

Southport U3A Russian Language & Culture Group: `To Moscow and St Petersburg with Titan Travel`

In late June 2017, members of the U3A Russian group, led by tutor Chris Devereux, undertook a six-day tour of Moscow and St Petersburg

The itinerary seemed daunting, but we couldn't wait to see the cities we'd read about and discussed in our fortnightly sessions at Lancaster House. We booked with Titan Travel, and formed a sub-group of eight within the larger party of 44.

Having arrived in Moscow, we surprised by the magnificence of the buildings, as the coach sped through the city to our hotel.

The Russian Government assigns apartments to the 15 million citizens according to family. Hence there are no private houses, but many families have country 'dachas' or weekend retreats in the countryside. Between the apartment blocks ('Stalin-' or 'Yeltzin-' esque, according to the degree of stone embellishment), we glimpsed domes and statuary; vistas of university and official buildings appeared on the skyline above the bridges and wide boulevards. Contrary to expectations, they were not grey, but pastel shades picked out in white or cream. Our tour guides delivered a commentary on the 850-year-old city as we journeyed to our hotel. We were to spend two nights at the 4* Azimut before travelling on to St Petersburg. Next day the tour began in earnest and we were whisked by coach to Red Square, dominated by the Byzantine splendour of St Basils Cathedral. From a high point on the quaintly named Sparrow Hills we enjoyed a vista of the city.

Next, we visited the courtyards and gardens of the New Maiden Convent, founded in 1524, with its sixteen gilded domes. Here many a Russian noblewomen spent her final years, including the wife and sister of Peter the Great.

We lunched al fresco, in the garden terrace of an outdoor restaurant just off Red Square. Here, as forewarned, we experienced the arrival of food in random order, so some of us received our dishes when it was almost ready to re-join the tour. It was a surprise to one of the vegetarians when the salad she thought she'd ordered turned out to be a huge sausage!

In the afternoon, we visited the Tretyakov Gallery, with its collection of Russian masterpieces. After an introduction to the most famous works there was time to wander through galleries according to choice. As with many of the places we visited, we felt there wasn't enough time to do justice to the vastness of the collection.

Next day found us in the 'heart of the country', the Kremlin. In the spacious enclosed area, fifteenth century cathedrals jostled with palaces and museums. Luckily, our tour guides had arranged an early visit to the Armoury Museum in advance of the crowds. Here we were impressed by huge glass cases filled with opulent artefacts such as the crowns of the successive Tsars, jewel-encrusted costumes and the priceless Faberge eggs which were a favourite gift for the Tsars' family members. Huge thrones and state carriages underlined the pomp and ceremony of the Romanov dynasty. Jewel-

encrusted costumes and exquisite tableware witnessed the luxurious lifestyles made possible by the labour of serfs, in a system akin to slavery.

Thanks to a friend of Chris's, a teacher of English at the university and resident of Moscow, we spent a memorable evening at a restaurant that specialised in Siberian food. A banquet was served in a room reserved for our party of eight. Decorated in the style of a nineteenth century parlour, dark walls were almost hidden in darkness round a central pendant which glowed above the velvet and lace tablecloth. Here pickled vegetables, raw fish and cured meats appeared in tasty succession.

Our journey by Metro to the restaurant was memorable. We made stops to view two splendid stations and to marvel at bronze statuary in the grandiose Socialist-Realist style, and at Art-Deco vaults and hallways. Our favourite was a bronze group of hunters and dogs where it was considered lucky travellers to stroke the muzzle of the leading dog for luck. In contrast with the dull brown of the rest, the dog's nose was worn to a bright yellow.

The next afternoon brought an interlude on the Sapsan high-speed train to St Petersburg where we were to spend four nights. The Radisson Sonya was unusually themed, based on Dostoevsky's gloomy novel 'Crime and Punishment'. It was located close to the main sights of the city. Moscow is impressive, but we were dazzled by St Petersburg, home to the Romanov Tsars since it was founded by Peter the Great in 1705 and intended to be the most European city in Russia. Although full of places it seemed at street-level, walker-friendly. Built on reclaimed land, it has an attractive layout of canal side routes which make for pleasant strolling. Abounding in statuary and fountains as well as quaintly named churches, it's the city of preference for most tourists.

Here the wealth of the Tsars was on full display, and the continuing gold leaf motif was a constant reminder of the great mineral wealth to be mined on the vast steppes of northern Russia.

We took a coach trip to the so-called Pushkin village, named in 1937 to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of the death of Russia's most famous poet. At a palace named after Catherine, the wife of Peter the Great, we walked in the gardens of Yekaterinsky Park. Inside, the rooms included the glowing chamber, lined with amber where visits by foreign VIP's and chief advisers were received. The entire village was a gift from Peter to his wife. Our coach was parked at the end of a short street full of market stalls, an opportunity to bargain for souvenirs, including the iconic 'Matroushka' dolls and glossy wooden boxes with painted scenes.

On the second day in St Petersburg we visited the Hermitage Museum on the banks of the Neva, with its collection of masterpieces by Da Vinci, Rembrandt and Michelangelo. The main Hermitage building is the Winter Palace, the main residence of the Tsars, who didn't stint on opulence. It was easy to imagine the glittering assemblies which once filled the successions of rooms with soaring marble and gold-leaf pillars, lit by sparkling chandeliers. We also visited the Peter and Paul Fortress, the oldest building in St Petersburg.

On the penultimate day, there was an excursion to the opulent Peterhof Palace and Gardens, built to impress European Royalty, with over 175 fountains in the gardens including the Great Cascade built to commemorate a military victory in 1709. At this stage, some of us preferred to explore the city on foot, to visit the small churches and galleries within walking distance of the hotel, approached on foot along the canals and wide streets, or to sit in cafes and enjoy the street life of a truly amazing city.

This was an unforgettable experience and we are grateful to class tutor Chris whose enthusiasm is a constant inspiration.

Sheila Cornelius,

Russian Language & Culture Group



Chykov`s Grave, The New Maiden Convent Cemetery, Moscow



Raisa Gorbachov`s Grave, The New Maiden Convent Cemetery, Moscow



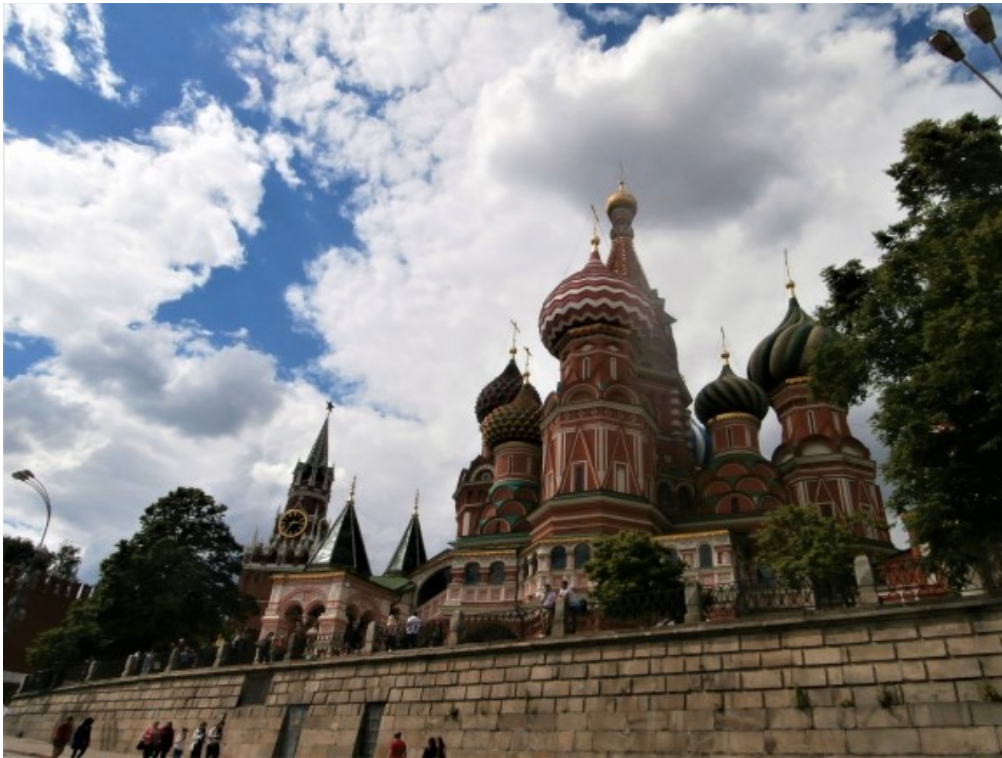
**Nikita Krushchov`s Grave, The New Maiden Convent Cemetery,
Moscow**



'GOOM': The State Department Store, Red Square, Moscow



The Guys at the Catherine Palace, Pushkin, Nr St Petersburg



St Basil`s Cathedral, Red Square



The Gang in the Beautiful Moscow Underground