

Mixing with the very best

IT IS not every day living in an island like Guernsey that you get the chance to travel and compete in a sporting competition as big as the World Championships.

So when the opportunity arose due to exam commitments for top players Olly Langlois and Matt Stubbington, there was no way that I intended on missing out on attending such a prestigious event.

Held each year, the World Table Tennis Championships alternate between individual championships and team championships; something that the Guernsey Table Tennis Association has committed to over the course of the last three events.

Sarnian men's and women's teams were sent to Bremen, Germany in 2006 and Guangzhou, China in 2008.

So on to 2010 and the event was staged in the Russian capital of Moscow.

Teams came from all over the world, resulting in a monumental figure of 109 competing men's teams and 81 women's comprising a staggering 733 players.

The Guernsey camp consisted of players Garry Dodd, Adam Langlois, Paul Hainsworth, Dawn Morgan, Paula Le Ber and Kate Stubbington.

They were joined by coach Becks O'Keefe, delegate Christine Webb and team manager, Derek Webb.

Travelling to Moscow was a tiring experience and involved a red-eye flight from Guernsey to Gatwick, before an hour or so bus journey to Heathrow, before finally reaching Moscow after roughly three-and-a-half hours in the air.

Upon arrival in the large Domodedovo airport, the first thing

Guernsey's table tennis players are back from the world championships in Moscow and his jet-lag behind him player **Paul Hainsworth** offers his viewpoint on what he saw there

on the agenda was to change times on watches and phones as there is a three-hour time difference between Moscow and the UK. Exiting the airport was the first chance to view the true scale of the impressive airport which was huge.

There is a distinctly clear visual difference between different classes of lifestyle in Moscow as there was a stark contrast between shiny expensive cars and those that are extremely old, it was not rare to see cars with steam or smoke coming out of them after breakdowns.

Just over an hour's worth of bus travel led us to the massive 15 floored four-star Cosmos Hotel, where all competitors, coaches and officials were staying.

It was such a surreal experience to just walk around the hotel at first and see all the top players in the world strolling around.

Most avid table tennis players regularly watch all of these world class stars in action on YouTube and to see them all relaxing with their respective camps was something truly remarkable, this was before even watching any of them compete.



After obtaining our accreditation, we made our way up to the rooms after getting past the guard that was constantly stood in front of the lifts to check that no un-authorised persons made their way up to the hotel rooms.

As the trip went on, it was clear that security was extremely tight in Russia and although intimidating, it did make you feel that little bit more comforted.

The stadium used for the championships was the incredible Olimpiyskiy Sports Complex that was originally built for the 1980 Olympics and has a seating capacity of 35,000 and was most recently used as the venue for the 2009 Eurovision Song Contest.

There were regular buses between the hotel and the stadium and it was only a short 10-20 minute journey depending on the traffic.

Upon first entry into the stadium the great level of security was immediately clear, as everyone was required to put their bags through a scanner and walk through a security gate in the same manner that you would expect to do at an airport.

Walking into the playing areas was another huge moment and directly in front of us were 20 training tables all in use.

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Have bat, will travel: Paul Hainsworth was grateful to get the chance to fill in for first-choice players and head to Moscow. (0705612)

was a special experience

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To the left was the room where all matches from Divisions 2, 3 and 4 took place. There were a massive 28 match tables in this area, each well spaced out with plenty of room in each court.

Sectioned off in the corner of the stadium was the area where all the matches from the championship division of the top 24 teams contested their initial group matches.

In this area there were six huge courts, two of which were TV courts with thousands of seats across both sides for the spectators.

This was where the World's best would compete against each other and a regular break to catch some of the action was a real treat.

It was immediately apparent that the training tables were going to be hard to obtain and there was the regular need to 'cross knock' with other nations to be able to get practice in.

It soon became obvious that it was going to be an absolute necessity to practice on the match tables prior to our games, as this was a guaranteed way of obtaining a table to practice on. Watching some of the best players practice, in particular the Chinese was incredible. The speed, spin and accuracy of these players is overwhelming and their professionalism is top notch.

The tables themselves offered perfect conditions, however it took a bit of getting used to for the Guernsey contingent, as the conditions are a lot quicker than what we are used to down at the GTTA centre down at the Hougue Du Pommier.

This is probably due to the enormity of the arena which has



The massive Olympiysky Stadium built for the 1980 Olympics housed the event. (Picture by Paul Hainsworth, 0979692)

better air circulation and the renowned table tennis floor, GERFLOR that is used for all big events.

Competition wise, Guernsey found the going tough, but this is to be expected. We are a small island with a population lower than most other competing countries and thus have less competition in the island than some of the higher populated nations.

The men's team managed to earn a 3-1 victory over Malawi and the women finished the championships with a gritty 3-2 victory over Pakistan, an encounter where all three Guernsey players contributed with wins.

Watching the championship division matches was certainly a highlight of the week and the atmosphere around the stadium was electric during certain encounters. Home support was excellent and the Russians fought well against China in their group match before ultimately losing to Germany in the quarter-finals.

The Japanese had by far the best support in the early stages of the tournament, their enthusiastic supporters were in full voice

and chanted each players name in between games and during timeouts.

But their support was no match for the impending might of the Chinese in the semi-finals and they were outclassed by clearly the best team, who have six of the top seven male players in the world.

The finals were held on the final day of the competition and the women were up first at 1pm. China were the hot favourites and had won the team championships on every occasion since 1991 where they had lost to a United Korea team.

Their opponents in the final were Singapore, who I had watched dominate the Commonwealth championships in Glasgow just a year ago, but were clear underdogs.

Singapore's hope rested largely on world No. 2 Feng Tianwei and when she lost the opening two legs to world No. 4 Ding Ning, it looked like China were going to romp to yet another title.

She did incredibly well to battle back and win in five games and she was clearly inspired by her

earlier performance and was by far the player of the match, winning the title by defeating world No. 1 Liu Shiwen.

The joy of the Singapore contingent was clear to see and this was a massive contrast to the Chinese players who were stunned.

While going to get a drink later in the day, I walked past the whole of the Chinese women's team and their coaches who were all sat at a table in utter silence looking totally devastated. To them, this really is the end of the world.

The men's final was between the hotly tipped China and Germany, the nearly men over the course of the last few team championships.

They were nearly again, enough said.

We were all incredibly busy during the course of the tournament and were at the stadium playing every single day.

Each team was on hand to support each other in matches and this was a nice gesture but made everyone extremely tired.

Luckily we got an opportunity to explore the main areas of Russia on one of the afternoons and Red Square was the place that everyone wanted to have a look at.

Going down to the busy Moscow underground was a daunting experience.

The place was absolutely stacked with people and underground it most certainly is, the escalators down there were huge, you looked down and they were about 10 times the size of the ones you are used to seeing in airports.

Whether it was paranoia or not, I felt compelled to ensure that I had my hands on my pockets of

my top at all times.

After navigating the underground trams, we arrived close to Red Square.

There was a short walk to actually get there and there were hundreds of stalls, each selling pretty much identical souvenirs.

It was a great opportunity to get gifts for friends and family back home.

Walking into Red Square showed off the enormity of the area, there are numerous large and highly impressive looking buildings and to see them all in a closed off area adds to the atmosphere and greatness of the place. Everyone took the opportunity to get some photos that will create great memories for the future.

During the trip, there were a few incidents that showed Moscow off in a bad light and one particular instance involved a drunk elderly man in a shop who must have been making inappropriate comments to the lady serving him at the till.

To our amazement it didn't take long for a security guard at the shop to assault him, kicking him viciously in the back of the leg and punching him in the back of the head before the old guy staggered limping out.

It is moments like this that remind you just how lucky we are to live on an island like Guernsey.

In summary, the World Championships and Moscow was a great experience for me and the rest of the players and with Guernsey's commitment to attending these championships I can assure you that whoever is at the top of the island table tennis scene in 2012 will absolutely love the experience up for offer in Dortmund, who are the next hosts of the championships.