

Better not to come by car."

"Latvia's main border crossings are clogged and disgraceful. There can be few more off-putting introductions to Latvia for the visitor than the chaotic, rude and incompetent treatment they receive when entering or leaving Latvia by road. How can things be improved? Cars and lorries can be kept in separate queues. Drunken, incompetent and corrupt officials can be dismissed. Instead of checking everybody equally thoroughly, some categories of drivers clearly need spot-checks, not the full treatment."

The new "Silk Road"

Things seem to be humming along this post-Communist era major trading route. Everything, from nuclear fuel to items equally damaging to the health, like cigarettes, are being traded.

I heard that cigarettes are exported from Germany to CIS states without duty, and then many of these cigarettes are smuggled back into Germany to be sold on the streets at bargain prices.

One sees armies of traders with their standard equipment of overloaded baggage trolleys. Be careful if you (like me) use a trolley instead of a backpack. You may be asked for a market trader's "fee". I was twice warned by Poles that I could be mistaken for a trader. In Bialystok, Eastern Poland, I was very lucky to escape being mugged by Russian or Ukrainian tough guys outside the train station at night. They wanted me to show them what I was carrying.

How not to buy a ferry ticket in Swinouscie

At the end of my six week tour of Poland, the Baltic States and Kaliningrad, I decided to take the ferryboat from Swinouscie (Swinemunde) to Ystad in Sweden.

On a Saturday afternoon I joined a queue at the ferry terminal to get info on fares and schedules. After ten minutes of waiting I was told by the girl at the desk that the queue was only for truck drivers. Where do foot passengers go? She stuck a thumb behind her. I followed the girl's instructions, went out of the building and was proceeding round to the back when a tubby customs officer bawled at me to stop. I tried to explain that I was going to the foot passenger ticket office, and then he bawled out, "Passport". I again tried to explain that the girl had directed me this way, and then he angrily shouted, "Passport". I gave it to him.

In broken English I was told that I was in a restricted customs area and that I would have to pay a *Strat*. This word *Strat* (penalty fine) is the same in German and Russian and is probably used in most Eastern European languages.

The officer was not interested in my explanation and even mocked my attempt. "The girl tell you go here, ha, ha!"

I could see that his mind was set on getting a fine. He asked me how much money I had. I lied that I only had travellers cheques and I showed him about 10 dollars worth of zloty which I hoped he would take and let me go. I was tired.

He said that I would have to pay a fine of several million zloty. My mind juggled with the zeros. Even though the rate of exchange is good the amount sounded staggering.

The officer sent a colleague to check if the port exchange office was open. I excused myself to visit the toilet and I dashed over to the truck drivers' desk and got the girl to come over and verify my story. The fellow was not interested. He knew I was telling the truth, but I was his day's opportunity.

The girl told me that my mistake had been that I had gone round her building anticlock-

wise instead of clockwise. Hence the trouble.

The other customs officer returned with the news that the exchange office was closed. Great! Thank God for the weekend!

The officer was clearly disappointed. He started playing with his pen and looking at my passport. I asked if I could telephone the British consul, but was told that it was closed until Monday. He started writing details from my passport and I made a final attempt for reason, stressing the excellent state of Anglo-Polish relations. He just continued writing without apparently listening.

Then a miracle happened. He stopped writing and then appeared to be deep in thought for a few seconds. He picked up my passport and waved it at me. Greatly relieved I took it, and was beginning to thank him for his change of mind when without a word he irritably waved me away. I left before he changed his mind again, or maybe discovered that there was another foreign exchange bureau open.

In general

I do not want to paint too gloomy a picture of East European border crossings. This would be very unfair to the majority of officials in the Baltic states and Poland, who I found to be friendly and courteous.

Away from the 'Smugglers' Triangle' and the main Berlin-CIS states, main transit route, the "New Silk Road" you should have few problems for your own security, with the usual precautions.

I thoroughly recommend a visit to the Baltic area. Exchange rates make these countries very good value for money. The people are most friendly and helpful. Some knowledge of German and Russian would be useful.

Conclusion

If any members have recently visited CIS

or Eastern Europe and have examples of official corruption at border posts, or elsewhere, I suggest they write and let us know about their experiences. The only way to put a stop to this malpractice is to turn the spotlight on the guilty parties. If there are several similar complaints then the appropriate embassy could be informed.

50th Anniversary Travel Seminar

As part of the celebrations we are holding a seminar for travellers of all sorts on November 4th 1995 in central London.

Included in the day will be a number of workshops, and we are looking for suggestions for subjects. So far the list includes: travel writing, medical, and mountain areas. Please let us have any other ideas.

Speakers and subjects for talks are also under discussion. Speakers must be proven, and have a subject of wide interest. Part of the brief will be the encouragement of young travellers. The cost of the day is still to be worked out, but will, of course, include a discount for members, and incentive for other participants to join the club.

Maybe the anniversary is a good time to stop and look at what we offer our members and each other as Globetrotters. Please let the committee know your views by writing down your suggestions, and bear in mind how new ideas can be put into practice — and who would do the work.

Bryan Hanson