

# Russians make surprise stop at Atlantic City International

**Jim Walsh, @jimwalsh\_cp** Published 8:16 p.m. ET Jan. 31, 2018 | Updated 4:45 p.m. ET Feb. 1, 2018



*(Photo: Photo provided)*

EGG HARBOR TWP. - Some unexpected visitors put the "international" in Atlantic City International Airport on Wednesday.

A Russian airline carrying almost 300 passengers was diverted by a mechanical problem to the South Jersey airport, where the travelers spent most of the day.

The Azur Air flight, initially headed from Moscow to Cuba, made an unscheduled refueling stop around 3:45 a.m., said Steve Sapp, a U.S. Customs and Border Protection spokesman.

But the Boeing 767 was grounded after the discovery of a fuel leak in an engine, he said.

The hours-long influx of foreigners was a surprise to the airport. But it was also a shock to the Russians, many of them parents taking children on a warm-weather vacation.

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"I do think a lot of them were apprehensive about being in America," said James Heinzen, a Rowan University history professor who served as a volunteer translator for the Russians.



**A Russian commercial jet and its passengers spent Wednesday at Atlantic City International Airport after being diverted by a mechanical problem during a flight from Russia to Cuba. (Photo: Courier-Post file photo)**

"I think they were shocked at how friendly people were," he said, adding the travelers also did not expect to meet a Russian-speaking American.

The 294 passengers, who resumed their flight to Cuba around 10 p.m., spent their day "in a secure section of the airport," said Sapp.

"The airport team provided them with food, drinks, cots and even toys and coloring books for the kids," said another translator, Darya Hrybava of the Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University.

"A special area was even designated for the smokers among the group," she said.

Hrybava noted the passengers "were very excited to sample American pizza, as most of them had only heard of it or seen it in movies."

Many asked "eagerly" about the possibility of visiting Atlantic City, she added.

But side trips weren't on the day's limited itinerary.

"They could not leave the premises," said Mark Amorosi, a spokesman for the South Jersey Transportation Authority, which runs the airport.

Officials found three Russian speakers by calling area colleges, while a fourth was on the staff of a nearby Federal Aviation Administration facility.

"The airport did an amazing job," said Heinzen. "They were incredible with the challenge they faced."



**James Heinzen, a history professor at Rowan University, served as a translator for some 300 Russians stranded at Atlantic City International Airport Wednesday.** (Photo: Photo provided)

The Russians, while tired, appeared in good spirits despite their long stay at the airport, the translators said.

"They were very grateful, not just to me but to the entire staff of the airport," said Heinzen, a scholar of Russian history who's visited the country many times.

"They wrote many pages of thank-you notes expressing their appreciation," said Hrybava, who was translating those messages on Thursday,

One Russian asked for permission to speak on the airport's public-address system, then expressed his thanks in Russian and English, noted Heinzen.

"Everybody applauded," he said "It's a triumph for this person-to-person contact between ordinary people, especially considering our governments don't get along."



**Darya Hrybava, a Stockton University employee, translates thank-you notes written by Russian travelers at Atlantic City International Airport.** (Photo: Photo provided)

The 14-member crew of Azur Air Flight 555 was "paroled" to a local hotel while mechanics worked on the leak, according to Sapp.

He noted a second plane flew into the airport around 7 p.m. so the travelers could resume their journey.

"They have a great story of American community and goodwill to tell to family and friends at home," Sapp said.

But Heinzen suggested the Russians, who'd been traveling for about 22 hours when they left Atlantic City International, might have other priorities on their Cuba-bound flight.

"Hopefully they're asleep," he said..

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