

A RUSSIAN EXPERIENCE – THE VOLGA-BALTIC WATERWAY

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After the glories of St Petersburg and non-stop visiting of so many museums and galleries, palaces and churches, I was happy to board the *Volga Dream* for a quiet few days of floating upriver through the Volga–Baltic Waterway, a series of rivers linked by lakes and canals built in the early 1800's, essentially joining St Petersburg to Moscow.

At the Hotel I meet my fellow passengers to be and we are already sorted into groups – naturally I am in the Anglophone group and there are fourteen of us – four Australians, five Americans and five English. We introduce ourselves cautiously, we will be spending the next six days and nights in close quarters! Apart from us there are about sixty other passengers of all nationalities but we do not meet them until later.

We are greeted at the Northern Port of St Peterburg by Olga who welcomes us aboard the MS *Volga Dream*. My cabin being a single is tiny but I love it straight away. It is aft of the ship with the berth right up against the large picture window so I can lie in bed and look out at the passing view. There is a triangular shower and loo in one corner, a full length mirror and a wardrobe and a television screen at the foot of the bed, all very compact.

I unpack quickly and make a cursory exploration of the ship, before going upstairs to the Sun Deck for a Welcome drink and address from the Captain, who only

speaks Russian. Never mind we get the gist of his speech and the flowing Champagne helps to break the ice.

My fellow anglophones seem charming and we pile into the dining room for an excellent dinner, dish after delicious dish efficiently served by gracious smiling waiters. The fourteen of us are placed together on four tables at one end of the dining room and there we eat every breakfast lunch and dinner, no mixing with the French and Russians! Then it's away to bed to watch the film "Peter the Great" which has been piped onto our television screens. It is informative and quite well done.

The next morning after breakfast Olga gives us a talk about the Cruise, the do's and don't's, safety regulations and a brief outline of what to expect over the next few days. Her English is perfect as is that of all the staff on board who are to a man (and woman) delightful.

We will be sailing 1,340 kilometres upstream and rising via the many locks about 170 metres. The River Neva flows out into the Baltic Sea from Lake Ladoga, the largest lake in Europe which provides St Petersburg with most of its drinking water, to the Gulf of Finland. The Svir River then takes over from Lake Ladoga to Lake Onega, another huge expanse of water. A short journey on the Kovzha River will bring us to Lake Beloye, the White Lake and from there we will take the Sheksna River to the Rybinski Reservoir. After crossing the Reservoir we will be on the Volga River, the longest river in Europe, before joining the Moscow Canal to enter the city itself.

After this introduction follows a lecture by Professor Ludmilla Selezneva from the University of Moscow. She will be giving us a talk every day on various subjects from social conditions in Russia and general politics to Russian Art. The first lecture is about Gorbachev the great Russian leader of the eighties and her own personal hero. Gorbachev opened up Russia in a way that had not

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happened since before the Revolution if ever – *Glasnost* provided a window on the West and let in the light of opportunity. After the oppression of Soviet Russia it should have been a breath of fresh air and at first he was extraordinarily popular, everyone lauding his plans for *Perestroika*, the re-structuring of the Soviet States. But under Soviet rule everybody had a job, education, and a reasonable standard of living, and the general populus were happy just existing. Gorbachev's dream of freedom and expansion jolted them out of this entitled sub-existence, and showed them possibilities they were unprepared for, which for many proved extremely unsettling. Amongst other things he tried to cure the prevalent alcoholism by limiting opening hours of the Vodka shops, which was not well received! Maybe he went too far too quickly but when the backlash came it hit hard and today he is almost branded a criminal in Russia.

Ludmilla is clear and succinct and talks with a fiery passion belied by her rather cool elegant looks. She has met Gorbi, as she calls him, several times and is deeply saddened by his fall from grace.

After lunch the ship moors at a small port (as it will every day) and we disembark to visit Mandrogi, a sort of tourist village with very little authenticity that I can see. A series of pretty houses and arts and crafts shops all built since 1996. However it is a beautiful afternoon and lovely to walk in the sunshine for a couple of hours and I end up in the Vodka museum buying a shot glass and a half bottle of Stolichnaya Vodka, the only brand I recognise!

Then back to the ship to rest before the Tea Ceremony up on the Sun Deck. This consists of the staff dressing up in local Russian costumes and ritually brewing tea in a giant silver samovar. The tea, served with iced buns, is delicious. Tradition says that a wife has to make and serve Tea to her husband when he comes back from work to revive him for the evening. I stay on the Sun deck as we go through the impressive Upper Svir Lock, we went through the Lower Svir Lock before lunch. During World War II the Svir River separated the Soviet south from the Finnish north and now forms part of the Volga–Baltic waterway. Alongside these locks are huge Hydroelectric Stations, built in the thirties during Stalin's time although the Upper Station was not completed until after the War. Rob, one of the Australians who is an engineer, explains how the locks work and how they were built to enable heavy cargo traffic to travel up and down the Canal, circumventing the Power Stations. Before Gorbachev no Westerner was ever allowed to travel these waterways.

We pass large logging stations in the midst of dense forests and begin to have an idea how huge this country is, so much of it covered in forest and woods and farmland.

The next day the ship takes a detour to sail across Lake Onega to Kizhi Island and we set off on a lovely summer morning's walk with a wonderful guide, Natalia, a witty and original lady, very well-informed and full of amusing anecdotes. The island is famous for its 18th century church which is built entirely of wood, not a single nail in sight (or out of sight apparently). After lunch I select along with a few others, to go up onto the Captain's Bridge and see how the River looks from there. Captain Dmitri greets us though he is not exactly chatty and we are probably a great nuisance for him. However he manages to smile and does bear a remarkable resemblance to his revered President, Vladimir Putin! He has been the Captain since the ship was launched some ten years ago.

Then my first Russian language lesson – the Cyrillic alphabet is fascinating and I always like to know something of the language in a country I am visiting. There are over 150 languages and dialects spoken in Russia, almost as many as in India! and there will be a lesson every day.

After that Ludmilla gives her second Lecture on Russian Politics – what happened after Gorbi? The problem was the massive inflation that hit after *Glasnost*, which affected 90% of the population and was devastating. The suffering incurred was a monumental price for Freedom and Gorbachev was regarded as a monster. Back in the twenties Lenin and the Revolution had been a disaster for the people and more people were out of work and starving than at any time in Russian history, then it settled down and by the time Stalin came to power the Russians had become comfortable in their isolation from the rest of the world. They felt Gorbachev was bringing back those terrible times. He had been the First President of Soviet Russia for just one month when he was toppled on Christmas Day 1991 by Yeltsin. He tried to come back as President of Russia in 1996 but got only 1% of the vote which depressed him sadly, although even now he remains politically active.

That night we pass through seven locks in quick succession as we leave the Onega Lake and I stay up all night to watch. Locks have always fascinated me ever since taking Barge holidays with my father years ago, although these huge industrial Locks are a far cry from the simple hand-operated ones on the gentle canals of Britain! but the principle is the same. It looks like we will rise over 70 metres in a few hours. It is not quite a Staircase Lock but

some are only 15 minutes apart, so one can see the next one ahead as the ship emerges from the basin. We are now on the Kovzha River and crossing Lake Beloye, the White Lake, to Goritsky.

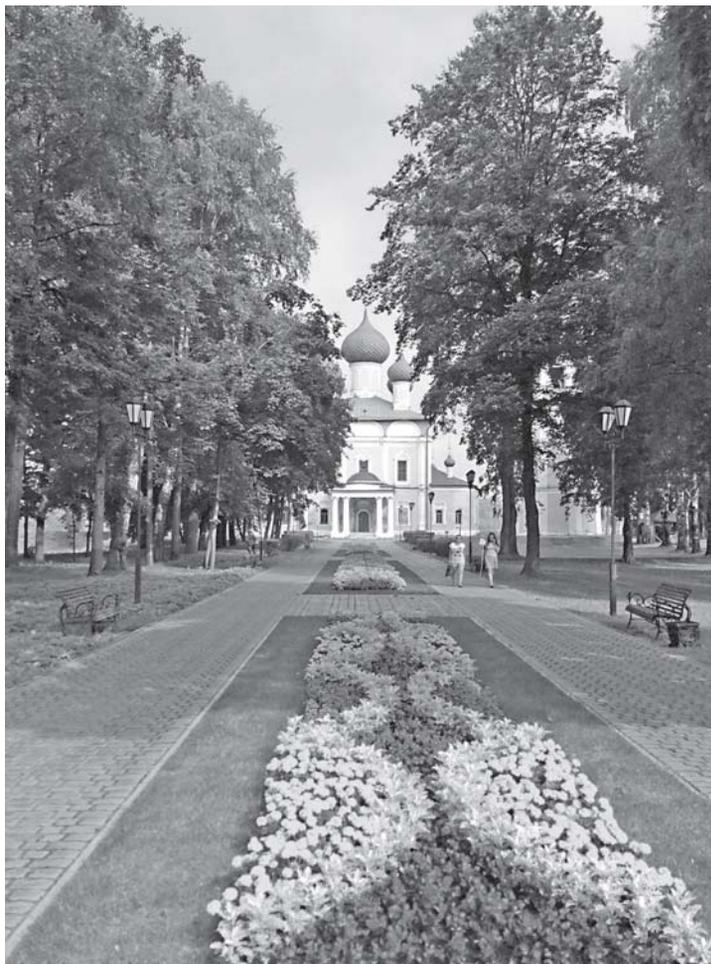
In the morning Ludmilla talks about Russian Art and Culture. I am intrigued that while we in the West all know Russian writers, composers and dramatists, I cannot name a single artist except Kandinsky. Ludmilla soon changes that! She talks about Surikov and Kramskoye and Ilya Repin, who painted many portraits of the elusive Tolstoy and many other painters. A visit to the Kirillov Monastery is on offer for the afternoon. It was founded in the late 14th century and is the largest Monastery in all Russia, although only a handful of monks inhabit it today. Largely in disrepair it is still impressive and the setting glorious. We visit a Gallery full of magnificent Icons, dating back to the 13th and 14th centuries, their brilliant gold and rich colours virtually untarnished. In one chapel the monks sing for us, a rich soulful sound, the beautiful harmonies unmistakably Russian. After dinner there is a piano recital from Vasily. He is a brilliant player, normally attached to the Conservatoire in Moscow and earning extra money in the summer recess just like Ludmilla. He plays Tchaikovsky, Chopin, Rachmaninov, Rimsky-Korsakov, a real treat.

That night we cross the Rybinski Reservoir, a massive body of water created by Stalin in the late thirties by damming several rivers. During breakfast the next morning we go through the dramatic Rybinski Lock at the mouth of the Reservoir, the largest on the Volga and a double one. The two parallel chambers, each 300 metres long and 33 metres wide, can hold many ships. The rise is roughly 15 metres and although the chambers fill rapidly, it takes about an hour to get through. On a spit of land at the entry to the locks stands the huge statue of Mother Volga, her hand forever outstretched towards the Reservoir.

Today Ludmilla is lecturing on the “Golden Age of Russian Art”. She tells us about Mikhail Vrubel (my favourite), Karl Bryullov, Isaak Levitan, and many others, showing us slides of their work, laying the groundwork for visiting the great Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. So many parallels with Western art. Later we have another Russian lesson. Vasily the pianist appears and we soon learn why – we have to sing! And perform tomorrow at the Captain’s Farewell cocktail party ... luckily it is not difficult - “*Kalinka Malinka*” and everyone knows the tune.

In the afternoon we make a detour along the Volga River to visit Yaroslavl, a charming small town. We walk around the grand Church of St Elijah built by a wealthy merchant and then up to the War Memorial and on to the Governor’s Palace where we are shown around by young girls dressed as 18th century Princesses who then dance for us in the Great Ballroom. There is to be a Russian evening tonight on board and we have to dress up – I buy a large woollen shawl and hope that will do. This largely consists of drinking a lot of Vodka and Vasily demonstrates how to drink traditionally, first from your hand then from your elbow, then your knee and then it is all getting rather complicated and impossible which of course is the point. The food is wonderful, many typical Russian dishes, Chicken Kiev, Stroganoffs and delicious creamy desserts.

I watch a documentary about Imperial Russia then go out on deck as we are exiting the Rysinski Lock again. It is 3am and dawn is breaking as the great statue of Mother Volga at its mouth looms into view again.



The uglich Kremlin

The next day we visit Uglich, an authentic, delightful little town, with several lovely churches, notably the Kremlin Cathedral and the Transfiguration Church. It was also the site of the murder of 10 year-old Prince Dmitri, the youngest son of Ivan the Terrible in 1591, commemorated by the building of the charming red and white Church of the Spilled Blood on the river shore. As we go shopping for Vodka and Caviar (and find the best prices so far) a colourful procession of Orthodox priests and followers passes down the centre of the street, apparently today is the Feast of the Holy Apostles. The afternoon brings the last Russian language class and we have a test! *Borzhe Moi!* I finish in two minutes so Olga makes me write my room number and name in Cyrillic which I just about manage. We practice our song for this evening and Ludmilla comes in to give the day's lecture. Then it is time to dress for the Captain's Farewell party and dinner. There are various speeches before our 15-strong choir – calling ourselves the “*Volga Dreamers*” - with Vasily playing the piano, perform our little song which is received with much merriment.

At the Farewell Dinner the entire staff comes out, waiters, cooks, stewards, and they parade up and down our tables bearing large dishes of steaming food, superb as usual.

The next day after navigating the last few locks we will arrive in Moscow. Ludmilla gives us her last lecture, interesting as always, this time about the Crimean War amongst other things. She also talks about Crimea today, saying it is very clearly a part of Russia and Putin (she is not a fan) has only taken back what was theirs, it was lumped with Ukraine in Soviet times but never was a part of it. She says there are no Russian troops in Ukraine, it is a Civil war between pro-Russian and pro-European Ukrainians. Interesting! I feel armed to appreciate the basics of Russian Art and she has increased my understanding of Russian politics a hundredfold. I will miss her! She is so informative and outspoken which I did not expect from a Professor and writer as prominent as she is. But I was to find this even more in Moscow. This was a peaceful gentle time. I love being on the water, and cruising along with the deep verdant forests of Russia on either side and occasional villages and Churches bordering the River I found deeply satisfying. There was also so much to do! and charming new friends to make. So spending the last hour sunbathing on the deck outside my little cabin was a fitting end before setting off into the crazy bustling hubbub that is Moscow ... but Moscow will be the next part of the adventure! □