The Russians are Coming
By Dr. Richard Kelley

In spite of the world’s economic problems, global tourism is growing, and many destinations are seeing rapid changes in the types of travelers they are hosting. Outbound tourism from Russia is growing, and although Hawaii currently receives very few visitors from that country, based on what I saw during a recent visit to Moscow and St. Petersburg, I predict we will soon start to hear Russian spoken in the lobbies of many of our properties, particularly in Thailand.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 heralded the collapse of the Soviet Union (which finally took place on Christmas Day, 1991) and the lifting of the yoke of communism that had stifled that part of the world since the 1917 Bolshevik revolution in Russia.

The economic rebirth of Russia has been amazing. Gone are the state-run food shops with empty shelves and the shabby government-manufactured automobiles and consumer goods that were always in pitifully short supply. Capitalism is alive and well today throughout Russia. Retail shops are filled with goods for sale, the streets are crowded with well-dressed, happy people, and new automobiles, trucks, and buses are causing traffic jams almost everywhere. AND, Russians are now traveling abroad.

In the Soviet period, Russians were banned from foreign travel; even visits to the Communist Bloc nations of Eastern Europe were only for the privileged – and politically reliable – few. Beginning in 1992, Russians began to travel, primarily for business. Over the past decade, driven by Russia’s gas- and oil-rich economy, the ruble is strong and incomes are rising. This year, Russia’s GDP is growing at a rate of 4.5 percent.

So, it is not surprising that leisure travel is growing too. In 2008, 11.3 million Russians traveled abroad for pleasure. That number dropped to 9.5 million at the height of the global recession in 2009, but it soared 38 percent in the first four months of 2010.

The World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) predicts that Russia is well placed to become one of the world’s tourism powerhouses by 2016.

The flow of Russian tourists to Thailand is rising very rapidly. Through the first eight months of this year, 347,000

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Russians traveled there – more than the entire year in 2007, 2008, and 2009! According to a report in Travel Daily News, Thailand is currently one of the top five favorite destinations for Russian leisure travelers!

Will the United States benefit from Russia’s tourist potential? Possibly, if our State Department will loosen up the visa process along the lines that I have suggested for visa processing for citizens of China. (See my article in the June 12 issue of Saturday Briefing — http://saturdaybriefing.outrigger.com/chairman_briefing/nhi-hao-from-china.)

The same basic problem applies. Would-be visitors from China, Russia, or any other country not included in the U.S. Visa Waiver Program (which is reserved for 36 developed nations, mostly in Western Europe), are required to prove that they do not intend to remain in the U.S. as illegal immigrants. This means that potential tourists from most of the world’s nations must be interviewed by a member of the staff of the U.S. embassy or consulate closest to home to determine that they really do intend to return to their own country at the end of their visit.

As explained on the website of the U.S. embassy in Moscow, U.S. law “requires a consular officer to presume that a visa applicant intends to immigrate to the United States until the applicant provides sufficient evidence to the contrary.” In other words, presumed guilty until proven innocent!

Fortunately, the U.S. embassy in Moscow appears to be taking a more practical approach than the U.S. embassy in Beijing. Chinese visa applicants must travel to one of the five cities in China where there is an appropriately staffed U.S. consulate, or to Hong Kong, for an interview with a member of the consular staff. The typical waiting time for this appointment, says the embassy website, is 100 days.

In Russia, visa applicants are told to be prepared to wait “at least 30 days,” but as a practical matter, according to information on the State Department’s website, the wait can be as little as three days, especially at one of the three U.S. consulates outside of Moscow. Apparently, it all depends on the volume of visa applications and the number of consular staffs available. Russian visa applicants are also fortunate in being able to submit their visa applications through a private courier service that has 82 offices around that vast country, providing at least a bit of convenience to would-be visitors to the U.S.

So far, Russia has not been much of a blip on the radar screens of Hawai‘i’s destination marketers. There is no line item for Russia in the statistical reports distributed by the state’s Hawai‘i Tourism Authority (HTA), and the state’s official visitor websites are translated only into Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and German.

Recently, the Hawai‘i Tourism Association (HiTA), a privately-funded organization, reported that Hawai‘i was represented at the 5th Luxury and Leisure Travel Show in Moscow by Russia Hawaii Tours (www.russiahawaiitours.com), a Honolulu company that specializes in serving Russian visitors to Hawai‘i. With its Russia-based staff, it manned a booth and distributed brochures, reporting, “Hawai‘i was among the new stars at the event and received enormous interest both among trade professionals and consumer travelers. The limited number of brochures and material was given out within the first day of the three-day event.” Russia Hawaii Tours estimates that some 8,000-10,000 Russian tourists visit the Hawaiian Islands each year.

So, with up to 10,000 Russians visiting Hawai‘i annually and nearly 350,000 visiting Thailand, I’m guessing that our ‘ohana at Outrigger Laguna Phuket Resort & Villas has probably already learned to greet its travelers from Russia with Добро пожаловать! — pronounced Duh-BRO po-ZHA-luh-vat! — Welcome!

To our ‘ohana in Hawai‘i and elsewhere, приготовььте (pronounced preh-guh-to-TOF-te) — get ready. The Russians are coming – perhaps sooner than you think!

Notes on Traveling in Russia
By Dr. Richard Kelley

This summer, Linda and I traveled to Russia. It was our first visit to that country and included stops in Moscow and St. Petersburg (called Leningrad in Soviet times). Having lived through the Cold War and read numerous reports of how backward everything was in Russia under Communist rule, we were prepared for poor hotels, transportation, and food.

Russia today is quite the opposite. The hotels are first class, the streets are filled with new, well-maintained cars, and our meals were excellent.

We were impressed by the beauty of St. Petersburg, which appears to be completely rebuilt after the terrible “900 Day Siege” by the Nazis that destroyed the city and killed some 600,000-800,000 people, mostly of starvation and cold, during World War II. Today, the arts are thriving, music fills the concert halls, and diners fill the restaurants.

In Moscow we traveled on the subway system where the walls and ceilings of the stations are covered with large beautiful murals, a heritage of Soviet days when the regime, unable to provide a decent standard of living to ordinary Russian workers, poured resources into large projects like the subways (“Metro”), in order to impress people with their grandeur and, by extension, the glory of the state. (Nonetheless, we asked each other, “How long would those murals last on the walls of the New York City subway system?”)

We were fascinated when we visited two huge, deep underground bunkers, relics of the Cold War years. One, Stalin’s Bunker in Izmailovo, was built to protect the Soviet leader and his military commanders from a nuclear attack. The other, the...
secret Taganka Bunker, was for communications equipment and personnel. There we went through a mock attack drill with sudden darkness from simulated loss of power and a symbolic donning of protective fallout gear.

We visited the Cosmonaut Training and Space Center and met two Russian Cosmonauts, Roman Yurievich Romanenko, a young man who was in space just last year, and Valdimir Nikolaevich Dezhurov, who was in space during the 1990s.

It was a fascinating, informative trip and gave me a much better understanding of why we may soon see Russians checking into our properties across the United States and the Pacific.
Photos of Stalin's life were everywhere in the Stalin Bunker. The Soviet dictator from 1924 to his death in 1953, Stalin ranks with Mao Zedong as one of the two biggest mass murderers in human history. While everybody knows how much blood Hitler had on his hands—thanks to the fact that the civilized world defeated and totally discredited him and his Nazi ideology—the world is less aware of Stalin’s “crimes against humanity.” According to the best scholarly estimates I’ve seen, Stalin was responsible for the death of some 43 million mostly civilian citizens of the Soviet Union, the lion’s share of the regime’s total of 62 million victims—by execution, deliberately caused famine, and the overworking of millions of malnourished and pitifully clothed political prisoners in the Gulag’s harshest conditions. (See www.hawaii.edu/powerkills/USSR.

Memorial commemorating the 900-Day Siege of Leningrad (today again called St. Petersburg) by the Germans during World War II. From September 1941 to January 1944, more than 600,000 inhabitants of the city died from bombardment, cold and starvation, this despite a major evacuation of women and children as the invaders closed in. The basic adult ration during the siege: 125 grams (4.4 ounces) of bread per person per day, made from flour mixed with sawdust. In several places along Nevsky Prospekt, the city’s most important street, signs posted during the siege are still visible today: “Citizens! During a bombardment, this side of the street is extremely dangerous.”

Vladimir Ilyich Lenin was a Marxist intellectual who split with other Russian and European socialists because they weren’t revolutionary enough and founded the Bolshevik Party, which eventually became the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. After leading the October Revolution in 1917 and heading the “Reds” in the bloody Russian Civil War, he led the Soviet state until his death. He is remembered as a spellbinding orator and the founder of Leninism, which turned Marxist theory on its head by insisting that the revolution that would usher in the era of communist utopia would come not from below, spontaneously, by the “exploited” workers, but would instead have to be led by a ruthless, utterly disciplined revolutionary party, headed by all-knowing Marxist intellectuals, “the vanguard of the working class.” Lenin is often mistakenly viewed as the “good guy” in early Soviet history, who, if he had lived, would never have engaged in the murderous policies pursued by his successor as head of the Soviet state, Joseph Stalin. The fact is that it was Lenin who outlawed all other political parties, arrested and executed thousands of their members, murdered thousands of priests, founded the Soviet secret police (the “Cheka,” predecessor to the notorious NKVD and KGB), launched the “Red Terror” against all domestic enemies, including potential enemies—policies that resulted in the deaths of over 3 million civilians (not including those killed in the Russian Civil War, who numbered less than half the total of Lenin’s victims). It has been argued that the bloodthirsty Stalin was Lenin’s star pupil in the ways of implementing policies and eliminating opposition with utter ruthlessness and disregard for human life.
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Lenin’s desk in Bolshevik headquarters at the Smolny Institute just after the October Revolution in 1917. Smolny, previously a school for young women of the noble class, was the nerve center of the new Bolshevik regime until the capital was moved to Moscow early in 1918. The statue of Lenin in the photo on page 4 is located in front of Smolny.

During the revolution in 1917, Lenin slept in this bed in his office.

Inside Smolny Institute: A veritable rogues’ gallery of Lenin’s associates at the head of the Bolshevik Party in 1917, including Joseph Stalin (bottom row, middle), Leon Trotsky (bottom row, right) and the first head of the Soviet secret police, Felix Dzerzhinsky (top row, middle).