EASTERN EUROPE BY TRAIN

3: St. Petersburg to Moscow

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St Petersburg

We know we are at the Russian border. Our train is held up interminably. Armed soldiers collect our passports and visas for official inspection and spirit them away to be processed by fine official minds and then returned to us. Why not examine them on the spot? More armed soldiers search our compartment, under the beds, under the roof. No, no stowaways.

Formalities over, you would think we could proceed. But no. One of our number, a nice old guy of 85, has filled in some lines on his visa with his address. Don’t write on a Russian visa: it invalidates it! So, do we proceed without our visa-less colleague? Or are we all to be sent back to Lithuania? Urgent discussions, feet fly in the corridors. Finally, after checking and double-checking – and a payout à la South America? – we are allowed on our way.

We arrive in St Petersburg late at night to be bussed to our splendid hotel in the main street of St. Petersburg, Nevsky Prospekt. John and Catherine are to spend three nights at the Grand Hotel Europa, where Tchaikovsky spent his honeymoon (to little avail) and where George Bernard Shaw dined with Maxim Gorky. Our room is surprisingly small, made smaller by a bloody great TV unit towering at the foot of the bed. It is a major nuisance but it seems very permanent. As we prepare for sleep, fumbling with light switches, we hear a humming sound: amazed we watch the TV slowly descend into a large unit, like a coffin in a vertical crematorium.

A check in the fridge prices Rufus Stone shiraz at 4,500 roubles ($180 – available in Australia for under $20), a local beer at 400 roubles: $16. No thanks. Catherine’s train vodka supplies me with a nightcap and leave the bottle on the dressing table. On checking out I’m faced with a 900 rouble bill for vodka. ‘A mistake,’ I cry. ‘I didn’t use the bar fridge!’ The clerk clearly doesn’t believe me, but this is the Grand Hotel Europa, where the customers, rich and famous as they usually are if not on this occasion, are always right.

Three nights and two days to do St. Petersburg is absurd, but we try. If I was amazed at the economic recovery of other countries, that of St. Petersburg is the most amazing. In the vicious three-year siege of Leningrad by the Germans, over one million citizens died, mostly from starvation, and 85% of buildings badly damaged or destroyed. Today, almost all the heritage buildings created in just two short centuries and more

* See Captain’s Choice of South America on my website.
extravagantly lavish than those of any other place we have seen this trip, have been completely restored.

Like Venice, St. Petersburg is built on water with the help of many islets. Founded by Peter the Great in 1703, it has been the capital of the Russian Empire for more than two hundred years. After the Russian Revolution it had ceased to be capital and following Lenin’s death in 1924 became Leningrad, becoming St. Petersburg again in 1991 by popular vote.

Peter the Great was originally something of an intellectual, visiting European countries incognito to learn various trades including surgery. Later, as Tsar, he put his learning to effect in the design of his palaces and choice of artwork, and to the terror of his subjects, his surgical skills. He had the healthiest court in Europe, for none dared to admit to illness, even toothache – especially toothache – for fear Peter would get to work on them. He especially delighted in extracting teeth; we see his special forceps.

Peter built the enormous Winter Palace, designed by the architect Rastrelli in the highly ornate Russian baroque style, within which, and using adjoining palaces, he established the Hermitage, now one of the largest museums in the world, housing the art collections of tsars down to Nicholas II in 1917: over 3 million works, of which only five percent are on display at any one time. We spent a morning there with a guide who whisked us through Rembrandts, Cezannes, Matisse, and so on and on: not to mention ancient Greek and Roman pieces, walls with old masters jammed together as ‘wallpaper’, the Amber Room the walls panelled with amber, huge blue-and-white delft ceramic heaters, nearly floor to ceiling, each small panel different from any other, chandeliers, painted ceilings – all collected not for the love of art or out of caring for the artist, but to feed monstrous egos. ‘See how rich and powerful I am!’ the collections say on behalf of the respective collectors.

The ‘gate’ to St. Petersburg is the Customs House, with its quaint columns. Peter the Great also built Peter and Paul Cathedral with an exceedingly tall delicate spire with a three metre angel as a weathervane on top. Unfortunately, it became stuck and Peter offered a reward to anyone who could fix it. A peasant climbed to the top, using only ropes, and fixed it. Peter rewarded him with money and a
gold goblet inscribed ‘Drink Up’. The peasant happily obeyed, dying of alcohol poisoning shortly after.

Pushkin is a village outside Moscow, named after the poet, where Peter built a Palace for his wife, Catherine the First. On the way, we pass through the lines where the Germans sat for three years trying to starve Leningrad into submission and nearly succeeding. They amused themselves by using a statue of Pushkin for rifle practice and looting Catherine’s Palace of the most valuable stuff and trashing the rest, leaving the place a ruin. Today the Palace and gardens are fully restored, most of that having been done since perestroika in the last twenty years, which is remarkable given that St. Petersburg in particular suffered very high unemployment and poverty from the early years of privatization following perestroika.

Catherine’s Palace is in the elaborate Russian baroque style of the Winter Palace, but Catherine I’s daughter Elizabeth found it too small. When she became Empress, she ordered Rastrelli to design two more wings, each as large as the original. Her nephew became Peter III who married another Catherine, a German princess. But she, sick of Peter’s incompetence and philandering, deposed her own husband to become Catherine the Great. She ruled pretty well by common consent for the next 34 years – no doubt there were lower orders who might dispute that, but they weren’t asked.

Catherine introduced a smidgen of restraint in these royal extravaganzas – she forbade the use of real gold to plate the large domes on these buildings. She refused to live in Catherine’s Palace itself, but as that had a standing staff of 300 retainers for the occasional times the Palace was used, this was hardly an economy measure. She lived in a smaller house in the grounds and built a pleasure pavilion, where she entertained guests – on the second floor so the servants couldn’t peep in at what might have been going on inside. Guests dropped their dinner orders through a hole in the floor and when ready, tables loaded with their orders were hoisted up. It is said that Catherine conducted orgies in her pavilion, but as those outside couldn’t look inside, and those inside weren’t talking, who knows?

Catherine’s son, Paul I, was paranoid about being assassinated. He lived away from his mother’s family and existing royal palaces, living instead in the newly built St Michael’s Palace, closely guarded, but 40 days only, when his fears were realised: he was assassinated.

Tsar Alexander II was also assassinated as his carriage was driving along the Griboedov Canal. His son Alexander III started to build the Cathedral of Spilt Blood on the site,
completed by Nicholas II in 1907, and possibly the most splendid cathedral in Russia. Catherine (my Catherine, not the Great although she is) and I visited it twice, but each time were unable to enter because our timing was wrong. We then found to our chagrin that the inside is also more splendid than any other Russian church interior – but the outside is splendid enough. Paul built a palace for his wife Maria, behind the splendid St Isaac’s Cathedral, with a statue of himself on a horse facing the cathedral, but she refused to live in it: the horse’s bum was pointing to her palace.

But how is that so many cathedrals are within a stone’s throw of each other? We learn that in Russia a large church is called a ‘cathedral’, not just the seat of a given diocese. Many of these magnificent buildings were used as museums or storage warehouses during the 80 year atheistic reign of the communists but are largely now restored and used for worship, more than half the population today being practising Orthodox Christians.

We look forward to an afternoon of exploring. We come across a man with a bear cub in the park: Have your photo taken holding the bear – very cheap! Safe too. See, it’s muzzled!” The poor bear looks terrified, so we just take a photo and hope for a happy ending for the exploited bear.

A troop of Cossack dancers add a new level of excitement to our farewell to St Petersburg. Having heard so much about what the higher orders had been getting up to, the dancers show us how what would have been the lower orders, the soldiers and their women, could impress with their excesses of energy, skill, exuberance and sheer sexual stereotyping. The women are pretty, graceful and feminine, the men are pumped up with testosterone-plus, legs flying, whips cracking, macho shouting. That’s Russia.

Moscow

Our last train journey: St. Petersburg to Moscow. The countryside seems less prosperous, clumps of small dilapidated cottages in unkempt gardens, no evidence of town centres.
But later we are told that Russians are encouraged to have small country holiday houses, *dashas*, to escape their cramped city living conditions. Whether these are the homes of the poorest of the poor or the summer shacks of middling rich, is unclear.

Our Marriott Aurora is a block from the Bolshoi Theatre, unfortunately closed for renovations, and five minutes from Red Square and the Kremlin. Ian our Hobart taxi driver had just been to Moscow. He told us, while driving us to the airport, ‘Red Square was nothing like what I’d expected. I’ll be interested to know what you think.’

Sorry, Ian, that’s a tough one. The Square itself is roughly what I had expected, perhaps smaller, but the buildings enclosing it were not. Along one side are the high red walls of the Kremlin and the star-tipped spires, familiar from movies and photos. Lenin’s mausoleum is in the middle of the wall on the Kremlin side.

We queue for nearly an hour to visit Lenin’s tomb, filing past statues of Soviet leaders. Stalin’s statue originally occupied a special place on its own but Khrushchev put him amongst the others. We are told we are not to talk when we enter the sacred tomb, guards hissing ‘ssshhh!’ at any unseemly whispering. The effect is spoiled when someone’s mobile blasts off with a rock call-tone. And there, in a glass case, in ghostly bluish light, is the waxy corpse of Lenin, who died of a heart attack early in the Revolution in 1924.

Outside, I say to our guide: ‘The body looked like it was made of wax. Surely it’s not his real body?’ ‘His body was immersed in a special solution containing potassium.’ She smiles. ‘So they say.’

At the far end of the Square, in crazy contrast to the architecture of atheistic politics, are the central spire and seven bizarrely coloured striped and studded onion domes of St. Basil’s Cathedral. The Cathedral was commissioned by Ivan the Terrible in the sixteenth century, and so pleased was he that – a story familiar from Prague’s astronomical clock – he blinded the architects so they couldn’t design another like it. Later we are to go inside, see the interior, which is not nearly as stridently stunning as the outside, and hear a concert of Russian folk music, followed by a shot of vodka (and you get to keep the glass) and a caviar topped biscuit.

Opposite the walls of the Kremlin walls is the huge GUM store, originally the austere, very basic government store for the people. Now, privatised, it is patronised only by the top end of town. ‘Don’t buy here,’ warns our guide. ‘Too expensive for tourists. Only locals shop here.’ But at least the toilets are free. At the far end of the Square is a replica of the Kazan Cathedral, destroyed by Stalin to enlarge the Square but rebuilt in 1993, and the tall multi-towered History Museum. So that’s Red Square, once a military parade.
ground now a tourist must-see, enclosed with a side each of hard-line politics, Christianity, commerce and history.

The surprises lie behind the stern Kremlin Wall. The Kremlin Museum contains more and more treasures the tsars and their families in their delusions of grandeur had collected over the centuries, from gold-plated horse-drawn carriages to a priest’s cope that Catherine the Great had ordered with 300,000 pearls individually sewn into it – and had been worn twice. The surprises are not only at the objects themselves, or even at the grotesque sense of proportion displayed by the royals when most of their subjects were starving, but also at the communist regime for preserving these priceless relics of class greed instead of cashing them in.

More surprises as we walk around the beautifully kept gardens of the Kremlin and the views over Moscow, and into the courtyard containing more cathedrals and chapels, all fully restored or in process of restoration. The Cathedral of St. Michael the Archangel, currently under repair, was built by Ivan the Terrible but he was barred from attending services as he had seven wives, three over the number approved by the Church. He added a platform at one of the windows so that during services he could stand outside and listen and watch. Now his remains are buried in the Church he can listen and watch more comfortably. But attending orthodox services was uncomfortable even for those inside the church who didn’t have to stand outside at a window: they had to stand inside, as there were no pews, and services lasted two hours or more. The peak moments of the service, such as the Consecration, are held behind a high rood screen, accessed by a door in the middle of the screen. On either side are highly decorated panels, the right hand panel containing a depiction relating to the naming of the church. The illustration here is in the Cathedral of the Assumption, also in the grounds of the Kremlin and in which the tsars were crowned.

Opposite is the Church of the Annunciation, in which on different days, different Russian choirs give a performance of a sacred motet to the enthralled tourists and then sell their CDs. One choir in particular impressed me, unusually using two women for the top two lines. Russian choirs are known for their surging bass voices, and to cover them with a roof of strong, sweet sopranos, instead of piercing high tenors, is a new and moving sound. Three more large Cathedrals and chapels are in the same courtyard, including a small chapel to the Deposition of the Virgin’s Robe. While we are in this last chapel, two women prostrate themselves before the statue of Mary.
This evidence of privately devout, and richly State funded, Christianity within the heart of the until so recently fiercely atheistic Kremlin is another major surprise. Although ideologically communism was dead opposed to religion, the Russian communists had some respect for their heritage. A Cultural Revolution, like that with the Chinese communists, didn’t happen. Not only that, but Christianity itself went underground, surviving two whole generations of professed atheism. Yet Stalin did tolerate the Church in Poland, and briefly in Russia during the War for morale reasons, a temporary respite that may yet have provided the continuity of Christian belief. That fragile thread of continuity proved stronger than unfettered tolerance, for Christianity is much more active in Eastern Europe than it is in Western Europe. That needs explaining, but John at least would do so on sociological not metaphysical grounds.

St. Sergius was Russia’s first patron saint, if St. George is now their official saint. St Sergius was a devote monk, who helped Russia win the first war against the Tartars. When he died, his body was buried near a well, and the waters prevented it from decomposing remained; a monastery and cathedral were built on spot. The well outside the cathedral contains those miracle waters and people bring plastic bottles there to fill, presumably to prevent their own bodies from decomposing.

The Cathedral and Monastery of St Sergius have become the equivalent of the Vatican to the Russian Orthodox Church. Although the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church lives 90 km away in Moscow, he comes to his comparatively humble two storey green and white house here at the Monastery twice a year and blesses the waiting crowd standing on a low balcony in front of his house, as does the Pope from his very much larger house and higher balcony. The grounds contain several ornate Cathedrals and chapels.

Since Glasnost there are many who revile the name of Gorbachov. While Possibly up to four fifths have gradually participated in the newly found wealth through a booming retail and finance sector – but the lives of the bottom fifth are grim indeed as social services are very limited to nonexistent. While Russia today looks prosperous and most people seem happy, there are still those who pine for the good old days of communism, who think that massive public resources should not be ploughed into restoring gross monuments to upper class selfishness and egotism when they themselves are hungry and cold. We see a group of poorly dressed people carrying the old Soviet flag march from Lenin’s tomb to the far end of Red Square. Our guide tells us they are older communists, yearning for the days when they had enough to eat and to remind
Muscovites that they still exist, and so should the principles of communism. For capitalism to work you need capital – and the only people who had capital, rather like in China, were those who could put their hands on public money, that is, corrupt Government officials, and those who had stacks of private money, that is crooks and especially the mafia. On privatisation, millions of jobs that the government had previously supplied over the country were shed. Universities had churned out teachers and engineers who had walked immediately into government jobs but these graduates were now unemployable; instead, they worked in retailing, as hawkers in the markets if nothing else was available. The trickle down from the Russian Mafia eventually did take place as we can see – so many expensive cars on the road, the GUM store too expensive for us mere tourists.

But most look ahead, not to a past that young adults would hardly know existed. They look to the future. Wednesdays Thursdays and Saturdays are official wedding days. Bride, groom and wedding party are whisked in ultra-stretch white limousines to lavish wedding receptions. Each happy couple buys a padlock, inscribe on it ‘ЮРЫ + КАТЯ 12.10.06’ (‘Yuri + Katya, 12/10/06’), lock it onto one of the many wedding trees made of padlocks on the Bol Sol Kamenyi Bridge, conveniently near the Cathedral of Christ the Redeemer, and drop the key into the Moskva River. They are locked in love for ever.

Continue further down from that bridge and you arrive at the Tretyakov Art Gallery, a private collection of Russian art that was in its way more interesting than the treasures in the Hermitage. In the 19th century, the Tetrayakov brothers collected ‘unrecognised’ artists, who were highly skilled but who refused to paint what the boyars or aristocrats wanted them to paint. These idealistic artists painted people and situations that reflected their times far more poignantly than the neo-classic pastiche the upper classes wanted: a woman being dragged away by the boyars, a peasant’s funeral, scenes from Russian folk stories. One striking picture is of Sofia, Peter the Great’s older half-sister, who believed the throne was hers and became quite stroppy about it. To cool her down, Peter thought that rather than to the throne, Sofia was called to the religious life, so he made her an unwilling nun and had her imprisoned in Novodevichi Convent. The artist has captured the look of uncontrollable rage on her face, a look she maintained until she died of it.

When we went to the Convent, it was very beautiful and peaceful, we heard a choir, all male this time, sing powerfully yet with total control over vast ranges of expression. Sacred and secular works, including the Song of the Volga Boatman (‘yo oh heave ho’), were sung as perfectly as could be imagined. In front of them is a pile of their CDs for sale. But it was not so perfect for everyone at Novodevichy.
Convent. While we were being thus entertained, outside a wedding was getting off to a bad start. In the car park, bride and groom were miserably watching their driver change a tyre on their ultra-stretch wedding limousine.

The Moscow Metro is the pride of Moscow. A huge and efficient network, it dives deeper underground than most metros because of the boggy nature of the soil. But the pride lies not so much in how well it works, but in the artworks that adorn the huge, clean walkways. Much of the arts, murals and statues, celebrate The People, or military men and victories. For good luck, a woman strokes the muzzle of a soldier’s dog as they guard the city during the war, the dog’s muzzle shiny from good luck pats. A huge mural celebrates Napoleon’s Retreat from Moscow, while an uncaring Muscovite sleeps it off on the bench below.

Moscow University is one of seven ‘Stalin Buildings’ in Moscow. We had already seen the shape in Stalin’s Gift to Warsaw: huge stepped, square buildings with a sharp tower. Here, up in the Sparrow Hills, it houses some 40,000 students, most of whom since Glasnost have to pay their own fees, around 100,000 roubles a year, or about $4,000, which is around what Australians on four times the salary pay, at least in Arts Faculties. Not for a minute are we arguing that our fees should be increased, but that education is not just a ‘private good’ as the likes of Thatcher and Howard argued, but the responsibility of the state to provide. At the far end from the University is a lookout, giving views right across Moscow, and with luck you can pick out the other six Stalin Buildings. Graduates, unemployable as teachers or engineers, keep the unemployment figures to near zero – so we are told – by selling toys, mamushkas, candy floss, anything that anyone can buy. A boy has difficulty in making up his mind what to select from all these riches.

We walk to Arbus Street market, negotiating packs of aloof stray dogs that quietly populate Moscow streets. Arbus Street is a fun street: street artists, hawkers’ stalls, tourist shops all doing a thriving business this warm sunny Sunday. Catherine is interested in buying a set of mamushka dolls. We find there are the cheap ones and look it, and the expensive ones that aren’t worth it. We don’t buy any. The sun is bright, people are laughing, the flowers are out. We see a Russia of healthy,
looking people, happily spending their money. With the possible exceptions of the Polish Highlanders and Budapestians, the modal shape for a young woman in Eastern Europe and especially here in Russia, in contrast to Tasmania the most obese of Australian states, is not a giant mango. So many Russian girls have figures and limbs like their athletes Sharapova and Gregoriova, with their perfect bodies and long golden legs. But alas, as you can see, far too of them many smoke.

The Writers’ Club, a beautiful old house with stained glass windows, was once the social centre of Russian writers in the 19th century. After the Revolution, the Bolsheviks thought it decadent and used it to house the destitute, then it became an orphanage. Today, by what process of transformation and ownership is unclear, it is a marvelous restaurant serving Russian haut cuisine with top growth Bordeaux, a red and a white, courtesy of Captain’s Choice. A fitting closing dinner for our tour. We say goodbye to one of our escorts, Jessie, who could give any Russian girl a run for her money in the looks department.

We close our fascinating and at times confronting tour with two images of Russia.