

GOING PLACES
JOHN COONEY

Church of our Saviour on the Spilled Blood

IN LOVE WITH ST PETERSBURG



It was weird waking up that first morning in St Petersburg. I mean, the cruise ship didn't feel weird. Far from it! We'd been having a fabulous time aboard our floating hotel. But we'd docked overnight in Russia (gulp), and I was on full alert. I'd seen enough spy movies to know that Russia was one weird, scary, sinister place. And, as we went ashore after breakfast, clutching passports in sweaty hands, I bet I wasn't the only one keeping a nervous eye out for raincoated men with guns ...

To my huge relief, however, St Petersburg turned out to be blow-your-mind beautiful. (Most of it, anyway, the bits that mattered.) The people on the streets looked as busy and harmless and friendly as people on the streets in any other big city. And I was neither arrested nor shot, nor shipped off to some frozen gulag.

Instead, surprise-surprise, I fell madly in love with this Baltic port.

Okay, there are still a few things that are slightly weird. For example, the city's had so many name-changes it's not funny: from St Petersburg (when it was founded in 1703 by Peter the Great) ... to Petrograd (after Bloody Sunday and the 1905 Workers Revolution) ... to Leningrad (when the Bolsheviks came to power in 1917) ... then back to St Petersburg again (in 1991, when the Soviet Union went kaput).

Also slightly weird is the Russian fondness for brass bands playing 'oom-paa-paa' music. Bearded men in tired blue uniforms blasted us loudly when we got off the ship. Their brothers, in green-and-red, entertained us with an old Russian marching tune as we entered Catherine's Palace. And their uncles or cousins, in purple-and-red-with-gold-tassels, trumpeted our arrival at the Hermitage. It was, well ... different.

Oh, and let's not forget the Russian alphabet, because that's slightly weird, too. "Добро пожаловать!" is how they write "Welcome!" And the sign below the

familiar Golden Arches on the road we took into town reads "МакДоиалдс".

(Imagine having to order a "Вуз Мак" ...)

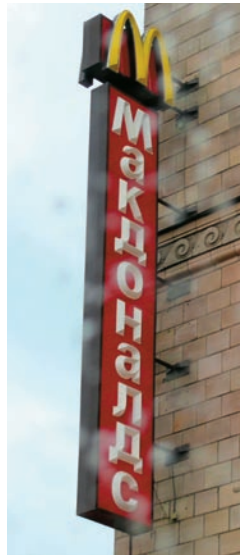
Four centuries ago, when the tsars set out to dazzle the world with their showcase capital, they spared no expense. And St Petersburg's original marble-and-gold-smothered grandeur must've been a sight for sore eyes. But, today, this famous city of five million leaves travellers confused.

In parts, you see, St Petersburg looks worn-out and run-down and falling-apart-at-the-seams. Which is hardly surprising, considering its long history of violent uprisings, bloody overthrows, and a truly horrific 900-day siege by the Nazis. Hitler, who for some reason hated this place, ordered the extermination of its civilians, the looting of its art treasures, the destruction of its palaces – and up to one million people were shelled or starved to death. But those brave Leningradites refused to submit. And, when the carnage was finally

over, they set to and rebuilt the heart of their magnetic city.

Nowadays, locals and tourists alike take to the Neva River, St Petersburg's untold canals, and its broad avenues (like the Nevsky Prospekt) in search of stately parks, cascading fountains, gorgeous statues and gleaming palaces.

I've gotta tell you, folks: you could spend a week in this magic metropolis and still queue up for more!





Hermitage Museum

Day One began with a leisurely couple of hours, wandering the banks of Neva and photographing its surrounding landmarks – highlight of which was undoubtedly the fantasy Church of Our Saviour on the Spilled Blood. If you're ever in St Petersburg, don't be put off by this cathedral's morbid name (which it earned by being erected on the site where Czar Alexander II was assassinated). The festive facade with its multi-coloured onion-domes make it a must-see!

Then, after lunching on local Russian dishes, we headed 25 km south of the city to Tsarskoye Selo (formerly called Pushkin) – home of Catherine's Palace. This baroque masterpiece was built by Peter the Great for his wife, and she must've been ecstatic when he was done. We oohed and aahed at the blue-white-&-gold exterior ... wandered open-mouthed through the opulent gilt-edged, multi-mirrored Grand Ballroom ... and stood in stunned silence in the glorious Amber Room, gutted by the Nazis but meticulously reconstructed.

Day Two saw us following two lovely young Russian guides through St Petersburg's stunning Hermitage Museum. It's one of the oldest and largest art muse-



Catherine's Palace and Grand Ballroom.





Hermitage Museum



ums in the world, with three million items displayed in six buildings (including the lavish Winter Palace, one-time residence of the Tsars, with its magnificent marble staircase). The artists are all here: Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Rubens, van Dyck, Rembrandt, Rodin, Monet, Renoir, Cézanne, van Gogh, Gauguin, Picasso, Matisse, and hundreds more – and, if you were so inclined, you could name-drop forever.

I'm usually poor company in museums and art galleries. Give me 15 minutes and I'm looking for the coffee shop. But I was spellbound and (almost) speechless in the Hermitage – *for two and a half hours!* – and majorly disappointed when we had to leave.

We had time that night for one last treat: an evening of Russian folksongs and lively Cossack dancing. But there's so much more in St Petersburg that we didn't have time for: Palace Square, St Isaac's Cathedral, Peter & Paul Fortress, Mariinsky Theatre, and Petrovoretz (another complex of palaces, gardens and sculptures formerly called Peterhof – ruined in WW2 but brilliantly restored).

Which leaves us, of course, with only one alternative: we'll just have to go back ... ❁



Grapevine's John & Robyn Cooney have been asked to lead a return cruise to Scandinavia and Russia

MIDLIFE MADNESS ON The Baltic

DEPARTING JUNE 2009

FABULOUS STOPOVERS

London • Copenhagen • Oslo • Helsinki
Stockholm • Tallin • St Petersburg • & more

phone 0800 277 477

or email roger.glynan@lionworld.co.nz