

ST PETERSBURG COLLECTION VIP TOUR TO ST PETERSBURG, RUSSIA

Saturday 22 July

We fly to Gatwick and on to Heathrow for our flight to St Petersburg. Met Anthony and Laurie and Judy and Roger in the club lounge and our journey begins. The new airport at St Petersburg is now complete and very like any other international destination - but a great improvement. After an hour of waiting for immigration and baggage we are off to the city. There had been a huge hailstone storm before we arrived and in some places it looked like it had snowed in the middle of summer! Hotel Astoria is as welcoming as always and room excellent. Overlooking St Isaac Cathedral a sure sign we have indeed arrived at an old friend. The canal trip is always a start to our trip here, unfortunately it poured with rain most of the boat trip, just the luck of the draw. We were shown the project of Holland Island and the rain had ceased, so were able to go on deck to have a better view. It is going to be I believe an area for enjoyment. Stroganoff Palace, a firm favourite, the ambience in red is truly decadent and this year we actually got stroganoff ! A tradition on the first night is to have a night walk in day light, being white night's time, so 6 of us set off towards the Neva River. All the naval boats were all decked out with flags and lights ready for the parade next week. The streets and squares were full of street bands and hundreds of people wandering about soaking up the wonderful atmosphere, all ending with a firework display over the river. Great welcome to the city which I love.

Sunday 23 July

The sun has returned, we set off for the river banks where a rehearsal is being staged for next Sunday's naval parade. It is a special one as St Petersburg is being recognised as the capital of the Russian Navy. Hundreds of Russians are out enjoying the spectacle, as all four bridges are open to let the naval boats through all decked out and ratings on deck to attention. The bridges are usually only open very early in the morning. It makes quite a spectacular scene against the palaces along the Neva River banks, hundreds of locals craning their necks to get a good view of Putin's strength of the high seas. This was followed by a large fly past of various military and naval aircraft - a rare treat for visitors. We had to walk back the same way we came as soldiers lined the route to stop any wayward walkers - still a touch of regimentation!

St Isaac's Cathedral still impresses you even after 3 visits, the size, mosaics and the silver dove floating high above you in the central dome never cease to amaze you as it was all built in the 1800 on marsh land! They had to pile drive down to bedrock! Lunch was at Shalyapin Restaurant, a Russian restaurant with shots of vodka made a memorable meal. The afternoon was a feast for the eyes and senses - The Fabergé Museum with Fabergé objets d'art in abundance. The Shuvalov Palace houses a huge collection on Fabergé eggs and other artefacts by Carl Fabergé amongst other well-known artists of enamel. A wealthy Russian, Viktor Vekeselberg, purchased the Forbes Collection from America and St Petersburg were the happy receivers of said Collection. He also refurbished the Palace in order to display the lost cultural valuables of Russia, the showcases are brilliantly done. A couple of hours there and you have sensory overload. I last went there 2 years ago and the collection has doubled since then. There are 9 Royal Fabergé Easter Eggs on display in a beautifully restored room. The evening saw us returning to the Angleterre Hotel with dinner in a private room with much improved food and service. Philip likes this private room to tell us things in private and as it is early on in the tour any questions can also be put to him.

Monday 24 July

Peterhof and the fabulous fountains. There is now a new highway so getting there only took 40 mins. Weather not kind to us and umbrellas were the order of the day. Our first visit was to the Grand Palace, stunning as ever but considering it was a closed day the crowds were larger than before, mainly cruise liners! A short walk to the Treasury (closed to all but us) and Peterhof's private collection including the Theo Fabergé egg presented by St Petersburg Collection. A short walk down to the Orangery for a very disappointing lunch, less said the better. We then had electric buggies to drive us around the grounds because of a few that could not walk long distances. We were heading for Catherine's House, a small building on the Gulf of Finland where Catherine would come to take treatment for her TB, and men for preening and spas. They lived the high life back then with much spare time on their hands. Across the beautifully laid out gardens and into the Bath house more spa treatment areas and probably the biggest spa room in existence. We had the privilege to see it in action where we stood in the corners of the room so as to not get wet. Then on to the master piece of the fountains - behind Peterhof Palace. They never seem to dull the senses, the gilding, the enormity of the cascade and volume of

water all worked on gravity defies belief. You leave Peterhof thinking nothing could top what the Tsars created.....Dinner at Mein Herz a new restaurant of Dutch German origin. All on one long table. Interesting middle course of a bread box with a lid filled with mushrooms in a sauce.

Tuesday 25 July

Off to the town of Pushkin and Tsarskoye Selo and Catherine's Palace. Greeted as always by Iraida, the Deputy Director of the Museum complex, having walked through the main gates and in the front door, as the Tsars would of done and a great privilege for us all due to Philip's connection with Iraida over many years. We walked through the meticulously laid out gardens to the back entrance of the Agate Rooms, which were originally the Bath House. Restored three years ago and only invited guests have the privilege of going through we don the usual slippers over our shoes. The Agate Rooms are actually full of jasper and original heavily wooded inlaid floors. We climb a spiral staircase with no supports as they are embedded in the wall and don felt slippers on top of already donned slippers, the floors we are about to walk on are spectacular and original. The walls are covered in different jaspers, ceilings restored with their frescoes and wonderful period furniture. Senses zinging, cameras whirring we proceed with Iraida's knowledge and onwards and out to Cameron's gallery walk, designed for Catherine the Great. Lined with bronze busts of famous figures and looking out over parkland, gardens and pavilions.

We make our way to The Treasury, again closed to the public today and opened specially for us. This is where all the special treasures of Catherine's Palace are kept. We see personal belongings of Peter the Great. Throne chairs of Alexander 1st, clothes worn by different Tsarinas and gifts given to Catherine the Great. The restaurant puts on a lovely lunch for us, again it is usually closed on a Tuesday, but not for us. So many privileges!

2pm and we are all seated in an anti hall of the great ballroom in the main Palace, surrounded by gold opulence, this is the presentation of the Amber Egg to the Palace to celebrate the 300 years of the gift of the Amber Room. Picture about 100 blue chairs all in rows filled with invited guests and TV cameras from four Russian TV stations plus various newspapers and magazines. The Director of the Museum, Olga, Philip, Iraida and Margarita have all made their speeches - they are about to unveil the egg, the cameras are at the ready the cloth slides gently off the display cabinet and the egg is revealed, the cameras are clicking in overload, they are all cramming to get closer. It is a beautiful Amber egg with gold bands and the surprise is an easel with a gold heart with a red rose inside. All designed by Theo Faberge. He adored the Amber Room hence the easel with the heart and red rose. We are then invited next door for drinks, another successful delivery of an egg from St Petersburg Collection as a thank you for allowing us to have such privileges here in Russia. Now we are shown around the stunning Palace which on my fourth visit still stuns me. Not another group is seen this is a very private tour. Gold surrounds you, size amazes you, and restoration is happening everywhere. Walking out to the bus there is nobody else in the area, we are the only group left and this is what makes coming with Philip so special. Cococo for dinner and what a treat, this eating experience was superb, each course was like a work of art culminating with a dessert that was a chocolate flowerpot on it's side with the earth, chocolate spilling out and the flower was mint and an edible flower, very clever. You fall asleep with visions of beauty flashing by as your eyes gently close with exhaustion.

Wednesday 26 July

Hermitage Museum, the Winter Palace. We are met by the International Director of the Museum Olga. She ushers us in an hour before any other group waiting to enter. Up the stairs to the old part of the Palace. The exhibits are not the only wonderful objects to view. Craning your neck there are the most beautiful ceilings and down by your feet exquisite floors, peering round the vast number of visitors, walls come in to view with yet more objet d'art are visible. Unfortunately the visitor ratio has swelled and has made it uncomfortable to go round in a relaxed atmosphere. We do manage, with Frieda's expert guiding, to get close to many artefacts. The huge mechanical clock designed for Catherine the Great was viewed, still works when wound up, always a crowd pleaser. The most pleasing exhibition was porcelain flowers exquisite to perfection. We went on to see the newer parts of the Hermitage and an area designated to Nicholas II and his family. As the Hermitage has now got the building across the square to the left of the Victory Arch we are



taken across for lunch. A much improvement of lunch to the old cafeteria. What they have done to the building is very impressive, with monies raised by local contributions. It now houses the paintings from Impressionists. Most of them are behind glass, which in my opinion can hinder the overall effect of a painting. Also because of the glass the windows of said building reflect on the glass.

Thursday 27 July

St Peter & St Paul Fortress is built on an island and was built to protect the harbour of St Petersburg but never saw any action. It is a large military garrison and the church has the highest steeple in the area. All the Tsars and their wives are buried here and Nicholas II marked his spot but due to the tragedy that befell them following the Revolution in 1917 the family and their loyal staff and doctor are all buried together in a side chapel, except Maria and their son Alexi. The Orthodox Church want more proof of the two bodies that they have found - so one day hopefully the family will all be reunited in one grave. Lunch is at Akle just off Nevsky Prospect and after lunch we head off for a walk down said street. We found the oldest grocery shop which equates to Harrods in the display of items, price and choice, beautifully displayed in a wonderful building with a palm tree in the middle and a few cafe tables placed around it. The old Singer Sewing shop is an Art Deco facaded building with a very interesting glass ceiling in the middle. It now houses probably the largest bookshop we have seen, books on every available space provided, even going up the stairs!! Walking along Nevsky Prospect you do wonder where all the people come from, so the majority must be tourists, none the less a lot of hustle and bustle. We deviate through the Kazan Cathedral and there is the usual long line of worshippers waiting to honour the Black Madonna, their wait can be up to two hours. Walk back to the hotel via the back streets to avoid the crowds, it is a hot day for Russia and we are pleased to get back in to the cool of the Astoria Hotel. A couple of hours rest and we get dolled up in black tie and evening dress for our Gala Dinner in Tsarskoye Selo. First a visit to the Amber shop, an amazing array of different coloured Amber and objects. We were offered vodka with an infusion of Amber, definitely gave it a different flavour. Knock it back in onebeautiful. Just round the corner and we are let in to the newly restored carriage house, with so many carriages used by the various Tsars which have been restored to a point. The carriage that carried Alexander I when he was attacked has been left in that state and brings it home to how the incendiary killed the footman, he then went to see what had happened to him and another was thrown at him which fatally wounded him and was his demise.

Our surprise dinner was on the Tsars private island in the middle of the lake. You are taken across in a flat bottomed boat pulled by wires. The island consists of a large square Pavilion, restored to perfection with huge pink marble pillars, frescoes and a stage at one end. Five tables are laid out with fine bone China and gold and silver cutlery, just like in the Tsars time. We are presented with a five course meal, wine and vodka. The St Petersburg conservatoire entertains us to opera and piano concertos, the acoustics are phenomenal and always a joy to listen to the artists. This is my third visit and never fails to enchant me. The evening nearly over and Geoff decides that he would like to try out the piano so he entertains us for about 5 mins. The best venue he has played in.....to date ! Returning over the lake in twilight is magical and so silent, a weary but happy bus load returns to the city our last night with happy memories. A few hardy folk go to the bar to down a few more vodkas and lively chat, where did we get the extra burst of energy??

Friday 28 July

Packed up and ready for home but first a visit to Marinsky Palace, also known as Marie Palace, was the last Neo classical Imperial Palace to be constructed in St Petersburg. It was built between 1839 and 1844 to a design by court architect Andrei Stackensneider, and is home of the Legislative body of St Petersburg, we are ushered in to the Red Room which is still how it was when built for Duke Maximilian of Leuchtenburg, husband of Grand Duchess Maria Nikolaevna, daughter of Nicholas I. We all get seated and a Member of Parliament gives a short speech about the workings of the building. The wooden inlaid doors in this room are worth 2 million a pair and there are six pairs!! We are then shown the actual legislative assembly hall and then a real treat.....We climb up some stairs and then along corridors more stairs, out of the windows is a beautiful view of the Blue Bridge, Astoria Hotel and the Pyotr Klodt's statue of Tsar Nicholas I, until we come to a beautiful staircase leading up to the Palace chapel. It has been restored to perfection and quite unlike any we have seen on the trip. Less gold, more marble, lots of painted frescoes.

A quick lunch and we depart for the airport, home and another great visit and memories of Russia.