoked pigs ears? The answer of course, is we couldn't! Needless to say, these tasted as bad as they sounded, and after every-one had tried at least two or three pieces, unselfishly, we decided to take the remainder back for Martin, as we did not wish for him to miss out.



Smoked pig's ears – Lovely Jubilee



Vodka in Red Square

As it was now early evening, we decided to head back towards the hotel and find a restaurant for dinner, on the way. Retracing our earlier steps, we stopped at what looked like a suitable venue, and were not disappointed. A lovely meal washed down with the eatery's homemade concoction of horseradish vodka.

Back to the hotel, via The Metro, a couple of night caps, and finally to bed around midnight.

Friday 18th . May 2012

The bus laid on by The European Sambo Federation, leaves at seven thirty am, to take the competitors and officials to the completion venue, three quarters of an hour away. As we have no-one competing today, we treat ourselves to a lay-in, having already decided to get a taxi. Reception explained that they could book their mini bus for eight of us, at a cost of 3500 Rubbles (about £70.00). I thought this a little expensive, but between us all, it was still less than ten pounds each.

We arrived at The Olympic Stadium in plenty of time to watch the preliminary rounds, right through to the semi-finals. Three mats on the go, Sport Sombo for men and women took place on two of the mats with Combat Sombo occupying the third. The action paused at two o'clock, and with the opening Ceremony beginning at half past four and the finals due to commence at five, it was time to get some dinner from across the road, in the Russian Olympic Headquarters.

Half past six and it is time to depart for the hotel. Outside The Olympic Stadium, we bump into a couple of Hungarians, who ask us if we were going to catch the free bus. Well, if it is going to cost us another three thousand five hundred Rubbles for a taxi, we were definitely going to get the bus! The Hungarians could not believe what we were telling them. Three thousand five hundred they exclaimed, we only paid five hundred! Bristling with indignation and the feeling of being well and truly conned, we made the journey back in near

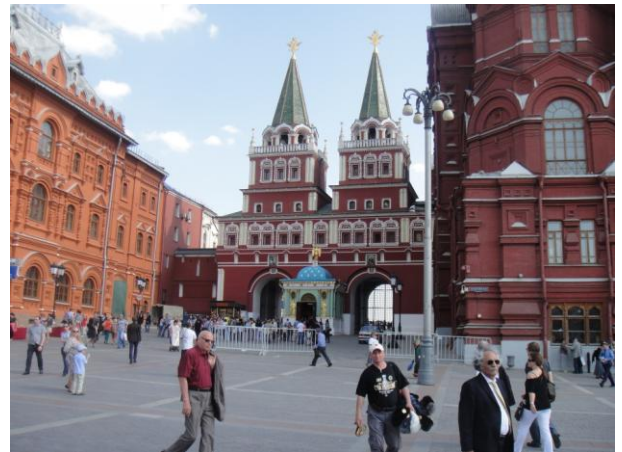
silence. Back at the hotel, a taxi pulled up outside, so we dashed out to ask the driver if what the Hungarians had told us was true. He confirmed that the trip should indeed have cost only five hundred Rubbles. With smoke coming from his ears, John challenged the young lady at reception. To her credit, she seemed mortified that we had been charged so much, and immediately offered a full refund. Well, what do we do with this unexpected windfall? Obviously the best answer was to seek refuge in the bar!

One evening meal and a few drinks later, it was time to retire once more to bed.

Saturday 19th. May 2012

The alarm wakes me up at six thirty, just time for a quick shower and a small breakfast before joining the coach at half past seven. I am joined by John and the three competitors, Bradley, Julia and Tom. Martin, Dave and Pete have decided to meet us at the competition venue at ten o'clock and will be getting a taxi there. Tom is competing in the Combat Sombor today, having weighed-in yesterday. The pool sheets tell us he is to be the fifth fight of the day. He is warmed up and raring to go by the time he is due at mat side, and puts up a creditable performance, losing on an arm lock after being ten points to three down. This gives Bradley and Julia something to think about, as they are fighting tomorrow. Once again, the competition breaks at around two o'clock, so it's a quick bite to eat before our three competitors have to weigh-in at three.

Every-one makes their weight, so the five non-competitors decide to leave the venue early, leaving Bradley, Julia and Tom to watch the finals. Martin wants to get his daughter a hat, so we need to travel back to the Red Square area of Moscow. With no taxis in sight, it's a trek to the Metro station, something Martin was overjoyed with, especially as he had always wanted to ride Moscow's famous underground tube! Into the market around Red Square, a quick sit down for some liquid refreshment and we're back looking for taxis to take us to the hotel. This time it was a far easier quest, but as I thought I had left my glasses at the restaurant a couple of nights earlier, I declined the offer of the lift and opted to go in search of my spectacles. Pete offered to join me, so the two of us retraced our steps of Thursday evening. On arrival at the restaurant, we settled down for a beer and between us tried to enquire about my lost possession. This proved difficult, as the waitress barely spoke English, and our Russian is limited to please and thank you! Needless to say, we left empty handed.



Entrance to Red Square

Back on The Metro, and I spot a list of stations that has "Aerostar" listed as being the stop after the one we have been using. I convinced Pete that this must be closer to the hotel as it bore the same name. Unfortunately, when we emerged from underground, neither of us recognised anything remotely like the area we were staying in. We decided to swallow our pride and go back a station, only to be told by a helpful female ticket vendor, that there was no need to double back, but that we should walk! Unconvinced, we started off once again. Pete had the brainwave that our best chance of asking directions and of being understood was to ask only good looking young girls. This theory seemed to be proved as the various young ladies we asked seemed to be pointing us in the right direction. Finally, after what seemed an endless walk, we arrived back safe and sound.

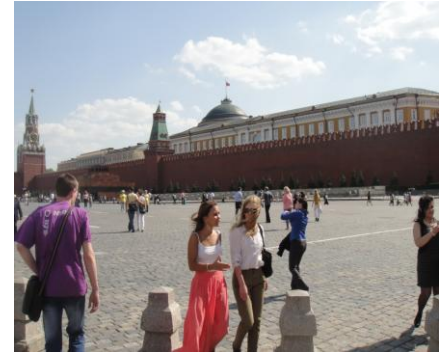
As it was Champions League Football cup final night, and as it was not due to kick off until ten forty five local time, it seemed prudent to have a nap before dinner. With an alarm set, just in case, my bed welcomed me with open arms. Washed, showered and fed, we watched the football in the hotel bar, retiring about two in the morning. As Pete is a Chelsea supporter, he decided to celebrate a bit more!

Sunday 20th . May 2012

Six thirty again, and I'm up to shower, have breakfast and catch the bus for the final time. Once again it's John, Bradley, Julia and I heading off, with the other three joining us later. All three fighters are on different mats, Julia fourth fight, Bradley fifth and Tom seventh. All make a good account of themselves, but unfortunately, none of them win and are all knocked out.

Following the routine of the previous days, we have lunch about two o'clock and endeavour, with the help of a friendly Russian, to flag down a couple of taxis to take us back. Once again, the three competitors stay behind, which means five of us need a lift. A car is flagged down, the destination agreed and a five hundred Rouble fare negotiated and Martin, John and Pete leave Dave and me behind. The same process is repeated ten minutes later when another car stops and the two of us get in, with Dave in the front. The

journey started with a wheel spin and a screech of tyres, and then got progressively worse! With a top speed of 155 kilometres per hour (96mph) we hurtled along the streets of Moscow, undertaking, overtaking and swerving to change lanes. Sitting in the back, was like viewing an arcade game. I could see the speedometer and the rev counter in front of the driver and a close up of the rear of the car in front us, through the windscreen. To make things worse, the driver was showing off his skills one handed, whilst he drank a cold drink with the other! We were dropped off at the hotel, and with a show stopping finale, the driver left us with a wheel spin and skid marks in the car park. We had arrived before the



The Kremlin Wall



Close up of St. Basil's cathedral

others, even though we left a good ten minutes after them! A clue to his driving prowess may have been the lack of a "taxi" sign anywhere on his car, and nowhere to be seen, was there a radio or meter for the fare!

After this heart stopping, adrenalin fuelled ride, a drink was definitely called for, and so we settled in the outside bar, in the sunshine, to calm our nerves.

As it was our last night, we all agreed to meet up for a final drink. We decided to go one stop on The Metro, to an area called Belorussia, where we were assured that there was a good selection of bars. After looking around, we sat in the first bar that we came across, which seemed to be a Turkish bar, where we had half a litre of warm Esse bear.

Monday 21st . May 2012

Our last day, and one that is going to be spent travelling. The coach picks us up to take us to the airport and we are there by twelve thirty. Unfortunately, or plane does not take off until five fifty! We wait an hour for the check in to open, deposit our bags and head for security. Once again, it's my passport that is scrutinised to a

greater depth than any-one else's. A quick look around the duty free shops and a sandwich later, we settle down and wait for departure.

The flight arrives back at Heathrow ahead of time, and to our pleasant surprise, there are only small queues to get through immigration. Our bags are ready for us when we get to the baggage carousel and we're straight through customs. John's car is waiting for us outside, so we waste no time in heading off for the M25. Back in Sittingbourne by eight thirty and I'm home less than an hour after that. No hick ups and no hold ups – lovely!