

# In the Footsteps of the Czars



by Patrick and Louise Krohn

# In the Footsteps of the Czars:

St Petersburg to Moscow - 2012

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# Contents

Itinerary at a glance	iv
London	1
Helsinki	6
Saint-Petersburg	20
Mandrogy	47
Kizhi	50
Kuzino	54
Yaroslavl	64
Uglich	72
Moscow	78
Sergiev Posad	88
In hindsight	92

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# Itinerary at a glance

29 August	Wednesday	Mid-day arrival in London
30 August	Thursday	Side trip to Nettleton for a family visit
31 August	Friday	Genealogy research at the British Library; evening at the theatre
1 September	Saturday	Shopping along Oxford Street; evening at the theatre
2 September	Sunday	Shopping along Regent Street
3 September	Monday	Travel to Helsinki
4 September	Tuesday	John and Pauline join us; tour of Helsinki
5 September	Wednesday	Exploring Helsinki
6 September	Thursday	Travel to St. Petersburg; boarding the Rurik at 4:00 pm
7 September	Friday	Tour of the Hermitage Museum; evening ballet performance
8 September	Saturday	Morning tour of Catherine’s Palace in Tsarskoye Selo (Pushkin); afternoon city tour ending at Peter and Paul Fortress; evening show of Cossack music under a big tent
9 September	Sunday	Morning tour of Peterhof Palace; afternoon boat ride along a few of St. Petersburg’s canals and the Neva river
10 September	Monday	Leaving St. Petersburg; afternoon stop at Mandrogy
11 September	Tuesday	Cruising; mid-day stop at Kizhi Island
12 September	Wednesday	Cruising; afternoon stop at Kirilov
13 September	Thursday	Cruising; afternoon stop at Yaroslavl
14 September	Friday	Cruising; morning stop at Uglich; town tour and visit to private house for vodka, cake and tea
15 September	Saturday	Arriving in Moscow at noon; afternoon city tour; evening concert of Russian classical and folk music
16 September	Sunday	Day-long excursion to Sergiev Posad
17 September	Monday	Tour of the Armory Museum; visit to the Kremlin
18 September	Tuesday	Leaving Moscow, arriving Vancouver mid-afternoon
19 September	Wednesday	Overnight in Princeton
20 September	Thursday	Arrival home early afternoon

# London

**Tuesday** • Finally, we are on our way to London to begin our journey. Our plans include a day with family, a visit to the British Library to do a bit of genealogical research, some shopping, of course, and at least a couple of nights at the theatre.

It’s early evening and our flight has just left Vancouver. I am sitting in business class. I have had a gin and tonic already and am on my second glass of a quite decent claret when the flight attendant brings my halibut dinner. One mouthful is enough to show that the fish is dry and tasteless. I am about to complain when I think: “What is wrong with me? Here I am, 33,000 feet in the air, reclining in a comfortable business class seat, having my meal served to me, starting a wonderful journey, and I complain about the fish?” “Get a grip!” I admonish myself. Thus suitably chastised, I relax and have a very nice, hassle-free trip... all nine hours of it...

We’re staying at the Hilton Paddington and have the most comfortable and quietest of rooms, even if it is about a quarter mile away from the elevator.

**Wednesday** • We get into London around noon. The rest of the day is a blur. It is pouring outside, so we don’t feel like going for a walk, we don’t want to go to sleep, and yet can’t fight the fatigue. We just keep dozing off. We make a quick visit to the Marks and Spencer food store down at the station, buy some salads, a big brick of cheese, a couple of buns, a bottle of wine and have dinner in our room. But finally, at 7:30, I decide I can’t stay awake any longer and give in to sleep. I am dead to the world the minute my head hits the pillow.



Zipline over Piccadilly Circus





Paddington Station

**Thursday** • We start with our pre-arranged one-day visit with the family, leaving on the 9:00 a.m. train from Paddington bound for Cheltenham. We, along with Val, Michael and Jane, have a quick but pleasant walk to the pub for a beer, then on to Michael's for a lavish lunch. We are back at our hotel just before 7:00 p.m., bringing with us a bag full of amber jewelry, leftover pieces from Dinny's collection. Only when I get back to the hotel do I start thinking about the possible perils of getting amber through Canadian customs at the end of a holiday in Russia. Will they really believe me when I try to explain how I came to have all this jewelry with me?

Once again, we are too tired to go out for dinner, so we make do with hors d'oeuvres and drinks at the hotel's Executive Lounge and then go and collapse in bed.

**Friday** • Today, I am spending the day at the British Library looking into Jane's family history. By the time I get my reader's card and find my bearing around the Library, it is past noon. Four hours later, I have nothing to show for my efforts. Disappointing...

While I am at the library, Patrick is delegated to go to Leicester Square to find us some good tickets for a play. In the end, he chooses the Trafalgar Studio, where "Yes, Prime Minister" is on that evening. We find the play very entertaining, even though the actors playing Sir Humphrys and the Prime Minister are nothing like Nigel Hawthorne and Paul Eddington in the TV series. Maybe that was done on purpose to avoid



Performer on Regent Street, celebrating the Paralympics

comparisons, but, as I watch, I can't help seeing the original TV actors in my mind. In retrospect, it was a really good performance. The story line was great, with many not-too-subtle references to the current British political scene: all together a most enjoyable evening.... except for the horrible dinner we had at a Garfunkel's restaurant prior to the play. I don't understand how a chain of restaurants that serve food this bad can remain in business for so long!





Regent Street, London

**Saturday** • Shopping day. Best deal for the day (well, for the entire trip, as it turns out) is the lovely Aquascutum duffel coat that Patrick got at Austin Reed, reduced from £600 to £200. For our second, and last theatre evening, we buy tickets for “Dancing in the Rain” at the Palace Theatre. It isn’t bad, although I find the music a bit “passé”. The most memorable moments include a rousing rendition of “Singing in the Rain,” a striking version of “Good Morning” (forever associated with the Viagra ads in my mind!) and a great finale. One of the actresses, playing the role of Lily Lamont, the silent era film star whose voice proved to be awful in the “talking pictures” era, is simply marvelous: I’ve never heard such a screeching voice in my life!

**Sunday** • Last day in London. We take the Tube to Oxford Circus and walk along Regent Street. We find the road closed to traffic: acrobats, jugglers and clowns have set up tents to entertain the crowd of shoppers walking and mingling on the street. This is just one of the many free entertainment events taking place all over London in celebration of the Paralympics.



# Helsinki

**Monday** • We're on our way to Helsinki. When we arrive, we decide to take a bus from the airport to our hotel, which, according to Viking's information, is "just across from the train station." The bus drops us off behind the station, but we can't see any sign of the hotel. We walk around in the general direction indicated by the bus driver, lugging our bags for what seems to me at least a mile. Still no sign of the hotel. Eventually, I park the luggage with Patrick and go in search of help. Approaching the first passer-by who seems to me a helpful sort of fellow, a young man in his twenties, I ask if he can help me. In flawless English, he says he can try. In the end, he has to look up the address on his mobile phone and, as it turns out, the hotel can be seen from where we stand.

It's now 6 o'clock. We find a lovely Scandinavian restaurant within walking distance, have a decent dinner and an early night to bed.

**Tuesday** • John and Pauline, having arrived from Vancouver late the night before, meet us for breakfast at the hotel after which we join a very cheerful tour guide for a half-day walking tour around Helsinki. We are joined by 20 cruise passengers who, like us, have signed up for the pre-cruise three-day excursion to Helsinki. We learn quite a bit of local history and are introduced to



Helsinki Lutheran Cathedral



many of the city’s main attractions. We visit the two main cathedrals: the very ornate Orthodox Uspenski Cathedral and the much plainer but just as impressive Helsinki Lutheran Cathedral. We have a quick walk through a most delightful public market, situated right in the centre of town, on the edge of one of the many bays around Helsinki. We learn that the market has been in operation since the 18th century.

After the tour, we stop in what looks like a temporary food kiosk located in an empty parking lot. It shouldn’t come as a surprise: the food is absolutely horrible!

Patrick, who is nurturing a bad cold, goes back to the hotel, while the rest of us continue exploring the city, walking for another three hours. This, I learn later, is not too smart: by the end of the day, my feet are so sore, I can barely walk the five minutes it takes to a near-by restaurant for dinner!

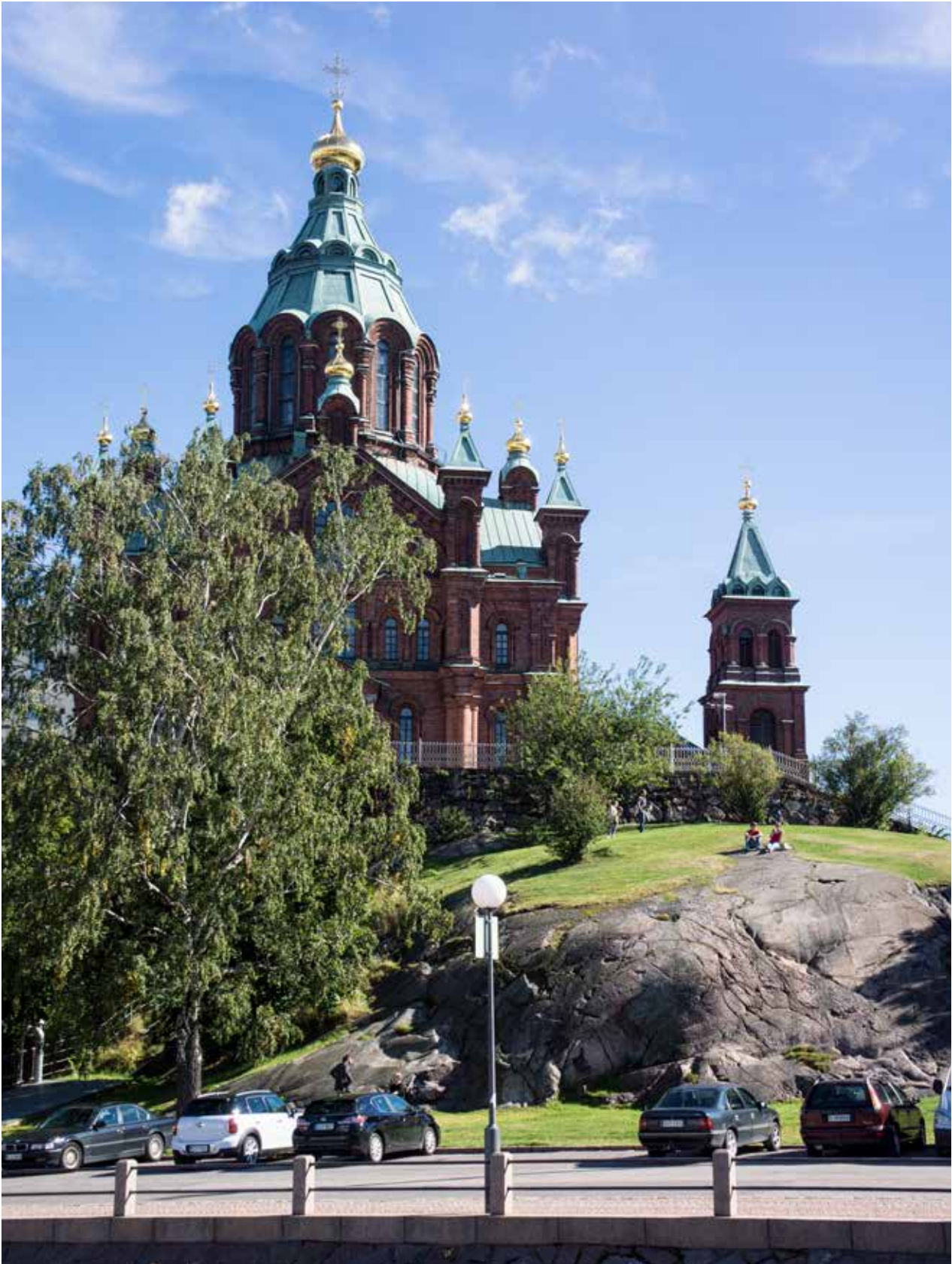
**Wednesday** • Our second and last day in Helsinki. In the morning, we go and see the Temppeliaukio church. The interior of this church, which was conceived in the 1930’s but not completed until 1968, was excavated directly into a massive rock of solid granite. It is bathed in natural light filtering through its glazed dome. The church is used frequently as a concert venue due to its excellent acoustics.

We walk back to the public market for a look around the various kiosks selling crafts, furs, jewelry, etc. I am very tempted by a lovely fur hat that Pauline says is just made for me, but I manage to resist. We have lunch at the market, go back for a last look at the fur hat and “Surprise! Surprise!” I give in to temptation and buy it! We spend the rest of the day browsing around some of the most iconic shops in the city: the Forum Design shop, a couple of Marimekko stores and the Stockman Department store where, according to our tour guide, “If it’s not at Stockman’s, it’s not worth having!”

For our last night in Helsinki, we find another Finnish restaurant, Aina, where we have a very good meal, certainly the best of our too-brief visit.



Temppeliaukio Church - Helsinki



Uspenski Cathedral - Helsinki





Inside the Uspenski Cathedral - Helsinki









Statue of writer Alexis Kivi and main Railway Station Tower



The Kamppi Chapel





Whimsical display on the balcony of a Helsinki building



Trees getting warm clothes for winter?





The Helsinki to St. Petersburg train



The Viking Rurik



Arrival in St. Petersburg

**Thursday** • We board a train at the Helsinki Central station at 11:00 a.m. We are going to join our cruise in St. Petersburg, where our riverboat, the Viking Rurik, awaits us. Customs procedures are handled on the train by a group of dour-looking officials with enough equipment on their belts to handle a major riot. No fooling around with these guys! At the St. Petersburg station, we are met by Sasha, one of the tour guides who will be with us for the entire cruise. We then board a bus and get our first experience of St. Petersburg's traffic. It is very slow going but finally, at around 4 p.m., we get to our ship, the Viking Rurik.

Our cabin is very spacious, comfortable and well designed with plenty of storage. After the embarkation briefing and the cocktail hour, we make our way to the dining room for dinner at 7:00 p.m. My first impression is that the food is excellent and the wine is free flowing, but just this side of drinkable.



# Saint-Petersburg



The Hermitage Museum

**Friday** • Our itinerary calls for three full days in St. Petersburg. During that time, we live on the ship and are bussed to various excursions each day.

At 9:30 this morning, we meet the five tour guides that will accompany us on most of the excursions. Based on John's pre-cruise research of ratings by previous passengers, we decide to go with fifty-ish, distinguished-looking Alexey, a good choice as it turns out. After an hour and a half drive in stop-and-go traffic, we finally arrive at the famous Hermitage Museum for our first excursion in Russia.

The Museum consists of five magnificent buildings arranged side by side on the embankment of the Niva River. Its main building, the Winter Palace, was built in the 18th century and was formerly a residence of the Russian Czars. Catherine the Great founded the museum in 1764 when she purchased 255 paintings from the city of Berlin. Today, the museum is among the largest in the world with almost 3 million works of art and artifacts, including works by Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Renoir, Cézanne, Monet, Picasso,

to name a few. Alexey is particularly fond and proud of the French collection, so we spend a bit of time visiting that part of the museum. Experts say that it would take about 11 years to see everything if you spent one minute viewing each item! Needless to say, we saw a very small fraction of the collection.

As wonderful as it is, it's hard not to think about how much of this collection was acquired by the "nationalization" of private collections in Russia and the looting of European museums by Russian soldiers during World War II.

After another hour-and-a-half on the bus in heavy traffic, we get back to the ship. To allow passengers enough time to return to the city for an evening ballet performance, dinner is served early at 4:30 p.m.!

Patrick and I decide to give ballet a miss and are both in bed by 8:00 p.m. I open the bottle of gin I bought at Heathrow and have a nice gin and tonic. Perhaps that is why I sleep so well. I'll test the hypothesis tomorrow night!





Tombs of the Czars - Peter and Paul Cathedral

**Saturday** • Our excursion today takes us to the town of Pushkin about 35 miles away from St. Petersburg for a visit to Catherine Palace.

The town, named for the famous Russian poet Alexander Pushkin, surrounds the park and palace of Tsarkoye Selo (the Czar's Village), one of two suburban estates in the area (Peterhof Palace being the other one). In the 17th century, the estate belonged to a Swedish noble. Peter the Great acquired it in 1708 for his wife, the future Empress Catherine I; she later started to develop it into a royal country residence. Her daughter, the Empress Elizabeth, and her architect Bartolomeo Rastrelli were largely responsible for the oldest structure, the Catherine Palace. However the whole of Tsarkoye Selo is a majestic architectural ensemble created by the most famous architects, painters and craftsmen of the time who transformed the residence into a Baroque and Classical masterpiece between 1744 and 1756. Today, the residence has been completely restored and is simply magnificent. It gives a glimpse of the extravagance of Russia's imperial rulers whose grandeur and excesses surpassed even Versailles. In the afternoon, we have a bus tour of St. Petersburg's historic city center, with short photo ops stops along the way. Our last and longest stop is at the Peter and Paul Fortress to visit its Cathedral.

Finally, in the evening, John, Pauline and I attend a very lively show of Cossack folklore, complete with a shot of vodka during the intermission. The show is held in a big tent, on the pier in front of the ship, and involves more than 20 dancers, singers and musicians. A bit cold, but a most entertaining evening, even if we did have to sit through a lot of hard-pressure sales to purchase souvenirs during the intermission!

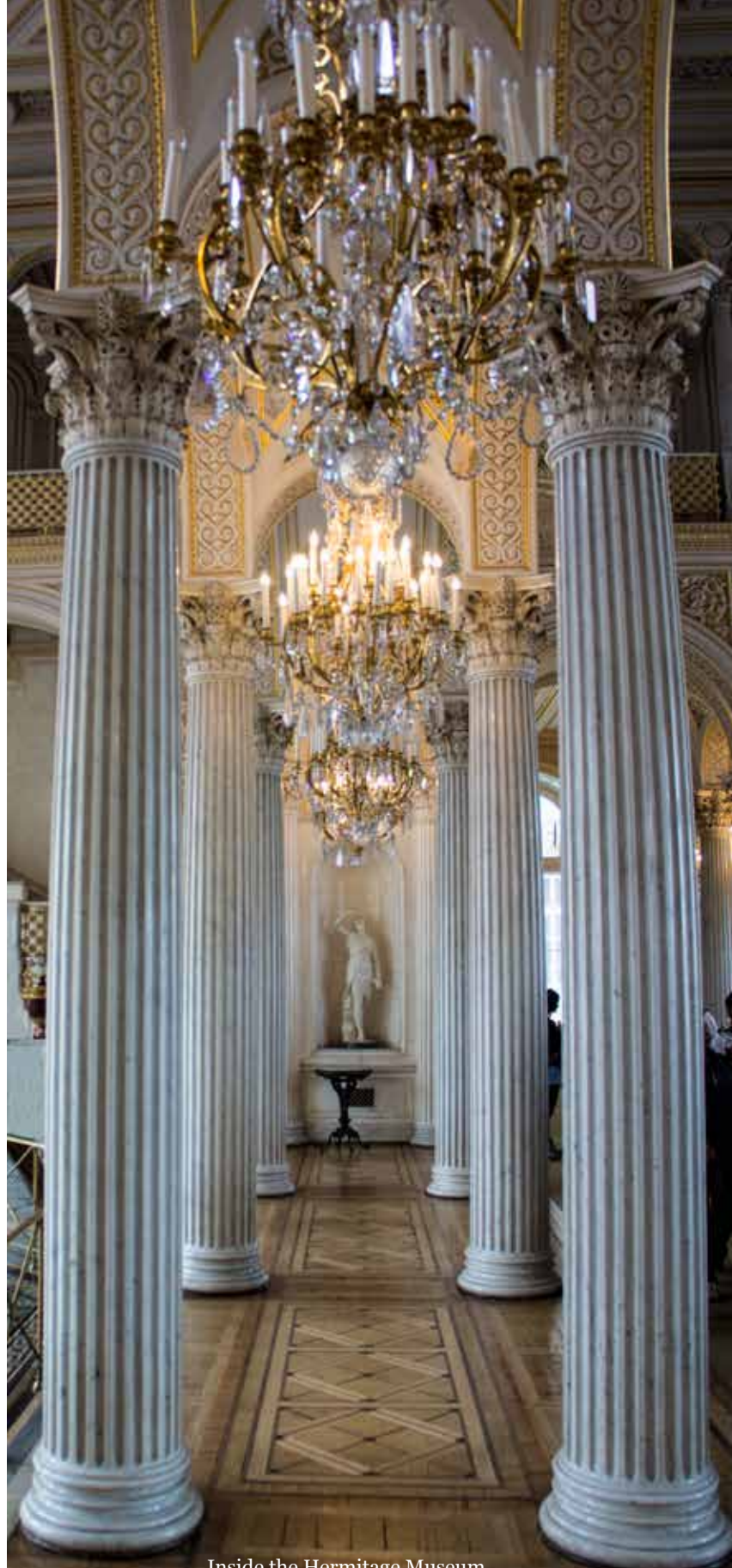


Catherine Palace, Tsarskoye Selo



The Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg





Inside the Hermitage Museum



Inside Catherine Palace







Portrait of unknown figure - Hermitage Museum

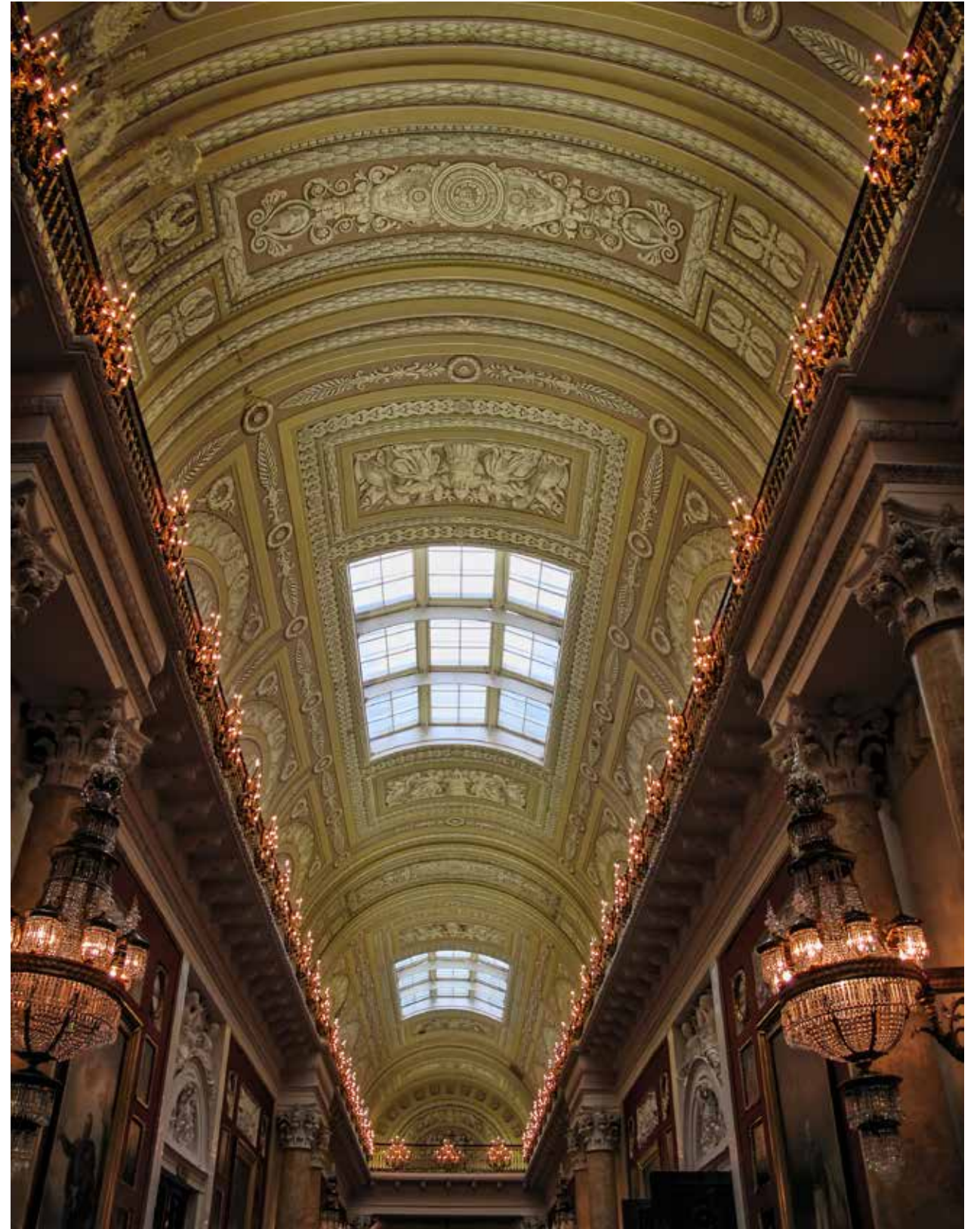


Peter the Great's daughter, Empress Elizabeth - Catherine Palace



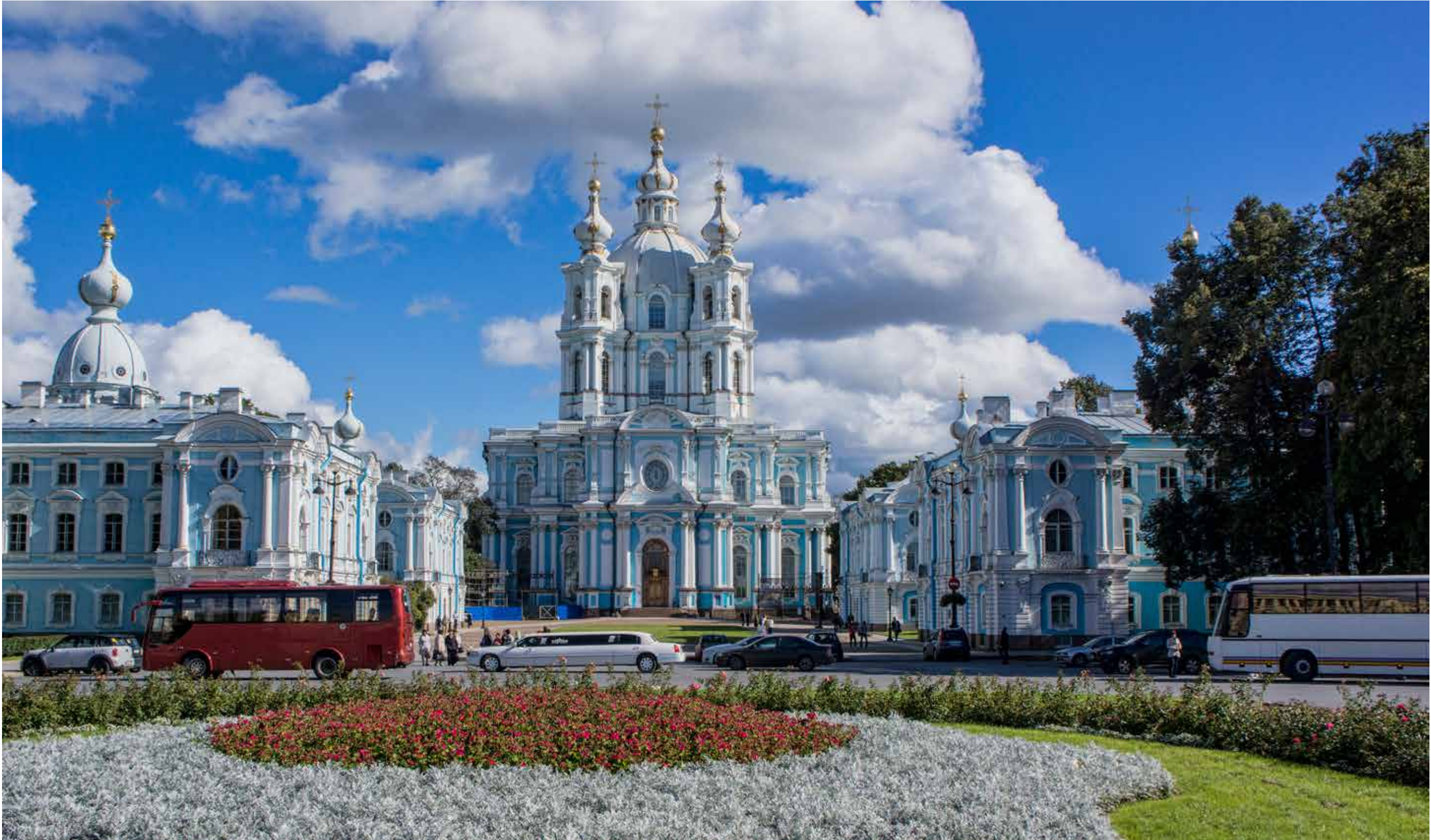


Marquetry and ceiling detail - Hermitage Museum



Ceiling detail - Hermitage Museum





Smolny Cathedral and Convent - St. Petersburg





St. Isaac's Cathedral



Entertainer outside the Church of the Savior on Spilled Blood

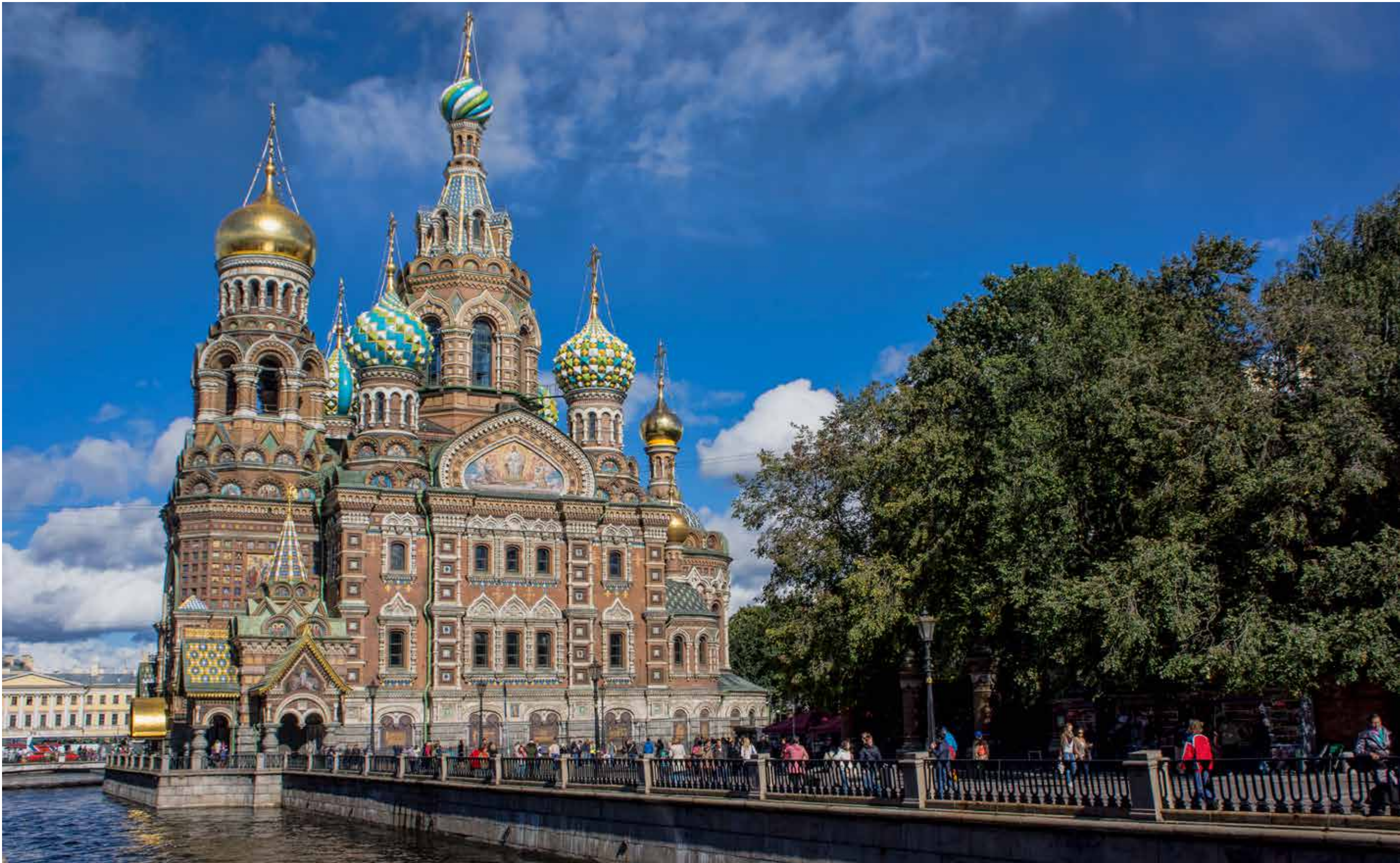


Policeman standing guard



Niche outside the Church of the Savior on Spilled Blood







**Sunday** • This is one of the many “free days” on this cruise, “free” as in: “you are free to stay on board, but if you want to see something, you have to pay extra.” We choose a tour of the Peterhof Palace in the morning and a cruise of St. Petersburg’s canals in the afternoon.

The Peterhof Palace consists of a series of buildings set in a magnificent park on the shore of the Gulf of Finland. Peter the Great constructed the first building. It is a relatively small palace called “Mon Plaisir” and is located very near the shore. Further up stands the most impressive Grand Palace built by Peter’s daughter Elizabeth in the baroque/rococo style. The Palace was enlarged under Catherine the Great, but as Catherine did not care for the Baroque style, the rooms she added are of neoclassical style.

We first enter the Palace through a grand staircase that leads to the part of the Palace used for official functions. It is truly awe-inspiring! The ceilings are about 25 feet high and a great deal of natural light comes through the huge windows. The walls are white, with intricately decorated large gilded mirrors covering most of the wall surfaces and huge ornate chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. The overall effect is one of great sumptuousness. Further along the tour, we enter the part of the Palace that was added by Catherine the Great. The rooms here are very different, with pastel walls and white-framed mirrors and paintings. A couple of rooms are completely covered by paintings. From there, we pass through the private apartments, where the walls are mostly covered with beautiful silk and the windows adorned with matching fabric. Most rooms have, in one corner, a floor-to-ceiling stove made of lovely white and blue ceramic tiles.



Peterhof Palace



Peterhof Palace - the Grand Cascade



Posing in the Peterhof Palace Gardens: John and Pauline, Louise, Patrick







When Peter the Great decided to establish his court at Peterhof, around 1720, he began to draw his own plans for the grounds. He wanted something modeled after Versailles and fountains were very much a part of that plan.

Most of the fountains are located in the Lower Gardens, in front of the Grand Palace. Taking advantage of a natural feature of the Peterhof grounds, a sixteen-meter high bluff lying less than a hundred meters from the shores of the Gulf of Finland, the engineers used gravity to power the fountains. The most famous ensemble of fountains, the Grand Cascade, which runs from the northern facade of the Grand Palace to the Marine Canal, comprises 64 different fountains, and over 200 bronze statues, bas-reliefs, and other decorations. At the centre stands Rastrelli’s spectacular statue of Samson wrestling the jaws of a lion. The vista of the Grand Cascade with the Grand Palace behind it is truly breathtaking. Elsewhere in the park, the range and diversity of fountains is astounding, from further monumental ensembles like the Chess Cascade and the Pyramid Fountain, to the ever-popular Joke Fountains, including one which sprays unwary passers-by who step on a particular paving stone. (Source: [www.saint-petersburg.com](http://www.saint-petersburg.com))

The afternoon tour consists of a one-hour boat ride on the Neva River and along a few of the canals that give the city its “Venice of the North” nickname. Mostly, we see the oldest part of St. Petersburg, with its 18th century buildings, all constructed following the rules that Peter the Great had laid out when he founded the city: straight and wide streets, all buildings adjoining each other, with their facades in a straight line and in matching colours and styles. The overall effect is one of elegant harmony.



Beware of pickpockets!



Dancers and singers at the Cossack Show

Views from the St. Petersburg Canals





This page and next: more views from the St. Petersburg Canals



We are lucky with the weather for this tour. Although it rained a lot earlier in the day, the sun shines through for the whole ride. I even get a bit sunburned.

At about 7:00 p.m., we set sail for Mandrogy, where we are scheduled to arrive shortly after lunch the next day. Our cruise takes us along the southern shores of Lake Ladoga, via the Niva River from St. Petersburg, and then on to the Svir River. We are told during the evening briefing that sailing on Lake Ladoga can be pretty rough. They were right! The next morning, many passengers complain about being kept awake by the rocking of the boat for most of the night.





The Bolshoi Obukhovskiy suspension bridge, also known as Vantovy Bridge.



# Mandrogы



Not everything is glitz and guild... On this page, scenes from our cabin as we sail towards Mandrogы!

**Monday** • The morning is filled by a couple of lectures and general free time as we sail towards Mandrogы. Outside, the sky is grey and there is nothing to see on the shore except trees, a mixture of evergreens and deciduous trees, some of which are beginning to change into their autumn colours. And this scenery will not change for the next three days, until we get closer to Moscow. At about 11:00 a.m., we approach the first lock of our cruise, the Lower Svir Lock; we arrive at our destination a couple of hours later.

Mandrogы is a re-constructed village on the banks of the River Svir. This small complex is made up of farmstead-type ornate houses, craft workshops, a school and a few other buildings, including a modern, relatively luxurious house that was built in the 1990's for Vladimir Putin's overnight visit to the village. Apparently, it has not been used since. More than 150 people live in Mandrogы full time, and another 200 come here to work such as instructing visitors as they learn to weave, embroider, paint matryoshkas, make pottery and carve wood.

The village also boasts a Vodka Museum, with about 2800 different kinds of vodka on display. Visitors are able to taste a sample (assuming they can elbow their way to the front of the line!) and are given a small bottle to take home.

We leave Mandrogы at 4:00 p.m. and, a half-hour later, I join my first Russian lesson. We learn to read the Russian alphabet and are given, as homework before the next lesson, the task of figuring out how to spell our name using the Cyrillic characters. It's a lot of fun.



Windmill and hut, Mandrogы





One of the buildings in which artisans demonstrate and sell their crafts



Souvenirs for sale



The Vodka Museum



# Kizhi

**Tuesday** • Our destination today is the island of Kizhi, near the centre of Lake Onega. There is heavy fog as we approach the island and, according to Russian regulations, the ship must stop and wait for the fog to dissipate before we can continue our journey.

Kizhi is an open-air museum and has a collection of old wooden houses, churches, barns and windmills. Some are original; others have been brought to the island from other parts of Russia. As we approach the entrance gate, we are introduced to the local guide who takes over from Alexey for the one-and-a-half hour tour. It's a very short stopover, and we see but a small part of the island. We visit the small, but most

impressive Church of the Transfiguration, built during the reign of Peter the Great. It has 22 domes, is made entirely of wood and was constructed without nails. In another building nearby, we can see how people used to live and work in that part of Russia centuries ago. A number of artisans, dressed in period costumes, demonstrate older crafts that have mostly disappeared today.

Also nearby, we can see the exterior of the Church of the Resurrection of Lazarus. Built in the late 14th century, it is the oldest surviving wooden church in Russia. This church is not open to the public.

We leave the island around noon and spend the rest of the afternoon sailing. I read most of the day.



Approaching the Island of Kizhi



The Church of the Transfiguration





### Musings about life aboard the Viking Rurik...

Our cabin is spacious and very well appointed. A lot of care has been taken to make the most efficient use of space and we find there's a place for everything. We do not feel cramped at all.

The food is so-so at best. Reading from the menu, you think you are going to get one thing but it turns out to be something completely different. It seems our chef does not have a very good mastery of food terminology in English. For example, we were offered "chicken chowder" for lunch a couple of days ago. We all ordered it, thinking we would receive a bowl of chowder, you know the kind with a thick creamy base, potatoes and bits of chicken. And what we did we get? A very thin chicken broth with spaghetti noodles and a few bits of chopped vegetables. Quite tasty, but definitely not "chicken chowder."

We long for good cheeses on the buffet table at lunchtime, but it never comes. There's cheese for breakfast

and dinner, but not for lunch. So, one day, we ask the restaurant manager if they can add a cheese plate to the lunch menu. He says that he's ever so sorry, but it's not possible, because they have to follow operating procedures and serve only those items that some bureaucrat in Switzerland (my words, not his) has decided can be on the menu.

As mentioned earlier, our guide is Alexey. He is very knowledgeable and has a very good way with people. He has been doing this for more than 20 years, and I suppose experience does count for something. He often uses rather quaint English expressions and particularly likes the work "perfectly" as in: "If you want to go on your own, it is perfectly possible" and "Peter the Great was perfectly impressed when he saw Versailles."

Everywhere we stop, we meet other river cruise ships. Researching the major companies that run cruises between St Petersburg and Moscow, they all seem to follow the same itinerary.





Ruins near the Kirilov Belozeresky Monastery

## Kuzino

Wednesday • We spend the morning sailing. Pauline and I attend the day's lecture: Sasha is speaking about the Communist era (1917 to 1985). It's interesting, but rather basic; I have to admit I did not learn anything new.

In the afternoon, we stop at Kuzino to see the Kirilov Belozeresky Monastery, built on the shore of the White Lake. The vast walled area of the monastery comprises two separate priories with eleven churches, most of them dating to the 16th century. Of these, nine belong to the Uspensky (Assumption) priory by the lake. The Assumption cathedral, erected by Rostov masters in 1497, was the largest monastery church built in Russia up to that date. Its 17th century iconostasis features many ancient icons, arranged in five tiers above a silver heaven gate endowed by Czar Alexis in 1645. A lot of valuable objects kept in the sacristy are personal gifts of the Czars who visited the monastery. (Wikipedia)

Some renovations are underway, but a lot more remains to be done. The Russian government seems to have embarked on a major historical artifact preservation project across the country. Everywhere we go, we see craftsmen at work, using ancient tools and techniques to ensure historically correct results. In the museum, we see some examples of the famous Vologda lace. It is absolutely exquisite.

Back on board, later on, I attend my "advanced" Russian language lesson. We review the Cyrillic alphabet and learn to say: "My name is..." and "I am from..." It was fun, but less than 24 hours later, I have to admit I don't remember any of it!



Kirilov Belozeresky Monastery



Garments made of Vologda lace



Icons from Kirilov Belozeresky Monastery





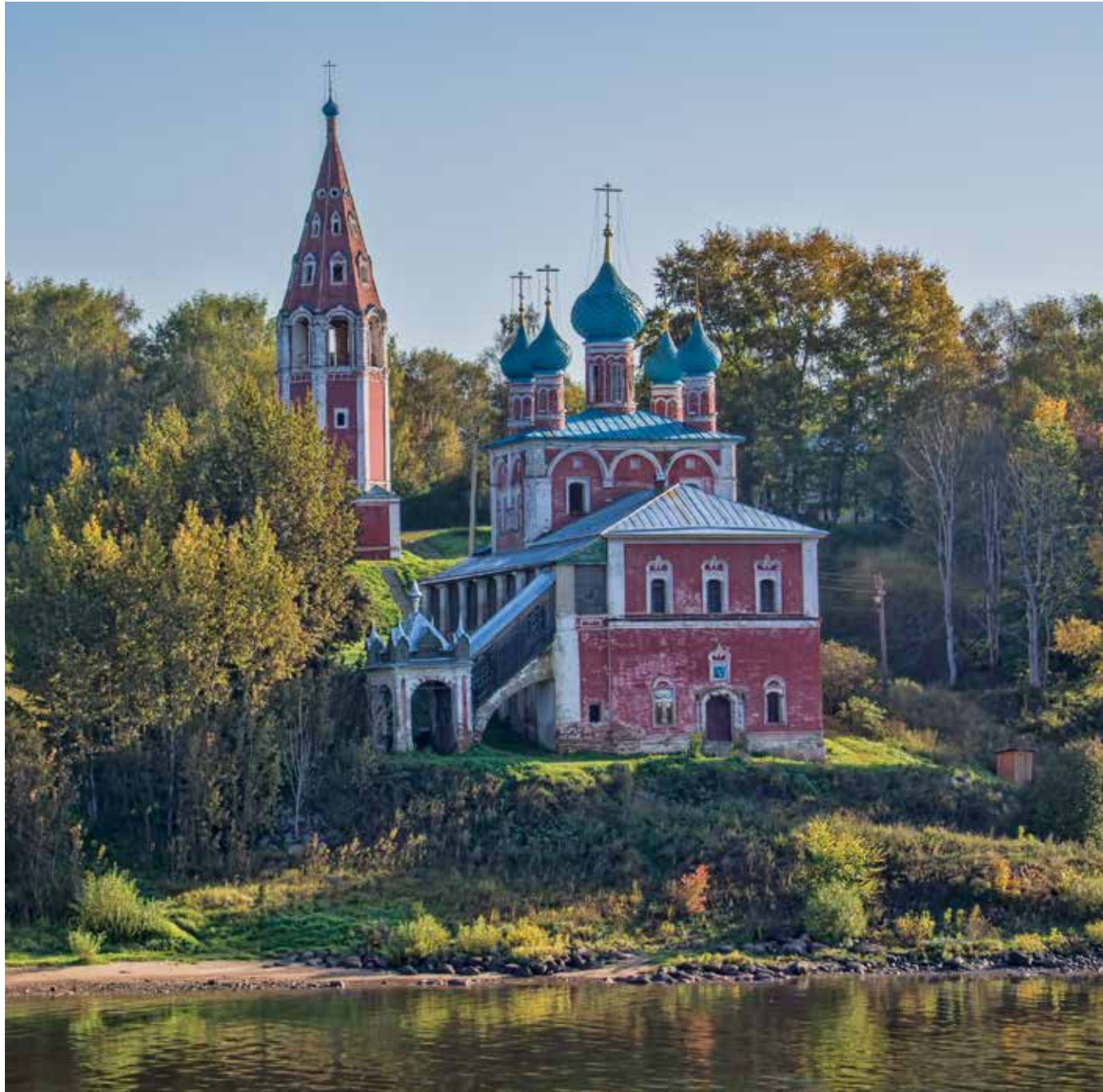
It's early morning. There's not a ripple on the water and not a cloud in the sky. It's warm enough outside so that we can actually sit on our balcony and admire the peaceful setting. Now, that is what river cruising should be about!





Early morning scene from our balcony





This page and next: a few of the lovely sights we see from our balcony as we get closer to Moscow









# Yaroslavl

**Thursday** • We are now sailing on the Volga. The scenery along the shoreline has greatly improved. We see small villages and interesting churches. In mid-morning, we pass the towns of Rybinsk and Tutayev.

In the afternoon, we visit the city of Yaroslavl. Stretching for 18 miles along both banks of the Volga, the city developed into a major commercial center beginning in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The town was renovated on a neoclassical style during the reign of Catherine the Great. The Church of Elijah the Prophet, situated in the town's central square, contains frescoes on the wall that constitute a veritable museum of Old Russian painting. The entire historic center is a World Heritage site.



Pretty girls by the fountain - Yaroslavl

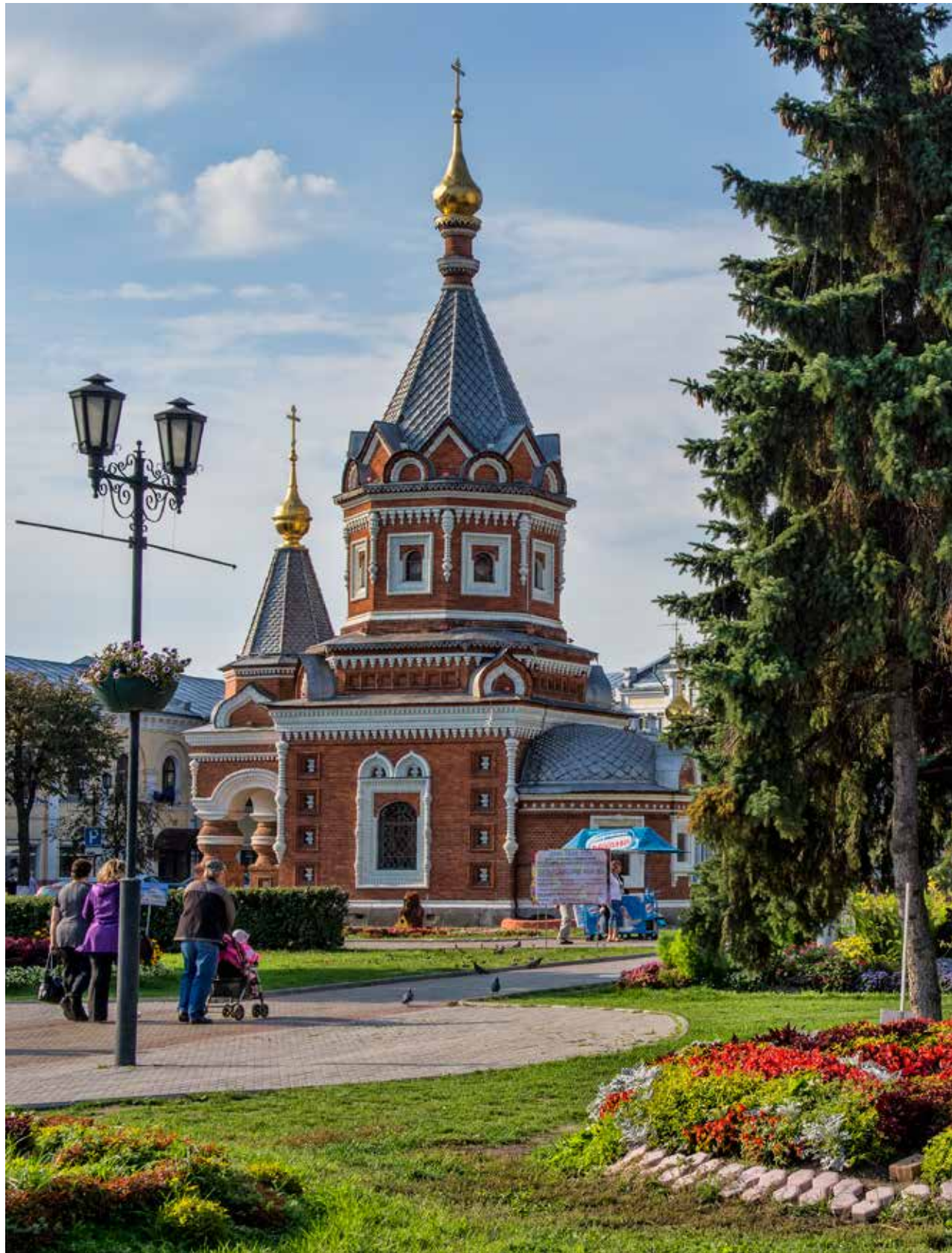


Historic Town Centre - Yaroslavl



Night Club - Yaroslavl





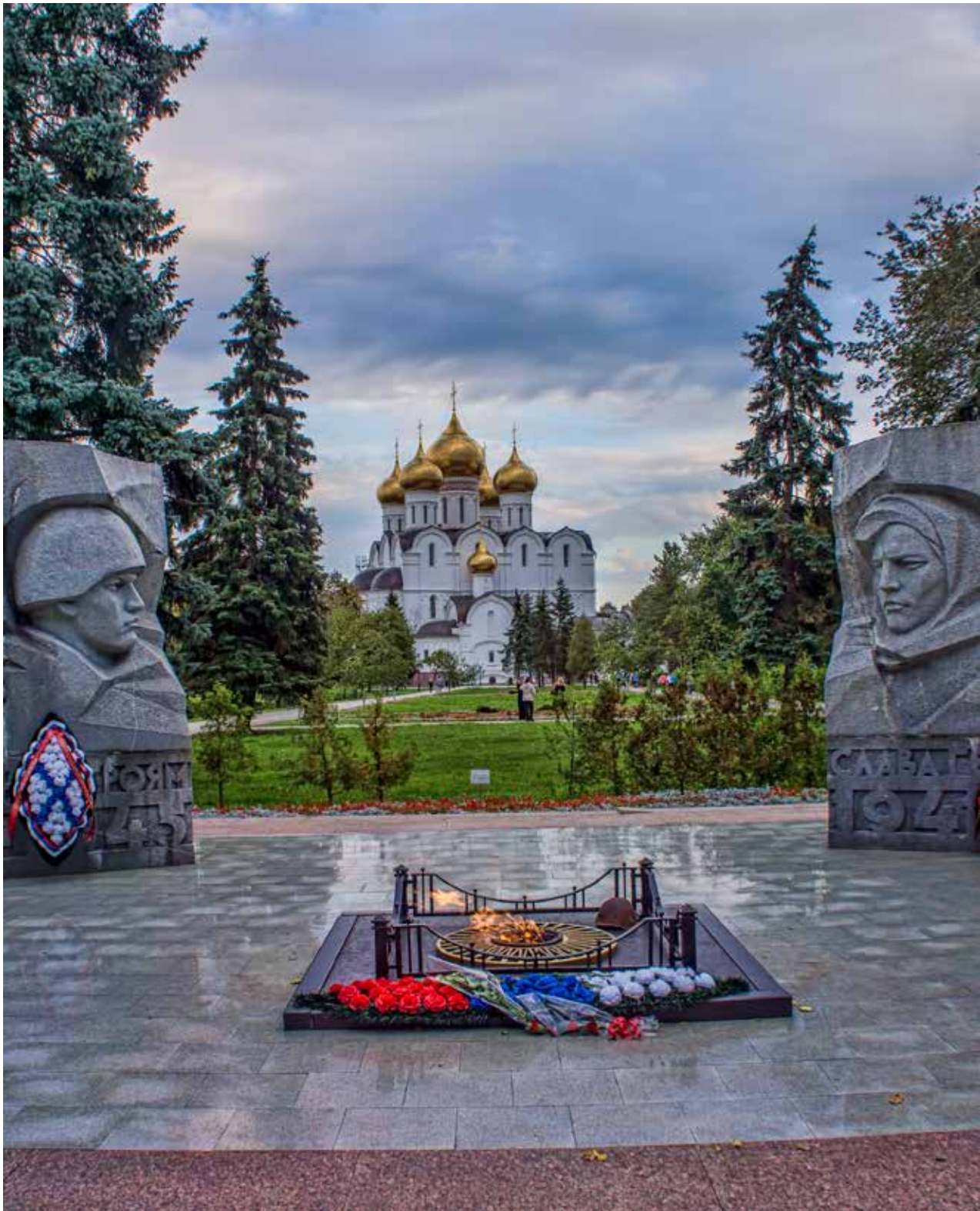
Old Yaroslavl Church - Town Centre



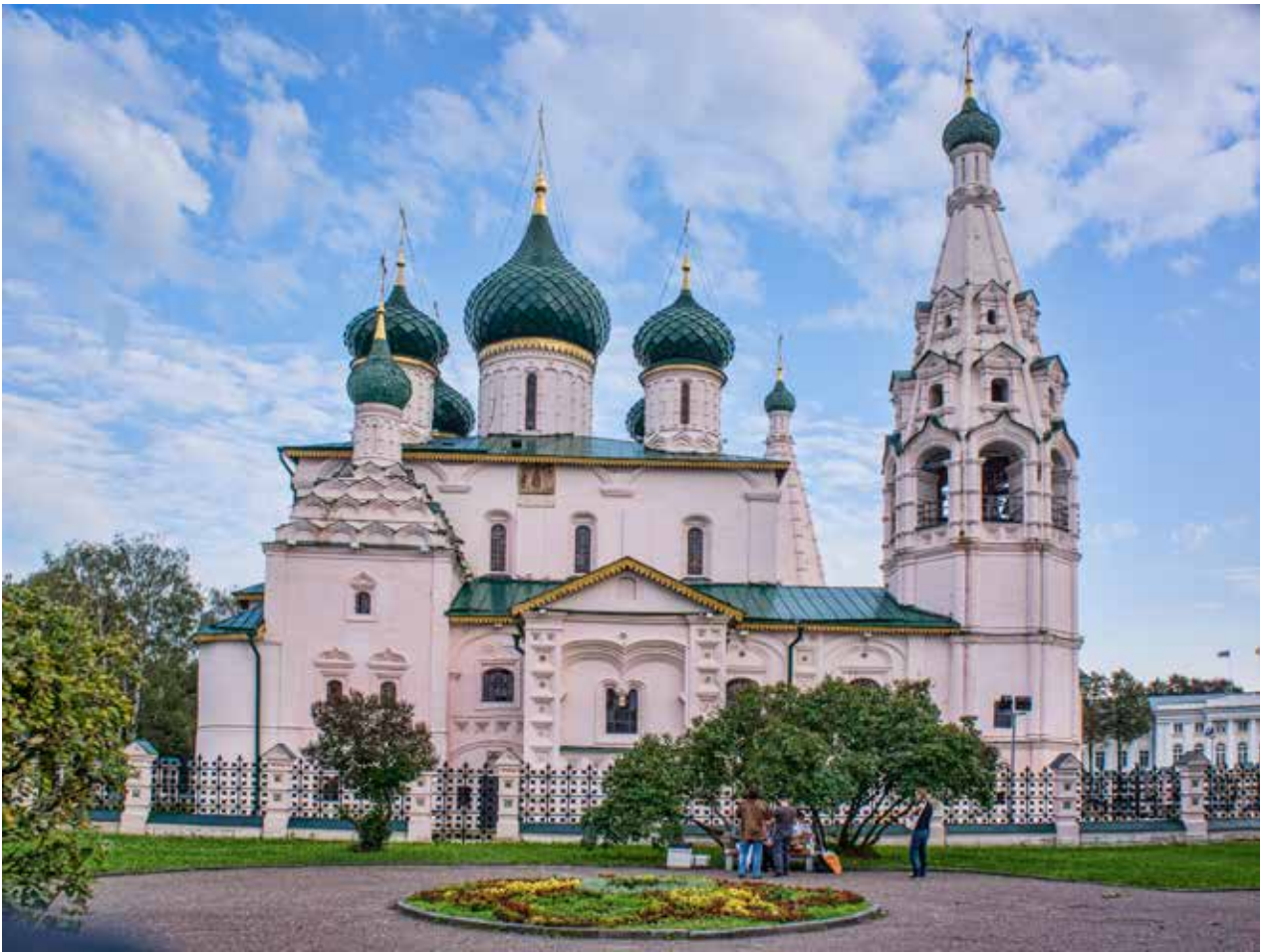
Above and below: Indoor market in Yaroslavl







World War II Memorial, with Assumption Cathedral in the background



This page and next: Church of Elijah the Prophet - Yaroslavl



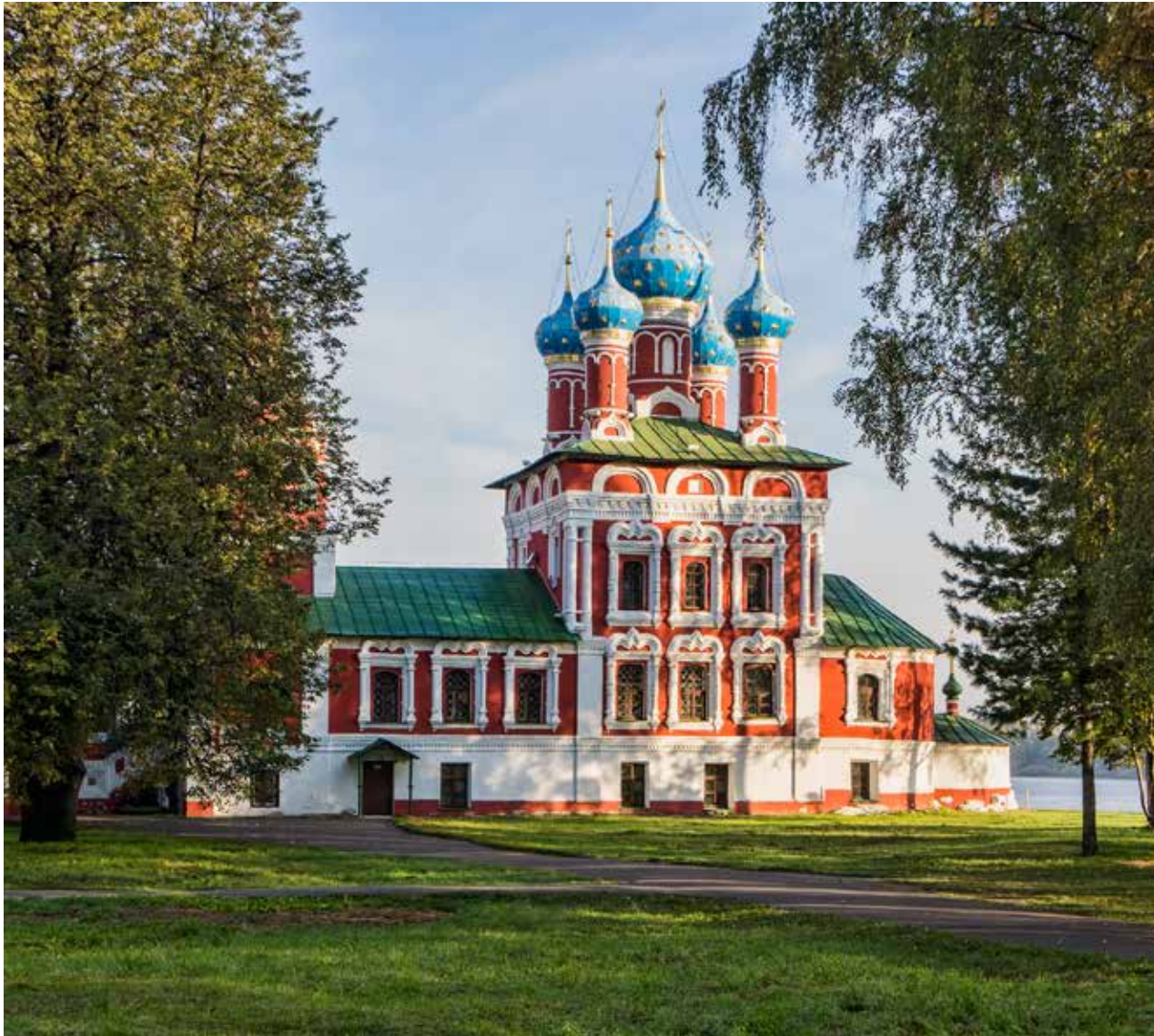






# Uglich

**Friday** • We arrive in Uglich early in the morning and disembark at 8:15 for a shore excursion. We start with a tour of the old kremlin (fort). This small town has a rather colourful history in connection with Ivan the Terrible. Ivan used the town as a base for his military campaigns. After his death, his son Dmitry joined his mother there, only to be murdered by Boris Godunov as part of his push to seize the Crown. On the spot where the murder took place, the City built the magnificent Church of Saint Demetrius on the Blood.



Church of St. Demetrius on the Blood - Uglich



Village house - Uglich

After walking through the historic downtown area, we are split into small groups of about 15 and, each accompanied by a guide, go and visit a local family. We meet Tatiana, a woman in her mid-fifties, living alone in a small house she inherited from her parents. She is an engineer working for the Water Company. She has two children and two grandchildren. Around her house is a huge, magnificent vegetable and flower garden that she tends by herself, as well as a typical banyan (Russian bath). After a tour of the garden and the banyan, we are invited inside and offered home made vodka (drinkable but awfully strong, particularly at 10:30 in the morning!) with pickles, bread and tomato slices, followed by tea and a very dry cake. The house is quite small, cheaply made, with thin plywood walls and ceilings and a wood-burning stove for heating. The warm hospitality, on the other hand, leaves absolutely nothing to be desired!





Hotel and bridge - Uglich





Old woman selling her wares in Uglich



Beautiful icon from a church in Uglich



# Moscow

**Saturday** • As we get closer to Moscow, the scenery is changing. The forested shores we saw a few days ago have now been replaced with small villages, lovely churches and other difficult-to-identify structures. Occasionally, we see fishermen at work on the water and children at play on the shores.

We have an interesting talk today in the Sky Bar with our six Tour Escorts about life in Russia after communism. Starting with a Power Point presentation, Aleksey demonstrates, with many pages of statistics, how the economy has improved since the end of the communist regime. After a big dip during the Yeltsin years when the old Soviet system was being dismantled, and another much smaller dip during the 2008 economic crisis, the overall economy of the Russian Republic continues to improve. Much of the economic gains have been made as a result of the exploitation and export of Russia's natural resources, particularly oil.



Moscow skyline



Hats for sale (Uglich)



More hats for sale (Moscow)

At lunchtime, we finally arrive in Moscow. Our ship is anchored at a pier on the Northeastern side of the City, pretty far from everything. As we did in St. Petersburg, we will be staying on the ship and will use buses to get to our various excursions. Our first sortie today consists of a city tour for the afternoon. We stop at Sparrow Hill, one of the highest points in Moscow. On a good day, we might have had a good panoramic view of the City. Unfortunately, the sky is grey and there is smog in the air, so that there's not much of a view. The area is teeming with tourists and the grounds are covered with souvenir shops. To our surprise, we see a lovely bride and her groom, fully attired in their wedding clothes, walking around the area, having photographs taken. They seem oblivious to the gawking tourists. What a very odd place for wedding pictures, I think. Then we see two more couples in full wedding attire also ambling around in the area. Later, we learn that couples must be married in a civil registry before their union becomes legal, and the registries assign a time for that event, without regards, it seems, to the couple's wedding day schedule. Between the church ceremony, the reception and the civil marriage, couples wander around the city in odd places (such as Red square and the GUM department store, as we witness later) in full wedding regalia.





After Sparrow Hill, we are taken to a Metro station for a short four-stop trip, so that we can see and experience the famous Russian Metro. Muscovites are very proud of their Metro, justifiably so, if the little bit we see today is any indication. Each station is unique; one may be quite modern in appearance, the next one may reflect neoclassical style. Our train looks very new and is spotlessly clean. I do wish I could have seen more of it.

We leave the Metro at the Red Square station, where we are given a guided tour of the area. Our guide leaves us at near the GUM Department store; we have an hour or so to explore and shop.

The evening concludes with a wonderful concert of classical and folkloric music at the Old Tretyakov Gallery. The orchestra members are all quite young, apparently recent graduates of a music academy; they play mostly traditional Russian musical instruments, such as the balalaika. The concert lasts just a little over an hour. The audience is most enthusiastic throughout the concert and gives the orchestra a long standing ovation at the end. I loved the performance and could have easily stayed at least another hour!

It is 9:15 p.m. by the time we get back to our ship for a late supper.



Top: Dome near Red Square (covering underground shopping centre)  
Bottom: Park Pobedy Metro Station



Fountains on the Moskva River





Moscow street scenes



Bride and groom posing near Red Square





Brides, grooms and bridesmaids everywhere!







Cathedral of the Annunciation - inside the Kremlin walls



Church of the Nativity - inside the Kremlin walls

Seen around Red Square: (clockwise from top left) building decoration, street performers, soldier guarding the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, veteran posing for the tourists



# Sergiev Posad

**Sunday** • Today, we have another “free day” to enjoy an “optional” excursion. We choose to go to Sergiev Posad, at a cost of €79 per person. We start early at 8:30 a.m. and arrive just before 10:00. On the way, our guide explains that the traffic can sometime be pretty bad: for example, the day before, another group who had left their ship at about the same time, did not get to their destination until noon. That does not bode well!

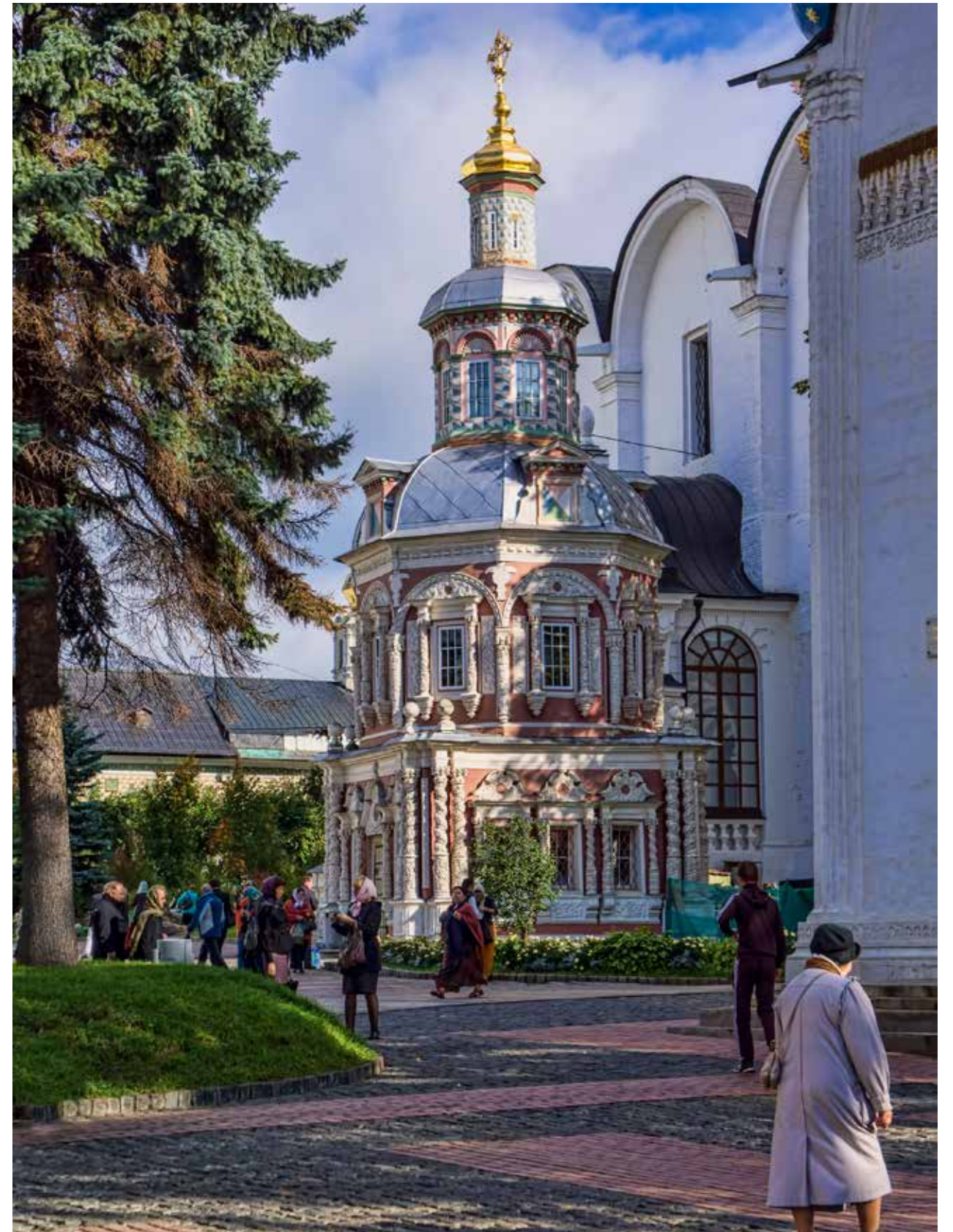
The city of Sergiev Posad is the location of the Troitse-Sergiyeva Lavra, considered to be the spiritual center of the Russian Orthodox Church. That is our destination. Given that it's Sunday, there are a number of services going on, and the place is jammed packed with tourists and churchgoers, all lining up to get into one of the churches in the complex. I manage to get into a church for about 5 minutes and observe devout pilgrims paying their respect to the relics of a saint whose name I forgot.

And that's about all we get out of that visit. The rest of the time, we wander around the grounds, go for a very nondescript lunch at a local restaurant, wander around some more until it's time to board our bus for the return trip home at 2:00 p.m. For the next three hours, we sit in this bus as it inches its way to the ship, stuck in a major traffic jam along with every Muscovite returning home from a weekend at the dacha. Five lanes of traffic are occupying the three-lane freeway we are using. It's an amazing sight to watch.

We have a leisurely dinner and give the evening “Moscow by Night” excursion a miss, a pity perhaps, as John and Pauline, who did go, thought it was well worth it... oh well..

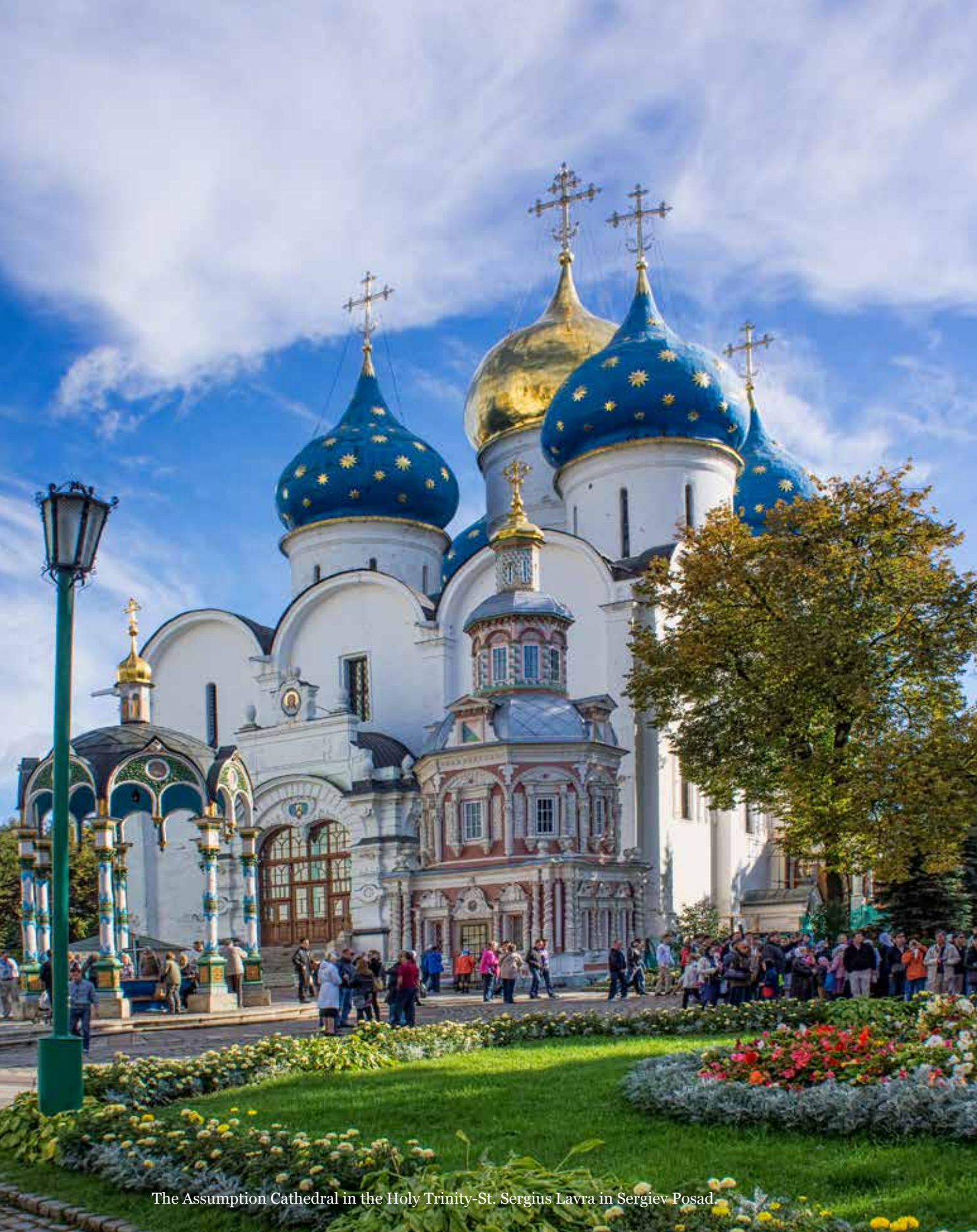


Fresco from the Assumption Cathedral



Close-up of the Assumption Cathedral in the Holy Trinity St. Sergius Lavra in Sergiev Posad.





The Assumption Cathedral in the Holy Trinity-St. Sergius Lavra in Sergiev Posad.

**Monday** • Our last day in Russia! We have signed up for a visit to the Armory Museum (another “optional tour”) prior to joining the tour of the rest of Kremlin.

To me, this Museum is a major highlight of the entire trip. “The Armory Chamber is a very special museum. It serves as a treasure house of Russia and contains over four thousand precious items. Most of these items were presented to the Russian Czars and Emperors by overseas ambassadors who sought to improve diplomatic relations and to appease Russia on various occasions.” (Source: [http://www.insider-tour.com/russia\\_travel\\_guide/moscow/armoury\\_chamber.html](http://www.insider-tour.com/russia_travel_guide/moscow/armoury_chamber.html))

Among the treasures we are able to see, I am particularly fascinated by the collection of ceremonial and coronation dresses, including a court dress of a young and slim Catherine the Great, with a waist size that could not have been bigger than 16 inches. The Museum also has an extensive collection of carriages dating from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a fascinating display of gold and silver from the 12<sup>th</sup> century onwards and a large case of the famous Fabergé eggs. This is a museum well worth a full day’s visit. Unfortunately we only had one hour and fifteen minutes, which I found grossly inadequate.

The rest of the Kremlin is not that interesting. A large part of the grounds where government buildings are located are closed to visitors. All we really see is a square that houses three cathedrals, and by now, I confess I am getting quite blasé about churches!

We are back on board by 1:00 and after a light lunch, decide we should try and get some rest in advance of the long journey home, starting at 2:00 a.m. tonight.



Inside the Kremlin - lone soldier guarding a very empty street



# In hindsight

Towards the end of our cruise, we agreed that the trip had been OK, but that we could have had a much more interesting experience on our own. John suggested we should have flown to St. Petersburg, hired a local guide for a week or so, then traveled to Moscow by train and hired another guide for our stay there. We thought that, indeed, it would have been a better way to see Russia. We felt that the cruise portion of the trip was simply not worth the money: there was little to see on the waterways between St. Petersburg and Moscow, and while the ship was quite luxurious and comfortable, the food was just OK and the wine barely drinkable. Most of all, we were resentful of all the extras that we had to pay for excursions and tips.

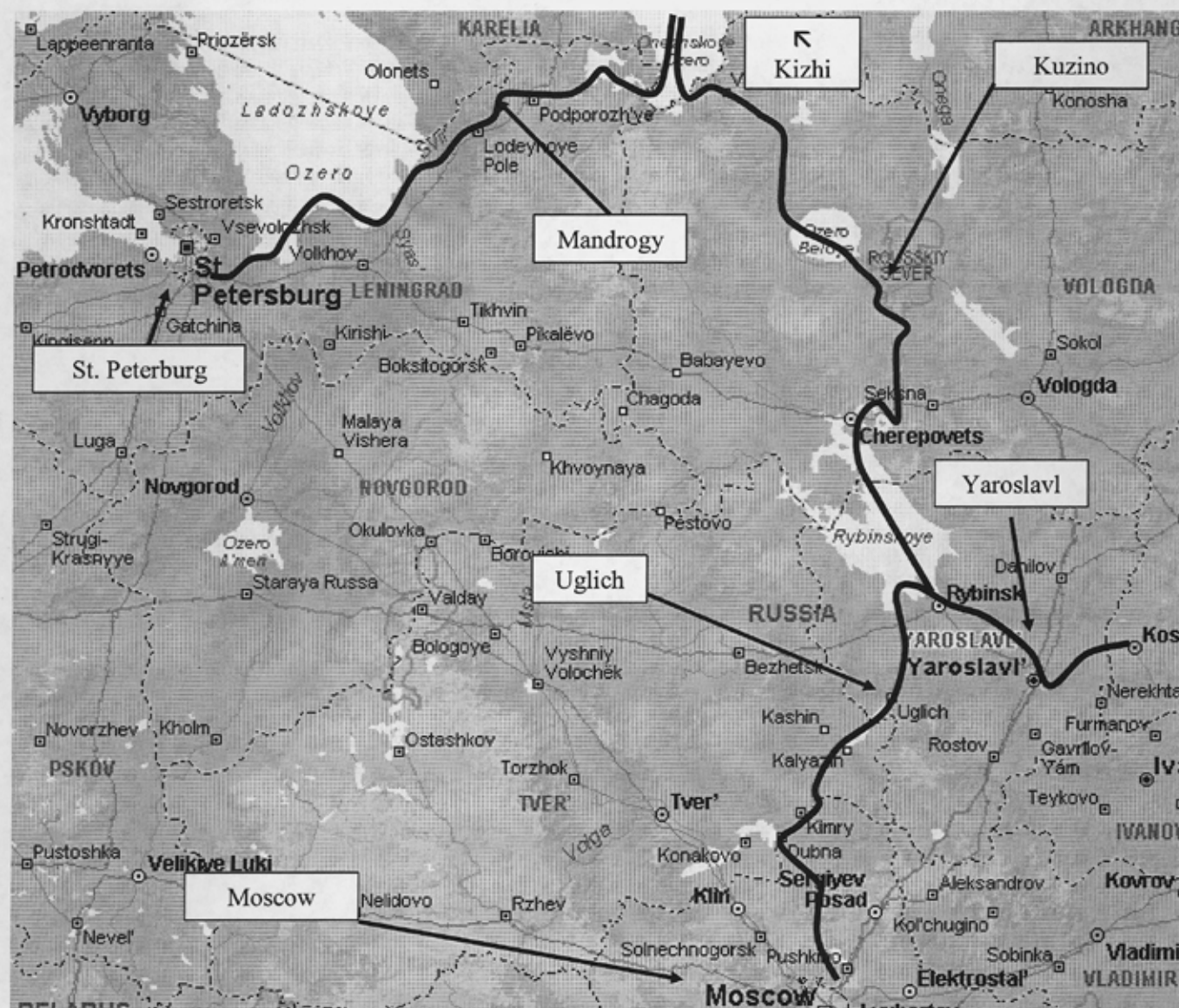
With the benefit of elapsed time and hindsight, I recognize that without the experience of doing an organized tour first, we would have never dared going alone: the language barrier and the exotic nature of Russia made it just a bit too scary for a solo adventure. So, I am grateful that I had the opportunity to travel “in the footsteps of the Czars” and happy to have learned so much about Russia. Hindsight, however, has not changed my opinion regarding the value of that cruise: sadly, I would not want to travel with Viking Cruises again. But, “never” is a long time, and memories do fade away, so who knows what the future might bring...





## OUR CRUISE

*St. Petersburg - Moscow*



Neva Fluss	Neva River	Total 74 km	Weisser See	White Sea	1400 km <sup>2</sup>
Ladoga See	Lake Ladoga	18390 km <sup>2</sup>	Sheksna Fluss	Sheksna River	Total 186 km
Svir Fluß	Svir River	Total 215 km	Rybinsk Reservoir		4500 km <sup>2</sup>
Onega See	Lake Onega	9610 km <sup>2</sup>	Volga	Volga river	Total 3688 km
Vytegra Fluss	Vytegra River	Total 53 km	Moskau Kanal	Moscow Canal	Total 128 km
Volga Baltic	Volga Baltic	Total 1400 km			





Louise and Patrick in Russia,  
September 2012