



A girl in Russian national costume offers bread and salt to a visiting U.S. Navy officer.

# Ship Visits

Breasting barges? Yokohama fenders? Med moorings?

Hardly the typical vocabulary of America's diplomats, but these are just some of the terms staff of the U.S. Consulate General in Vladivostok have become familiar with as they facilitate ship visits to the Russian Far East by destroyers, cutters or mine sweepers from the U.S. Navy's Pacific Fleet.

These visits include policy discussions between high-level personnel of the U.S. and Russian navies, and ceremonial events such as participation in marches to mark the Allied victory in World War II. But they are also a superb opportunity to expose the local population to

America and Americans, whether it be chess matches between sailors and local children, cook-offs, jazz concerts or volleyball games for naval personnel.

Navy ships the post has welcomed include the *USS Cowpens*, *USS Stethem* and, most recently, the *USS Blue Ridge*. During my tour in Vladivostok as consul general, post personnel were thrilled to see sailors on the city's streets, or to catch that first glimpse of a ship coming through the fog, flag flying high. On departure, some ships play "Stars and Stripes Forever" on their loudspeakers, another morale-lifter for Americans in this far-flung part of the Russian Federation.

The latest of dozens of U.S. Navy ships to visit Vladivostok, headquarters of the Russian Pacific Fleet, the *USS Blue Ridge* arrived in May. The flagship of the U.S. Seventh Fleet arrived with fleet commander Vice Admiral John M. Bird and its crew of 1,200 sailors and Marines to help Russia to celebrate the 65th anniversary of the end of WWII. After the *Blue Ridge* docked alongside Russian warships, its sailors came ashore to engage in outreach and community relations events.

## Much Planning

Ship visits are often planned as much as year in advance, although their actual schedules

may not be fully developed until about three weeks before arrival. For our small consulate, each meeting requires all hands on deck. The consulate identifies the interests of the ship's personnel—for example, what sports competitions are preferred—and organizes outreach efforts such as visits to spruce up orphanages, children's cancer wards or veterans centers. The *Blue Ridge* visit, for instance, required the consulate to coordinate more than 15 events.

The consulate also works with the local authorities to arrange protocol meetings with the city's mayor and other officials. The city's leaders welcomed the *Blue Ridge* with a traditional

Post comes alive when U.S. Navy hits port /// By Thomas Armbruster



**Above:** Members of the *USS Stethem's* crew participate in the Victory Day Parade in Vladivostok. **Below:** A Russian woman and a sailor dance to the music of the 7th Fleet Band.

ceremony involving bread and the sprinkling of salt.

The fun is in the community relation events. Seeing 12-year-old Russian kids beat the sailors in chess is a guilty pleasure. When possible, the staff also likes to get out to the ship aboard the pilot boat to welcome its captain.

The post arranges briefings on security and the economic and political situation. The post also works closely with Russian naval officials, ensuring that senior U.S. Navy officers get meetings with their Russian counterparts and with a Navy

advance team on security issues, such as setting the “Cinderella Liberty” rule—everyone is due back on board by midnight.

Once off limits to all—including most Russians—during the Cold War, Vladivostok is today a place that delights sailors of all ages. They enjoy the night life and dislike having to be back aboard ship by midnight.

During ship visits, the Russian press has a field day, inevitably finding just the right photos such as the one taken of a Russian boy on the bridge

with his hands on the ship’s wheel.

On another occasion a ship arrived with a female Navy captain, and Russians who met her said they were amazed and impressed with her professionalism and poise. There are no women in the Russian navy.

That’s just one more way ship visits build understanding among host nation leaders and among those at the post supporting the visit. ■

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The author, at left, meets with Australian Captain Justin Jones, center, and U.S. Admiral John M. Bird on board the *USS Blue Ridge*.

## Consul General Gets At-Sea View

As consul general in Vladivostok during the *USS Blue Ridge* visit, I was mindful of how ship visits give U.S. diplomats opportunities to remind Russia of the importance of our cooperation. At official events, talks can segue from World War II’s successful U.S.-Soviet alliance to space and security cooperation today.

The visits also promote ties between the U.S. Navy and the Department of State. To that end, when the visit concluded, I was invited to return with the ship on a three-day trip to its home port of Yokosuka, Japan. On the way, I watched the *Blue Ridge* conduct a man-overboard exercise. The sailors, who showed professionalism and dedication while ashore, displayed great synchronicity when “saving” their shipmate from the sea.

It was very interesting to learn about their traditions. At the mess table, a sailor approaching with his tray will ask the senior officer, “May I join you?” Sailors also ask to be excused from the table. Hats can be worn in some ship spaces, but not in others. Also, everyone passes each other on the right in corridors. The ship’s captain, Rudy Lupton, also explained the workings of the ship’s bridge, and Fleet Commander Vice Admiral John Bird and I had a good talk about regional security as the ship was mooring in Yokosuka.

It’s clear that the Seventh Fleet has a sense of its regional mission and challenges and is making its presence felt.