

RUSSIAN RIVER CRUISE 2013

Well, once again this trip started with something we got in the mail. It was a Vantage brochure about a Russian Waterways cruise from Moscow to Saint Petersburg. Kathy said she had always wanted to stand in Red Square, so that was all it took.



I had planned to do this cruise some years ago, but was put off by the comments about tiny cabins on the ship they offered. As an example, on the other ship the cabins were 90 square feet! The beds were 30 inches wide and there was a foot between the beds! On our ship, the Lev Tolstoy, the smallest cabins were 103 square feet. The Junior Suite we selected was 166 square feet. We Googled the ship deck plans, and found that the Junior Suite was more than adequate for us.



The nice thing about the Vantage tour is that we would be in hotels in Moscow and Saint Petersburg. This avoids long bus rides in the horrendous traffic from the ship into the city every day. We contacted Vantage, and made all our arrangements. After this cruise we planned to fly to Athens to meet the Pacific Princess for a Holy Land cruise. We were using British Airways miles for this trip and I had to book the flights 330 days ahead!!! In checking all the available flights, the best one got us into Moscow at 6:05PM, but there was only an hour connection time in London! I asked British Airways about that, and they said it was a flight offered every day. On previous plane changes, we have had to go to the main terminal at London's Heathrow airport and go through security again!

A few months before we were to leave, disaster struck! I discovered that, because of the unrest in the Middle East, Princess had changed the cruise to visit ports in the Black Sea instead!

We cancelled our Princess cruise reservations, and then had to cancel our flights to and from the Holy Land cruise! It took me weeks of getting up at 6 AM, going to the British Airways website to get our Business Class seats for the earlier return date to Los Angeles.

All things happen for a reason, as it would have been difficult for us to handle another two week cruise after spending two weeks in Russia.

Three months before our departure, we got phone call from Vantage offering us the Deluxe Suite for a price of \$500 extra per person! We were happy with the Junior Suite, and made a counteroffer. Fortunately, they did not accept the offer, so we stayed where we were. It turned out we were better off with the Junior Suite, as the Deluxe suites were divided into 2 rooms. We also found out both the windows in our suite opened, which was nice when our room got too warm.

The bed was very comfortable, but we have found that Europeans do not believe in top sheets, only duvets.

We had our car service take us to the LAX international terminal which was its usual zoo. We checked our luggage through to Moscow, went through security, and headed up to the British Airways lounge. It was a pleasure to get to relax in a quiet place and have a light supper with wine.

On this flight we reserved seats in the main cabin instead of the upper deck. We discovered it was a pain to haul our carry on luggage up and down the spiral staircase to upper deck of a Boeing 747. Also, we could get out of the plane faster, since we only had an hour between flights.

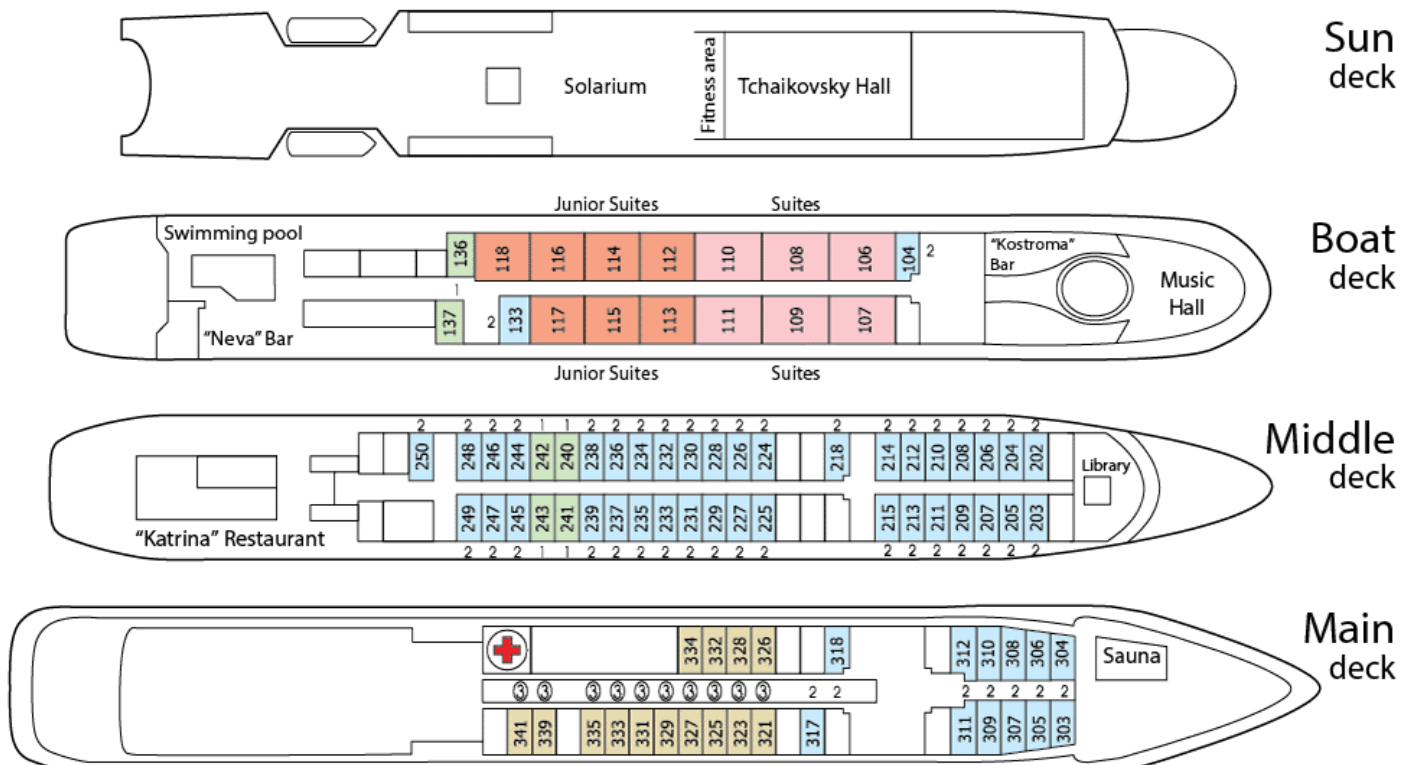
Because there is only one British Airways connecting flight from Los Angeles to Moscow, and our flight leaves at 3:30 PM, we may not get much sleep! The other issue is that Moscow is 11 hours ahead of California, so it was a complete opposite for us.

On this trip story, I have changed the format I have been using to include many more pictures. I have included pictures of the dining room and some of the menus. I have also included many more pictures of the sights we have seen on this cruise.

Below is the deck plan of the ship.

Motorship "Lev Tolstoy"

type Q-056



MOSCOW

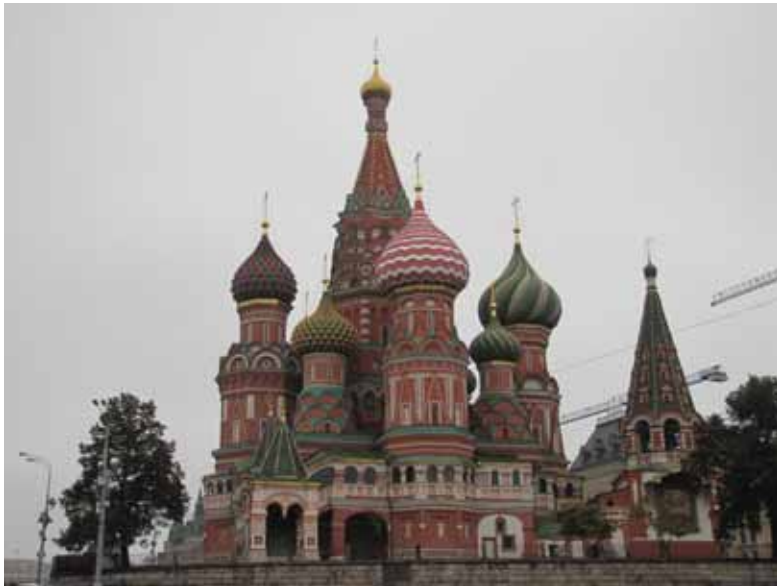
Our flights to Moscow were uneventful, but our biggest concern was the fact we only had an hour to make our connection in London. Our flight from Los Angeles arrived a little early, but we had a hang up in Security. They insisted on taking everything out of my carry on and backpack for some reason. I asked to be fast tracked because of our connection, but they would not do it.

As soon as we were cleared, we raced to our gate with a few minutes to spare. The plane was not full, so we each took 3 center seats to stretch out. We cleared Immigration and Customs in Moscow and looked for the taxi driver who was supposed to meet us with a sign with our name on it. We did not see him, but ran into one of the Vantage Tour Managers, who put us on their bus. The airport is 26 miles outside the city, but the Moscow traffic was horrendous! It took us almost 2 hours to get to our hotel!

We were put up at the Marriott Grand Hotel, which was very comfortable. As a member of Marriott Rewards plan, we were put up on the Executive floor. We had access to the lounge where they served snacks and hors d'oeuvres, as well as 24 hour coffee.

From the 9th floor of our hotel we could look down on Tverskaya Street, which our hotel fronted on, and see gridlocked traffic in both directions.

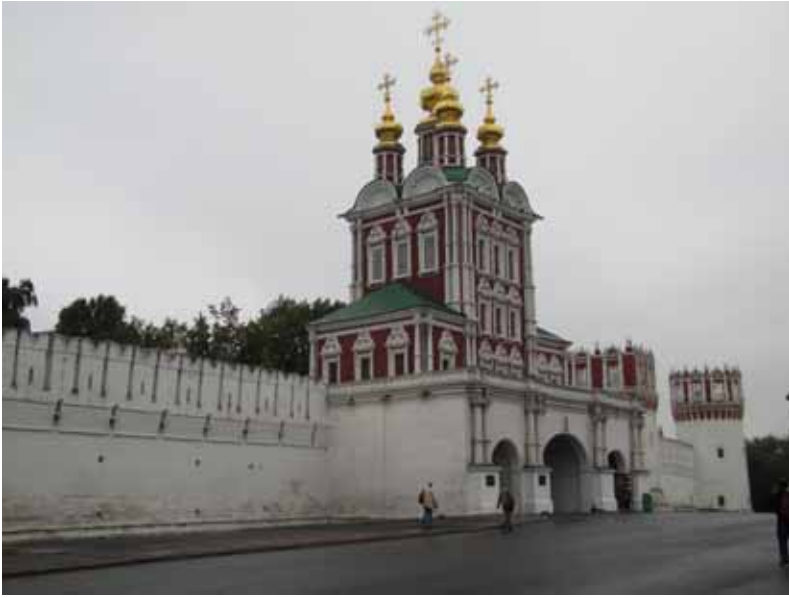
We met our Tour Manager, Irina Kuzyka, who lives in Moscow and was a real gem. She gave fascinating lectures on Russian history, as well as helping us out with some personal requests. The next morning we took a city tour, stopping at Red Square first. We stopped by St. Basil's, and also saw the clock on the Kremlin tower. I also saw the bridge that Mathais Rust had to fly over before landing his plane in Red Square.



We were then taken to Arbat Street which is a pedestrian street full of shops and restaurants including a MacDonal'd's and a Hard Rock Cafe. We were told not to buy anything in Moscow as the prices were better in the small towns.

After we had lunch we were taken to a convent which had many Russian people buried on the grounds. There was one large crypt in the style of a Russian cathedral which was impressive. We were told the symbolism of the slanted bar and crescent moon below the transverse part of the main cross.

The slanted bar symbolized the two thieves crucified with Jesus. One went to heaven and one went to hell. The crescent moon at the bottom represented the Muslims that ruled Russia centuries ago.



After returning to the hotel, I walked down the street from our hotel to a supermarket and was pleasantly surprised at the variety and quantities of food. I remember reading stories about Russians lining up for a loaf of bread during the Communist Era.

Later, we went to the Welcome Dinner, which had Chicken Kiev as the main course. We shared a table with a couple from Santa Clarita, California, which is 28 miles from where we live.

The next day was a free day, which we took to decompress from our flight. The 11 hour time difference was a killer, especially since we did not get much sleep on the plane. The other problem was that the sky was dark and gloomy for days on end, so we never saw the sun to help reset our biological clocks. This was the wettest September in Moscow in recorded history.

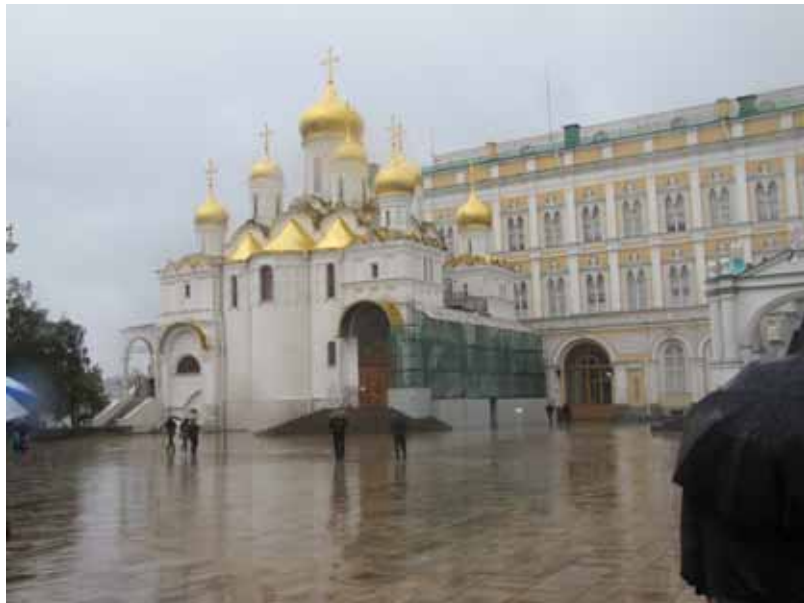
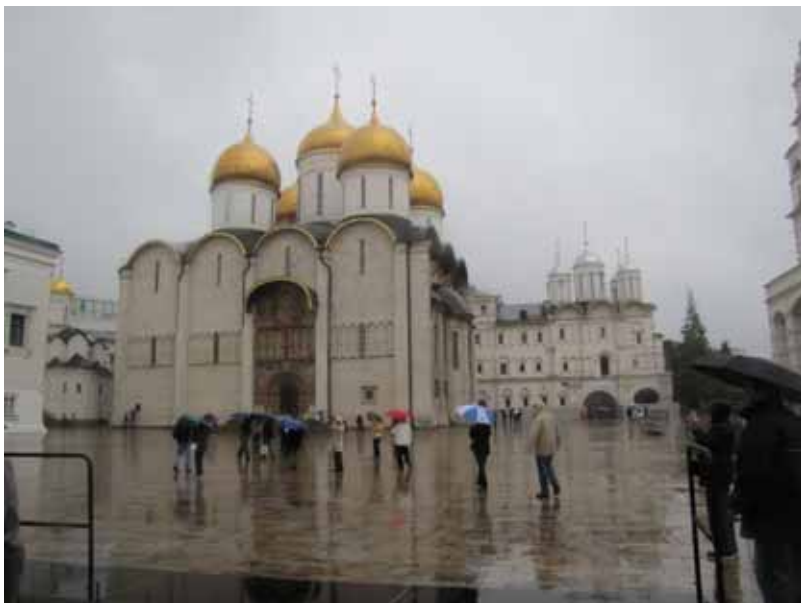
Our final day in Moscow included a tour of the Kremlin grounds and the Armory. Kremlin is Russian for fortress, and there are Kremlins all over Russia, but the Kremlin in Moscow is the seat of power.

It was a miserable rainy day, and we slogged through the grounds and 2 churches waiting for the Armory to open up.

During our tour of the grounds, we saw a huge cannon and a large bell. The bell was cracked, as it was in a fire and they hit it with cold water, which cracked it!



We were then taken to two churches in the Kremlin, the cathedral of the Assumption, and the Archangel Cathedral



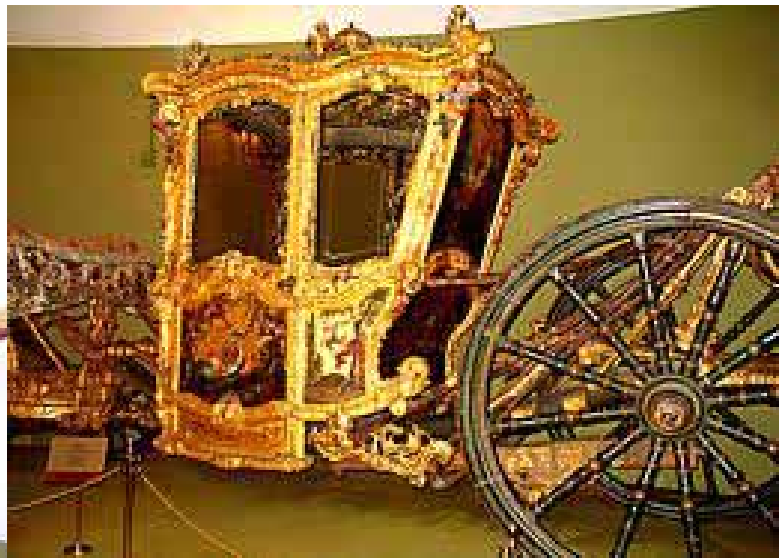
After visiting both cathedrals, and getting a welcome respite from the rain, we headed down to the State Armory.

The Armory, one of Russia's oldest museums, has almost five hundred years of history. Its unique collection of decorative and applied art is closely linked to the Kremlin itself. The museum's collection was formed gradually over several centuries.

The collection consists of treasures from the Kremlin repositories: gold and silverware, weapons and horse harness, ancient state regalia, ceremonial dress, mediaeval Russian embroidery and other works of art.

The exhibits range from religious artifacts to jewelry and royal carriages. One of the most interesting collections is that of Fabergé eggs, many of which contained smaller art works.

One of the most interesting is an egg that contained a gold and platinum model of the Trans-Siberian Express.



After leaving the Armory, we once again braved the Moscow traffic to get to the Lev Tolstoy, our ship. We were very happy with our accommodations, and set out to explore the ship. One thing that struck us was the dining room, which had tables set out in a U around the kitchen, so every table had a window.



Below are a couple of the menus



In general, the food was pretty good, but given the size of the kitchen, we did not expect the extensive menu choices that we would have seen on a large ocean cruise ship.

On the way to Uglich, we saw a cable ferry taking cars across the river. The cable is long enough that it sinks to allow ships to pass over it.



We also saw the largest statue of Lenin in Russia and some local churches. In the middle of the river was a belfry that was moved there because the town it was in got flooded out when they built a dam. It is a traditional place where couples go to get engaged.



UGLICH

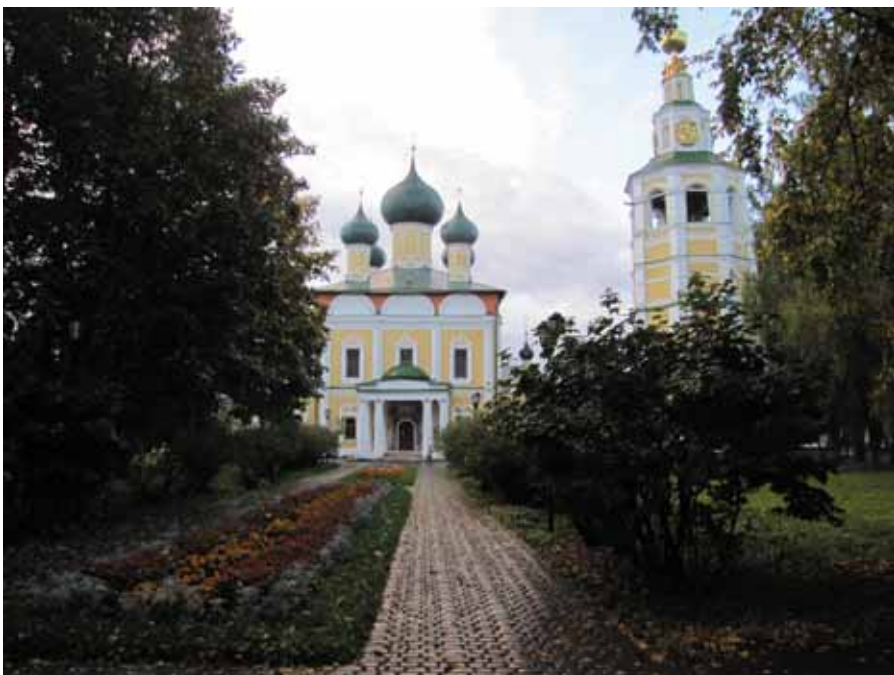
We were told the incredible story of the “False Dmitris” before we arrived at Uglich, but we heard it in detail when we visited the church in Uglich where Dmitri, the youngest son of Ivan the Terrible was murdered. Apparently, Boris Godunov planned to become Czar by having the real Dmitri murdered. Officially it was reported that Dmitri committed suicide during an epileptic fit.

According to the original investigation, Dmitri was playing a game of darts with throwing knives when he suddenly went into an epileptic seizure (which he was apparently prone to do), and, as poor luck would have it, the eight year old boy stabbed himself in the neck with his own knife.

Almost no one believes that Dmitri did himself in this way, but then the story really got interesting. The false Dmitris were imposters to the throne. The first False Dmitri was able to take the throne based on the identification by the real Dmitri’s mother. Apparently, the mother was sent to a convent by Boris Godunov, so she had an incentive to kick Godunov out of Czardom. What is fascinating is that she also identified a second False Dmitri after the demise of the first False Dmitri. Any way, we saw the church in which the real Dmitri was murdered. It is called Church of St. Dmitri on the Blood. Next to it is the Palace of Prince Dmitri.



We were then taken to a museum for a concert of 4 men singing traditional Russian songs. I bought a CD of theirs of Russian Folk songs. It will always bring back memories of our trip when I hear them.



YAROSLAVL

Our next stop was at Yaroslavl, which was named after Yaroslav, who had slain a bear with his ax that the local pagans had set on him. This subdued the city, and its people converted to Christianity. The bear and the axe are included in the symbols of the city. We saw the impressive Transfiguration of the Savior Cathedral of the Spassky Monastery constructed in 1506–1516. The title of the diagram is translated as “Rostov Kremlin”.



One of the interesting parts of the Rostov Kremlin was the belfry, instead of being a tall tower, was laid out horizontally. I believe one of the reasons is that the biggest bell is so large there would not be room for the others in a bell tower.



Rostov is also famous for its enamelwork. We were taken to a museum on the second floor and shown a video of the process. Glass is melted and is flowed over a copper substrate. The designs are painted over the glass using metallic inks and are fired to make them permanent.



We were then taken to the battlements that were on the walls of the Kremlin to view the frescoes. Our guide explained that there is restoration to be done due to the use of iron nails holding the plaster. The nails expanded and contracted with the temperature, cracking the plaster. The plaster over each nail is carefully removed, the nails are replaced with ones made of ceramic, and the plaster is replaced.



From the Kremlin we were taken by bus to the church of Elijah the Prophet. We did not have much time to sightsee, but it was interesting nevertheless.



The next day, still in Yaroslavl, we stopped at a memorial for WW2, or “The Great Patriotic War”, as it is called in Russia. From there we were taken to the Governor’s mansion, where we were greeted by one of his beautiful daughters. She spoke with a slight British accent, as she had learned much of her English from BBC!



We were treated to a choral presentation by 4 men, then some chamber music. Following that, the daughter and her sister, along with 2 men performed an old court dance. Then 4 people from the audience were chosen to dance with the daughters and their escorts.



After that delightful concert, we were taken to a studio which showcased some of the local artists, as well as a display of the famous Russian lacquer boxes. There are only 4 villages, Palekh, Fedoskino, Mstera, and Kholuy that have an association of artists that make these boxes. Each box is signed by the artist on the bottom. Because of the time consuming effort it takes to make these boxes, they are fairly expensive. We bought one on our Baltic cruise in 2010 and will always cherish it as a souvenir of Russian art.

The next day, after passing through a lock, we were told to look to the left, as there was a statue to "Mother Volga" as the river was called.



That afternoon, there was a class on the ship in painting the Russian Matrushka dolls. We were blown away by how talented some of the people were with their painting.



GORITSY

We arrived in Goritsy and were greeted by blowing snow!!! We could not believe it, as it was only late September!



We just walked off the dock to look at the shops, and for Kathy to get a hat. We found a nice hat for her, and down the road we found a beautiful chinchilla neck wrap. That should keep her warm for the rest of the trip.

KIHZI ISLAND

Kizhi is an open-air museum similar to Skansen Park in Sweden. The most famous of them is the Kizhi Pogost, which contains two churches and a bell-tower surrounded by a fence. The site was included in the UNESCO World Heritage list. A large number of historical buildings were moved to the island. They include Church of the Resurrection of Lazarus from Murom Monastery, which is regarded as the oldest remaining wooden church in Russia (14 century). There are several bell-towers, peasant houses, mills, barns and saunas.



The two bottom pictures are of the interior of the Church of the Intercession from 1694 to 1764. It was built on the island as a winter heated church. It is crowned with ten domes covered with aspen shingles. There were places to light candles in the church, but I would be nervous about lighting a candle in a wooden church!

We then visited the house of a peasant from 1876. It consisted of dwelling quarters and a cattle shed and hayloft.

There was a lady working on an old loom making a rug of some sort.



There was also another lady doing freehand embroidery. This is where there is no template or pattern on the cloth, but is done strictly by eye.



The bottom pictures are of the Chapel of the Archangel from the 18th century. There was a man in the belfry playing the bells, and was selling CD's of his bell ringing. The thought of listening to an hour of that is right up there with an hour of bagpipe music or Mongolian throat singing. The last church we saw was the Church of Lazarus Rising from the 16th century. According to legend, it was built by Russian monk Lazarus of Murom.



MANDROGI

This was basically a shopping stop along with a shashlyk (barbecue) lunch. We were taken to a huge handicraft building which featured all kinds of artisans. I wanted to buy a Faberge egg replica, but could not find any. I had taken a picture of the ones on the ship, and showed them to one of the shop ladies. She led me to the store that sold them, and I picked out one that opened like a clamshell and had a church inside. It will be put in a place of honor in my curio cabinet.



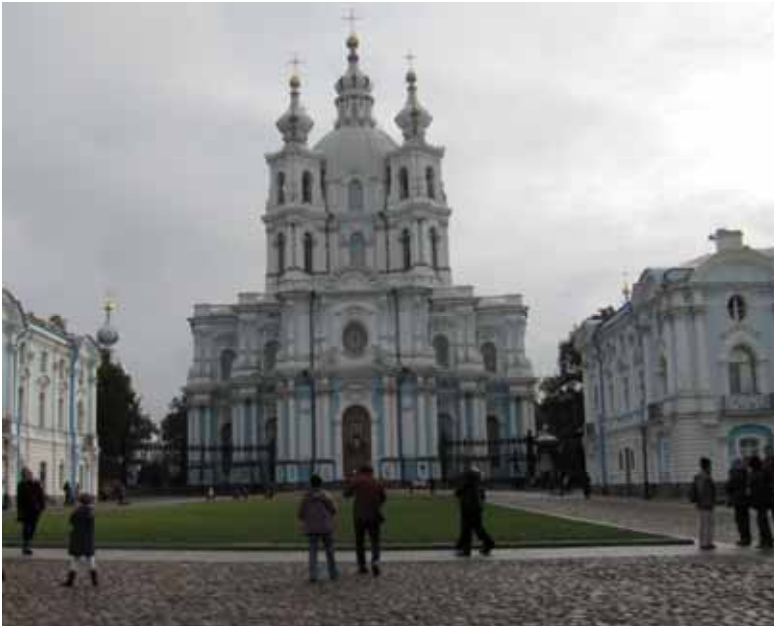
We saw lady driving a horse drawn carriage, and based on our other experiences with carriage rides, figured it was a great way to see the sights.

It was a leisurely journey through the woods, looking at all the houses and other structures. After taking us all around the island, she kindly dropped us in front of the building where we were being served the barbecue lunch.

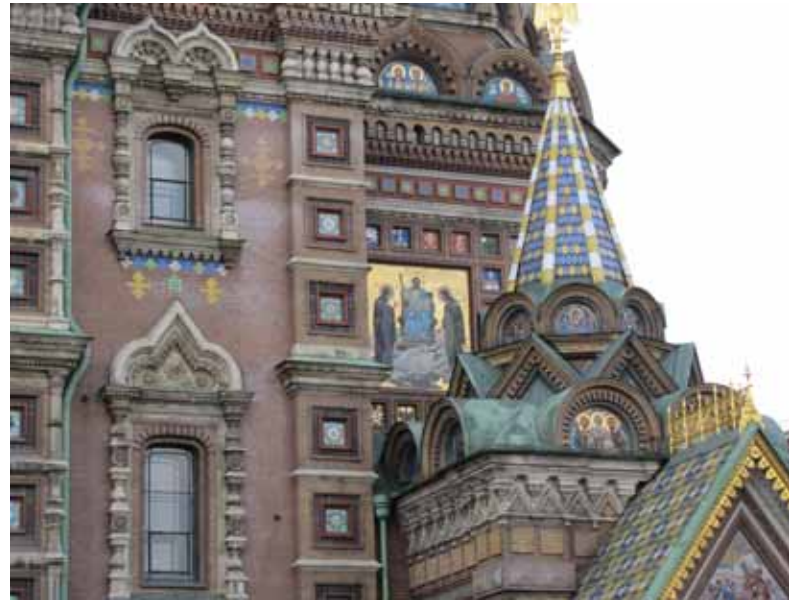


SAINT PETERSBURG

This morning, we put out bags out, had breakfast, and boarded the bus for the trip from the Lev Tolstoy to our hotel. On the way we stopped at the Smolensk Convent. This church is being rehabilitated after the Communists closed it and the bell will be mounted back in the belfry.



Our next stop was at the Church of the Spilled Blood, This Church was built on the site where Tsar Alexander II was assassinated and was dedicated in his memory. There is a golden icon behind the right hand lower tower that was fantastic.
Across the street from the church is an entire street full of shops selling the usual dolls and other souvenirs.



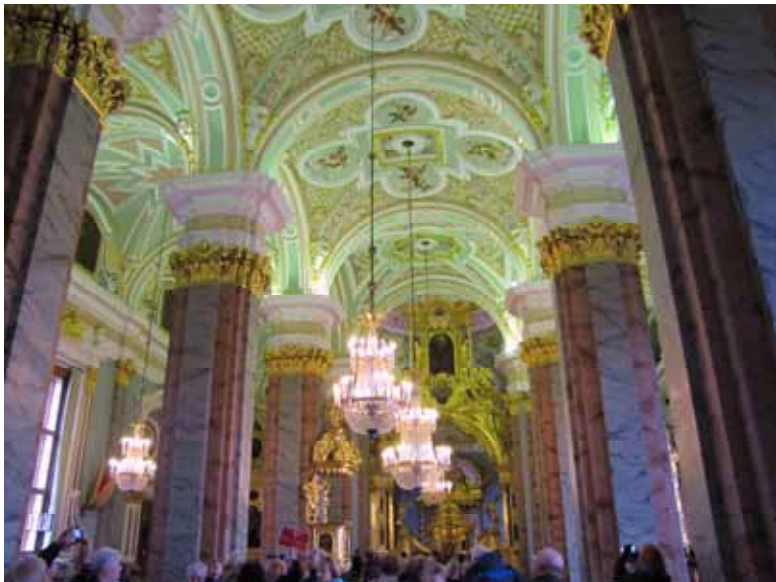
We were then taken to see St. Isaac's cathedral and a statue of Nicholas I.



We then passed the statue of Peter the Great and the two red rostral columns. The columns have the bows of ships on them and were lit by flames at night to be lighthouses in previous times. They are only lit on special occasions now.



Our next stop was the Peter and Paul Fortress. The fortress was established by Peter the Great as a base for the city garrison and also as a prison for high-ranking or political prisoners. On previous visits, I had never been inside the fortress, so I really looked forward to seeing the inside for the first time.





In the side chapel, there were crypts with some of the Russian rulers, including Peter I (The Great)



A recent addition to the fortress was a chapel dedicated to Czar Nicolas II. The crypt contains the proven remains of Nicolas, his wife, and their children.

The Romanov family was taken to Yekaterinburg in 1918, but as the White Russian Army got close, the order to execute the Czar and his family was given. The fear in Moscow was that the presence of the Czar would rally the Army. They were taken to a cellar and all shot and their remains were buried in the woods. In 1991 the remains of all the family and their retainers were found and identified by DNA.



They were reburied by the Russian government following a state funeral. A ceremony of Christian burial was held in 1998. The bodies were laid to rest with state honors in the St. Catherine Chapel of the Peter and Paul Fortress in St. Petersburg, where most other Russian monarchs since Peter the Great lie.

We checked into our hotel and went to the room we were assigned. It was the strangest room we had ever seen. There were no windows, just a skylight with an electronically controlled shade. This was absolutely unacceptable, so we went to the desk to request a different room.

There were very few rooms available, as the previous Vantage group had just checked out. We were given another room that had windows, but was smaller than our cabin on the ship. We figured we would change the next day, and made the best of it. The next day we were given a much nicer room. The other problem was our luggage had not been delivered, but we were going to the ballet that night and needed our clothes. The bags finally arrived about 5PM, and we dressed to go to the ballet. The ballet we saw was Swan Lake, one of the most popular ballets. The troupe was known as the Kirov, but is now called the Hermitage ballet troupe.



We were not allowed to photograph the ballet, but we have included pictures of other performances. The performance was fantastic, and we both enjoyed it thoroughly. Someone pointed out that the conductor did not have the score in front of him, but conducted from memory! The next morning we were taken to the Hermitage. We had been there previously in the summer when there were 4 cruise ships in port and it was a zoo. We were hoping that this time it would not be as crowded, but there were a number of ground tours going through the same time we were. The main stairway, which was under repair previously, was open and made for an easier ascent.



We went from room to room, admiring the mosaics on the floors and the wall decorations



Two of the most striking pieces were Michelangelo's Crouching Boy and Rembrandt's Return of the Prodigal Son. The statue was completed in 1534, and the painting, which was Rembrandt's last painting, was completed in 1667.



The Hermitage has more of Rembrandt's works than the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, but the space between the partitions they are displayed on is small. It was difficult for our group to all gather and view the paintings.

There were long hallways reminiscent of the Vatican, and there was one mirror that had not been replaced because it had a bullet hole in it. This was to remind people of the siege of Leningrad.



After visiting the Hermitage, we returned to our hotel to unwind and figure out where we would have dinner. We checked the menus in the hotel, and they offered the usual 5 star hotel hamburger for \$20! Our Tour Manager gave us a list of reasonably priced restaurants within walking distance, and we found a place called the Soviet Café almost right next door. They had a great menu, and we ended up eating there all 3 nights. I also saw a restaurant across the street called Nihao, which is hello in Chinese. We had lunch there twice and really liked it. Their menu was in Russian, Chinese, and English, and they pictures of all the dishes. We also had a MacDonal'd's and a Burger King nearby, but we did not travel through 11 time zones to eat what we can get at home.

The next day was a visit to Catherine's Palace, and after passing through the gates, we were greeted by a brass band and a cute little girl marching in front of them.



Of course, we had to go up the stairs to the second floor, which was where all the state rooms were located. The most impressive was the Grand Ballroom, which was mirrored like Versailles and the Queloz Palace in Lisbon.





In one of the rooms dinner tables were set up, and there were apples wrapped in gold leaf on stands on all the tables.



In another room was a replica of Catherine's coronation gown. The most interesting thing was that it was made out of paper! We also saw a desk with a beautiful inlay of a fort.



Outside of the palace was a beautiful pool with a bathhouse at the end.



As we were leaving Catherine's palace, we saw a newlywed couple having their pictures taken.



On our way back to our hotel, we took a street next to one of the smaller rivers. The bridge was about 2 blocks from the hotel, and had bronze horses on each corner. Traffic was so bad, that we saw a lady in a maroon coat walking down the sidewalk next to the bus, and she passed us three times!



On our last full day in St. Petersburg we visited Peterhof, Peter the Great's summer house. It was as impressive as any other palace, but the grounds and fountains were unique and spectacular! Peter designed the fountains himself by tapping into a spring for water. No pumps or modern devices are required even today; the same system is still essentially functioning. The main fountains right behind the palace were like nothing we have seen, and the grounds had smaller fountains of different designs.





We were very lucky to see the fountains, as they normally shut down on October 1st. Aside from the main fountains and cascades, there were other magnificent fountains throughout the grounds.



The evening after our Peterhof visit was the Farewell Dinner for our tour. Frankly, the dinner itself was less than impressive, as the Beef Stroganoff was almost tasteless. The chocolate mousse tasted like chocolate flavored Reddi Whip!

However, it was wonderful to be together with our tour group, as we met some very nice and memorable people.

The next day we had our bags collected and loaded on the bus to go to the airport. The porters got a little overenthusiastic and loaded the Tour Managers' bags also! That was sorted out, fortunately.

The St. Petersburg airport was small, and had a strange way of checking in. You could not go through security and check in until there was an announcement it was time to go. We requested our bags get checked from St. Petersburg straight through to Los Angeles instead of collecting them and rechecking them in London. We packed our essentials in our carry on bags for our overnight stay at the hotel in London.

After arriving at London's Heathrow airport from St. Petersburg, we went through customs and immigration and caught a taxi to our hotel. The hotel was quite a step down from the ones in Moscow and St. Petersburg, but must have been designed to accommodate transient guests like us. It was comfortable enough and had a nice restaurant, so we were happy.

The next morning we checked in for the flight from London to Los Angeles without any problem going through Security, and went to the British Airways lounge to have breakfast. On the way, I was offered a dram of Isle of Jura Scotch whisky, but at 8 AM it was way too early.

Because our flight left from the furthest concourse and gate, British Airways arranged for an electric cart to take us and another couple to our gate. It was a fascinating 20 minute ride going through all the tunnels under the huge Heathrow airport and arriving at our gate just in time to board.

I have a ritual that I do prior to leaving the UK-a pint of English beer, a Cumberland Sausage and a visit to the World of Whiskey. Well, because it was early morning, I did it a little differently-I put of can of Fuller's London Pride beer in my back pack, had a bacon sandwich, and bought a liter of special whiskey on the plane!

In conclusion, it was a fantastic trip in spite of the nasty weather. We have agreed, however, that after 8 transatlantic and 3 transpacific round trip flights from California in 6 years, this was our last trip outside the Western Hemisphere. We have enjoyed all of these trips, but now look forward to traveling closer to home.

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