

Kosmos: A Portrait of the Russian Space Age, by Adam Bartos; Princeton Architectural Press, New York, NY, \$40.00, 176 pages oversize. Contact: Lottchen Shivers, lottchen@papress.com

This photo album is an astonishingly unique “view” of the Russian space program, with hundreds of superb photographs of all aspects of the program, and an insightful 10-page essay by Svetlana Boym. It is a delight both to the eye and to the mind. It is not a history nor a technical analysis, but it provides an intimate immersion in a world both familiar and still poorly known to Western space workers and buffs.

Adam Bartos, the photographer, spent a total of x weeks in Russia, on y separate visits in 1997-1998. Before his visits, he carefully prepared his trip, consulting with American experts about what to look for and what to expect to see, and he brought those notes with him. But the best parts involve another tool he brought, his own skills as a photographer, and his know-how to use his artistic sense to compose and capture unexpected views.

The hardware is all there, to be sure. There’s the desert launch complex at Baykonur, space vehicles and training devices, factory scenes, crisp views of the workplaces and homes of program leaders and ordinary workers. My own visual adventures occurred when a turning page revealed a scene that at first looked empty or bland, and when further inspection showed what had caught the photographer’s eye and mind. After so many of my own visits to these same locations, I clearly didn’t really see much until I saw these photographs later.

Bartos met with many leading figures of the Soviet program, most long retired, and created touchingly lifelike portraits of them all. His photograph of Vasiliy Mishin, director of the Soviet space program when it lost the Moon Race to the US, is the finest shot I’ve ever seen of him, or expect to see since he died late last year. He’s only one in a parade of at-home views of retired giants of the Soviet space program.

For anyone who has visited Russia, especially during the cooperative efforts involving the International Space Station, the scenes in this book capture the essence of Russia’s space facilities so vividly I would have sworn I could smell the Russian paints and soaps and other sensory features of really being there. The photographs are of such three-dimensional quality a viewer’s other senses are also all activated, with the feel of a wood desk, or the rustle of some old notes, or the roar of a launching, or the smell of a workshop, all cued from one’s memory or imagination. The dust on one desk was so realistic my hand moved to brush it off the page.

Although there is an attempt to provide background information on all of the photographs, their sequence is too disjointed and the sensory overload is too overwhelming to really make sense unless one has a fairly good overview of the Soviet program in mind before starting. For those who don’t, the book’s images may motivate them to seek such deeper knowledge. For those who already have such knowledge, the book will add depth to their sight, and new insights to their understanding.