

Robert O'Shea is an Evening Echo sports journalist following Russia at Euro 2004

I LEAVE Lisbon by bus. It will take over five hours to get to Tavira. First we must cross the bridge on the Tagus.

I saw the bridge from the plane yesterday and it did look fairly big, but crossing it is ridiculous. We travel at around 50mph, but after six minutes, still have not reached the other side.

Tavira is a little further from Faro, where the Algarve Stadium is, than I expected: around 30 miles. My hotel is further west of Tavira.

The hotel in Tavira is nicer than I'm used to.

Last night in Lisbon, the lift in the hotel had no door, so you could watch as the wall moved down (or up) in front of you.

The place was kind of grubby. It was only 5pm when I arrived, yet when I turned on the TV the first channel I saw had a reception that kept flickering and carnal sounds were filling the room. I was disgusted.

After around fifteen minutes of tuning, the picture was much clearer.

Now, I'm not trying to defend myself for watching the Sexy Hot TV, but the only other English-language channels were news stations with blanket coverage of the Reagan funeral.

Is there some kind of symbolism here: the man who 'ended' communism dying and me following the Russian football team with my CCCP jersey?

Will Russian victory in the tournament see the masses rise once more?

Could it be that I have been sent here to lead the comrades back to the Promised Land? And what is she going to do with that banana?

At the hotel in Tavira you are not allowed wear shorts to dinner. This is more my kind of joint. The hotel has a pool, a church, a gym, a massage, a museum (the first museum I have been in bare-chested) and, unfortunately, a mini-bar in the room.

After dropping the key to the mini-bar in at reception, I dine at the all-you-can-eat barbecue buffet for €22, before getting an early night.

DAY 3

After a dip in the pool, it's time to head to Faro. I decide to wear the Russian jersey instead of the CCCP one, because I'm not too sure what the reaction of their fans will be to an Irishman wearing a shirt that celebrates the era of Soviet oppression.

For two hours it looks like I needn't have worried. Fifty miles from their border, Faro has been invaded by the Spanish. Not a single Rooski in sight.

I'm a little nervous about bumping into them though. I've had 20



Russia's Aleksandr Mostovoy (right), battles with Spain's Vicente during their Euro 2004 Group A clash at the Algarve Stadium in Faro, Portugal, last Saturday. Picture: AP Photo

Bridge too far for us comrades

weeks of night classes in the language, but, out of practice for a few months, I'm going to be on shaky ground.

Most Russians I have encountered in the past have been guarded with people they don't know, but have a quirky sense of humour.

My Russian teacher displayed the latter in class one night. We were discussing Russian holidays, when a German girl (inevitably, head and shoulders above the rest of us in her progress in the language) asked what one of the holidays was for:

"Oh, that is Victory Day. Do you not have that in Germany?" said my teacher. With that, she gave me a knowing smile. The German girl soon quit coming to class.

I have never had a full-blown conversation in Russian.

In a bookmakers in Cork I tried to strike up a conversation with two men who I thought were speaking Russian, but it turned out they were

from West Cork.

One of my ambitions on this trip is to get blinding vodka-drunk with a group of Russians, until we are singing songs in praise of the Motherland.

There are supposed to be 5,000 of them here and eventually I see a trickle of them making their way through the sea of red. I will need a few beers before I approach them.

At the Carlsberg tent is my first encounter.

I am addressed in Russian. I venture, hello, which is 'zdrastvootye'. "You are English, eh?" comes the reply.

Our talk continues in English, but I am slightly disappointed. Asked why I am following Russia, I admit I don't know. After a lull in the conversation I decide to lean on that trusted kickstart, the weather.

Maybe he thinks the only word I know in Russian is 'hello'. I prepare to say: "It is hot," but I forget the

word for hot and I am left muttering 'it is': "Eta... Eta... Eta..." I sense the Spanish in the queue growing uncomfortable, so I admit defeat.

My support of his country, however, has earned me a free drink. Ah, the international language of beer. There's a good vibe in Faro town centre. I get the finger from a Spanish fan, but otherwise there is plenty of cheer and hundreds of fans wish me and my country good luck.

I watch the opening half of the Portugal game on a big screen in the fan park. Yours truly has put a lot of money on Portugal to win the tournament.

Yours truly always backs Italy and they always lose and viewed Portugal as the best bet at 7-1.

If there are other bets you would like to avoid, I also have money on Sweden.

On the bus to the stadium I meet a Japanese man wearing a Spanish

shirt. A kindred spirit. I crank up a conversation in Japanese (one of my hidden talents is that I can fail in an attempt to speak several world languages) but we soon resort to English.

Yuki will be travelling to 19 matches in Portugal. I try to correct him to say nine, but he insists, 19. And I bet he has a shirt for each team too. I don't really like these prostitutes to football, following whoever they fancy; I'm a one-team man no matter how awful Russia are.

Okay, maybe a fling with Italy, but that's as far as it goes.

On our way to the stadium the curtain keeps flying out the window with the wind. Yuki sees it as his task to keep pulling it back in. I look around and all the white curtains are flying out the windows, but Yuki finally gets a grip on his curtain as we sail towards the stadium like Kildare fans on the way to Croker.

Portugal have done a great job getting all 10 stadiums ready for €550million all right, but still, the two stands in the Algarve stadium are held up by scaffolding.

I take a photograph of Yuki in front of the stadium before entering. I imagine him getting 18 more of these pictures.

Once inside I find myself seated in between six Russians and four Americans.

The Russians tell me they are friends of Roman Abramovich (but I sense not 'on speaking terms' friends considering their cheap seats) and unfurl a Chelsea banner. They shake my hand for following Russia.

Sitting in front of me is the actor who played a bent copper (DC Beech, I think) in *The Bill*, the character who was a cross between Jack Nicholson and Terry Venables.

I decide at some point to lean over and say, "You're nicked, son," but he must have been in the wrong seat because he is gone the next time I look.

The match begins and it's not great. In fairness, I'm feeling a bit drowsy after a few beers in the sun, but the match only sparks up in the 35th minute after a good Spanish chance.

The Russians press forward, but there's nothing doing. Porto clubman Alenichev goes on a mazy run and tests Cassilas. The American on my right is following Russia. He shouts: "Come on guys, score! Wing it! Wing it! Ah, shit." I choose not to talk to him.

Then half-time.

I don't feel very Russian as the game progresses in the second half and can't say I'm too upset about the Spanish goal. Mind you, the Russians around me don't seem too pushed either.

Valeron comes off the bench and scores with practically his first touch. His goal is even announced over the tannoy before his substitution. I'm pretty jacked leaving the stadium, but I have to hurry so I can get the last train to Tavira.

Seven drunken English fans are ahead of me in the queue, discussing the various merits of the Portuguese train service with the ticket teller. I spend a pleasant few minutes imagining their painful deaths. The train is supposed to be at half ten.

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