



Peterhof Palace



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Patsy and Bill Rowe

# To Russia with love

**Patsy and Bill Rowe were enchanted by St Petersburg during their recent visit.**

On the eighth day into our 12 day Baltic cruise, as we floated along the wide St Petersburg canals past swans, ducks, fishermen and young lovers canoodling, I was reminded of Venice.

Wherever I looked there were magnificent baroque and neo classical, beautifully painted buildings right up to the edge of the canal, and I was overwhelmed by these grand homes of the past.

After feasting on what seemed like endless caviar and Vodka on board, once we were ashore Bill and I had a bit of a jig to the music of a trio in national dress who gave a robust rendition of Russian songs. It was so much fun I was reluctant to leave, but Bill dragged me off and we wandered around on foot admiring the impressive wide boulevards.

I wanted to go on the Russian underground, which I'd been told was one of the deepest in the world. So down we went ... down and still further down by escalator, with the people going 'up' staring at us, unsmiling, but clearly fascinated. We finally arrived at the station itself, which is stunning.

Apparently the Communists wanted the people to think Russia was very affluent so the

underground is elaborately decorated with bronze and marble with imposing statues either side of the 'Plaza'. As a result it's very opulent and quite breath-taking.

The trains run every two minutes and the secret is to stand well back as the people come off. There is no time for courtesy. It's a matter of not being trodden on and getting inside before the doors slam with you in them!

We managed to get off at the right stop despite the fact that nobody seemed to want to talk to us, and went to a fresh food market where we wandered around admiring fish, meat, fruit and vegetables from all corners of Russia. It was here that I noticed again that even when I smiled at someone, they didn't smile back.

I was aware of this everywhere I went and when I mentioned it at dinner on the ship, everyone had experienced the same lack of response. I have to say, when you smile at someone, and they just stare back, unsmiling, it's a really uncomfortable sensation.

One of the highlights was our visit to a local woman, Svetlana, in her apartment ... five flights up! No elevator. She was extremely proud of her two small rooms and even smaller kitchen

and told us that during the communist regime she and her late husband had lived with twelve families in one room divided by curtains.

Even if the curtains went floor to ceiling every word could be heard from 'next door'. The kitchen and bathroom were communal with a time slot allotted to each family (I didn't like to ask what happened during the night if there was an urgent call of nature.)

Svetlana is the fifth generation to inhabit this apartment but it was interesting to hear that although she and her parents and grandparents before her had lived there, she only knew one neighbour on her floor of four apartments, yet those other families had also lived there for many years. It was even more extraordinary when she explained that all four apartments share the same bathroom.

By contrast, the magnificence of Peterhof, Peter the Great's summer imperial palace, was mind-boggling. I have never seen so much gold.

Peterhof was almost in ruins following World War II, however, it could have been worse.

When the Russians heard the Germans were coming, they buried huge stone statues in the garden and transported enormous chandeliers

piece by piece to Siberia. Magnificent ceramic, hand-painted stove-fireplaces were shattered, but restorers, many of whom are young art students, found the pieces and painstakingly matched them. Except for a fine hair-line it is almost impossible to see where they were joined.

The palace boasted 1/2mm thick gold mirrors and countless gold doors with gold carvings, and every room was decorated in a different theme.

Many years ago, in one room the original wallpaper, which had grown shabby and soiled, had been carefully copied and replaced with new wallpaper. Unfortunately, however, this was just before the Germans came. When this new wallpaper was destroyed, the young restorers were able to find the shabby soiled wallpaper that had been taken off (and thankfully stored), clean it with modern methods and replace the damaged one.

In another room the ceiling of frescoes was ruined. But again, the young restorers found oil paintings that had been hidden and unrolled them, stretching them across the ceiling so that from below they look like painted frescoes. The palace is something I will never forget and it was wonderful that these beautiful treasures have been restored over hundreds and hundreds of hours by patriotic young art students.

On a rather amusing note every time we left or returned to the ship we had to go through a security building where three sombre women scrutinised our passports, looking at my photo, at me, back at the photo. Then they grunted, which was the signal you could go through. I have to admit that I wondered what they'd do with me, (or to me) if something was wrong. They never smiled or acknowledged that they'd seen us a couple of hours earlier as often we were going back and forth to the boat three times a day. The night we went to the ballet, they demanded to see the ballet tickets before they would let us leave the wharf.

I was sad to leave St Petersburg where I'd seen more beauty than I could recall. However, I have wonderful memories that will last a lifetime. ●