

## **St. Petersburg, Russia: Pulling back the former iron curtain to reveal breathtaking beauty**

*By Alexandra Edmiston*

“Ladies and Germans, can I have your attention please? We are about to enter the Catherine Palace, the summer home of the first Empress Catherine of Russia, the wife of Peter the Great. I need you to march behind me.”

With those words, Nina, our guide for a day’s excursion in St. Petersburg, Russia, was off towards one of the most magnificent palaces in Russia.

“Quickly, quickly, you must follow me, “she orders. We swiftly follow behind -- not because Nina could teach the former occupants of this palace a thing or two about absolute rule -- but simply because we are fully under her spell. She is the most enchanting host. We wouldn’t dream of correcting her amusing assumption that we’re all either German or female.

Before Nina greeted us so warmly at the entrance to our tour bus about an hour ago, I was hyperventilating my way towards a full-throttled panic attack. After we dropped anchor, I excitedly yanked aside my porthole curtains and locked eyes with some crew members smoking on the deck of their cargo ship -- docked right next to ours. We’d be warned in advance that large tonnage cruise ships have to dock in the city’s trade port. It really is impossible to prepare a tourist for the industrial panorama from my window -- cranes swinging back and forth on the horizon, black piles of industrial raw stuff and endless rows and columns of steel Lego-like cylinders.

I hardly slept the night before contemplating this warning given at the port information session: “We scare because we care.” They followed up that amusing line from the movie *Monster Inc.* with this: “Don’t leave this ship without your passport. Don’t lose it. You don’t have a Russian Visa. You’re only allowed ashore if you stay with your tour. Don’t get separated. Otherwise, you’ll have to deal with the Russian authorities.”

As I walked tentatively towards Nina, I was still pondering whether to abort this idea and join the Ping Pong Tournament with the Cruise Director’s Staff on the Pool Deck. My nerves disappear into laughter as we hit the road and Nina starts negotiating her way down the aisle. She’s bobbing, weaving and babbling in half English, half Russian as she presents all of us with a tiny plastic bag and a mysterious black box. She provides no instructions just this: “It’s very important that you don’t lose this thing,” pointing to the worn Ziploc bag that contains earphones.

Halfway through the task, huffing and puffing, she asks my husband to help her, to the amusement of the “three Patricias” at the back of the bus, who inquire whether he’s getting a discount for his efforts.

When she’s finished, Nina cranes her neck over the first row at the front of the coach and says, “Can you hear me, can you hear me?” Most of us are not entirely sure what to do... but eventually catch on.

“Okay, that’s better,” she says when all of us have our headphones securely around our ears. “The Catherine Palace is a very hot, busy place. Half of Russia will be there. You will need these to hear me. Please don’t get lost. They will make me hunt you down and chase you back to the ship. It will be very stressful. I’m too old for this.”

On the short drive to Pushkin (named in honour of the beloved Russian poet), where the Catherine Place is located, we learn Nina’s life story. She arrived from Moscow in the late 60s when Brezhnev was in power to attend university and now teaches English at the St. Petersburg State University (“I tell my students if Peter the Great saw their bare midribs, he’d chop off their heads”), an average dinner at her apartment is salad and good cottage cheese that she picks up at the city outdoor market, she stayed up last night reading from a stack of art books taller than her, and she looks forward to visiting friends in London, England every couple of years (something she could never do prior to the fall of the Soviet Union).

The journey is a blur of sights which Nina attempts to explain as they flash by – drab and non-descript apartments called Stalinist architecture, the statue to Lenin in Moskovskaya Square, the Wal-Mart, McDonald’s, a massive Ford Dealership and the spectacular Monument to the Heroic people of Leningrad (the city returned to its original name when the Soviet Union collapsed). They survived the tortuous 900-day Nazi siege of their city during World War Two. Millions starved and froze as trade routes into the city were blocked and temperatures dipped to record lows. Nina points out the spot marking how far the Nazis advanced into the city. They set up their headquarters in the palace we’re about to visit, used its precious furniture as foot stools and pillaged it and torched it to the ground before retreating.

When we arrive at the Catherine Palace we march -- as Nina instructs -- past the spectacular front of the building – a majestic flowing ribbon of blue and gold – up a winding staircase framed by gold and mirrors towards the piece du resistance – the entrance to the magnificent Great Hall, where the great rulers of Europe were feted by the Russian royal families. Circling the 846 square metres of mirrors, windows, gilded carvings, mural ceiling and elaborately patterned oak inlaid parquet floor, is like peering into a kaleidoscope of light and beauty.

Francesco Bartolomeo Rastrelli and Charles Cameron, the architects chosen to design the Catherine Place, were masters at creating a grand entrance. The room is stunning in an overwhelming way, like a rich woman dripping in every piece of jewelry she owns. The Amber Room just down the hall is even more dazzling. Dubbed the eighth wonder of the world, it’s like the inside of an exquisite jewelry box -- completely embellished from floor to ceiling with panels of amber harvested from the bottom of the Baltic Sea. When you twirl around in this room, you feel like the little ballerina doing a pirouette in a child’s jewelry box.

When the Nazis overran the palace, Nina tells us, they had their experts strip the entire room bare, right down to the exquisite inlaid parquet floor. They sent it crate by crate to Königsberg in Prussia (now Kaliningrad) where it was displayed in the town’s castle. “Before they arrived, the palace curators furiously attempted to dismantle the fragile amber panels and move them to safety. They had little success -- some of it crumbled to the touch. What they salvaged they sent to St. Isaac’s Cathedral in Leningrad. I have no idea how they did it.” Thankfully, this masterpiece is now restored. It was widely believed the original amber room was destroyed in an air raid on Königsberg, but some pieces of

it mysteriously turned up in Germany in the late 1990s. They were officially presented to Russian President Vladimir Putin, closing a very tragic circle.

Before leaving, Nina points out the horrific black and white photos of the palace after the Nazis turned it into a charred shell with the magnificent treasures lying in ashes. The Russians painstakingly restored their palace out of this rubble.

Peter the Great's vision of St. Petersburg was a Venice of the north with a series of canals and bridges snaking through the city via drawbridges across the Neva River. We are now standing at the State Hermitage Museum in front of the Palace Bridge that spans the Neva. The city is a gorgeous palace that was hidden from the world by the Iron Curtain. The view from the window of the bus as we traveled here along the Nevsky Prospect was a historical feast -- St. Isaac's Cathedral, The Peter and Paul Cathedral (where the Romanov's tomb is located), the Peter and Paul Fortress built to protect the city from attack (where Dostoyevsky was later imprisoned in its political jail) the stunning Church of our Saviour on Spilled Blood (a gorgeous holy place that the Bolsheviks closed down for 30 years), and the Philharmonic Hall where Dmitri Shostakovich premiered his Seventh Symphony during the siege via candlelight with an orchestra of emaciated and starving musicians. The performance was a tour de force shared via loudspeakers with the starving residents of the city.

"Ladies and Germans move in closely please," Nina says at the Jordan Staircase just inside the Hermitage, one of the world's most famous museums, nine buildings anchored by the illustrious Winter Palace, whose name elegantly translates to a place of retreat. It's a majestic symbol of beauty and grace that endured the brutality of Hitler, Napoleon, and the Bolsheviks, who assaulted its gorgeous exterior with cannons from the famous battleship Aurora.

"I need you to understand how lucky you are. Hermitage is closed on Monday. They open for Cruise Ships tourists only. The lines to get in are so long. The noise is unbelievable. You go out of your mind. That's why they give us these things," she says pointing to the mysterious black box. Nina neglected to mention the sweltering heat -- shockingly the museum that houses more than three million treasures is not air conditioned.

"Are you familiar with the novel War and Peace?" Nina says standing in the middle of one of the ballrooms in the Winter Palace. "It was here in this room where Natasha Rostova met her lover at a ball."

With only have three hours and so much to see, she whizzes off towards the Malachite Room, a drawing room accented with the semi-precious green stone said to promote calm and peace -- which may have been why the Provisional Government chose it as their regular meeting place after the famous Tsar Nicholas II abdicated. Impatient for decisions, the savage Bolsheviks stormed the Winter Palace, smashing the priceless treasures and draining the Tsar's wine cellar before taking power.

We're all hungry for more but Nina's off towards the Rembrandt Room. "This painting, The Return of the Prodigal Son, is one of Rembrandt's later masterpieces. Rembrandt's genius is drawing out personality through the eyes and hands. You could spend a day just standing here analyzing the meaning of this beautiful story about forgiveness

through the father's hands on his son's shoulders." When the Nazis declared war, The Return of the Prodigal Son was placed in a special case and evacuated to safety under armed guard along with the rest of the treasures. The Hermitage was bombed mercilessly and lived up to its name by providing a home and refuge for 2000 desperate people during the siege.

We're in sensory overload as we make our way towards the exit. At the last corner, Nina points to Henri Matisse's The Dance proclaiming I wouldn't have that in my drawing room...if I had one." Our tour is not over. We're off to see Swan Lake, in a theatre, located steps away from the lake surrounding the Church of our Saviour on Spilled blood that is said to have inspired Tchaikovsky's masterpiece. The beautiful tale of Prince Siegfried's struggle between the white swan Odette, and the black swan Odile, could be a metaphor for Russia.

It's a country of fascinating extremes where the options are Odette or Odile and nothing in between. Day doesn't even gently fade into night here. When we leave the theatre just before midnight, the sun is still shining brightly on this gorgeous city. It's the famous 'White Nights' when St. Petersburg's northern latitude prevents the summer sun from disappearing below the horizon. The streets are teeming with people out enjoying this fascinating phenomenon. Even my fellow seafarers are still busy at work on the deck of their cargo ship. When I look over at the view from my window it's not so shocking anymore. As Nina explained to us today, we don't want what you have in the West. We want to do what works best for us. Maybe docking a cruise ship here isn't so odd after all. Maybe it's very Russian...and this is the new Russia. I lie down to fall asleep in the middle of the night with the sun shining through my window.