

The International Geography Olympiad 2015

Milton Brown

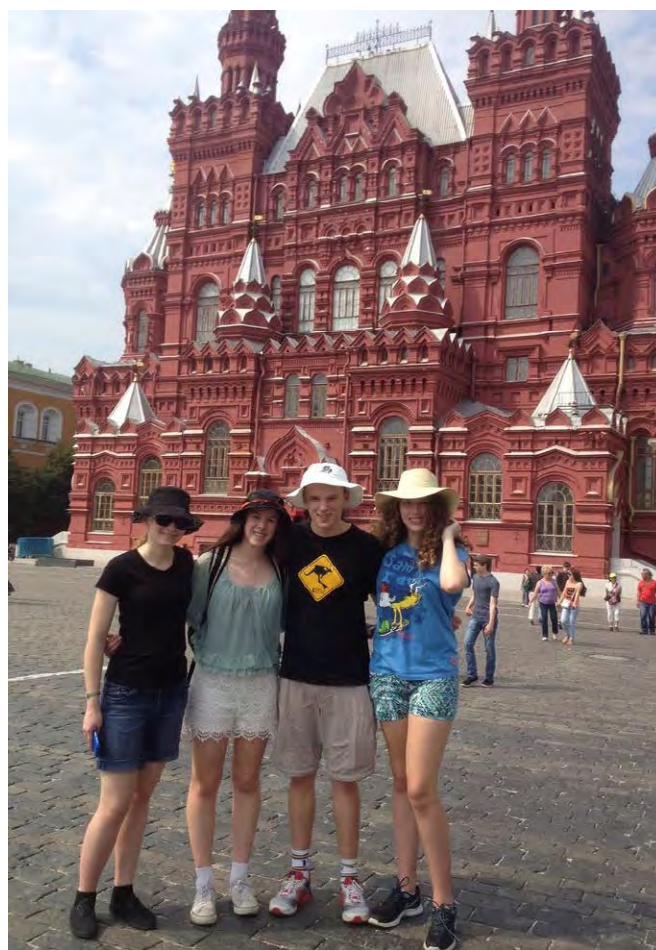
I never imagined in my wildest dreams that I would ever stand in Red Square in Moscow. It wasn't a place on my travel bucket list and given the 50's and 60's propaganda I grew up with, it certainly had a distasteful aura. I remember those military displays on May Day that were designed to show the scary might of a hostile Soviet Union, the stern looking Generals in their silly hats and the troops precision marching, supposedly to come and get us!

Yet here I was and all because of Geography and my love of the subject. When past GTANSW President Nick Hutchinson announced that New South Wales was to host the Geography Big Week Out in 2013 I had no idea what he was talking about. Calling for volunteers is usually the moment when people look for a pen or at their phones but in this case I became interested when he said it involved fieldwork - the beating heart of geography.

Fast forward past two years of the Geography Big Week Out activities on Sydney's Northern Beaches and here we were in Russia for the 12th International Geography Olympiad (iGeo), held from 11 to 17 August. It was hosted by the Russian Geographical Society at the Computeria youth recreation and educational centre in Tver Oblast, 200 km NW from Moscow. The iGeo is an annual competition for the world's best 16 to 19 year old geography students selected through a national geography competition. Based on their performances at the 2014 Geography's Big Week Out (GBWO), the four students chosen to represent Australia in 2015 were:

- Samantha Dixon, South Ballajura Community College, Perth W A
- Canada Gavin, Kinross Wolaroi School, Orange NSW
- Esrom Leaman, Pembroke School, Adelaide SA
- Giselle Pickering, Wavell State High School, Brisbane Qld.

Below: The Russian town of Torzhok



Team Australian in Red Square, Moscow

I was a Team Leader along with Marg McIvor (Australian Geography Competition Committee member). Kath Berg also accompanied the team but she was mainly involved with her duties as Co-Chair of the Olympiad Task Force.

The iGeo programme included three tests: a written response test, a multimedia test and a substantial fieldwork exercise requiring observation, cartographic representation and geographical analysis. Students must be able to answer all test questions in the official language of the Olympiad which is English. This year, a record 41 countries participated and we are proud to announce that Esrom and Sam won silver medals and Giselle a bronze.

Two official half day excursions were to Torzhok and Tver. Torzhok (population 47,000) is an ancient Russian town which is a very popular tourist destination today because of its historical monuments and its small urban centre atmosphere. Tver (population 409,000) is an important administrative and industrial centre on the Volga River. It was the capital of a medieval principality

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and competed with Moscow for a time. In 1466, the local merchant Afanasiy Nikitin left from Tver and started his famous "Travel Beyond Three Seas" – one of the oldest geography books in Russia.

The full day excursion was to the famous Nilovo-Stolpensky monastery – regarded by many as one of the most impressive examples of neoclassical architecture in Eastern Europe. Founded in 1594, the monastery is built on Stolbnyi Island in the south eastern part of Lake Seliger. This lake, one of the largest natural lakes in Central Russia, is surrounded by the picturesque forest landscapes of the northern taiga.

We travelled in a convoy of six buses with full police escort the entire way. Watching the police drivers force oncoming cars off the road as we approached was definitely another memorable moment. I couldn't imagine any fieldwork group here getting that kind of treatment.

The closing ceremony and the awarding of Olympiad winners took place on the afternoon of 17 August 2015 at the Lomonosov Moscow State University, after the opening of the IGU Moscow Regional Conference. Another highlight was the live cross to the International Space Station where the astronauts congratulated



Nilovo-Stolpensky monastery, Stolbnyi Island. Source: Wikimedia Commons

all the participants – way more impressive than any military parade.

Huge thanks to all the teachers and organisations who helped me during the GBWO activities in Sydney, special thanks to Kath Berg and Marg McIvor and of course kudos to the students who represented Australia with intelligence, dignity and humour.

Below: View from the Dome of the Cathedral of the Epiphany, Nilovo-Stolpensky monastery, source: Wikimedia Commons

