

Glamour hit the streets of Moscow when Thierry Mugler's fashion circus arrived

PORTRAIT **BRAD BRANSON/FRITZ KOK**

A TWIST OF MUGLERMOSCOW LENIN

REPORT **KIM BOWEN**

During one boiling hot day in

May, photographer Brad Branson and I queued for twelve-and-a-half hours outside the Soviet Embassy in London's Bayswater Road. Due to an altercation in the lobby some years ago, those applying for visas are now obliged to wait in the street. Couriers and people who are familiar with the procedure queue-jump expertly, causing fights in the road, where the Metropolitan Police can deal with them. Others, less experienced (us), stand stupidly in the exhaust fumes, or squat, or balance on wobbly milk crates, occasionally getting up and wandering to the front in frustration to see what's going on. Nothing's going on.

During the course of the day, the Embassy treated itself to a two-hour lunch break and four people were allowed in, an achievement which was heralded each time by an announcement of "collection" or "application", delivered in a fierce *Dr No* voice over a small speaker mounted on the wall by the entrance. We were the last to get in the gate. "What do you want?" asked the squat beige man at the door. We responded (with exceptional politeness) that we wished to lodge an ▶



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Gorby dolls

► application for a visa. Expressionless, he scanned our file, closed it and handed it back, declaring, "The Embassy is now closed, come back tomorrow." He turned on his heel and went back through the heavy door.

In the end, we received our visas on the day before flying, only fifteen minutes before Intourist, the Russian tourist board, shut for the day. The purpose of the trip was to accompany French fashion star Thierry Mugler and his crew of models, voguers and photographers to Moscow to stage two events — the Miss Supermodel USSR contest, and a major Mugler retrospective — in association with Soviet cultural communication group Ibis International.

Inevitably, it wasn't as easy as it sounded. On arrival we discovered that our hotel booking had been cancelled at the last minute. Due to unrest in the Baltic, a major political meeting had been called and all hotel rooms, booked or otherwise, had been corralled. Alix Malka, Mugler's press officer, had even attempted to cancel the entire event but had been unable to book a telephone call to the West in time. Instead of a hotel, Branson and I — along with Danilo, a New York hairdresser, and Apollonia B, a make-up artist from Greece — were assigned an apartment in the sprawling, dirty, grim, factory district.

To drive anywhere in Moscow takes an eternity — we seemed to phut-phut past the same gigantic apartment blocks over and over again. Everything is grey, especially in the rain. Maintenance is not high on the priority list in Moscow. Paint peels and doors buckle. Corner tobacco kiosks are identifiable a quarter of a mile away, so deep is the queue. Battered old boxy cars in every neutral shade imaginable seethe along the wide avenues. All the windows appear to drip with condensation and scars from old combat are swathed in sticky tape. The air was so thick and grey the first few days it seemed to be smeared with salt. The damp was penetrating, but fortunately our apartment — roughly the size of two cigarette kiosks and situated at the top of a

gargantuan apartment block — was warm. We were careful to conceal our distaste from our Russian drivers, who were peeking in with gleeful comments of "not bad, not bad".

The next morning our translators arrived. Branson and I were assigned Aksana, a plump bespectacled young woman of 25. I asked her to choose freely from the carrier bag full of cosmetics that I'd brought from London. "I cannot take this present, it makes me feel very bad to take like this from you," she cried. I insisted that she help herself, explaining that they were gifts for her, and that if she didn't accept them, I'd feel very bad. She nervously relented.

From that moment on Aksana watched me like a mother, adjusting my collar if it was awry, stroking my hair back into place if it strayed, picking up my handbag and following me if I wandered more than four feet away from it. Wherever I was at any given point, her eyes were upon me. My guide books were full of reminders that Russians are very expressive physically and that intrasexual affection should not be misinterpreted, but I became convinced that she fancied me. As it later turned out, the Russians were every bit as puzzled by our sexuality as we were by theirs.

The most demanding concern in Russia is food. If you are vegetarian, then you may as well forget it. Theoretically it's better if you are a fish eater, since for tourists there is no shortage of caviar. The more adventurous can try the battered fish which is rather appallingly fried in beef fat. Voguers Willie Ninja and Adrian Magnifique were suspicious of everything but the meat, heartily ingesting fearful plates of lamb in mayonnaise and Spam soup.

Six nights out of seven we dined at the same restaurant, peculiarly located on a housing estate at least twenty miles from the city centre. Recommended by one of the translators, it was the only establishment sensible enough to stay open for our late dining hours. The tables were theatrically set with candles, flowers and silver tableware. Vodka was served liberally, and as the week progressed it became a daily staple as the food supplies became less and less palatable. Nevertheless, Mugler, who adores all things Russian, was in seventh heaven as yet another bowl of caviar was pushed in his direction — unlike model Tanya Coleridge, who demanded, "Horseradish! Something sharp to kill the bacteria!" The most fascinating dinner conversation featured voguer Adrian's instructions — delivered in a pure Bronx honk — on how to perform a "proper" blowjob: "You have to grab the cack an' the balls together in the one hand..." and so on. At least it took one's mind off the food.

We were finally transferred to the Hotel Ukraine, one of seven monolithic tourist hotels commissioned by Lenin that dominate the Moscow skyline with their jagged spires. Entrance is gained only with a pass card and guests are obliged to sign a form agreeing, among other things, not to "gamble or behave in a demoralizing way". The hotel was packed to the gills with cardinals, bishops and monks of the Russian Orthodox Church, amassed in Moscow for the election of the new Russian Pope. There is something dreadfully surreal about being crammed in a lift with twenty-five men who all look like Rasputin.

Shopping in Moscow's department stores is an experience not to be missed. The men's jumpers on display are so synthetic that they squeak on contact. Towelling hair elastics, meanwhile, are so

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Space is the place... the Soviet space museum



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► precisely regarded that they are enshrined in glass cabinets. The watch counter was six people deep. We stared in awe at battleship-sized cotton girdles and brassieres designed like scaffolding. My heart contracted in pity for Russian women.

Nearby in the main tourist shopping street of Arbat, Moscow's revered artists' quarter of old, we examined vast numbers of *matryoshka* dolls. The illegal version of these feature Gorbachev as the largest doll, with Brezhnev inside, followed by Khrushchev, Stalin and finally a foetus-sized Lenin. By this stage we were well used to paying for everything on the street with dollars — the government exchange rate for roubles is so extortionate that it makes more sense to run the risk of arrest and do all your business on the street. Even taxi drivers keep their doors locked until a hard currency price is fixed.

While we wandered, the Hotel Roysia — Mugler's temporary headquarters — was a hive of activity. All the models had been briefed by Mugler the day before; he had paced about the stage, brown hands clenched and waving, exhorting the girls to "*combat à mort*" and to "*utilisez votre magnétisme animal*", with the translator ranting alongside "as if she were trying for President", according to Branson. Mugler urged the girls to watch *Ninja* and *Magnifique* "*pour l'esprit de la*

marche". As the vogueurs swished their limbs about like flyswatters, the girls stared on awestruck, pausing momentarily to applaud.

The actual competition was a drawn-out affair. All the pomp of Thierry Mugler (which is considerable), and all the circumstance of the USSR was an absurd blend. There were several breaks in the Supermodel parade for heavy metal groups, who ground their hips so hard they must have been cracking walnuts up their anuses. When the girls, attired in Mugler, glided (albeit somewhat awkwardly) onstage, the Russian audience appeared to be pinned to their seats by G-force winds. The Parisian gloss was so powerful that all the colour from the room seemed to be sucked onto the stage. It is surprising to see exactly how cut off Russia is in the fashion stakes from the rest of Europe.

The panel of judges included Mugler, superstar model Iman, Frederika of City models in Paris, Brad Branson, myself and many Russian celebrities, actresses and film directors. The final decision was not easy. Backstage, judges gathered in the cavernous corridor, out of earshot of the contestants, and the squabbling was relentless. One of the Russian judges — an enormous, expensively dressed man who clutched at all times a rolled-up copy of *Playboy* (illegal in the USSR) —

led the Russian revolt, insisting that Number 15 must be Miss Supermodel. When none of the Western judges could remember her, screaming matches broke out. Iman shouldered her way in, yelling, "None of us even knows who Number 15 is! The only reason you remember is because you're shtupping her!"

An hour and a half later the winner was announced. All this time the audience waited patiently. It was astounding — Western audiences would have stormed off

home by that time. Elena Boznykoba — tall, slim, and the sole contestant to possess an individuality and sleekness that matched any supermodel on the Western catwalks — was the rightful winner, and Number 15 was thankfully forgotten. Elena's *tour de triomphe* lasted at least forty-five minutes, which prompted an utterly nonplussed Mugler to utter, "My God, I thought she was going to walk forever!"

The next evening Elena went on to appear in Mugler's retrospective fashion show, with the new Russian audience watching in awe and staring at us in puzzlement as we screamed and cheered — the norm at Western fashion shows. The vogueurs were the most popular element and allowed the audience an opportunity to clap and show their pleasure. As before, the women stared hungrily at the cocktail suits and the men drooled unwittingly as their eyes travelled up the models' legs. Pretty much like most Westerners' reactions to Mugler's shows.

After the show Mugler held a demented party in some tastelessly genteel function rooms that could have been inspired by Diane Arbus. People downed half-pints of vodka in one while Russian girls in stonewashed denim learned how to vogue. Rapidly, some sort of ►

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The palatial elegance of the Russian underground



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► vodka-fuelled Felliniesque chaos took over. An invisible centrifugal force seemed to be hurling people atop one another. Brad Branson crashed to the floor, Tanya Coleridge on top of him, while Iman and Luciana, a Brazilian beauty, swirled hysterically on the dancefloor.

The delirious behaviour of the Westerners was so extreme that the Russians joined in with this spiritual hyperventilation in the most curious way. Russian male models were screwing Russian female models in the toilets, and then trying to drag in and grapple with the Western men as well. Everybody seemed to be instantly sexually available. It appears that the Russians had noted the Western behaviour (basically a lot of gay men and straight women having a good time) and reinterpreted it as a free licence for penile dementia. One utterly wrecked Russian man announced to me, "I want someone

in my bed tonight. I want to make sex with you right now!" and he arched his massive hands tarantula-style above me. Needless to say I beat a very hasty retreat.

As the homebound coach rattled through a dawn-gilded Moscow, all the dry neutral colour had melted away and the subtle yellows and blues of the doors and paintwork became apparent. Neither the starkness of the city nor the oddness of the nearly empty shop windows seemed to matter. Our coach was filled with excess Russians, whom we smuggled into the hotel with us, where they remained for the rest of our stay. At a party in our room the next evening, one of them fell asleep in the wardrobe — which unfortunately he also took to be a toilet.

Miss Supermodel Elena spent the last day and a half with us. Her exuberance and kittenish sense of fun was contagious as she warded off ardent bucks left, right and centre. Appallingly, despite Soviet women's reputed status as equal workers, the first-hand observer soon realizes that this is not the case. For women, evidently the most traditional method of escape from the country is via a foreigner's mattress. At one point during our stay, Aksana very generously offered Tampax to a needy Tanya Coleridge, who was incredulous that they couldn't be purchased in Russia. Aksana — who had procured her supply from a Western visitor — told Tanya that you normally couldn't get sanitary towels either, and that usually a torn-up sheet was used. Fifty-odd years ago in outback County Wicklow, Ireland, my mother did the same.

Our last night was spent in Red Square enjoying the mesmeric goosetstep of the guards as they changed their watch over Lenin's embalmed body. Adrian Magnifique sang 'Sailing' with Elena as we were surrounded by supposedly deaf-mute watchsellers, one of whom was arrested — dragged roughly away by plainclothes policemen — to exclamations of horror. His crime — handling foreign currency. At the airport we were told that our flight was full. We insisted that it was not, and began thrusting our baggage down the chute. Our

efforts intensified when I remembered that there would be a meal on the plane, and I know for a fact that we stole one desperate woman's seat. Once boarded, we ate two meals apiece and gulped down sweet liqueurs with half a tranquillizer, groaning with pleasure.

In addition to losing weight, almost everyone on the trip lost their voices from the rubbing-alcohol quality of the vodka. I also spent a week in bed recovering from flu and malnutrition. While I was privileged to have visited Moscow, and could talk of nothing else on my return, I have a memory of standing before my open fridge in a state of confusion, clutching a yoghurt, a boiled egg and an apple. I was actually overcome with choice — I didn't know which to eat. My brain was working on the simplest of levels: "I have three things. I have three things." That is what a week in Russia will do. ●