My Trip to Russia

My earliest recollection of the Cold War goes all the way back to the first grade. I can still picture the classroom drills when we were required to kneel below our desk, keeping our heads down, in the event of a Soviet nuclear attack. The teacher never actually used the word 'soviet', referring to these unseen aggressors simply as Russians. My little pristine brain was confused, and when I told my mom later about the safety drill I was nervously excited because 'the Rushings are going to drop 'clear bombs on us'. Let me tell you, for all the scary talk about terrorism today, those earlier Cold War years were *more* frightening. And the older I got the more specific the threats became; as a Cuban-American, I had to look no further than my parents' island homeland – just 90 miles off the coast of Florida – to sense how real this communist menace was to our way of life. By the time I graduated college, Marxist regimes and insurgencies were prevalent throughout Central and South America, Asia and Africa. It seemed no matter where you looked those *Rushings* were up to no good.

Well, who knew that beneath the fearsome military might of the Soviet Union was a teetering economic foundation ready to collapse of its own accord, bringing an end to one of the greatest revolutionary experiments in human history. I think Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels never fully understood the effects of collectivism on the human psyche; when you artificially control and stymie the flow of goods and services in a society you take away a worker's incentive to be rewarded for his or her hard work, it isn't long before this kind of economic mismanagement, combined with a plunging *proletariat* morale, conspires to drag down an entire society. Economic hardships inevitably follow; at least judging from the sad state of affairs in the world's remaining true communist countries (China doesn't count since the Chinese embraced capitalism forty years ago). In Russia, those hardships had been building for decades. When the central government in Moscow finally collapsed in 1991, bringing down the rest of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (the U.S.S.R) and its satellite countries, the Cold War was officially declared over, the West – and capitalism – had prevailed. *Long Live Consumerism*…!

As Russia and her former client states underwent the often-painful transition from a controlled economy to a free market one, a new foe had emerged to menace the West. The specter of fighting the Iron Curtain was replaced now by the rise of 'radical Islamic fundamentalism'. After the attacks of 9/11, the United States and her staunchest allies became entwined in a continuing battle against shadowy Islamic groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS. Russia, for the most part, hardly registered a blip in our news media, anymore. But things were changing rapidly in that country.

During the disastrous administration of Boris Yeltsin, the first president of the new Russian Federation – who served from 1991 until 1999 – the country seemed almost rudderless. Under Yeltsin's *democratization* program a group of ruthless businessmen known as Russian oligarchs quickly positioned themselves to control and monopolize the former Soviet markets, creating huge disparities in prices that led to great economic hardships for the common folk who were not used to the price fluctuations of a free market system, especially one rigged by these newly created, and despised, Russian billionaires. Wages fell, prices rose, criminal elements took control of certain industries and corruption was rampant. Yeltsin was forced to resign in 1999, his chosen successor as president was Vladimir Putin, the acting prime minister. Unknown nationally, Putin was one of five prime ministers appointed during a politically turbulent 18th month period. *Nobody* expected him to last in his post very long. But Putin had other ideas; he consolidated his power base rather quickly and has remained till this day Russia's strongman leader.

Putin's presidency proved to be a stabilizing force within Russia. After the economic chaos of the nineties, Russia experienced eight straight years of GDP growth under Putin. Aided by high oil prices and the commodities boom of the 2000s, and coupled with more prudent fiscal and economic policies, the country's economic freefall seemed halted and things began to improve markedly. He negotiated a peace treaty that ended a very bloody civil war, keeping the rebellious Republic of Chechnya within the Russian fold. In 2008, when he completed his second term as president, Putin's popularity was at an all time high, and deservedly so despite American misgivings about this former KGB officer. All things considered, the man had done right by his people, at least during the period when the country needed a strong leader to guide them forward. But as is often the case with men who rise to such powerful positions, Putin didn't want to simply go

away after his terms as president and prime minister ended. And so constitutional changes were made, political opponents and outspoken government critics were threatened, killed, imprisoned or sent into exile abroad. The oligarchs who hijacked the Russian economy – in tandem with the Kremlin – and Putin's allies fill most of the politically important government positions. Whatever opposition exists in the country tends to remain cautiously low-key for fear of reprisals. This is not to say the same kind of blanket censorship that existed under the Soviets is still in force in Russia today. Young people, especially those born after the fall of communism, tend to be very vocal about their opinions of Putin and their hatred of the oligarchy; while older citizens, accustomed to strong central leadership, continue to support Putin.

Ironically, the biggest detriment to Putin's legacy might actually result from the aftermath of what he considers his greatest accomplishment. In 2014, concerned with anti-Russian sentiments within the Ukraine, and their move to side closer with NATO and the European Union, which Putin viewed as a direct threat to Russian sovereignty in the region, he ordered his military to invade the Crimea and forced a hotly contested local referendum that eventually annexed this port area back to the Russian Federation. And while this move was very popular in Russia, worldwide condemnation was swift. The West, led by the United States, placed crippling economic sanctions and banking restrictions on Russia. It wasn't long before the Russian economy began reeling from the move. Inflation began eating away at the value of the *ruble* as trade sanctions (and a decline in oil prices) took a telling toll on the average Russian citizen. Wages remained stagnant while prices doubled or tripled, creating difficult economic times for the majority of Russians. This, coupled with the stranglehold Putin and his allies have on the government, has led to a measurable degree of discontent within the country, despite what their 'official' polls might indicate.

The thing Putin seems to fear more than political opponents (whom he can apparently cower and silence through his manipulation of the legal system and other dubious means) are more street uprisings like the ones that led to the fall of the Soviet Union. It's one thing to deny people *real* representation in government, but when you combine that with economic hard times the stage is set for yet another 'revolution'. So, it isn't really surprising the Russians tried to influence the outcome of the 2016 U.S. presidential elections. After all, Hilary Clinton was all for keeping the sanctions in place, while Donald Trump had spoken openly about closer ties

with Russia. I'm assuming Putin thought sanctions had a better chance of being lifted under a Trump administration.

As I type these words, independent Special Counsel Robert Mueller has been conducting a lengthy investigation into Russian meddling in our elections. Charges have been filed against some former Trump campaign officials, and a few have already pleaded guilty to different charges, but nothing conclusive has been revealed concerning any actual collusion between President Trump and President Putin. The one thing *all* of our intelligence agencies seem to agree on is that the Russians most certainly interfered in our election process by using phony organizations to place social media ads designed to incite anger and divisiveness in key electoral districts.

Under this politically charged atmosphere I was a little hesitant about visiting Russia, concerned over possible anti-American backlash. In mid-2016 I had discussed the possibility of reuniting again with some former traveling companions: Ron and Anke Wilckens, and DanaMarie Trunfio. The four of us had met on a tour of the Balkans back in 2012. We traveled to Iceland two years later and had a wonderful time. Since then, we'd wanted to take another trip together. All three of them are avid travelers – who've been to many more countries than I have – and trying to agree on a specific location isn't always easy. Gate 1 Travel, one of my favorite tour companies, ended the debate for us when they put their Russian river cruise tour on sale in late 2016. The tour included a three-night stay in St. Petersburg, a six-day river cruise down the Volga-Baltic Waterway, and a two-night stay in Moscow. Despite the current political imbroglio between our two countries I was curious about Russia, the Russian people and their culture. We decided to book the tour for September 13, 2017, roughly ten months in advance. We were hopeful things would have quieted down politically by then, especially since Trump was now president.

As we began preparing for our September 13th trip, though, tensions only worsened when Congress, angered over continuing intelligence reports outlining Russia's election meddling, promptly added more economic sanctions. This led to a diplomatic row that saw a dramatic reduction in the embassy and consulate staffs in both our countries…*at the very moment my companions and I were anxiously awaiting our visas*. My travel insurance did not cover 'failure to secure travel documents', which meant I was in the lurch for the entire cost of this tour if my Russian visa was denied.

Thankfully, we were able to obtain them (in the Wilckens' case they received their visas only weeks before our departure date).

Little did I know that obtaining my visa would be the *least* of my worries. Hurricane Irma tore through South Florida where I live only three days before my trip to Russia. While the storm ended up hugging the Gulf Coast of the state, avoiding a direct hit on Miami, the destruction in my area was nonetheless massive. Trees, rooftops and fences were uprooted all over the county, severe flooding clogged the streets, electrical power was out for days and businesses grounded to a halt. Miami International Airport, where my flight to Russia originated, was closed down just two days prior to my trip. I sat, *sans* electricity, sweating profusely in my Miami duplex – eating my emergency rations of crackers and Spam, a single candle illuminating the darkness – and wondered aloud why I had agreed to a depart on a date with the number '13' in it? You get superstitious at moments like this. My only consolation was that if my tour had to be cancelled the cost of the trip would now be covered under the 'natural calamity' clause. Meanwhile, just behind Hurricane Irma were two more destructive storms possibly heading my way: Hurricanes Jose and Maria. *Ay, caramba*!

Without knowing if my flight would be cancelled, I packed my bags and was prepared to leave. Actually, I was *praying* I could leave. I had no idea what kind of reception awaited me in Russia, but it had to be better than the current conditions in South Florida. Miami International Airport re-opened just 24 hours before my flight was scheduled to take-off. I called Austrian Airlines and they were guardedly optimistic. On September 13th, 2017, against what looked like insurmountable odds just days before, I (gratefully) boarded my plane and began my tour of Russia…

Days One and Two

I arrived at Miami International Airport four hours prior to my scheduled departure. I'm glad I did, too, because the line of anxious tourists waiting to leave the 'Sunshine State' was a long one. Much to my relief I was able to acquire aisles seats for both legs of my flight to Russia. I suffer

from claustrophobia and the only way I can fly without a major panic attack is to sit next to the aisles row. One of the tour package restrictions was the inability to secure my seats in advance. As a back-up plan my doctor had given me a prescription for Xanax. The Austrian Airlines flight was fully booked, but despite the continuously crying baby one row over – and the smelly passenger who reclined his seat practically into my lap – I was grateful to be aboard and taking off on schedule. After dinner was served, I popped a Xanax and watched the movie *Kong: Skull Island* before drifting off to sleep. I didn't wake until an hour before we touched down in Vienna, at 8:30am on day two of my trip.

I had a three and a half hour layover in Vienna. To get my blood circulating again after such a long flight I walked the departure area for over an hour, occasionally browsing in the duty-free shops. I purchased a $7.50 cup of coffee and sat down to charge my smart phone, taking advantage of the airport's free Wi-Fi service to catch up on the news back home. This was when I ran into DanaMarie, or Dani. She had flown in from Washington and we both lit up when we saw one another. I hadn't seen her in over two years; in the interim she'd started an exercise regimen and looked fantastic. We hugged and quickly caught up on old times. Our Austrian Airlines flight to St. Petersburg left at 12:50pm. There were no entertainment venues on the short flight, but we did get served a lunch/breakfast of lox. We arrived at Pulkovo Airport (LED) in St. Petersburg by 4:10pm.

The passport visa check was a quick affair and we gathered our luggage and headed for the exit where a Gate 1 Travel representative was holding up a sign. She told us we needed to wait for several members of our tour group who were arriving on another flight. Dani and I each cashed dollars into Russian rubles (the exchange rate was 57 rubles for one dollar) and sat down at a Starbucks to wait. An hour later the representative apologized and informed us the other flight was running late, so she secured a taxi for us outside the terminal building and we left for the hotel on our own.

The taxi ride was not only my first glimpse into beautiful St. Petersburg, but also my first experience with the insane traffic that plagues Russia's major cities. It took us over an hour and a half to reach the Radisson Sonya Hotel near the downtown area. Meanwhile, through the taxi's windows, St. Petersburg appeared like an Old World maze of canals and bridges, bustling with excitement. We checked into the hotel around 7:00pm, meeting our tour director, Elena, in the lobby. A young woman with a very cheery

disposition, always smiling, Elena welcomed us to Russia and informed us there would be a brief orientation meeting inside the hotel conference room at 8:00pm. I went to my room to freshen up. After washing my face and squaring away my luggage I headed back downstairs to the bar lounge where I met with my three traveling companions. Ron and Anke had arrived on an earlier flight. Despite being tired from the jet lag, we were all excited about being reunited again.

At the brief orientation meeting (only half the tour group was present), Elena went over the trip's itinerary and gave us some useful tips on exchanging money, ATM machines and the charge cards we would be issued on the riverboat to make purchases. The following day was a 'free day' for us, so she also handed out tourist maps of St. Petersburg and made several suggestions on some of the historical places we might want to visit on our own. Luckily, Radisson Sonya Hotel was only a few blocks away from the city's historic center. My companions and I planned to make the most of our limited stay in the city and had pre-booked a tour of Catherine Palace in the town of Pushkin (26 kilometers south of St. Petersburg) for the following morning. The afternoon we reserved for sightseeing in the city's historic quarter.

By 8:35pm the four of us were back inside the bar lounge area ordering a light dinner of panini sandwiches and fries (Russian cuisine would have to wait). We reminisced about our previous trips and shared details of our lives since we last met, retiring for the evening by 10:30pm. Before I went up to my room I walked down the street to a popular European supermarket chain called SPAR and purchased two large bottles of water for my morning coffee. When I got back to my room I took a Xanax. I was sound asleep thirty minutes later.

Day Three

I awoke at 5:00am (I'm usually an early riser) and immediately made instant coffee. I texted my brother Joe to let him know I had reached St. Petersburg and then sat down to write in my travel journal. I also set aside the clothes I would be wearing over the next several days. After showering

and shaving I headed downstairs to the hotel restaurant and joined Anke and Ron for breakfast. At 10:00am my companions and I were met in the lobby by Sasha, a young tour guide with Viator (one of the world's largest private day tour companies), who led us to an awaiting black Mercedes van for our personal tour of Catherine Palace. Anke had booked this tour stateside. The cost was just over a hundred dollars apiece. Our driver's name was Edward. He took us along Nevsky Prospekt – the main avenue in the city's historic quarter – and turned left onto Sadovaya Street, following that to Moscow Prospekt, another major thoroughfare that heads south out of St. Petersburg.

It took us about an hour to reach the town of Pushkin where the palace is located. On our way south out of the city we had to cross several of the many water channels that dissect St. Petersburg. Sasha would continuously point out key landmarks to us like the National Library of Russia (the oldest library in the country, home to a collection of Voltaire's works), several former soviet administrative buildings, statues of Lenin (there are supposedly more than 50 throughout the city) and some impressive memorials to World War II including the one at Victory Square, a dramatic roundabout memorial dedicated to the defenders of the city during the Nazi siege. It consists of a tall, clean obelisk rising up from a broken ring. Sasha spoke briefly about the hardships the city (known as Leningrad back then) endured during the '900-day' siege that began in September of 1941. It was one of the worst winters on record (with temperatures well below zero). The city had no power, no food supply and no potable water. She told us the starving inhabitants of Leningrad made bread using pulverized wood.

Sasha also explained the various name changes the city has gone through over the past one hundred years. St. Petersburg was originally named after Peter the Great, the Russian tsar who transformed his isolated kingdom into a transcontinental superpower. He built St. Petersburg from scratch to showcase his new modernized Russia, moving the capital here from Moscow in 1711. During World War I, though, when Russia was at war with Germany, the citizens thought perhaps St. Petersburg sounded *too* German and Tsar Nicolas II officially changed the name of the city to Petrograd. Just ten years later the Soviets (who now controlled Russia and had moved the capital back to Moscow) renamed it Leningrad in honor of Lenin who died in January of 1924. Following the fall of the communists in 1991, the city reverted back to St. Petersburg. Its residents simply (and fondly) call it 'Piter', but the administrative province (known in Russia as an *oblast*) is still referred to as the Leningrad Oblast, probably in deference to the survivors of

the siege. Sasha joked that perhaps the city's name might change again. *Putingrad*, anyone?

We reached the town of Pushkin shortly after 11:00am. This area was officially known as *Tsarskoye Selo* ('imperial village') and served as the summer residence of the royal family from about 1710 onward, becoming an official town in 1808. Today, the town is called Pushkin, renamed in 1937 to honor the 100th anniversary of the death of Russia's greatest poet, Alexander Pushkin, who studied here at the famous Tsarskoye Selo Lyceum and is considered the father of modern Russian literature. Pushkin contains several restored and well-preserved UNESCO sites, including the Catherine Palace and the Alexander Palace. The town itself is not very large, located along the left bank of the Neva River, but the surrounding landscape is very beautiful and varied; hills and ridges creating valleys and plains interspersed with forests and farmlands.

The centerpiece of Pushkin is undoubtedly the beautiful Catherine Palace. The original residence was built by Catherine I, Peter the Great's second wife, in 1717. Her daughter, Elizabeth, who became the Empress of Russia in 1741, found her mother's palace out-dated and later commissioned her court architect, Bartolomeo Rastrelli, to tear it down and build her a new one. What Rastrelli created was a signature Late Baroque (also known as Rococo) masterpiece, a spectacular 325-meter long palace decorated in sheer opulence. The entire thing took four years to build (1752 – 1756) and at a staggering cost. Later, Elizabeth's daughter, the Empress Catherine the Great, added her own antique and neoclassical touches and decorations to the place, employing the Scottish architect Charles Cameron to refurbish several of the palace rooms. Cameron's work is notable, among other things, for the use of dark red jasper with quartzite intrusions in two upper floor chambers referred to as the Agate Rooms. He also used a neo-Palladian style in vogue at the time.

Following the death of Catherine the Great in 1796, the succeeding monarchs chose to live in other palaces. No new construction was done until the Great Fire of 1820, which greatly damaged the building. After the fire, Tsar Alexander I commissioned the famous Russian architect Vasily Stasov to remodel his grandmother's beloved palace back to its neoclassical roots but added some interior refurbishments in what is known as the Empire style, a late Romanticism design inspired by Napoleon. Stasov also created a

magnificent staircase to replace the old circular one next to the palace church.

What is truly amazing about this exquisite estate is that it has been *entirely* recreated using pre-World War II Soviet archives. When the Germans were forced to retreat following the siege of Leningrad in 1944, they deliberately set fire to Catherine Palace, leaving nothing but a burnt-out hollowed shell where the building once stood. Of the original 58 halls, more than 30 have already been finished, in what can only be described as an astonishing reconstruction effort.

As we approached the imperial grounds we passed the Egyptian Gates that once served as the official entranceway into *Tsarskoye Selo*. Built in 1829, the design was inspired by the ancient gates of the Temple of Khonsu in Luxor, Egypt. We continued through a section of Alexander Park, a 200-hectare area of gardens and landscaped scenery that connects the major palaces, and parked within a block or two of the Catherine Palace. We walked the rest of the way. During its heyday, visitors to the palace would have entered through the ornately decorated Golden Gate in front of the north side of the building, but nowadays tourists file onto the palace grounds via an entrance situated next to the Tsarskoye Selo Lyceum, the famous school of the male nobility where Alexander Pushkin studied (which has its own interesting museum, I might add). Our group, together with a growing throng of visitors, crossed the carriage courtyard along what I believe is the east wing of the estate, congregating in a queue just in front of the visitors' entrance situated to the right of the official palace entrance. It was from here where we began our tour of the inside. As we entered the building I photographed the stucco façade, decorated with carved statues and lion heads. Supposedly, more than a 100 kilograms of gold was used to gild the original decorations.

Before we began the inside tour we had to don shoe coverings made from some kind of cloth-like fiber. A clever way to not only preserve the wooden floors but also allow the public to conveniently polish them as they slide over the surface. On the days that the Catherine Palace museum is open, only three hours are set aside for individual viewing, the rest of the time is reserved for pre-booked tour groups like ours. We joined a larger group and followed one of the museum guides through the various halls as she explained the interesting features of each room. The first series of chambers appeared to be sitting rooms, including Lyons Hall, which was still being

restored. Architect Charles Cameron designed the interior of this room for Catherine the Great, a picture of what the original hall looked like is on display, and noticeably missing is the room's namesake, the luxurious silk lining from Lyon, France that once covered the walls. Next, we passed through the Arabesque Hall, an exquisite gala room also designed by Cameron, embellished with oval-framed mirrors, pilasters and rectangular vertical panels with painted neoclassical ornaments. The ceiling was covered with paintings praising the human virtues.

We continued through several spacious halls known as the Antechambers. Originally, there were five of these chambers located next to the main staircase in the southern wing of the palace. It was here where the nobility and invited guests waited for the empress to make her appearance. Later on, Catherine the Great had two of the Antechambers converted into the Lyons and Arabesque Halls. These massive waiting rooms were quite impressive with gilded woodcarvings running along the walls, the portals around the doors opulently decorated with three-dimensional sculptures, garlands and cartouches. Tall windows on each side of these chambers provided plenty of illumination during the daytime. The parquet floors, made of precious types of wood, had a geometrical pattern, and the ceilings were covered with enormous painted canvasses with images from Greek mythology. The third Antechamber had fluted columns and large, absolutely gorgeous, blue marble fireplaces to keep everyone toasty during the colder months. If the purpose of these Baroque-style waiting chambers was to convey the empress' wealth and culture, they certainly succeeded.

From here we entered the Great Hall, the largest state room in the palace, designed as the venue for official receptions, banquets and balls. The floor space here covered more than 800-square meters and occupied the entire width of the palace. A series of very tall windows provided light during the day, and at night hundreds of candles framed by strategically placed mirrors lit the enormous room (which was known as the Bright Gallery during the 18th century). Beautifully gilded sculptural and ornamental woodcarvings form a continuous pattern around the entire hall. The original ceiling canvass paintings from the mid-1700s – based on compositional sketches made by the famous Venetian decorative artist Giuseppe Valeriani – have been meticulously recreated and framed by a gold-painted colonnade, giving the entire chamber the illusion of heightened space.

From the Great Hall we crossed the Main Staircase, its two levels made of marble in a Rococo fashion with ornate vases and elaborately carved balustrades. We passed through several halls containing portraits of some of the royals, dresses worn by the empress and finely-crafted study furniture. We then entered perhaps the most famous room in the palace, the legendary Amber Room. The history of this room is a fascinating one. It was *given* as a gift from Frederick William I (King of Prussia) to Peter the Great in November of 1716 to mark the conclusion of an alliance between their two nations. The gift was a study hall made up of amber panels that were separated into large crates and shipped to Peter the Great's Winter Palace in St. Petersburg. It is not known if Peter the Great actually assembled the amber panels, but his daughter, Empress Elizabeth I, instructed her architect Rastrelli in 1755 to build her an Amber Room inside the Catherine Palace using these ornately carved panels. Rastrelli embellished the Amber Room by adding mirrors and gilded woodcarvings. Later, Catherine the Great ordered eight additional panels to be made to cover lower portions of the walls. During WWII, the Germans plundered the amber panels, sending them back to Germany where they were put on display inside Konigsberg Castle. When the war was over the castle lay in ruins and it was believed the original panels had perished, but in recent years rumors have surfaced that perhaps a portion of the panels survived and were secreted away and stashed for safe-keeping. It's a never-ending mystery. The German government largely funded the reconstruction work done on the current Amber Room, which opened in 2004. Unfortunately, they do not permit photography inside this stunning room.

We then entered the Picture Hall, a large state room once used for diplomatic receptions, dinners and musical soirees. Lining its walls are over 100 canvas paintings of mostly Western European artwork from the 17th and 18th centuries, aligned not so much by the importance of the artists but rather by size and color scheme, each painting separated by gilded frames in a 'tapestry' style. Of the original 130 paintings, 114 survived the destruction of WWII. Later, art museums around St. Petersburg donated similar works to replace the 16 that had been lost. Beyond the Picture Hall our tour began to wind down. We walked through several of the rooms reserved for the imperial apartments, like the Small White Dining Room and the Chinese Drawing Room of Alexander I. Believe me, there was nothing *small* about these rooms. We also came upon the Green Dining Room, an airy, multi-windowed addition to the private apartments in the northern part of the palace built in the 1770s for Grand Duke Paul and his wife. Soon after, we

exited the palace through a long corridor, which I believe was called the Passage Gallery, containing many black and white photographs depicting not only the palace destruction caused by the Germans during WWII, but the concealment efforts of the Soviets – who evacuated what artwork they could and buried some of the rest – and the various phases of the massive reconstruction effort that put the building back together again over the ensuing decades. You'll also see color photos of famous world leaders and dignitaries who've visited the palace in recent years, including one of Hillary Clinton.

Catherine Palace has two parks: the *Old Garden* and the *Landscaped (English) Garden*. During the 1720s, two Dutch master gardeners laid out the Old Gardens along three terraces directly in front of the imperial palace, this included several small ponds. Towards the end of that century, Catherine the Great commissioned the *Landscaped Garden* just to the south of the palace around what is known as the Great Pond, which was later converted into a small lake. She sent her master gardener to England to learn about their landscaping techniques and eventually hired an English master gardener to complete the park. Because the natural terrain of the estate tends to slope towards the northeast, it was possible to link the small ponds with the Great Pond, creating channels that are a hallmark of the property and the basis of several small, but elegant waterfalls.

We spent about thirty minutes walking through sections of Catherine Park before leaving. We saw the Great Pond, and on a hill overlooking the Old Gardens was the Cameron Gallery, a beautifully columned two-story arcade that served as a favorite spot for the empress and her guests to stroll and share philosophical musings. In addition to laying out a spectacular garden in the latest fashion, Catherine the Great wanted to decorate it with achievements from her reign, most notably a string of victories during the Russo-Turkish Wars. Dotting the Landscaped Gardens are statues like the Tower Ruin (a symbolic tribute to the collapse of the Turkish empire), various columned memorials celebrating Russian naval victories, the Kagul Obelisk and the Red or Turkish cascade. The gardens are also interspersed with baths and small iron-gate bridges, and towards the back of the gardens we came across the Hermitage Pavilion, a private dining quarter that resembled a mini-palace, tucked away from the hustle and bustle of the palace staff, used for when the royals wanted to entertain on a more intimate level.

We finished our tour of the Catherine Palace museum around 1:00pm and headed back to St. Petersburg. Sasha had the driver drop us off at the Anglotourismo boat dock area along the Fontanka River, adjacent to the Anichkov Bridge on Nevsky Prospekt. We tipped the Viator crew and thanked them for a wonderful time, proceeding to the dock area to inquire about a boat tour of the city's water channels. While Anglotourismo is just one of many boat tour companies operating the rivers and cannels of St. Petersburg, it is the only one (currently, anyway) offering English-language boat tours during certain months of the year. Luckily for us September was one of those months. The cost of the hour and a half long tour was 1,100 rubles (approximately $18). We purchased tickets for the 3:00pm tour and decided to have lunch while we waited. Across the street from the dock area was a very popular restaurant called Café Diner. Like many local restaurants it was set up in a cafeteria-style where you took a tray and wandered from station to station picking out whatever dishes you wanted. I opted for a pork sausage with yellow rice, a bowl of vegetable soup and a flaky crème-filled pastry for dessert. The entire meal came to less than $6.

Ten minutes before our scheduled departure time we crossed the street and headed back to the dock area. The sky was overcast with intermittent drizzling. We prayed the weather would clear up, but no such luck. It rained throughout the boat cruise and we had to take refuge inside the glass-enclosed sitting area below ship. Our tour guide was an attractive young Russian woman named Maria who spoke very good English. We were the only passengers. By 3:00pm the boat slowly left the dock and made a U-turn after passing the Anichkov Bridge, heading north along the Fontanka River. The first interesting building we saw was the Faberge Museum, housed in the restored Shuvalovsky Palace a block from where we embarked. We had wanted to take the hour-long tour of the museum, which includes one of the largest collections of jewelry pieces designed by Peter Carl Faberge (including several imperial Easter eggs he made for Tsar Nicolas II), but sadly it was closed on that day.

The Russian word for bridge is *mosty*, and there are an astonishing number of them in St. Petersburg. In fact, 342 bridges criss-cross the waterways of this famous city. Across the Neva River (the largest river in the area) all but one of them are drawbridges. And while these larger bridges are impressive, it's the smaller structures you find over the canals that are the most interesting. Along the Fontanka River there are many, like the Anichkov Bridge, which has a horse statue on each corner, symbolizing the

human need to tame nature, and the Lomonosova Bridge with its four Doric towers, or the Panteleymonovsky Bridge with lampposts decorated with double-headed eagles. During the months of April to November, the larger drawbridges along the Neva River are raised every evening at designated times to allow large ships to pass. It is quite the spectacle…and also quite time-consuming, so if you need to be on the other side of these bridges you best get there before the shipping lanes are fully opened. Although, our guide told us the drawbridges offer a convenient excuse for when young people want to party in town with friends, telling their parents they would have come home earlier…*but the darn bridges were up*!

We slowly made our way north along the Fontanka River, our guide pointing out interesting structures on either side of us, mostly former palaces now converted into museums. As we approached the Neva River we came upon the Summer Palace of Peter the Great, constructed between 1710-1714. It served as the summer residence for the royal family for several years and was the first palace built in St. Petersburg. It sits on the northeast corner of a large imperial park known as the Summer Gardens, the park was supposedly designed by the tsar himself in a Dutch baroque style, utilizing a geometric pattern and adorned with fountains, sculptures and pavilions. We entered the wide Neva River channel from here, turning left and traveling underneath the Troitskiy drawbridge. To our right was Zayachy Island where Peter the Great built the *Peter and Paul Fortress*, the first major construction of what would become the great city of St. Petersburg. Zayachy Island was a small, unpopulated swampy isle divided by canals. The canals have since been filled up creating a small island that is connected to the rest of the city via the Kronversksky and Ioannovsky bridges. In addition to the walled fortress, Zayachy Island is home to the *Saints Peter and Paul Cathedral* where many of the Romanov rulers are buried, the tall golden spire of the church is visible for miles. We did a walking tour of the fortress and cathedral on our last day in St. Petersburg.

In the drizzling rain we continued to cruise the Neva River heading west, passing the eastern tip of Vasilievsky Island situated on the Neva Delta. The island splits the Neva River into two major distributaries (the *Bolshaya Neva* and the *Malaya Neva*) and is bordered in the south and northeast by the Gulf of Finland; this was an ideal place for Peter the Great to build the first major port of St. Petersburg. The area around the eastern tip (known as the Spit of Vasilievsky Island) has several historical buildings, notably the Old St. Petersburg Stock Exchange (built between 1805-1810) designed in a Greek

Revival style inspired by the famous Greek Temple of Hera at Paestrum. This impressive structure contains forty-four Doric columns. Following the communist revolution of 1917, the stock exchange was abolished and the building was used to house a naval museum. Today, I believe it's an armory museum. In front of the Old St. Petersburg Stock Exchange, leading towards the river, are two large rostral columns. The top of these decorative columns once served as beacons for passing ships.

Our tour boat continued down the Bolshaya Neva, tracing the southern part of Vasilievsky Island. Along the right bank of the river is the University Embankment, a section that spans from the Palace Bridge to the Blagoveshchenskiy Bridge, the two bridges that connect the island to the mainland. We saw several historical buildings along this University Embankment. The *Kunstkamera* (1727), commissioned by Peter the Great, was Russia's first museum. It housed an assortment of 'oddities and curiosities', like deformed human and animal fetuses. One of our guides told us that a major purpose of the museum was to scare religion into the peasants. Also along the University Embankment was the *Twelve Collegia* (or Colleges), a series of 12 interconnected three-story buildings completed in 1744 designed to give the illusion that it was one structure. It is the largest existing complex from that era in St. Petersburg. The original buildings once housed the various offices of the Russian imperial government, but today are used as the campus for the St. Petersburg State University.

Another famous structure we saw was the *Menshikov Palace*, the first stone building ever built in the city, completed in 1727. Alexander Menshikov was a nobleman and friend of Peter the Great who eventually served as the de facto ruler during the short reign of Peter's wife, Catherine I. He quickly conspired to have Catherine I crowned empress following the death of Peter in 1725 and governed Russia with an iron fist supposedly on her behalf. He had a much deserved reputation for being corrupt and was despised by other members of the nobility who succeeded in overthrowing Menshikov after the death of Catherine I in 1727. Menshikov and his family lost their titles and property and were exiled to Siberia. His palace is now a part of the Hermitage Museum. Another beautiful building we saw along the University Embankment was the neoclassical *Russian Academy of Arts*, founded in 1757, which is just as renowned today for its art history and training as it was when it first opened.

The boat made a U-turn when we reached the Blagoveshchenskiy Bridge and began heading back towards the Neva River. On our right now was the English Embankment (or English Quay) a historically fashionable street named after two structures: the British Embassy that once stood there and a famous English church that today has been preserved as an architectural landmark. Many of the buildings along the English Embankment were former palaces and pre-revolutionary embassies that now contain corporate offices or government agencies. At the end of this quay is the Senate Square (also known as the Decembrists Square for a revolt that took place in 1825). We saw the old Senate and Synod Building (home to the Constitutional Court of Russia), a striking neoclassical structure that curves around the quay with a continuous row of Corinthian columns culminating in a massive triumphal arch. In the actual square we could see the large equestrian statue known as the Bronze Horseman, commissioned by Catherine the Great in honor of Peter the Great. This bronze sculpture sits atop a stone pedestal that holds the record for the largest stone ever moved by mankind. The pedestal was part of a solid granite boulder found six kilometers away and weighing 1500 tons (it was 'whittled' down to its current 1250 tons while being transported to this spot).

Just to the east of the Senate Square, on the Admiralty Embankment, is the Admiralty Building, the former Imperial Navy building that now serves as the headquarters for the Russian Navy. Rebuilt in the early 19th century using an Empire style design, the Admiralty has a long gilded spire topped by a golden weather vane in the shape of a small sail warship. The location of this building is paramount. It sits at the northern end of St. Petersburg's three main avenues – Nevsky, Gorokhovaya and Voznesensky – underlining the importance that Peter the Great placed on his navy.

Once we crossed underneath the Palace Bridge we were back on the Neva River, heading east. On our right, along the Palace Embankment (or Palace Quay) are a series of famous palaces known collectively today as the State Hermitage Museum. Founded by Catherine the Great in 1764 to showcase her art collection, the Hermitage has morphed into one of the largest museum complexes on the planet, second only to the Louvre of Paris, consisting of six separate palace structures lined up against each other along the quay. Five of these buildings are open to the public. The most famous is the green-and-white Winter Palace sitting on the western end of the embankment; this was the official residence of the Romanov rulers from 1732 until the end of their reign in 1917. Next to the Winter Palace we saw

the light green Small Hermitage palace, followed by the yellowish Old Hermitage structure (just behind it, and out of view, was the New Hermitage) and bringing up the rear was the Hermitage Theater building. We would spend an entire afternoon touring the inside of this enormous museum complex on our last day in St. Petersburg.

Beyond here we passed several more beautiful palace buildings, including the Marble Palace, the New Michael Palace and the Vladimir Palace (the last palace built in St. Petersburg). We turned right when we reached the Fontanka River again, heading south, back to the dock area. It was almost 4:30pm when our boat tour concluded. I would recommend to anyone spending several days in St. Petersburg to cruise the water channels here. For the price, it is an excellent way to get a feel of this 'Venice of the East' and to see some of the grander historical buildings from a different perspective. I would also suggest you buy a tourist map or do a little online research to familiarize yourself with the layout. Many of the structures along the quays were originally designed as the homes of the nobility, and it's very easy to confuse one palace with another.

While it was still daylight we decided to visit the *Church of the Savior on the Spilled Blood*, a rather dramatic nickname for what is *officially* the Church of the Resurrection of Christ. This is considered St. Petersburg's most elaborate church. It was built over a 24-year period on the spot where Tsar Alexander II was assassinated. Alexander II was a liberal-minded ruler who served from 1855 until his violent death in 1881. He introduced radical reforms designed not only to help the peasantry, which included the emancipation of the serfs, but also to improve Russia's infrastructure to better utilize the country's resources. Alexander II also issued laws aimed at reforming the often corrupt and archaic branches of his own government. But despite these efforts, or perhaps because of them, there were many attempts on his life by revolutionaries and separatists. On March 13, 1881, a terrorist cell succeeded in killing the tsar with an explosive device. His son, Alexander III, became the new tsar and commissioned this church – now more popularly referred to as the Church of the Savior on the Spilled Blood – to commemorate his father's death. It is quite the stunner, and visitors to St. Petersburg should definitely put it on their itinerary.

To get to the church we had to walk westward for five long blocks down Nevsky Prospekt, one of Russia's most famous streets. This was the main road laid out in the early years of St. Petersburg. By the beginning of the 20th

century it became one of Europe's grandest boulevards, dotted with eloquent buildings, bridges, squares, churches and businesses. It had cobblestone footpaths and tracks in the middle of the street for horse-drawn trams that were flanked by wooden paving blocks which effectively muffled the sound of the carriages, making Nevsky Prospekt the quietest avenue in all of Europe. Today, this wide boulevard is anything *but* quiet, as traffic and shoppers spill onto it en masse, a bustling exciting place that is often the highlight of a local's weekend, with many shops, restaurants and clubs situated along its path and side streets. It's easy to get distracted as you stroll the sidewalk here. We stopped at several gift shops looking for souvenirs. Ron and Anke were looking for collectible espresso cups and wooden Russian toys for their collections back home; Dani had her eye out for a decorative ornament to put on her Christmas tree. When we reached the intersection of Nevsky Prospekt and the Griboyedov channel embankment we turned right, following the pathway along the canal until we arrived at the Church of the Savior of the Spilled Blood. And what a beautiful sight it was!

While most of historical St. Petersburg was built along Baroque and Neoclassical designs, the Church of the Spilled Blood harkens back to an older Russian romantic nationalism. The architecture of this Orthodox Church resembles that of the famous St. Basil's Cathedral in Moscow and the celebrated Russian churches of the 17th century. It has five colorful domes; this amount of domes, used widely in Russian churches, represents Jesus and the Four Evangelists (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John). The main tower was undergoing restoration and was surrounded by scaffolding, but not even that took away from the elegant structure. And as beautiful as the exterior of this church was, the real artwork lay inside.

We arrived at 5:15pm, just forty-five minutes before closing time. We quickly purchased the 250-ruble tickets (roughly five dollars) and queued up at the entrance with the late afternoon tourists. The amount and varied collection of mosaic icons that decorate the inside of the church is incredible. There are more than 7500 square meters of mosaic artwork on display here. Every conceivable inch of wall and ceiling space is covered in religious icons: paintings, murals, symbols, statues and mosaics. When I stood in the center of the church and looked up, it was a jaw-dropping experience. The magnificent altar (supposedly built on the very spot where Alexander II died) is a stone-carved shrine decorated with mosaic images of

the patron saint of the Romanov family, the whole thing resting on a base of gray violet jasper.

After our visit to the church we decided to return to Nevsky Prospekt and find a place to have dinner. Along the Griboyedov canal we passed many outdoor vendors selling clothes and crafts in front of the Korpus Benua building, a wing of the Russian Museum which is located just behind it, containing the largest collection of Russian art in the country. Just further up the street, Anke and Dani spotted a promising restaurant and went inside to get us a table (I do not remember the name of the establishment). Ron and I continued to head up to the main avenue to take pictures of the famous Kazan Square, situated on the corner of Nevsky and the Griboyedov canal.

The pride and glory of this square is the Kazan Cathedral, an unusual Orthodox Church that resembles St. Peter's Basilica in Rome with a grandiose colonnade of 96 columns and a massive dome. This is considered a very sacred church not only in St. Petersburg but also throughout Russia. The image of the Kazan icon (Mother Mary, or *Our Lady of Kazan*)) is one of the most revered in the country. The land space beneath the square was once a settlement for the workers who transformed St. Petersburg from a swampland into a majestic city. The cathedral is also famous for its celebration of the Russian army's triumph over Napoleon's forces. Monuments to Field Marshals Mikhail Kutuzov and Barclay de Tolly, two of the military men responsible for defeating Napoleon in 1812, were built in front of the church along Nevsky Prospekt. General Kutuzov is actually buried here.

Ron and I headed first to the cathedral, hopeful we might still be able to take a look inside even at this late hour but the church was closing as we arrived. Tsar Paul I (another assassinated Romanov ruler) commissioned the Kazan Cathedral just before he was killed in 1801 by a band of dismissed military officers who had conspired with members of the nobility disgruntled over the emperor's reforms. The building was completed in 1811. The design of the cathedral reflected Paul I's desire to combine Catholicism and Orthodoxy into some kind of *grand* Christianity. We made our way around the structure taking photos in the fading sunlight and returned to the monument of Kutuzov, a bronze statue of the general with sword in hand overlooking Nevsky Prospekt. As the sun began to set I took some awesome photos from behind the statue with the Church of the Savior on the Spilled Blood in the distance.

We returned to the restaurant to join Anke and Dani for dinner. The ladies, it turned out, were having a great time in our absence, downing cocktails and flirting shamelessly with the waiter, a young, attractive Estonian man named Leo who was studying architecture in St. Petersburg. Anke later joked that she and Dani tipped him enough to pay for his entire education! Leo recommended a few dishes from the menu and I opted for the pork medallions in a mushroom sauce served with potatoes. For dessert I had a delicious raspberry meringue concoction. My bill came to about 1,000 rubles with the tip (roughly $20). This turned out to be the most expensive meal I had while in Russia. We stayed at the restaurant for nearly two and a half hours, enjoying the food and conversation. The night was cool and clear and we decided to walk back to our hotel, misjudging the distance on our tourist map. It took us over an hour – including a trek along the Neva River – before we made it back by 10:30pm. As exhausted as I was, I managed to stay up for another hour writing in my journal, fearful I would forget many of the day's details if I didn't jot them down before going to bed. By midnight I was sound asleep.

Day Four

I was awake by 5:00am. I had several cups of instant coffee in my room and continued writing in my journal. We would be transferring to the riverboat later that afternoon, so after showering and dressing I repacked my luggage. At 6:30am I went downstairs for the breakfast buffet and by 7:45am I brought my bags to the lobby and checked out. Our luggage was kept in a storage room until we returned from a scheduled morning outing to Peterhof, a seafront town along the southern shoreline of the Gulf of Finland, roughly 29 kilometers west of St. Petersburg.

By 8:00am we boarded the tour bus for the drive to Peterhof, taking the ring road out of St. Petersburg for most of the trip. Our tour director, Elena, tried teaching us some Russian words, but I have to admit, the older I get the harder it is for me to learn another language. She told us the words '*fantastico*' and '*super*' are used to describe something great, which was

pretty easy to remember. As in, *do you like your borscht*? Yeah, it's fantastico! A local tour guide named Zina joined us, and during the hour-long bus ride she had time to give us the back-story on Peterhof, known as the 'Russian Versailles'.

Peter I (or the Great) lived from 1672 until 1725. He is universally recognized as one of the best rulers in Russian history. He succeeded not only in expanding Russia's territory but also modernizing the country, transforming it from a predominantly isolated kingdom surrounded by warring foreign overlords into a true European super power, establishing the nation's first naval base. Many of Peter's ideas came from his travels throughout Western Europe. At the very end of the 17th century he spent roughly 18 months touring various countries in the west with a large Russian delegation known as the *Grand Embassy*. He attempted to travel incognito, using a different name, but the man's height – 6ft 8in tall – made him stick out like a sore thumb. I'm sure the cordon of Russians who surrounded him didn't fool anyone, either. His original mission was to solicit allies in his continuing war with Turkey, and on this front he was not too successful (both the monarchs of France and Austria did not want to wage war with the Turks). But he did take in and learn much from his visit to the west.

Peter the Great came to the realization that Western European culture was, in fact, superior to the medieval practices still in use in Eastern Europe, and when he returned to Russia he began implementing reforms designed to bring his kingdom into the modern world. In the Netherlands he learned the art of ship-building, using the techniques he saw there to build his own navy back home. In England he learned about city-planning while touring Manchester, something that came in handy when he began laying out St. Petersburg. In France he was bowled over by the sheer elegance of King Louis XIV's Palace at Versailles. He vowed to build himself something similar in order to showcase his new Russia. The result was a series of beautiful palaces in the coastal town of Peterhof known collectively as the Peterhof Grand Palace, which, in many ways, may have surpassed the one in Versailles.

As we traveled west out of St. Petersburg, Zina would point out various landmarks like the ornately designed Avtovo train station built in 1955, or a monument dedicated to the city's tram drivers (St. Petersburg has more trams than any other city in the world), or a water fountain memorial to WWII. On Petergofskoye Highway we passed *Planeta Leta*, a popular

amusement park, and just further west was a large, partially completed residential complex known as the Baltic Pearl, which is being constructed by a Chinese consortium. This enormous complex, planned over 200 hectares (500 acres) of land, is one of the answers to St. Petersburg's housing problems. Because of the historical importance of the city, construction of residential buildings within city limits is a delicate matter for most residents. The Baltic Pearl was designed to create housing for young families outside of the city (a suburban apartment complex). Due to the recent economic downturn the project has proceeded slowly, but several residential buildings and a shopping plaza have already been completed. When finished, the Baltic Pearl will be truly independent with nine kindergartens, five schools, a mall, restaurants and even a theater. Each apartment building will be 20 stories tall, the entire complex capable of housing up to 35,000 residents. If the Baltic Pearl proves successful, I think there will be many more such construction sites throughout the country.

We continued westward towards Peterhof, entering the suburb of Strelna. Initially, Peter the Great selected Strelna as the site of his Grand Palace but the land here was too boggy for what he had in mind and the project was moved to nearby Peterhof. In Strelna we passed the famous Coastal Monastery of St. Sergius, which was once one of the richest and most important in all of Russia, containing seven churches and several chapels. Many Russian nobles were buried here. After the communist revolution, though, religion was suppressed throughout the Soviet Union and the cemetery and churches of this monastery were torn down and the grounds used for other purposes, including as a labor camp. The monastery was given back to the Orthodox Church in 1993 and has undergone restoration. A little further west we came across the Konstantin Palace, also in the town of Strelna, once owned by a branch of the Romanov family. This building was virtually destroyed by the Germans during WWII. In 2001, Putin himself ordered that the palace be restored to its former glory. The building is now the official presidential residence of St. Petersburg and is sometimes referred to as 'Putin's Palace'. It can be toured during certain times of the year and is also used for state functions. In the vicinity are other restored palaces that once belonged to members of the Romanov family, as well.

We arrived at the Grand Palace in Peterhof around 9:00am. Zina told us we were very fortunate to tour the grounds as this was supposedly the last day the estate museum was open to the public before closing down for the winter. The weather was perfect, mostly sunny. And although we found

many tourists there, Zina said this was nothing compared to the enormous crowds that show up during the summer months. We immediately proceeded to the visitors' entrance for the guided tour. Photography is not permitted inside the Grand Palace so I had to purchase a detailed picture book later on in the gift shop to remind me of the splendor of this place. Once again, we had to slip on shoe covers. Due to the normally large crowds the pace of the tours are timed, so you go through the palace rather quickly. There are always museum guides and personnel hurrying you along. A tad frustrating, but…*hey*.

The Peterhof imperial estate is actually comprised of a *series* of palaces and gardens that were built and continually renovated during a period that spanned more than 150 years. The estate sits on a 10-kilometer strip along the Gulf of Finland, covering an area of over 1,000 hectares (2500 acres). For two centuries, Peterhof served as a crown residence of the Russian monarchs. It began in 1705, when Peter the Great built a relatively modest manor here near the Gulf, and then ten years later construction began in earnest on a grander imperial residence with palaces, pavilions, fountains, cascades and gardens designed by some of the best Dutch, French and German architects of the time. The estate was formally inaugurated in 1723, initially consisting of the main palace's Upper Chamber, a 15-hectare Upper Garden and the 102-hectare Lower Park which also has two smaller palaces: the Monplaisir and the Marly. Over the ensuing years several chambers and halls were added to the main palace, each reigning monarch throwing his or her own personal architectural preference into the mix. Many of the famous halls were routinely re-designed, each one more spectacular than the last. By the time of Tsar Nicholas I in the mid-1800s, which is considered the Golden Age of Peterhof, the Grand Palace had to rank easily among the most beautiful in the world.

But – like the Catherine Palace – what we were touring was actually a *reconstruction* of the original. The Peterhof Grand Palace was completely destroyed during WWII. Ironically, it was the Soviets, and not the Germans, who did the main damage. After the initial success of his eastern invasion, Hitler planned to celebrate his 'conquest' of Russia by throwing a party at the Grand Palace. Supposedly, the Fuehrer even issued outlandish invitations to the event. This *really* pissed Stalin off, who vowed to preempt any such celebrations. Stalin ordered his military to bomb the palace into oblivion during the winter of 1941-42.

Zina served as our official tour guide through the palace, but all around us were museum staff keeping a watchful eye and hurrying us along. Because we were not permitted to take photographs within the palace it is difficult for me to accurately outline how the tour unfolded. Suffice it to say that the Grand Palace was every bit as opulent and elegant as the Catherine Palace we toured the day before. When Peter the Great died in 1725, work on the palace ceased until his daughter, Elizabeth I, became empress. During the 1740s she commissioned her favorite architect, Bartolomeo Rastrelli, to build her something truly regal at Peterhof. It's interesting to note that the exterior, while long and narrow, appears smaller than its actual size, having been built in a Baroque style that was elegant but modest and made to blend well with the formal Upper Gardens. The inside, though, is very lavish with sumptuous rooms of painted ceilings, intricately twining gilded woodcarving, patterned parquet floors and décor mirrors.

The main suite of halls – or state rooms – are found on the second-story, reached by an ornately designed Main Staircase that sets the tone for what is to come. We toured the Ballroom, one of the most impressive halls Rastrelli created. It has a floor space of 2,900 square feet with a vaulted ceiling that is completely covered by a painting entitled *Mount Parnassus* (made in 1751 by Venetian artist Bartolomeo Tarsia, featuring Elizabeth I as the Roman goddess Juno). Between the gilded woodcarvings framing the walls are 16 additional classical paintings. The Ballroom was used for receptions, balls and masquerades, a favorite room of the Empress who loved to entertain and was known for her dancing abilities.

Another famous room was the Chesme Hall, commissioned by Catherine the Great during the 1770s to memorialize Russia's naval triumphs. The design of this room is in stark contrast to Rastrelli's dynamism style; it was created using precise horizontal and vertical divisions, and stucco molding instead of the usual gilded woodcarvings. The chief adornments are a series of twelve large canvass paintings along the walls depicting the strength of the Russian naval fleet, including six epic scenes from the Battle of Chesme (1770) in which the Ottoman navy was soundly defeated by forces under the command of Count Alexei Orlov (whose marble bust is on display inside the hall). The ceiling has a huge painted canvass of an episode from the Trojan War. According to our guide, the original naval battle renditions seemed inaccurate because the German artist who painted them had never actually seen an explosion before. For his benefit, Catherine the Great supposedly

had some ships blown up in the harbor so the artist could render a better drawing.

We toured the Blue Reception Room, a modestly decorated hall that was used by palace officials and secretaries who kept written accounts of the daily goings-on. We also saw the largest hall in the palace, the white and green Throne Room (3500 square feet), the site for official receptions, concerts and balls. This room had beautifully patterned parquet floors and a wide airy formal space. Crimson drapes framed the windows; elegant chandeliers hung down from the ceiling. Along the walls were portraits of the Romanov dynasty. In the center of the back wall is the actual throne of the monarch. We continued through the Audience Hall, another Rastrelli masterpiece of gilded woodcarvings and mirrors, which served as the room for Ladies-in-Waiting. We also saw the White Dining Room with its table setting for 30 persons. Among this room's decorations were five crystal chandeliers and two tall heating stoves lined with white tiles bearing relief images symbolic of music and poetry.

One of my favorite rooms was the Picture Hall. This was the last of the great state rooms we saw. It is a classic example of 18th century Russian Baroque and the later Rococo style; and while some elements from the original room still exists, Rastrelli basically reconfigured the hall in the mid-1700s by adding gilded woodcarvings, décor mirrors and an absolutely gorgeous parquet floor with a stunning diamond pattern. But the most interesting thing about this room had to be the wall-to-wall portraits that are aligned in a tapestry manner with no gaps between the paintings. The portraits (there are more than 360) mostly depict local women donning the regular attire of the time painted by Italian artist Pietro Rotari (many of the portraits were actually of the same model posing as different characters).

Next to the Picture Hall were two smaller rooms decorated in a fancy Far Eastern style, featuring several Chinese cabinets and desks, and walls adorned with Chinese screens painted in gold and silver on black lacquer panels. Most of the rooms we saw beyond this point pertained to the imperial apartments; smaller, but by no means less ornate or elegant. These included private studies, dressing rooms and passage galleries. Our tour of the palace lasted about an hour. We spent the rest of our visit walking the beautiful gardens of the Lower Park.

The parkland area surrounding the Grand Palace is nothing short of remarkable, an outdoor museum of sweeping vistas and decorations that encompasses nearly 200 years of European aristocratic fashion. As one strolls through the beautifully designed gardens – with statues and other monuments, impressive cascades, pavilions and smaller mansions – you come across a variety of landscaping styles that showcase the age of empire. What is even more surprising is that the architects behind this fantastic landscaping somehow managed to turn these gardens into a wonderland of flowers and greenery despite the bitterly cold northern climate. The Upper Gardens to the south of the Grand Palace consist of three alleys leading to the palace entrance, lined with flowerbeds and neatly trimmed low hedges and trees in a very eye-pleasing aesthetic manner. But the true gems lie on the other side of the Grand Palace, in the Lower Park area.

The first thing we witnessed when we exited the north side of the palace, on the bluff just above the Lower Park, is Peter the Great's biggest accomplishment at Peterhof: the *Grand Cascade*. There are more than 140 fountains at Peterhof, the most impressive is the Grand Cascade that runs from the northern façade of the palace and connects to a marine channel which in turn leads out into the Gulf of Finland. You can actually stand behind the cascade and look down this long channel into the gulf from the Grand Palace. The tsar himself was involved in the engineering phase of the canals and fountains. It was his vision to have a nautical entrance from the Gulf of Finland to his hilltop palace, a cascading fountain with grottos at its footsteps. Surrounding the fountains of the Grand Cascade are dozens of gilded bronze sculptures (the originals were lead gilded sculptures but those were destroyed during WWII). In the center of the fountain is a statue of the mythical Samson tearing open a lion's jaw; the beast is shooting water straight up into the air. This statue is symbolic of Peter the Great's victory over the Swedes, a conquest that allowed him control of the region, the Gulf of Finland and access to the Baltic Sea. In fact, the central idea behind the cascade and its channels was to symbolize Russia's new naval power.

Zina led us through the Lower Park explaining the various sites. It was all so beautifully laid out. The Lower Park is divided into three interconnecting parts: the western part (the Marly Palace), the eastern part (the Monsplaisir Palace) and the central part (the Grand Palace). A system of two tree-lined alleys span out from the center and western parts, each alley ends in a spectacular fountain or palace. On the eastern side is Peter the Great's first palace, the Monsplaisir, a modest building constructed along the shoreline

that he designed himself using a Dutch architectural model. *Monsplaisir* is French for 'my pleasure (or delight)' and even after the first phase of the Grand Palace had been built, the tsar still considered Monsplaisir his favorite suburban palace and would often retreat here and entertain guests. Its large windows overlook the gulf, his prized conquest. The original palace has been largely preserved and can be viewed for an additional fee. The interior is authentic and contains many of the items that Peter the Great used while residing here. This building also served as Russia's first art gallery. The tsar was an avid collector and many of his Western European paintings still line the walls.

On the western side of the Lower Park is the Marly Palace (named after the residence of King Louis XIV of France), a rather small, but elegant building at one end of the large Marly Pond. Used for fish breeding, even till this day, the pond plays an integral role in the layout of the Lower Park as water from it is channeled throughout the area. During our guided walk we saw Peter's orchid, surrounded by cherry and apples trees, known as the Garden of Venus, and the nearby Garden of Bacchus. We saw two other spectacular cascades: the Chessboard Hill (a slanting series of giant chess board-looking fountains) and the Golden Hill Cascade (made of marble with gilded statues). We saw another statue of Samson tearing open a lion's jaw in the center of a pond in the Lower Park and later came upon a set of marble Adam and Eve water fountains that were sculpted to resemble the ones at the Palace of Doges in Italy. The alleys and gardens were simply beautiful, dotted with more statues and fountains.

One very interesting – and entertaining – aspect of the Lower Park is the use of 'tricky fountains'. Apparently, Peter the Great was a bit of a prankster. He had a series of fountains, benches and walkways created throughout the park with hidden spouts designed to squirt water on unsuspecting guests. And they're still functional today. Visitors who get too close to a fountain, or a flowerbed, might find themselves drenched when an unexpected stream of water douses them. And if you feel tired from walking: *beware*! That welcomed bench could suddenly shoot water all over you. Yeah, the emperor was a real card.

Our tour of the grounds took us near the entrance of the palace water channel that leads into the Gulf of Finland. In the distance, across the water, we could see the outline of St. Petersburg. On the way back to the Grand Palace we passed a statue of Neptune positioned near the shore whose

tarnished green body was only shiny around the feet where visitors rub them for good luck. Our tour concluded at the Grand Cascade. It was almost noon. We had about an hour and a half of free time. My companions and I headed over to a very crowded food court where it took us 30 minutes to get coffee and snacks. Afterwards, we wandered through an outdoor vendor's section looking for souvenirs. Ron purchased a thimble for Anke (who collects them). Anke found a very nice espresso cup (she also collects those). I think Dani bought some shawls to hand out as souvenirs. I browsed but didn't find anything I wanted to buy. Besides, I thought the merchandise was a little on the expensive side. I figured I could get what I wanted much cheaper back in St. Petersburg or elsewhere throughout the trip. After years of traveling, I seldom go overboard when it comes to souvenirs. I try to pick up a few items like T-shirts, hats, scarves or simple knick-knacks for friends and family back home (and the list of potential recipients gets smaller with each trip, believe me). For myself, I usually look for one or two items that seem representative of the country I'm visiting…then the stuff sits on my souvenir shelf as permanent dust collectors.

By 1:45pm we wearily boarded our bus for the drive back to St. Petersburg. This was a great time for a short nap. It was raining when we reached our hotel and we decided to have a long leisurely lunch inside the bar lounge before our departure to the riverboat. I ordered the Siberian Pelmeni, a traditional dumpling filled with minced beef and served with sour cream and a side of ajika sauce (a spicy tomato mixture). It was tasty, although the portion was small. After lunch, our group made a quick visit to the SPAR supermarket down the street to pick up snacks for our riverboat cruise. The Wilckens may have bought a bottle of spirits or wine, I'm not sure. We each purchased these delicious crème-filled chocolate cookies that Anke had previously tried and recommended. We returned to the hotel lobby and at 4:45 pm our official riverboat guide, Alyona, helped us tag and identify our luggage before it was stored on the bus. During the river cruise portion of our trip we had both a tour director (Elena) and a riverboat guide (Alyona) who accompanied us everywhere.

By 5:15pm we headed over to the pier along the Neva River and boarded our boat, the *MS Mstislav Rostropovich*, which was docked alongside two other riverboats. Our ship had a near-full capacity of 200 passengers. We arrived at the same time as the two other tour groups that were also booked for the cruise; one from Spain, the other from France. It was a chaotic check-in process as everyone crammed around the tiny reception desk in the ship's

atrium (lobby) waiting to get room keys and charge cards. Except for tipping, money was not used on the boat. Instead, a charge card was issued to each guest and was used as a credit card to make all purchases onboard. At the end of the trip you were handed a bill.

The *MS Mstislav Rostropovich* was built in Czechoslovakia in 1980, and like most of the motor ships that now make up the riverboat industry along the Volga, it was fully refurbished to cater to a growing demand in tourism. Many of the older riverboats plying this route tend to be the same size but with almost double the amount of cabins, making for cramped quarters (and endless complaints). In 2009, the *MS Mstislav Rostropovich* was reconfigured from the hull, the original contingent of compartments was cut almost in half, greatly expanding each cabin space. I'd only been on one riverboat in my lifetime – in Egypt – and I half-expected my cabin to be maybe slightly larger than that. But, boy, was I in for a very pleasant surprise when I entered my room on the middle deck to discover a very generous accommodation. It was billed as a Junior Suite and contained a double bed, private bathroom facilities, and a floor space totaling 21.7 *glorious* square meters. The only drawback was that it did not include a balcony, but it did have two large windows looking out over the port side of the ship. There were only four of these suites on the middle deck, and just a few more throughout the vessel. I have no idea how I landed this particular cabin, especially since my companions were in accommodations half this size. I jokingly referred to it as the 'ballroom suite'…probably to the annoyance of my friends. Needless to say, I was very happy. On the flipside, the Wilckens' probably found their living quarters a bit confining (Anke said they passed one another by detouring over the beds) and their balcony door didn't lock properly (a technician had to be called to fix it). Dani complained about mold on her shower curtain. When we finally set sail, though, a moldy shower curtain was the least of Dani's concerns. Her cabin was on the sun deck and at times the engine smoke filtering out of the ship's funnel would linger in the air and she could smell it inside her room.

To get a better feel of the boat I decided to do a little reconnoitering before unpacking my luggage. From the information guide inside my welcome folder I discovered there were four decks on the ship: the main deck, the middle deck (where I was located), the boat deck and the sun deck. I headed downstairs to the main deck. Besides the atrium and the small gift shop near the main stairwell, the only thing of note on this deck was the medical room located in the bow, and the Maestro Conference and Movie

Hall at the stern. The middle deck had cabins and the Opera Restaurant, conveniently situated just a few feet from my cabin door. This was the assigned restaurant for our tour group. The boat deck consisted of cabins sandwiched on one end by the Melody River Bar Lounge (a popular watering hole, offering free – albeit choppy – WiFi reception) and the Symphony Restaurant on the opposite end. The sundeck had eighteen cabins in the center, including a small gymnasium and a playing room (for cards or board games). At the fore of this deck was the captain's bridge and towards the aft you could step outside to the solarium deck with chaise-lounge and enjoy the passing scenery. This was my home for the next six days.

At 6:45pm our tour group gathered in the Melody River Bar Lounge for an information briefing by Elena and Alyona. Because the bar lounge quickly became the most popular gathering spot on the boat, it was sometimes difficult to hear with the tour groups from Spain and France chatting excitedly nearby. Both our tour director and the ship's guide formally introduced themselves, going over their qualifications (they each had college degrees; one of the ladies had a masters, the other I think was working towards hers). Elena was in her thirties, married with children; Alyona was a single twenty-something-year old. They'd both been employed in the tourism industry for several years, but they seemed to imply they wanted to move on to other careers. The impression I got was that Russians did what they had to do under the current economic situation to survive. We discovered throughout our tour that many of the people working in the tourism industry, and by extension the food and other service industries, were actually college and post college graduates who couldn't find work in their respective fields. This is probably the underlining factor for the discontent many young people in Russia feel towards their government at the moment. By the end of the river cruise we had an occasion to interview several of the other young guides on the boat and this attitude was fairly prevalent among them.

Our informational briefing ended at 7:20pm and everyone trekked to the Opera Restaurant on the middle deck for dinner. My companions and I sat at a table on the port side of the boat. We were joined by Anne (from Texas) and Joyce (from Canada). This table became our assigned seating for the rest of the cruise, we took all our meals here. An alcoholic beverage was included with each dinner and the group insisted on making a toast. I am a recovering alcoholic who has been sober for many, many years so I opted for a Tuborg non-alcoholic brew to clink my glass. Our dinner consisted of a

chicken dish, rice, sweet potatoes, salad and cake. On the table was an individual menu selection for the next dinner. Every night we selected our choices for the following day. I enjoyed the dinner and our group's conversation, learning about our new tablemates, Anne and Joyce, who were both frequent travelers. After dinner I went upstairs to the boat deck to take a look at the cabins of my companions. I did my best not to snicker (*hee-hee-hee*).

I retired to my cabin shortly after 9:30pm. I busied myself sorting out my luggage and hanging up my clothes. I charged my camera batteries and wrote in my journal while munching on my stash of cookies I'd purchased at the SPAR supermarket earlier that day. There weren't many channels available on TV. I managed to watch the news on the RT station until I got tired of the continuous USA-bashing. Formerly known as Russia Today, the RT is a cable and satellite television station funded by the Russian government. It is about as neutral as FOX News or MSNBC. I hit the lights and went to bed just before midnight.

DAY FIVE

I awoke suddenly from a weird dream; it was shortly after 5:00am. I don't recall the dream, but I often experience these nocturnal sleep-ending fantasies while on my trips, and I attribute them to the lingering jet lag. The odd thing is that they usually continue for about a week after I return home (I find myself jolting out of bed thinking my tour mates are in my bedroom). In my socks, I quickly made my way to the boat deck (one floor above) where the crew had set up a day-long coffee station near a central stairwell, consisting of several tables with coffee urns, a big water bottle dispenser and trays of cookies. I made good use of this station throughout the trip.

Back in my room, with two cups brimming with delicious java juice (and a handful of cookies) I sat down to write in my journal, periodically watching the early morning news broadcast on the BBC channel. I shaved, showered and dressed, heading to the Opera Restaurant for breakfast at

7:00am. I sat with Ron and Anke; Dani did not make it down for breakfast that morning, I believe she was exercising in the gym. We had a full itinerary of activities scheduled for the day, starting with a city tour of St. Petersburg and finishing with an afternoon visit to the famous State Hermitage Museum. I was very excited about the museum visit. Prior to disembarking the ship we exchanged our key cards for boarding passes. Everyone had to get one. When we returned in the late afternoon, the collected boarding passes became the indicator of whether or not everyone was back on board. The rule was simple: a missing boarding pass meant a missing passenger. Several large buses were lined up in the lot next to the dock area, each one assigned to a different tour group. Joining us that day was an awesome local guide named Ivan who taught art history at a St. Petersburg college. His knowledge made our tour of the State Hermitage Museum even more memorable.

I don't recall the exact route we took from the pier through the city, but we eventually ended up heading north along a quay road adjacent to the Neva River called Sinopskaya Naberezhnaya. The first major landmark we passed was the Alexander Nevsky Monastery, a complex of some of the oldest buildings in St. Petersburg. Peter the Great founded the original wooden monastery that once stood here in 1710 when the city was still in its infancy. In 1724 a new church was consecrated here, designed by Italian architect Domenico Trezzini. It was named after the legendary Russian leader Alexander Nevsky – considered a saint under the Russian Orthodox Church – whose remains were brought to the monastery from the city of Vladimir (east of Moscow) in a seven-month long journey. The date of the arrival of his remains became a celebrated holiday in the country. By the 20th century, the monastery complex had 16 churches, but only five survived the wrath of the communist revolution. Today, the remaining structures have been restored. One of the biggest attractions of this monastery seems to be the surrounding graveyards, especially the Tikhvin Cemetery, which contains the tombs of some of the greatest names of Russian culture: Tchaikovsky, Rubinshtein, Glinka, Mussorgsky and Dorstoevsky, to name just a few.

Beyond the Bolsheokhtinsky Bridge, approaching a wide bend in the Neva River, we stopped to visit the Smolny Convent and Cathedral. The history of this complex is quite interesting. The convent was originally built for Peter the Great's daughter, Elizabeth, who opted to become a nun after she was disallowed succession to the throne following her father's death.

But the austere life of a convent apparently didn't suit her because in 1741 a palace coup d'etat overthrew Tsar Ivan VI, who was only 13 months old at the time – his mother served as regent – and Elizabeth was installed as Empress of Russia. She allowed work on the convent to continue and had her favorite architect, Bartolomeo Rastrelli, build her a beautiful blue-and-white baroque cathedral which turned out to be the last major project the famous architect ever worked on. When Elizabeth I died in 1762, the new empress, Catherine II (the Great), had tired of the baroque style and Rastrelli was officially retired as senior court architect. He never got to finish the cathedral's bell tower (it would have made the church the tallest structure in the city) nor the interior. Even so, this church is considered one of Rastrelli's greatest works. After 1764, Catherine the Great stopped funding the cathedral's construction, so it was not actually completed until the reign of Nicolas I some seventy years later.

The interior of the Smolny Cathedral was redesigned with a neoclassical style and officially consecrated on July 22, 1835. During the time of the Soviets, like most churches, the cathedral was looted and allowed to decay. The complex later found new life as a concert hall and a branch of the St. Petersburg State University. In 2015, the building was returned to the Russian Orthodox Church and is currently undergoing restoration. We spent about twenty minutes here walking through the grounds and taking a look inside the church. The outside structure, a gorgeous trademark baroque design by Rastrelli, is the real key feature here, as the white interior seems rather plain by comparison.

We continued west on a street called Shpalernaya, eventually turning south along the Fontanka River to Nevsky Prospekt where we headed north again and drove straight through the historic quarter back to the Neva River. Along the way we passed the Kazan Cathedral, and just a little further to the west was the Stroganov Palace, another beautiful Rastrelli design built in the 1750s for Baron Sergei Grigoriyevich Stroganov, who hailed from the richest family in Russia. A family chef invented the popular dish *beef stroganoff* (although, in Russia, the dish is served with potatoes, not noodles, and is made of sautéed pieces of beef in a mustard sauce topped with sour cream). The Stroganov Palace is now part of the Russian Museum.

We continued down Nevsky Prospekt and passed the Palace Square, the central city square of St. Petersburg. The Palace Square gets it name from the Winter Palace, which is adjacent to it. On the other side of the square is

the equally impressive General Staff Building, built in a bow shape by architect Carlo Rossi in the early 1800s, consisting of two wings separated by a tripartite triumphal arch. In the center of the square is the Alexander Column, the largest red granite column in the world, dedicated to Tsar Alexander I and his victory over Napoleon's forces. Past the square we drove between the Winter Palace and the Admiralty Building and crossed the Neva River via the Palace Bridge to Vasilievsky Island.

St. Petersburg is the second largest city in Russia (Moscow is the biggest) and because it is an important port city and regarded as the cultural capital of the country (with many UNESCO World Heritage sites) the area falls under an administrative status known as a 'federal subject' (making it a federal city). St. Petersburg is roughly 605 square kilometers (234 square miles) but the area of the federal subject to which it belongs is more than twice that size, incorporating not only St. Petersburg (and its 81 municipal districts), but also nine municipal towns (including Pushkin and Peterhof) and about 21 smaller suburban settlements. Geographically, the city lies in the middle of a taiga lowlands along the shores of Neva Bay on the Gulf of Finland, and includes a series of islands along the river delta on which the city is built, connected today by a system of bridges.

The original inhabitants were a colony of Swedes who built a fortress here called *Nyenskans*. Peter the Great wanted a Baltic port in order to trade with Europe. The main Russian port at the time was located on the White Sea in the extreme northern town of Arkhangelsk; it was closed during the long winter months. In 1703, Peter the Great defeated the Swedes and began building his citadel – the Peter and Paul Fortress – on Zayachy Island. This fortress, which still stands today, became the first construction site of the new St. Petersburg. Because of its lowland geography, parts of this originally swampy city are just a dozen feet or so above sea level, allowing for devastating flood inundations over the centuries. In fact, Ivan told us the city sinks a little bit each year. As a result, the terrain of the city has been artificially raised since the 18th century, resulting in the merger of some of the islands and a redirection of the water flow in certain areas. Putin, who hails from the city, ordered the completion of the St. Petersburg Dam in order to prevent future flooding. The dam was finished in 2011 and serves to protect St. Petersburg from storm surges by separating the Neva Bay from the rest of the Gulf of Finland.

Ivan mentioned that St. Petersburg's climate is similar to that of mid-level Canada, with short summers and long, bitterly cold winters. He recalled a particularly brutal season when it snowed 5-7 inches every day for nearly two months. Only the school kids were happy because they were allowed to stay home. Temperatures can sometimes drop to 40 degrees Fahrenheit below zero. *Brrrrrrrr*! City residents usually check the license plates before they begin digging their vehicle out of the snow…you don't want to expend all that energy just to discover it's your neighbor's car. With such an unforgiving climate, the running joke among Russian historians is that if Peter the Great wanted a viable port city he should have fought the Turks in the south instead of the Swedes in the north!

On the easternmost tip of Vasilievsky Island, just across the Palace Bridge, we stopped at the *Birzhevaya Ploshchad* (or Stock Exchange Square). Vasilievsky Island is one of the largest islands that make up St. Petersburg, and it was here that Peter the Great envisioned the center of the city. The island is bordered north and south by two branches of the Neva River and on its western side by the Gulf of Finland. Vasilievsky Island would eventually grow to contain the country's main trading port facilities, the St. Petersburg Stock Exchange building, shops featuring foreign goods and various palaces and institutions. The Birzhevaya Ploshchad is a garden square shaped like a semi-circle and framed by a sloping granite embankment jutting out into the Neva River. On opposite ends are the two Rostral Columns we saw during our canal cruise on Day Three. These large red columns have sculptured allegorical figures along their bases that symbolize Russia's major rivers. At one time they were also used as lighthouse beacons. In front of this square sits the old St. Petersburg Stock Exchange Building, an impressive structure resembling a Greek temple with forty-four Doric columns surrounding the main body, the whole thing resting on a platform of red granite. Today, this building and the two other structures on either side of it are used as museums. We spent about twenty minutes here, walking around the square and taking pictures. This was a wonderful spot to get a panoramic photo of the State Hermitage Museum across the river. And just to the northeast was the Peter and Paul Fortress on Zayachy Island.

We then drove west along the University Embankment road on the southern side of Vasilievsky Island, getting a closer look at some of the old palaces and buildings we had seen on our canal cruise two days earlier, like the *Kunstkamera* (Russia's first museum), and the collection of

administrative buildings known as the *Twelve Collegia* (now the campus of the St. Petersburg State University), and the fabulous *Menshikov Palace* (now a part of the State Hermitage Museum complex). At one point we drove through a historic neighborhood, passing the former homes of writer Alexander Pushkin and the apartment of famed physiologist Ivan Pavlov. Upon reaching the Blagoveshchensky Bridge we caught glimpses of a busy naval shipyard before turning around and heading back east. We made a forty-five minute pit stop at an unusually large souvenir shop (sorry, I cannot recall the name) on Vasilievsky Island that sold a wide variety of Russian traditional crafts at pretty good prices. I will discuss Russian crafts later in this journal. Prior to shopping, though, Ron and I walked about two blocks from the store to photograph an old, relatively nondescript pink stone church that Ivan mentioned was one of the first such stone structures in the city.

From the gift shop we drove back to the *strelka* (the eastern tip of Vasilievsky Island) and crossed the Birzhevoy Bridge onto Petrogradsky Island. This is another of the larger islands in the Neva Delta, home to several noted universities and leading science and research institutes like ITMO University (St. Petersburg State University of Information Technologies, Mechanics and Optics) considered among the country's leading technical schools. Petrogradsky Island has quite a few museums, as well, including the first 'palace' of Peter the Great, a small, simple log cabin built in just three days by his soldiers in May of 1703; its construction marks the founding of St. Petersburg. The tsar lived here briefly (until 1708) while he supervised the planning and construction of his fortress and imperial city. We crossed the small Kronverkskiy Bridge leading to Zayachy Island to visit the Peter and Paul Fortress. We parked just outside its defensive walls and spent the next hour touring the inside of the fortress complex.

Zayachy Island (which translates into 'Hare Island') was an unappealing, unpopulated small parcel of swampy land lying on the northern bank of the Neva River, the last upstream island in the delta, with a commanding view of what would later become the historic center of St. Petersburg. In 1703, after conquering the Swedes in the Baltic area, Peter the Great ordered a fortress built here to guard against a Swedish counterattack from the Gulf of Finland. The original citadel was constructed within a year and made out of wood with six earthen bastions, but from 1706 – 1740 the entire fortress was rebuilt in a star-like formation and fortified in stone. The Swedes never returned, so its defensive purpose was never tested. Instead, the fortress became the base for the city garrison; its bastions used as a notorious prison

for high-ranking or political prisoners. Sometimes referred to as the 'Russian Bastille', some of Russia's most prominent political prisoners have been held here over the centuries (this includes Leon Trotsky and the former Yugoslavian leader, Josip Broz Tito). During the Bolshevik Revolution, the communists used the fort to round up tsarist officials or sympathizers. Many were executed here. Communist propaganda repeatedly described the fortress as a hellish place, making it a hated symbol of the Tsarist government, but in reality it wasn't that bad, rarely were there more than 100 prisoners held here at any given time, and they were probably treated better than other prisons. Today, though, the fortress has re-emerged as the birthplace of the city, with annual celebrations and a sandy beach along its western border that is quite popular during the summer months.

Within the walls of the fortress complex are several buildings; most are now dedicated to exhibitions and museums (like the City Museum and the Trubetskoy prison bastion), and along the western section is the still-functioning St. Petersburg Mint. During the weekdays you can see armored cars pulling up here to haul away freshly minted money. The large cobbled-stone square in the center of the complex contains the most impressive building and the fortress' namesake: the Saints Peter and Paul Cathedral. The original wooden church that stood here was built just a month after the city was founded. In 1712, construction on *this* cathedral began, taking twenty years to complete. This is the oldest church in St. Petersburg, and served as the city's Orthodox Cathedral until 1859 when that function was transferred to the St. Isaac's Cathedral in the city. The architectural design was a milestone departure from the typical Orthodox churches of Russia, it was constructed under an early Baroque style with a rectangular-shaped bell tower (instead of the onion dome style one sees in older Russian churches) and has a landmark golden needle – topped by the figure of a flying angel bearing a cross – stretching up towards the sky similar to the protestant churches of Western Europe. This is one of the tallest structures in St. Petersburg, and its golden peak can be seen from miles around jutting high above the fortress walls. The outer walls of the church are formed with decorative pilasters (resembling columns) with ornate cherub statues above the windows. The inside was nothing less than spectacular.

Ivan took us on a walking tour of the interior. While the architectural style of this church might be similar to the grand – but modestly decorated – Lutheran Churches that Peter the Great experienced on his travels throughout Western Europe, the inside of the Saints Peter and Paul

Cathedral is quite extravagant. And there is a reason for this. The church is the final resting place for all but two of the Romanov rulers from Peter the Great onward (only Peter II and Ivan VI are not buried here). Their elaborate tombs – some fashioned with carved monoliths made from valuable stones like gray and green jasper – line various areas of the church. The walls are embellished with paintings of biblical themes; marble columns decorated with gilded edges support the tall vaulted ceiling, which has mosaics of cherubs surrounded by an attractive green-and-white color scheme. Large crystal chandeliers help illuminate the interior. One of the most impressive aspects of this church is the enormous golden iconostasis that separates the nave from the sanctuary. This large, portable and beautifully decorated wall is framed with religious icons painted in a manner usually associated with Catholic Churches of the day. Another indication that Peter I wanted to infuse Western culture into his new, modern Russia.

Towards the front right section of the church we saw the tomb of Peter the Great himself, and those of Elizabeth I and Catherine II. As we wandered around the sanctuary, Ivan told us interesting tidbits about some of the more elaborate stone tombs and their occupants. In a separate section called the St. Catherine's Chapel are the graves of the last tsar of Russia, Nicolas II, and his family, who were murdered by the Bolsheviks in 1918. When their bodies were discovered decades later the entire royal family was re-interred here.

Ivan then led us around the cathedral and spoke briefly about the bell tower, which currently holds the record for the tallest bell tower of any Orthodox church in the world. It houses an enormous *carillon*, an elaborate musical instrument consisting of 51 bells (the largest weighing 3 tons, the smallest only 22 pounds) with a range of four octaves, allowing it to play most classical and modern music. When the bells ring it is a truly memorable moment. But the bell tower has had its share of bad luck. Over the centuries the tall tower has been struck by lightening numerous times causing fires which have damaged the church (the original carillon was destroyed by a lightening strike in 1756 that burned the whole tower down). I believe the long golden spire now acts as a lightening rod, diverting the dangerous electrical currents into the ground.

We left the Peter and Paul Fortress, crossing back to Vasilievsky Island and returned to the historic city center across the Neva River via the Blagoveshchensky Bridge. On the day we toured the city there was a

marathon race in progress and we had to take this longer route back. We stopped to visit the St. Isaac's Cathedral, the largest church in the city and the fourth largest Orthodox basilica in the world. Its massive golden dome is one of the famous landmarks of the city, dominating the skyline. Commissioned by Tsar Alexander I, and built on the site where three previous churches once stood, the cathedral took 40 years to complete (1818 – 1858). To support the weight of this church, 25,000 piles were driven into the low marshy fenland upon which it was built. Auguste de Montferrand, a French neoclassical architect, designed the structure. Because it took so long to finish, though, the succeeding tsar, Nicolas I, insisted on making it even more grandiose than originally planned.

St. Isaac's Cathedral was designed in the traditional Russian-Byzantine style of a Greek-cross ground plan, and crowned by a large central dome with four subsidiary domes. More than 100kg (over 220 pounds) of gold leaf was used just to cover the central dome. Ivan told us that during WWII the soviets painted the dome a gray color to make it harder for the German bombers to spot. Incredibly, the church survived the massive bombardments. The exterior face is made of gray and pink stone, but the main features are the 112 red granite columns with Corinthian capitals that surround the church at almost every angle: the four sides, the rotunda of the upper dome, the smaller subsidiary domes and the windows. Each column was hewn from a single block of granite (pretty amazing considering their different sizes). For panoramic views of the city, visitors can climb 262 steps to a colonnade that wraps around the drum of the central dome. The cathedral offers services during major religious holidays, but the lavishly decorated interior is mostly open as a museum (a fee is charged to go inside).

Across the street from the church is the St. Isaac's Square consisting of a small well-manicured park and just beyond it an open plaza containing a monument to Nicolas I on his horse. The beautiful Mariinsky Palace right in back of the monument was built as a wedding present for Nicolas I's daughter, the Grand Duchess Maria Nikolaevna, but according to Ivan the princess did not like the idea of staring out her window and seeing the back of her father's image (his statue faces St. Isaac's Cathedral). Or perhaps it was seeing the horse's ass that offended her? These royals are a finicky lot. She eventually moved into another palace. In 1884 the Mariinsky Palace became the seat of the State Council of Imperial Russia and has been used as a government center ever since. It housed the State Council of the Provisional Government of 1917, and later became the Leningrad Soviet

building under the communists, and today it houses the St. Petersburg legislative assembly.

Other historical buildings can be found around this wide square. On the corner of Voznesenky Avenue and Bol'shaya Street is the famous 5-star Hotel Astoria, which opened in 1912 to accommodate the guests who were visiting Russia to attend the 1913 Romanov tercentenary celebrations (marking the 300th year of Romanov rule). This is one swanky place. Across from it stands the former German Imperial Embassy, which was redesigned around the same time, and a unique standout in terms of the surrounding architecture. Created by famed German architect Peter Behrens, it is one of the earliest and most influential examples of a style known as 20th century Stripped Classicism, a traditional classical design stripped of all or most of its ornamentations. The building has been described as a 'monolithic red-granite block…a grandiose monument to a unified Germany'. When war broke out between Russia and Germany this building became a hated symbol in St. Petersburg and was attacked and vandalized repeatedly. But it survived *both* World Wars; its plain architectural design has come to influence the construction of government buildings everywhere. Today, it houses the Russian Ministry of Justice.

From St. Isaac's Square we headed several blocks west to have lunch at an elegant restaurant called *Graf-in*, located on Konnogvardeysky Boulevard. This trendy restaurant, which offers state-of-the-art hookahs, is adorned with decorative carafes that hang primarily from the ceiling around the beautiful bar area. The word *graf-in* actually means 'carafe'. It was a wonderful restaurant, although I felt a tad underdressed judging by the well-to-do locals already seated at the tables. This was an included lunch and I don't recall what we had, but it was all very tasty.

Following lunch we headed over to the nearby State Hermitage Museum. We would spend the rest of the afternoon touring this wonderful collection of artwork, one of the world's largest. There was a queue to get into the museum, but it was not that long. September is the tail end of the tourist season in St. Petersburg, just before the weather changes, ushering in the bitterly cold and snowy winter months. Ivan got us through the lines quickly. We gathered inside the lobby entrance of the Winter Palace momentarily while our guide organized the group and explained the layout of the museum. In order to hear Ivan against the background noise, we used Whisper earpiece listening devices that were handed out at the start of our

Russian tour. But you needed to stay within a close distance of the speaker or else the voice would trail off.

The guided tour was to last just over two hours, and then we were given some time on our own. It is impossible to see all of the exhibits in one visit. In fact, it would probably take several days just to get a 'good feel' of the place. The entire collection consists of over 3 million pieces, of which only a fraction is on display at any given time, not to mention the exhibition halls. The State Hermitage Museum is housed within five interconnected palaces stretching along the Neva River. The largest, the Winter Palace, was the tsar's primary residence while in St. Petersburg. Each of these structures can be considered architectural museums in their own right. So there is plenty to absorb as you wander from room to room and building to building.

Originally, I was not going to join the guided museum tour. These tours have a tendency to bog down as the speaker goes into so much detail about each exhibit that the overall viewing time is often cut short. And since we only had a few hours here I wanted to go off on my own. My *Lonely Planet* guidebook listed 11 rooms within the museum that were considered 'must views'. Ivan handed out maps of the place and once I was certain where my first stop was located – the Ancient Egypt exhibit in Room 100 on the first level of the Winter Palace – I set off in earnest. Little did I know that mastering the passageways here is also considered an art form…and by that I mean it takes a lot of skill and practice in order to know where the hell you're going. It took me nearly 10 minutes to find Room 100. After a fast viewing of the collection of Egyptian antiquities – and the limited section on Ancient Mesopotamia, including a number of Assyrian reliefs – I became disorientated rather quickly, something that readers of my past journals would understand. Despite being a mailman, I have a terrible sense of direction. But in my defense, the map layout was very confusing. Although the rooms are numbered, trying to ascertain the sequencing of those numbers (where one group ended and another began) was perplexing, to say the least. You would think Rooms 143-146 would be on the first floor not far from Room 100. But *noooooo*, those numbers are on the second floor. And by the way, the first floor is the ground floor, the second floor is actual the first floor, and the third floor is the second floor. In addition, some of the numbered interior passageways do not line up with the rooms adjacent to them. If you walk down palace interior 303, for example, you'll be surrounded by Rooms 157- 177, as well as rooms in the 300 number range.

Whoever designed the official State Hermitage Museum map must have been mainlining vodka.

Once I left Room 100, I climbed the Jordan Staircase to the second floor (um, I mean the *first* floor) and asked a museum employee working at an information kiosk where I might find the French painting exhibits from the 19th and 20th centuries. She didn't speak English but recognized the numbered rooms I had pointed to on my map. What I received was a set of Russian instructions that seemed more convoluted than a Dostoevsky novel. Knowing I would never find all these rooms without wasting copious amounts of precious viewing time I opted to swallow my pride and rejoin my group. I'm glad I did, too, because Ivan proved to be an excellent museum guide, both informative and entertaining.

It would be impossible for me to do justice to the State Hermitage Museum in these pages. There is so much to see here that trying to list what I saw during my short visit would require a much lengthier journal. And I wouldn't be able to remember all the artwork, anyway. We traversed the palace interiors, entering room after room, each separated by artwork from different historical periods. After a while I lost track of which palace we were in (they're connected by corridors). When I rejoined my group they were entering the tsar's throne room. We continued into the Pavilion Hall to see the famous Peacock Clock, created by British jeweler and entrepreneur James Cox during the late 1700s. The clock is a large golden automaton device featuring three life-sized mechanical birds – an owl, a peacock and a rooster – that spring into motion on the hour, setting off a chain of events that ends with the rooster crowing. This ingenious and highly entertaining contraption is billed as the only example of 18th century robotics to have survived unaltered to the present day.

Ivan took us through a portrait gallery dedicated to the Russian military heroes who defeated Napoleon during the War of 1812. We toured the Majolica Room, a collection of Italian treasures from the Renaissance Period, including two masterpieces from Raphael: *Conestabile Madonna* (1504) and *Holy Family* (1505-06). Later on we also wandered through the Leonardo da Vinci Room, which features two of the artist's paintings: *The Litta Madonna* (1490) and *The Benois Madonna* (1478). We crossed a vaulted corridor called the Raphael Loggias, commissioned by Catherine the Great in the late 1780s, which is an exact copy of the 16th century gallery at the papal palace known as the Vatican Loggia. The frescoes painted by

Raphael are considered among his best work. Russian artists were sent to the Vatican to make sketches of the original paintings, and the whole shebang was re-created here.

In the New Hermitage building we walked through a series of vaulted rooms with glass skylines designed to feature large-scale paintings. The biggest of these galleries is the Large Italian Skyline Hall, lined with works from famous Italian artists of the 17th and 18th centuries. A bit further we came upon the only work by Michelangelo in the entire State Hermitage Museum, an unfinished but still brilliantly detailed marble sculpture called *The Crouching Boy* (c.1530-34). In another very ornate corridor we saw one of my favorite sculptures, *The Three Graces*, a late work by Antonio Canova (1757 – 1822), a Neoclassical sculpture that depicts the mythological three charites (daughters of Zeus) who embody the virtues of youth and beauty. Why was it one of my favorite sculptures? Well, not to sound crass, but the statue is a detailed sculpture of three naked babes tenderly embracing one another…um, okay, maybe that *did* sound a little crass.

We entered the halls featuring paintings from Flanders (the northern Dutch-speaking region of Belgium) and the Dutch Netherlands, with many works by Rembrandt on display, including *Return of the Prodigal Son*, considered one of the best paintings of all time. There was a dramatic painting by Peter Paul Rubens, the Flemish artist, entitled *Roman Charity*, showing a frail bound prisoner being breast fed by his caring daughter. Also on display in this area was the Rembrandt painting entitled *Danae* that survived an acid attack by a crazed visitor 12 years ago. It has now been fully restored. Before we moved on from this section, Ivan showed us his favorite painting in the museum, a work by Dutch painter Paulus Potter called *Wolf-Hound (1650)*. Potter produced about 100 paintings before dying of tuberculosis at the age of 28, mostly of animals within landscapes. This particular painting is of a wolfhound, chained to a doghouse, sadly looking out over an open field. According to Ivan, the story behind this painting is that the wolfhound was once free to roam the fields, but now that his master has gotten married, he's been chained and confined to his doghouse because the new wife does not like the animal. The fact that Paulus Potter's name appears in large letters above the doghouse, according to Ivan, seems like a clear metaphor for how the artist viewed his own marriage.

We found ourselves at the main staircase of the Winter Palace, and took the wide steps between the dramatic gray columns down to the ground floor.

We walked through the Greek and Roman Antiquities section, stopping to see the oldest artifact in the museum, the glass-encased Regina Vasorum (a beautifully decorated Greek vase, circa 400 BC). We made our way through a corridor lined with Roman stele and miniature statues and entered the Ancient Egypt hall in Room 100. Our guided tour of the museum ended shortly thereafter. I have left out a ton of things that we saw simply because I cannot remember all of the exhibits, there were just too many. We were given roughly 45 minutes to either shop, grab a snack, rest or go back to see more of the exhibits. We left the State Hermitage Museum around 5:00pm, most of us tipping Ivan generously for a job well done. I don't recall the bus ride back to the boat because I napped the whole way.

Back on the *MS Mstislav Rostropovich*, I grabbed two cups of coffee at the coffee station on the third deck (and some cookies) and went to my room to relax. At 6:15pm the ship's crew conducted a safety drill. We were required to put our life vests on and wait for the crew's inspection in the hallway. I don't know who had previously used the life vest in my room, but they had strapped the darn thing so tightly I didn't know which end was which. The French couple across the hall had to assist me getting it on. Once the safety drill was completed, the boat was ready to launch. I went up to the sun deck to get my last look at St. Petersburg. I was really going to miss this place. This is one of those beautiful historic cities that harkens you to come back. My companions and I had crammed a lot of sightseeing into these past three days, but there was so much more to see and do here. Perhaps one day I will return. As we left the pier the loud speakers were blaring Russian sailing music. It was pretty exciting.

At 7:30pm everyone gathered in the conference room on the first deck for the formal Captain's cocktail reception. I think they handed out champagne for toasting. The captain stood in the front of the room, surrounded by crew members, chefs and tour guides. He introduced himself and his staff (the head chef got the biggest applause) and gave us a brief welcoming speech. Because there were three groups of foreign tourists, everything he said had to be broken into intervals of French, Spanish and English. Following the Captain's reception everyone moved to their respective dining rooms for dinner. The menu for me that night was salad, trout and ice cream. During dinner, Anne and Joyce mentioned they had tickets for the Bolshoi Ballet in Moscow – something I had wanted to purchase back in the states – and there was talk from some of the other tour members that Elena might be able to secure seats for anyone else who wanted to go. I immediately told our tour

director to count me in, regardless of the price. What better way to spend my last night in Russia than a performance at the legendary Bolshoi?

After dinner, our little group headed over to the Melody River Bar Lounge for a nightcap. This was the only place on board where I could get a WiFi connection, but the service was intermittent, at best. I tried to text some photos to family and friends back home with limited success. By 10:30pm I was in my room. I watched a little bit of the Toronto Film Festival coverage on the BBC channel before drifting off to sleep.

DAY SIX

I awoke at 6:00am. During the night we had traveled southeast down the Neva River before turning north to cross the southern tip of Lake Ladoga, the largest freshwater lake in Europe. I was excited to see the view, but when I looked out my windows all I witnessed was the eerily calm early morning waters of the Volga-Baltic Waterway covered in a light mist, beyond it nothing but dense forest. I wasn't sure if we had actually crossed the lake yet. The portion of Lake Ladoga we were traversing was nearly 150 kilometers long. Perhaps the forest I was seeing was an island? Well, *that* was about as curious as I get without my morning java juice. I headed up to the boat deck and made my usual two-cup withdrawal at the coffee station (plus four cookies). I returned to my cabin and over the next two hours I showered, shaved, dressed, watched the BBC international news and wrote in my journal. Shortly after 8:00am I joined Anke, Ron and Dani for breakfast.

At 9:30am our tour group gathered in the Melody River Bar Lounge for a quick briefing by Elena on the day's itinerary. Basically, we only had one stop, at a place called Mandrogi, a re-created traditional Russian settlement located on a semi-island along the Svir River. Our tour director handed out tourist maps of Mandrogi and told us the history of the place. It wasn't much. Mandrogi was once a mill town and fishing village populated by a regional ethnic group known as the *Vepsians* (a Karelian peoples descended from the Baltic Finns). After WWII the wooden town was pretty much burnt to the ground and abandoned. When the Soviet Union collapsed, a group of

entrepreneurs purchased the land and decided to re-create this Karelian village as a tourist stop along the Volga-Baltic Waterway. The region's best woodworkers were brought in to help restore what is called Upper Mandrogi to its original Karelian roots. The logs to build this village come from the nearby forests (which is pretty darn convenient since everything in these parts is surrounded by seemingly endless wilderness). Many of the quaint wooden structures have craft workshops where regional woodcarving, weaving, lacework, doll painting and pottery are demonstrated and sold. There are a few museums, including the very popular Museum of Russian Vodka, and a bakeshop/restaurant offering local goodies. For the children, a petting zoo and a quail farm. You can also ride a traditional horse and buggy along the cobbled-stone main street, driven by a humorless bearded guy dressed in a Russian peasant costume. The entire stop sounded like an amusing diversion – akin to a typical tourist trap – designed to kill some time (and extract some dollars) along a particular part of the waterway that otherwise had nothing more to offer than woodlands. We were scheduled to arrive in Mandrogi around noon.

At 10:00am I joined my companions in the conference room on the main deck for a very informative arts and craft presentation on traditional Russian miniature lacquer boxes. Our host was the gift shop saleswoman, Valeria, who explained the origins of the boxes and then showed us two brief videos on how they're made. Both papier-mâché and wood can be used for lacquer boxes. Linden wood is often used in these parts because it is lightweight but durable (or 'child-proof' as Valeria put it). The most important feature is the painted image on the top of the box. This artwork has its origins in the icon painters of Imperial Russia who were paid to create religious images on jewelry boxes and so forth. When the communists took over, the painted images reverted mostly to Russian fairy tale characters. The artwork on these miniature boxes is incredibly detailed. And there are four basic styles of Russian lacquer art, all use egg tempera as the basis for the painted image except the Fedoskino style, which uses oil paints, allowing for a more impressionistic interpretation when creating an image. Valeria showed us how to tell the difference between a real and fake lacquer box so we wouldn't get ripped off (basically, you run your finger over the lid, if it has a raised surface that means the painting is most likely a copied print that was added and lacquered over). Authentic Russian miniature lacquer boxes are among the country's coveted souvenirs, and they're not cheap, either. Some can set you back hundreds – even thousands – of dollars depending on the size and quality of the artwork.

I returned to my cabin after the art crafts presentation and wrote some more details into my journal. The scenery outside my window had not changed a lick. Nothing but forests. By the time we arrived in Moscow four days later I had seen enough trees to fell a lumberjack. From birch and alder to willow, pine and linden. Trees as far as the eye could see…and then *more* trees! Every now and then I'd spot a solitary *dacha*, possibly a hunting cabin, and the river end of a small village with a smattering of wooden homes, but that was it. Unless we were arriving in a port town, basically all we saw was wilderness from one end of the cruise to the other.

The purpose of the Volga-Baltic Waterway was to connect St. Petersburg to the rest of the interior. Peter the Great began its construction within years of founding his city. Over the centuries, a system of canals were dug (the major ones during the 1930s) that eventually connected the Volga River with the Baltic Sea along an 1,100 kilometer waterway, passing through a series of rivers, lakes, man-made channels and reservoirs in the process. Millions of tons of timber, metals, oil products, fertilizers, construction materials, etc, are transported along this route yearly. From time to time shipping tankers would pass us by on the larger sections of the river system. In the early morning hours they were often shrouded in fog and resembled gigantic ghost ships. Because the river cruise industry is a relatively new concept along the Volga-Baltic Waterway (it was always imagined as a shipping lane and not a route for tourists) there are currently few stops to break up the monotony of the journey. As more and more international visitors arrive in Russia, I'm sure more attempts will be made within these local riverfront communities to build attractions that will entice the riverboats to stop. But until then, you pretty much have to kick back and just watch the trees…(not that there's anything wrong with nature, mind you).

We disembarked in Mandrogi at 12:15pm along one of two quays designed for the riverboats. Directly in front of us was the River Station and just beyond that – on the main village road – a large covered picnic area where the boat's crew busied themselves setting up a nice barbecue lunch for us. Elena told us that lunch would be served at 1:45pm, so we had an hour and a half on our own to explore the village. Judging from the illustrated maps we were given, Mandrogi consisted of roughly 50 wooden structures (an assortment of living or guest houses, smith and craft shops, a windmill, inns, stables, saunas, museums, a restaurant and so forth) spread out over a tiny semi-island of pine trees. Along the main road were the larger

craft and souvenir shops, their wide and uniquely shaped roofs decorated with spires or bright colors and traditional carvings. On the back roads into the woods were the living houses, or guest homes, built in the same manner as a 17th or 18th century Russian countryside dwelling known as an *izba*. These were mostly log cabins with a yard, enclosed by a simple woven stick fence. A few of the unoccupied ones were open to the public and you could walk the porch or look inside. Everything was made of wood. Apparently, this is not just a 'working village'. According to the back of my map brochure there are locals who actually live here year-round and administer the place like a collective.

My companions and I walked the main street and entered a fairly large craft shop where several local women were painting *Matryoshka* dolls. This is another must-have Russian souvenir. Known also as nesting or stacking dolls, the *Matryoshka* dolls are made of a lightweight wood like lime, birch or balsa and are created in sets that fit inside one another in diminishing sizes. The name *Matryoshka* means 'little matron'. The first set of these Russian dolls is believed to have been made in 1890 in a small town not far from Moscow. Traditionally, the outer (and largest doll) is that of a woman wearing a long peasant jumper dress called a *sarafan*. The various dolls inside can be of either gender and the last is usually a baby made out of a single piece of wood. The artwork is in the fine, detailed painting of each doll, which keeps getting smaller and smaller within the set. It is a clever thing, indeed. Some *Matryoshka* dolls have over a dozen smaller dolls stacked inside (the world record is more than 50). People can have images of their entire family painted on these dolls, like a family heirloom; others might contain political leaders. We saw *Matryoshka* dolls of Putin, and inside were miniatures of Yeltsin, Gorbachev and so forth all the way down to a teeny tiny Lenin. The cost of a set depends on the craftsmanship and artwork.

From here, we walked next door to a bakery/restaurant called the Gostiny Dvor and sampled – on Elena's earlier suggestion – the delicious blueberry-filled hand pies (*piroshki*). The berries were in season and the pies (they had different fillings) were out of this world! At this point, our little group split up. Ron and I walked further up the main road while Anke and Dani continued shopping for souvenirs. At the next craft shop, though, I lost Ron. He'd spotted some souvenir espresso cups that Anke likes to collect and headed back to find his wife to let her know. I decided to take a solo hike around the island, photographing the structures I came across in the woods.

At one isolated log house I walked through the stick fence and right up to the porch area. “Hello?” I called out, and when no one answered I tried the door and found myself in the kitchen. I think visitors are allowed to rent these log cabins. It was all finely crafted wood, from the floors to the cupboards. I continued following the wooded trails towards the other side of the village, passing two uniquely shaped inns, eventually finding my way back to the picnic area in time for lunch. The ship’s guides were dressed in traditional peasant costumes and singing folk sings as we filed in. The meal was great: barbecue pork with potatoes and onions, meat *piroshkis,* cabbage salad with tomatoes, pickles and squash, and raspberry pastry rolls for dessert.

After lunch we still had another hour and a half to explore Mandrogi. We headed over to the Russian Vodka Museum near the river. Visitors are greeted by a tall, stuffed bear holding a tray with a vodka bottle on it and a couple of shot glasses. Inside, you can learn about the process of vodka making and the cultural role that this drink plays in Russian society. There are more than 2,500 different labels of vodka on display. The price of admission allows you to sample 3 or 4 different types of vodka. Ron and I passed on the museum and proceeded to explore the craft shops located near the southern tip of the island, leaving the ladies to ‘drink away’. On our walk we came across a blacksmith and a 17th century designed windmill in this part of the village, and we saw construction workers building yet another log structure. Apparently, Mandrogi was thriving. We decided to check out a two-story planked cabin along the side of the road and were pleasantly surprised to find a birch wood carving shop inside. Ron and I each purchased decorative miniature birch wood boxes carved with intricate forest scenery. Mine now sits atop my souvenir shelf. By 3:30pm I had to leave Ron and return to the boat to meet Elena inside the Melody River Bar Lounge. She had requested that all those interested in purchasing tickets to the Bolshoi Ballet come to the lounge area at that time so that she could use our credit card information to buy the tickets online. The WiFi reception tended to be better when the boat was docked.

I was back in my cabin before 4:00pm. Perhaps it was the continuing jet lag (combined with the pace of the tour thus far) but I was exhausted and laid down to take what I thought was a brief 30-minute nap. I had promised Ron I’d join him for the Russian History lecture in the Symphony Bar area offered by Vladimir Kalmykov, a college professor at the Dobroliubov State Linguistic University in Novgorod. I forgot to set my cell phone alarm and didn’t wake until 7:00pm when the ship’s radio crackled to life and an

announcement was made in both English, French and Spanish that the captain was having an emergency meeting in the conference room to discuss changes in the following day's itinerary. *Hmmmm*, I thought, *that's interesting*. And then I rolled over and promptly fell asleep again. Somehow I managed to wake just in time for dinner (my fat cells must have their own internal clock).

Dani, Joyce and Anne were the only ones from our table who actually attended the captain's meeting. The captain informed the passengers that due to inclement weather and particularly rough waters in Lake Onega, he had decided to cancel the scheduled visit to Kizhi for the following day. The passengers, according to Joyce, were a little upset since Kizhi was one of the highlights of the river cruise. Kizhi is a small island in the middle of Lake Onega that contains a complex of 89 wooden Orthodox Churches and other structures built between the 15th and 20th centuries, including the famous World Heritage site known as the *Kizhi Pogost*, a fenced-in area consisting of two large wooden churches and a wooden bell tower built in the 17th century. The *Kizhi Pogost* was erected from thousands of logs shipped in from the mainland (a logistical nightmare at the time) and constructed without using a single nail. The fact this beautiful wooden complex has survived this long is one of its marvels. The main structure, the Church of the Transfiguration, has 22 intricately carved domes, and at 37 meters high it is one of the largest wooden structures in Northern Europe. Damn, not being able to see this historical site was a real disappointment. To make matters worse, every time I glanced down at my Lonely Planet guidebook the picture on the front cover was that of the Church of the Transfiguration. *Double damn*!

But I guess it's better to be safe than sorry. In July of 2011, an over-crowded Russian riverboat called the Bulgaria sank in a section of the Volga River, drowning more than 120 passengers. Russia's internal transport system has been routinely plagued with accidents due, according to their own government, by a lack of funding in safety and maintenance. Smaller companies, in order to turn a profit, often overlook the kind of rigid inspections and routine safety checks that are required in their industries. At times, issues concerning corruption and turning a blind eye have been at the center of these unfortunate accidents. So, as disappointed as I was in not seeing Kizhi, I felt re-assured by the captain's decision that our safety was paramount. A woman I met on a tour of Morocco named Debbie Benson, who will be taking a trip with me later this year to Southeast Asia, did a

similar Russian river cruise in 2016 and told me that crossing Lake Onega to visit Kizhi was one unsettling experience; the crossing occurred at night and the boat was rolling violently back and forth from the waves. The captain intended to take a course along the southern tip of the lake as we continued along the Volga-Baltic Waterway, hoping to avoid the rougher waters. In lieu of our visit to Kizhi the following day, it was announced we would instead dock in the town of Vytegra for a tour of a local museum and a vintage Soviet submarine. My disappointment at not being able to see Kizhi dissipated quickly; the idea of touring a Cold War-era submarine seemed like a cool trade-off.

For dinner I had a garden salad with *gulyash* soup (made from potatoes, sweet pepper, tomatoes and beef). The main course was duck breast with cranberry sauce, rice and celery croquettes, and pickled pear and prunes. Dessert was a chocolate panna cota with cherry topping. After dinner, I joined my companions in the Melody River Bar Lounge where we chatted away until 11:00pm. Back in my cabin I felt a sore throat coming on and gargled with hot water from the coffee station. I watched a portion of the BBC international news and learned that Hurricane Maria was bearing down on the Caribbean. I said a prayer for the poor folks of Puerto Rico who were in the direct path of the storm. By midnight I was out like a light.

DAY SEVEN

By the time I awoke at 6:00am we were already docked in the town of Vytegra. Everyone from my table group was present at breakfast, and all of them were complaining about how rocky the boat had been during the night. I tend to be a heavy sleeper and didn't feel a thing. Afterwards, my companions and I moseyed over to the Melody Bar Lounge to check our emails and make idle chatter, but the room was packed with members of the other two tour groups. Noisy and with no place to sit, we abandoned the bar lounge and headed upstairs to Dani's room. Directly in front of her cabin was a small glass-enclosed game room with several tables, chairs and an assortment of puzzles and board games to keep one busy. The ladies went elsewhere, but Ron and I stayed put. Ron wanted to show me how to play chess using his electronic tablet. He opened an app and began to play against

the tablet's computer, explaining to me the moves he was making. Um, he lost two games in rapid succession. At this time, Bill – another member of our tour group – joined us. The three of us shared stories about ourselves, talking up the economy, politics, and the real estate markets in our perspective towns. By 11:10am we were actually booted out of the game room by the French guide who was having a scheduled meeting there with members from her own group.

At 11:30am I joined Elena and a few others for a visit to the Captain's bridge. The captain himself was not present, but the chief officer (first mate) gave us a briefing and showed us around the control room, explaining the navigational equipment and the engine components (3 diesel engines with a combined maximum thrust of 3000 hp). We learned some basic statistics about the *MS Mstislav Rostropovich:* the boat was 135 meters long, 16 meters tall, 13 meters wide and had a storage area and bunkers for the crew at the bow of the ship. It took 40 crewmembers to run the boat, 40 restaurant and maintenance personnel to service the guests and a team of 25 'animation' staff who acted as tour guides and entertainment organizers. The maximum passenger capacity was 223, and we were pretty close to that number. From the helm the captain can control two thrusters (fore and aft), and on either side were two auxiliary helms used for docking. Someone is always at the helm since the only time the ship's autopilot is engaged is during big lake crossings.

One of the crewmembers was always taking photographs of the passengers. As we toured the bridge he kept snapping away, and the running joke on the boat was that he was the local KGB guy. I actually took a picture of the man as he was taking *my* picture. Tit for tat, I say. Actually, the photos he took were posted along the corridors daily and guests had the option of purchasing them at the end of the cruise. But somehow, in the back of my paranoid mind, I couldn't shake this nagging suspicion that when the tour was over, a Russian agent – tucked away in the bowels of some intelligence building in Moscow– was assigned to scour over the images of the passengers. I'm almost certain I know what his report on me would conclude: *For a guy who walks all day, this is the fattest mailman I've ever seen*!

When the tour of the bridge concluded, Ron and I headed down to the conference room for the second part of the Russian History lecture by Professor Vladimir Kalmykov. His sessions were quite popular and he

extended his lecture series throughout the cruise. I was sorry I missed the first one in which he spoke about the historical events that led to the formation of the country. The ancestors of modern Russians are the Slavic tribes who migrated to western Russia – most scholars believe – from the wetlands of the Pinsk Marshes that constitutes the southern part of Belarus and the northwestern areas of the Ukraine. From the 7th century onward, these Eastern Slavs came to dominate western and central Russia, assimilating other native ethnic groups into their own culture. In this particular lecture, Professor Vladimir (as he was affectionately referred to) explained the events that led to the creation of the modern Russian state.

Here's the nutshell:

By the 9th century, several East Slavic states had emerged to form a loose federation known as the Kievan Rus'. In 862, a Varangian chieftan named Rurik became ruler of Ladoga and built a settlement at Novgorod, establishing the Rurik dynasty that would control the Kievan Rus' federation, its capital in Kiev, until the 13th century when the Mongols invaded. Following the disintegration of the Kievan Rus' state, feuding between the surviving Rurik princedoms and the absorption of western Russia by foreign invaders like the Mongol hordes had conspired to keep the area in disunity until a powerful clan from Moscow rose to eventually unite all of Russia. For all intents and purposes, according to the professor, the start of the Rurik dynasty during the end of the 9th century is seen as the beginning of the process that led to modern day Russia because this dynasty, and the succeeding princedoms that emerged from it, gave rise among the Kievan Rus' the sense of a cultural identity, which is the first necessary step in creating *a national* identity.

Following the fall of the Kievan Rus' state to the Mongols, there was fierce competition and feuding between the Rurik royal clans. The most powerful state to arise from the ashes of the Kievan Rus' federation was the one in Moscow, known as the Grand Duchy of Muscovy. Initially, the Rurik princes of Moscow connived with the Mongol-Tartars (who held sway over Russia) to garner favor and territory, collecting the taxes for their overlords. Eventually, though, these Moscow princes became more powerful and began uniting other Rus' states, building better armies and challenging the Mongol-Tartars outright. During the reign of Ivan III, the Grand Prince of Moscow (1440 – 1505), the Mongol-Tartars domination in Russia ended. Ivan III, one of the longest-reigning rulers in Russia, tripled the land size of his territory,

laying the foundation for what would become the modern Russian state. After the fall of Constantinople in 1453, Ivan III married the niece of the last Byzantine emperor and claimed for Moscow the succession not only of the Eastern Roman Empire but the head of the Eastern Orthodox religion.

In 1547, Ivan IV (also known as Ivan the Terrible) became the first crowned *tsar* of Russia. The argument for this new title was that his grandfather, Ivan III, had inherited the Eastern Roman Empire after the fall of Constantinople, and the Roman Empire had been ruled by a *Caesar*, which is the literal translation for 'tsar'. Ivan the Terrible continued Russia's expansion, conquering new lands and doubling the nation's territory, making it a truly transcontinental state with multiethnic and multidenominational peoples. His son, Fedor I, was a weak ruler who suffered from 'mental issues'. He died in 1598 without an heir, effectively ending the Rurik dynastic line. What ensued was a fifteen-year period known as the Time of Troubles. A bunch of wannabe tsars (usurpers and imposters alike) stepped forward claiming the throne causing civil unrest throughout the land, this was coupled by a devastating famine that killed nearly one-third of Russia's population. To make matters worse, the kingdom was temporarily occupied by the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which took advantage of the chaos besetting Russia.

In 1613, the *Zemsky Sobor*, the Russian parliament of the feudal estate, convened what must have been a very desperate meeting indeed and elected Mikhail Romanov, a nephew of Fedor I and a member of a prominent high-ranking aristocratic family in Moscow, to become the new tsar. Mikhail's ascension to the throne marked the end of the Times of Troubles in Russia and the start of the Romanov Dynasty that would rule the country for the next three hundred years. His grandson, Peter the Great, was responsible for establishing the Russian Empire.

Professor Vladimir also talked about the role of religion in Russia. Prior to the Rurik Dynasty, most Russians were pagans. Around the end of the 10th century, according to the professor, a Rurik ambassador returning from a trip to the Byzantine Empire informed his prince of the dominating role the Christian faith had throughout the Byzantine Empire and how it seemed to unite the people (in fact, the Latin word for religion, *religio*, actually means 'to bind' or 'unite'). In 988, the Rurik prince who would become known as Vladimir the Great decided to adopt the Christian Orthodox faith. The Russian population took to the religion very quickly. Currently, 70% of

Russia is Orthodox Christian, 20% is Muslim and 10% is a smattering of other religions like Buddhism, Hinduism and Judaism.

Another thing the professor touched upon was the advent of written laws under Prince Yaroslav the Wise (who succeeded Vladimir the Great). Prior to written codes and laws, Russian societies were governed by tradition handed down verbally over generations. But now these traditions or laws were put down on paper, allowing for a legal system under which the people knew what was expected of them and what they could expect in return. Professor Vladimir concluded his history lesson by stating that these three events – the establishment of a national identity under the Rurik Dynasty, the adoption of Christianity, and the introduction of written laws – were the three most important historical factors that helped paved the way for the modern Russian state.

He ended his lecture by discussing the pivotal role of strong leaders in Russian history, explaining Putin's popularity in these terms. Historically, the leaders who have gotten things done in Russia, who have advanced the society, have been autocratic types who governed with a firm grip. Putin's successes can be measured by his control of a strong central government, something that almost all Russians can relate to. The professor was obviously a Putin supporter, and admitted as such. He told us how he, and many in his profession, suffered economically after the fall of communism, when the social safety nets everyone depended on suddenly vanished. But he also argued that Putin might not be popular among the younger generation – who did not grow up under communism and are accustomed to the continuous barrage of free information the Internet provides. To them, Putin's strong rule is seen as something that undermines true democracy. The question the professor seemed to be hinting at was whether or not Russians were really ready for a *truly* democratic society. Perhaps, like so many other things in life, one must take baby steps before one can take strides. I guess the lessons of the disastrous Yeltsin years are still fresh in everyone's mind… and nobody wants to return to that (*blanking*) mess.

From the conference room we headed up to the Opera Restaurant for a quick lunch. By 2:30pm our group disembarked for the tour of Vytegra. A local Vytegra guide named Ludmina, who didn't speak English, was waiting for us at the pier. Andrew, one of the boat guides (a personable young man with the Asian features of someone from Tartar descent) was assigned to serve as our interpreter throughout the walking tour of the town's museum

and submarine. Ludmina looked to me like the stereotypical matron one sees in all the Soviet movies about the Cold War. She was short and slightly stout with a very pale complexion and dark reddish hair (possibly dyed). I guessed her age to be around sixty, but Ludmina still had a ruggedness about her that suggested she would have made an awesome resistance fighter during WWII. She barely cracked a smile, and spoke in the same matter-of-fact tone whether she was discussing the town's shipbuilding past or the horrors of the Great Patriotic War. *I loved her*. She was quite a character.

Vytegra seemed deserted, our riverboat was the only ship berthed at the quay. We followed Ludmina on a ten-minute walk beyond the pier and then down a tree-lined residential street called Victory Lane. In the center of this street was a pedestrian walkway that ended in front of a large WWII monument called Victory Square. On either side of this quiet lane were several homes and a series of drab five-story housing projects that were probably built during the time of the Soviets. The sky was overcast and gray, which seemed to suit this town well. The grass was overgrown along the walkway, and the asphalt roads needed repairing. There weren't many cars on the street, and I wondered if the entire neighborhood was at work. Except for a few children and a couple of elderly people, we didn't see anyone else. Granted, this probably wasn't the center of town, but it did have a very authentic feel to it, as if this was the *real* Russia we were finally witnessing. Actually, it felt like visiting a small town in America's rural south. You couldn't get any more *homespun* than this.

Ludmina led us to what I thought was the entrance of one of the housing projects, and I was excited by the prospect of possibly getting a glimpse inside a Russian apartment. Instead, it was the entrance into a small museum that took up several rooms on the first floor of this particular housing unit. The Russian sign above the door translated into: *Museum of Local Lore*. I'm not sure who put this exhibit together, it had the feel of a community volunteer project, but as we wandered through the rooms it became clear to me that the folks who in live in the Vytegra district were very proud of their origins. Ludmina gave us a brief history of the town; the exhibits provided glimpses into how the area was settled, its natural resources and how the people live their lives here (since its founding in the late 1700s). I am a huge museum fan, and while this relatively tiny exhibit paled in comparison with most of the places I've visited, I admired the townsfolk's pride and effort at preserving their culture and history. By the time we finished walking

through the museum, I had a fairly good idea about Vytegra. And the region, in general.

Vytegra is a small town along the shores of the Vytegra River that lies within the federal district known as the Vologda Oblast. The original inhabitants of this region were the Finno-Ugric peoples whose descendents, the Vepsians, still live in the area today. This region is known for its large reserves of forest timber, fresh water and limestone mining. According to Ludmina, Vytegra has a population around 10,000. When the Mariinsky System (the precursor of the Volga-Baltic Waterway) was built in the early 1800s, Vytegra became a major transit port for ships plying the waterway; it was, at one point, the largest dock area after Lake Ladoga. The town became famous for its ship-building around that time. Today, approximately 50% of the local workers are employed at the dam locks along the nearby Volga-Baltic canal system. The rest, I'm assuming, work in timber or mining.

Upon entering the Museum of Local Lore, visitors are confronted with a section outlining the local wildlife, including several stuffed bears (and I'm not talking about the cuddly ones you win at the carnival, either). The taxidermists in this town must have been working overtime. Every conceivable mammal that roams these parts was on display – bears, wolves, foxes, minks, wild boars, etc – in dioramas that showed them in their natural setting. The next exhibit described the geological make-up of the region, the various minerals and metals that are mined here, and a listing of the species of indigenous trees and flora that fill the region's forests. A pre-historic diorama showed how the first Finno-Ugric settlers lived along the river, this included clothing, skeletal remains, jewelry, tools and other artifacts from these earlier peoples. The rest of the museum showcased the development of the town since its inception: exhibits detailing Vytegra's shipbuilding past, or icons attesting to their deep Orthodox religious roots, or glimpses into how the people lived through dated clothing, furniture and relic-looking home appliances. And there was a very interesting section on life during the Soviet times and various displays dedicated to the town's role in helping fight the Nazis during WWII, this included black-and-white photos of local resistance fighters and the firearms used in their battles. Everything you needed to know about this district could be learned here in under an hour.

After exiting the museum, Ludmina led us down the street to the Victory Square memorial. A statue of a Russian soldier stood atop a red granite wall decorated with plaques of what I believe contained the names of the locals

who died during WWII. The memorial is set along one side of an open square paved with red stone, on either side of the square are two small fields with trees and within these spaces are additional smaller memorials dedicated to specific groups – women, factory workers, etc – who either fought and/or perished during the war. The saddest memorial was the one dedicated to the children who were killed. (Note: Russians refer to World War II as the *Great Patriotic War* and are seldom interested in the roles that other nations played in defeating the Third Reich, just their own version; this might stem from the fact that their country was the main target of the German's eastern front assault, leading to the deaths of more than 20 million Soviet citizens and military personnel. With their backs against the proverbial wall, the Soviet Army regrouped and fought back from what seemed like impending defeat).

We were given some time here to wander and take pictures. I walked over to a nearby corner and took photos of the apartment buildings. I wondered how these people lived, what they did for recreation? The town, at least judging from this section, didn't seem prosperous, but neither did it look downtrodden. It was clean and quiet. I would love to have done a meet-and-greet with the locals and ask them about their daily lives. But, again, we saw almost no one on the streets.

At this point the members of our group had a decision to make. We were heading over to the Russian submarine next, but not everyone felt comfortable being in such a confined space so there was the option of visiting a local store, instead. I believe Dani and Anke joined that group; Ron and I went on the submarine tour. I have to admit, I'm claustrophobic, and the idea of being in a crowded submarine made me nervous. To avoid a full-blown panic attack I stayed always in the rear of the group and gave myself some distance. As long as I didn't feel 'hemmed in' I would be okay. To reach the submarine, Ludmina led us down another tree-lined path back to a separate section of the dock area where the vessel was moored permanently as a museum exhibit. Along this pathway were signs with photographs featuring prominent submarine naval commanders, including one officer who hailed from Vytegra and was responsible for designing Russian submarines from that era. He is considered a local hero. I would tell you his name but it was in Russian, so I have no clue.

The submarine we were touring was part of what NATO called the Foxtrot class of Soviet vessels built between 1958 and 1983. The Russians

referred to them as Project 641, they were designed to replace the earlier Zulu class of submarines in the Soviet fleet. A total of 58 of these diesel-electric patrol submarines were made at a shipyard in St. Petersburg. In terms of armaments and performance, the Foxtrot class was comparable to other submarines of its size and specifications, but its three screws (or propellers) made it much nosier and easier to pinpoint. Another drawback was the size of its batteries, which required two of the submarine's three decks to house, making what was a fairly large vessel actually very cramped for the crewmembers, who numbered around 120. The batteries allowed it to be submerged for up to ten days at a time, but the weight of the batteries slowed the vessel down to an average 2 knots at its maximum submerged time capability, making it very slow and somewhat impractical. By the time the last Foxtrot class submarine was built in the early 1980s, the series was obsolete. In 2000, the entire class had been replaced, and the models scrapped or used (as this one was) for museum purposes. An interesting nod to my Cuban-American roots is that the Foxtrot class submarine was used during the Cuban Missile Crisis to patrol the waters off the island. U.S. Navy destroyers used depth charges to force them to the surface and identify themselves.

It took us about 30-40 minutes to make our way from one end of the submarine to the other. I am not familiar with ships or submarines, so I will describe what I saw in strictly layman's terms. The first compartment had six torpedo launchers. The vessel held 22 torpedoes stored on either end of the submarine (in one section they were secured next to the crewmembers' bunks… *Yikes*). We made our way through a hatchway and down a narrow corridor that contained the officers' cabins. None looked spacious by any means. We saw tiny rooms with electronic transmitting and surveillance equipment, and one section lined with dozens of red and blue valves of differing sizes that I'm assuming controlled the depths or buoyancy of the submarine. We came across the vessel's *two* toilets (mind you, the crew numbered around 120). We took turns looking through the periscope, and beyond that toured the diesel engine room. Ludmina told us it was so hot in the engine room the crewmen usually stripped down to their underwear. She showed us one of the submarine's most important apparatus, the ventilator machine. If that went on the fritz, she said, the crew would suffocate. Crewmembers were issued red side bags containing facemasks in case of emergencies. At the end of the submarine tour was a display case with what looked like a hazmet-type suit. I'm guessing it was used only in the event of

a real *serious* emergency. Although, judging from its appearance, if this thing ever had to be deployed, you might want to reach for a bible, too.

We finished our tour of the submarine by 4:45pm. I enjoyed my visit to Vytegra. I'm not sure if our original stop at Kizhi would have been this informative. It was rainy and getting colder when we returned to the riverboat. My throat was still aching, a sure sign I was coming down with something. I went to the coffee station and picked up some brew and a separate cup of hot water for gargling, plus a few of whatever cookies or pastries they had on the tray. Back in my cabin I turned on the TV and was able to see President Trump's 45-minute address to the United Nations Assembly. Suddenly, I felt even colder.

It was Pirate Night on the boat, and the guides and staff were dressed in pirate costumes. A treasure hunt was held in the Melody River Bar Lounge. At dinner, the tables and napkins were red in keeping with the pirate theme. A group of fellow tour members at the adjacent table gave us a free bottle of champagne (since I don't imbibe I never really found out why they gave us the bottle, but I know that Anke and Dani thanked them for us). Dinner was delicious, it started with a Mediterranean salad followed by a tomato cream soup with corn. For the main course I had opted for the potato gnocchi with pumpkin, served with a porcini mushroom sauce, and the dessert was meringue with chocolate ice cream. As was our customary thing now after dinner, my companions and I headed up to the Melody River Bar Lounge and chatted away (while they sipped martinis) until nearly 11:00pm. I returned to my cabin and quickly went to sleep. During the middle of the night I woke to use the bathroom and found the boat rocking. It was too dark outside to see where we were.

I went back to bed and had a nightmare that I was being forced to walk the gangplank by Captain Blackbeard. *So much for Pirate Night*…

DAY EIGHT

I was up at 6:30am. The early morning sky outside my window was overcast, and not even the rising sun could shake the depressing grayness that enveloped the area. Fog obscured whatever landmass we were passing at the moment. During the night we had traveled more than 80 kilometers in a southeasterly direction down the Volga-Baltic Waterway and were now crossing Lake Beloye en route to our next stop to visit the historic Kirillo-Belozersky Monastery near the small town of Goritsy. I went through my usual routine that morning: coffee, journal-writing, watched the BBC international news channel, shaved and showered. I also began editing (or rather, deleting) photos from my camera. Each trip I vow to keep my overall picture count to fewer than 800 photographs, but I had already exceeded that number and there were still four more days to go on this tour. I went to breakfast at 8:00am. Although it was midweek, they were serving brunch all the way through to lunchtime. Dani was the only one at the table. She had stopped by the Wilckens' cabin but they had a Do Not Disturb sign on the door. Hmmmmm? You know what they say: *If the boat's a rockin', don't bother knockin'*…

At 9:00am, Dani and I went up to the Melody River Bar Lounge to attend a lecture on Russian fairy tales conducted by Valeria, the gift shop saleswoman (who apparently wore many hats on this boat). She began the lecture by describing some of the more popular characters and the roles they play in Russian fairy tales. Basically, these characters live in a magical kingdom and are always engaged in some kind of trial or tribulation – saving a damsel in distress, defending their land from evil beasts, or simply doing the king's bidding on some adventuresome errand. Like all fairy tales, these stories were meant not just to entertain but also to convey a moral lesson. No matter how daunting the main character's dilemma was, it was always resolved by combining such attributes as heroics, duty, sense of honor, trustworthiness, cleverness and sometimes the coming together of a community or group. In other words, all of the things good citizens should embody. These fairy tales, many passed down through the centuries, were often acted out in villages throughout the country.

The first character Valeria mentioned was *Ivan the Fool*. Ivan is usually portrayed as the youngest son of a peasant family who abhors hard labor and usually screws up most tasks assigned to him. But he is essentially good-natured and always ends up saving the day. His use in fairy tales provided amusement (in his bungling of things) and taught the moral that no matter how dull-witted a person can be, *everyone* can make a positive contribution

to society. *Elena or Maria* is the character of the good and innocent noble woman who always needs help or rescuing. *Koschei the Evil King* is the antagonist in many fairy tales, usually portrayed as a scrawny old man or a king on horseback, who was once a good warrior but now turned evil after something bad happened to him. His role in fairy tales is usually to imprison the beautifully betrothed woman of the hero who comes to save her. *Baba Yaga* is another character often found in Russian fairy tales, and she can be used in two different ways. The first is as the guardian of the forest, who lives in a wooden hut on chicken legs and tests the protagonist's courage before allowing him safe passage. The other version is not so nice. This Baba Yaga is the evil witch kind who enjoys eating children. When she is in the fairy tale the protagonist must use his wits to defeat her. There are numerous other characters that are prevalent throughout these stories, some take on animal or beast form, like the *Frog Princess*, or *Schuka*, the pike fish, or the fearsome *Gorynych the Dragon*. There are evil spirits that inhabit the sea, or marshes, or woods. Surprisingly, the character of the *Tsar* – while playing an all-powerful role within the subplot of these fairy tales – seems rather helpless and is always in need of someone to solve a perplexing problem for him or to acquire something of value. He usually dispatches his son, the prince, or one of his knights, or at times even a wandering traveler, to perform these tasks.

Valeria asked for volunteers from the room to perform a popular fairy tale called *The Gigantic Turnip*. The story centers on a grandfather who is trying to pull a stubborn turnip out of the ground but cannot, so he calls his wife over for help. They still can't dislodge the turnip, so the grand daughter is called over to assist them. Still the turnip doesn't budge. Eventually the family dog, cat and even a field mouse are utilized, each one pulling on the last character in a comical line leading up to grandpa who has a tight grip on the turnip. Eventually, the turnip is released once the mouse is added to the line. The moral of this story is that by working together, even the smallest member of the group can make a difference. I played the role of the grandfather in this 'theatrical revue'.

Valeria then asked for volunteers to perform another popular fairy tale called *The White Horse*, which had a more detailed storyline. But before we donned our hats and costumes, the ship's PA system crackled to life and it was announced that we were passing the flooded church of Krokhino on our port side. We stopped for a moment to go and see it. And what an unusual sight! Sticking out of the Sheksna River was the crumbling remains of the

18th century Church of the Nativity of Krokhino, a small village that was eventually inundated when the Volga-Baltic Waterway was deepened near Lake Beloye to allow larger ships to pass. All that is left of this former 600-year-old town is the top portion of the church rising up from the river. Over the years, the local government has been trying to keep this famous church from sinking completely under the water.

We returned to the Melody River Bar Lounge and continued with our second act, *The White Horse*. I played the horse. Everything mentioned in the fairy tale – from the sun, trees, and flowers to the actual characters – was performed by someone in the group. The storyline centers on an evil robber (or road bandit) who kidnaps the daughter of the tsar. Around this time a prince on a white horse shows up (somewhat fortuitously, if you ask me) and the distressed tsar asks him to rescue his daughter, which he does. The fairy tale contains some adventure (the knight duals with the robber) and has several funny moments, as well. Especially at the end when the rescued princess is returned to her grateful father and all the characters commence to kissing one another in celebration, including the horse. By now, members of the other tour groups had converged on the lounge and took interest in our little production. We received rousing applause when it was over. Perhaps I've found a new calling…*as a thespian in fairy tale productions.*

After the second 'performance', Valeria continued with her lecture on Russian fairy tales. On a table she displayed three beautifully carved and painted figurines (which could be purchased at the gift shop) of the most popular folklore characters in the country. The first one she spoke about was *Morozko* (Jack Frost) the spirit of winter who in pagan times was a cruel god of frost and ice. When the Orthodox faith was introduced in Russia, the image of Morozko softened, and he became a wise and impartial old man (with a long white beard) who gave people 'second chances' before freezing them. Another figurine was that of *Ded Moroz* (Father Frost) who is often dressed in red robes and has taken on a role similar to that of Santa Claus. The third figurine was the *Spirit of the Forest* (in my research I found several, and they seem to appear as either elves or mushroom-like creatures), these spirits would guide you safely through the woods if you were a good and noble person, but if you were not they would lead you astray until you simply vanished in the forest. All three of these characters are popular souvenir items in Russia. They're usually carved out of wood with incredible detail and beautifully painted. The price depends on the quality of the work. Some can cost hundreds of dollars.

At 10:00am the Russian fairy tale lecture concluded, and our tour group convened in the lounge for another briefing by Elena. She went over the next three days' itinerary with us, telling us what to expect later that afternoon at Goritsy and the following day at Uglich. She also discussed the optional excursions in Moscow. One of the excursions was offered by the ship, a late night driving tour of the city entitled Moscow by Night. The other excursion was offered by Gate 1 Travel, and included a stop at the famous Novodevichy Convent and a tour of the Moscow subway system. My companions and I were booked for both. She also informed us that if we were interested in buying a lacquer miniature box to do so in the ancient city of Uglich (our last stop on the cruise before reaching Moscow), which is famous for this particular artwork. In fact, she told us that most souvenirs would be cheaper in Uglich than elsewhere. Elena also went over the boat's billing and tipping procedures, and advised us to take care of our accounts prior to disembarking in Moscow to avoid delays at the reception desk. Following the briefing, we went down to the Opera Restaurant for a quick lunch.

By 12:15pm we were disembarking at the Goritsy Village pier. Local vendors had set up a lane of souvenir stalls and shops that we had to traverse in order to reach our buses. We boarded the coach marked for our specific tour group and proceeded to drive for about 10-15 minutes (approximately seven kilometers) through sections of the rural villages of Goritsy and Kirillov until we reached the famous 14th century Kirillo-Belozersky Monastery. Our local guide for this excursion was André, a very informative and entertaining fellow. Some of the homes in this backwoods area reminded me of the wooden *izba* dwellings I had seen in Mandrogi. We arrived at the monastery complex shortly after 12:30pm and spent almost two hours touring the museum and grounds.

Over the centuries, the remote natural setting of this region attracted monks who built various monasteries in the area, creating a spiritual retreat for those of the Orthodox faith. The first monastery built here was this one, the Kirillo-Belozersky Monastery, constructed in 1397 by a monk named Reverend Kirill (who later was canonized as St. Cyril of Beloezero). The reverend left his privileged life behind in Moscow to find an isolated place where he could get closer to God. His monastery, more popularly referred to as the Monastery of St. Cyril of the White Lake, is today one of the largest and best preserved medieval abbeys in Russia. And while the site might have

been founded as a religious retreat, the rulers back in Moscow considered its location as both a strategic point for Northern trade and as a base for their struggles against the powerful state in Novgorod. During the late Middle Ages the monastery prospered (as a fishing enterprise) and the villages nearby continued to grow. It became a refuge for noblemen fleeing the Times of Troubles (the short turbulent period that proceeded the end of the Rurik dynasty). A fortress was built around the monastery to fend off the Polish and Lithuanian armies that invaded during that time. When the Bolsheviks took over the country, the monks were rounded up and shot, but the monastery-fortress itself was one of the few not used as a concentration camp by the communists. Its beautiful structure was preserved and today the site is considered one of the "New Seven Wonders of Russia".

Situated along the shores of Lake Siverskoye in what is now the town of Kirillov, the vast monastery complex is surrounded by a defensive wall constructed in the 17th century, measuring 24,000 feet long and 22 feet thick. This massive wall has several towers and contains parts of the original citadel used to fend off the Polish siege of 1612 during the Times of Troubles. At one point, this fortified abbey was considered among the biggest fortresses in Russia. Inside, there are two monasteries and eleven churches, most them dating back to the 16th century. The larger of the two monasteries is a Dormition cathedral dedicated to the Assumption of Mary, constructed near the lake. It has a beautiful iconostasis featuring ancient icons arranged above a silver gate. Many of the valuables kept in the sacristy were donated to the church by visiting tsars. The smaller monastery is dedicated to St. John the Precursor, the patron saint of Ivan the Terrible.

We followed André through the front gates; centuries-old religious murals decorated the archways. He led us to the Abbey Museum where we walked room after room filled with religious icons in many different forms: crosses, paintings, tapestries, knitted patterns and sculptures. There was an ancient printing press used to make bibles and various display cases with a collection of robes worn by the clergy during mass. A preserved living quarter showed how those earlier monks lived. From here, André walked us around the complex, pointing out the various churches, leading us to the section outside the fortress walls that lines up along the still waters of Lake Sivorskoye. I have to admit, the area was very peaceful, the perfect place for a spiritual retreat.

We returned to the dock area around 2:00pm. On the drive back we passed over a hilly area that allowed us to see a section of the older canal system built by Stalin during the 1930s using labor from the prison camps. Our group was given thirty minutes to shop or browse the vendor stalls near the pier before we had to re-embark our ship. By 2:45pm we set sail again. On our way south we passed the 16th century Monastery of the Resurrection along the shoreline of the Sheksna River, the second most famous monastic complex in these parts after the Kirillo-Belozersky Monastery. This nunnery was built in 1544 by Princess Ephrosiniya (the wife of Ivan III's youngest son, Andrei Staritsky). Ironically, it also became her place of imprisonment. During the reign of Ivan the Terrible, he declared Prince Staritsky to be a traitor and eventually murdered him and his entire family. The princess, who was forced to become a nun and held in captivity at the Monastery of the Resurrection, was eventually dragged to the Sheksna River and drowned on the tsar's orders. (Hey, they didn't call him Ivan the *Terrible* for nothing). Afterwards, the monastery, also known as the Goritsy Nunnery, became famous as a prison of sorts for the spouses and family members of the disgraced nobility. When the Bolsheviks took over, they allowed the sisters to run the complex as an agricultural cooperative, but during the 1930s the place was shut down and many of the nuns were allegedly shot. Since the fall of communism, a small group of *wary* nuns have returned to the convent.

At 3:00pm I joined Ron in the conference room for the third part of Professor Vladimir's lecture series on Russian history. Basically, the lecture covered the 300-year reign of the Romanovs. I will try to *briefly* recap what the professor said:

There were seventeen Romanov rulers prior to their overthrow by the Bolsheviks in 1917. The first two, Michael I (1613 – 1645) and his son Alexis I (1645 – 1676), governed during a relatively peaceful era in Russia. Michael I ascended to the thrown after the Times of Troubles, uniting the country once again, and despite some border skirmishes with neighboring states the country was *generally* at peace for much of the next six decades. The feudal system that existed in Russia at the time became even more suffocating under the early Romanov reign as stricter serfdom laws bound the peasant farmers to their landlord's estate, making them, for all intents and purposes, slaves of the nobility. These farmers were obligated to work four out of every seven days for their landlords. According to the professor,

many peasants either fled to Siberia or headed to southern Russia and became part of the feared and independent Cossacks.

The third Romanov ruler, Feodor III (1676 –1682) died young due to exposure from lead used in palace construction materials. The next in line was Peter I, better known as Peter the Great. His older half-brother Ivan V served briefly with him as a 'co-tsar' (but in name only since he suffered from severe mental disabilities). I've already discussed Peter the Great's achievements throughout this journal; he was instrumental in bringing Russia into the modern age. After his death, most of 18th century Russia was ruled by a succession of powerful women: Anna (1730-1740), Elizabeth I (1741-1762) and Catherine II (1762-1796). Of these, Catherine II (also known as Catherine the Great) was an exceptionally good ruler. She was considered 'fair-minded' in her legal dealings and was successful in defeating the Turkish navy, adding the Crimea port area to the territory of Russia. Following her death the country reverted back to male rulers until the end of the dynasty.

Paul I, Catherine the Great's son, ruled briefly, his interventionist foreign policies and attempts to reform the corruption within the nobility did not sit well with many and he was assassinated in 1801. Throughout much of the 1800s, perhaps due in part by the influences of the French and American revolutions, the tsars who followed (Alexander I, Nicolas I, Alexander II and III) began instituting reforms to improve Russian society. Following the decades after Napoleon's defeat in 1812, the country underwent significant changes: the serfs were emancipated; government reforms were instituted; national public works projects were started to modernize the country's infrastructure.

By the time of Nicolas II, the last tsar of Russia, the world – and Western Europe in particular – was undergoing a radical upheaval. The major countries of the world had shifted from an agricultural based economy to an industrial based one. Manufacturing was booming, creating newer and newer technologies and products that required an ever-increasing amount of raw materials to produce. Territorial wars would become inevitable. The deplorable conditions and abuses under which the new working class lived became the basis for communist philosophy. By 1917, a disastrous world war and a growing socialist movement at home fueled the fire for change in Russia…and the monarchy was consumed by the blaze.

Before he concluded his lecture, Professor Vladimir, much like he had done in yesterday's lecture, felt a need to impress upon us why Putin was popular in Russia. He told us that prior to Peter the Great, the Russian peasantry lived locally centered lives, confined to villages or small communities. But due to stricter serfdom laws passed under the earlier Romanov rulers, the people were now legally connected to their landlords (or the nobility) and they became accustomed to having the ruling class take care of them and make all the important decisions. This cultural custom served the communist party well during their time in power. And today, according to Professor Vladimir, many older Russians still identify with that notion of a strong ruling central government telling them what to do. Putin and those around him certainly embody this governing style in the minds of more traditional Russians. And to be honest, I can understand this premise on an historical level. Obviously, nobody likes a weak leader. But what is the political price that a populace has to pay for such a strong and unchallengeable government? When that government is wrong, who corrects them? The old adage that 'power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely' comes to mind. Without checks and balances, abuses will surely follow because those in control will feel that they are only accountable to themselves.

At 4:00pm, when the lecture was over, Ron and I headed upstairs to the Opera Restaurant for a vodka and caviar tasting session. Dani and Anke were already at the table, along with Joyce (Anne chose to skip the event). On the table in front of each of us were three elegant shot glasses filled with different types of vodka. In addition, a plate was served to everyone that included two blini (saucer-shaped wheat pancakes), two spoon-sized servings of caviar – a black caviar, which I'm assuming was sturgeon, and an orange salmon caviar – along with two pats of butter and raspberry sauce. On a separate plate was a salted herring on brown bread, pickled cucumber and grape tomatoes. According to our host (one of the ship's guides) this was the traditional set up for eating caviar and drinking vodka. Russian tea was also served. After a brief explanation on the vodka drinking tradition, which had to be interpreted into Spanish and French for the other tour groups, our host told us that vodka is consumed in a single shot usually in a social group setting, accompanied by music and cheers. Prior to the drinking commencement, he described the flavors of the three samples before us – an amber-colored vodka, reddish tinted vodka and a clear vodka – and then made a series of rousing toasts after which everyone raised their shot glass

and yelled '*zazdarovye*' ('cheers' in Russian) and slammed down the alcohol. Since I do not imbibe I gave my three shots to my companions.

Next, after another brief explanation on the history of Russian caviar, we commenced to tasting the fish eggs. The idea was to smear the caviar onto the blini (with or without butter) and eat it that way. This is definitely an acquired taste. I mean, if the idea of chewing on tiny, salty balls of gooey fish substance is something that excites you…then you'll *love* caviar. I was not a fan, but if I had to choose I think I 'enjoyed' the salmon caviar better, at least it resembled orange marmalade (in color, not taste). This yucky stuff is not cheap, either. Black caviar averages about $130 for a 250-gram jar. But it wasn't always this costly. In fact, during the 12th century caviar was pretty common in Russia and everybody could afford it. Historical records indicate that Slavs began eating Atlantic sturgeon, which was once abundant in the river systems of northern Russia, as far back as the 8th century. Interestingly, Russia's first 'industrial' fishing enterprise was established at the Kirillo-Belozersky Monastery we just visited. Lake Siverskoye, where the monastery was built, was full of sturgeon. Eventually, the monks began catching and processing sturgeon, beluga, starry sturgeon (sevruga) and other fish from these waters.

Following the annexation of the Astrakhan and Kazan Khanates in the mid-16th century, the Volga River Basin was completely absorbed into the Russian realm and local fishermen could ply the rivers openly without having to pay tribute. By now, tons of caviar was being produced annually. Under the early Romanov rulers the state had a monopoly on the caviar industry, exporting the delicacy in order to fill its treasury and (under Peter the Great) build its navy. By the time of the Soviet Union, though, the sturgeon in the Caspian Sea and Volga region had been over-fished and was in danger of becoming extinct. Since 1998, international trade in sturgeon is regulated under CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora). With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia now controls less than one third of the Caspian Sea coastline, so their annual production of caviar is considerably less (up to 14 times less) than when the communists were in charge. Conservation efforts have steered the industry into sturgeon fish farming (or sturgeon aquaculture); fish eggs are safely removed and the sturgeon is returned to the water. Poaching, though, is still a big problem, as is fake caviar (made from sea kelp).

After my companions had downed their shots of vodka and eaten their caviar, they were still in the mood to drink. Anke instigated what ensued. She noticed that at the nearby table nobody had touched their shot glasses. Like a seasoned wife, she coaxed her husband Ron to wander over to the table and ask if they could give us their vodka. Turns out, they were a good-natured Christian group that abstained from alcohol but were more than delighted to give away their samples. Before you knew it, Ron was transporting about two dozen shot glasses to our table. Even 82-year old Joyce got caught up in the frenzy, tossing back vodka like a one-legged sailor with a story to tell. I later had to assist her up to her cabin when the 'tasting' was over. Meanwhile, Dani and Anke were feeling no pain. They asked me to knock on their doors that evening to make sure they didn't miss dinner. Everyone retreated to their cabins for a much-needed nap (including me).

At 7:30pm I awoke, dressed and headed upstairs to knock on my companions' cabin doors. Only Dani responded. We all met in the Opera Restaurant for dinner. That night I had a salad, followed by carrot cream soup. The main course was rabbit simmered with vegetable sauce and served with boiled buckwheat and onion and a baked apple. For dessert, honey cake with ice cream. *Delicious*. As usual, we headed up to the Melody River Bar Lounge after dinner. By 11:00pm I was back in my cabin. On the BBC channel, I watched a little of the devastating news of Hurricane Maria's impact on Puerto Rico. The storm had battered the island. I said another prayer for the folks who lived there and went to bed.

Day Nine

I was awake by 5:00am. I sluggishly went through my usual morning routine. Outside, as the sun began to rise, the area was covered in a thick, eerie, blinding white fog. A huge tanker passed us by and I could barely see the outline of the ship. I grabbed my camera and raced to the railing just outside my cabin windows to take a photo and was surprised to discover how quiet it was, as if the fog had also sucked the noise out of the air along

with the visibility. It was kinda freaky. I decided to go back inside before zombies began popping out of the water.

During the night we continued traveling south along the Sheksna River portion of the Volga-Baltic Waterway, at one point crossing the expansive Rybinsk Reservoir and entering the central federal district of *Yaroslavl Oblast*. The Rybinsk Hydroelectric Station – situated along the Volga River and its tributaries, the Sheksna and Mologa Rivers – was one of Stalin's largest public works projects of the 1930s. When the dam was completed in 1941 it eventually formed this body of water, becoming the largest man-made lake at the time. In fact, the reservoir is so big it is informally referred to as the Rybinsk Sea. The electrical output of this station is not considered significant by today's standards, and the cost to the environment has been monumental. More than 600 villages perished under the water, including the historical town of Mologa, and hundreds of thousands had to be relocated. Historians view this dam as a typical example of *Stalinism*: a total disregard for the impact it would have on local communities.

At 7:45am I went for breakfast, everyone was sitting at the table except Dani. She had told Anke she wasn't feeling well from the night before. I wondered if the vodka had anything to do with that? During breakfast, Alyona, our ship's guide, asked fellow tour members Mike, Bill and myself if we would volunteer to perform a musical comedy number for that evening's talent show. I was a little reluctant. I am not musically inclined and have two left feet when it comes to dancing, but she told us we would be sitting the whole time and the rehearsal would only take ten minutes. *If only life were that easy*! Sure, I said, sign me up. She instructed us to meet later that afternoon for the rehearsal. After breakfast I sat in the Melody River Bar Lounge with a cup of coffee trying to text photos to family and friends back home. It seemed the closer we got to Moscow the better the WiFi reception. We docked in Uglich at 10:00am and disembarked fifteen minutes later. I could tell from the boat that this was a much larger town than most of the riverfront communities we had visited. There were at least five other riverboats already moored to the quay when we docked and more ships were arriving both in front and in back of us. This was a popular tourist attraction. And for good reason.

Uglich is part of the Golden Ring of historical cities and towns northeast of Moscow, in a region known as *Zalesye,* which is comprised of the northeastern parts of the Moscow Oblast, the north and western parts of the

Vladimir Oblast and the southern section of the Yaroslavl Oblast. The word '*zalesye'* refers to the deep forests that separated the medieval principalities that existed in the region before the country was united. These thick woods provided fertile grounds for Slavs migrating from the southern borders of the Kievan Rus, and protection from Turkic incursions. The population that settled this region grew quickly and several key towns emerged that were instrumental in Russia's early development. I believe there are about a dozen of these ancient towns within this Golden Ring. All of them date back to medieval times. Each one is often described as an 'open-air museum' because you will find beautifully preserved structures from the 12th – 18th centuries, such as kremlins (fortresses), monasteries, cathedrals, and churches with the traditional 'onion-dome' rooftops. All of these towns served some kind of historical or political purpose during their heyday, one became the capital of medieval Russia for a while, and *all* promoted the growth of the Orthodox faith in the area, as evidenced through the wonderful religious structures that have survived the centuries. But Uglich's place in Russian history is an *infamous* one, based on a suspicious death that occurred here more than 400 years ago.

Uglich sits on the banks of the Volga River. There has been a settlement here dating as far back as the 10th century, but the town was not officially documented until 1148. It was part of a smaller princedom on the border of the Grand Duchy of Muscovy and later sold in the 14th century to the Grand Prince of Moscow. Throughout its early years, the town struggled to survive through a series of raids by Tartars, Lithuanians and other princedoms. It was burned to the ground several times. In 1462, Ivan III gave Uglich to his younger brother Andrey Bolshoy, and this is probably when the town began to prosper and expand. During Andrey's governance he built the first stone structures (a monastery, cathedral and his own palace, of which the latter, a red-brick structure, still exists). Later, Uglich passed to the brother of Ivan IV (the Terrible). When Ivan the Terrible died in 1584, he had two remaining sons, Feodor and Dmitry. In 1581 he had accidentally killed his oldest son and heir, Ivan Ivanovich, in one of his legendary angry outbursts when the son confronted him over his father's beating of his pregnant sister. Upon Ivan the Terrible's death, his unfit middle child Feodor became emperor.

Feodor was a pious man who was raised in the shadow of his overbearing father. He did not enjoy politics, often retreating from public life. Under his short reign the country was actually governed by his brother-in-law, Boris

Godunov, who served as the de facto regent. Godunov's first order of business was to get rid of Dmitry Ivanovich, Ivan the Terrible's last male child. Dmitry was born in 1581; his mother was the seventh wife of Ivan the Terrible. The Russian Orthodox Church only recognized the children of the tsar's first three marriages as legitimate heirs, so, technically, Dmitry and his mother had no claims to the throne, but Godunov did not want to take any chances. He banished Dmitry and his mother to Uglich in 1584.

On May 15, 1591, poor 10-year old Dmitry was found with his throat slashed in the palace courtyard of Uglich. Later, the 'official' cause of death was that the young prince was playing with a knife when he suffered an epileptic seizure and stabbed himself in the throat. No one is really certain how the boy died, historians have argued in favor for both the validity and absurdity of the official version. The townspeople of Uglich, though, immediately suspected Godunov's henchmen who were 'protecting' the young Dmitry, and they ended up hanging the alleged assassins and some local officials. Godunov suppressed the revolt, killing many and sending a good portion of the rebellious village to exile in Siberia, including a piece of the church bell that rung with the news of Dmitry's death. Afterwards, Godunov forced the boy's mother into a convent. I'm sure Godunov thought he was finally rid of Dmitry. As it turned out, when Tsar Feodor I died in 1598 without any heirs, stories emerged that Dmitry had survived the assassination attempt and fled Uglich. Several imposters, some of them seemingly genuine, rose up over the years during the Times of Troubles claiming to be Dmitry, creating civil chaos as they tried to seize the throne after Godunov – who had been crowned tsar by the feudal assembly – died in 1605. Eight troubling years later, the Romanovs came to power.

Till this day, no one can say for certain how Dmitry died, whether it was murder or an accident. But his death had a profound impact on Russia. Since Feodor I died childless, this meant that Dmitry – had he survived – would have been the last male heir (legitimate or not) of the Rurik dynasty. His suspicious death would forever close the Rurik chapter in Russian history.

Our local guide in Uglich was a young man named Vladimir who met us after we disembarked on the pier. He led us on a walking tour through the kremlin of this historic city. Because this is a popular destination stop for riverboat cruise ships, the atmosphere near the docks was pretty festive. There were street musicians, food vendors and a long tree-lined pathway filled with souvenir peddlers that extended from the pier almost to

Yaroslavskaya Street, the town's main avenue. We walked for about ten minutes until we reached the *Uspenskaya Ploshchad*, the main square in front of the historic fortress of Uglich. As I gazed down the wide and spotless rustic streets of Uglich, the entire area resembled – in my mind, anyway – Smalltown, USA.

Most people tend to associate the word 'kremlin' with the government center in Moscow, but actually the term refers to any fortress or citadel. Every major historical city in Russia had a kremlin that protected (or tried to, anyway) its citizens during times of invasions. This is also where the local ruler lived. The original Uglich Kremlin was small, built on a high bank along the Volga River and surrounded by a body of water that further insulated it like a moat. Over the centuries, the fortress was expanded greatly, and a newer, deeper water canal was dug around it. To access the Uglich Kremlin we had to cross the Nikolsky Bridge (built in 1820). As we walked across the bridge I did not see any major wall system surrounding the kremlin so I'm assuming the moat (or canal) presented a formidable obstacle, making the site inaccessible to its enemies.

Inside this nicely landscaped fortress are several structures, some dating back to the 15th century. The first one we visited was perhaps the most majestic of all the buildings within the kremlin: the Transfiguration Cathedral. It is impossible to miss since it sits at the end of the long, paved pedestrian walkway that leads you into the fortress. Built in 1713, this magnificent five-domed church is decorated with frescoes (including a rare one with the image of God looking down on Jesus). The hand-carved golden iconostasis in back of the altar is both impressive and solemn, extending all the way to the ceiling, covered with centuries-old paintings of Orthodox saints. Along the walls are dramatic religious murals. As is the tradition in all Russian Orthodox churches, the large space in front of the altar is empty, devoid of pews or seats. Worshippers actually stand during the entire mass, which can last for hours. The idea, I think, is to remind the faithful of the suffering Jesus endured at the end of His life. *That is some devotion*. For the elderly or infirmed there are benches located along the sides of the nave (this is where we sat while Vladimir give us details about the church via our Whisper devices). Next to the cathedral is the 30-meter high, hexagonally shaped Bell Tower constructed in 1730. The Bell Tower now houses a lacquer box museum and gift shop.

From here, Vladimir led us to a smaller church called the Epiphany Cathedral (built in 1827). The inside looked more like a museum with a modern hall. We were treated to a six-man *a cappella* rendition of two popular Russian folk songs: 'Down the Volga River' and 'Kalinka'. Actually, it wasn't a true *a cappella* because several rather strange-looking string instruments were used, but the performance centered on the vocals of these incredibly talented young choir men. It was deeply moving. I would suggest you check out the YouTube downloads of the male folk singers from Uglich. I video recorded the group singing 'Kalinka' on my smartphone and still watch it from time to time…it's so good I *still* get goosebumps.

From the cathedral we walked to the *Church of St. Dmitry on the Blood*, a stone church (1692) built on the very spot where Dmitry died that can be seen from the Volga River. The exterior of this church is mostly painted red to symbolize the blood spilled by the young prince back in 1591. It has a small bell tower as you enter, and the main body is topped with five blue domes. This is a relatively small church, but like all Orthodox churches it is ornately decorated, with an iconostasis, paintings of saints and religious murals. The only exceptions are the frescoes along a section of the nave depicting the murder of young Dmitry and the subsequent uprising by the townsfolk. The original church bell that rang on the day Dmitry died is also on display in a corner just to the left as you enter the nave. In a symbolic gesture, the clapper, or 'tongue' of the bell (the dangling piece inside which makes it ring) was cut and sent into exile in Siberia along with many of the town rioters, where it remained for 300 years before it was brought back to Uglich in 1892.

Next to the Church of St. Dmitry on the Blood is the oldest structure within the kremlin, the redbrick palace built in the 15th century by Ivan III's brother, Andrey Bolshoy. When Dmitry was exiled to Uglich he lived in this building, which was later known as the Princely Chambers. This is the only surviving structure from the original Uglich Kremlin (the other buildings were destroyed during a Polish invasion). The Princely Chambers is now a museum.

We returned to the Bell Tower of the Transfiguration Cathedral to visit the lacquer box museum and gift shop. The curator (or proprietor, as the case may be) gave us a brief explanation into the history of this art form – I needed to use the bathroom so I missed most of what he said – and then we were given time to browse and shop. The lacquer boxes were simply

beautiful; most had renditions of famous fairy tales painted on the covers. These were exceptional pieces and as such were a lot more expensive than the ones we saw being sold by street vendors or in other souvenir shops. I regret not picking one up, because this was definitely the place to buy an authentic, quality-made miniature lacquer box.

Our walking tour of the Uglich Kremlin ended here. The only structure we had not visited was the old Municipal Building (1815) where the city council met, but we passed it on the way in. It sits just to the right after you cross the Nikolsky Bridge into the fortress. From this point on, we had nearly two hours of free time to explore the town of Uglich. I quickly returned to the Church of St. Dmitry of the Blood and paid the caretaker the 100-rubles fee that allowed me to photograph the interior. Afterwards, Ron and I did a brief walking tour of the streets in front of Uspenskaya Square. Anke and Dani opted to go shopping.

We reached the square and crossed the wide avenue and began walking south along Rostovskaya Street along a paved walkway, passing several small shops, including one with what looked like a Marilyn Monroe poster hanging from the storefront awning. Soon the sidewalk was lined with trees as we entered a residential area with old, colorful wooden homes hidden behind green or red wooden fences. On the corner of Yanvarya Street and Rostovskaya we came across the walled Monastery of the Epiphany complex. Ron and I were able to enter the complex grounds through a large open gate entrance. Inside, we saw the blue-domed Epiphany Monastery Cathedral and two other churches, the golden-domed Theodore Icon of the Mother of God Church and the red-painted Shrine of Our Lady of Smolensk. A brick bell tower had recently been constructed to our right, and the entire complex seemed to be undergoing renovations. I was unable to locate any significant historical information about this female monastery online. From what I gathered, the history of this nunnery dates back hundreds of years (possibly to the 1600s), although none of the three structures we saw within the complex appeared to be older than the 19th century. But I could be wrong, so don't take my word for it.

Ron and I decided to head back to the pier area to do some souvenir shopping before we had to re-board our ship. On the way back to Uspenskaya Square we stopped at a Visitor's Center where Ron purchased some postcards. As we continued down Rostovkaya Street we saw two men trying to push-start an old pickup truck. Ron suggested we lend a hand by

pushing from behind. Another fellow joined in, as well. The men barely spoke English and didn't seem to mind at first, but when our initial attempt to push-start the truck failed, one of the men turned to us abruptly and in broken English said they didn't need our assistance. Perhaps it was his accent, but for a moment I felt as if the man was angry with us. Or maybe he was just embarrassed that two older Americans were helping him push his broken down Russian vehicle down the street. Well, at least we *tried* to help. Score one for the Ugly Americans!

We spent about an hour shopping the vendor stands along the walkway that led back to the docks, along the way we reunited with Anke and Dani. Ron was able to buy a beautifully hand-carved chess set for only $46, and Dani helped me select a few scarves that I later handed out as souvenirs back home. Our tour director Elena wasn't kidding when she told us that Uglich would have the best bargains for souvenirs. In fact, Ron and I discovered we had overpaid for our birch wood boxes in Mandrogi; they were a lot cheaper here. *Drats*. I really enjoyed this stop in Uglich. This is one of those wonderful little places where you need more time to explore. In addition to the historical sites, you'll find many entertaining museums here, including a museum on the region's hydroelectric plants, a doll museum, a prison artwork museum, a museum on local myths and superstitions, a vodka museum, and so forth. Uglich also has an incredible collection of 17th century churches that showcase old Russian architecture. Perhaps the most striking is the Assumption Church of the Monastery of St. Alexis, built in 1628, boasting a three-tented roof design that was a hallmark of medieval church architecture, and nearby is the impressive Church of John the Baptist (1681). Closer to the Volga River is the Resurrection Monastic complex with its huge cathedral, refectory, belfry and summer church all constructed during the 1670s. Unfortunately, our four-hour stop in Uglich did not permit us enough time to see everything the town had to offer.

By 2:30pm we were back onboard and having a buffet lunch in the Opera Restaurant. Professor Vladimir was conducting his next Russian History lesson inside the tiny game room opposite Dani's cabin at 3:30pm, but when I arrived there was no place left to sit so I returned to my room and spent the next hour writing in my journal. At 4:45pm I joined fellow tour members Mike and Bill in the Melody River Bar Lounge to rehearse our comedy musical number for that evening's talent show. Alyona first explained the premise of the routine to us. We were going to wear Russian hats and be introduced as a band of traveling musical spoon players who had fallen on

hard times. There would be three chairs facing the audience and we would sit in them holding up a large wooden spoon in each hand. The ship's band would play a round of rousing traditional music and suddenly stop, at which point we would click our spoons once. The band would continue playing and stop again. We would click our spoons twice. The third time the band stopped, we would lift our right leg off the chair and click the spoons beneath our knee. Each time we smacked our spoons we would return to the original position of holding them upright in our hands. *That was it*. The entire act. When (or *if*) the audience began applauding, Alyona instructed us to stand and bang the spoons together as if we were clapping with them. The idea seemed ludicrous, and hardly amusing beyond perhaps the first spoon click, which would be unexpected and funny considering the band's music.

We tried rehearsing the number for about fifteen minutes. You'd think banging spoons together would be easy, but my fellow 'musicians' had apparently been drinking and our coordination was completely off. Instead of clicking twice during the second round, they tapped once. Instead of clicking beneath the right knee on the third round they clicked underneath the left knee. We were not in sync (the giggling and laughing didn't help any). Alyona told us the key was to remain serious and stare straight ahead at all times and not at her, but that was impossible because we weren't sure when to bang the spoons unless she gave us the signal. The rehearsal was a disaster. On our fifth attempt to do the routine we sort of got it right and Alyona ended the rehearsal on that note. She told us we would do fine and left us alone in the bar lounge to contemplate the impact this routine was going to have on our reputations. Our tour group was aware we would be representing them in the talent show. The French and Spanish groups had practiced song and dance numbers and were going to perform one of the fairy tales. As far as we knew, this spoon number was going to be *our* group's contribution. Thank goodness I'd never have to face these people again!

I returned to my cabin shortly after 5:00pm. Twenty minutes later the ship's intercom crackled to life and announced we were passing the famous Bell Tower of the Nikolsky Cathedral of Kalyazin. I grabbed my camera and raced to the port side of the ship. It was another weird, flooded church scene. Our riverboat had entered a bend in the Volga River where the Uglich Reservoir is located. The hydroelectric dam that created this reservoir – another of Stalin's projects from 1939 – flooded parts of the historic city of Kalyazin, including the Nikolsky Cathedral (the Cathedral of St. Nicolas)

built in 1694. At the turn of the 18th century a neoclassical five-tiered bell tower was added to the cathedral, and this crumbling tower is the only thing left standing after the area flooded. It literally sticks out of the water from the Uglich Reservoir. A bizarre monument to Old Russia. To keep the tower from collapsing the local government has shored up the land around it, forming a small man-made island. Again, historians regard the construction of this dam as another example of the ill effects of Stalinism, with its complete disregard for the environment or the communities affected by it. But, if I may interject in Stalin's defense – on this particular dam, anyway – the Uglich hydroelectric power station actually helped the Russians defeat the Nazis. This station provided Moscow with precious electricity during the harshest period of the German invasion (1941-42), a crucial element in keeping the city humming while the Soviets planned their counterattack.

I returned to my cabin and took a short nap, missing the captain's farewell toast in the conference room. At 7:45pm I joined my companions in the Opera Restaurant for the traditional Farewell Dinner. I felt somewhat underdressed for the occasion in my jeans and short-sleeved plaid shirt. Prior to this trip I had gained some weight and none of the 'smart casual' attire I owned actually fit. I had intended to do some last minute shopping in the final days leading up to my departure but then Hurricane Irma struck and all the stores closed down. So, dress codes be damned! Before dinner was served, the ship's cruise director brought out the entire kitchen and wait staff to much applause. I think there was another toast. On each table was a chef's compliment of salmon rolls with cheese sauce and red caviar. The appetizer was a set of chicken rolls with cashews and mushrooms, a melon salad with Proscuitto di Parma and lettuce topped by a pesto sauce, salmon coquille with shrimps, and a lemon-lime sorbet to cleanse the palate. Next came the main course (everyone had chosen their own dish). Mine consisted of rack of lamb with barberry sauce, accompanied by a potato and pumpkin mash and a salad medley. Desert was the traditional baked Alaska (served with blackcurrant sauce). A bowl of fresh fruit was placed in the center of each table. *Dinner was delicious*.

At 9:45pm, all three tour groups gathered in the conference room for our Gala Talent Show. The passengers and crew did about a dozen performances. Mike, Bill and I sat together, watching (in horror) as the other tour groups put on serious dance and song numbers. Some played instruments; an Indian couple from our group did a sexy tango dance. Crew members belted out songs. Just before we were scheduled to perform,

Alyona fetched us and led us into the hallway where we donned Elmer Fudd-looking Russian hats – the ones with the floppy ears – and waited to be introduced. I could smell alcohol on Bill and Mike, both appeared to have continued drinking after our 'rehearsal'. *And could you blame them, really*? Finally, it was show time. We filed into the conference room and took our seats in front of the audience, many were already giggling at the sight of us wearing those ridiculous hats and holding up those over-sized wooden spoons. Alyona made this dramatic intro about the Trio of Failed Spoon Players from Minsk. The ship's band commenced to playing the music. The audience watched us intently, wondering what we were going to do. When the music stopped, we did our first single click of the spoons…*and the audience howled with laughter*. At this point, I knew we were a hit. The laughter just kept increasing as we did our series of two clicks and then the under-the-knee bit. The applause was phenomenal. Apparently, our number added a little comedic relief to the event. Boy, were we relieved.

We returned to our seats to watch the remainder of the show. At one point, Professor Vladimir sang a Spanish love song. After listening to him sing, I think I understood why he probably became a history professor. Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying his singing was bad, I'm just saying it wasn't, um, *good*. Afterwards, he invited the passengers who had attended his lecture series to join him for a rendition of his favorite American song, *I Walk the Line* by Johnny Cash. Professor Vladimir had handed out the lyrics to the song earlier in the week, and to be honest I had memorized the lines and practiced the song inside my cabin nightly. Before the talent show began I was actually looking forward to doing this number, thinking it might redeem me in the eyes of my fellow tour members after what I was certain would be the Spoon Player fiasco. But when my earlier gig went over well, I started feeling my oats. I confidently joined the group to sing *I Walk the Line*. As we started singing, though, I could have sworn I heard a tumbling noise in the distance…which I assumed was Mr. Cash spinning furiously in his grave. It wasn't as if we had screwed up the words to the song, we were each holding a copy of the lyrics. It was Vladimir's off key singing that did the trick. We attempted to bring harmony to this classic song, but an over-powering, thick Russian-accented warble in the background kept throwing the tempo into disarray. It was like a horrible version of the mythical Lure of the Sirens, I didn't know whether to cover my ears or sail to my death. And for those of you who haven't heard *I Walk the Line* lately, it's a very long number…at least, it seemed that way by the time we finished. Ironically, the earlier Spoon Player bit was my saving grace.

Afterwards, the tour group from Spain performed a spirited Spanish version of *The Gigantic Turnip* fairy tale story in funny costumes. The Gala Talent Show concluded with three sets by the ship's young guides. Two of them did a comedy sketch, the attractive French guide sang a French pop song, and the finale was a three-song set – in English, Spanish and French – that were renditions of popular tunes but with whimsical lyrics about the cruise replacing the original lyrics. It was a fun evening. By 11:00pm the show was over. I headed up to the Melody River Bar Lounge to text my friends back home and retired to my cabin just before midnight.

That night I dreamt the Failed Spoon Players from Minsk were headlining in Vegas…*Viva Las Spoons, baby!*

Day Ten

I was awake by 5:45am. I immediately headed to the coffee station for my morning brew and then spent the next hour writing in my journal. I shaved, showered and dressed. I also began repacking my luggage. At 7:30am I went for breakfast. Anne and Joyce were already at the table. Anke, Dani and Ron joined us at 8:15am. We got into an interesting debate about geopolitics and American meddling in foreign affairs. I love having these types of discussions, especially with tour members from other countries. One of my stated purposes for traveling is to learn about the world via my interactions with others. Most Americans tend to live insulated lives as far as the rest of the global community goes. Many of my family, friends and co-workers do not understand how America is perceived around the world. Beyond a few thumb scrolls of their smartphones to check the daily news briefings, they have little understanding of the current political or social conditions that are changing this planet (for better or for worse). In my opinion, the age of social media has rendered us almost incapable of concentrating on anything for too long.

At 9:15am I returned to my cabin and continued to organize my suitcase. I filled out the cruise evaluation form provided by the ship and then went to the main deck to pay my final bill and drop off the tip money envelope for the crew. I had also separately tipped our personal food server in the restaurant and the woman who cleaned my cabin daily. By 10:30am I was in the conference room for Professor Vladimir's final lecture.

For those of us in attendance, it was a true revelation.

The professor concluded his lecture series by discussing how the former Soviet Union collapsed and the intervening years between the formation of the new Russian Federation and the rise of Vladimir Putin. When Gorbachev – the eighth and final leader of the Soviet Union – came to power in 1985 he presided over a country in the throes of a real economic crisis. He realized that the Cold War and the rising military costs and investments associated with it, together with the archaic economic mechanics of communism, had bankrupted the country. His reconciliatory overtures to the West and his desire to truly reform Soviet society led to programs like *glasnost* (political openness and transparency) and *perestroika* (economic and political restructuring). The latter was eventually blamed for unraveling the Soviet Union. Under *perestroika*, the role of the Communist Party in governing the state was removed from the constitution. Intended to democratize the Soviet Union, this act actually led to a surge of regional nationalism and anti-communist activism that subsequently did away with the entire system.

One aspect of his *perestroika* was to transition the Soviet Union into a free market economy. To this end he assembled a prestigious collection of economists, socialists and Western capitalists to come up with a blueprint for how this could be achieved. The new economic plan had three major components: first, plants and factories would be independent from the government (no interference); secondly, the goal of each enterprise was to turn a profit (run by managers and workers); thirdly, and most importantly, there was to be no price controls (the market would determine the costs of each product). Perhaps, according to Professor Vladimir, this may have worked, but in the end Gorbachev balked at not having price controls, fearing runaway inflation. As a result, the economy did not take off as promised. This led to widespread discontent, and because the Communist Party, under the new constitution, was no longer politically omnipotent, huge crowds of protestors – spurred on by the likes of Boris Yeltsin, who

emerged as a populist leader under *perestroika* – took to the streets and the government collapsed.

Unfortunately, the economic changes introduced by the incoming Yeltsin administration only made matters worse. The professor told us the value of his communist-era rubles was wiped away, and many professionals like him suddenly found themselves broke and without a government safety net as they entered middle age or neared retirement. The government initially gave company vouchers to the public, making the citizens of the new Russian Federation the owners of the country's major industries. But the average citizen, accustomed to decades of communist rule, had no idea what capitalism or share holding really meant. With the economy at an all-time low, hard-pressed Russians sold their vouchers at ridiculously low prices. Conniving former communist hardliners quickly positioned themselves to pick up the controlling shares of the country's top industries and markets. A new ruling class was created. The dreaded oligarchs. Inflation, low wages, criminal enterprises and corruption soon became the norm throughout the 1990s. It was a terrible time, according to Professor Vladimir. But within years of Putin becoming president in 1999, the country rebounded due to increased oil prices (Russia is a major exporter) and more prudent fiscal policies from the central government. Inflation was held in check, wages increased. Things improved tremendously. And this was why Putin became popular, he argued.

When his lecture concluded, Professor Vladimir brought three of the ship's young guides to the front of the conference room for a Q & A session. The professor – who is part of a demographic group that grew up under the Soviets – reiterated his support for Putin. But, he conceded, the younger generation, represented by the three young guides he assembled before us, might not share his views. So, in all fairness, he invited us to ask them questions. I don't think Vladimir expected what ensued. All three of the guides were in their mid-twenties (just out of college). None of them had grown up under communism. These were Russian *Millennials*. And they did not hold back their opinions. When asked if they supported Putin, their responses were often cynical. How could they not support the Russian president, they argued sarcastically, he had a favorability polling of *146 percent*! (Apparently, in certain areas, Putin has polled higher than the amount of actual registered voters). One of the guides did not like Putin outright, and the other two seemed ambivalent. They agreed that during the early years of his rule, Putin had many successes, but his inability to allow

for genuinely free elections has soured the youth of Russia into believing that politics will solve their problems. Putin, in their eyes, has turned into an autocrat, and the people who run the government for him today are the children of the oligarchs who ran the country back in the 1990s. If you are not a member or supporter of this privileged clique, they complained, you cannot enter politics because they simply will not allow it through their manipulation of the legal system. Young people, according to what these guides were telling us, seemed disillusioned not only by the government but also by the control of the economy by these hated oligarchs.

One of the most telling signs of this youthful discontent centered on education. There was a time, they argued, when you could earn a degree and find meaningful work in your field, but not now. With the economy in such bad shape, college graduates find themselves struggling to make a living. One of the guides even went so far as to suggest starting some kind of business was better than getting an education in today's Russia. When asked, none of them had plans to marry or start a family until they were economically on their feet. And who knew how long that was going to be? A few even hinted that perhaps leaving the country might be a better economic move than staying. *Wow*. They didn't seem happy, at all. Professor Vladimir had to step in and admonish them politely in Russian for all the negative talk. At least, I think that's what he said because he concluded the Q & A shortly afterwards (probably before he had a full revolt on his hands). I, for one, was surprised at the young guides' candor. I expected them to be a little more reserved in their comments. But they went full throttle. Granted, this could also have been the restlessness of youth talking. I mean, at their age I was anti-establishment, angry and unsure of my future, too, wanting to blame others for my lack of direction. Part of the growing process, I guess. But listening to them I could easily detect a huge disconnect between Putin and the younger generation of Russia. How this frustration will shape the future of the country remains to be seen.

I returned to my cabin, eager to write the events of the lecture session in my journal before I could forget the details. Afterwards, I grabbed my camera and proceeded to the sun deck. Our ship was traveling south along the Moscow Canal, which links the Volga River to the Moscow River, and we were passing one of several locks on our approach to the capital. Riverboat traffic was much heavier now; we entered the locks two at a time. The Moscow Canal was constructed during the 1930s using more than 200,000 slave laborers from the Gulag prison camp system run by the Soviet

secret police. This important canal system allows Moscow access to five seas: the White Sea, Baltic Sea, Caspian Sea, Black Sea and the Sea of Azov. In addition, half of Moscow's water supply comes from the canal, and the shores of the various reservoirs formed by it have become summer recreational sites. The closer we got to Moscow along this waterway, the nicer the homes in the vicinity. At one point we saw sailboats and yachts. Around 1:15pm I'd had enough of the view and joined my companions in the restaurant for a buffet lunch.

The *MS M. Rostropovich* finally docked at Moscow's Northern River Terminal at 3:00pm. This is one of two terminals used by cruise lines, and the primary one used by riverboats plying the St. Petersburg-Moscow route. As we approached the pier we could see a lot of construction going on along the waterfront, large cranes and steel girders everywhere. At 3:15pm, our group disembarked for a tour of the city that also included the Moscow By Night excursion later that evening. Most of us did not return to the ship until midnight. It would be an exhausting – but fun – nine hours!

Moscow is the capital of Russia. By land size, it is the largest city on the European continent, home to more than 17 million people (2010 census figures) who live within its city limits and combined urban areas. Moscow is divided into 12 *okrugs* (administrative divisions) with 123 individual districts. The city is the financial hub of the country; most of Russia's largest banks and industries are headquartered here. In addition, Moscow has one of the largest municipal economies in Europe. As such, the unemployment rate is much lower in the city than elsewhere, attracting more and more workers annually, making the cost of living here very high. The city also serves as an important educational center with more than 300 institutions of higher learning, catering to a very large student population. Art is an integral part of the city's fabric, being the center for the Russian performing arts, which includes the ballet, theater and film. The city boasts hundreds of museums, galleries, theaters, concert halls and cinemas. And if art and culture is not your thing, well, don't worry, because the city also has more than 70 sports stadiums to keep the more Neanderthal types entertained.

The architecture, like any old city, is quite fascinating. Moscow was founded around the 12th century, much of its neighborhoods have developed along a series of rings that radiate out from the Kremlin (which forms the center of the city). Prior to the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, palaces and churches dominated the noted architecture of the capital. But by the 1930s,

Stalin began reshaping the urban landscape of Moscow. In order to modernize the city, he ordered the destruction of much of its past, building huge avenues and roadways straight through historical quarters, tearing down mansions and some of the oldest and most elegant churches. One of Stalin's biggest contributions to the city's skyline was the construction of seven spectacular skyscrapers known collectively as the Seven Sisters. Supposedly inspired by the Manhattan Municipal Building of New York City, these skyscrapers were built in different areas, but all within an equal distance from the Kremlin. Each has intricate exteriors and a large central spiral that can be seen from many points in Moscow. They are absolutely beautiful structures. Most now serve as either hotels or administrative buildings.

In addition, over 11,000 apartment complexes were built to accommodate the severe housing shortages created by World War II. These post-Stalinist apartment buildings are where the majority of Muscovites live. Heading into the city center, we drove by whole neighborhoods lined with these monotonous block-style apartments, and while they have weathered the Soviet-era (and beyond) some are better maintained than others, according to our guide. Among this eclectic architectural mix are also newer neighborhoods, like the financial district, re-designed in a sleek, modern style with tall, glass buildings that are lit up like Christmas trees at night. Another interesting thing about Moscow is the greenery. There are 96 parks and 18 gardens within the city limits, amounting to nearly 210 square miles of green zones and forest area. This loosely translates into 290 square feet of parkland per resident, making Moscow one of the greenest megacities in the world. And the place was spotless. I hardly saw graffiti or trash anywhere. I have to admit, during my short stay here I was very impressed with the city.

We boarded an awaiting tour bus at the North River Terminal and slowly joined the traffic along Leningradskoye Highway, heading south. Beginning a city tour at 3:15pm might seem insane, but we had to make the most of our limited time in Moscow. The worst part of getting around the city, especially at this hour, was the vehicular traffic. Having been born and raised in the American northeast I have seen some gridlock in my day…but few places can compare to the frustration that Muscovites must endure on a daily basis during rush hour. Thank goodness they have an excellent subway system! It would take us more than an hour to reach the Kremlin, and believe me, it was a game of Beat the Clock trying to stay ahead of the steadily increasing

traffic. Our local guide for both the Kremlin tour and the Moscow by Night excursion was a young woman named Alexandria.

Shortly beyond the North River Terminal Station, to our right, was the Dynamo water stadium, which also serves as a residential and marina complex. Further south we passed a large wooded section with trails and a lake area called *Park Pokrovshoe-Streshnevo.* Just a bit further on our left was another much smaller park with a sizeable playground for kids. These two were the first of many green spaces we encountered on our way to the Kremlin. But most of the area along the Leningradskoye Highway was a commercial zone, with storefronts and businesses on either side of the roadway. As we approached the awesomely name Adrenaline Stadium (a state-of-the-art music theater venue) the highway began to curve and morph into Leningradsky Avenue, which took us in a southeasterly direction closer to Moscow's city center.

We crossed the Khoroshyovsky District and drove through an enormous ring intersection on Leningradsky Avenue that had at least six roads curving around it in all directions. Just beyond it we entered the Begovoy District, passing the Sovietsky Legendary Hotel, a grand Empire-style structure touted as an elegant throwback to another time. And speaking of throwbacks, the streets along Leningradsky Avenue were flanked by old granite block-size apartment complexes built by Stalin during the 1930s in a typical Russian Classical style, with ornately decorated exteriors. According to our guide, these housing projects were very well constructed and contain spacious apartments. In contrast, we also saw the plain-looking apartment buildings built during the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras (from the fifties, sixties and seventies). Not only were they aesthetically less pleasing to look at than the older Stalinist models, but they also required more maintenance, attesting to a cheaper construction method. In all fairness, though, after World War II millions of Russians around Moscow were left homeless, so in terms of necessity I think expediency and cost probably outweighed style.

Once we crossed Lesnaya Street, both the north and southbound lanes of Leningradsky Avenue converged into a single road called 1-Ya Tverskaya-Yamskaya Street. It was obvious we were fast approaching the center of the city. We passed several major hotel chains along this route, like Sheraton and Marriott, and there were many more restaurants and retail shops. We traveled for about five or six *very* long blocks before crossing Bol'shaya Sadovaya Street, a part of the famous Garden Ring road system that

encircles the center of the city along the lines of the 17th century ramparts and moat that once protected Moscow. At this point, the roadway we were on turned into the historic Tverskaya Street, the main arterial thoroughfare of central Moscow.

Tverskaya Street, which has existed in one form or another since the 12th century, once connected Moscow to the powerful city of Tver (a capital of medieval Russia). Under the Romanov period, Tverskaya Street became the center of Moscow's social life. It was the street upon which the tsars arrived from the north to stay at their Kremlin residence. The nobility built numerous neoclassical palaces and mansions here, and five beautiful churches were constructed along its pathway. But by the 20th century, Tverskaya Street had been transformed (yet again) by the addition of grandiose commercial buildings: museums, hotels, theaters and clubhouses designed in an eclectic mix of architectural styles. During the 1930s, much of the historic flavor of Tverskaya Street was wiped away when Stalin, under his master plan to modernize Moscow, ordered the churches and mansions torn down to widen the street in order to build his block-long apartment complexes and government buildings. Tverskaya Street extends from the Manege Square in the very heart of the city, next to the Kremlin, and runs through the Tverskoy District, crossing the Boulevard Ring (at Pushkin Square) – Moscow's second centermost ring road – and heads northward towards the Garden Ring where the street continues under a different name. Today, as in the past, Tverskaya Street still dominates the social scene of Moscow with its high-end shops, gourmet restaurants and glitzy nightclubs. In terms of commercial rental fees, it is considered one of the most expensive urban streets in the world.

When we reached Pushkin Square our driver made a right onto Tverskoy Boulevard, passing the first McDonald's restaurant ever built in Russia. A long pedestrian park separated the north and southbound lanes of the Tverskoy Boulevard. Muscovites were sitting on park benches, strolling or pushing baby carriages, children were enjoying the playground and swings. We drove south until we crossed New Arbat Avenue, turning onto Znamenka Street and followed that until we reached Mokhovaya Street, which runs directly in front of the Kremlin. Along the way we passed foreign embassies and some rather large Russian administrative buildings, including the Main Building of the Russian Ministry of Defense (which I'm assuming is the Pentagon's counterpart). Just outside the Kremlin's southwest corner we also passed the recently erected (and somewhat

controversial) monument to Prince Vladimir the Great, an imposing statue more than 50 feet tall of the 10th century ruler who introduced Christianity to the Slavs and is considered the founder of the nation. Many critics of the monument feel that it was a politically motivated snub at the Ukraine, which also claims St. Vladimir as their own.

Our bus parked near the Kutafia Tower (one of 20 towers surrounding the walled Kremlin). From this tower we crossed the Trinity Bridge, overlooking the Alexander Gardens below, and entered the Kremlin via the Trinity Tower gate. The Trinity Tower, situated in the center of the western wall, is the largest of the defensive towers and serves as the main through-passage into the Kremlin (at least for tourists).

The Kremlin is a walled citadel built in an irregular triangular shape in the heart of Moscow. In front of this fortified complex, to the west, is the beautiful Alexander Gardens. Just to the east are Red Square and the stunning St. Basil's Cathedral. To the south is the Moscow River. This fortress was the center of government under the Soviets, and today it is the seat of the Russian Federation. When one refers to the 'Kremlin' nowadays, it is akin to saying the White House. This is where the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, lives and works.

The Kremlin was constructed on a hilltop called Borovitsky Hill, one of the seven major hills of Moscow. It has an altitude of roughly 145 meters and sits at the confluence of the Moscow and Neglinnaya Rivers, which made it an idea place for a settlement. Archaeological finds have recorded Finno-Ugric peoples living here as far back as the 2nd century BC. The Slavs began occupying Borovitsky Hill during the Middle Ages. The earlier wooden fortresses that existed on the hill were repeatedly attacked and destroyed by invaders. It wasn't until Moscow's Grand Duke Ivan III – in the 15th century – that the current Kremlin began to take shape. Ivan III (also referred to as Ivan the Great) commissioned some of Italy's finest Renaissance architects to design the new walls and towers. During his long reign he also built several palaces and a series of spectacular cathedrals within his new fortress. His grandson, Ivan the Terrible, would later add a new palace and another cathedral.

When the Rurik dynasty came to an end, ushering in the turbulent Time of Troubles, an invading Polish force occupied the Kremlin for two years (1610 – 1612). The volunteer army of Dmitry Pozharsky, a Rurik prince, and

his skilled commander, a former merchant named Kuzma Minin, liberated the fortress. The liberation of the Kremlin (and Moscow) from the Poles was an important historical event in that it paved the way for Mikhail Romanov to become the new tsar, thus establishing the Romanov dynasty. Under the early Romanov rulers, another cathedral and several more palaces were built inside the Kremlin, including the Patriarch Palace (for the head of the Russian Orthodox Church). Following the death of Tsar Feodor III, a power struggle ensued that led to what is known as the *Moscow Uprising of 1682*. Mob rioting and looting broke out in Moscow, making a terrible impression on the then 10-year old Peter the Great, who would eventually abandon the Kremlin (and Moscow) and set up his new capital in St. Petersburg. It wasn't until Catherine the Great decided to build herself a palace inside the Kremlin that the Romanovs took any real interest in the fortress again. Her architects would tear down several churches, palaces and a portion of the Kremlin wall to build several structures, including her new palace, a monastery and the spacious and luxurious Kremlin Senate (where President Putin works today). In 1812, when Napoleon invaded Moscow, portions of the Kremlin were either destroyed or partially damaged by fire and explosions.

In 1838, Tsar Nicolas I commissioned a new imperial palace to be built inside the Kremlin. His architect, Konstantin Thon, created a structure that in many ways rivaled the tsar's Winter Palace in St. Petersburg, which I think was the general idea. It cost a staggering amount of money to build back then (and even in the 1990s, its renovation cost over one billion dollars). In addition to all the imperial perks (apartments, dining halls, etc) the Grand Kremlin Palace contains dazzling reception halls and a ceremonial red staircase used for receiving visiting dignitaries. The Grand Kremlin Palace is where Putin resides.

Throughout its history, many original Kremlin structures were torn down to create new ones, depending on the needs or whims of the reigning rulers. The Soviet era was no different. A monastery, convent, palace and a cathedral were all torn down to build several Soviet buildings, including a military school. The golden double eagle emblem that represented the tsarist government was replaced by the shiny red Soviet stars which still adorn the top of the tower gates surrounding the fortress. During the late 1950s, Khrushchev ordered the construction of a modern arena for Communist Party meetings called the State Kremlin Palace (or Kremlin Palace of Congresses). It sits to the right as you enter the fortress from the Trinity Tower gate and looks somewhat out of place with its sleek marble facade

and tinted windows surrounded by so many historical buildings. In 1961, the Soviet government opened the Kremlin museums to the general public. Considering that the entire site only measures roughly 68 acres (27.7 hectares), the Kremlin pacts quite a historical punch for its size. The structures within its walls were among the first designated World Heritage buildings of Russia. And I would be lying if I told you I wasn't excited about visiting this place.

Immediately to our left, as we entered via the Trinity Tower gate, was a large elongated, two-story building known as the Kremlin Arsenal. Initially constructed in 1736, this armory has since been torn down and rebuilt several times. Today, it is still used by the military, home to the Kremlin Regiment, the security detail that protects the Russian president and the entire complex. It is closed off to tourists, but you can still admire the structure. The exterior brick walls are painted yellow, like many of the official buildings within the Kremlin, and contain two rows of arched windows with white limestone frames. What draws one's attention, though, are the rows of cannons and mortars that are placed all around the building. These are *actual* artillery pieces captured from Napoleon's retreating army from the battles of 1812. Directly in front of the Kremlin Arsenal is the modern-looking State Kremlin Palace (arena) that Khrushchev built. Following the fall of the Soviet Union, the new Russian Federation re-adopted the golden double eagle for its emblem, and a large one hangs at the top of this building above the entrance doors. Our guide Alexandria told us the arena is now used for special events and performances.

We walked south along the pavement adjacent to a gray brick road called Trinity Street until we reached Ivanovskaya Square. There was no traffic on this or any street we saw while at the Kremlin, I'm assuming only government vehicles on official business are allowed to drive here. And it was forbidden to walk on the streets other than at designated crosswalks. The security detail made sure of it. If you stepped onto the brick road, a guard was soon admonishing you to get back onto the sidewalk. At Ivanovskaya Square, Alexandria pointed to the building across the street, the famous Kremlin Senate Palace where Putin and his administration run the government. This is the same building where all the communist rulers from Lenin to Gorbachev had offices. It's an interesting three-storied yellow building, constructed in the late 1700s in the shape of an isosceles triangle with each side measuring approximately 100 meters in length. The main façade has an arched passage similar to a triumphal arch, leading to an inner

courtyard. The exterior is styled with a curious mix of both Doric and Ionic columns. One section of the roof is capped with a large green dome, a Russian Federation flag hoisted above it. The entire building runs along the side of the Kremlin wall that overlooks Red Square. I read it is absolutely gorgeous inside, but we could not get any closer because the security cordon (although mostly out-of-sight) was pretty intense, as one can imagine.

We continued walking along the sidewalk in front of Ivanovskaya Square and came upon a large ornamental artillery piece called the Tsar's Cannon. At almost 20 feet long, this is the largest 'cannon by caliber' in the world. It was built in 1586 to showcase Russia's artillery casting skills (the massive gun was made of bronze, which explains its green color today). Four enormous iron cannon balls are piled in front of it. The weapon was created only for symbolic purposes, but it is believed to have been fired at least once. What a gaping hole that must have left! If the cannon's size didn't impress you, well, hold onto your vodka glass because just a little bit further down the street – on the corner of Ivanovskaya Square and Borovitskaya Street – was the Tsar Bell, the largest bell on record. Also made of bronze, it was cast in 1737, commissioned by Empress Anna. The first Tsar Bell (there were three altogether) weighed 40,000 pounds; it was completed in the year 1600 and placed inside the original Ivan the Great Bell Tower. But the building caught fire and the bell came crashing down and was ruined. The second bell was cast in 1655 and was even heavier than the first, at 220,000 pounds. This one caught fire in 1701. Empress Anna decided to build a third bell by melting down the remnants of the first two and adding more bronze to the mix. When completed, the new Tsar Bell measured 22 feet in diameter, was 20 feet tall and weighed in at a hefty 445,166 pounds. Sadly, though, 'three times' was *not* the charm. Another fire broke out in the Kremlin and spread to the wooden structure where the bell was being completed. It caught fire and the men guarding the bell doused it with cold water thinking it would help; instead, the water caused small cracks to develop and a huge piece actually broke off. It has never been rung. The bell is decorated with relief images of saints, angels, plants and nearly life-size images of Empress Anna and Tsar Alexis I. It now sits atop a sidewalk pedestal – dwarfing the pedestrians who walk around it on a daily basis – next to the Ivan the Great Bell Tower (the broken piece resting against it). The famous French satirist Voltaire once quipped that the Kremlin's greatest achievements are a cannon that's never been fired and a bell that's never been rung. But they're still impressive, nonetheless.

We walked down Borovitskaya Street and entered what is probably the most visited site in the Kremlin, the Cathedral Square. Situated in the heart of the fortress, the square is surrounded by several historical religious buildings: three cathedrals, two churches and the Ivan the Great Bell Tower. Alexandria led us to the middle of the open square, pointing out the structures, giving us a little information on each building. On the north side of the square is the *Cathedral of the Dormition* (also referred to as the Assumption Cathedral). It was completed in 1479 and served as the main church of Moscow where all the tsars were crowned. It has a white, massive limestone façade and is topped with five large golden cupolas. The Cathedral of the Dormition was the only structure we entered while at the Kremlin (this, by the way, was due to the fact that it was so late in the day and the Kremlin's visiting hours were coming to a close).

On the southwest corner of the square is the *Cathedral of the Annunciation*, built in 1489. This building is connected to the main complex that makes up the Grand Kremlin Palace just behind it. Constructed of brick with a façade of white limestone, it has nine golden domes topped with Orthodox crosses and decorated with rich *kokoshnik* ornamentations, these are designs inspired by the traditional headdresses worn by Russian women at the time. The cathedral – like so many of the Orthodox churches – is dedicated to the *Theotokos*, which means Mary, Mother of God, the most revered icon in the country. On the southeast corner of the square is the *Cathedral of the Archangel Michael*, built in 1508. This was the original necropolis of the tsars (and the earlier grand princes of Moscow) before they started interring them at the Peter and Paul Cathedral in St. Petersburg. Inside are 54 burial sites; many have ornately decorated tombstones and cases, including that of the murdered 10-year old Dmitry who was later canonized a saint. The building's exterior is also limestone but differs in its nod to the Italian Renaissance with characteristic semi-circular niches, shell-shaped ornamentations and arc-shaped entranceways decorated with floral patterns. The roof, like the Cathedral of the Dormition, is topped with five domes, one very large golden one (representing Jesus) surrounded by four smaller ones (representing the Four Evangelists: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John).

Next to the Cathedral of the Dormition is the *Church of the Deposition of the Virgin's Robes*, a one-domed church built during the late 15th century originally as the chapel of the Patriarch of Moscow, but later taken over by the royal family. It is dedicated upon a 5th century festival that celebrates a

tradition (or story) of the Virgin Mary's robes that were supposedly taken from Palestine to Constantinople where it protected the city from being conquered. Inside is a display of wooden sculptures from the 14th to the 16th centuries. Behind the *Church of the Deposition of the Virgin's Robes* is the *Terem Palace*, the official residence of the royal family during the 17th century. Only the ground floor of the original palace remains, connected now to the Grand Kremlin Palace and, as such, off-limits to the public. From the square, the most notable thing about the structure were the eleven golden domes surmounted above the Golden Tsaritsa's Chamber, which I'm assuming is the back of the palace (I'm not certain, though).

Beyond the Cathedral of the Dormition, on the northern side of the square, are the *Patriarch's Palace* (the stately residence of the head of the Russian Orthodox Church) and the connecting *Church of the Twelve Apostles*, commissioned during the mid-1600s by Patriarch Nikon (a close friend of Tsar Alexis I) who rose to become a very powerful figure in the country before his controversial reforms led to his own downfall. The exterior walls of the Church of the Twelve Apostles have two belts of columned arches, and a very unique two-arched passageway that connects to the Patriarch's Palace. The roof has five green-helmeted domes topped with golden crosses.

On the northeast corner of Cathedral Square is the Ivan the Great Bell Tower, initially constructed in 1508 – on the spot that supposedly marks the very center of Moscow – it was refurbished and heightened later on. At 266 feet tall (81 meters) this structure was the tallest thing in Moscow up until the communist revolution of 1917 (a royal decree made it illegal to build anything higher). The bell tower served as the belfry for the three cathedrals within the square, but its 21 bells were also rung to sound the alarm if enemies were approaching the city. The structure consists of three parts, all made of brick and whitewashed with limestone like the rest of the square's buildings. You have the main tower and then a separate building with two smaller towers, each topped with golden domes and crosses. The massive Tsar's Bell we saw earlier was supposed to be placed inside this tower, but when the bell splintered during the fire it eventually ended up on a pedestal along the sidewalk in back of the building.

The Cathedral Square also has one notable non-religious structure called the *Palace of the Facets*, built in 1491. This rather small, almost non-descript looking palace – sandwiched between the Dormition Cathedral and

the Cathedral of the Annunciation – is the oldest preserved non-secular building in Moscow. Ivan III had this stone palace built after fires destroyed the previous wooden structures within the Kremlin. It was used as a reception hall for banquets, coronations and state ceremonies, and, in fact, still serves in this capacity today, which makes it off-limits to most tourists. The Palace of the Facets has been damaged and rebuilt several times; this is the only remaining section, its western side is connected to the Grand Kremlin Palace. In recent years it underwent extensive restorations, and while the palace appears to be a three-story rectangular building based on its façade, it is actually a one-story structure with a semi-basement. The inside is lavishly decorated with frescoes, gilded carvings and has a vaulted main hall.

Following her brief explanation of the buildings surrounding the Cathedral Square, we followed Alexandria into the Cathedral of the Dormition (dedicated to the death of Mary, Mother of God). Commissioned by Ivan III, the building was designed by an Italian Renaissance architect and constructed between 1475-79. This became the mother church of Moscow, and from 1547 till the end of the 19th century it was where the coronation of all the Russian monarchs was conducted. The building is also the burial place for many of the ranking members of the Russian Orthodox Church. It has a three-nave design with a high vaulted cross-dome. The structure is supported by six pillars, five apses and is topped by five golden domes with crosses. The tall, spacious interior is dominated by religious frescoes with ornately decorated doors, tombs and the main altar. The huge multi-tiered iconostasis contains the usual paintings of Orthodox saints, but it also served as a sort of trophy wall for the Russian monarchs who would place icons on it from the cities they conquered.

We left the Cathedral Square and headed down Borovitskaya Street to the southwestern corner of the Kremlin (between the Blagoveschenskaya, Borovitskaya and Komendantskaya Towers). From here we were able to see the Kremlin Armory building, which is now a museum that houses the Russian Diamond Fund, a collection of gemstones and jewelry spanning the 5th to the 20th centuries. Some of the incredible exhibits within the Kremlin Armory museum include the imperial crown of Russia, ten Faberge imperial Easter eggs, the ivory throne of Ivan the Terrible, and imperial regalia such as sabers, helmets and necklaces. We strolled up Dvortsovaya Street to the corner of the Grand Kremlin Palace (where Putin lives) to take some photos of the building from across the street, and that was as close as we could get.

From here we backtracked to the Trinity Tower gate and exited the Kremlin, walking through the upper section of the Alexander Gardens. This was one of the first urban parks of Moscow, built during the city's reconstruction phase following the defeat of Napoleon's forces. In 1812, prior to the French army's occupation of Moscow, the city went up in flames and was greatly destroyed. Historians seem to blame the Russians themselves for the fire. Count Rostopchin, the governor of Moscow during Napoleon's invasion, ordered the Kremlin and other important buildings to be blown up or set on fire to deny the French access. Apparently, other saboteurs throughout the city also set fires and soon all of Moscow (which was mostly built of wood) was ablaze. After Napoleon's defeat, Tsar Alexander I commissioned his architects to rebuild the city, and this beautiful park was one of those projects. It runs the entire length of the Kremlin's western wall. The area we were walking through is called the Upper Gardens; it has memorials to the War of 1812 and an obelisk originally erected to honor the 300th anniversary of the Romanov Dynasty, but once the Bolsheviks were in power they carved out the names of the imperial rulers and re-dedicated the monument to Lenin and a host of communist and socialist philosophers. Throughout the park are beautiful sections decorated with colorful flowerbed arrangements.

As we approached the north end of Alexander Garden we passed the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier with its eternal flame and military sentinels standing at attention. Constructed in 1967 along the western wall of the Kremlin, it contains the body of a Russian soldier who was killed on the very spot where the German forward advance into Moscow was halted. Just before the Tomb of the Unknown Solder are a series of commemorative stone markers inscribed with the names of the key Russian cities that faced the brunt of the German invasion during the Great Patriotic War. Beyond the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier we reached the entrance into Red Square. Alexandra led us over a hilly section that took us directly into the square, a wide rectangular open space of cobblestones surrounded by some incredible architectural structures. I took it all in, slack-jawed. It's hard not to be impressed with Red Square. So much of Russia's history has unfolded here.

Alexandra had us gather in the center of the square and began pointing out all the various buildings. To our immediate right, at the foot of the eastern wall of the Kremlin, was Lenin's Mausoleum where the preserved body of the late communist leader has been lying in state since 1924.

Although Lenin had requested to be buried alongside his mother in St. Petersburg, the long line of daily mourners following his unexpected death from a massive stroke impressed Stalin so much that he ordered the body to be preserved in perpetuity, turning it into a holy relic for the Soviet cause. How his body was preserved against decay for so many decades was a closely guarded state secret. The public is allowed to file through the tomb and see the embalmed figure, but no picture-taking or any disrespectful behavior is tolerated. You gawk at the mummy quietly and move on. Now that the Soviet Union is no more, there has been a lot of political talk about finally laying Lenin to rest in St. Petersburg, as per his wishes. Both leftists and tour operators in Moscow are vehemently opposed. This mausoleum represents the most sacred shrine of Soviet communism, and Lenin's body is the embodiment of that revolution. And, truth be told, it attracts the curious to Red Square. In back of Lenin's Mausoleum are the tombs of other famous communists like Josef Stalin, Leonid Brezhnev, Felix Dzerzhinsky (founder of the Cheka, the forerunner of the KGB) and even American writer John Reed who wrote a famous account of the Bolshevik Revolution entitled *Ten Days that Shook the World*.

Directly in front of Lenin's Mausoleum, across the square, lies the enormous GUM shopping mall. I had no idea that this famous department store building was situated in Red Square, but after researching the history of GUM, it certainly fit in with the rest of the structures. Catherine the Great was the first to commission a huge trading center just east of the Kremlin wall. Following the Fire of Moscow of 1812 a new trade building was created during the reconstruction of the city, consisting of rows of small stores for retailers and merchants. From 1890 to 1893, the building was re-designed and a series of upper trading rows were added to the original structure; a gorgeous building that takes up the entire block in front of the Kremlin east wall, combining elements of Russian medieval architecture with a modern steel framework and topped by a spectacular curving glass ceiling in each of the building's three arcades, constructed using more than 20,000 panes of glass. The façade of the building fronting the square is divided into several horizontal tiers lined with red Finnish granite.

During Soviet times, the trading building was renamed GUM, the abbreviation for *State Department Store*, and was part of a chain of stores, or malls, situated around the country run by the government (although the one at Red Square has always been the best). In 1928, when Stalin began implementing his Five Year Plans to modernize Russia he converted the

GUM building into offices. In 1932, Stalin's second wife Nadezhda committed suicide and GUM was briefly used to display her body. GUM reopened as a department store in 1953. Its close proximity to the powers that be meant the store was never plagued with shortages like other government-run markets, and the queues to shop here were very, very long. Today, the building is a privately owned, high-end shopping mall that has retained the GUM name (only now it translates into 'Main Universal Store'). GUM is an *expensive* place to shop, with hundreds of retail stores ranging from designer fashion boutiques, name brand perfumeries, tech stores and upscale jewelry outlets. I found it somewhat ironic that this bastion of conspicuous consumerism would end up across from where Lenin – the Father of Russian communism – lies in state.

On the north end of Red Square is the large, red building of the State Historical Museum, constructed in the late 19th century combining elements of pre-Peterine Russian architecture with Byzantine architecture in a style popular at the time called neo-Russian or Russian Revival. The museum's collection runs into the millions, with exhibits that showcase the history of the Russian Empire from the time of the Stone Age all the way to the Romanov imperial family.

On the northeastern corner of the square sits the Kazan Cathedral, dedicated to the icon *Theotokos* of Kazan. When Prince Dmitry Pozharsky liberated Moscow from the armies of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth at the end of the Times of Troubles (in 1612), he claimed to have been helped by the intervention of the Virgin Mary (Our Lady of Kazan). He financed a wooden church to be built here on her behalf. After the original building burned down in 1632, Tsar Michael I ordered the construction of this small, one-domed brick church, which was later expanded. During its day, the Kazan Cathedral was one of the most revered churches in the city, with annual processions to honor the liberation of Moscow. But in 1936, the building was destroyed under the direction of Stalin so that Red Square could be lengthened for Soviet military parades. The Kazan Cathedral that exists today is a re-constructed model of the original.

On the southern end of the wide cobbled-stone plaza is the crown jewel of Red Square: *St. Basil's Cathedral*. No image of Russia is more iconic than that of this famous church. The structure catches your eye from the moment you enter Red Square, and no matter how many times you photograph this church, it is never enough. Not surprising, either, since the

architectural style consists of a combination of dazzling patterns, shapes and colors that are uniquely Russian…*yet somehow different, too*. Officially, two architects, Barma and Postnik Yakovlev, are listed as the geniuses behind the construction, but historians now believe that the names refer to the same person, Postnik Yakovlev. No one seems to be certain what inspired the design of this magnificent church. Looking at it you can see influences of Byzantine architecture in the corbel arches, or Asian influences in the form of its unique onion-domes and round towers (seen in famous mosques of that time), or even the influences of the wooden churches of the Russian north, whose motifs, particularly in the votive churches, were used in the masonry. Regardless of whatever styles influenced the final image of this spectacular structure, it is a one-of-a-kind masterpiece. And to think, Stalin had to be *persuaded* not to tear it down when he expanded Red Square.

St. Basil's Cathedral – (which goes by a number of 'official' religious titles, but *St. Basil's* is the most popular, by far) – was commissioned by Ivan the Terrible in the mid 16th century to commemorate his capture of Kazan (putting an end to one of the last strong Golden Horde states in Russia). The foundation was made of white stone. Red bricks were used to construct the actual cathedral, the whole thing in the shape of a large bonfire (the onion-dome rooftops are supposed to be flames rising up to the sky). Nothing like it had ever been built in Russia before. During the 17th century, with the introduction of different paints and dyes, Russians became fond of vibrant colors and hues. This led to an explosion of icon and mural artwork, and the domes were re-painted to their magnificent colors. The most unusual feature of St. Basil's Cathedral is that the tall, tent-roofed tower of the main church is actually off-centered, surrounded and partially obscured by a seemingly hodge-podge collection of nine chapels with different domes, an architectural jumble of sorts which only adds to its uniqueness and appeal. In front of the cathedral, atop three massive blocks of granite, is a large commemorative bronze statue of Prince Dmitry Pozharsky and his general, Kuzma Minin, the men responsible for liberating Moscow from the invading Polish forces during the Times of Troubles. Initially, the statue stood in the center of Red Square but the Soviets later moved it to its present location.

And so here I was, in the middle of Red Square, taking it all in. I remembered all those television news clips of this plaza, usually from when the Soviets were having their annual Revolution Day parades. The square would be filled with hundreds of thousands of cheering Muscovites and a procession of marching troops, followed by tanks and missiles sitting atop

mobile launchers, the whole spectacle observed by the Politburo leadership from the Kremlin Senate Palace, which overlooks Red Square. Looking at it now, though, the plaza actually looked much smaller than it did on TV. *Go figure*.

We were given roughly an hour to wander on our own. Elena instructed us to meet on the opposite side of the State Historical Museum building – facing Manege Square – in front of the equestrian statue of Marshall Georgy Zhukov, the brilliant Russian general who helped drive the Germans out of Russia and led the Battle for Berlin. At this point, I split from my companions and headed over to St. Basil's Cathedral to take closer photographs of the church. I also took pictures of Lenin's Mausoleum and the other buildings in the vicinity before heading over to the GUM shopping mall for a look around. This was *definitely* one of the most beautiful malls I've ever been in. I browsed beneath the glass-paneled ceiling along three elegant levels of walkways – the upper ones connected by pedestrian bridges that looked down onto the main floor – lined by ornately designed banisters and railings. The central parts of the mall were decorated for the fall season, with pumpkin displays surrounded by potted trees with yellow and orange leaves. Most of the stores – regardless of what they sold – had designer brands from all over the world. I stopped at a kiosk to buy a cone of pistachio ice cream. It has become a sort of tradition for visitors to eat ice cream inside GUM; this is based on a popular joke that the only thing the average Russian shopper can afford at GUM is the ice cream (a one-scoop cone costs about $1.50 US…and, yes, it does appear to be the cheapest thing you can buy inside the mall!).

I could not locate my companions inside GUM, so I opted to check out the very busy Manege Square on the opposite side of the State Historical Museum. The Manege Square is a wide-open pedestrian plaza just to the north of the upper Alexander Gardens. It is a very popular gathering spot for young people (soccer riots and political protests have broken out here in the past). In the late 18th century, this area used to be known as the Moiseyevskaya Square, which grew into a kind of seedy neighborhood crammed with public housing and taverns (nicknamed Moscow's Belly). In the 1930s, the Soviets tore it down to build a plaza for communist rallies and demonstrations, and renamed it Manege Square because it abutted the Moscow Manege building, a former indoor horse riding academy that sits on the western end of the plaza and is now home to the Moscow Design Museum. Fronting the square on the eastern side is the Four Seasons Hotel

Moscow. In the center of this plaza is a jutting glass dome that is actually the top of an underground four-story shopping mall (and parking garage) called the *Okhotny Ryad*, containing more than 160 shops.

I took some photographs of the equestrian statue of Marshall Zhukov and then strolled around the square. The side directly in front of the Four Seasons Hotel Moscow resembled an autumn festival, it was full of sidewalk vendors, carousels for children, pumpkin and other autumn displays and an assortment of unusual games or attractions, including, believe it or not, simulated surf board riding. Participants put on wet suits and tried their skill at surfboarding over a continuous jet stream of water. I was shocked. It was nearly nightfall and *very* cold outside, with the temperature continuing to drop, and these young Russians were trying their hand at surfing! Unbelievable.

I walked over to the nearby *Iberian Gate* to take some photos. This is the only existing gate from the historical neighborhood called the *Kitai-gorod* just to the east of the Kremlin. Sandwiched between the Moscow City Hall building and the State Historical Museum, the Iberian Gate (also known as the Resurrection Gate) connects the northwestern side of Red Square with the Manege Square. The gate was re-constructed in the mid-1990s because the original was destroyed by the Soviets in order to allow heavy military vehicles access into Red Square during annual parades. It has twin-arched towers, and contains a small, star-studded, blue domed chapel in front with a shrine dedicated to one of the Virgin Mary icons. Local tradition requires those who enter Red Square to first stop in the chapel and pay homage at the shrine. Apparently, Muscovites take this seriously. Even the tsars used to pray here alongside the general public before entering the square.

At 6:30pm I rendezvoused with my tour group in front of the Zhukov Statue. Elena and Alexandria led us past the Moscow City Hall building and through the adjacent Revolution Plaza (which contains the last Karl Marx statue in Moscow). We stopped along the street directly in front of the Theater Square. On the opposite side of this fountain plaza was the legendary Bolshoi Theater. I would be attending a ballet performance there the following evening. Our tour bus pulled up and we quickly filed in. We were on our way now to a scheduled dinner in the financial district. The bus slowly joined the one-way traffic heading east towards Lubyanka Square. It was slow going, but I cannot say the traffic moved at a snail's pace…*because that would be an insult to snails everywhere*. This was inertia

in motion. Whoever coined the phrase ‘time does not stand still’ has never been caught in Moscow’s downtown rush hour. It took us nearly thirty minutes just to traverse the three and half short blocks to the intersection where the Lubyanka Square is located.

Looming large over Lubyanka Square is the infamous Lubyanka building. Originally built in 1898 to house an insurance company, it was seized by the Bolsheviks and became the headquarters for the Cheka, which later became the KGB. The ground floor contains a prison, notorious for its interrogations, tortures and executions during Soviet times. It has undergone reconstruction and additions over the years, and remains a massive block-style building still used today for state policing and intelligence-gathering, housing a directorate of the FSB (the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation, the agency that replaced the KGB) and the Boarder Guard Service (responsible for protecting Russia’s borders) which is now a branch of the FSB. Ironically, on one corner of the square, next to the Lubyanka building, is the Central Children’s Store, considered the largest toy shop in the world, a large mall complex comprising of over 100 children’s stores. It has a beautiful atrium containing one of the largest mechanical clocks ever made.

We turned south at Lubyanka Square and followed the streets to the Moscow River, where we made a right and drove along the embankment road heading west, past the Kremlin. Across the Moscow River, to our left, was the small islet called Bolotny Island; its main street, *Balchug*, has one of Moscow’s oldest market areas. On the western tip of the island is a large monument to Peter the Great. We continued along the river, passing the Cathedral of Christ the Savior. This was actually the second cathedral erected on this spot. The first one was commissioned in 1812 by Alexander I to honor what he felt was divine intervention in the war against Napoleon’s forces (and also to commemorate the Russians who had died in defense of the country). The tsar never got to see the completed building because it wasn’t finished until the 1860s. Later, Stalin had the church demolished to make room for a colossal Soviet government complex, which was never built due to the German invasion. After the fall of the USSR, the property was returned to the Russian Orthodox Church and this new cathedral was constructed in the late 1990s. At a height of almost 340 feet (103 meters), this is considered the tallest Orthodox Christian church in the world. Although, it was recently discovered that the massive structure is slowly

sinking and will require major underpinning and reconstruction work to rectify the situation.

As the Moscow River continued its bend, we crossed through the Arbat District and headed into the Presnensky District, to an area called the Moscow International Business Center (MIBC). This financial sector, situated near the Moscow River just east of the Third Ring Road, is home to the city's modern business district. Conceived in the early 1990s and still under construction in parts, MIBC is built along a 150-acre (60 hectare) land space that was once home to a stone quarry and several abandoned factories. Today, several impressive glass skyscrapers, among the tallest in Europe, have been erected using eye-catching architectural designs. The Evolution Tower, for example, is a 55-story office building with 51 of its floors rotating 3 degrees from one another, creating a swirling effect that makes the tower appear like it's twisting into the air. By the time we arrived in the MIBC it was already nighttime and these uniquely shaped tall buildings were lit up like giant ornaments.

We had an included dinner in a restaurant inside the Crown Plaza Hotel located within the World Trade Center building in the MIBC area. I believe they served us a traditional Russian meal, although I don't recall exactly what it was, just that it ended with a delicious piece of Napoleon cake, a flaky French pastry filled with crème. After dinner, those of us who had opted for the Moscow by Night excursion boarded one of two buses (the other bus took the remaining tour members back to the boat).

It was 9:00pm, dark and very cold outside when we began the Moscow by Night tour. The bus drove through the MIBC district so we could see its collection of impressive buildings: besides the twisting Evolution Tower, we also saw the Federation Tower (the tallest completed building in Europe), the Mercury City Tower, another tall skyscraper with a golden glass façade, the greenish Eurasia Tower, the only steel skyscraper in the bunch (the rest are made of concrete), the Naberezhnaya (or Embankment) Tower, consisting of three interconnected buildings that seem to wrap around each other in a semi circle, the Capital City complex, which has two skyscrapers and an office building, and the Expocenter building. These were just some of the structures that Alexandria pointed out to us, and all were beautifully lit against the night sky. The MIBC is slated for more development over the coming years.

We drove back east, along the Moscow River, and stopped in front of a large Soviet-era white structure called the *House of the Government of the Russian Federation* (more commonly referred to as the White House), this is the primary office of the Russian government and the official workplace of the prime minister. A few blocks north of this building is where the U.S. Embassy is located. From here we crossed the Moscow River along Kutuzovsky Avenue, heading in a southwesterly direction until we arrived at Victory Park. Our bus stopped near the Triumphal Arch, a re-constructed replica of the 1834 triumphal gate built to commemorate the defeat of Napoleon. Made of brick with cast iron columns and statues, it includes a six-horse chariot that sits on top of the arch. We exited the bus and walked across the avenue to visit Victory Park, situated on *Poklonnaya Gora*, the hill where Napoleon waited in vain for his troops to conquer Moscow. Originally commissioned by the Soviets in the 1960s – to celebrate the victories over both Napoleon's armies in 1812 and the invading Germans during the Great Patriotic War – it was actually completed under Boris Yeltsin's administration in the mid-1990s (just in time for the 50th anniversary of the Second World War). It is a large open square and the strong winds made for a bitterly cold experience.

Victory Park is considered a last nod to the Soviet-era style of building grandiose triumphal monuments. The main section consists of a wide central avenue called the "Years of War" built on five terraces that symbolize the five years of the Great Patriotic War. Running along this avenue is a dramatic series of 1,418 fountains (one for each day the war lasted) and leads to the circular Victors' Place with its tall, triangular obelisk surmounted by a statue of Nike, the Goddess of Victory. Surrounding the central avenue are several religious memorials: an Orthodox chapel, a mosque and a synagogue. And behind all of this is the equally impressive crescent-shaped and columned building of the Museum of the Great Patriotic War, which gives a stark account of the suffering of the Soviet peoples during World War II and their eventual triumph over the Germans. By comparison, the section of the park dedicated to the defeat of Napoleon was considerably smaller in scale and almost unforgettable. According to our guide, on May 9th (Victory Day) of each year, this park becomes the center of Moscow's Great Patriotic War celebrations. Hundreds of thousands (including remaining veterans and survivors) cram into the open square to participate. It's interesting to note that Russians tend to focus more on celebration than remembrance during these kinds of annual holidays, and this one is very popular in the country. It was an impressive memorial, but I

would have enjoyed the visit more if I wasn't shivering uncontrollably from the cold, gusty winds. I was grateful when we got back on the bus.

We continued westward on Kutuzovsky Avenue and turned left on Minskaya Street, driving south through the hilly Ramenki District and coming to stop in front of the famous Moscow State University campus along Universitetsky Prospekt. We got off the bus near an observation platform directly above the Sparrow Hills section (*Vorobyovy Gory*) just to the right of the Moscow River, which offers a panoramic view of the city's skyline. On the opposite side of the river we could see the Luzhniki Stadium (formerly the Lenin Stadium) where the opening and closing ceremonies of the 1980 Summer Olympics were held. Russia is currently preparing to host the 2018 FIFA World Cup and during our stay in Moscow we passed several stadiums either being constructed or undergoing renovations.

From the Moscow State University campus we drove back across the Moscow River via the Luzhnetsky Bridge and followed the embankment road northwest towards New Arbat Avenue. Along the way we crossed the enormous Luzhniki Stadium and stopped briefly at the Novodevichy Ponds Park to take pictures of the 16th century Novodevichy Convent complex just on the other side of the pond. I would be visiting this convent fortress the following day as part of an optional excursion. On our way towards New Arbat Avenue we passed several embassies, including the new British Embassy with its unique five-tower construction. Our Moscow by Night tour ended back at the Kremlin, where we were given twenty minutes to re-visit Red Square. It was almost 11:00pm on a Friday night, and downtown was hopping. Traffic was almost as bad as it had been during rush hour as Muscovites were still celebrating the start of the weekend. Red Square was lit up like a Christmas tree. Floodlights shined against the Kremlin's Senate Palace building, the red stars above the fortress towers glowing intensely. A line of yellow lights traced the façade of the GUM department store building. But the most striking feature inside Red Square had to be the image of St. Basil's Cathedral, its onion domes colorfully illuminated against the night sky. *What a sight*!

We re-boarded our bus and drove back to the riverboat. It had been a *very* long day. I wearily climbed into bed just after midnight and fell asleep promptly.

Day Eleven

I awoke at 5:30am, despite being dog-tired from the previous day's outing. But once I'm awake I hardly ever go right back to sleep, so I busied myself writing in my journal and watching the international news on TV. After showering and shaving I headed over to the restaurant for breakfast and then returned to my room to do my last-minute packing. Later that afternoon we would be transferring to a hotel near the downtown area for our final night in Russia. At 9:00am I placed my suitcase in the hallway and proceeded to the boat's reception desk to check out. Those of us who were doing the optional excursion tour of the Moscow subway system and the Novodevichy Convent gathered on the pier at 9:30am. Our local guide for the day was named Sergei.

We left the pier following the same path into the city as the previous day, but stopped at the Tverskaya Zastava Square where the Belorusskaya subway metro station is located. On the drive over, Sergei gave us a brief history of the Moscow subway system:

Prior to World War I, Tsar Nicolas II paid a visit to his cousin in England – the newly crowned King George V – and was impressed with London's Underground rail system. At the time, Moscow's population was only about one million (compared to over 17 million today), but due to its limited infrastructure the streets were often congested. Nicolas II commissioned a subway system to be built. Plans were drawn up but the outbreak of World War I – and the eventual overthrow of the monarchy by the Bolsheviks – put everything on hold. It wasn't until the mid-1930s, during Stalin's massive campaign to modernize the country, that the subway was finally constructed. The subway officially opened in 1935 with 13 stations and one line stretching 6.9 miles (11 kilometers) within the city limits. This was the first underground rail system in Russia. Today, the Moscow Metro has grown into a rapid transit system comprising of 214 stations (87 of which are deep underground) with 12 lines covering a total length of 226 miles (365 kilometers), connecting four other cities within the Moscow Oblast to the capital and making this the sixth largest subway

system in the world. The deepest station is the Park Pobedy station situated 276 feet (84 kilometers) underground. Approximately 7 million commuters ride the Metro daily. The current fare is 55 rubles, or roughly one U.S. dollar.

Tours of the Moscow Metro are quite popular. Some of the original subway stations will make you feel like you've been transported back in time to Stalinist Russia. They are immaculately maintained. You will not see trash or graffiti (or smell urine anywhere). Muscovites are proud of their Metro. The original stations were decorated with Soviet-themed mosaics, tile work, murals and statues. Most of it has been carefully preserved. You'll see the hammer-and-sickle emblems on light fixtures and the red communist stars on tiled walls and trim, and artwork decorations extolling the virtues of the socialist way of life. And while communism has fallen into disfavor, these older subway stations serve as a reminder of that time, not unlike the images of Imperial Russia captured by the preservation of the tsars' palaces. Someone in our group asked Sergei how is it that the artwork hasn't been stolen or vandalized? He told us the Soviet government convinced the people to respect the Metro (and all public works projects, for that matter) because it was built for them. If you use the subway twice a day to go back and forth from work, you can always enjoy the artwork without having to steal it. This pride in community seems to have been maintained and fairly consistent throughout the country. Even in the poorer areas we seldom saw trash or graffiti.

The first subway station we visited was the *Belorusskaya Station*, named after the nearby Belorussky Rail Terminal that serves long distance trains to regions south and southwest of Moscow. This subway station was completed in 1952. From the ground level vestibule we had to take an incredibly long (and steep) escalator down to the platform, which was designed with low, white marble pylons supporting a curved plastered ceiling. The light fixtures were encased in ornate scroll-like bases and the ceiling was marked by twelve octagonal mosaics, evenly spaced, depicting images of Belarusian daily life: men and women working in the fields or factories, or soldiers in uniform around a red communist flag. Some of the mosaics displayed the symbols of the CCCP (the communist party logo). The intricately tiled floor had a pattern resembling a Belarusian quilt.

When the next subway train pulled into the platform, we boarded one of the cars and rode for a couple of minutes to the *Novoslobodskaya Station*,

also opened in 1952. This platform had a similarly low, deep pylon tri-vault design, the smooth white-plastered ceiling giving the impression of an underground crypt. The pylons here were traced with pinkish Ural marble and edged with brass molding, and each one contained a magnificent stained glass panel (illuminated from within) surrounded by an ornately decorated brass border, with colorful artwork from several noted Latvian artists. The artwork depicted typical images of Soviet Russia. Elegant conical chandeliers hung down from the ceiling. At the end of the platform was a large gold-leafed mosaic entitled 'Peace Throughout the World'.

We boarded another subway car from here and rode it to the *Kiyevskaya Station*. This subway was opened in 1954. The theme here was to celebrate Russo-Ukrainian solidarity and its design was chosen from a competition held in the Ukraine. The low, square pylons were faced with white marble, and contained mosaics depicting Ukrainian life interspersed with Soviet propaganda and images of the struggles during the Great Patriotic War. A portrait of Vladimir Lenin was situated at the end of the platform. Both the arches of the pylons and the mosaic artworks were bordered with elaborately decorated gold-colored trim.

Our next and final stop was the famous downtown station of *Ploshchad Revolyutsii* situated underneath Revolution Square near the Kremlin. This station is one of three in the general vicinity of Red Square that date back to the 1930s and were part of the original subway system constructed under Stalin. Opened in 1938, the low pylon design has red and yellow marble arches faced with black Armenian marble, partially connected by decorative ventilation grilles and ceiling tracery containing communist party imagery like red stars, sickle-and-hammers or the initials CCCP. The best part of this station was the 76 bronze sculptures that flank the archways. Created by prominent Russian sculptor Matvey Manizer (whose work was famous for portraying *Socialist Realism*), the statues depict everyday citizens of the Soviet Union: schoolchildren, athletes, aviators, factory workers, soldiers and artists. The details are excellent. Walking from statue to statue along the platforms made me feel like I was strolling through a museum. Sergei showed us one particular statue of a frontier guard with his dog. He told us that superstitious Muscovites rub the dog's nose for good luck (it was notably shinier than the rest of the body).

I *really* enjoyed the subway tour of Moscow and highly recommend it to anyone visiting the city. In fact, it might be better to just buy yourself a

paper token for one dollar and spend an entire morning traveling from station to station in the downtown area. We visited four stations but I definitely wanted to see more. Each subway platform was a surprise, offering different designs and artwork that uniquely depicted the impressions of a bygone era. I have seen newer and sleeker subway systems in my day, but none of them have come off anywhere near as *interesting* as the Moscow Metro.

Sergei led us out of the *Ploshchad Revolyutsii* station and we walked several minutes north beyond Revolution Square to the famed theater district of central Moscow. Directly in front of the Karl Marx monument was Theater Square. We made our way along the east side of the fountain plaza and waited for our tour bus to arrive in the insane traffic. In the meantime, Sergei gave us a little background information on Theater Square. The area was designed in a neoclassical style following the *Fire of 1812.* The Neglinnaya River, which has been channeled underground, runs diagonally underneath the square's park. Surrounding Theater Square are several famous buildings, most of which were constructed during the 19th century. One of those is the Gothic Revival six-story structure that is home to TsUM (Central Universal Department Store) one of the ritziest high-end department stores in all of Russia. This place gives GUM a run for its money…(or *your* money as the case may be).

On the east side of the square's park is the *Maly Theater* (which means the 'small theater'). This imperial drama theater, which traces its roots back to the Moscow University drama company of 1756, has been at its present location since 1824. The theater, in addition to having a professional symphony and choir, also runs the Shchepkin Theater School, the oldest drama school in Moscow. Most of the productions center around dramatic classical heritage plays. On the west side of the square's plaza is the *Russian Academic Youth Theater* (RAMT), one of the oldest repertory theater companies doing performances geared specifically towards children and young people. And fronting the north side of Theater Square is the legendary *Bolshoi Theater* (which means the 'grand theater') built in the early 1800s, one of the oldest and most renowned ballet and opera companies in the world. It was designed by Italian-Russian architect Joseph Bove, its neoclassical façade has become one of the iconic images for the city of Moscow. I would be returning to the Bolshoi Theater later that evening to see a ballet performance entitled *Jewels*.

We boarded our bus and once again slowly maneuvered the downtown streets towards the Moscow River, heading west. At one point we turned north and made a left onto Volkhonka Street, passing the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, which houses the largest collection of European art in Moscow, and the front side of the Christ the Savior Cathedral before veering to the left again and following Prechistenka Street in a southwesterly direction. We came upon a park with a monument dedicated to Friedrich Engels (the German philosopher who, together with Karl Marx, created the theory of communism). Further south we drove by the Leo Tolstoy State Museum, one of a complex of museums dedicated to the writer (his house is located not far from here in the Khamovniki District). We also saw the mansion where famed American dancer Isadora Duncan lived with her husband, Russian poet Sergei Esenin. She is universally recognized as the founder of modern dance, her revolutionary ideas of integrating different styles of music and dance seemed to fit well with the revolutionary fervor sweeping Russia at the time. She opened a dance school in Moscow shortly after the Bolsheviks took over, but when the new Soviet government halted its funding she was forced to tour again to make money.

After crossing the Garden Ring at Zubovsky Boulevard we reached the Leo Tolstoy monument and park. The boulevard here also changed names and we were now traveling on Bol'shaya Pirogovskaya Street, dedicated to Dr. Nikolay Pirogov, the brilliant 19th century Russian surgeon who is considered the founder of field surgery (he invented his own methods for surgical operations, including foot amputations, and used plaster casts to heal broken bones, which was a new concept at the time). He was also one of the first surgeons to use ether as an anesthetic. A monument was built in his honor just beyond the Tolstoy Park. Less than a mile later we reached the Novodevichy Convent. We would spend more than an hour visiting this site.

On the drive over, Sergei gave us the historical lowdown. (Please note that the words *monastery* and *convent* are interchangeable, and refer to the same thing).

Vasili III, Grand Prince of Moscow, founded the Novodevichy Convent, also known as the Bogoroditse-Smolensky Monastery, in 1524 to commemorate his conquest of the city of Smolensk during the fourth Muscovite-Lithuanian War. The fall of Smolensk was a crucial step in Moscow's ability to recapture the old Kievian Rus lands, helping to re-unite the country. Situated on a curve of the Moscow River, it was initially

constructed as a fortress monastery, part of a defensive belt protecting the city's southern flanks from invasion. A high masonry wall with twelve guard towers surrounds the entire complex. Over the centuries, the monastery grew to administer 36 villages and own thousands of peasants, and had a permanent military garrison of hundreds of soldiers.

During the mid-17th century, nuns from other monasteries in the Ukraine and Belarusia were transferred to this monastery and the convent was formed, which, I'm assuming, is when the name *novodevichy* (which means 'new nunnery') was first used. The physical layout of the Novodevichy Convent is in the shape of an irregular rectangle stretching from west to east, with gate entrances on both the northern and southern fortress walls. There is a park with a large pond in front of the complex to the north, often referred to by Russians as the Maiden's Field because it is a popular spot for couples to meet, especially during the winter months when the pond is used for ice-skating.

The oldest structure – and main attraction – within the fortress is the Smolenksy Cathedral, which dates back to the founding of the complex, but scholars believe it was rebuilt during the mid-1500s. It is an impressive white-colored, six-pillared, five-domed structure with a lofty ground floor and a tall central gable; the inside is lined with some of the best religious frescoes in Moscow. The design was modeled after the Assumption Cathedral of the Kremlin. Unfortunately for us, during our visit the cathedral was closed for renovations. But there are other churches within the complex, as well, most were built during the 1680s when the convent was entirely renovated under Sofia Alexeyevna, who ruled as regent of Russia while brother Ivan V and step-brother Peter I (the future Peter the Great) grew into adulthood. A good thing she made these renovations because Peter I, upon his ascension to the throne, had her arrested for trying to usurp his power. She was incarcerated inside the fortress for the rest of her life. Which brings us to the most important role this convent probably played during imperial times. Basically, the Novodevichy Convent came to house the powerful ladies of the Russian royal families and feudal clans who had been forced to 'take the veil', usually to avoid some kind of power struggle or if they had displeased their more powerful male counterparts. Being forced into the nunnery was akin to imprisonment for these royal ladies, and the Novodevichy Convent became the *primo* royal prison for females, if you will. Some other notable royal ladies who finished out their lives here were

Irina Godunova (wife of Feodor I and sister of Boris Godunov) and Eudoxia Lopukhina (first wife of Peter the Great).

Everything constructed from the 1680s onward within the complex was designed in the Muscovite Baroque style, which garnered the convent UNESCO World Heritage status in 2004. This is Moscow's most famous cloister, and it has remained virtually intact since the 17th century. We entered through the Transfiguration Gate-Church entranceway built into the north wall and did a walking tour of the grounds, which today is still a functioning monastery. Our guide pointed out the over-the-gates churches, the refectory and the residential quarters, describing the blood-red walls and façade of the Dormition Church (beautifully designed in that Moscow Baroque style), the elaborate Bell Tower along the eastern wall and some of the other famous crown-towers that were used as prisons or as barracks for the soldiers. But to be honest, without being able to see the inside of the Smolensky Cathedral (or any of the other structures for that matter) it just felt like we were walking around the inside of a large courtyard. I was a tad disappointed…*until we visited the adjacent cemetery*. When our tour within the complex concluded, Sergei led us around the southern wall of the convent so we could visit the Novodevichy Cemetery.

You would think a cemetery would be a weird place to visit on a guided tour, but the Novodevichy Cemetery is an *incredibly* fascinating site. This ranks among the country's most prestigious graveyards, containing the final resting places of a veritable *who's who* from Russia's political, military, cultural and science fields. Since the 16th century the monastery was used as a coveted burial place for the ranking members of the nobility, but the more *public* Novodevichy Cemetery we visited wasn't created until the end of the 1800s. Everything is in Russian; so if you want to visit the graveyard on your own, buy the official map at the visitors' kiosk which pinpoints the tombstones of almost 200 important dead people. What makes this place so interesting are the elaborate tombstones. It feels more like an open-air museum than a cemetery: rows of statues, images, emblems and artwork top most of the graves. In certain sections you will know what the deceased looked like because a life-size statue has been erected of the person. Some of the funerary sculptures will detail their occupant's profession so you won't have to guess what they did for a living; you'll see popular ballerinas in leotards, actors dressed for the stage, officers and aviators in full military regalia, scientists next to images of whatever they helped invent (a lot of jet planes and rockets from what I saw).

According to Sergei, the cemetery is divided by groups; the cultural icons (dancers, actors, singers, writers, musicians and so forth) are separated from the political and civil servants, the military leaders and the scientists. I can't even remember all the important gravestones we saw that day. Former communist leader Nikita Khrushshev and the first Russian Federation president, Boris Yeltsin. The writers Anton Chekov, Mikhail Bulgakov, Nikolai Gogol, and Sergey Aksakov (to name just a few). Filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, top composer Sergei Prokofiev, famed stage actor and director Constantin Stanislavski…the list goes on and on. In addition to the tombstones there is a long wall that serves as a columbarium, where the ashes of lesser-known (but important contributors to Russian society over the years) are interred. Along this wall we came across the tombstone of Raisa Gorbachev, the popular wife of the Soviet Union's last leader. More than 27,000 people are buried in the Novodevichy Cemetery and room is very scarce. Sergei told us the national government decides who is to be buried here. Nowadays, space is limited to symbolically significant burials, like that of Yeltsin and world-renowned cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, who both died within a week of each other in 2007.

Our morning excursion concluded shortly after 12:00pm. We boarded our bus and headed back to the downtown area, to the Marriott Grand Hotel Moscow located on Tverskaya Street where we would spend our last night in Russia. Along the way we passed several interesting buildings, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs housed in one of the 'Seven Sisters' skyscrapers commissioned by Stalin in the late forties (the 27-level structure is topped with a long metal spiral that was supposedly added by Stalin in the final planning stages to make the building taller). We drove by the U.S. Embassy complex and the former home of writer Anton Chekov (now a museum). Another interesting thing we saw was the recently unveiled monument of Lt. General Mikhail Kalashnikov, the inventor of the AK-47 assault rifle. The Kalashnikov Monument consisted of a tall statue of the man atop a pedestal holding his famous weapon. The AK-47 proved to be so popular that a version of it has been used in just about every major conflict worldwide for the past fifty years. Supposedly, more than 200 million of them exist today. Kalashnikov's own daughter was on hand for the unveiling but a major controversy erupted when the statue had to be covered three days later to 'fix' a serious flaw. The sculptor had erroneously added a German assault rifle to the bas-relief display behind the statue depicting Kalashnikov's inventions. This created quite a public uproar…and considerable

embarrassment for the government after they unveiled the statue with much fanfare. I wonder what Kalashnikov himself would have thought of the monument. Prior to his death in 2013, he wrote a letter to the head of the Russian Orthodox Church lamenting that his inventions had caused so much death and sorrow throughout the world.

We arrived at the Marriott Grand Hotel Moscow around 1:00pm. After checking into our rooms, my companions and I decided to have lunch at a nearby restaurant Elena recommended. We walked south along Tverskaya Street for several blocks and found the place down a narrow side street. It was a popular cafeteria-style establishment with a tented outdoor patio. We ordered from the separate food stations and sat outside in the patio area, at times annoyed by the pigeons that would swoop down on any vacated table to peck at the leftovers. The servers would shoo them away with such half-hearted effort you could tell this was a common enough occurrence (and a losing battle, at that). But the food and drink were good and we had a nice time idly chatting away, at one point discussing the pros and cons of the tour (and there were many, which I'll get to in my closing comments). We were also anxious about returning home the following morning. No matter how much I love traveling there comes a moment on every tour when you just relish getting back to the comforts of home.

I felt bad that I would not be spending my final night in Russia with my companions. They had elected not to attend the performance at the Bolshoi Theater later that evening and chose, instead, to have dinner on the town. Their reason for not going was that they had already seen a visiting tour company from the Bolshoi Ballet perform in the United States, and since tonight's show was not one of the classical ballets, they wanted to skip the show and see a little bit more of Moscow. I have to confess, I am not a fan of the ballet. But the idea of sitting in the legendary Bolshoi Theater to watch a production by this world-renowned company was just too much for me to resist. I might never get a chance to visit Russia again, and I didn't want to pass up this opportunity. The fact that the show – entitled *Jewels* – was more of a modern ensemble piece and not a classical ballet did not dissuade me, they could have been performing a Russian version of the hokey-pokey on stage and I still would have wanted to see it.

I returned to my hotel room shortly after 3:00pm. My companions wanted to do a little shopping and sightseeing along Tverskaya Street but I wanted to take another shower and get ready for the show. I had set aside what I

thought was my nicest remaining shirt, a long-sleeved black-and-gray checkered thing, and matched that with a pair of black jeans hoping it looked appropriate enough for a night at the Bolshoi Theater. Had this been a classical ballet performance during the regular season, I probably would have been underdressed, but it was late summer and a good portion of the audience consisted of curious tourists like me, so I blended in well. At 5:30pm I rendezvoused in the hotel lobby with four other members of my tour group who had also purchased tickets for the show: Mike, my fellow Spoon Player, his wife, Pat, and two Indian women from California whose names I believe were Rekha and Saanvi (please forgive me ladies if I got it wrong). Earlier, Elena suggested that instead of taking a taxi, the five of us should ride the Subway Metro since the nearest station was only a few minutes walking distance from the hotel. This way, she said, we could feel like true Muscovites. The show was scheduled to begin at 7:00pm, so we agreed beforehand that leaving an hour and a half early would give us sufficient time in case we got lost. As it turned out, though, using the Metro was like the proverbial 'hop, skip and a jump'…it took us less than twenty minutes to reach the Bolshoi Theater from our hotel.

We walked north on Tverskaya Street for one block and after crossing the wide Bolshaya Sadovaya Street (a part of the Garden Ring road) we entered the Mayakovskaya Subway Station. We were in for a treat because the Mayakovskaya Station, opened in 1938, is considered one of the most beautiful in the entire Moscow Metro system. It was designed using an art style known as Futurism, which originated in Italy during the early 20th century and incorporated images of modern, industrial life. This was the first subway station in the world where the vault space was overlapped and supported by two sets of colonnades on either side, creating a new style of subway architecture called *deep column station*. The platform is 108 feet (33 meters) below ground, and during WWII the station not only served as an air raid shelter, it also became the temporary living quarters of Joseph Stalin. The station is named after Russian poet Mayakovsky, who had envisioned a grand Soviet future for the nation. The streamlined columns are laced with stainless steel and pink stone, the walls made of white and gray marble, and the floor of white and pink patterned marble, all in a sleek Art Deco design. Along the ceiling runs a collection of 34 mosaic pieces entitled "24-hour Soviet Sky", each housed in a separate niche brightly displayed by filament lights. Indeed, this was one impressive subway platform!

We rode the subway train for two stops until we reached the Teatralnaya (Theater District) Station. The cars were packed with eager young Muscovites heading into the downtown area to begin their Saturday night revelry. Stepping onto the crowded platform of the Teatralnaya Station, we were – once again – transported back to another time. This station, like the previous one, also opened in 1938, and was part of the second stage construction of the Moscow Metro. The fluted pylons supporting the vaulted halls were faced with marble taken from the original (and demolished) Cathedral of Christ the Savior. Hanging crystal lamps in bronze bases bathed the central vaulted hall in a bright, festive light; the curved ceiling was decorated with colorful majolica bas-reliefs with images representing dance and music from various nationalities of the former Soviet Union. Another unique feature of this subway station is that it does not have its own entrance hall, but rather two long escalators leading to other stations nearby: the north escalator takes you to the Okhotniy Ryad station, and the south escalator takes you to the Ploshchad Revolyutsii station. Elena instructed us to take the latter, so we followed the crowds up the south escalator and soon found ourselves in Revolution Square, a short walking distance from the Bolshoi Theater.

The streets were filled with thousands and thousands of people. An outdoor laser-and-light show was scheduled for later that evening around the Theater Square district, and the police had the whole area blocked off from traffic. Muscovites, young and old, were already congregating around the plaza for the free concert. We made our way to the water fountain in the center of the square and took photos of ourselves with the Bolshoi Theater in the background. By 6:15pm we decided to go in. Our tickets were in Russian, so we had no idea which entrance to go through. We saw many elegant, well-dressed Muscovites (the suit-and-gown crowd) entering through the front of the building, but when we tried going in that way the ushers gave us a discreet up-and-down glance, smiled a little *too* politely and pointed to the side of the theater where the ‘peanut gallery’ entrance was located.

Once inside, we had to deposit our jackets in the cloakroom. Mike rented a pair of binoculars here for 150 rubles that he later shared with the rest of us during the show. Afterwards, we crammed into one of the smallest elevators on earth (or at least it felt that way) for an agonizingly slow ride up to the fourth floor. I nearly had an anxiety attack. The doors to the balcony sections were not yet open and we decided to climb the stairs to the next level where

the nearest bar lounge was located. Mike treated me to a bottle of water; everyone else had alcohol. About fifteen minutes before show time we headed back down to the fourth level and took our seats in a box section lined with movable chairs. Several other members of our tour group had arrived, as well. We were situated on the left-hand side of the enormous stage, four levels up.

I sat next to the balcony's edge, rested my elbows on the cushioned railing and leaned forward to survey the theater. The Bolshoi Theater is an iconic landmark for both Moscow *and* Russia; its neoclassical façade is featured on the 100-ruble banknote. The building initially opened in 1825, but has undergone many reconstructions over the years. The latest took place from 2005 – 2011 when the theater was closed for a massive, much needed and very costly renovation that improved the acoustics and restored the original imperial décor of the place lost during the Soviet-era. The foundation and brickwork was thoroughly reset, and the five-level circular auditorium was stripped bare and redone; the original 19th century wooden fixtures, the red and silver stage curtain and the red velvet banquettes were taken down, restored in special workshops and then re-installed. Being inside this theater was definitely thrilling, a grandiose throwback to imperial times…but somehow it still seemed a little run down or worn to me. Maybe because it is such an old foundation and so many people are continuously passing through it, or perhaps because of my own heightened expectations…*or maybe the tiny elevator ride was still preying on my mind.*

The show started shortly after 7:00pm, and while the theater was packed, it was not fully sold out. *Hmmmmmm.* That's never a good sign. It's like eating in a restaurant with hardly any customers. Yeah, maybe the food is okay, but in the back of your mind you're wondering, "Why aren't there more people here?" I read online that during the regular ballet season it was almost impossible to get tickets (at normal prices, anyway). So I checked the one-page information sheet describing the show that Elena had downloaded from the Internet. I brought it along with me and used it as a playbill. *Jewels* is the unique creation of famed Russian ballet choreographer George Ballanchine, who came to the United States in the 1930s and co-founded the New York City Ballet. The show is a full-length, three act *plotless* ballet that uses the music of three very different composers (Faure, Stravinsky and Tchaikovsky) to convey the essence of three very different types of precious stones: Emeralds, Rubies and Diamonds. Supposedly, this was the first 'story-less' ballet ever created; in fact, the only thing connecting the acts

was this concept of the jewels, which serves as a metaphor for the different facets of dance represented during the performance.

Each act was named after a specific gemstone. The first act was called *Emeralds*, and the dancers came out wearing green-laced leotards and costumes. In this particular set, the dancers twirled to the music of the 19th century French Romantic sounds of composer Gabriel Faure, invoking – according to the info sheet – French 'elegance, comfort, dress, (and) perfume'. *Perfume*? This was the longest of the three acts, lasting roughly forty-five minutes, but after the initial excitement wore off, it felt more like a millennium. From time to time, more sophisticated members of the audience would shout "BRAVO! BRAVO!" and I wondered what they found so spectacular in a particular dance move that would make them react this way. Granted, the physical training these wonderful dancers have to endure to develop the discipline and skills necessary to perform these steps is, in itself, astonishing. I mean, if I had to stand on my tippy toes for just one second you would hear them cracking as I tumbled to the floor. But, for the life of me, I couldn't discern one ballet routine from another, let alone the essence of 'comfort, dress *or* perfume' the info sheet mentioned.

Halfway through the first act I came to the realization that this was going to be a long night, indeed. Look, you can call me uncultured, dull or an idiot…all three are probably apt descriptions… but at least I'm brutally frank. In other words, *I call them like a sees them*. And I think Mike felt the same way; fifteen minutes into the set he had already lost interest in the dancers and was scanning the members of the orchestra with his binoculars, zeroing in on one of nearly a hundred symphony musicians inside the pit just in front of the stage. He nudged me, handed over the binoculars and said, "take a look at the guy on the big drum". I focused on the middle-aged man sitting behind the concert bass drum, the largest instrument of the percussion family. The guy was actually reading a newspaper! I almost laughed out loud. Every now and then he would look up at the conductor and at some precise moment in the music he would strike his drum once (or twice) with his mallets and then return to his newspaper. By far, this had to be the easiest musician's gig on the planet. Several times throughout the show he actually got up and walked out of the orchestra pit area altogether, returning minutes later just in time to strike his drum…*and then leave again*. I'm assuming this guy was even more bored with the ballet than I was.

When the first act ended, there was a lengthy intermission and the theater cleared out as everyone headed to the various bar lounge areas for some alcohol reinforcement. This process was repeated after each act, one of the reasons that ballet performances last as long as they do. I no longer drink alcohol, but if there were ever a good reason to imbibe, a ballet intermission would certainly fit that bill. I'm surprised they don't just pass a bottle of vodka up and down the aisles during the actual performance. But I spoke (or thought) a little too soon about the show. The next act was called *Rubies*, and the dancers were now wearing reddish costumes and leotards in keeping with the shade of the gemstone. This set lasted just over thirty minutes or so, but it was phenomenal. The music was crisp and witty, the work of Russian composer Igor Stravinsky, and the dance numbers were very exciting, moving at the same velocity as the frenetic upbeat tempo. I was actually…*enthralled*. And not only me, down in the orchestra pit the concert bass drummer had actually put down his newspaper and was staring up at the stage with rapt attention. When the second act ended the entire theater was on its feet applauding and shouting 'bravo!' deliriously. This was followed by another exodus to the bar lounge.

Ballanchine saved the best for last. *Diamonds*, the third act of the show, was another stunning set accompanied by the music of Tchaikovsky and included a big finale that did not disappoint. The stage was backlit with blue lighting and the dancers wore bright-white costumes and the whole thing was so in sync and grandly orchestrated, with many dancers coming on stage, inter-connecting in these elaborately designed dance moves and then quickly moving off stage just to re-appear moments later in another leaping clash of dancers, the whole while the classical music kept building to this incredible crescendo…I have to admit, it was all *very* thrilling. Even I was on my feet shouting 'bravo!' when the final curtain began to close. I guess, in retrospect, the ballet can be quite fun. *Live and learn, people*, that's all this idiot can say.

Leaving the theater was akin to rush hour traffic; we *slowly* made our way out the building as everyone headed for the exits simultaneously. Outside, the laser light show concert was in full progress, and the night was brightly lit in a kaleidoscope of brilliantly concentrated colors. The façades of the buildings within the Theater Square were used as screens, and psychedelic images and cartoonish characters bathed the walls. Meanwhile, loud, pounding Russian electronic music blared from a tower of amplifiers near the plaza. It was like experiencing an acid trip without actually taking

the drug! The whole area was packed with spectators. This was just as *thrilling* as the ballet. In the square we met up with a few other members of our tour group who had also attended the performance. It was fast approaching 10:00pm and while the night was still young and exciting, almost all of us had a very early morning airport shuttle to catch. A few chose to stay in the Red Square area but I joined my original group and returned to the hotel via the Metro. Along the way we temporarily lost Saanvi who had remained on the subway car after we reached the Mayakovskaya station. We waited patiently on the platform – on the opposite side of the track – for her to return to us before exiting the station. I was in my hotel room by 10:20pm. I quickly wrote down the night's events in my journal. Before going to bed, I set aside my clothes for the trip home and did some last minute re-packing. By midnight I was sound asleep.

DAY TWELVE

I was up at 3:15am. I took a quick shower, dressed and went over my checklist one final time to make sure I wasn't leaving anything behind. At 4:45am I headed to the lobby with my luggage. A large group of us – almost 25 – were going to the airport on the same shuttle bus. Elena was there to say goodbye, and those of us who had not already done so tipped her for her wonderful service. She provided each of us with a plastic bag containing a 'boxed' breakfast; later, mine inconveniently broke, spilling its contents onto the floor just as I was going through airport security. By 5:00am a large bus pulled up to the hotel and we climbed in for the hour-long drive to the airport. A young woman from Gate 1 Travel who spoke very little English accompanied us to the terminal building. Since no one could understand what she was saying, her instructions were meaningless. Upon entering the terminal building there was a bit of confusion and everyone kind of scattered when we went through the first security checkpoint. We quickly re-grouped and the Gate 1 Travel rep led us to a departure board so we could locate our airline check-in counters.

I will not bore you with the tedious details of my return trip home. This journal is way too long as it is. My companions and I left Moscow almost at the same time, but on different airlines. I was flying back on Swiss Air; they were on Lufthansa. We said our 'goodbyes' at the departure gate. I always feel a little sad at this point in the journey. I love traveling with Anke, Ron and Dani. The four of us have developed a great chemistry together. But with each of us living in different parts of the country – and life being what it is – one can never be certain when we'll see each other again. So I tend to hug them a little tighter now during our farewells and pray that God will bless us with many more trips together.

I flew to Zurich and then took a connecting flight back to Miami. Although the city still looked battered from Hurricane Irma, everything was working and back to normal. The flight home was wonderful. I had the last row of the plane all to myself and took two Xanax after the stewardesses served the first meal. I didn't wake until we arrived in South Florida. In fact, I was groggy throughout the whole immigration process. When I arrived home I dropped my luggage on the living room floor and promptly crawled into bed, sleeping straight through until the following afternoon. I must have slept away every ounce of jet lag because I woke up refreshed and invigorated.

I apologize to my readers for not only the length of this journal but also the time it took to write it. Since my travelogues become my memories, I always want to paint a vivid picture in my mind of not only what I did and saw, but also what it all meant. And that takes a ton of research to uncover. I always tell people the real journey for me begins after I get home and start writing my travel memoirs.

As for Russia, I had a great time. Although, if I had to do it all over again I wouldn't book a river cruise to see this fascinating country, at least not without adding some additional time to the tour. Don't get me wrong, the river cruise portion of my trip was very enjoyable and gave me access to some very rural out-of-the-way sites, but longer stays in St. Petersburg and Moscow would have been a better trip. There is just not enough to see and do along the Volga-Baltic Waterway that justifies the cost of a river cruise. By comparison, one can easily spend weeks in St. Petersburg or Moscow and never run out of things to do. The historical palaces, churches, museums and theaters will keep you busy for days on end. And from Moscow you can actually do day trips to the famous historical ring cities like Uglich. Russia is

a beautiful and vast country with seemingly endless possibilities, with many diverse regions and cities. I thought I was going to experience some kind of anti-American backlash, but the people, while mostly reserved, were very polite and welcoming just about everywhere we went. The food was excellent, and the service was pretty good. I was impressed with how clean the cities and towns were, and the sort of civic pride that Russians embrace, regardless of whatever is going on politically in their country. Russians are very proud of their heritage and culture (and remember, this is a nation with various deep-rooted ethnicities that once warred with one another, living side-by-side). I wish the tour had been longer, and hope to go back one day to see more of the country.

Since the end of the Second World War both our nations have been locked in this never-ending propaganda campaign to discredit each other's government and/or way of life. And while one could argue that during the Cold War the fundamental ideologies which shaped our societies were mutually exclusive and forced us to be political adversaries, you'd think the fall of the Soviet Union would have brought our countries a little bit closer by now. Sadly, we find ourselves almost back to square one. And I am not naïve; I understand the United States and Russia have separate geo-political agendas that often clash. But if we can work together on the International Space Station, for crying out loud, we can certainly work together in many other areas to help all humanity. Putin is an enigma – part populist leader, part autocrat – a man who rose from an obscure KGB past to govern a new type of Russia. But somehow, this new Russia is starting to morph – politically, anyway – back into its former self. I hope Putin, in his waning political years, will help solidify his own legacy by allowing true democracy and due process to flourish in his country. I think Russia will fare very well if its citizens were allowed to shape their own destiny in a truly representative, fairer environment.

Every time I complete one of these journals it is my fervent desire that whoever reads it will be inspired enough to want to visit that country. And such is the case with *this* journal. If more Americans visited Russia, and vice-versa, I believe our relationship will improve exponentially. So, if you're one of the poor souls who actually reached the end of this tome, you now know what I know…those *Rushings* don't seem so bad, after all…

Until next time,

Richard C. Rodriguez, the traveling mailman
(My trip to Russia occurred during the month of September 2017)