My Russian IYSF experience

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Never in a million years would I have thought that I would have had the opportunity to visit Russia, but before I begin on this epic journal I would like to thank a few people and organisations. First off I would like to thank the entire National Youth Science Forum personnel, without them none of this would have happened. I cannot express any more gratitude for the rushing around trying to organise the half a dozen visas, passports and paperwork! So thank you once again. Thank you to the Rotary Club of Como for sponsoring the NYSF in Canberra and for the help with Russia. While my school and teachers thank you for working around my hectic study timetable, and being so gracious for letting me fly to the other side of the planet for 2 and half weeks. To I H & RP Cochrane, Susie, Connie and the dozen more, thank you for the funding and encouragement, I couldn’t have done it without you! Finally to mum, dad and Corrado, I’m sorry for the rushing around, my general annoying eager attitude and my obvious excitement. But thank you for everything; you were my backbone, my support and my wallet. But seriously, thank you everyone for this, it was a once in a lifetime opportunity that I will never forget. Now on to the report!

It was a dark and stormy night as the wind whistled through the trees. Wait, what am I saying? It was a brilliant sunny day when I was dropped off at Perth airport, meeting up with Ben who I was on the same session with and Nic. We then flew to Melbourne where we met up with the 3 other students we were going to spend the next 2 and half weeks with Tristan, Georgia and Chris. We were all interested in astrophysics and/or aerospace engineering, thus our language was found! The long haul continued to Abu Dhabi and then to Moscow! But wow, Moscow airport was extremely busy! Never in my life had I seen that many people in one area all trying to get into Russia. Learning the hard way on how to spot the fastest moving queue we finally got our way through customs, where we met up with Sasha, our Russian guide.

We made our way into Moscow and reached our flat where we were to be staying. After staying awake for what felt like over 48 hours, but was more like 24, I fell asleep as soon as I sat down!

Our first day in Russia we walked down the main street of Moscow which was massive!
And the comfortable feel of commercialisation for the likes of ‘Hugo Boss’ or “Channel” with the occasional ‘Transformers 3’ billboards. Reaching the Kremlin and Red Square, I couldn’t believe my eyes, it was extraordinary, and I have never seen anything like it. The red bricks littered the area creating an awe of national pride. Inside the Kremlin, ancient churches filled the extensive vicinity. Making our way back home via the metro was awe inspiring, nearly every single metro station we passed was a museum in itself, completely made out of marble with the monument decorating WWII here and there. We entered our first museum; it was the history museum! Dating back to the earliest human civilisations of Eastern Europe up into the medieval times, it was incredible.

One of the things I was most looking forward to was the visit to the Australian Embassy. It was categorised as a medium sized embassy yet it looked after most of Eastern Europe. As soon as you stepped inside it felt like home, hearing and feeling the Australian accent. We were able to sit down with the Australian Ambassador Ms. Margaret Twomey, who surely captivated all with her unique past and history.

Today was the Day of Remembrance, similar to ANZAC day, I often attend memorials back home and we were all eager to experience the Russian Military history and to pay our respects, and thus Sasha took us to visit the war museum. Entering the museum, I had never known so much carnage then that of the Soviets during WWII. Here it really opened our eyes to view World War II from a different angle, something that I will truly cherish.

One of the most notable days was the visit to the Small Business College 48, similar to a high school. The first item on the agenda was the traditional bread and salt tasting ceremony. From here one of the students who id learning the English language took us through the school war museum explaining various battles and soldiers. After we headed out to the basketball court where four military students performed their duties. Then onto the tournament! In teams of 6 we battled the students and in the end and fully satisfied we came out with a draw. The students and teachers treated us to a glorious lunch where they performed various traditional and contemporary dances and songs. Here we were able to converse (or try to) with the students, trying to encourage the ‘drop bears’ and ‘hoop snakes’ was quite memorable. Coming to an end we said our thank you and goodbyes.

One of the days we were quite excited for, was the market day! Taking the metro, we were all eager to explore and vanish inside the massive complex, stores littered the walk ways, it was incredible. I’ve never been in a place like it. An atmosphere of exoticness filled the air, haggling in a different language was always fun, while Georgia having a competition with herself as who could buy the most
babushka dolls. Tristan on the other hand felt the need to solve a Rubik’s cube that a man was selling, and hence Tristan had a part of the markets cheering and clapping for him.

The polytechnic museum was on the list today and we were joined by two Russian university students, the museum was astounding, (I seem to be using a fair amount of adjectives), the history of the motor, computer, telescopes, space rockets, shuttles and the list goes on. Driving up to the highest point in Moscow, Sparrows Hill, also the home to Moscow State University. Which was awe inspiring as to how massive it was, our necks were cramped upwards in admiration. Then off to the circus which was interesting to say the least.

Finally the day had arrived. We were going to Star City, situated just out of Moscow, it was lush and green, and the size was incredible! An entire town built just for the space program. This was what I had been looking forward to the entire trip. We were able to stand next to one of the largest centrifuges in the world which the cosmonauts use for testing g-forces on the bodies. Walking through the city we visited the Hydro Lab which is designed for the cosmonauts in training to complete tests underwater as to simulate zero or minimal gravity. The replica of part of a space station is used for the cosmonauts in training to work on in order to prepare for the real thing.
Unfortunately the Space Museum here was closed when we visited, (those Mondays), although we did get to see the full size replica of the MIR, the Russian Space Station. It was used by the cosmonauts to prepare for and feel comfortable in when they reached the actual station. Although everything is placed back into the correct position on Earth, in space it is another thing. Apparently things tend to be moved around by the cosmonauts to different positions and hence the new cosmonauts didn’t know where anything was. Although this was when MIR was up in space, which it isn’t now. One of the exciting things was visiting a test mock up with a cosmonaut in training actually working inside to mock up. Rather exciting!

Waking up in the early morning to jump onto the train we reached St Petersburg! A much more ‘touristy’ city and former capital of Russia, here felt more at home, gone was the hustle and bustle and relaxation burst onto the scene. We stayed next to a metro and thus we easily accessed all parts of St Petersburg!

One of the amazing places we visited was the Hermitage, the largest art museum in the world. Every single room was a museum in itself, we spent the entire day there and we wanted to stay longer! We couldn’t get enough! Very quickly we separated in groups of twos and moved around the museum at our own pace. What fascinated me most was the Ancient Greek, Roman and Egyptians statues, incredible, just plain incredible! Quickly working out that if we wanted to see every single item in the museum in between opening and close we would have had to spend 1.2 seconds at each item and that is including the walking to each item!

Still in St Petersburg we were able to visit the Summer Palace which was marvellous, amazing, no words could describe the manor and grounds! It was incredibly lush and green, I had honesty never seen anything like it (which I seem to be saying rather frequently). It was packed yet with the fields being so large you could easily find yourself alone.
Heading back to Moscow it was Mission Control time! A magnificent building, monuments decorated the inside. We were able to see the live stream of the International Space Station or ISS travel across the planet. Just how I pictured it, although without the rush; the workers below doing their duties, collecting data, sending it out. It was magnificent to see the actual thing in real life. It was probably the best day of the entire trip.

The final day was a relaxing river cruise along the river, a time to reflect on everything we had done and it was a lovely way to end the trip.

The few trivia tibits of Russia include; the new found respect for Perth car parks, massive escalators, underground shopping centres, and the Russian card game of ‘Durack.’ While a lady in a cafe wanted to take a photo with us, which was quite surprising! Another note was that both Georgia and I were getting rather strange looks on the metro, finally figuring it out at the Small business College 48 when one of the students noted our facial features, it was the freckles! Realising this, we remembered that we haven’t seen one Russian with freckles. It amused us for a while I have to say.

I still can’t believe that I had the opportunity to visit Russia, a place I often viewed as far off into the horizon yet I have been able to view the Cold War and The Space Race from a different angle, a different perspective, something that I will treasure forever. A have experienced a vastly different culture, language and learned an invaluable amount of knowledge, so thank you NYSF. Thank you so very much.

Captions of photos
1. Ben, Chris, Nic, Georgia and Tristan in one of the most expensive shopping centres in Moscow situated next to Red Square
2. One of the stations on the Metro Underground
3. Australian Embassy
4. Nic, Tristan, Ashley, Sasha, Georgia, Ben at Star City
5. Underwater view of the Hydro Lab
6. At the centrifuge in Star City
7. Full size replica of MIR
8. Outside Mission Control
9. The Hermitage
10. The Summer Palace
11. A cosmonaut in training.