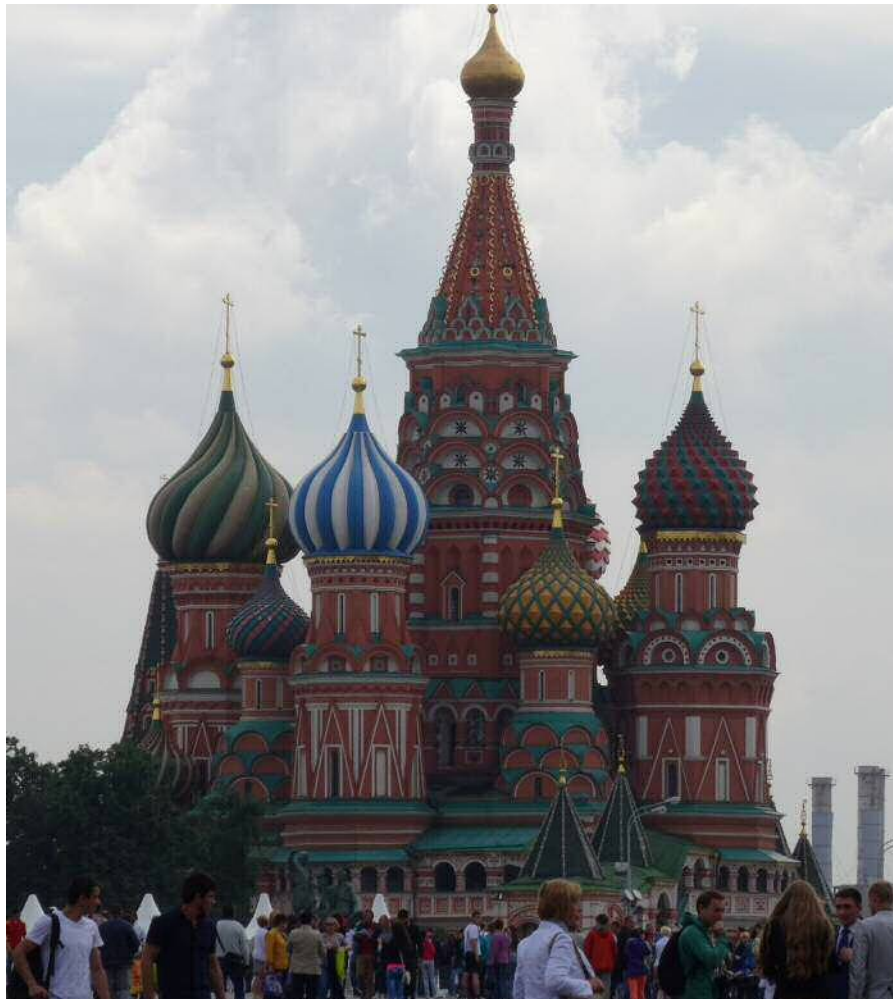


# RUSSIA

# Россия



Июнь (June) 2014

*Bob and Molly Hillery*

This was our first visit to Russia (except for a two day call in St Petersburg as part of a Baltic Cruise in 2008) and this journey would take us by river from Moscow to St Petersburg. We were taking the vacation with our friends Keith and Zena (a first in Russia for them, as well as a first cruise) and all arrangements had been made for the four of us to leave from England. We had chosen an organized tour (versus our more normal "do it yourself") because of the obvious difficulties in finding our own way around two large Russian cities, not to mention the transportation issues in getting between the two. In addition, Molly and I knew from past experience that Viking River Cruises generally were well organized and provide many interesting shore excursions.

So, after spending about six weeks in England, following our late April visit to Israel, we were about to embark on another exciting trip to a country that had been on our Wish List for quite some time. We were expecting to see big differences in architecture and culture from those we had witnessed previously and were eagerly anticipating this country that has so much history. Just how much we were a little uncertain and, perhaps not surprisingly, our expectations were clouded somewhat by the more recent years of the Soviet Union and its collapse during our lifetime.

What we saw, however, was so much different than our prior images that it is now difficult to "see" just what we expected. From the very first hours in the country we were amazed at what we saw and the pictures just kept getting better as we got further into our stay. This is an amazing country and we had an amazing experience. The architecture and culture were different; the people were far more open and friendly than we had anticipated; and the whole added up to a vacation that will live with us for a very long time.

# ***Russia, June 2014***

## **Wednesday June 11**

We left Ilkley around 2:30 and drove to Eldwick to pick up our friends Keith and Zena at the start of our twelve day visit to Russia. We had a final cup of English tea sitting on their deck on a beautiful warm afternoon before loading their cases in the car and starting out for Manchester.

We drove via Keighley and Colne and then down the east side of Manchester and arrived at the Airport Hilton just before 5:30pm. We checked in and re-grouped at 6:30 to drive to Mobberley for dinner at the Plough and Flail pub, which Molly and I seem to frequent every time we leave from Manchester.

We had a pleasant relaxing meal and left about 9:15 to go back to the hotel in preparation for a very early wake up on Thursday morning. I dropped them off at the hotel and returned our rental car – a process that went more smoothly and much more quickly than normal, so I was back at the hotel less than 15 minutes after everyone else.

## **Thursday June 12**

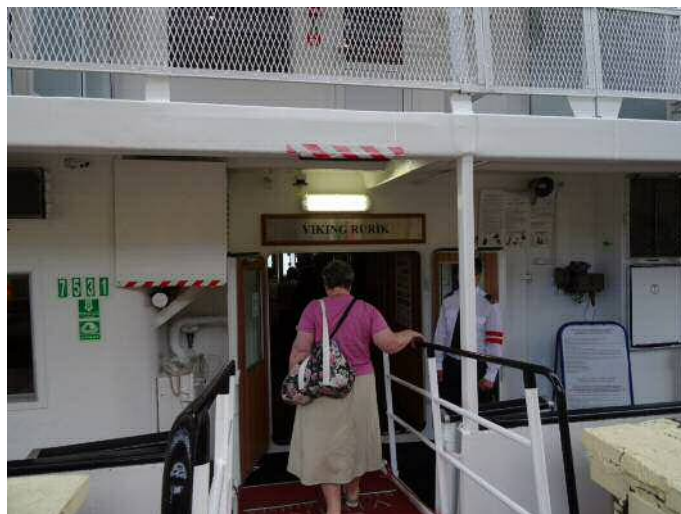
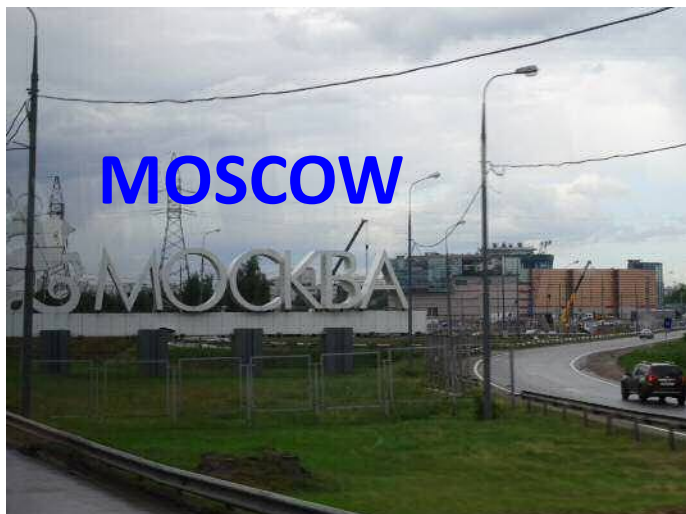
We were up just after 4am (didn't even know there was such an hour) and checked out before getting the shuttle bus to Terminal 1. Here we moved quite quickly through Security and check-in and had time for a light snack in the lounge before boarding our Lufthansa flight to Munich. This left on time at 7:15 and we headed east to cross the North Sea just south of Hull and were soon over the flat lands of Holland. The cloud cover here was more prevalent than it had been at take-off so we had only intermittent views of the country side as we crossed Holland and entered Germany.

The flight arrived on time in Munich and we had less than an hour layover so we were soon on our way to Moscow. This was another Lufthansa flight and was just short of three hours in duration so we were served lunch on board. Molly and I were in Business Class which, throughout Europe, is supposedly equivalent to domestic First Class in the US. Certainly in the case of this Lufthansa flight, the meal service was about the same (good but not in the same league as Asian airlines) and the seating is perhaps a little inferior. Basically, the airline maintains a three seat configuration throughout but does not seat anyone in the middle seat in Business Class, giving the feeling of extra space but no more seat width than coach.

Still, it was a very smooth and pleasant flight across eastern Germany, the Czech Republic, Poland and then into western Russia. The skies were partly cloudy throughout the flight but what we could see of the countryside gave the impression of basically flat lands with a good deal of farming.

We arrived in Moscow about 4:30 to some rain but some sunny spells. We were the first, of about a dozen, that were being met by the Viking representatives and it took almost an hour to get everyone for the drive to our ship. Although we went through the city we didn't see too many of the world-renowned sites but it was interesting, nevertheless, to see the living areas of Moscow as well as parts of the university and the broad river that runs through town.

Along the way our guide pointed out a few places of interest but spent most of his time giving us a detailed listing of our itinerary for the days in the city as well as the options available to us.







We arrived at the ship about 7pm and our bags were promptly delivered to the room – a room that is quite spacious with lots of storage space and a decent sized balcony.



## ***Oriental ...and (not quite) Midnight in Moscow***

We unpacked and put everything away and then joined Keith and Zena for a very pleasant introductory dinner. We made friends with several of the restaurant staff as well as other guests and at 9:30 listened to the program director's introduction. We retired about 11pm, surprisingly not too tired after a very long day.

**Friday June 13**

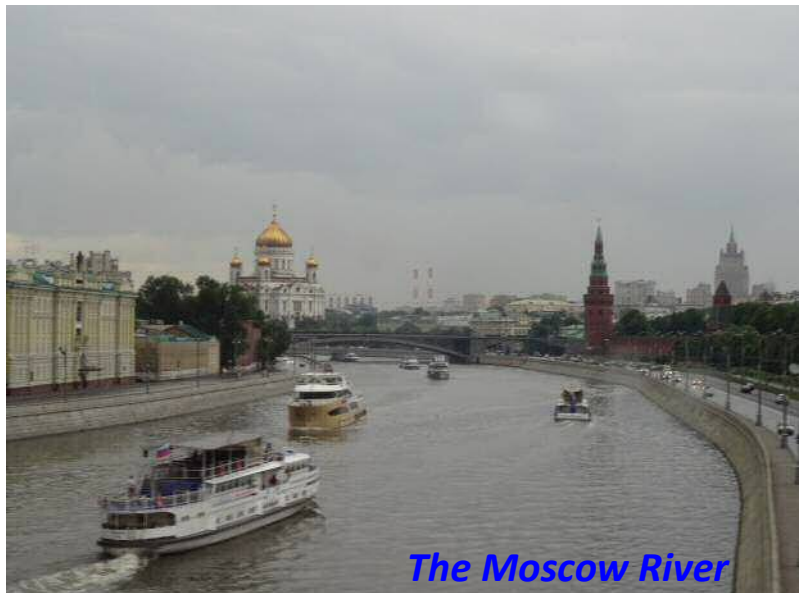


***An early morning walk to the bank and local shops.***

We were quite late getting up this morning and missed breakfast in the main dining room but had a good Continental meal in the Panorama Lounge. Keith and Zena, who had already eaten, joined us for coffee and we spent an hour chatting about the day ahead.

We booked our afternoon tours of the city of Moscow: Molly and I choosing the bus tour and Keith and Zena opting for the walking tour.

We had a good lunch before we all departed at 1:30 pm and went our separate ways. Our bus took us on a quite extensive tour of the center of Moscow from which we saw the Kremlin, the Bolshoi Ballet Theatre and many more public and private buildings – the most spectacular of which were the dozens of onion domed churches. Obviously we had seen pictures and TV programs about these magnificent

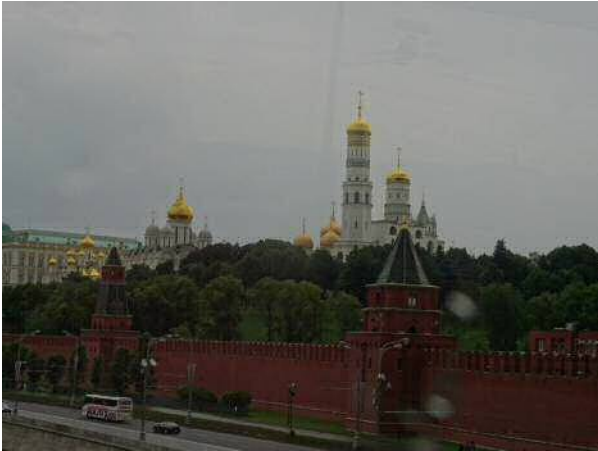


***The Moscow River***



buildings but the “real life” versions are so much more impressive. I think that the most distinctive difference between the images we had had and the sites we saw today were twofold: first the size and secondly the number. We must, in just the few hours we were downtown, have seen dozens of absolutely marvelous churches (usually with five domes representing Christ and the Four Apostles) and we were told that the country has 50,000 such buildings.

The colors are the same as we had seen on photographs but so much more vivid and spectacular as we got close and were able to look at them in a little more detail. While still on the bus we stopped at an overlook where we had a great panoramic view of the city – churches, the Kremlin, the KGB Building, civic and government buildings and ultra-modern skyscrapers; and so much more. Criss-crossing the entire city was the Moscow River which essentially loops the downtown area and which numerous wide bridges span and provide another perspective.



*Moscow: Churches, beautiful buildings, wide boulevards and gardens. An impressive first look.*



After this two hour plus bus tour, we got off the bus and were ushered into the Metro system to travel for about 15 minutes and four stations in distance. The Moscow Metro is the largest in the world and, in addition to being a major mode of transport (as many as 9 million passengers per day) it is something of a work of art in itself. Each station is built in a different style and each has its own character, architecture and art work. We saw just two: the first was essentially a long domed round roof structure in various marbles from across the country as well as a rather fine mural; and the second was filled with various sculptures in bronze, each representing a part of Russian life – specifically that at the time of the Soviet Union. There were life size (and bigger) statues of farmers, miners, tradesmen of all kinds, as well as military, civilian and religious figures. We were rushed past these at a fair pace but it was clear that each represented a significant work of art in its own right.

*The Moscow Metro, a state-owned enterprise, is 202.2 miles long and consists of twelve lines and 194 stations. Daily ridership of seven million passengers rises on weekdays to over nine million. Each line is identified by a name, a number and a color. The upcoming station is announced by a male voice on inbound trains to the city center, and by a female voice on outbound trains. On the Circle line, the clockwise direction uses a male announcer, and the counter-clockwise direction, a female. The color assigned to each line for display on maps and signs becomes the line's identifier colloquially.*



*The first plans for a metro system in Moscow date back to the Russian Empire but were postponed by World War I, the October Revolution and the Russian Civil War. In 1923, the Moscow City Council formed the Underground Railway Design Office at the Moscow Board of Urban Railways. It carried out preliminary studies, and by 1928 had developed a project for the first route from Sokolniki to the city center. At the same time, an offer was made to German company Siemens Bauunion to submit its own project for the same route. In June 1931, the decision to begin construction of the Moscow Metro was made by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. In January 1932 the plan for the first lines was approved, and on March 21, 1933 the Soviet government approved a plan for 10 lines with a total route length of 50 miles.*



*The Moscow Metro was one of the USSR's most extravagant architectural projects. Stalin ordered the metro's artists and architects to design a structure that embodied svet (radiance or brilliance) and svetloe budushchee (a radiant future). With their reflective marble walls, high ceilings and grandiose chandeliers, many Moscow Metro stations have been likened to an "artificial underground sun". This underground communist paradise reminded its riders that Stalin and his party had delivered something substantial to the people in return for their sacrifices.*

Keith and Zena, who visited more stations than we did, were impressed with one in particular that contained many chandeliers in a brightly lit high-ceiling hall.





## ***On the Moscow Metro***

We climbed up from the underground (as much as 100 feet below street level) and were close to the Bolshoi Theatre and only five minutes' walk from Red Square and the Kremlin. We were led by our guide to the center of Red Square and then into the three storey exclusive department store, GUM. Actually, the store is not filled with departments under one brand but is in fact more like a market ( a rather exclusive market) containing many store brands, ranging from Gucci to De Beers and including every name that might be found in Paris, London or New York – and probably many more besides.

Molly and I chose to spend most of our time walking around Red Square (rather than GUM) where we saw the magnificent St Basil Basilica, one side (about a quarter mile in length) of the Kremlin wall, Lenin's Tomb, a magnificent History Museum and several other onion-domed churches – as well as the outside of GUM, a beautiful stone edifice that could grace any European city as a civic or government building.

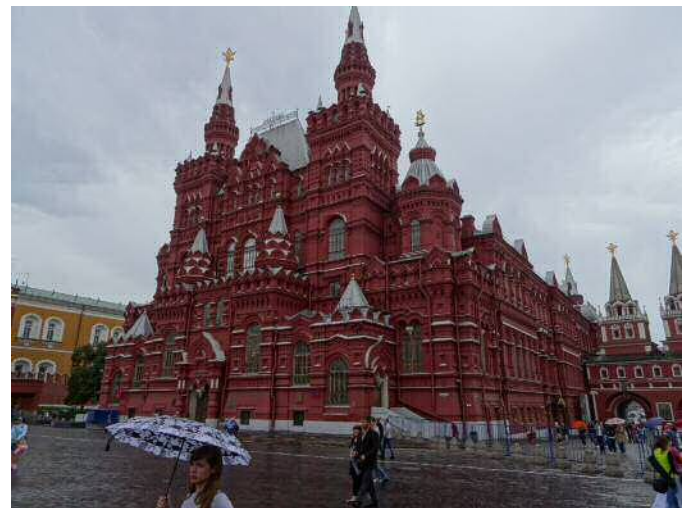
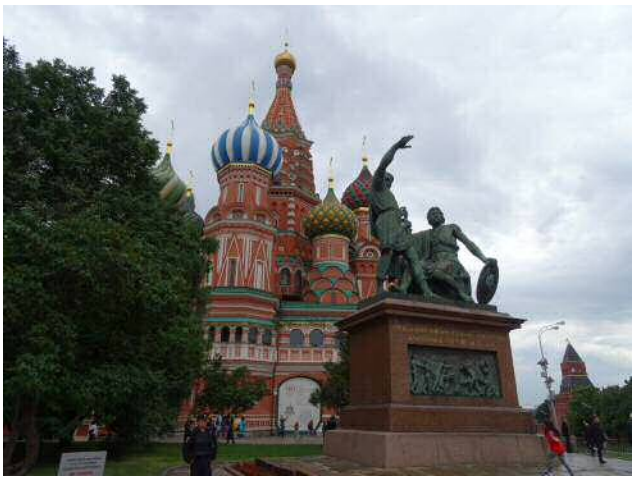
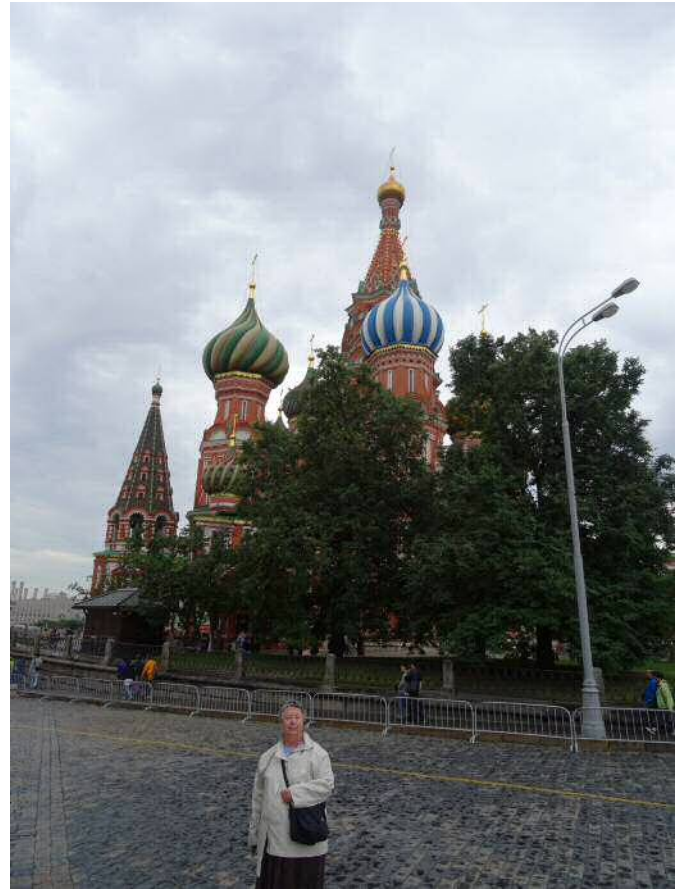
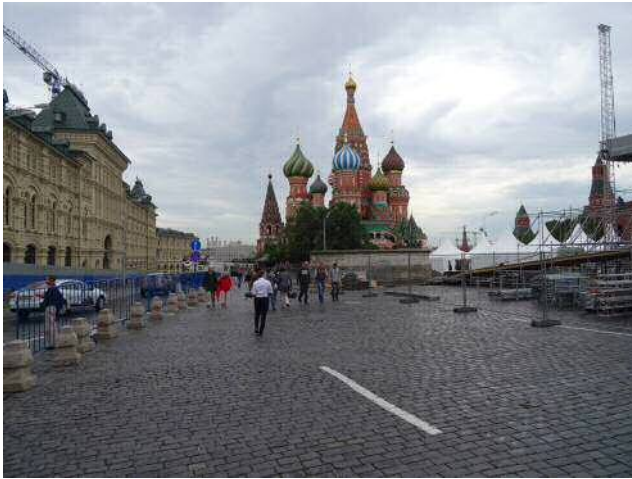
The Kremlin is much more than the austere walls that one normally sees and, although we didn't venture inside the walls, we could plainly see that the huge area (it must be at least a mile in perimeter) had within it beautiful churches, a magnificent domed structure and many other structures of enormous dimensions and wonderful architecture.

Red Square itself – a cobble stone plaza – is also enormous and much more appealing than the iconic setting for Red Army parades and Soviet display of strength. It is much like many similar open areas in other European cities (Vienna sprang to my mind) but on a much larger scale.









## ***Red Square***

***The Kremlin Walls***

***St Basil's Cathedral***

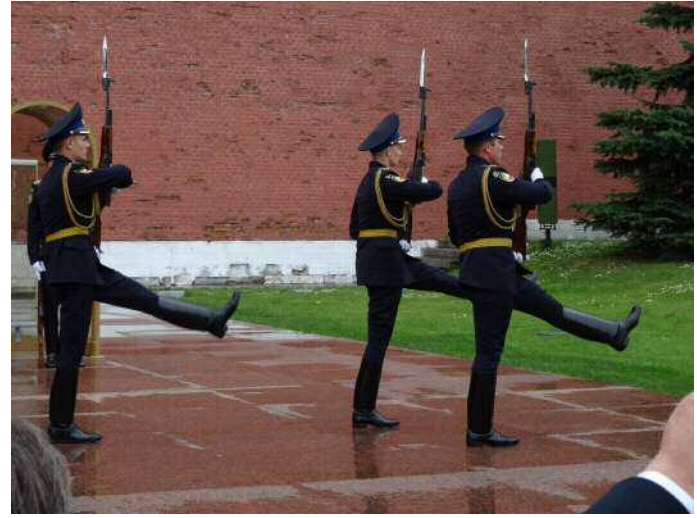
***The History Museum***

***Lenin's Tomb***

***GUM Department Store***



After walking all around the Square we left and walked a short distance to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. This is guarded by two army officers (presumably 24/7) and fronted by an eternal flame. We arrived in time to witness the changing of the guard and saw the two new arrivals replace those that had been on duty for an hour – the march in and out being in the high-stepping form that we associate with Russian (and other eastern European) armies.



We returned to GUM, had an expensive coffee and then were taken back to our bus which took us to a theater where we were to see a “local musical evening”.



On the way we crossed another bridge over the Moscow River and saw some unusual “trees”. These comprised hundreds of padlocks which had been placed there by just married couples and the keys had been thrown into the river as a sign that the lock (their love) could not be undone.



Molly and I were somewhat apprehensive about the evening's entertainment as we have experienced several of these on previous tours and, while of some interest, have generally been of rather amateurish caliber. Not tonight, however. We were treated to almost 1 ½ hours of absolutely first class musical entertainment by the Moscow Folk Orchestra.

The ensemble were young (I thought perhaps students at a musical academy) but were of the highest quality and amassed an amazing collection of authentic Russian instruments – the balalaika, the goosli, accordions, drones (?) and wonderful percussionists. Several provided solo performances, which were excellent; there were several duets (like “dueling balalaikas!”) and an amazing “competition” for supremacy between two xylophone players. In addition there was a comic musician who played (amongst other things) a saw, and a beautiful soprano who sang two very graphic and enthusiastic love songs. In addition to serious classical pieces played in classical mode, there were classical renditions in far from serious style and comic routines that seemed to involve the whole orchestra. It was a truly magnificent, beautiful, interesting, unusual – and amusing – end to our day.

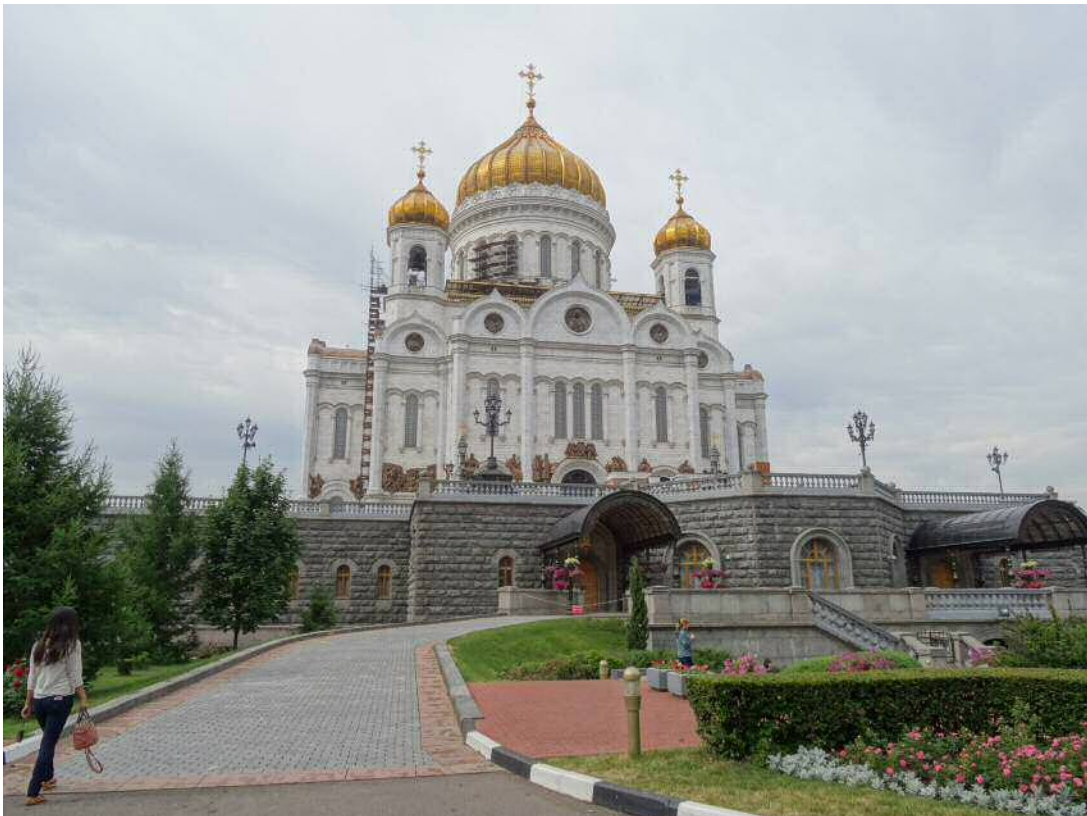


Actually that didn't quite end the day as we returned to the ship for another very good dinner with ample wine that took us until 11pm and bedtime!

#### **Saturday June 14**

We were up later this morning but still had time for a “Full English” breakfast before the 10am departure time for downtown Moscow. Today was to be a day of sightseeing on our own and the bus was available simply to ferry us back and forth. In fact, the four of us decided ahead of time that we would return to the ship via the Metro so that we could leave town at our convenience.

On getting off the bus we immediately walked about ¼ mile to the magnificent Cathedral Church of Our Saviour, not too far from the Kremlin. This church was built (in only four years) at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century on the same site that had housed a 19<sup>th</sup> Century cathedral before Stalin ordered it demolished in the thirties. It was actually blown up and, as the plans also were lost, the “restoration” was a complete re-build based on photographs and, presumably, memories. The site was to be used for an enormous “Palace of the Soviets” but funding issues stalled the construction and a swimming pool was built there instead!



## *The Cathedral of Christ the Saviour*

*One of the most imposing and controversial buildings in Russia, the resurrected Cathedral of Christ the Saviour has had a short but turbulent history. It was originally commissioned after the defeat of Napoleon, but work did not begin on its construction until 1839. Designed by the great St. Petersburg architect Konstantin Ton, who was also responsible for the Grand Kremlin Palace and the Kremlin Armoury and whose church designs pioneered the Byzantine revival style, the cathedral was erected, for maximum effect, on the embankment only a few minutes' walk from the Kremlin. Sadly, this entailed the destruction of the medieval Akseevskiy Convent, a course of events which lends an intriguing irony to the cathedral's own fate.*

*The enormous - and extremely expensive - cathedral was eventually consecrated in 1883, and its vast copper domes dominated the Moscow skyline. However, the cathedral had taken almost as much net to build and to decorate as it would generate in its lifetime. For fairly obvious reasons, it was singled out by the Soviet government for destruction and in 1931 blown to pieces to make way for a proposed Palace of Soviets, one of the most influential pieces of architecture never to be built. The design approved by Stalin would have stood over 400 meters high, with a vast statue of Lenin at its peak, and, although it was never built, the blueprint was nonetheless the forefather of the Seven Sisters, the magnificent Stalinist skyscrapers that towered over central Moscow. Only the foundations had been laid when the Second World War brought an abrupt end to such an ambitious project, and Stalin's successor, Nikita Khrushchev, had no stomach for such grandiose displays of hubris. The project was abandoned, and the site turned over to become an open-air swimming pool, the largest in the world, which was kept at a temperature of 27°C all year round. The result was a thick covering of fog that shrouded a number of gruesome deaths (and murders) among the swimmers.*

*The symbolic significance of the site was reaffirmed after the fall of the Soviet Union, when ambitious Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov ordered the Orthodox Church to resurrect the cathedral in a \$360-million reconstruction project. Completed in 2000, the new cathedral is loosely based on Ton's original designs, but constructed with modern building materials and fitted out with all mod-cons including air conditioning, telecommunications facilities, elevators and underground parking. Visitors can only see the cathedral as part of an organized tour, one of the highlights of which is the panoramic view from the 40-meter-high observation platform.*

When the USSR fell and Russia became independent, the then mayor of Moscow was instrumental in the decision to build a cathedral here again. Apparently the designers and builders did as faithful a reproduction as possible, even to the extent of persuading the Italian quarry to be re-opened to obtain identical red marble for some of the decorations. The Cathedral is now the tallest Orthodox Church in the world and dominates the skyline, despite the whole city, it seems, being a sea of onion domed churches, and is capable of housing as many as 10,000 people. It would appear, however, that it is not used on a regular basis for worship although there were dozens of faithful in the building during our visit, lighting candles and kissing the numerous icons.

The central dome above the main sanctuary is 103 meters tall and is decorated with what must be an enormous Christ figure, surrounded by many Biblical paintings. The rest of the church has dozens of wall paintings, many icons and a beautiful marble floor. It is very open, very light and very inspiring.

The high altar is not seen from the sanctuary and in its place is a very ornate building within the church itself. As we visited the interior of many more churches in Russia, we realized that the altar is not usually seen by the general public or service attendees but only by the priests. Usually a wall (the iconostasis) separates the main area from the altar and it would appear that what we saw was an unusual (and very beautiful) example. There is what appears to be a communion rail in front of this baptistery-like structure and that is really the only clue to the existence of an altar. Nevertheless, the cathedral is an amazingly beautiful building and, in my opinion, loses nothing as a result of it being a "copy" of the original.



We were not allowed to photograph the interior of the church but I have borrowed a couple of pictures from an official web site to illustrate the beauty of the church as it was—and as it is now.



We left the cathedral and took the Metro just a couple of stops to emerge right next to the Bolshoi Theater, from where we were able to walk to the entrance to Red Square. We had wanted to visit Lenin's tomb but as we reached the end of the line, security personnel were indicating that only those actually in line would be able to get in before the appointed closing time. So, we missed it – just as we had on our visit to Temple Mount in Jerusalem a few weeks earlier! As Molly said – we shall just have to come back again. And, indeed, a return visit to this city would be a worthwhile objective as it clearly has a lot more than we have been able to cover in this visit.



***Above: The Bolshoi Theater***

***Right: Kilometer Zero of the Russian Highway System***



We once again watched the changing of the guards around the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, paid another visit to Red Square and St Basil's Cathedral and past the magnificent city hall. We then walked into a shopping mall and found a Starbucks for a light lunch. After that we decided to return to the ship via the Metro, stopping at one very ornate station before completing our journey.



On getting back to the ship we had Reception help us get on an evening tour by boat along the Moscow River. The cruise we were on had this on the itinerary as an optional extra but, due to a paperwork mix-up, we were too late to sign up for the limited space on that tour. However, with the aid of a very helpful Viking representative, we were able to get on a similar tour organized by the Radisson hotel and to have taxi service to and from the point of embarkation.



So, we had dinner on the ship at 7pm and left by taxi for downtown once again to start our "Moscow by Night" tour from the water. The boat was not very crowded so we were able to move across the ship to get views and photographs on both sides. The river at this point essentially does two U-turns in the heart of the city; hence we saw most of the monuments, churches and other historical, cultural and civic sites that we had already seen in our two bus tours. However, the views from the water obviously gave another perspective and, at least towards the end of the ride, the approach of darkness and the illumination of the buildings provided yet another dimension.

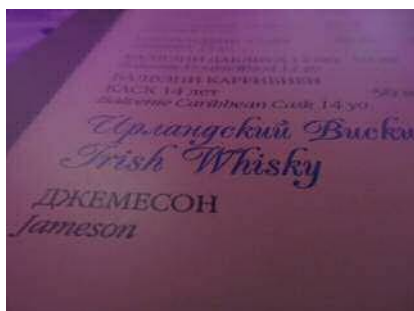




Party time on board and on the River Bank



From Peter The Great (left) to the Russian Space Shuttle



*Jameson and fireworks on the menu!*



The cruise was almost 2 ½ hours in duration and we all enjoyed the ride itself, the views from the water and – in the case of Keith and I – our first sample of vodka.

The same taxi driver who had taken us to the port was on the river bank waiting for us when we docked and we were back at the ship by midnight after a very enjoyable evening in this amazing city.

### Sunday June 15

We had breakfast about 8:30 and at 9:45 we boarded the bus for our tour of the Kremlin. We were fortunate to have the same guide we had had two days ago and she provided us with lots of information, a steady pace of walking and a good deal of humor.

## THE MOSCOW KREMLIN

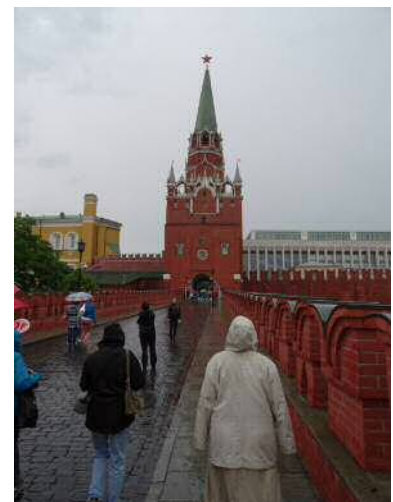
*Although there is evidence of human habitation on the site of the Kremlin dating back to 500 BC, Moscow's history really begins around 1147, when Yuri Dolgoruky, Grand Duke of Kiev, built a wooden fort at the point where the Neglina and Moskva Rivers converge. The city grew rapidly and, despite being razed by the Mongols in 1208, was soon powerful enough to attain primacy among the Russian principalities, acknowledged in 1326 when the seat of the Russian Orthodox Church moved there from Vladimir.*

*At the same time, stone buildings began to appear in the Kremlin and by the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> Century, the citadel was fortified with stone walls. Under Ivan the Great (1462-1505), the Kremlin became the center of a unified Russian state, and was extensively remodeled, as befitted its new status. Meanwhile, Moscow spread outside the walls of the citadel, and the Kremlin became a world apart, the base of the twin powers of state and religion. This period saw the construction of the magnificent Cathedral of the Assumption of the Annunciation and the Archangel, and the uniquely Russian Terem Palaces, the royal residence. The addition of the Ivan the Great Bell Tower completed Sobor'naya Square and added to the imposing effect of the Kremlin skyline.*

*Ivan's descendants further developed and adapted the Kremlin complex and, even when Peter the Great moved the capital to St Petersburg, Russia's rulers continued to leave their mark on the medieval town. Peter himself built the Kremlin Arsenal, originally planned as a military museum and now occupied by a barracks, and the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries brought Neoclassical masterpieces such as the Senate Building and the Great Kremlin Palace. After the 1917 Revolution, the Kremlin regained its rightful place as the seat of the Russian government, and the legacy of the Communist era is still visible in the larger structures that top many of the defensive towers, and in the vast, modern State Kremlin Palace, originally the Palace of Congresses.*

We started by walking through one of the many gates of the Kremlin on the side opposite Red Square and immediately ran into a tremendous downpour with some thunder and lightning. However, after sheltering for a few minutes while our guide got tickets, the rain had settled to a less threatening level and, indeed, part way through the two hour tour, it stopped altogether. It is perhaps worth noting here that this format (rain, drizzle, clouds and sunshine, combined with temperatures in the sixties) had been followed pretty much the whole of the past two days in Moscow, although this initial downpour today had been by far the heaviest.

Once inside the Kremlin walls (which are two kilometers in circumference in a roughly triangular shape) we saw just how different it was from the pictures we had received over the years whenever this institution was mentioned. First, its size is perhaps an order of magnitude bigger than the image I had had and, secondly, inside the walls is a small but very impressive city.







## ***The Kremlin as a Fortress and a Civic Center***

### ***The Tsar Bell***

***Molly had nothing to do with the  
crack! See next page)***



## *The Tsar Bell*

The Tsar Bell stands on a large pedestal in the Kremlin not far from the Ivan the Great Bell Tower. This is the largest bell in the world, weighing almost 202 tons and standing more than 6 meters high and 6.6 meters across. The story of its construction is marked by a series of almost supernatural misfortunes, as if this white elephant was cursed from conception. Empress Anna Ioanovna had wanted to entrust the making of the bell to a French royal mechanic, but was refused. Monsieur Germaine judged that it was impossible to make a bell that big. The work was therefore handed to the Motorin father and son team of Russian craftsmen.

The bell was cast in a large ditch dug in Ivanovskiy Square. The craftsmen prepared for the casting for two years, but work had to be stopped when leaking metal caused a fire that burnt down the wooden derrick designed to lift the future bell. It is claimed that after this the elder Motorin "died of grief". However, his son began work again, and in 1735 the bronze was poured into the cast in only half an hour. But that was not the end of the disasters, and during a fire in 1737 overheating and uneven cooling caused a large chunk weighing more than 11 tons to crack from the bell. For another century the monster lay in its casting pit, and it was only in 1836, on a second attempt, that the bell was at last raised from the pit and placed on its pedestal.

We saw at least five cathedrals of various sizes (some designated for Royal Family use only when built, others in honor of various saints), many colorful and beautiful civic and reception buildings and some beautiful gardens and parks. Each was approached via broad streets (now essentially devoid of traffic) and, as a result of the location on one of Moscow's higher hills, with great views over the rest of the city and the Moscow River on which we had sailed last night.

The first cathedral we entered was the *Cathedral of the Assumption* and, of course, was built in the Russian Orthodox style with few pillars but with every inch of wall space decorated with either frescoes or mosaic, painted or metallic relief icons. There were no three dimensional sculptures as such as they are not found in any Ortho-



dox Church but the decorations were very impressive. Apparently all Russian Orthodox churches are very similar in design and ornamentation (the guide said "If you have seen one, you have seen them all") but, of course the icons and frescoes added the individuality.

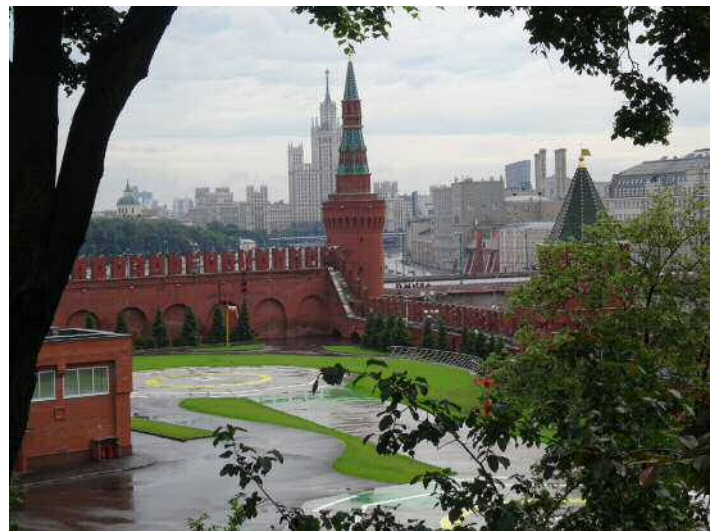
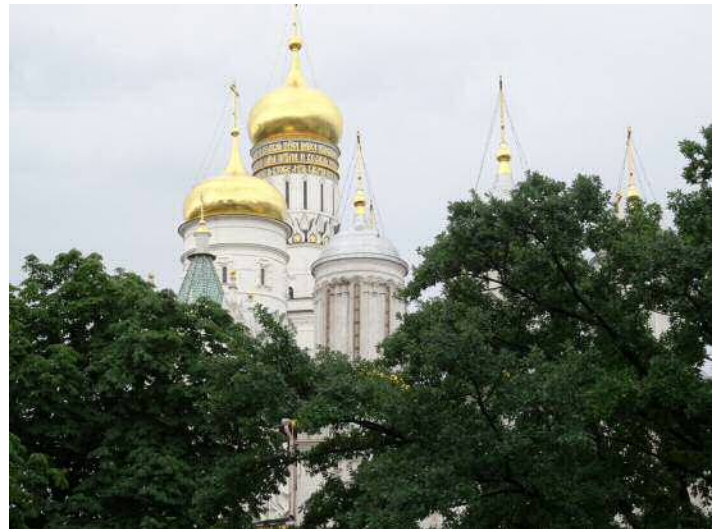
## *The Cathedral of The Assumption*

*(Inside photograph from Web site)*





The second cathedral we visited was dedicated to **St Michael** (the Patron Saint of Moscow) and also contained the tombs of most of the Czars of the past six centuries until the capital was moved to St Petersburg. The guide gave us an interesting perspective on the pre-Revolution Royal history as well as describing some of the changes that resulted during the Soviet years when religion was banned and many icons and even buildings were destroyed. Apparently, however, a goodly number of these decorations were saved by moving them to “safe houses”, although whether this was a sanctioned or covert operation was not clear. In any event, the post-Soviet era has seen a tremendous resurgence in religion and church attendance (even amongst the young) so perhaps these glorious edifices will be around for future generations of locals and tourists to enjoy.

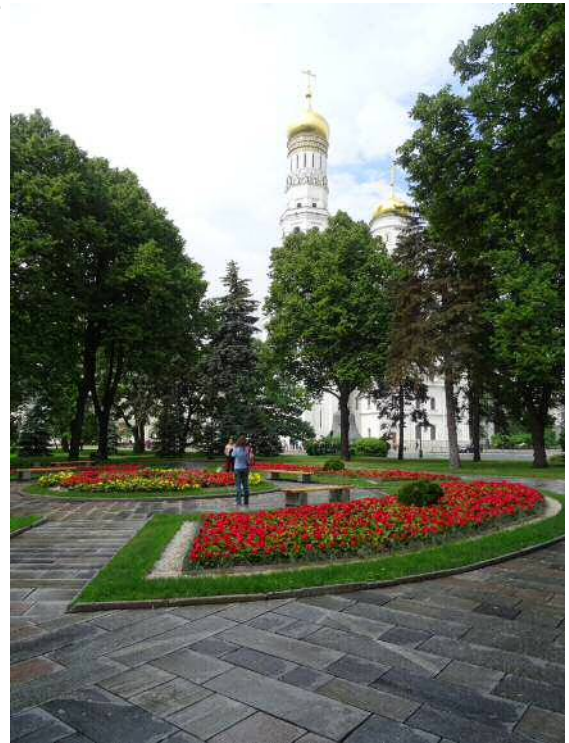


***The Kremlin as the Religious Center of the city with magnificent cathedrals and churches  
—all within the Red Wall perimeter!***

Once again, we felt that no matter what your Faith (or level of its intensity), it is difficult not to be moved by the beauty of these buildings and the “story” on which they were built and decorated and how much we owe (in architecture, art, design and music) to those whose faith did indeed inspire such expressions of beauty, which has provided generations with such emotion and awe.



Our final half hour within the Kremlin walls was spent walking through the park and garden areas where beautiful flower beds, trees and grassy areas provided an oasis from the hustle of the city proper and a wonderful setting for the cathedrals and civic buildings.



### *The Kremlin as a beautiful city park and tranquil sanctuary*

We then got the bus back to our ship and, shortly after lunch, we set sail for St Petersburg – once again in a tremendous thunderstorm.

So we left Moscow following an amazing three days during which our impressions of the city (and to some extent the entire country) had been totally transformed. We had arrived with an expectation of a dour, drab, perhaps dirty city (probably matched by its inhabitants) and left with a picture of a vibrant, clean, stunningly beautiful city with a wide variety of European and Asian architecture and, for the most part, a population that mirrored that image. Yes, there are still the non-smiling toilet attendants and eye contact in busy public places is minimal but on every occasion when we had direct interface with the locals it was a pleasant, helpful and rewarding experience. We were yet again so grateful that we are in a position to experience other countries and cultures and see just how different – and so much alike – we all are.

So, after three days in this wonderful city, we set sail for St Petersburg, eager to see that city once again as well as the countryside between the two. A brief summary of Moscow facts and Figures is included in the inset on the opposite page.

Once we were underway after leaving the port we were on the Moscow canal which would lead us to the Volga River and northwest to St Petersburg. The canal, built to allow shipping to reach Moscow from each of Russia's five surrounding oceans, is about 80 miles long and a marvel of engineering in itself. On the outskirts of the city we passed many large residences, presumably many of which were summer and/or weekend retreats for the richer Moscow residents. And there are many these days, with Moscow boasting the highest population of billionaires of any city in the world.

Later in the afternoon we attended a Russian lesson and a talk about the cruise and at 6:30 we gathered on the Sky Deck for cocktails and a reception hosted by the captain.

Then we had another good dinner on board and got chatting with the restaurant manager who, together with his assistant, asked us to join him on the Sky Deck at 10:30 so we could witness his "Sun Dance". He claimed that he normally does it in a tutu, which in itself was intriguing as he was a big man, but in any event Keith and I decided to be up there at the appointed hour. He and Sophia arrived promptly at 10:30, immediately ordered vodka for the four of us and then he did his dance, interspersed with some very amusing banter. We were the only ones on the outside deck – it had stopped raining but was cool – and we had a wonderful half hour with them. We were invited to do the same again next evening – with our wives.



*Moscow is the capital city and the most populous federal subject of Russia. The city is a major political, economic, cultural and scientific center in Russia and in Eastern Europe. According to Forbes 2013, Moscow has the largest number of billionaire residents in the world, has been ranked as the second most expensive city in the world by Mercer and is one of the world's largest urban economies, and is also one of the fastest growing tourist destinations in the world. Moscow is the northernmost and coldest megacity and metropolis on Earth, the second most populous city in Europe after Istanbul and the 8th largest city proper in the world, as well as the largest amongst high income economies. It is home to the Ostankino Tower the tallest free standing structure in Europe, Mercury City Tower, the tallest skyscraper in Europe and the Moscow International Business Center. It is the largest city in Russia, with a population of 12 108 257 people (2014).*

*Moscow is situated on the Moskva River in the Central Federal District of European Russia making it the world's most populated inland city. The city is well known for its unique architecture which consists of many different historic buildings such as Saint Basil's Cathedral with its brightly colored domes. With over 40 percent of its territory covered by greenery, it is one of the greenest capitals and major cities in Europe and the world, having the largest forest in an urban area within its borders—more than any other major city—even before its expansion in 2012. In the course of its history the city has served as the capital of a progression of states, from the medieval Grand Duchy of Moscow and the subsequent Tsardom of Russia to the Soviet Union. Moscow is considered the center of Russian culture, having served as the home of prestigious Russian artists, scientists and sports figures during the course of its history and because of the presence of many different museums, academic and political institutions and theaters. Moscow is also the seat of power of the Government of Russia, being the site of the Moscow Kremlin, a medieval city-fortress that is today the residence of the Russian president. The Moscow Kremlin and the Red Square are also one of several World Heritage Sites in the city. Both chambers of the Russian parliament (the State Duma and the Federation Council) also sit in within the city.*

*The city is served by an extensive transit network, which includes four international airports, nine railway terminals, numerous trams, a monorail system and one of the deepest underground metro systems in the world,. The Moscow Metro, fourth largest in the world and largest outside of Asia in terms of passenger numbers is recognized as one of the city's landmarks due to the rich and varied architecture of its 194 stations.*

*The Seven Sisters are a group of seven skyscrapers in Moscow designed in the Stalinist style. The term "Seven Sisters" is neither used nor understood by the local population; Muscovites call them Vysotki or Stalinskie Vysotki meaning "(Stalin's) high-rises" (or "Stalinist skyscrapers"). They were built from 1947 to 1953, in an elaborate combination of Russian Baroque and Gothic styles, and the technology used in building American skyscrapers.*

*The seven are: Hotel Ukraina, Kotelnicheskaya Embankment Apartments, the Kudrinskaya Square Building, the Hotel Leningradskaya, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the main building of the Moscow State University, and the Red Gates Administrative Building. There were two more skyscrapers in the same style that were never built: the Zaryadye Administrative Building and the Palace of the Soviets.*

### Monday June 16

The sun dance of late last evening had worked and we woke up to a beautiful bright and sunny morning. We were now on the Volga River, having left the Moscow Canal, and it was very pleasant viewing both banks as we ate breakfast. The area is very heavily wooded, with a few rather nice homes and even fewer small villages, and the river was generally very wide – certainly as wide as the Mississippi in places. We descended through a few more locks, attended a lecture on the Romanov period of Russia (three centuries until the 1917 Revolution) and sat outside on the sun deck. It was still a little cool but nevertheless a very pleasant change from the weather we had generally experienced in Moscow.



### *Cruising on the Volga River:*

*Homes, villages and churches on the river banks. A church belfry that survived the flooding to improve navigation. One of 27 locks on our route. Taking in the river breezes and the cool sunshine.*



Shortly after lunch we docked at the small town of Uglich for a three hour stay. The town has a population of less than 50,000 but has played an important part in Russian history, being the town in which the young next-in-line for the throne, Dmitry, was allegedly executed by his uncle. This was in the middle of the Romanov period and resulted in a break in the direct lineage and the influx of Prussian royals as the future Czars.

### *A musical greeting as we docked at the attractive town of Uglich*



*Uglich a historic town in Yaroslavl Oblast, Russia, which stands on the Volga River. And had a population of about 35,000 in 2010.*

*A local tradition dates the town's origins to 937. It was first documented in 1148 as Ugliche Pole (Corner Field). The town's name is thought to allude to the nearby turn in the Volga River.*

*Uglich had been the seat of a small principedom from 1218 until 1328 when the local princes sold their rights to the great prince of Moscow. As a border town of the Grand Duchy of Moscow, it was burned several times by Lithuanians, Tatars, and the grand prince of Tver.*

*Grand Duke Ivan III of Moscow gave the town to his younger brother Andrey Bolshoy in 1462. During Andrey's reign, the town was expanded and the first stone buildings were constructed. Particularly notable were the cathedral (rebuilt in 1713), the Intercession Monastery (destroyed by the Bolsheviks) and the red-brick palace of the prince (completed in 1481 and still standing).*

*During the reign of Ivan the Terrible, the town passed to his only brother, Yury. Local inhabitants helped the Tsar capture Kazan by building a wooden fortress which was transported by the Volga all the way to Kazan. Throughout the 16th century, Uglich prospered both politically and economically, but thereafter its fortunes began to decline.*

*After Ivan's death, his youngest son Dmitry Ivanovich was banished to Uglich in 1584. The most famous event in the town's history took place on May 15, 1591 when the 10-year old boy was found dead with his throat cut in the palace courtyard. Official investigators concluded however that Dimitri's death was an accident. They cut a "tongue" from the cathedral bell that rung the news of Dimitri's death and "exiled" it to Siberia.*



Consequently, while in Uglich, we visited the Church of the Spilled Blood, built on the site where Dmitry was killed and saw frescoes depicting the event and its consequences. We also visited two additional cathedrals - one of the Assumption and the other of the Epiphany. In the latter we listened to a six man a capella group with an absolutely marvelous deep bass. They sang one sacred song and then the Volga Boatmen: not enough, so I bought a CD.







*Frescoes and iconostasis in  
the Church of St Dmitry,  
Uglich*



Also in Uglich we visited a private home where we (about 14 of us in the group) were entertained by the lady of the house who provided us with tea, vodka (homemade), pickles, peppers, sweets and cake and let us look through the one storey home. Viking has a habit of showing the "local life" in this manner (although in China and Cambodia it was by visiting schools) and it is not usually our favorite part of the tour. However, in this case it was a very enjoyable experience and a nice way to see the very hospitable and friendly locals. Perhaps the homemade "moonshine" vodka helped!







### *Our hostess's kitchen (straight out of the fifties?) and vegetable garden.*

We had a young and attractive local guide who showed us the cathedrals and a few other civic and public buildings and did a good job of filling in the history that we had touched on in our morning lecture. I should point out, however, that the Romanov period of Russian history appears to have been full of intrigue and many twists and turns that were not easy to follow, so I wouldn't want the reader to take my translated version (throughout this journal) as the whole (or even the correct) story.



### *Uglich*





Of course, Uglich also had its tourist trap shops and one in particular was selling very beautiful (and very expensive) hand-painted and lacquered boxes and other items, most of which seemed to be of limited practical use. We also saw some of



the works of art in progress and, indeed, there is a tremendous amount of work involved in their production. We successfully resisted any purchases except a glasses case that Molly bought—and this was so much less expensive than the rest that we assume it was one of a more mass produced variety. Nevertheless it is very attractive—and useful.

As soon as everyone was back on board we continued our journey along the Volga River and later enjoyed dinner as we sailed. We were now almost at the 60 degree latitude line so, in the middle of June, we had bright skies even as late as the second Sun Dance at 10:30pm.

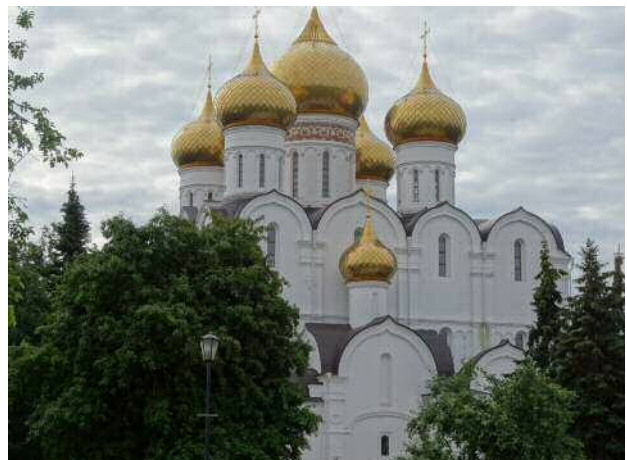
## *Leaving Uglich*



### **Tuesday June 17**

We had a light breakfast in the Panorama Bar this morning as we had an early (8:15) departure for a tour of the city of Yaroslavl. The city was founded in 1010 – making it one of the oldest in Russia – and had a brief period as the country's capital. However, its major claim to fame seems to be as the city that brought Christianity to Russia after Vladimir the Great embraced the Orthodox Church based on his emissaries' visit to Constantinople in which they said that they didn't know whether they were in Heaven or on Earth. As late as the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century the city boasted over 50 churches and 15 monasteries at a time when the population was much smaller than today's 650,000.

The Stalin era brought the destruction of many of them and only in the past 25 years have some been converted back to churches from the non-religious use that they were given in the 1930s.

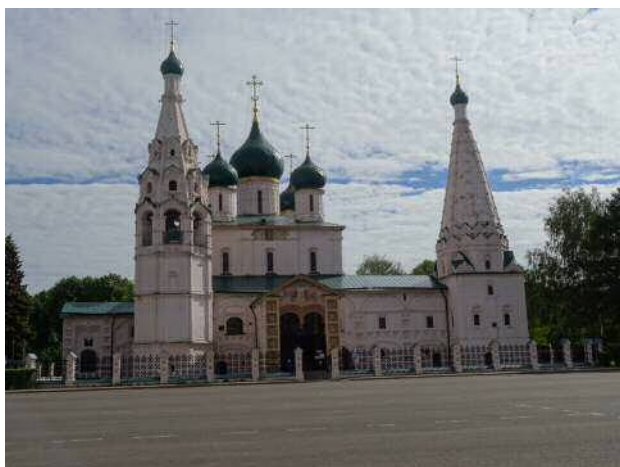




The first church we visited was the Cathedral of the Transfiguration which is fronted at a distance by an unusual but impressive war memorial and eternal flame. This church was completely destroyed in Stalin's time and has just been re-built, the construction completed for the city's millennium in 2010. As with all the Orthodox churches we have seen, the iconostasis (the "wall" between the worship space and the altar) is covered with beautiful icons and the other walls and ceiling with frescoes.



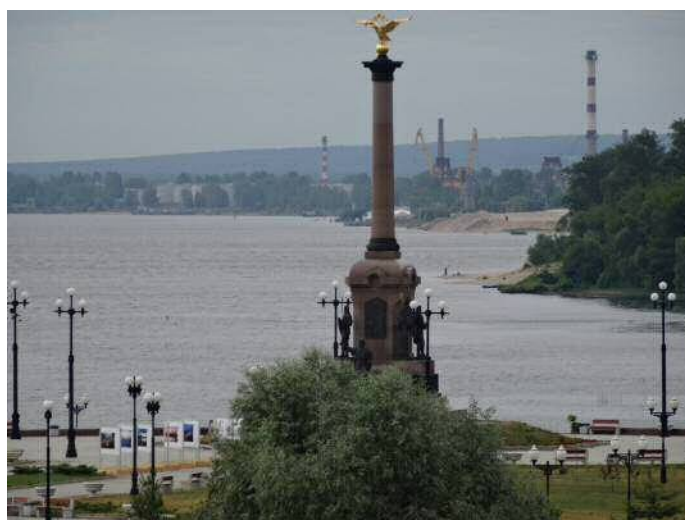
We also visited (below) the Cathedral of Elijah the Prophet (the patron saint of the city) which had survived since the 18<sup>th</sup> Century and its "frescoes" we were told were actually egg tempura which are much more durable and retain their vibrant colors for a longer period. Indeed, many of the blues, reds and greens were in what would appear to be almost new condition. The picture is taken from a web site).



Following a brief visit to a market (housed in a large building as is often the case in Britain) we went to a viewpoint overlooking the Volga and one of its tributaries that formed a natural defense for the city. In fact,

this river barrier formed two thirds of the exterior of the city's kremlin and the churches we had visited were inside the old fortress.

We were reminded that the kremlin was the central fortress of Russian cities and also included the political, cultural and religious buildings and functions, just as the more famous one we had visited in Moscow.







Our final stop was at the Governor's Mansion. Yaroslavl is the capital of its region and this building and its grounds had been the leaders' residence and office in earlier years. It is now referred to as a Gallery (it has numerous paintings of Russian royalty, for example) but is basically a museum to past glories. It is a beautiful building inside and out and we were given an excellent tour by the "governor's daughters" dressed in period costume (late 19<sup>th</sup> Century). We were also given a short dancing demonstration with a three piece instrumental accompaniment – and the audience were approached by the "professionals" to join them in a dance.



*The Governor's Mansion, Yaroslavl*



It may be telling that I was the only one of the four of us not asked to join in, with Keith, Zena and Molly each performing with their beautiful or handsome partners. However, I consoled myself by recognizing that someone had to take the videos of their performance!



Although it is a large city, the part we visited was quite compact (we walked everywhere) and in most European cities would be classed as the Old Town. In fact, it is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the only 20<sup>th</sup> century building in the area was the ugly concrete structure built as the Communist Party Headquarters (Right). Certainly the city we saw (with that one exception) was very picturesque and with the



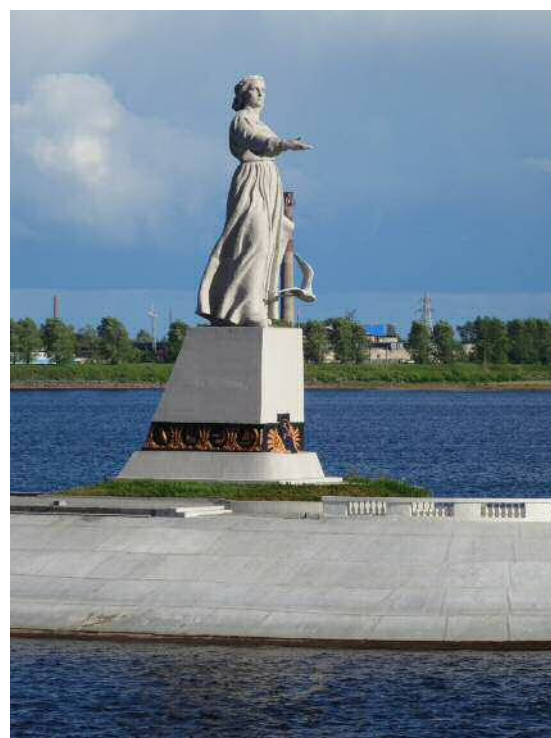
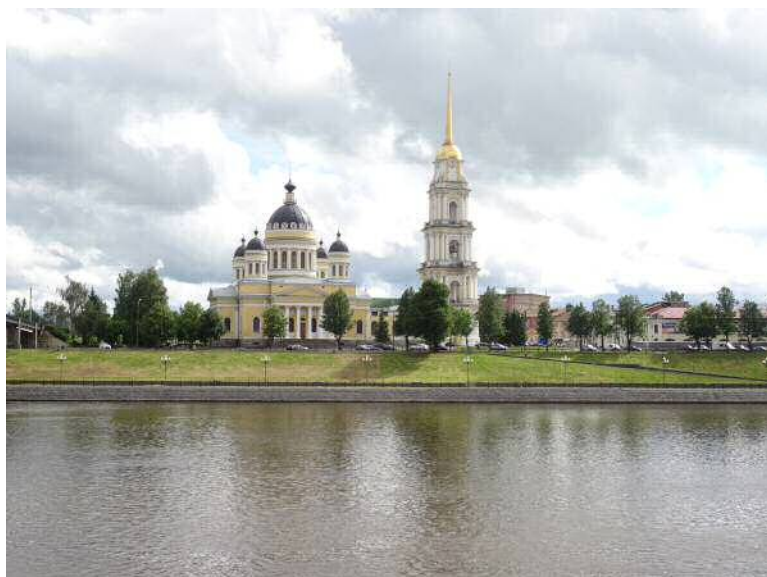


weather cooperating (cloudy but bright) it was pleasant to end our visit with a coffee sitting in one of the outdoor cafes.

We returned to the ship and almost immediately set sail for our next stop. After lunch we listened to a lecture on the Soviet era (from Lenin to Gorbachev) which was very interesting and we also passed the town of Tutayev with beautiful churches on both sides of the river and nick- named the “Fairy Tale” churches.



Later on we passed the town of Rybinsk (“Fish Town”) with a beautiful cathedral (the Cathedral of the Transfiguration) with a golden-domed Baroque belfry. We also passed a recently restored statue of Mother Volga – a huge tribute to this great river.



Then, once again, it was time to eat! Later, the four of us formed a team to compete in the Music Quiz in the Sky Bar.

There were eight tunes played by the pianist and for each we were asked to name its country of origin, answer a question on that country – and get on the dance floor to move with the music. We are proud to say that our team (“4 Tykes Abroad”) scored 15 out of a possible 16 points and were declared the winners. Each couple received a voucher for a bag full of laundry on board, which probably amounts to \$50 per room. More importantly, it was a fun way to spend the evening being as excited and crazy as kids throughout.



### Wednesday June 18

We docked at the town of Kuzino about 9am and at 9:30 left for a three hour excursion. The first stop was on the dock where a Viking long house replica was used to give us a taste of the Scandinavian invasions of this part of the world in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century. The brief show was interesting and quite amusing and added yet another dimension to this country and its history.



We were then driven about 15 miles to visit the town of Kirillov-Belozersky where we attended a school. School was no longer in session but we were given a tour by a student and shown the classrooms and given a description of primary and secondary education in this northern part of the country. It was interesting to see a physical facility not that different to the one Keith and I had attended sixty years ago and to get an idea of the curriculum – both now and as it had existed during the Soviet era. Our local guide (not the student who escorted us in the school) had been a teacher (before retiring at the customary age of forty for many professionals!) and gave the impression that she perhaps preferred the discipline and range of study “in her day” more than the “easier” course work of today. I suppose that was a reaction that many of us get as we age: “You have it easy; not like in my day”.



We then went to the monastery dedicated to **Saint Cyril** ("Kirillo"). As our handout said, it looked more like a fortress than a monastery with high, imposing walls much like the Moscow Kremlin – and almost as big. Within the walls were several churches as well as the old monastery of The Assumption (which had been a place of pilgrimage for the Czars) and the much smaller one dedicated to St John where a handful of monks still reside.

There is a great deal of archeological work and reconstruction taking place on the huge site but the major building that we visited was basically a museum containing frescoes, icons, paintings and church pieces which had adorned the monastery







## *St Cyril Monastery*

(and others) over the 600 years of its existence. Photography was not allowed inside (except after the purchase of a permit that was inordinately expensive; I don't think any of the group availed themselves) but we were able to view some fantastic pieces of art put together both here and in the capitals of St Petersburg and Mos-

cow. Once again, the primary pieces were icons, although there were a number of frescoes remaining and many fabric works of art on various materials and often including much gold, silver and precious stones.

It was the type of museum where one could easily spend many hours not only on the whole but looking at the detail in one piece – but, of course, we were there for less than an hour. But it provided another level of detail on the Orthodox Church to which we had been introduced in Israel and which has been probably the major theme of the past six days in Russia. It is amazing that, in a country that was officially atheist for much of the past century and during which many religious sites were destroyed or put to other use, so much emphasis is on the church today. For those faithful to the Christian tradition, Russia must provide great hope for the future; for those not so inclined it still provides a tremendous collection of beautiful architecture and art comparable to that of the great Western European countries.

As an aside, perhaps, our guide made more than one reference to the Trinity being cited in the Old Testament: specifically pointing out icons in which a Three-in-One God is depicted in distinctly non-New Testament surroundings (for example, with animal sacrifices). This took Molly and me a little by surprise but I have since seen a number of (presumably) scholarly references to that anachronism (at least in our eyes). I leave it to the more theologically trained readers to render judgment!

Back on board ship we soon set sail again and after about three hours we were on the White Lake, one of



*St Cyril Monastery from the water*

the ten biggest natural lakes in Europe, and now part of the Volga-Baltic Waterway – a 700 mile long system for commercial navigation. In the meantime we had attended another lecture on recent Russian history – this time the period from Gorbachev to Yeltsin; the period of Perestroika and Glasnost. The speaker was very complimentary of Gorbachev and the changes he initiated as well as his continuing global support of cancer research.

Once again we enjoyed another good dinner on board (tonight's was a Russian theme) followed by a vodka tasting session at 9:30. We were given six different vodkas to taste, together with appropriate snacks, and for each we had a toast and a different way of holding the glass – or, in one case, glasses! We were taught how to drink from two cascading glasses at once; some more successfully than others, the less skillful getting another shirt for the laundry.

***Vodka** is a distilled beverage composed primarily of water and ethanol, sometimes with traces of impurities and flavorings. Traditionally, vodka is made by the distillation of fermented grains or potatoes, though some modern brands use other substances, such as fruits or sugar. It is usually 40% alcohol by volume.*

*Vodka is traditionally drunk neat (not mixed with any water, ice, or other mixer), though it is often served chilled in the vodka belt countries of Eastern Europe and around the Baltic Sea. It is also commonly used (primarily outside Eastern Europe) in cocktails and mixed drinks, such as the vodka martini, vodka tonic, screwdriver and Bloody Mary. CHEERS!*

vashee zda-ró-vye



#### Thursday June 19

Today was essentially a lazy day on ship, although there were plenty of activities to attend if one felt so inclined. I attended another good lecture on the Putin years to round out our History of Russia series.

At 3pm we docked at a small island, Kizhi. There has been a settlement here for over 500 years, principally populated by peoples from Finland originally. In fact the area is called Karelia, presumably named for (or perhaps with) the area of the same name in Finland. Most of the villages had disappeared by the 1950s but more recently the island has been re-populated with buildings from various parts of the province to preserve them in what is, in fact, an open-air museum.



The unique feature of the buildings, including the magnificent 22 domed **Cathedral of the Assumption**, is that they are built of wood. Even the onion domes are made up of dozens (probably hundreds in some cases) of shingles, each cut and shaped from aspen trees. In addition to the church and its belfry, there are perhaps twenty additional structures that made up villages of this type – two storey homes with housing for a large family and its animals, a windmill and various craft shops. Our guide was very good and made the place come alive with her descriptions not only of the dwellings but of the life that the inhabitants followed in this remote area. Since we were now at a latitude of 60 degrees, we could believe her descriptions of the very hard winters and see the benefit of the entire family bedding down in one room for about three months every year.





**Kizhi** is an island near the center of the Lake Onega in the Republic of Karelia, Russia. It is about 6 km long, 1 km wide and is about 68 km away from the capital of Karelia, Petrozavodsk.

Settlements and churches on the island were known from at least the 15th century. The population was rural, but was forced by the government to assist development of the ore mining and iron plants in the area that resulted in a major Kizhi Uprising in 1769–1771. In the 18th century, two major churches and a bell tower were built on the island, which are now known as Kizhi Pogost. In the 1950s, dozens of historical wooden buildings were moved to the island from various parts of Karelia for preservation purposes. Now, the entire island and the nearby area form a national open-air museum with more than 80 historical wooden structures. The most famous is the Kizhi Pogost, which is a UNESCO World Heritage site.



We were fortunate in that we experienced temperature in the fifties but we did experience a heavy shower for the final ten minutes of our walk and, with a stiff breeze, it was indeed quite cool. However, once back on board we were able to quickly get out of our wet clothes and change for a champagne and snacks departure session on the Sun Deck – now bathed in sunlight on a very pleasant evening.



### Friday June 20

Our only shore visit today was at the town of Mandrogy. This was in many respects similar to Kizhi in that it is fundamentally a living museum. The town was destroyed in World War II but an enterprising Russian built a reproduction in the late nineties simply as a tourist attraction. Again, as at Kizhi, most of the buildings are wooden and many are very brightly painted and decorated with impressive carvings.



### Mandrogy







We walked around the entire small area in about 90 minutes and made the obligatory stops at craft shops where the stacking dolls are carved and painted and where other very beautiful – but expensive – wooden and fabric souvenirs were available. We settled for the more down-market versions sold nearer the dock!

Keith and Zena went to a Russian Banya where they experienced the sauna and (at least for Keith) a cool dip in a lake. Both thoroughly enjoyed their experience. I don't believe they realized that an official photograph was taken!



In the afternoon we sailed, first along the river and later into the largest lake in Europe (Lake Ladoga) in preparation for our arrival tomorrow in St Petersburg. Lunch served on the Sun Deck as we sailed was a buffet containing a wide selection of typical Russian dishes, with what appeared to be an emphasis on breads and other starches, cheeses and some delicious salads. At 3pm we listened to a final lecture on Russia – this one covering the Russia of today. There were some interesting questions from the audience and some equally interesting – and candid – answers from the

three tour guides. It re-enforced our opinion that travel is a key ingredient in promoting more harmony in the world as the vast majority of people from across the globe want exactly what we want and are prepared to work to get it.

Tonight's dinner was the more formal (shirts, ties, jackets for the men were widely seen – but not tuxedos that would be seen on the ocean cruises) and was the Captain's Toast and, in effect, farewell as tomorrow we will be in St Petersburg and his role will be complete for this trip.

### Saturday June 21 (Our 49<sup>th</sup> Wedding Anniversary)

For some reason Bob was up soon after seven this morning and Molly followed well before eight. The ship had arrived in St Petersburg (having crossed the huge lake but without choppy “seas”), although the only view from our stateroom was of another ship moored to our port side.

Mid-morning we started our time in St Petersburg with a visit to the Hermitage. The building itself is huge (see web photo below—and my attempt to capture it, right) and comprises six buildings, of which five are now open to the public

It is impossible to describe this palace/museum/art gallery with its 600 rooms, each, it seems, more beautiful and ornate than the last. We had visited the Hermitage on our last visit here in 2008 and so we were prepared not only for its beauty and its contents, but also its crowds. Our group of 40 people from the ship had one guide who somehow managed to herd us through several dozen rooms and describe in some detail perhaps 50 works of art.

The palace had been built by Catherine the Great and she and subsequent rulers must have spent a huge amount of time (not to mention money) filling the rooms with the works of masters from across Europe.



The **State Hermitage** is a museum of art and culture in Saint Petersburg. One of the largest and oldest museums in the world, it was founded in 1764 by Catherine the Great and has been open to the public since 1852. Its collections, of which only a small part is on permanent display, comprise over three million items, including the largest collection of paintings in the world. The collections occupy a large complex of six historic buildings along Palace Embankment, including the Winter Palace, a former residence of Russian emperors. Apart from them, the Menshikov Palace, Museum of Porcelain, the Storage Facility and the eastern wing of the General Staff Building are also part of the museum. Of six buildings in the main museum complex, five, (the Winter Palace, Small Hermitage, Old Hermitage, New Hermitage and Hermitage Theatre) are open to the public.

Catherine the Great started her art collection in 1764 by purchasing paintings from Berlin merchant Johann Ernst Gotzkowsky. He assembled the collection for Frederick II of Prussia who ultimately refused to purchase it. Thus, Gotzkowsky provided over 225 paintings, mainly Flemish and Dutch, including 90 not precisely identified, to the Russian crown. In 1764, Catherine commissioned Yuri Felten to build an extension on the east of the Winter Palace which he completed in 1766. Later it became the Southern Pavilion of the Small Hermitage. In 1767–1769, French architect Jean-Baptiste Vallin de la Mothe built the Northern Pavilion on the Neva embankment. Between 1767 and 1775, the extensions were connected by galleries, where Catherine put her collections.<sup>[8]</sup> The entire neoclassical building is now known as the Small Hermitage.



As with our last visit, the three hours spent in the Hermitage barely scratched the surface and was conducted at almost breakneck speed. Certainly it was by no means sufficient time to get more than just an overall impression of the grandeur of the place and a sampling of its contents and one could imagine spending days or weeks there and still missing a lot. On the other hand, for tired legs and brains that can soon get “overloaded”, this was an excellent tour.



Unfortunately, we did not take our cameras as we had recalled from our previous visit that photography was not allowed inside the galleries. This turned out to be wrong and cameras were permitted. However, we did remember the crowds and the frenetic pace of a tour correctly, so getting pictures of the artwork alone (without a dozen tourists in the frame) would have been extremely difficult. So, a few pictures stolen from the Web are included here just to give a taste for the opulence and vastness of the museum.

The bus trip to and from the palace gave us an introduction to the city and its amazing architecture which will be amplified and seen close-up during the next two days of tours. For today, however, we had a four hour break back on the ship before our evening trip to the ballet. We went to see a performance of “The Nutcracker” at the Rimsky-Korsakov Theater and it was excellent. We have no idea where the troupe fits in the hierarchy of Russian ballet companies but to us they seemed very professional and flawless in their performance.

The **N. A. Rimsky-Korsakov Saint Petersburg State Conservatory** is a music school in Saint Petersburg. In 2004, the conservatory had around 275 faculty members and 1,400 students. It was founded in 1862 by the Russian pianist and composer Anton Rubinstein. Rimsky-Korsakov was appointed in 1871 and the conservatory has borne his name since 1944.

The current building was erected in the 1890s on the site of the old Bolshoi Theatre of Saint Petersburg and still preserves the grand staircase and landing from that historic theatre. As the city changed its name in the 20th century, the conservatory was duly renamed *Petrograd Conservatory* and *Leningrad Conservatory*.

Today, it is a Russian composition school whose graduates have included many notable composers from Pyotr Tchaikovsky to Sergei Prokofiev. During the 1960s, Shostakovich taught at the conservatory, which brought it additional fame.

The Mariinsky Theater, located across from the Conservatory and a part of the school is where the Ballet Theater of St Petersburg performs.

The show lasted just under two hours and we returned to the ship about 10:30 for a “snack” of goulash, bread and wine to finish the day. It was still almost full daylight as we went to bed close to midnight after a pleasantly sunny afternoon and evening. We are hoping for similar weather for tomorrow as we journey to the Summer Palace and on a city tour.

## Sunday June 22

It was indeed a beautiful sunny day as we drove to the summer palace of Tsarina Elizabeth in the town of Pushkin (named after Russia's most famous poet). In fact, as we drove into town we passed a statue of Pushkin in a very pleasant park near the palace (Right).

The palace was designed in 1752 and named in honor of Elizabeth's mother Catherine who originally owned the estate.



The palace is not as big (nor as crowded) as the Hermitage but it still contains numerous works of art and, especially, very ornate rooms within its beautiful walls, which have a predominantly pastel blue and white exterior. As we entered the gates at 8:30 we were greeted by a small brass band that played local music as well as virtually

any tune requested by the multi-national visitors. They (or similar groups) kept appearing at various locations during the tour!

The residence originated in 1717, when Catherine I of Russia had a summer palace constructed for her pleasure. In 1733, Her daughter Empress Elizabeth commissioned an expansion to the Catherine Palace. However, she found the residence outdated and incommensurable and in May 1752 asked her court architect to demolish the old structure and replace it with a much grander edifice in a flamboyant Rococo style. Construction lasted for four years, and on 30 July 1756 the architect presented the brand-new 325-meter-long palace to the Empress, her dazed courtiers, and stupefied foreign ambassadors.

More than 100 kilograms of gold were used to gild the sophisticated stucco façade and numerous statues erected on the roof. It was even rumored that the palace's roof was constructed entirely of gold. In front of the palace a great formal garden was laid out. It centers on the azure-and-white Hermitage Pavilion near the lake. The interior of the pavilion featured dining tables with dumbwaiter mechanisms. The grand entrance to the palace is flanked by two massive "circumferences", also in the Rococo style. A delicate cast-iron grille separates the complex from the town of Tsarskoe Selo. (Pushkin).

Although the palace is popularly associated with Catherine the Great, she actually regarded its "whipped cream" architecture as old-fashioned. When she ascended to the throne, a number of statues in the park were being covered with gold, in accordance with the last wish of Empress Elizabeth, yet the new monarch had all the works suspended upon being informed about the expense. In her memoirs she censured her predecessor's reckless extravagance:

"The palace was then being built, but it was the work of Penelope: what was done to-day, was destroyed tomorrow. That house has been pulled down six times to the foundation, then built up again till it was brought to its present state. The sum of a million six hundred thousand rubles was spent on the construction. Accounts exist to prove it; but besides this sum the Empress spent much money out of her own pocket on it, without ever counting".



In order to gratify her passion for antique and Neoclassical art, Catherine employed the Scottish architect Charles Cameron, who not only refurbished the interior of one wing in the Neo-Palladian style then in vogue, but also constructed the personal apartments of the Empress, a rather modest Greek Revival structure known as the Agate Rooms and situated to the left of the grand palace. Noted for their elaborate jasper decor, the rooms were designed so as to be connected to the Hanging Gardens, the Cold Baths, and the Cameron Gallery (still housing a collection of bronze statuary)—three Neoclassical edifices constructed to Cameron's designs. According to Catherine's wishes, many remarkable structures were erected for her amusement in the Catherine Park. These include the Dutch Admiralty, Creaking Pagoda, Chesme Column, Rumyantsev Obelisk, and Marble Bridge.

Upon Catherine's death in 1796, the palace was abandoned in favor of Pavlovsk Palace. Subsequent monarchs preferred to reside in the nearby Alexander Palace and, with only two exceptions, refrained from making new additions to the Catherine Palace, regarding it as a splendid monument to Elizabeth's wealth and Catherine II's glory. In 1817 Alexander I engaged Vasily Stasov to refurbish some interiors of his grandmother's residence in the Empire style. Twenty years later, the magnificent Stasov Staircase was constructed to replace the old circular staircase leading to the Palace Chapel. Unfortunately, most of Stasov's interiors—specifically those dating from the reign of Nicholas I—have not been restored after the destruction caused by the Germans during World War II.



*The Palace façade,  
Its unusual sup-  
porting columns*

*- and Molly at the  
Front Door*







***Our guide explains the palace layout using the Model - after we had entered via the grand staircase***



Inside the palace our guide took us through all the rooms currently open to the public – from ballroom, to entertaining rooms, dining rooms and some much smaller containing works of art – often of the czars of the Romanov dynasty. The overwhelming sense is of gold, with virtually all of the rooms being lavishly decorated with gold leaf. Often mirrors or windows added a lot of light to these rooms so the effect was almost dazzling at times.



***The Grand Ballroom and its magnificent painted ceiling***





Delft was also quite common (the early czars loved Holland), particularly in what were enormous stoves (for heating) in corners of many rooms. Some dining tables were set out with original or copies of fine china and silverware and gave the impression that a state occasion was about to begin! The majority of the floors were parquet (we had to wear booties) and, in the enormous ballroom, perfectly matched the golden figures and shapes of the ceiling. It really is a palace of beauty and one can only imagine the enormous cost to build and decorate.



*Inside the Catherine palace, and The Lady herself.*





*The very attractive Green Room, reminiscent of Wedgwood,  
and a change from all that gold!*

In actual fact, there are recent figures that give an idea of the value of the palace since much of it was destroyed or desecrated by Nazi forces as they retreated from St Petersburg in World War II. There were several pictures taken just after the war showing open rooms devoid of decoration, walls fallen and rubble almost everywhere. One room (the famous Amber Room, almost completely covered in all shades of amber) had its contents taken by the retreating army and have not been found to this day. However, this and many of the other rooms have been reconstructed, exactly as they were when built, over the past 50 years and, hopefully, will provide a continuing statement of Russia's monarchy as well as a tourist mecca for years to come.



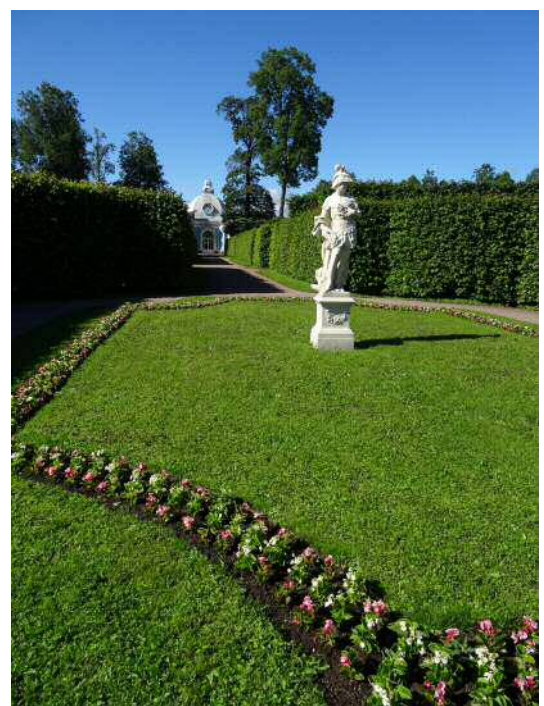
*The Palace before and during the fire (Left)  
The Grand Staircase afterwards*





***When the German forces retreated after the siege of Leningrad, they intentionally destroyed the residence.<sup>[1]</sup> leaving only the hollow shell of the palace behind. Prior to World War II, the Russian archivists managed to document a fair amount of the interior, which proved of great importance in reconstructing the palace. Although the largest part of the reconstruction was completed in time for the Tercentenary of St. Petersburg in 2003, much work is still required to restore the palace to its former glory. In order to attract funds, the palace's administration has leased the Grand Hall for such high-profile events as Elton John's concert for an elite audience in 2001 and an exclusive party in 2005 featuring the likes of Bill Clinton, Tina Turner, Whitney Houston, Naomi Campbell, and Sting.***

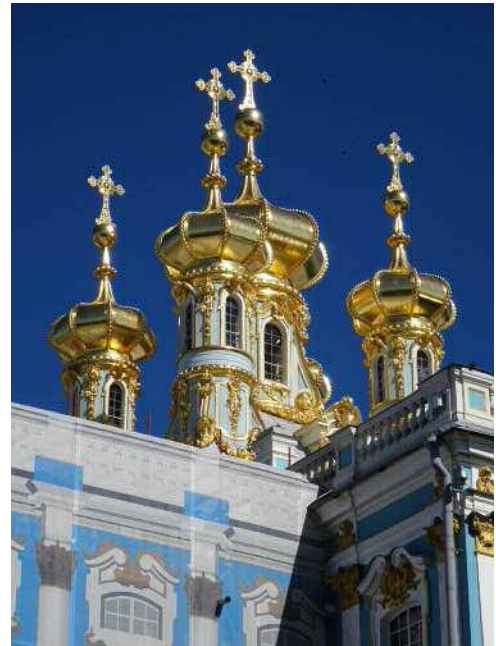
The gardens of the palace estate are also quite beautiful and typical of those found in many other great European cities. Although started as a copy of Versailles it is not as ornate but, with its two lakes and beautiful “out-buildings”, provides a tranquil sanctuary now as it must have for the rulers.



***The Palace Gardens***



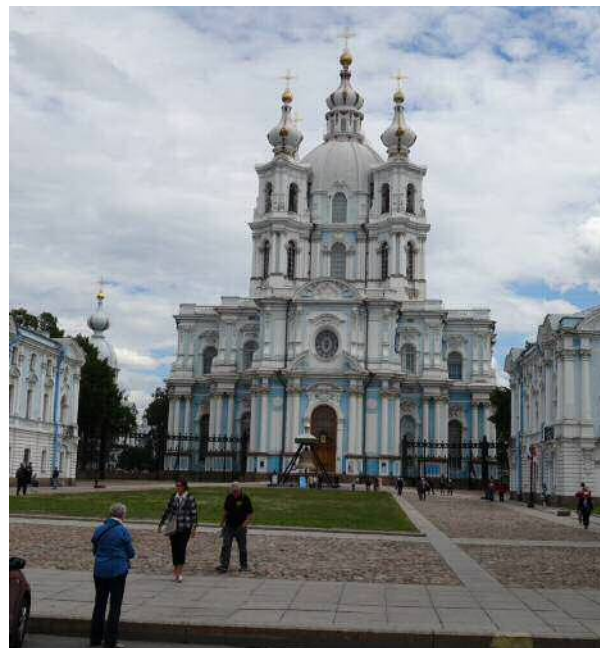
### *Final Views of The Catherine Palace*



Our afternoon tour was of the most famous sites in the center of St Petersburg. Once again, we find it difficult to convey the stunning architecture of every style found in this wonderful city. For those who have visited Vienna, Paris, Budapest or Rome, you have seen somewhat similar examples – but, to my mind, St Petersburg outshines them all. Perhaps the history is not as extensive and the cathedrals are unfamiliar to Western eyes but I doubt there are any cities with so many iconic buildings.

*Located on the banks of the River Neva, the stunning blue-and-white Smolny Monastery was originally built to house Elizabeth, the daughter of Peter the Great, when she was pushed to become a nun after being denied succession to the throne.*

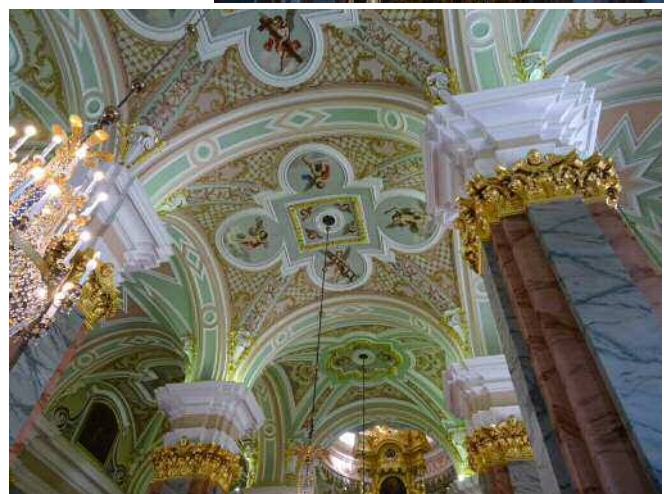
*Though political situations prompted a change in her plans and allowed her to ascend to power, construction of this Russian Orthodox convent continued for several years with the help of the royal family. The complex was built at the site of Elizabeth's Palace and named after the tar (smolny) used to seal the hulls of ships in the nearby docks.*







We made a quick stop at the Smolny Monastery (opposite page) and drove by the Hermitage and Stock Exchange building before our first scheduled stop. Here we visited the St Peter and Paul Cathedral and Fortress, which as its name implies is a huge complex, the centerpiece of which is the cathedral in which all the Czars of the Romanov Dynasty are entombed. This includes one tomb containing what they believe are the remains of Nicholas and Alexandra and their family who were slaughtered in the 1917-1918 Revolution which saw the beginning of the Soviet Communist rule. As with all Orthodox churches, this one is ornately decorated but it is surprisingly “Western” (Roman Catholic?) in its interior. There is no iconostasis and there are a number of pillars supporting the structure and there is even a pulpit – although our guide suggested that it had never been used as such.

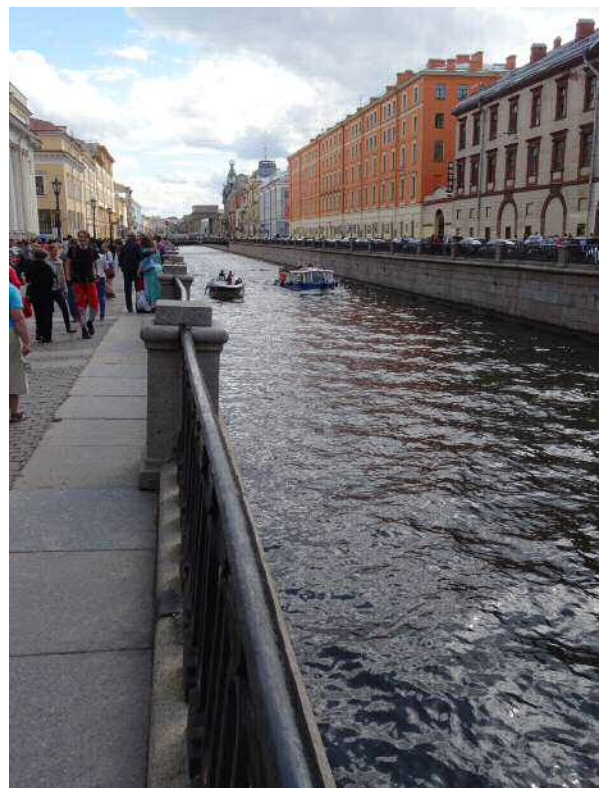






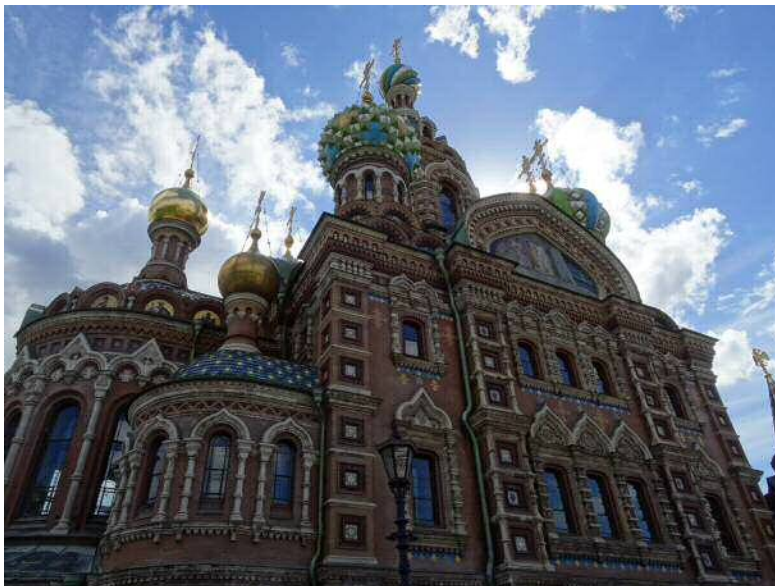
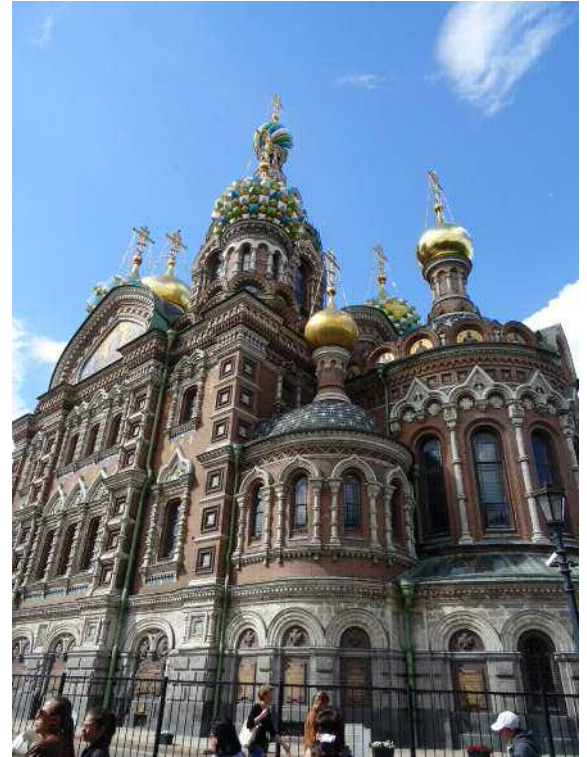
*The final resting place of the Romanov Czars including (above) the entire Nicholas and Alexandra family*

*Outside, it is easy to see why St Petersburg is often called the “Venice of the North”*





We passed many waterways and canals on our way to the next highlight was the visit to the Church on the Spilled Blood (also known as the Resurrection of Our Savior), perhaps the most recognizable of St Petersburg buildings. It has numerous onion domes at differing heights and which are very brightly painted, giving the whole a surreal and wonderfully ornate appearance. It was built on the spot where Czar Alexander II was assassinated in 1881. It's recent history, however, is quite remarkable (see inset below). We didn't have sufficient time to go inside the church but it was sufficient to gaze at its exterior – along with many tourists and local families out on a beautiful Sunday afternoon, alongside one of the many canals of the city.



In the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, the church was ransacked and looted, badly damaging its interior.

The Soviet government closed the church in the early 1930s. During the Second World War when many people were starving due to the Siege of Leningrad by Nazi German military forces, the church was used as a temporary morgue for those who died in

combat and from starvation and illness. The church suffered significant damage. After the war, it was used as a warehouse for vegetables, leading to the sardonic name of *Saviour on Potatoes*.

In July 1970, management of the Church passed to Saint Isaac's Cathedral (then used as a highly profitable museum) and proceeds from the Cathedral were funneled back into restoring the Church. It was reopened in August 1997, after 27 years of restoration, but has not been re-consecrated and does not function as a full-time place of worship; it is a Museum of Mosaics. Even before the Revolution it never functioned as a public place of worship; having been dedicated exclusively to the memory of the assassinated tsar, the only services were panikhidas (memorial services).



The final stop (actually we had several “photo opportunity” quick stops en route) was for an hour outside the enormous Cathedral of St Isaac. This is one of the world’s largest cathedrals, completed in 1858 after forty years of construction and decoration. In the Soviet era it was converted to a museum of Atheism and is still a museum (rather than a functioning church) today – although now containing 19<sup>th</sup> century works of art. Again we did not enter the church but it is possible to climb to its dome (much like St Paul’s in London) and walk around its exterior on two levels.



We walked past the cathedral to the massive bronze statue of Peter the Great which overlooks the river and bounded by another beautiful park.



St Petersburg is very green and its streets are generally very wide boulevards (“prospects”) and with the density of iconic structures seen at every turn, it is certainly the jewel in Russia’s crown. It had been the capital throughout the Romanov period and is still the cultural and financial center of the country leaving, it would appear, the politics to Moscow.

This evening we were given a cake and champagne at dinner in celebration of our wedding anniversary and then walked about 50 yards from the ship to attend a Cossack





Folk Song and Dance Experience. The show lasted just over an hour (with a 10 minute vodka break!) and was quite good, although I felt, not of the same professional standards of our previous entertainment on this cruise. It tended to be a little repetitious and I couldn't help comparing it (unfortunately not as favorably) with a number of Cossack shows that I had attended (and seen on TV) in my youth in England. Still, it was another exposure to Russian life and its culture and a good way to bring our tour (almost) to an end.



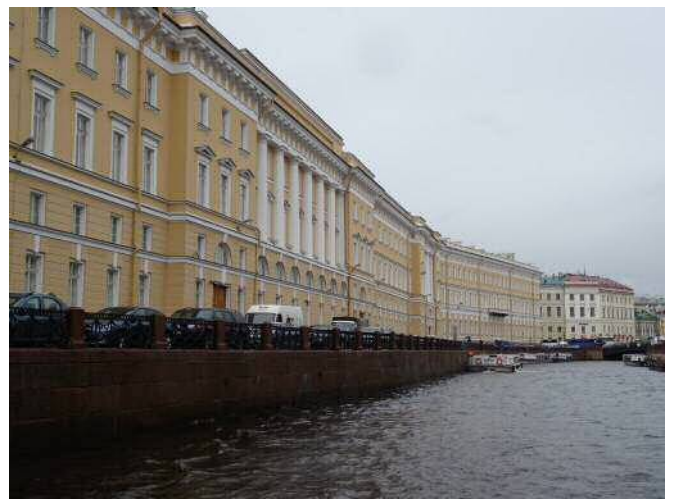
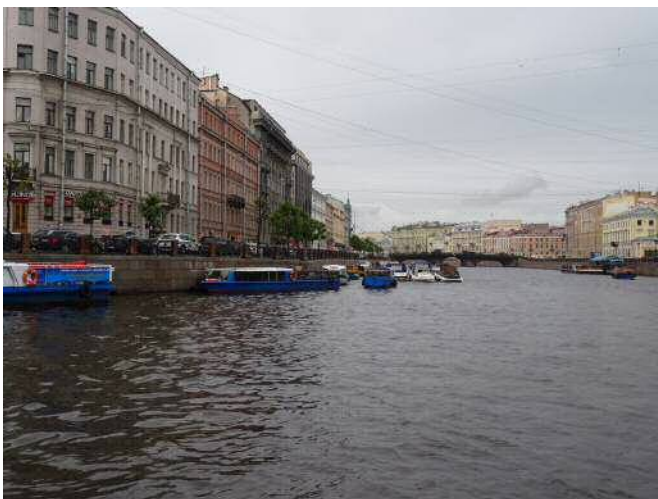
### Monday June 23

This morning was spent on board ship as we had chosen to take the afternoon waterways excursion in the afternoon as an alternative to visits to another palace. It was a good time to catch up on a little sleep (we seem to have had some long days and late nights) and on reading or (in my case) catching up on the journal.

In the afternoon we took a one hour boat trip on the rivers and canals of central St Petersburg. The weather was not so good (drizzle and cool) but the trip gave another perspective on this magnificent city.

*Right: A passing glimpse of the site on which  
Peter the Great declared his new capital.*

Most of the buildings we had already seen on other excursions but naturally we got a different perspective and view from the water. In addition, passing under some of the very low bridges (reminiscent of Venice) added another level of excitement!







Back on board our ship we had a couple of hours before dinner to settle bills, organize the tipping envelopes and get ready for our farewell dinner. Julian, our Maitre D' had arranged a table for six so that we (Keith, Zena, Molly and I) who were traveling together could spend our final dinner with Bill and Ann from Wetherby (15 miles from Ilkley), with whom we had become friends. It was a very pleasant way to enjoy our final meal together and was followed by an hour of music in the Sky Bar with an operatic singer (originally from southeastern Ohio) and a pianist, both from one of the prestigious Marinsky Theater in the city.





Thus our twelve day cruise through northern Russia and extended visits to Moscow and St Petersburg came to an end and I believe that everyone – and certainly our party of four – had enjoyed it thoroughly and had experienced another part of the world together with its peoples, its history and its culture. It was – certainly for Molly and me – an eye-opening experience and changes our image of this country forever.

#### **Tuesday June 24**

Today was the day we left the Viking Rurik and St Petersburg and flew back to Manchester via Frankfurt. We were fortunate that we had a mid-afternoon flight so we didn't have to leave the ship until 11am. Even the time for getting our bags out of our stateroom was a very civilized 10am so we had a final hour or more in the Panorama Lounge. It was a beautiful sunny morning and felt much warmer than any previous morning on this trip. For the most part the week has been quite cool (often barely reaching 60F) and cloudy with periods of rain – at times spectacularly heavy. However, the rain rarely interfered with the itinerary too badly and walking around was generally very pleasant.

In addition to having Keith and Zena with us most of the time, we also met several other people on board, and we specifically enjoyed the company of Brenda and Audrey (both from Liverpool but Audrey now living in Toronto) and Bill and Ann Baker from Wetherby. Bill particularly was a comedian and we are planning to meet up with them during our New Year trip to England. In addition, we hope to be able to listen to his talk program on Radio Wetherby!

XX

## ***Appendices on the following pages***

***The Russian Alphabet***

***The Route of our Cruise***

***Vodka Tasting and a little vodka history***



# Cyrillic alphabet with approximate pronunciation

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	А	а	МАМА	MOM	A	as in father
2	Б	б	БАЛ	BALL	B	as in book
3	В	в	ВОЛНА	WAVE	V	as in vote
4	Г	г	ГАЗ	GAS	G	as in good
5	Д	д	ДОМ	HOME	D	as in day
6	Е	е	ЕЛЬ	FIR	YE	as in yes
7	Ё	ё	ЁЖИК	HEDGEHOG	YO	as in yonder
8	Ж	ж	ЖАБА	FROG	S	as in pleasure
9	З	з	ЗИМА	WINTER	Z	as in zone
10	И	и	ИКРА	CAVIAR	EE	as in meet
11	Й	й	ЙОГА	YOGA	Y	as in boy
12	К	к	КОТ	CAT	K	as in kind
13	Л	л	ЛАМПА	LAMP	L	as in lemon
14	М	м	МОРЕ	SEA	M	as in man
15	Н	н	НЕБО	SKY	N	as in note
16	О	о	ОКОЛО	NEAR	O	as in pot
17	П	п	ПОЛЕ	FIELD	P	as in pet
18	Р	р	РЫБА	FISH	R	as in rosso
19	С	с	СОЛЬ	SALT	S	as in speak
20	Т	т	ТАНК	TANK	T	as in too
21	У	у	УРОК	LESSON	OO	as in fool
22	Ф	ф	ФАКТ	FACT	F	as in fire
23	Х	х	ХОР	CHOIR	KH	
24	Ц	ц	ЦЕНА	PRICE	TZ	as in quartz
25	Ч	ч	ЧАС	HOUR	CH	as in chair
26	Ш	ш	ШКОЛА	SCHOOL	SH	as in short
27	Щ	щ	ЩУКА	PIKE	SHCH	
28	Ъ	ъ	СЪЕЗД	CONGRESS		hard sign (voiceless)
29	Ы	ы	МЫЛО	SOAP		no equivalent
30	Ь	ь	ПЫЛЬ	DUST		soft sign (voiceless)
31	Э	э	ЭРА	ERA	A	as in man
32	Ю	ю	ЮГ	SOUTH	U	as in university
33	Я	я	ЯД	POISON	YA	as in yard





- 1 Rybinsk Reservoir (1700 sq miles)
- 2 Lake Onega (3700 sq miles)
- 3 Lake Ladoga (7100 sq miles, largest lake in Europe)

## ***Moscow to St Petersburg River Cruise***



## **Vodka Tasting**

### **Short introduction and history about Vodka:**

Vodka is a drink that accompanies humans in sorrow, joy and simple relaxation. It's good to know more about "Vodka":

- Where and when it was first made?
- From what product is it made?
- How was it used before, and how is it used today?

*Vodka has a mixed reputation! Some consider it Heaven, some Hell!  
Both sides can be right.*

The word "Vodka" is feminine in Russian and means "little water". Like woman, vodka is held in great esteem and its powers are well known. At the birth of a child, christening or wedding ceremony "Vodka" will be drunk to herald happy times. People with a flu or cold should take advantage of "Vodka" bandages around the neck and a trip to the sauna. A "Vodka" and salt poultice is used to treat toothache. And at the death of a loved one a glass of "Vodka" with dark rye bread placed across the rim is set before a portrait of the deceased.

It looks like simple water and like any alcohol, can be very addictive, and if abused can lead to illness. The history of alcohol in Russia goes back a long way. It is widely believed that Prince Vladimir of Kiev chose Christianity over Islam in the year 987 simply to avoid the Muslim prohibition on alcohol. His words, "drinking is the joy of the Rus", are better remembered in Russia than his other historical achievements.

Real "Vodka" appeared on the scene in Russia when Vladimir's countrymen learned the craft of alcohol distillation. The Russian historian V. Pokhlebin wrote that "Vodka" was first produced in a monastery in Moscow in the middle of the 15th century. Other sources point out that the first to obtain liquid similar to "Vodka" were doctors in Persia (now Iran) in 11th century, and the first to distill alcohol in Europe was an Italian monk-alchemist Valentinus using the Arab methods.

By the same account the history of "Vodka" in Russia began in 1386 when Genoese merchants first brought "aqua vitae" to Moscow. Instead of grapes, Russians used rye to extract ethanol, thus the Russian called "Vodka" bread wine at first. Many monasteries, medicine-men, and natural healers used alcohol to create herbal tinctures that were prescribed to treat many disorders. Alcohol was much stronger than water for infusions and has antibacterial properties. Herbal tinctures became popular as new remedies and alcohol was used during surgery as an anesthetic. Today alcohol is still widely used in medicine. The essences of many herbs were used to treat different diseases. The method of extracting herbal essences is simple: a bottle containing herbs is filled with alcohol. This mixture stands for 2 weeks and is shaken well every few days. It is then strained and the residue is squeezed out. The herbal extract or essence is ready! Tinctures were sold by healers or in pharmacies and prescribed to use as drops. But the taste of some of them was so pleasant that people used more than was prescribed. Later, alcohol started to be used in cosmetics.

The 80-proof Russian "Vodka", the standard set by Tsar Alexander III in 1894, based on a formula of a famous Russian scientist Dmitri Mendeleev, is just right for perfect "Vodka". The 100-proof "Vodka", which is 50 percent alcohol, burns the mouth, but it can be fine-tuned by simply adding water. The Muscovite "Vodka" Museum reports that chemist Dmitri Mendeleev determined the ideal alcohol content as 38 percent; however, because in that time distilled spirits were taxed per their alcoholic strength, that percentage was rounded upwards to 40 percent for simplified taxation calculation.



The best way to drink "Vodka" is just out of the freezer, followed by a toast with caviar, a pickle, or even an onion. Ironically, it happens that Russians are not the champions of "Vodka" consumption and people in other countries drink more. But RUSSIAN VODKA has more fame and popularity!

*"Vodka is white; it paints your nose red and blackens your reputation"*

"Vodka"- the invention of the 15<sup>th</sup> century monk, a distilled grain spirit is passed through a carbon filter. The longer the process in the filter, the smoother and sweeter the "Vodka" becomes. As well as plain "Vodka" flavored one is available such as Lemon, Pepper, Chili, Bison grass, Cranberry and Redcurrant. You can make your own "Vodka" called "Samogon", using potatoes. You can flavor the vodka with Citrus zest from Lemons or Oranges as well as the all other Fruits and Herbs.

In the West we tend to buy "Vodka" according to brand name, but in Russia you should look for the name of the factory where the "Vodka" is produced, "Kristall" in Moscow is one of the most famous Factories in Russia. There are many false pretenders in the realms of "Vodka" and you do have to be careful what you buy and where. To test for good "Vodka" hold a bottle in your right hand and shake the bottle to form a "Tornado" in it. The whiter and stronger the effect, the better is the quality of the "Vodka". Look through the "Vodka" to the back of the production label: A distinct line of glue from the factory machine should be visible. The cap should be metal and fixed with a paper band showing the license, but these are easily "Acquired" by the salesman!

During the time of Gorbachov, "Vodka" prices increased and "Vodka" could be exchanged for privatization vouchers. Restrictions also led people to make their own variation and many were hospitalized after drinking almost pure alcohol. It is not a great idea to drink lots of water after a "Vodka- drinking session" as the alcohol crystallizes in the bloodstream and when diluted makes you drink again!

"Vodka" is worth over \$12 billion in Global sales annually, and growing. It is sold by weight in glasses holding 50g or 100g. Traditionally it is served ice cold in chilled glasses filled to the rim. A toast is made; the "Vodka" is downed in on to the shout of "do dna" (bottoms ups!) or "Na Zdaroviye" (cheers!). "Vodka" is unpleasant if sipped and Russians will star in amazement if you order "Vodka" adulterated with tonic or orange juice. "Vodka" is to be drunk neat and followed by early black bread, pickles, cheese, salami, salmon or caviar. These snacks are known as "Zakuski" and are often accompanied by sparkling mineral water. This combination helps you to upright longer! There are many toasts at a Russian drinking session and these are traditionally given by the men around the table commencing with a toast to beautiful women. If you wish to see the Northern Lights then you mix "Vodka & Champagne". If you want to see Russian submarines then fill a small glass of "Vodka" and drop it into a tall glass of beer. Try do drink the "Vodka" through the beer. The "Vodka" is heavier then the beer and should stay in the small "Vodka" glass - quite a party trick! Be warned that once a bottle of "Vodka" is opened it must be drunk to the end and empties are left on the floor.

If someone invites you for a drink "Russian style" they will often gesture by flicking the side of the neck, indicating that they would like you to join them for "Vodka". It is said that during the time of "Peter the Great", the Tsar rewarded a brave soldier by giving him a tattoo on the side of his neck. If the soldier entered a bar and wanted a drink then all he had to do was show his tattoo and drink was given without payment as a mark of respect for his bravery.

Do enjoy the traditions of "Vodka" tasting but remember to eat "The Zakuski" and have sparkling mineral water at hand. Inhaling the earthy aroma of Russian Black rye bread then downing the Vodka is a truly Russian Experience!

*Thank you very much for your shown interest and "Na Zdaroviye"*