

RANGERS IN RUSSIA:

The Story of the 1962 Tour

Rangers, Britain's most experienced football adventurers, were ready to fly off again into the great unknown. Russia, in the early 1960s, was as mysterious as the likes of North Korea is now. But even the most hardened of the Ibrox travellers must still have felt a real sense of excitement about the impending trip.

But while the USSR was still looked upon as the land of mystery and intrigue, there is no doubt Russian football had progressed as quickly as their scientists. Rangers were set to face teams as slick, well-drilled and as fit as any in the world. And, they were set to carry on their blue-clad shoulders, the soccer prestige of a nation. At the time, it was said that Rangers were the only team in the country prepared to take on such a challenge – and have the ability to overcome it.

When the plane took off from Scottish soil, there were seven players aboard – as well as the unavailable Jim Baxter – who had yet to sign new contracts. Unperturbed, the manager said: "That can be sorted out when we get back from the Soviet Union. Now, who to play at left-half or, for that matter, centre-forward, is far greater a worry for me."

On board, the players enjoyed the strangest of lunches as they sped through the blue Scandinavian skies at an estimated 500mph. They laughed and joked as trim hostesses served succulent caviar, fresh bread and Danish butter. And then there was the Russian cheese and ... cider.

Cider made a strange contrast for a meal which deserved champagne, and it should have served as a warning to the players – a warning of the fiasco which would meet them at Moscow Airport. When the Rangers party emerged from customs, there was NO red carpet for Scotland's mightiest team. There was not even a single autograph hunter, and not even a blink of interest!

A few minor officials from the Russian FA had taken the trouble to come along and greet the party, which miffed both players and management alike. This was followed by fretting and fuming as the party were forced to hang around for over an hour before being taken by bus to their hotel.

Mystery still surrounded the small-print details of the tour, such as where and when the final two matches would be played. The players were also hoping to train at the giant Lenin Stadium, venue of their first match against Locomotiv Moscow, the following day, although that had apparently still to be ratified by the same minor officials who had welcomed the Scots to their homeland.

Still, the only thing the players wanted was their beds. The flight from Renfrew Airport to Copenhagen had been among the bumpiest endured, and then there was the trip to Moscow and the subsequent wait to be taken to their hotel. It was warm in Moscow's late Spring, and the forecast for the day of the opening game was for a scorcher!

But Rangers introduced their own brand of Iron Curtain secrecy, as when they were asked to name their team, they refused to do so. Oh well, when in Moscow...

And while the Rangers players bedded down for the night, a storm was brewing in the Far East. Jim Baxter and his Army teammates had been accused of being disrespectful to the King and Queen of Malaya – a charge they strongly refuted.

The players landed in hot water after losing 4-3 to the Malayan national team in Kuala Lumpur. A local newspaper accused them of NOT remaining on the field when the King and Queen arrived, and failing to stand to attention for the national anthem – and losing their tempers when it became clear that the game was going against them.

The Army were booed on several occasions for rough play and several newspapers demanded they be punished for "discourtesy" and "bad sportsmanship". But the manager of the team, Lieut-Colonel AV Lewington defended his players, saying his team had not been called to the field when the King and Queen arrived and that the national anthem had been played AFTER the game, as the players were trooping back to the dressing room for their post-match shower. As one player put it, 'we didn't even know what the Malayan national anthem was, so how were we meant to recognise it when it was played well after the final whistle?'