

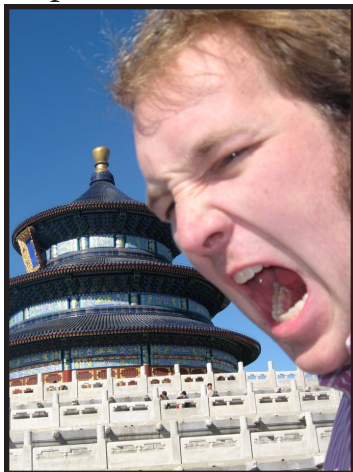
Stephen M. Yoss

Epic Journey 2008 -- Family & Friend's Newsletter
Volume VIII - Far East Escapades & Anchors Away on the Pacific

25 November 2008
At Sea, USS Benfold (DDG-65)

Привет, Сайн байна
уу, 你好, and
Aloha!

Greetings from Russia, Mongolia, China, Hawaii and the bridge of the USS Benfold! The epic world adventure continues with travel through the East, Pacific and beyond. This section of my trip was the most highly planned and anticipated part of my trip. It was so EPIC that it required a special double edition



St. Petersburg, Russia

When I awoke in Amsterdam the morning I was to leave for Russia a sense of excitement flared up inside of me like heartburn after

of the newsletter just to fit in all the tales of glory.

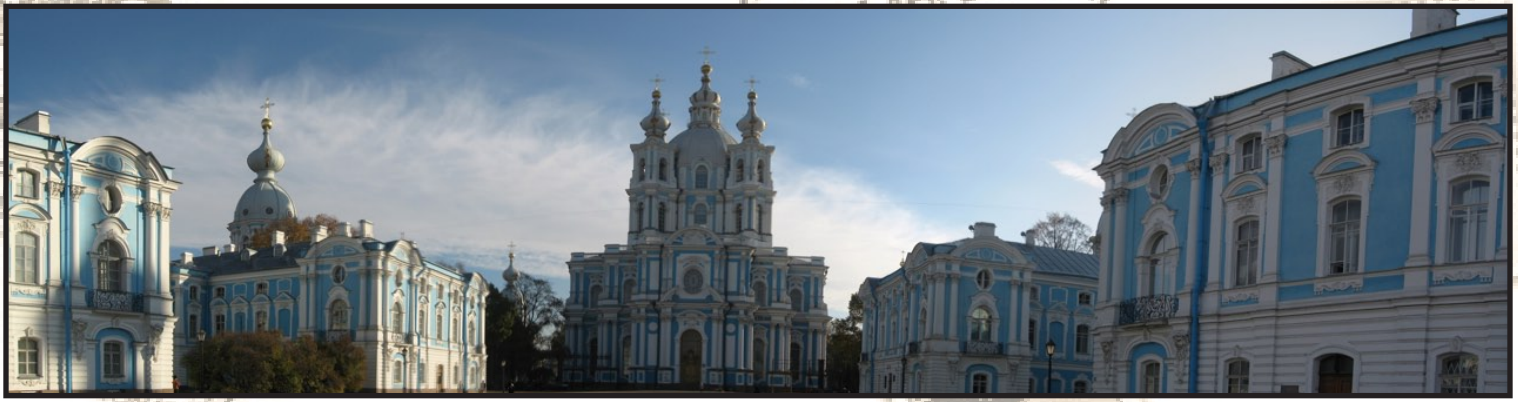
In the last several weeks I enjoyed an opera in St. Petersburg, the beauty of Red Square in Moscow, a wild train ride through Russia, tobogganing down the Great Wall of China like a rocket taking flight, and living the life of a US sailor aboard the USS Benfold. The last month has certainly been one of the most thrilling and entertaining periods of my life and I am happy I can share my stories with you!



At one of many train stations between Moscow and Beijing. The Trans-Mongolian Railway travels for seven days and covers approximately 10,000 kilometers between those two cities. It stops a few times a day in cities throughout Russia, Mongolia, and China. eating spicy fajitas. I realized I was leaving the tame nature of the European Union for the wildness of the Russian Federation. It took months of painstaking effort to arrange my entrance visa and other travel arrangements. My appointments with my dentist are far more enjoyable than the appointments I had with the Russian embassy. My efforts were well rewarded as Russia proved to be a diamond in the rough. My first destination was St. Petersburg, the Venice of the North and the former capital of Imperial Russia. Tsar Peter the Great established St. Petersburg on the delta of the Neva River in 1703. He built the city to his specifications and modeled it after Amsterdam. He moved the capital from Moscow to St. Petersburg where it would remain until the Russian Revolution. In recent years St. Petersburg has become the unofficial



Above: Goofing around at the Temple of the Heaven in Beijing, China. I am pretty sure the locals thought I was Godzilla. **Below:** With Mark Belanger aboard the USS Benfold. Mark arranged for me to travel between Hawaii and San Diego aboard his warship.



cultural capitol of the country. Music, drama, and art flourish there. My time in St. Petersburg was spent wandering the streets doing my best to absorb the culture and vibe of the city. I attended an excellent opera at the famed Mariinsky Theater, took in a water/light show on the shores of the Neva River and had a leisure stroll through the endless corridors of the Hermitage Museum.

St. Petersburg has a low skyline and most buildings look identical. There are few distinguishable landmarks visible everywhere and absolutely no English street signs. It is a city that even a boy scout could get lost in. I have grown to love these types of cities, they are a labyrinth and it is a challenge to understand and appreciate them. A major-

ity of the sights are situated on the banks of the Neva River and Nevsky Prospect (aka Nevsky Avenue). A pleasurable stroll will present you with the world famous Hermitage Museum, the Peter and Paul Fortress, St. Michael's Castle, a variety of beautiful bridges and waterways and many other impressive highlights. As a history buff, I appreciated that this city was home to one of the most important sieges of World War II. The rubble might be gone but city still has many scars from those years.

Moscow, Russia

An overnight train delivered me to Moscow on a crisp clear autumn morning. Moscow has captured my imagination and attention for years. I remem-

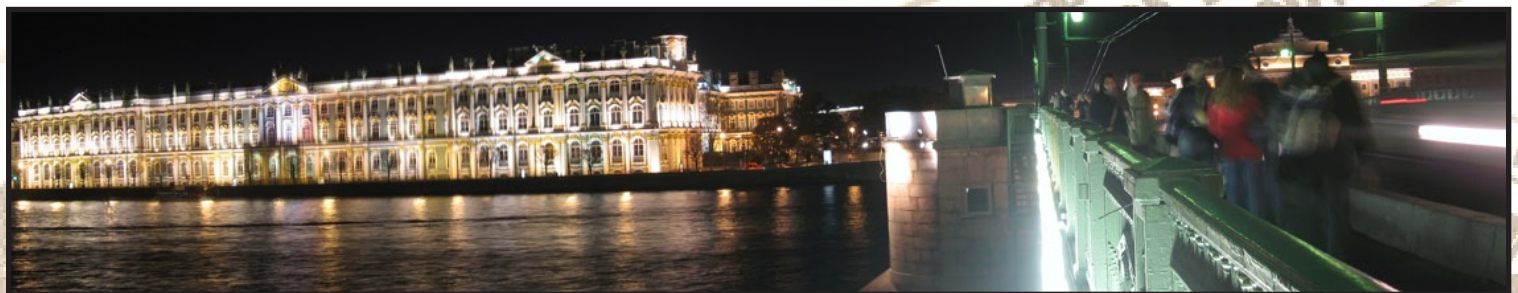


Above: Smolny Cathedral and surrounding buildings in St. Petersburg, Russia. Although called a cathedral these buildings were never used for religious purposes. Below: St. Basil's Cathedral in Moscow, Russia. The beautiful onion shaped domes and bright colors have been dazzling people for centuries.

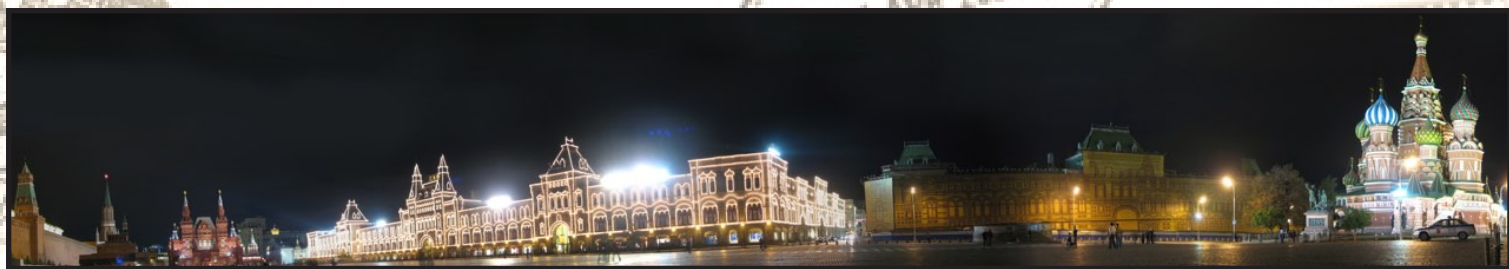
ber watching the news as a little boy and seeing the reporter stand in Red Square with St. Basil's in the background. It was a city of infamy during the Cold War, the capital of the Soviet Bloc, and the other Ally during World War II. A few years ago it would seem inconceivable for an American to independently tour the city. Now, I am one of

countless tourists that come and go at leisure.

My first stop in Moscow was Red Square, the Russian equivalent of Times Square. I have always longed to walk its fabled cobblestone plaza. Red Square is home to a variety of structures the most famous being St. Basil's Cathedral, the Kremlin, and Lenin's Mausoleum. It



The Russian Winter palace, Neva River and Palace Bridge at night. This building was one the winter residence of Peter the Great, it now houses the world famous Hermitage Museum. The Hermitage is one of the greatest collections of art and cultural relics in the world. It is only equaled by the Louvre in Paris and the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.



Red Square at night. The buildings starting from the far left are the Kremlin, Lenin's Mausoleum, the State Historical Museum, the Main Department Store and St. Basil's Cathedral. The square was established in the 15th Century and has been the location of countless historical events.

has seen much in its five centuries of existence. As I approached St. Basil's Cathedral I became lost in the beauty of its vivid colors and unusual shapes. Ivan the Terrible commissioned the cathedral in 1552 to commemorate the capture of Kazan from the Tartans. He was so terrible that he blinded the architect that built it, so that he would never build anything as beautiful ever again. You can not help but walk in circles around the building, taking it in from ev-

ery angle. The exterior of the building is the true attraction as the interior is as disappointing as the Los Angeles Clippers.

Directly across from St. Basil's is the mausoleum, the final resting place of the great Marxist revolutionary Vladimir Ilich Lenin as well as many other Russian leaders. Lenin was principal figure in the Russian revolution and was the first premier of the Soviet Union. When he died in 1924 the government decided to pay

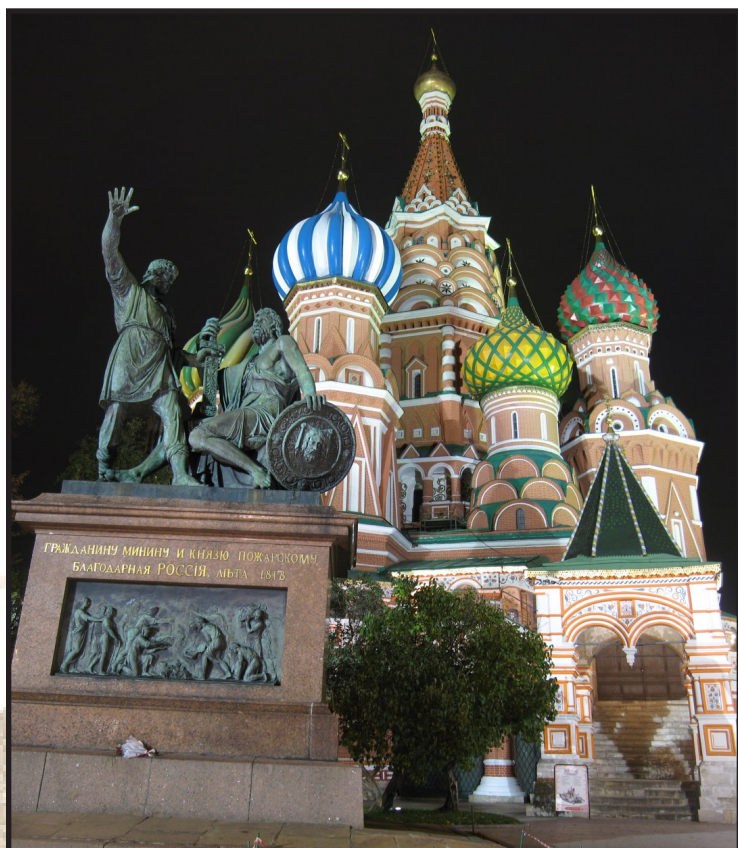
tribute to his life and legacy by building a giant marble tomb in the middle of the Square. His body has been on public display almost every day since his death. Millions of people have come to shuffle past his body and to pay their respects. After queuing for over an hour I was led by a stern soldier to view "Grandfather Lenin". After a security check I was led underground and allowed to walk slowly past his glass coffin. The experience can only be described as eerie, a combination between a Stephen King novel and a trip to the wax museum. I'm not entirely sure the body was real, but I have decided since that I will be cremated.

Moscow has the best metro I have ever experienced. It is better than New York, Tokyo, and even Los Angeles (I know you must be surprised by this). It is efficient, cheap, fast, huge and surprisingly beautiful. Joseph Stalin built the system during the Cold War and did not spare any expense. There are 177 stations spread throughout the city and each is ornately deco-

rated. Crystal chandeliers, gold leaf mosaics, marble floors and beautiful paintings are everywhere. The stations are "palaces of the people". A trip anywhere in the city regardless of the distance is less than a dollar and you rarely wait more than a minute for a train.

I spent the better part of a day traveling from station to station admiring their beauty. One station was more than 80 meters (275 feet) underground and one train I traveled was transformed into a mobile art gallery. I would gladly trade my car for their metro.

I was able to continue my exploration into World War II history by visiting the Museum of the Great Patriotic War in Moscow. It was opened by Russian President Boris Yeltsin and US President Bill Clinton in the early 1990s; it pays tribute to the Russian soldiers that died during the war. It contains a variety of authentic artifacts including weapons, propaganda, vehicles, and uniforms. The lower level is home to the Hall of Tears which has an individual memorial for each of the 25+ million



St. Basil's Cathedral; legend has it that Tsar Ivan the Terrible blinded the architect so that he would never create anything more beautiful.

Russian soldiers that were killed in action. There are also realistic life size dioramas that gives insight to the nature of the battlefronts. History comes alive at this memorial and museum.

My last day I toured the Kremlin and related armory. The Kremlin has served as the residence of tsars, soviet leaders, and is now the official residence of the president of Russia.

It is a collection of buildings including numerous churches, political offices, private residences, and other historical artifacts. This walled citadel is as integral to Russian history as the White House is to American history.

The armory exhibit is separate from the rest of the Kremlin and is significantly more expensive to tour. The exhibit is astounding and I witnessed world trea-



Enjoying a bit of fresh air from the window of my car.

sures unlike anything I have ever seen before. In particular, the Diamond Fund exhibit stands above the other museums I have toured. The Diamond Fund is a special room inside the armory that contains the greatest treasures of the country. The room was built with enough reinforced concrete and steel to give Fort Knox a run for its money. After completely removing everything from my pockets and being frisked twice I was led through a five-foot thick vault door into the room.

I was greeted with a gold nugget twice the size of my head; it weighs 36kg (80lbs)! I walked around the exhibit with my jaw on the floor gawking at the treasures. There are thousands of gems in variety of sizes, shapes, origins, and color. There are pure platinum bars that weigh thousands of grams. The Tsar jewelry is particularly lavish and larger than anything I have ever seen! It is so gaudy that even the most arrogant rapper would blush wearing it. I do not know how you



Above: The train stops a few times a day at various cities in Russia, Mongolia, and China. At almost every stop there are babushkas (grandmothers) selling a variety of delicious homemade cuisine. You certainly do not starve in transit. **Below:** A diorama at the Moscow World War II memorial, it accurately depicts a Russian battlefront during the war.



Getting off the train after seven action packed days! Somehow I have condensed my entire life into the contents of two bags. could keep your head level while wearing the tsar's crown! I have no confirmation of the value of the items in the room, but I would not doubt if it was in the billions. I wish I had pictures, but they forbid photos of the treasures. Gentlemen, you might want to come alone as your next tour will be in Tiffany's if you bring your better half.

The Trans-Mongolian Railway

No epic journey would be complete without a marathon train ride across Russia. The Trans-Mongolian Train originates in Moscow, Russia and terminates in Beijing, China. The journey lasts seven days and covers almost 10,000 kilometers (6,200 miles)! A majority of the trip is through Russia with the last two days in Mongolia and China. You might assume that seven days on a train would be boring, but just the opposite. The journey passed as

quickly as the landscapes outside my window. I expected to spend my days reading and writing in solitude, but instead they were filled spending time with new friends from all over the world.

The night of my departure was a hectic and stressful night. I had to arrange my onward transportation out of China, purchase food for the journey, and get to the train station on time. The Moscow station is a gargantuan structure with hundreds of tracks going every possible direction with thousands of people frantically searching for their train. I found and boarded my train with minutes to spare, no pain no gain right? The trains are divided into several cars and each car has several compartments. Each compartment holds four passengers (second class) or two passengers (first class). I shared my compartment with two guys from Canada, Ian Rodger and Mike Bradshaw.

Almost every person in my car was a Westerner, young, and looking for a good time. This made it easy to build community within our car.

When the wheels started rolling my compartment instantly became the party place. My fellow passengers made their way down and soon the vodka was following as freely as the waters of Niagara Falls. Everybody brought something to share and the first evening was just a glimpse of the fun to come. The coming nights would be filled with sharing stories, drinks, countless hours of poker, and plenty of laughing.

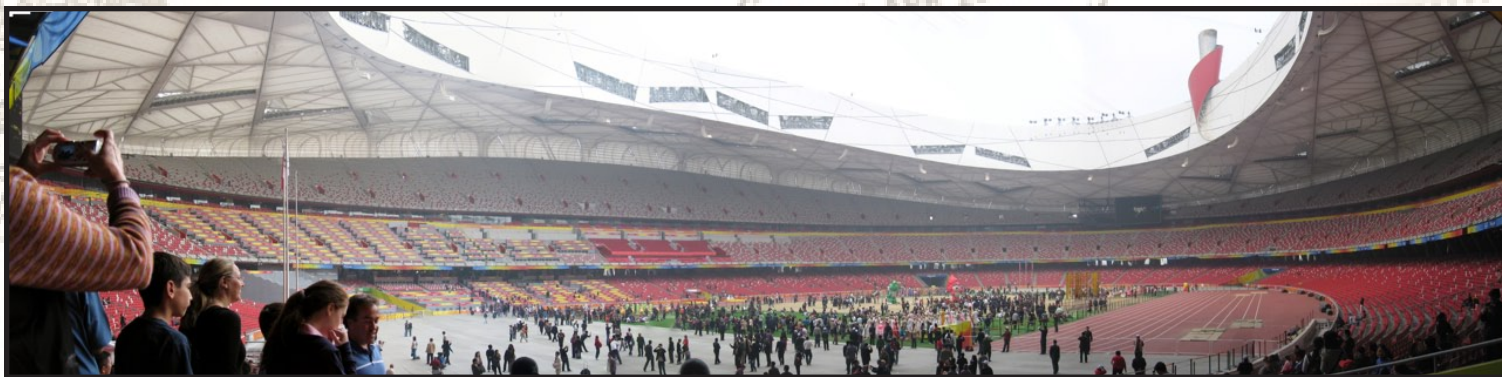
The third night into the journey the train traveled back in time to the days of Plato and Aristotle. My train mates and I decided that we needed to further liven up the journey by throwing a Greek toga party for the entire train. On a

whim we designed some flyers and distributed them throughout the train. We invited people to dress up in a sheet and stop by for a drink (or several). As usual my compartment was the hub of the commotion and soon it was filled to overflowing. For a room that is designed to accommodate four people comfortably, we were able to fit twenty-two! Several dozen people made an appearance over the course of the evening and over sixteen nationalities were represented. The night raged into the wee hours of the morning but everybody left happy.

When the train pulls into a station along the way it stops only for a few brief moments. During that time the platform is flooded with locals selling a myriad of items, including home cooked meals, toiletries, vodka, and beer. No item has a price tag and



The "lower level" of the toga party. There were another ten or so people sitting on the upper bunks above these people. We had music, drinks and good company! It will be a night that we all will remember for many years to come. Photo credit: Amanda Shackleton



often the vendor states a price based on what they think you can pay. During this trip I became a connoisseur of Russian dumplings and beer. I made a point to try the dumplings at every stop and purchase a few liters of ale for the onward journey. In particular, the dumplings on the Russian/Mongolian border were the best (in case you are ever there). The beer is sold in giant plastic bottles ranging in size from two to five liters! The beer is best described as a dark malty ale, but satisfying and refreshing. The only hiccup is the lack of refrigeration, but we did not

let that small problem stop us from enjoying it. The trip was amazing from start to finish and I would definitely do it again. I attribute its success to my fellow passengers; everybody was social and brought something unique to the community. When the train pulled up for the last time in Beijing there was a sense of sadness as everyone gathered their belongings and parted ways. For one week of our lives were the most important people to each other. There was no access to the outside world, all we had was an abundance of time, a deck of cards, a few bottles of



Above: The interior of Beijing National Stadium or as it is known in the Western world, the Bird's Nest. This stadium hosted the 2008 Olympic Summer Games. **Below:** The exterior of the same stadium. Perhaps it is the nest of a giant prehistoric bird?

vodka and each other.

Beijing, China

As the train arrived in Beijing the landscape slowly changed from isolated desert to bustling metropolis in a manner of hours, from the Gobi Desert to the innumerable skyscrapers of downtown Beijing. As I packed my gear, said my poignant goodbyes to my train buddies and made my way out of station, I became enamored with the next adventure.

Unfortunately, arriving in October I was a few months to late to enjoy the Olympics. However, I was able to tour

the Olympic facilities at my leisure and see where the action occurred. When I traveled to Beijing in 2006, the city was in the midst of a building frenzy unlike anything I had seen before. There were half finished buildings everywhere and it seemed like nothing would be finished in time for the games. My observations proved to be false as I toured a finished Olympic Village. The Chinese built several massive stadiums of different varieties including indoor, outdoor, and aquatic. I toured the two most famous structures, the Beijing National Stadium (aka the Bird's



Inside the Beijing National Aquatic Center or as it is more commonly known the "Water Cube". This venue hosted a majority of the aquatic events including swimming, diving, water polo, etc. Additionally, this was the location that American Michael Phelps won eight gold metals in a single Olympiad.



The outer wall and north west corner tower of the Forbidden City during the still of the night, simultaneously beautiful and spooky. Nest) and the Beijing as well as the opening/ National Aquatics Cen- closing ceremonies. It is ter (aka the Water Cube). a masterpiece contem-

The Bird's Nest is a massive outdoor stadium that was the site of a majority of the track events I would gladly exchange my beloved Angel Stadium for it. The stadium is

as much a home of sport as a home for theater. It is filled with theater lights, rigging and other stage equipment. If they ever wanted to have the world's largest performance of Cats, Beijing could host it. On the floor of the stadium there was a selection of costumes worn during the opening/closing ceremonies. They are more elaborate and decorative than anything I had ever seen. As I wandered through the stadium I came to appreciate how many athlete's dreams had been fulfilled or crushed during the few brief weeks of the games.

Directly across from the Bird's Nest is the Water Cube or as I like to call it "the house that Michael Phelps built". This building is also a beautiful piece of architecture that uses an exemplary blend of glass, steel and lighting. By day it is a semi-translucent building and by night it glows every color in the rainbow. There are two pools inside the building, one for competition and the other for

practice. The competition pool hosted a variety of events including water polo, swimming, synchronized swimming and diving. It was also the location that Michael Phelps won his eight gold metals for the US!

Visiting the Great Wall is mandatory when traveling to Beijing. Much like how grand describes that ravine in northern Arizona, the adjective great truly befits the wall. It was built circa 210 BC to protect China from nomadic invaders. It begins in the Kansu providence and extends to the Yellow Sea. It is approximately 2,400KM (1,500 miles) in total length. My first visit to the wall in 2006 was a complete tourist trap with oodles of other people. This time I decided to get on a bus for a couple of hours and visit the more remote Mutianyu section of the Wall. It proved to be worth the extra effort as the experience was more authentic and meaningful. I got to climb the real deal, a section of the wall



Above: At the entrance of the Forbidden City. If you look closely you can see a large portrait of Chairman Mao Zedong hanging in the middle of the photo. **Below:** At the Great Wall of China. This section is located in the more distant Mutianyu provenance. This section of the wall is authentic, unlike the other sections that a majority of the tourists go to.



The crew receiving a refueling line from an oil tanker. The Benfold participates in many replenishments while at sea. During this time they receive fuel, mail and other supplies the ship might need. Also in view of this photo are the Tomahawk and Harpoon missiles launchers.

that existed two hundred years before Christ and will most likely exist into perpetuity. I was one of only a handful of people there which allowed me to have a more personal experience.

Rather than climb down the wall I could not help but take the far easier toboggan option, far from authentic but certainly fun! The Chinese built a dilapidated track that runs from the top of the wall to the visitor's center several hundred feet below. No sane person would ever consider getting near it, much less riding it. In the spirit of adventure (or stupidity) I decided to roll the dice and have a go. As I boarded the death sled and looked down a track that probably had not been maintained since disco had been popular, I said a quick prayer to God, Jesus, Allah, Buddha, Chuck Norris and anybody else that could help. I eased off the break and proceeded to rocket down the mountain faster than a fat kid

running for cake (and I love cake). The track has several hairpin turns and crosses several chasms while being hundreds of feet above the ground. I escaped the ride thankful for my life and with another great story.

Beijing is a beautiful city with great people and culture. One of the best experiences is just taking a walk around the city. From the Summer Palace to the Forbidden City it is a fascinating

place to get lost in (my favorite hobby). In particular, the Wangfujing district satisfied my curiosity for the unique. It is a street dedicated to the most unusual foods you will EVER see. Replace your Big Mac for a kebob of live scorpions, substitute your French fries for a side of silk worms and wash it all down with milk from an animal I will not mention. The food on this street is more a show for tourists than

part of the regular diet of the Chinese. The Chinese (and myself) are much more fond of dumplings than anything else. These tiny steamed bundles of joy can be found just about anywhere and are always delicious!

Honolulu, Hawaii

From the heart of the Eastern world to the Pacific edge of the Americas, I waved goodbye to my adventures in Asia and



(L-R): Mark Belanger, Jack Donahue and Steve Yoss; The guys and I paid our respects to the fallen sailors of the USS Arizona in Pearl Harbor. The destroyed ship is still visible below the waterline.



Above: This ship supplied the USS Benfold with thousands of gallons of fuel. During replenishments, ships come within a hundred yards of each other. It is a very delicate process! **Below:** A helicopter landing on the stern of the ship.

welcomed the familiarity of my home country. Initially, I roamed Oahu by myself, I explored the many beaches, ancient volcanoes and beautiful countryside. After a few days I experienced a joyful reunion when I was joined by my best friend Mark Belanger. It had been ten months since we had seen each other and I was overwhelmed with jubilation and glee. This meeting was not by coincidence but had been planned months prior. My travels had been organized around meeting him in Hawaii at the end of October. We were to meet and travel back

to San Diego aboard his ship, the USS Benfold.

USS Benfold (DDG-65)

You might be wondering how in the world a civilian was able to travel aboard a billion dollar vessel of war. I would like to tell you that I was there at the president's request or that my writings had made a celebrity but my friend Mark arranged the cruise on my behalf. The Navy occasionally operates a program called a Tiger Cruise. The program invites the friends and family of servicemen aboard

the ship of their relative to experience life at sea. The type of cruise depends on the ship, their mission, and commanding officer. Some cruises only last a day and restrict what the passenger can see or do. I was one of about fifty lucky people chosen for this voyage. My cruise lasted seven days, allowed me to see almost everything aboard the ship and gave me an even greater appreciation for our sailors.

Mark is a graduate of the United States Naval Academy class of 2007. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates commissioned him into the United States Navy at the rank of ensign at

his graduation last year. The Benfold is his first ship and he serves as the STRIKE warfare officer. His primary responsibility is to maintain the ship's numerous tomahawk cruise missiles. Whenever the ship trains or actually launches a cruise missile it is his responsibility that it is conducted correctly, safely, and successfully. In addition to his duties as the STRIKE officer, he has numerous other collateral duties that keep him far busier than any other person I know.

While aboard the Benfold I lived the life of an officer since the person who sponsored me was an officer. I lived



The massive 5" gun firing a few rounds. The awesome force of this gun would make the entire ship vigorously shake when fired.



Pearl Harbor and the surrounding area. The above ship supports vertical takeoff aircraft (e.g. Helicopters). To the right, the memorial for the USS Arizona. This harbor was the location of a majority of the destruction that occurred on December 7th, 1941.

with Mark in his stateroom and ate my meals in the wardroom with the ship's other officers. I shadowed him and witnessed a week in his life. Life at sea is far different than life on land. Each day begins before dawn and sometimes does not end until far into the night (or sometimes the next day). Each day every officer has a variety of tasks to fulfill their primary duties. In addition, they must also stand watch for four or five hours at either the bridge (where they drive/control the ship) or in the combat systems room (where they control the ship's weapons). The time at which they stand watches changes every day. For example, if Mark stood watch today from 7AM to noon, tomorrow he would stand watch from 2AM to 7AM. It is a good day if he can sleep to sleep for six hours, but often it is much less.

When an officer is standing watch at the bridge they are responsible for the navigation of the ship. They are in charge of the direc-

tion, speed, watching for other vessels, communication as well as many other tasks. I stood many hours of watch with Mark and observed him command a team of almost ten other people. He explained that during his deployment in the Persian Gulf he was constantly watching for pirates and other adversaries. Since the waters between Hawaii and the mainland are safe the atmosphere was calm and relaxed. This gave us plenty of time to catch up and visit with each other.

There were a variety of demonstrations while aboard. The three highlights were watching a helicopter land on the stern, refueling at sea, and the ship's weapons presentation. The Benfold has a flight deck on the stern (back) of the ship. It is capable of landing, rearming and refueling a giant Seahawk helicopter. In the middle of the cruise one of the other ships sent their helicopter to our ship to pick up one of our passengers. Landing a helicopter is the

second most dangerous operation and requires numerous preparations and safety precautions. As the helicopter approached the Benfold it had a closer resemblance to a flying bus than a whirlybird. The expert pilot landed it perfectly while the ship was doing twenty knots and rolling with the ocean. It received the passenger and took off as skillfully as it arrived. After it departed the crew gave a demonstration on what happens in a crash situation. They demoed their fire fighting equipment and showed how to rescue the helicopter crew in the case of an emergency.

The last day of the cruise the Benfold needed to refuel before pulling into the San Diego harbor. The Navy requires that all their ships have a certain quantity of fuel before docking, regardless of the port. The Benfold uses thousands of gallons of fuel each day. According to the ship's commanding officer (aka CO) the cost of the fuel each day is approximately \$80,000US! Refueling at sea is the most dangerous operation of the ship and requires the participation of the entire crew. During a RAS (replenishment at sea) the Benfold will take on ship fuel, helicopter fuel, mail, and



Ensign Mark Belanger standing at attention as more senior battleship passes the Benfold in the open waters of the Pacific Ocean. As ships pass each other the crews salute as a sign of respect.



anything else it needs.

The morning the RAS occurred the Benfold was one of many ships taking on fuel. Just as you would wait at the pump for your car, the Benfold queued behind other ships waiting its turn with the oilier (the ship with the fuel/supplies). As the ship ahead of us finished and broke away the Benfold cautiously pulled up to the oilier. During this operation the ships come within a hundred yards (91 meters) of each other and must maintain the same speed and heading. From the oilier they fired from a rifle a small rope to our ship. The small rope eventually turned into a bigger rope, than a steel cable and finally a giant fuel nozzle. For the next hour the ship

received fuel to feed its hungry engines. Like the ship before us, when we were full we broke away and rejoined the fleet.

While all the demonstrations were awesome my favorite was the

weapons presentation. Perhaps it is because I am a young man and like things that go boom, but the weapons aboard the ship blew me away (pardon the pun)! The demonstration was divided into two sections, the big stuff (e.g. Gatling guns) and the slightly smaller stuff (e.g. .50 caliber machine guns). The first demonstration consisted of firing the 20mm CIWS (pronounced see-wis) Gatling gun. This gun's purpose is to shoot down air targets. Using radar it can shoot a missile or anything else out of the air in seconds. It shoots approximately 100 rounds a second and can unload its magazines in less than a minute. Its bullets are about the size of a large hand and are made from depleted uranium. The demonstration lasted

for only a second, but for that second that gun reined terror in the sky.

Next, I moved from the stern to the bow (front) of the ship to watch the 5" (12.7cm) gun unload pure chaos. The crew fired ten rounds in short bursts. Other than missiles this is the largest piece of artillery on the ship. The ship can use a variety of projectiles ranging from explosives to armor piercing rounds. The rounds weigh approximately 80 pounds (36kg) and can do serious damage to a target. When fired the ship shakes like San Francisco during an earthquake and it is louder than the fireworks of the 4th of July. The gun can hit targets on either land or sea, so don't become a bogey!

In addition to the big guns the ship



Above: A view of the super structure and bow of the Benfold. She has a multitude of radars, sonars, and other electronic sensors. **Below:** Not only did the US Navy let me aboard for a week but they also let me get some trigger time on a .50 caliber machine gun! It kicked like a mean horse, but it was certainly fun!

also has a variety of deck weapons. The deck weapons are primarily defensive and are used to defend the ship when under close quarters attack. After a safety briefing and instructions the crew allowed myself and the other tiger passengers a little trigger time. The first gun I was able to shoot was a .50 caliber fully automatic machine gun. Next, they moved me up to upper level of the ship to fire the 25mm chain gun. This gun looks like a supercharged M-16 and although mounted to the ship it can still give tremendous recoil. I could not help but laugh like Tony Montana from Scarface as I eased the trigger back on these guns and fired several rounds into the blue waves of the Pacific Ocean.

While the guns might seem impressive the true might of the battleship comes from its battery of guided missiles. The Benfold can

hold approximately 90 guided missiles at any one time. Each missile costs hundreds of thousands of dollars; therefore we did not see a demonstration. The missiles are used to destroy surface targets hundreds of miles away, they are brilliantly designed and can be controlled mid-flight. The ship also has a variety of electronic warfare systems and defensive sensors that aid the primary weapon systems. These and the other tools are all controlled from the combat systems room deep inside the ship.

While the crew might always at work while underway they still keep a trace of a social life. Halloween occurred while I was aboard the ship and the crew went to great lengths to dress up and entertain each other. Their costumes ranged from an authentic Michael Jackson to adult baby complete with rattle and bonnet. The



The Benfold beautifully gliding through the water at dawn.

last evening aboard the ship we feasted outside at what they call a “steel beach picnic”. There was good food, music, laughing and socialization amongst everybody. They work incredibly hard and small tokens of normalcy such as these make it easier to live six months away from loved ones.

On the seventh day the ship pulled into the San Diego Naval Base, and the crew was warmly greeted by their family and friends. The Benfold began its tour in May and had been away six months, it traveled to the other side of the world to protect our nation’s interests. The crew might choose their lifestyle but their actions are ensuring our freedom and security. Please remember to thank our veterans and active military for their time of service. I will forever be grateful to the crew of the Benfold for graciously hosting me and letting me see how they live.

The story was supposed to end here. I originally planned to come home after my voyage on the Benfold. After all, I would disembark in San Diego a city less than two hours from my home. As I got off the ship I looked north to home and then gazed south yearning for the next adventure. Much to the dismay of my family and friends, I gathered my nerve and traveled south to Mexico and Central America.

The next edition of my newsletter will be focused on my adventures south of the border and beyond. It is a fantastic tale of my travels through the Yucatán of Mexico, the islands of the Caribbean and on the mainland of Central America. As always, thank you very much for reading. Expect the next edition in a few weeks. Thank you for being a part of my epic journey.

Cheers!
--Steve



Holding a round of the 5 inch gun ammunition. This projectile weighs approximately 80lbs (36kg)! Thank God I did not drop it on my foot.