

## TOUR REPORT

Our trip begins in Terminal 4 at London's Heathrow Airport. Old friends are reunited and new acquaintances made, while we check in for our flight on Aeroflot.

We are joined by our companions from COAP who will share parts of our itinerary. As everyone gets to know each other and the tour manager, we board our flight to Moscow. Gone (unfortunately) are the days of the classic Tu-154 and Il-96 on this route, instead we get to experience the modern 21<sup>st</sup> century product of Aeroflot, with a distinct Russian taste. Soon we are collecting our bags at Sheremetyevo and meet our local guide – Oleg.

We begin the coach journey from the airport to our accommodation, taking in the sites of Moscow en-route. We travel deep into the Russian countryside arriving in the hamlet of Tuchkovo by early evening, many take the chance to relax with a beer at the open-air terrace, breathing in the fresh air of the Tuchkovo forest. Not far away is Kubinka airbase!

The following morning we wake up early, barely containing our excitement for the day ahead. We arrive at Kubinka air base to be met by wet and overcast sky, but that is soon forgotten as we step through the gate and come face to face with the dozens of aircraft on display. We photograph the latest and most famous Russian fighters, bombers and support aircraft, some of them only recently returned from combat in Syria.



There are also many other unique machines stored around the airfield and we get to photograph many rare birds indeed – including a pair of DC-3s, which flew from Alaska to Moscow in 2015 to commemorate the ALSIB air bridge of WWII. Some of our more inquisitive members manage to sneak a peak at the latest generation PAK FA and MiG-35 hidden away in a hangar!



We have barely taken in the multitude of great planes on display, when the flying starts. We are joined by a handful of other visitors and locals, but mostly have the airport to ourselves. As attack helicopters twist and turn within a few metres above our heads, dropping flares and annihilating the imaginary enemy, we are left in awe of these fearsome beasts. Soon we smell the kerosene and feel the warm blast of the engines of dozens of MiGs and Sukhois, which taxi past us at an arm's distance. We wave at the pilots and they salute us in return as one by one they line up and take off for their breath-taking displays.

Formations, solos, dogfights, high-speed passes and flares – the display has it all. We are treated to performances from virtually all the Russian teams – many new types are logged and thousands of photos are taken.

But the day is not over yet! We en-bus and take the short trip to Kubinka Repair Plant, while photographing several more MiGs on display around town. As we gather in front of the plant gate guard, we are met by the plant's manager who then gives us a personal tour of the beautiful outdoor exhibition, before leading us through the base museum – a privilege experienced by only a handful of westerners! The hospitality of the plant's staff is exceptional and we are treated to a tour of the live work floor where the latest upgrades are implemented on RuAF Su-25s, many of them combat veterans from recent and past conflicts.

We leave the plant truly impressed, but Oleg has another surprise for us when he takes us to a displayed MiG-15, which is only known to the locals! We return to our base with large smiles on our faces.

Day 3 and we leave for Kubinka again, brimming with excitement, which is soon dashed by the incoming weather and the news that the RuAF has declared today a non-flying day. Some quick thinking from our tour manager rescues the day and the group splits in two – some remain at the base for more photos, while the majority of the group take the unexpected chance to visit the world-class Kubinka Tank museum. Although not a part of the itinerary, many in our midst were secretly happy to have this opportunity to see an amazing collection of WWI to modern day tanks from all over the world.

While some of us are marvelling at the legendary Maus, others get to shoot AK-47s and WWII-era rifles at the adjacent range.

After a few hours well-spent, we re-join our comrades at the base, who it turns out have also had a good day – getting to see some rarities take off, including the Il-20 command post and the PAK FA.

Some of our creative colleagues are undeterred by the rain and turn lemons into lemonade by taking many beautiful and artistic puddle and rainbow shots. We wave goodbye to the Lenin statue and then capture a MiG-21PF on a pylon in the garrison town.



We return to Tuchkovo, where the staff have arranged more beer for us and we take full advantage of it, whilst excitedly sharing photographs and stories of the day.

Next day we start off full of hope and high expectations for the truly magnificent exhibition at the brand new Patriots Park. We have barely got off the bus, when Mil's own Mi-8 lands right next to us in the car park! We are awe-struck by the scale and variety of the exhibition – there are 50,000 exhibits - from tanks and guns to space rockets! We take it all in as we dash through the site, photographing the displayed helicopters.

A short bus journey takes us to the park's museum – a magnificent collection of several dozen beautiful aircraft, as well as hundreds of tanks and classic cars. Many beautiful shots are taken, while we also bow our heads in awe and gratitude at the many displays telling the stories of the real men and women of WWII.



We leave the museum and head to the Alabino live-firing range, where we take our seats in the grandstand and ready our lenses for the pending action!

Soon, attack helicopters fire rockets above our heads, while tanks roll in and, before our eyes, begin annihilating the targets with cannon and missile fire.

Meanwhile elite Spetsnaz demonstrate a seaborne assault – capturing and holding a bridgehead, through which yet more tanks and SPGs arrive to take up firing positions.

We are treated by various demonstrations of infantry, tank and artillery working together, while long-range flame throwers and even ballistic missiles set up before us. We are left truly impressed by the display and return to the Park to continue browsing the thousands of exhibits.



We finish the day and transfer to our new hotel which is in Moscow itself for the last 2 nights, where we share a few more beers and laughs with each other.

Our 5<sup>th</sup> day in Russia is all about museums and sightseeing. We start off with the large Victory Park (pictured below), where we not only get to see the two big outdoor exhibitions, but also take the time to visit the awe-inspiring indoor memorial to WWII. The enormity of the war on the Eastern Front and the huge sacrifices of the Soviet people are placed into perspective by many poignant dioramas, panoramas and displays from the war. We are treated to an emotional lights and sounds display, while we have the unexpected privilege to shake hands with a Russian Admiral – veteran of the Great Patriotic War!



We then proceed to our second destination – the Central Armed Forces Museum, where we enjoy many more aircraft, tanks and other historical exhibits from the ancient times to present day. From the heart-wrenching final goodbyes, etched into concrete by the defenders of the Brest fortress, to the wreck of Gary Power's U2, the museum has many treasures.

Some skilful navigating and planning by our tour manager and Oleg, mean that we manage to take in a tour of Red Square and GUM, with several hours left over for extra bonus trips. While a small part of our group decide to have a leisurely evening stroll through Moscow's centre, the majority of the group embark on yet more adventures in addition to the itinerary.

We visit the VDNH park where we see several displayed aircraft, as well as a Vostok space rocket and even one of the Buran test vehicles. Undeterred by the rain, we then dash over to the magnificent Vadim Zadorozhny Museum at the other end of town. The group is very impressed and appreciative of the opportunity to see this truly remarkable private collection of planes, tanks and classic vehicles. We reunite at the hotel late in the evening, having spent another great day and accumulated yet more unique stories to tell.

Our last day in Russia starts off with a visit to the amazing Central Air Force Museum – better known as just "Monino".

We are treated to unique access by the museum staff and go behind the barriers to all the indoor and outdoor exhibits, a brand new WWII collection and even a tour of the largest helicopter on earth - the V-12! We are treated to several fly pasts of active RuAF transports, flying in to nearby Chkalovskaya Air Base and even get to visit the wreck dump, which is normally off limits.

Happy and satisfied, we begin our journey to Sheremetyevo Airport for our return flight. However, the plane experience is not over, as we stop to photograph an Aeroflot passenger plane on display and then are treated by Oleg to a visit to the local flight school, where we are given tours of several Russian airliners and take the opportunity to snap a group photo.

We say goodbye to Oleg at the terminal and do some spotting and souvenir shopping as we wait for our departure time. Later, as we sit in our Aeroflot widebody, we share more stories and photos, while many of us are thinking what an amazing trip this has been, packed with hundreds of aircraft and many unique experiences. We say our goodbyes, promising each other to meet again on another great aviation adventure.