

thought that if that fellow was going to write down the serial numbers in full from each cheque, including US\$ and Sterling, then it would take hours and piles of pink forms. Soviet/Russian official form designers hate blank spaces.

Another surprise. After writing down three serial numbers for three DEM cheques he told me to sign and that I could get back on the train. I protested that he had only written down three serial numbers and also that there was no mention of US\$ and Sterling cheques.

The officer shrugged his shoulders. 'Not important. D-Mark enough. You sign here and you can get back on the train.'

It slowly began to dawn on me what the game was. On my way back to Poland that same evening I would be fleeced of every-

thing not declared.

I again protested that if the full amount of my travellers cheques was not written down, then how could I avoid problems when I left the country (returned to this border post). I was told that it was okay, no problem. Then all four officers in the office urged me to sign as I was 'holding up the train'.

I was seriously thinking about cancelling this trip to Kaliningrad and returning to Poland when a young lady customs officer walked in and came to my rescue. She spoke good English and asked me what the problem was. The train was waiting to go.

I explained the situation. She quickly grasped the point. She spoke rapidly and, I thought, rather scornfully to my tormentor, and twice used the word 'contraband'. Sulk-

ily, and without a word, the officer wrote down the full amount of my TCs. I thanked the young lady (I wanted to give her a hug, but I would probably have been arrested). I signed the form and boarded the train. I shall always bless that young Russian lady customs officer. She was a real rose in a garden of weeds.

So, something had changed from the 'good' old days? I had been several times to the former Soviet Union but I never experienced such blatant crookedness as this.

My advice to travellers is to take only as much money as you need when going to Kaliningrad. Leave other money in a safe place in Poland, if convenient. You do not have to fill in currency declaration forms in Poland and the Baltic States.

Persons travelling in a group with the 'protection' of a Russian-speaking guide will probably be less at risk than individual travellers.

Kaliningrad

Kaliningrad is disappointing. Completely destroyed at the end of the war and completely closed to tourists until just two years ago — due to the nearby strategic naval base at Baltijsk.

One day is adequate to see this place. Shabbily-dressed, serious-looking people. Typical dull, drab Soviet architecture. About all there is to see of old Konigsberg is the ruined cathedral on Kneiphof Island (now being restored with Germany money) a memorial to the philosopher Kant and a couple of churches (also being restored with DEM).

Although I had a train ticket, I took the hydrofoil back to Poland that evening. This gave me the opportunity to see mile after mile of rusting, double-berthed, Russian merchant ships. Nothing seemed to be moving — and it was not Sunday or a holiday.

Immigration and customs were quick at the Kaliningrad hydrofoil terminal. My currency form was not even looked at. I was glad to avoid the vultures of Mamonovo, probably waiting for my return.

"The Berlin Wall has just moved further east"

With the three Baltic states eagerly wanting to develop all transport routes to the West, Kaliningrad province is a serious blockage. Traffic to the west is forced to use such bottlenecks as Sestokai and Lazdijai. These places lie in the so-called 'Smugglers' Triangle' where the Polish, Belorus and Lithuanian borders meet.

Lazdijai is notorious. The very name sends shivers down the spines of regular transit drivers. Waits of several days are common. I took the bus from Lithuania to Poland via this place. The bus passed mile after mile of waiting vehicles. Drivers were sunbathing in deck chairs, having picnics, playing football, etc. We went straight to the front of the queue. This special priority may have had something to do with the hefty 'supplement' on the ticket prices.

The situation could be greatly improved if there were more border crossings and if the customs officers did not inspect every vehicle so thoroughly.

Here are a couple of quotes from Baltic state newspapers: "Since independence, the Iron Curtain has come crashing down, but Lithuanian land borders have been clogged by useless administrative procedures, unfriendliness, and Soviet style customs officials who insist on inspecting every single car. The situation has been disastrous at the Lithuania-Polish border at Lazdijai where you are sometimes made to wait several days before being allowed through. Never bribe a customs official — they don't deserve it!

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