

## **Travel junkie's first trip was to communist Russia**

By JEFFREY SIMPSON, Staff Reporter

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When Kirsten Koza was 11 years old, her parents shelled out \$400 for a plane ticket and bundled her off to spend the summer at a Communist camp for kids in the Soviet Union.

"They gave me \$50 and said, 'Bye-bye, darling, off you go, have a nice summer,' " Koza, who's now 39, said in a recent interview from her home in Ontario.

Her grandmother, an ardent Communist who spent the 1970s attending secret meetings and watching propaganda films in Toronto, had submitted her name to the Soviet Union, and Koza was selected to be part of a group of Canadian youngsters who headed over.

"She basically raffled me off," Koza said. "But I was excited to go. I was over the moon about going."

It proved to be one of the most memorable experiences of Koza's life.

Two decades later, her parents were preparing to move to France when her mother discovered a box of mementos from the trip stashed in a closet. Among other things, the box contained Koza's diary and scrapbook from that summer.

Koza realized she had the makings of a book and began writing a travel memoir about her often hilarious exploits that summer as a precocious child.

The recently published *Lost in Moscow* is the result of that work. The story is told from an 11-year-old point of view, but isn't intended for children; it touches on topics such as sex, fashion, politics and religion.

It seems the two-month stint wasn't long enough to turn her into a Communist.

"It probably did a little bit of the opposite," she said.

But she discovered that some things worked well. Communism might have been beneficial for those with special talents, she said.

"If you tried hard and if you had talent of any kind, they absolutely did nurture you and they had what seemed like a pretty good education system," she said.

But the country fell short when it came to the young Canadians' expectations for food.

"We were given whole boiled tongue at one meal," she said. "I'll never forget - it still had the taste buds on it. So there was this cow tongue sitting there and it was undercooked, so it bled when you put your knife and fork into it."

She was saved from the ordeal of eating it when she was kicked out of the dining hall that evening for acting up.

The only time she wanted to return home early was when she developed tonsillitis. Instead of simply giving her a dose of antibiotics the Russian doctors zapped her tonsils with radiation treatments.

"Through a translator they told me, 'You'll never have tonsillitis again,'" she said.

And she never did. But she did develop thyroid problems and required a replacement. "I'm a ticking time bomb for a lot of neck and throat cancers," she said.

Other than that, she had a great time. The trip also included a parachute jump and being chased by Red Army soldiers around Moscow.

She and a friend hadn't realized that there were certain hours people were forbidden from walking through Red Square until the soldiers started pursuing them.

"The whistles were blowing and there were police and army men running at us," she said. "Of course we ran - what any sensible person would do. We ran until we were entirely lost. We didn't even know the name of our hotel."

But Koza eventually found her way home, ultimately changed by her experience that summer.

"It opened my eyes to travel and acceptance to people from other cultures," said Koza, who cycled through Romania with her sister-in-law last year. "And I can't stop travelling. It instilled it and I love it to this day. I love exploring."

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