

**The 2017 Tour of St Petersburg with Philip Birkenstein, including a presentation of a Theo Fabergé Amber Egg to the Catherine Palace in celebration of the 300<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Amber Room.**

**By Helen Wilkins**

The invitation for a Russian adventure came from St Petersburg Collection, a company created in 1985 by Theo Fabergé, the last grandson of Carl Fabergé. It arrived by email in October 2016. Without a second thought I responded with a clear 'YES PLEASE' and booked my flights. Like so many other rather privileged invitees, this was not my first tour with Philip, (CEO of the UK based company). It was my sixth journey from New Zealand for this super-luxury week, staying in the Astoria Hotel (fit for a Tsar), getting to places and parts of palaces that no one else gets to see, also dining with curators of the world's most wonderful museums. We even appeared on Russian television as Philip presented Theo's stunning Amber Egg to the curator at the Catherine Palace, for the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the gift of the amber panels and now the famous Amber Room in Tsarskoye Selo, (Tsar's Village in Russian). A village 15 miles south of St Petersburg, which is now known as the town of Pushkin, after that famous Russian poet. Guiding us and describing the historical events of the past four hundred years was the incredibly knowledgeable historian, Frieda, assisted by Margarita and Nina.

We started with a boat ride along the rivers and canals, (which gave the city the nick-name 'Venice of the North') for our first views of St Petersburg. That night we dined at the Stroganoff Palace on Borscht, a signature Russian soup, and yes you guessed it - Beef Stroganoff – of course.

Next day, after a sumptuous breakfast of caviar, smoked salmon and everything else on the miles of buffet offerings, we walked some of it off, down to the Neva River to see the rehearsal of the upcoming annual celebration of the 'birthday' of the Russian Navy, created by Peter the Great in 1696 during the war against the Ottoman Empire. We saw the parade of military ships, submarines along with other vessels gliding down the river, and even a fly-over of various military planes. Very exciting. Our walk took us to St Isaac's Cathedral, a



huge monument whose dome can be seen for miles; the interior of which was breath-taking in its splendour. But the Carl Fabergé Museum in the Shuvalov Palace was the highlight of the day – a new event on the annual agenda – giving us privileged, close-up views of that famous artist’s creations, not to mention the beautifully restored palace. The collection was established by Viktor Vekselberg in 2004 with the purpose of repatriating lost cultural valuables to Russia.



Peterhof Palace, an hour’s drive away, next day, was totally spectacular and drew many ‘aaaaah’s and ‘wow’s to which Philip responded ‘You ain’t seen nothin’ yet.’ Newly restored fountains, waterfalls, gardens and gold statuary dazzled as we trundled along in specially ordered electric carts; cameras doing overtime, with Frieda communicating the history to us via radio walkie-talkies. The Coat of Arms Pavillion, the Grand Palace and lunch at the Orangery Restaurant were followed by the viewing of the old kitchen, the gardens, the ancient baths and the cute shower system within the Bath House. Then the dash back into town for dinner at the Mein Herz Restaurant. All meals being four courses!!!

Each day took us to new and greater heights of delight and intrigue, which peaked when we visited Tsarskoye Selo to see the Agate Rooms, the Amber Room, the Charles Cameron



Gallery, then the grand presentation by Philip of the Amber Egg at the Catherine Palace; which on that day was closed to the public - we had it all to ourselves. That night we dined at Cococo Restaurant in St Petersburg and without question enjoyed the most delightful meal yet. Many of us took photos of the superb presentations before tucking in.

Wednesday, Hermitage Day. A new building which had once been the Army Headquarters on Palace Square, now housed a great collection of Western Art plus the Fabergé Memorial Room; a stunning display of the Tsarina’s gowns, gifts of fine art and jewellery showing the development of the highest craftsmanship, the Rothschild Clock Egg, replicas of the imperial crown jewels, rock crystal dishes, porcelain flowers, beautifully decorated cigarette cases

and other jewels - to name but a few of the fabulous items. That night was the ballet – Swan Lake – at the Mikhailovsky Theatre. Breathtakingly beautiful.

Thursday was a more than thought-provoking day. A tour of the Church of the Spilled Blood, (aka ‘The Saviour on the Spilled Blood’) built on the spot where Tsar Alexander II was assassinated in 1881, and thus named. The exterior, an exceptional work of multi-coloured cupolas, similar to St Basil’s Cathedral in Moscow, was regarded as a symbol of Russian architecture at the time. The interior, walls to vaulted ceilings were decorated with mosaics, ceramics, enamels and paintings, depicting scenes from Christ’s life. The 308 mosaics covering 6,560 square metres are a true artistic and cultural treasure.

A trip in the afternoon, to the Peter and Paul Fortress and Cathedral where all the Tsars and the last Royal Family rest, generated a melancholy feeling for those final days. Seeing their homes, their beautiful belongings and portraits of their everyday life, touched many of us, and by late afternoon we were very pleased to be out in the sunshine again, dashing off to dress up for our final evening together – a Black Tie Gala Dinner and private concert in a secret venue.

Philip loved to give us a surprise on each annual tour. This year, 2017, it was dinner in the Tsar’s Island Pavillion on the lake at Tsarskoye Selo, reached only on a small pontoon. There was much hilarity as the ladies, holding their evening skirts above their high-heeled shoes, stepped on board, with a gentleman kindly assisting them. The dining hall was exquisite, the service immaculate and the meal superb: Salmon Mousse with fennel cream, Smoked sturgeon fillet with Kamchatka crab salad, Rabbit leg stuffed with spicy vegetables, Golden Dorado fish fillet with Zucchini Julienne were followed by a dessert of Mille-feuille, vanilla cream and fresh berries. Too delicious for words... Various wines befitting each course were served, and of course the traditional Vodka kept flowing. The concert with pianist and soprano topped the evening off beautifully. We all felt a bit like Tsars and Tsarinas and indeed, were treated in like manner.

Getting back onto the pontoon to return to our coach at midnight was not so regal – nobody actually fell into the lake, but the promise was there!

Departure day was upon us as we scrambled to pack up our strewn belongings. We had truly settled into the Astoria and it was with leaden hearts that we closed our cases for the flight back to London. However, this was not the end of the tour. Somehow Philip managed to squeeze in a visit to the Mariinsky Palace which houses the Legislative Assembly of St Petersburg. We met one of the Members of the Assembly who described to us new plans for the city, tourism and ways of developing better relations with the outside world. Philip gave him a few suggestions and there was much laughter. Lunch followed in yet another highly decorated and truly beautiful hall, with all four courses sustaining us during our three-and-a-half-hour flight back to Heathrow. We gave three cheers for Philip, and Frieda and her team for a most splendid tour. It was hard saying goodbye to our newly found friends, with promises to keep in touch. It had been a truly happy Russian adventure.