

And Many Minutes Passed



Would the baby, Nikos, be allowed to visit his grandparents in Moscow? A visa is required!

We were in a rush to get back to Athens. Manos needed to pick up a visa for his son, 10-month old Nikos. His Russian wife, Sveta, had dropped the paperwork off at the Russian Embassy a week earlier. They would have had plenty of time to get the visa completed, but the embassy closes for business early in the day and so Manos needed to be there by 11 am.

We started from Methoni at 6:15 am. The drive to Athens takes about three and a half hours, but then we would have to drive through downtown Athens to get to the Russian Embassy. Eyal was driving, which was annoying, since he also wanted to navigate, that is,

look at the map, and he likes to talk a lot, which is ok, except for his need to make eye contact with whom he is speaking. Obviously, he should not be driver, but he had rented the car and wouldn't let either of us drive because he was worried about insurance liability. And so we endured, constantly telling him to "Look at the road," as he turned his head to make eye contact. And we took the map away from him. We got to the general vicinity of the Embassy almost exactly at 11 am. Manos had been there once before and knew what the building looked like, but we couldn't find it! Finally, we zeroed in on the address and discovered a large construction site – no building. However a Russian flag was flying above a small building set back 100 m up the side street. We rushed up to assess the situation.

There were two groups of people waiting. One set was near the doors of the building, within the compound, and a second set was pressed against the outside gate of the compound, on the street curb. Manos quickly determined that the outside set was waiting to "take a number" to be allowed to wait with the first group inside the gate. But he desperately needed to use a restroom, and so I volunteered to wait to "take a ticket" while he and Eyal rushed off to find a restroom. The situation did not appear to be as Manos had suggested. Every now and then, a Russian official would walk out to the outer gate and look at a document or two being waved at him or her by members of the crowd at the outer gate. If the document seemed to be of interest, the person would be allowed into the compound. How could I do this for Manos? I didn't have any documents, and I don't speak Russian. I waited, and many minutes passed. Two

officials were coming out to the gate: one was an older woman and the second was a large man, sharply dressed in a blue shirt and tie. He would bark at the crowd in Russian and make them step back from the gate. It didn't look promising.

Finally Manos returned and I described what I thought was happening. The older woman official approached the crowd. Nothing caught her eye and she turned back towards the building. Manos waved the visa application and shouted "Visa for **BABY, BABY!**" It worked! She turned back and took his document and went inside, but left Manos outside the outer gate. "Excellent," I thought, "This will be quick." And many minutes passed.

Eventually the woman reappeared. She had some questions for Manos. Manos was allowed through the outer gate, but not into the building. Eyal was agitating to leave, so that he could get a non-smoking room at his hotel, call his wife in Israel, and have time to do some exploring in Athens on his last full day in Greece. But Manos and I were booked on the 3:30 pm ferry to the island of Sifnos, where his family owns a house and some land, and so I was prepared to wait a bit longer, especially since the wait could only be a few more minutes. And many minutes passed.

Manos was talking with other "customers" in the blazing sun on the steps of the building. Finally, he was allowed into the building. We could no longer communicate with him, but surely this would only take a few more minutes. Eyal was getting more agitated. He wanted to leave, but I stalled. Suddenly Manos rushed out to us. "Do you have €100 in cash?" I didn't have quite that much, but Eyal did. Manos dashed back inside. Things should go smoothly now. And many minutes passed.

Eyal was now very agitated. I tried to distract him by offering to go over the talk that Eyal would be presenting the next week in Seattle (I'm a co-author.) This worked for a few minutes, but many minutes passed. Eyal now insisted that he would leave, but I had decided that I was committed to wait for Manos, and so I took my bags out of the car. Eyal was free to go, but Manos now owed him €100 and I didn't have enough money to pay Eyal off. We continued to wait, and many minutes passed.

The lady that Manos had first interacted with appeared, apparently on her way to lunch or home. I excused myself, stepped into her path, and asked in my best, broken English, "Manos, visa, the baby??" She nodded and got out her cell phone and called back into the Embassy. She smiled, "Yes, wait here. He will come. Five minutes." And many minutes passed.

Eyal was now crazy with agitation. He would not be able to find a non-smoking room; it was too late to call his wife; he had gotten up at 6 am, only to waste his last day in Greece. Manos reappeared – only €30 had been needed. I could pay that much, and so I paid it. Eyal had his €100 back. He could go now, but suddenly he had given up. Manos said that they were printing the visa, and went back inside. Eyal and I chatted calmly. It would only be a few more minutes. And many minutes passed.

Finally, at 2 pm, Manos appeared and it was done. It seems that no date for the visit to Russia had been entered on the initial paperwork that Sveta had submitted. Manos supplied the dates, but the clerk preparing the visa had entered "8/19/03" instead of "8/09/03." Manos caught the mistake, but the clerks were unwilling to take responsibility for making the change. The visa would have to be canceled and the process restarted. The initial visa application had cost €100, but charging another €100 seemed excessive. The Consulate General needed to make a decision. [This is when Manos rushed out to get €100 from us.] Ultimately, the large Russian man in the blue shirt had saved the day. It was decided that for €30 more, the change could be made. And this is a visa for a 10-month old baby to visit his grandparents for a week. The original application had included an official invitation from the grandparents stating that the baby would be staying at their home. And Sveta, the mother, is Russian!

Apparently, new rules are in place that will allow the baby of a Russian citizen to visit Russia without a visa, but one needs to fill out the proper forms and that hadn't happened in a timely manner.

Well, after 3 hours, we had Nikos' visa. Manos could not say what he was thinking. Eyal was totally agitated. And my desire to visit Russia had not been significantly promoted. Eyal drove Manos and me to the Omonia Metro Station, and we headed for Piraeus, the port of Athens, to catch our ferry to Sifnos. They had no record of our reservations, but we could still buy first class seats. The ferry is fast, but the distance is far. And so many minutes passed, but now the destination was Sifnos, where I got to meet Nikos and enjoyed a weekend in the hot Aegean sun.



***Yes! The visa is secured!
Nikos anticipates the visit to
his grandparents in Russia!***

***Sveta, Nikos
and Manos***

