

**Your On the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

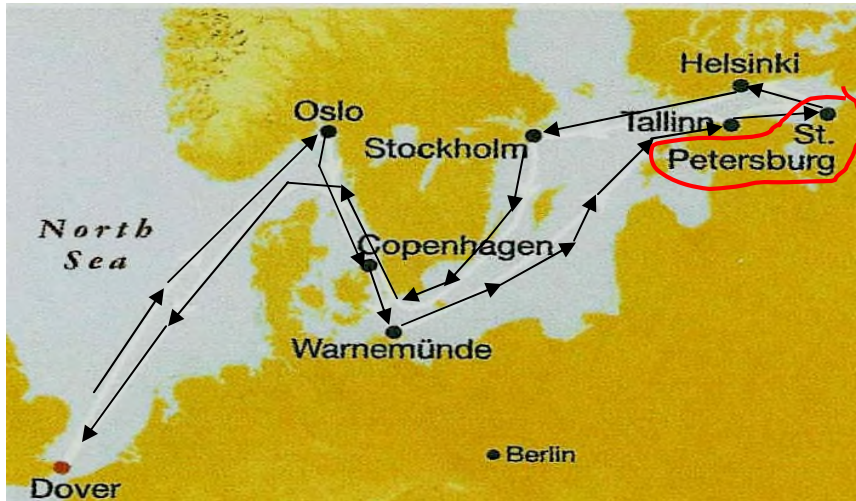
**The Baltic Sea Tour:
St. Petersburg, Russia**

The Baltic Sea Tour

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Chapter 7: St. Petersburg, Russia



August 9, 2008

Yesterday, we visited Moscow. Today, we paid a call on St. Petersburg. In between these treats, we indulged ourselves in cruise ship luxuries: fine food and drink, available 24 hours a day, swimming pool, sauna, exercise room, even a small casino.

Speaking of luxuries, the palaces of St. Petersburg hearken to a past era of such opulence and extravagance it is difficult to grasp in today's times. The city was built by Peter the Great in the early 18th century. Its first building was placed on a cold, damp island in the Neva River, near the northeast Baltic. From a wet and isolated forest, Peter erected one of the most beautiful cities in the world and some of the most lavish residences for Russian royalty. Coincidentally, the homes were for Peter and his Romanov relatives. It would be two centuries later that these buildings would be taken over as homes for the people of the state.

Of course, Peter did not nail the shingles or saw the boards for these fine edifices. He had a lot of help from his subjects. Historians tell us nearly 100,000 people died from cold and hunger during the first years of the city's construction. Peter's citizens did not die from accidents in building the city. Peter's people died from deprivation while building Peter's buildings. It is a wonder it took another 200 years for the Russians to kick the Romanov family's miserable carcasses out of the country.

Such are the ironies of luxury. The old saw comes to mind: *Luxury for the few is brought with the blood, sweat, and tears of the many.* I would also add for our modern times, and the *money* of the many. Today's CEO and senior officer salaries and bonuses in public American corporations could boot-strap another St. Petersburg.

Anyway, in 1703 Peter selected Zayachy Island in the Neva River for his city---one to replace Moscow as Russia's capital, and to serve as both a seaport and a "window on Europe." His somewhat depleted "union" of carpenters first constructed the Peter and Paul Fortress, named

after two saints. Thereafter, St. Petersburg rose from this inhospitable land to become a major Baltic seaport and a dream-like city.

With the editorials behind, let's revisit this writer's day here. A single day to take-in St. Petersburg was ambitious. But I thought of this Baltic cruise as a reconnaissance mission, one leading to a more detailed exploration. With so little time, I decided to take a short tour of the city, but spend most of the day at the Hermitage museum and its Winter Palace. Holly would spend her day at other fanciful places in and around St. Petersburg.

The Hermitage

St. Petersburg requires many days of exploration to appreciate its splendor. I place the city in my list of top five extraordinary cities; places I hope to see again before my joints freeze up and my innards congeal. Even more, St. Petersburg's Hermitage museum is almost beyond belief. I rank it in along with Stonehenge, the Grand Canyon, Niagara Falls, and the El Prado museum.



Because these reports are intended to span a few pages, it is difficult to show and explain the scope and beauty of the Hermitage. For starters, I took several shots of a wall and ceiling of one of the many huge rooms in the museum, as seen in Figure 1. (Visitors are allowed to use nonflash cameras.)

In addition to the collection here, branches of the museum are located in Amsterdam, London, Las Vegas, and Ferrara, Italy. The Hermitage holds the Guinness World Record as having the world's largest collection of paintings. One guide said the museum had at least three million pieces. A Web page cited the number as six million. I wondered how they keep tabs on the inventory? I counted 5,999,997 pieces...or was that 5,999,998? Ah! I'll start over. Of course, not all the works are on display.

Peter the Great is credited with naming the museum the Hermitage, but Catherine the Great is credited for creating the museum itself. During an economic meltdown in Europe in 1764, Catherine acquired 317 paintings from one collector alone. Among these works were thirteen Rembrandts, eleven Rubens, one Titian, seven Jacob Jordaens, five van Dycks, and two Raphaels. This acquisition seems fantastic to us now, but for Catherine, it was one of many such purchases.

Figure 1. A typical view inside the museum.

During the next few years, this extraordinary woman built the main building of the museum. In her later years, she made a likely facetious comment about her fantastic number and quality of acquisitions: “It is not love of art. It is voracity. I am a glutton.”¹ Afterwards, her successors added more buildings and more artwork.

The story of the Hermitage warrants a book unto itself. We must confine ourselves to a chapter in this story. To help a bit, Figure 2 shows three examples of many lavish rooms in the museum. Without taking away the breathtaking magnificence of this museum, as I wandered and wondered my way through it, I also thought of how many serfs’ lives were consumed for Catherine to satisfy what she herself characterized as gluttony.



Figure 2. Three rooms in the Hermitage.



Figure 3. One of Catherine’s carriages.

The museum has carriages on display.² The carriage in Figure 3 was one of several that belong to Catherine II. She used this one for formal occasions. For longer travels, say to Moscow, more practical vehicles were employed. On her longest journey to the Crimea (six months, over four thousand miles) to meet her friend and lover (Potemkin), and to inspect newly conquered territory from the Turks, she often rode large carriage-sledges with runners to traverse the snow. On this trip, she was accompanied by 124 other sledges and sleighs that carried her retinue of staff and servants.

During the tour, I turned-on my video and walked through several contiguous rooms that displayed paintings. I also recorded some of my comments about what I was viewing:

¹ Kasimierz Waliszewski. *The Romance of an Empress* (New Haven: Archon Books, 1968), 344.

² I viewed some of them, but did not take this photo. Thanks to <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/425379127274040246/> for this shot.

“Here’s a Rembrandt...This is the room of Rubens. Forty pictures, unbelievable...This is an entire room of Cézanne, with The Lady in Blue... Now Monet (pause), I can’t get over this. Fifteen pictures by Monet...only fifteen? That Catherine was a piker...Next is the Renoir room. (pause) Opps, some LaTour in here. What? Renoir and LaTour in the same room!...This is the van Gogh room: one, two, three ...An open window! So are the window shades. Sun is coming directly into the room. Unreal, must be a lot of damage done...Here’s Gauguin, a room-full of Gauguin’s paintings...This is a post impressionist room. It’s air-conditioned, the windows are closed...This next room is Picasso. (Pause) so is the next room! Two rooms of Picasso. (Pause) Here’s some of Picasso’s pottery.”

On and on: Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Poussin, Watteau, Rodin, Pissarro, Matisse. As I walked around this extraordinary place, I recall that upon my entry, I was holding high expectations, and was thinking of an old saying about the person who expects nothing will never be disappointed. I was expecting a lot, and I was not disappointed.

I mentioned the museum authorities allowed photos to be taken of the exhibits. They permitted sun and smog in certain places. Equally surprising, they permitted visitors to walk *directly* on the floors.

The museum had no designated carpets for us to tread. No rope barriers to contain the masses from soiling and spoiling the beautifully-patterned wood floors. Many were works of art unto themselves, and they suffered much wear from the tourists. I mentioned to a guide that I had never visited a famous museum, such as the Hermitage, that permitted the sightseers so much freedom---especially with taking photos. She was pleased with my observation. I video-taped:

- “Thank you. We want everyone to feel welcome. We try to accommodate our visitors.”
- Reporter, “Yes, it’s obvious. Say, do you permit visitors to chew gum?”
- “What? Yes, of course! Why do you ask?”
- “I’ve been to a couple of places in America that forbid gum-chewing. The guards told us we had to spit-out our gum before we could enter the exhibits.”
- “You’re joking with me!”
- “Nope. If you’re in America, and try to visit Lincoln’s home or the Washington Monument, they check your jaws for gum-chewing. I asked the guard at the Washington Monument if chewing tobacco was OK, but he was not amused.”
- “Eh, sorry...chewing tobacco?”
- “Never mind.”
- “Well, we let our visitors roam around. We just restore the floors on occasion.”
- “That must be a very expensive operation.”
- “Very, but it’s worth it not to have liners on the floor.”
- “This is a wonderous place.”
- “We think so, and I thank you for saying so.”

Scenes from St. Petersburg

Most of my day was spent in the Hermitage, but the bus tour was also eventful. We passed by or stopped at the places shown in Figure 4. The top left photo depicts a typical scene in this city of

palaces and castles. The same can be said for the top right photo, which is an example of the architecture of many apartments and hotels located in the central city.

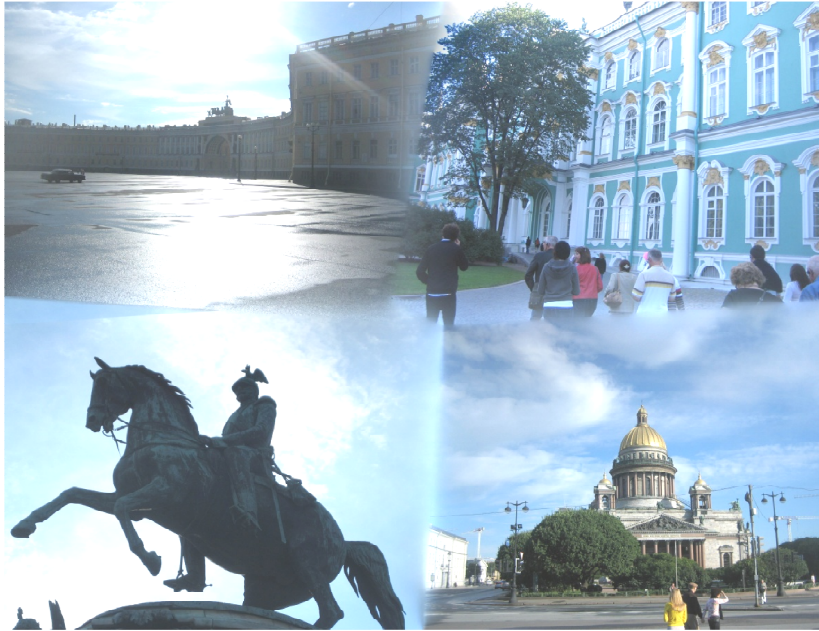


Figure 4. Scenes from St. Peterburg.

Decembrists' Revolt. St. Petersburg likely has as many statues as Washington, DC. The lower left picture in Figure 3 shows a statue of St. Nicholas I, who reigned as the Russian Emperor from 1825 to 1855. Nick's reign did not get-off to a good start. It was in 1825 when the Decembrists' revolt took place in this city---in a square nearby this statue.

On the very day of the Tsar's inauguration, a group of the emperor's guards attempted a coup. These men harbored a forward-thinking idea of imposing a constitutional monarchy on the country. If successful, this coup would have left Nicholas somewhat in charge. However, being completely in charge at the time, he did not take kindly to his guards' initiatives and had the ringleaders executed. The others were exiled to Siberia.

The Reds' Revolt. However unsuccessful the Decembrists' Revolt was, it set the stage for subsequent uprisings, first from the gentry, and later from the masses. The die was cast. Alexander II, the son of Nicholas I, was assassinated in St. Petersburg by a terrorist organization. His grandson, Nicholas II, along with Alexandra and their children were murdered by the Bolsheviks shortly after he abdicated the throne.

The Romanovs, with all their egregious excesses, had finally been toppled. In their place came the supposedly equal opportunity Reds, at last, for the abject common Russian. But such was not to be. Lenin and Stalin proved to be as venal and barbarous as the Romanovs.

A regime that for centuries had made a mockery of the human spirit was replaced by another regime that continued the practice. When will we humans ever learn? Supposedly, the new and fragmented Russia is leaning toward a government revolving around democracy and equal rights.

Let us hope so, but I'm skeptical of the Russian's ability to shed his wolf clothing. Hierarchy and corruption, and acceptance of autocracy are deeply embedded into the Russian soul.

Revolt against Peter The Great. The wrath of Nicholas I stemming from this revolt paled in comparison to Peter the Great's reaction to a revolt occurring during his time "in office." After suppressing a rebellion, he rounded-up possible informants and suspects for interrogation.

Russia had yet to embrace the Geneva Conventions, and Peter held the Christian view that it was better to give than receive. But with a variation of this kind Christian credo: Peter believed it was better to give torture than receive it. He had his soldiers place these poor souls on a giant roasting spit. The guards ignited the fire on a prototype BBQ fire, and then turned the spit to slowly roast the men alive.

The photo at the bottom right of Figure 4 is of St. Isaac's Cathedral, a must see the next time you pass through St. Petersburg. Designed and erected in the early 1800s, the building was considered a colossal engineering feat. Because the land underneath and around St. Petersburg is marshy, thousands of wooden piles were sunk into the ground to support its weight of 310,000 tons. Its three doors are made of oak and bronze, and weigh 21 tons. The interior is as impressive as the exterior.

What to do with all Those Churches?

As I walked around this wonderful building, I wondered how St. Issac's and so many other churches survived the Communist era, why they were not torn down by the Godless Reds? I posed this question to one of our guides.

- She responded, "Some of the Communists were closet believers. They had considerable influence on what happened to the churches."
- "Sure, but Stalin and his ilk were atheists, and I learned Joe considered removing St. Basils from Red Square."
- "Yes, I know that story. But many Communists wanted the historical buildings to be preserved and turned over to the state. They wanted to protect Russia's heritage. But did you know Lenin sold a lot of the masters in the Hermitage to raise money for the country?"
- "No." (But a thought entered my mind that the Smithsonian was one of the few remaining sources of funds the U.S. Congress had not yet tapped.)
- Anyway, for the church we are now in, during the Soviet era it was converted into a museum of atheism."
- "No!"
- "Yes."

A museum of atheism. Weird. I left the building thinking about the artifacts the museum might display. Crosses, old Italian religious paintings, and Jesus figurines were out. So were examples of miracles, such as weeping rocks. So were old Bibles. Hmm. Maybe a giant statue of Friedrich Nietzsche, and in place of the *Ten Commandants* on the wall, an excerpt from *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. Maybe a painting of David Hume. Whatever was on display during the Soviet times at St. Issac's, it is long-gone now.

Tourists

During these reports on the Baltic Sea, I have refrained from making comments about fellow tourists. But a few observations at this point are just too funny (or sad) to exclude from this report.

Stop this Bus, I Wanna Get-off! As mentioned, during the stay in St. Petersburg, I boarded a bus that made stops around the city. After a few minutes, the guide informed us our first stop would be Red October (a curio store). Fine by me. After my T-shirt fix in Moscow, I knew I could resist the temptation of another slip so soon after my two shirt slip-ons in Moscow. A tourist protested:

- “Look, can we just stop at a grocery store?”
- Guide, “Beg pardon?”
- “I’ve been in St. Petersburg for two days now. Every tour stops once or twice at a Red October store.”
- “No, I’ve a schedule. I may not like Red October, but we have to stop there.”
- “Then let me off this bus!”
- “That is not permitted.”

Not permitted? I did not have an opportunity to learn about this rule. Later, when we re-boarded from a stop, this man was missing. I assumed he had gone looking for a grocery store. Perhaps *glasnost* had not yet reached Northern Russia and our protestor was under wraps somewhere in the city.

Inflexibility is what one pays for being on a tour bus. In turn, one receives a cocoon of convenience. If the man wanted tailored service, he should have called your reporter, and I would have put him in contact with my secret, public, overt, covert tour guide in Moscow. I assume the unhappy tourist had ventured into the suburbs of St. Petersburg. I wished him well and hoped he spoke Russian. I hoped he had his passport with him.

Yeah, but can it Conjugate Verbs? Speaking of Russian and the Red October (Trinket, T-shirt, and Vodka) Store, I asked a clerk:

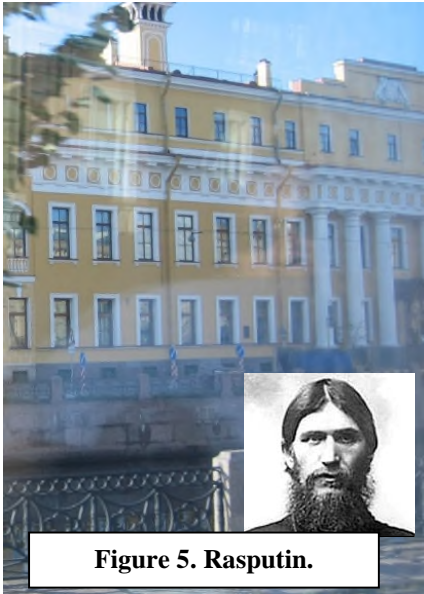
- “How much is this pen?” (The pen was to be a gift for my niece.).
- “Three dollars US.”
- “I’ll take it on one condition.”
-”Yes?”
- “If it writes in Russian.”
- “Ha.No, those cost more money!” (I love a good come-back.)
- “OK, I’ll settle for the English-writing pen.”

Rasputin’s Hangout

During the tour, we passed by the building where Rasputin the (former) Monk was murdered. It is shown in Figure 5, along with a picture of Rasputin.³

³ “Rasputin,” photo, Bettmann Archive/UPI and Microsoft Encarta, 2006. The snapshot of the building was taken from the bus.

The story of Rasputin, Emperor Nicholas II, and Empress Alexandria has been recounted in many books and stories. We seem to be fascinated by how a semiliterate peasant could have gained the trust and confidence of the royal family. Without discounting the probability that Alexandria was not playing with a full deck, the monk appeared to be able to help Alexis, the heir to the throne, with several of his hemophilic bleeding episodes. If left at that, perhaps the saga would not have



turned bizarre and tragic. But he gained tremendous influence as an advisor to Alexandria---at least from the perspective of Russian aristocrats.

Rasputin's inculcated himself into the family's personal circle. He used this arrangement to engage in public arguments with the church, and flaunt his privileges in front of Romanov dukes and princes. This monk also became famous (infamous?) for his fondness of missionary positions...many of them.

Why can't we humans learn when enough is enough? I suspect Rasputin could have kept up his improbable life style if he had reined-in his ego and penis. (Freudian feminists pose this question to males: How does a man rein in one but not the other? I'll defer my answer for later.) Shakespeare (*Agamemnon*) said, "He that is proud eats up himself."

Shakespeare could have been writing about Rasputin. In December 1916, Rasputin was lured to the building shown in Figure 5 and was murdered by a group of aristocrats, including one of Nicholas' nephews.

This Time You've Gone Too Far. During the visit to the Hermitage, I was listening to a guide explain a work by Leonardo da Vinci. During her talk, a tourist snapped a flash photo of the picture. The guide was cool. She looked at the man for a few seconds.

She then said, "As the signs in this museum state; as I said; as all guides say: Flash is not allowed! Yet time and again, on-lookers continue to use flash. Ninety percent of them seem not to understand." Looking at the flasher, she asked, "Do you understand?"

His answer? He snapped another flash picture of the da Vinci masterpiece. The guide froze. We guidees froze. The man seemed unaware he was the object of attention and scorn from the group. He was either supremely stupid or supremely arrogant, maybe both. The guide had had enough. She waved to a nearby guard, who came over. Pointing to the flasher she said, "Escort this man out of this building."

The man made no protest. He was a milk-toast. When challenged, aren't most belligerents milk-toasts? Our group gave the guide a round of applause.

Other Examples of Exhibits and a Contest

I took photos of many of the Hermitage exhibits. I have provided some of them in Figure 6. Let's hold a contest. See if you can identify the four artists of the paintings. The first winner wins an admittance ticket to the Hermitage museum in St. Petersburg. Of course, you must pay for your airfare to Russia, and I do not wish to give up a museum ticket unless I know you are serious about using it. So, here's the deal. Send me your airline ticket to prove you will use my museum ticket. After my verification of your intentions, I will....ah....don't forget to send your passport along with the airline ticket. Thanks for participating in this contest.



Figure 5. For a free ticket to the Hermitage, identify the artists.

To the Next Port

We've sampled only a few of St. Petersburg's delights in this report. The mistake I made was not allotting enough time for the visit to Peter the Great's great creation. I will correct this error the next time I go to Russia.

As our ship was leaving the harbor, we stood on our cabin balcony and watched the receding landscape of Russia slip from the horizon. We reminisced about the past two days in Moscow and St. Petersburg. I mentioned to Holly a statement I recalled from a long-buried curmudgeon who proclaimed: *The most beautiful things in the world are the most useless.* We both had a laugh at this deprived soul. How could anyone harbor such an improvised view of the world? Quite the opposite: *The most beautiful things in the world are the most useful...*because of their beauty.

Next stop, Helsinki.