



‘John, we go ride’

John Lewis travels to Russia to fly a ‘truly awesome aeroplane’ at Mach 2 to the edge of space

Flights in Russian military aircraft started some years ago, but somehow the pictures conveyed an image of ‘cash for rides’ that did not appeal to me. They did get better with Col. Tom Orsos purveying rides in anything military you could think of, including Hind helicopter gunships and contra-rotating-head Kamovs from an airbase near the Black Sea. I started to get tempted again, but then his website died. So through the internet I found that Russian State Tourism, www.bestrussiantour.com were running flights in the MiG 29 for advanced aerobatics and the MiG 31 for edge of space with high mach numbers from the Sokal MiG factory complex in Novgorod, 450 km from Moscow. A factory-prepped MiG with a multi-thousand-hour military pilot sealed the deal, so I started filling out the application. 20 minutes or 45 in the MiG 29, a 45 minute dash in the 31 to the edge of space with some very fancy mach numbers on the way... which to choose?

Anna Komleva was my point of contact and shepherded me not only through the process of going to Russia, with my visa, but also into what was until a few years ago a top secret military base. My local-born interpreter could not believe he was getting entry to an

installation that made Novgorod a closed town under the Communist regime. I must say that during my short stay in Russia my hosts displayed genuine hospitality, were keen to improve their already excellent language skills and suffice it to say, I was not allowed to spend a single rouble whilst I was in their country.

I flew in via Vienna and then took a direct flight to Novgorod. Alternatively, one can bolt on a trip to Moscow with the onward connection by train. Whilst helicopters are my first love, I am a sucker for classic beauty warbirds and I am very lucky to have some illustrious names in my fixed wing log book – Spitfire, Strikemaster, L39 Albatros, Hunter and now the MiG. However, my dilemma was that I wanted to do the MiG 31 trip but the 29 is so visually stunning... It turned out to be my lucky day because the 31 went tech - would I like to do the ride in the 29? Yes please!

I was picked up from my hotel at 0900 after the recommended breakfast of one piece of toast (I took a sailor’s Stugeron travel-sickness pill later) and had a 45-minute drive across town to the base. Apparently, traffic jams are a modern phenomenon in Russia. Security was very much in evidence, as one might expect,

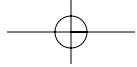


**Left: John Lewis adjusts his oxygen mask as pilot Yuri ratchets up his harness
Above: the day starts with a comprehensive medical check
Below: trussed up like a turkey in a ‘full body corset’ pressure suit**



but after a while we set off across the 20 sq km site to the briefing building. This again takes quite a while with a medical, outfitting into a high-altitude suit, which is a total body corset that lets you empathise with a Christmas turkey and doubles as a ‘G’ suit fed from the onboard sensors on the aircraft. The helmet and oxygen mask demo takes a little time, as you have to experiment in front of the mirror and then do it by feel to the pilot’s satisfaction. The ejection seat procedures come next, followed by somewhat quaint instruction ‘John, we go ride’. Much merriment seemed to ensue over my concern that my large flight boots might blow off at Mach 2. Parachutes start to open progressively as you come down, the seat then detaches – does it have a homing device? – the helicopter will find you – OK...

Suited and booted, as they say, my pilot Yuri and I were taken over to the aircraft in light rain but they all seemed keen to do the flight. Perhaps it had something to do with the alleged 30 pre-flight engineers who had been in since 0500. Yuri was a very undemonstrative guy who through the briefing of where we going to go and what we were going to do instilled enormous confidence –



been there, done that a thousand times. I, on the other hand, wanted to experience the MiG's awesome aerobatic repertoire but did not want my internal organs re-arranged doing things called Immelmans and 9G outside loops.

Now I'm loaded in the rear cockpit. Surprisingly, it is Yuri who belts me in, then

Left: outside it was raining, but the Russians were keen to fly anyway
Below: the crew show John Lewis where the oomph comes from



using a ratchet tightens my harness further (has he remembered what I said?) All the umbilicals come next, then the oxygen controls – boost if you feel sick, but not too much if you don't want to be gasping on empty coming home. Then the instruments, to which it is advisable to pay particular attention, because whilst they have numbers they don't have names. Canopy down, periscope in auto with the gear so I can see the runway over Yuri's head, and he is spooling up the engines – time to go.

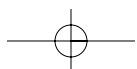
A short taxi and turn into wind on a 3km runway, spool up the engines, bobbing gently



Peter R March

on the brakes. 'OK John?' 'Affirm,' - and we're off. Rain quickly off the canopy – feels racing car fast, rotate after a short distance as you would expect followed by a gently banked turn and now climbing quite steeply into the cloudbase. A bit of afterburner to get through the cloud cover and we pop out into the sunshine at 6,000 ft. The instruments are calibrated in metric so ongoing mental arithmetic is the order of the day. We have to go 170 km to the 'play area' so I use this time to really get my head around the instruments in order to know what is going on. In a few minutes Yuri announces we have arrived; I am quite pleased with myself that I have picked this up on the DME. I suspect these guys get bored easily, because the MiG's attitude indicator is soon in funny places doing a 180 and Yuri announces we are going to go supersonic. Watch the mach indicator go

Above: Yuri and John prepare for blast-off in the MiG 29
Left: front cockpit of MiG 29
Below: taxiing out, periscope up





Peter R March

Below: the 29's party trick – the 'Cobra Strike'
Below right: from the edge of space to a full afterburner low-level pass



Paul Johnson



through the magic number without even the expected tremor and on to mach 1.8 and then it's the turn of the altimeter as up we go. Even though we are on full afterburner and consuming fuel at a rate the green lobby would go faint over, there is no sensation of speed. The instruments alone tell the story. In a few minutes Yuri announces we have arrived on the edge of space. The sun is very strong, the sky not as dark blue as I had expected and the earth curved far below, covered with what looks like a wool cloud carpet.

Yuri is bored again and the MiG is on its side, slaloming left and then right in a steep dive earthwards. Yuri explains it is the best way down! The mach meter impresses and the altimeter is trying to throw its hands off. The assumption that this must end soon proves to be correct, but Yuri announces 'not good day for aerobatics'. My relief is short-lived as we do a sky-earth-sky repeat sequence that I only understand back on terra firma when Yuri

demonstrates with a model. Then follows the 29's party trick – the 'Cobra Strike'. We stand vertically still on the afterburner. Even the computer-controlled American planes creep forward, as you will have seen at airshows. This is a truly awesome aeroplane. You are aware that it can easily deliver more than you can take – some loose vision comes with the package, then black out at high G. Quite how you run a dog fight in it is completely beyond me. We dive to regain airspeed and are back in the cloud, but a surprise awaits. 'You have control!' What followed was IR instruction in a MiG 29, changing headings, angle of bank, and rate of descent with an eagle eyed instructor who kept making me work. However, I did not feel that induction into the MiG Flying Academy was on the cards as we headed for the airfield on the DME. Time much better spent for me than having my insides re-arranged by Yuri, and my gratitude to him for the opportunity.

Another party trick to enjoy as we broke cloud with the airfield in sight – down to a height I can't mention, 800 km per hour, then full afterburner just short of the tower where the baby's crew are – it's their treat. Yuri has been too smooth with the afterburner hitherto but this time it's a kick in the back, which is a further reminder of just what you are sitting in.

A climbing banked turn away and the suit pressure reminds you what's going on again while we go a short distance to an area of

broken cloud to do some light aerobatics for my benefit. I can see on the cockpit timer that the tank must be getting near empty and the fun is nearly over, so we return to the airfield for a smooth touchdown. You expect from the photographs a high angle of attack, but it does not feel that way from the cockpit. A slight tug from the parachute and we are back. I have some big ticks in some big boxes and feel the MiG will be impossible to top.

To round off the day they had kept the large Sukol factory museum open for us, and one got the impression that not many Westerners had been in there. It proved to be a fascinating insight into Russian military aviation, but included detail of how the facility was built with labourers wearing straw slippers in the hard Russian winters. Aircraft models of impressive quality from the early Yak biplanes are in spherical glass cases which are lit and rotate, through the WW2 Yak 3, allegedly better than a Spitfire and on through the early jet age with the MiGs, up to the yet to be seen MiG 35. Around the walls is a long array of display cabinets starting showing the construction, early flying ephemera, bronze busts of the aviator heroes of the Soviet Union up to the present day. A fascinating insight narrated for us by the plant interpreter, the delectable Irina.

Everyone in Russia worked very hard to make my trip a success. I can thoroughly recommend it. ■



This photo: MiG 29 arrives over the fence

Right: a slight tug from the parachute and we are back



Peter R March