

## **The Small Kaliningrad Expedition (SKE) 28 April - 1 May 2011**

On the way to Vistyitis (located in the opposite corner - i.e. furthest to the South-East), we drove through the country on the many small roads. The agricultural land is hardly cultivated - most of it is grassland. Beautiful landscapes were reminiscent of the Danish with hills and small forests. There are almost no people in the countryside and the Russian collective farms are more or less disused and abandoned.

When we got to the border zone 5 km before the border, we were asked for a "border zone permit", but Jan is perfect for "fixing" this kind of thing with smiles and convincing gestures.... and by smiling and showing them a lot of other papers, we got a lot surprisingly allowed to continue down to the Vistyitis border, where Jan had a long talk with the Lithuanian family who ended up on the Russian side of the border. The border has moved since we were there in 2003 and now two more houses have joined Lithuania. The remaining family receives a pension from Lithuania., but must drive 60 km to get to the nearest border crossing. However, the daughter came sailing with a man in a small boat carrying shopping bags from Vistytes, so we guess they can somehow sail the few hundred meters over to Vistytes in Lithuania. Across the road, a military base has now been built. From there a nice young man came and complained that he couldn't speak English.... – looked at our passports and left again.... – We remember back in 2003 when the furious Russian officer chased us back across the border while old Lithuanian ladies raged at him.... – now in 2011, there is a completely different and much calmer atmosphere. We could enjoy the nice high fence that hid most of the Lithuanian houses on the other side. Why the Russians guard the border so well is a bit of a mystery... – just like the border with Norway. After all, it is the free exit for the Russians – it is the permission to travel IN on the other side that is missing. We wonder if the Russians get money from the EU to guard the border so effectively. The Russians were most interested in us having Schengen passports...

On the way back we wanted to see the closed Polish border. Still, we met the police and this time we were kindly and firmly told that without the permits we couldn't go any further, so we had a nice trip back to Chernyahovsk, formerly called Insterburg, where we drove around and looked at the town and then had dinner. Cosy and quiet town with many preserved houses and old environments, but very poor and very worn.... the most positive thing was the wedding which attracted many happy and festively decorated people.

Insterburg was also badly vandalized at the end of the war, but much was rebuilt in the old style, so the town looks quite old, and the roads are paved with old topped cobblestones. As if time has stood still. There is no ring road around the city, so all traffic still goes through the city as in the old days – see the map here:

<http://www.chernyahovsk.com/maps.php>

There are maps from the old days and from now.

It is a quiet and worn city – not at all as modern as Kaliningrad and the city's best restaurant, where we ate cheaply, does not get stars for anything good. Even beer was lukewarm.,...

On this English-language page there are some good pictures from the city from the winter of 2010 – they give a pretty good impression:

<http://www.tiwy.com/pais/rusia/chernyakhovsk-zima-2010/eng.phtml>

Then it was back home to Kaliningrad as darkness fell. A nice drive through the flat country towards Kaliningrad.