

A Sample Story – Dan Pilots AWhat?

I was in Latvia a few years after they threw off communism. Why was I there? Pure accident. I was teaching aircraft design classes in two different cities in Sweden. I'd deliberately arranged the schedule to have a free week in between.

On the previous trip I'd heard about big cruise ships that take you to Russia overnight, stay in the harbor a few days while you tour the city, and return overnight to Sweden. I called the travel agency for a ticket and was told "sorry, no boats to Russia are leaving and returning on the dates you need." I asked if there was someplace else I could go. She said "Riga, Latvia."

I bought a ticket, and then I looked on a map to find out where Riga might be.

When I got there I walked around the city all day – great place. From a tourist pamphlet I learned that you could take an evening river cruise on a big tour boat, probably 140 feet long and maybe 300 passengers. They serve dinner, with live music. It sounded like a nice way to see the city and surroundings, and besides I was hungry.

Got on the boat, ate my dinner, watched the ancient city and the communist bridges and the green countryside go by. I got bored. I didn't know anybody, there wasn't that much to see outside, and inside all there was to see was a drunken group dancing to bad music that sounded like a cross between polka and disco.

I went outside and started exploring the big boat, climbing up and up, getting farther away from the music and the crowd. Finally I got to some steep metal stairs leading up to the pilot house. There was a chain blocking the stairs and the door was closed, but I could see some people inside. I waved – one of them waved back. I used hand gestures to indicate I wanted to come up the stairs. He used hand gestures to say no.

Knowing something of the local culture, I went back down to the bar and bought a big bottle of vodka, borrowed some glasses, and went back up the stairs to the pilothouse. Now they were really happy to see me, whoever the heck I might be.

The young captain spoke only a few words of English and the only Russian I knew I'd learned the night before, but we got along great with hand gestures and toasts ("nosdarovia!"). There were five other crew members plus a fairly cute young woman, whom the captain and the pilot were both trying to impress.

We "chatted" for a while, trying to get across such important things as "I fly airplanes", "The food was good", and "The city is beautiful."

We became swell friends. The vodka flowed.

Twenty minutes later, the captain, the crew, the girl, and the vodka were all outside on the deck watching the city go by. I was inside driving the boat.