

A RUSSIAN EXPERIENCE – MOSCOW AS A TOURIST

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And so to Moscow the great capital city of Russia with its thousands of years of history to explore. I had arrived by ship, as described in the last article, after cruising up the Volga-Baltic Waterway which links St Petersburg to Moscow over 1350 kilometres of river, lake and canal. Together with a few of my new friends from the cruise we have hired a guide for a couple of days just to get our bearings.

So we have Milla, a tough matter-of-fact little lady, a force to be reckoned with, who takes no nonsense from anyone and is very opinionated over just about everything. She arrives in a small coach which drives us into the centre and at once I am aware of a monumental, bustling modern metropolis, huge and thriving and not quite the drab city I had imagined. We go straight to Red Square although we will be visiting it properly the next day. It is immense – a huge wide open space with the Kremlin on one side and the fantastical Church of St Basil at the far end. What strikes me is the colours – there are flowers everywhere – banks of municipal arrangements on the pavements and flower baskets hanging from every building. Milla gives a brief talk about it then takes us inside GUM – the massive Department Store, pride of Moscow. Here one can buy anything – there are streets within it, and many floors all lined with dress shops grocery stores and restaurants. Milla tells us she remembers when there used to be long queues to buy just a tiny fragment of cheese! Now the store is full of produce from all over the world, bustling with

people spending money on everything from designer clothes to luxury foods, all sorts of quality and not inexpensive goods.

We walk down to the Church of St Basil where Peter the Great used to mercilessly execute people publicly on a slab outside the church. He was an incredible man in so many ways and yet also a monster, cruel and despotic, as related in my previous article on St Petersburg.

Then we drive to the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour. The 19th century Church, where Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture premiered in 1882, was destroyed on the orders of Stalin to make way for a grand Soviet Palace (and a huge swimming pool according to Milla). Work halted during World War II when Germany invaded Russia so it was never completed. After the dissolution of Soviet Russia it was entirely rebuilt and reopened in 1999, an exact replica of the original which was the largest Orthodox Church ever to be built, complete with obelisks towers and golden icons.

It is quite an exhausting afternoon and the final stop is to be the fascinating Novodevichy Cemetery. It reminds me of the Pere Lachaise Cemetery in Paris where the great and the good of France are buried, but a smaller version. So many illustrious people are buried here, musicians, artists, politicians, writers, actors, philosophers. We walk all over it, and see the graves of Rostropovich, Tchevov, Oistrakh, Shostakovitch, Yeltsin, Khrushchev, Prokofiev and many others. The statuary is beautiful and imposing, inspired monuments to love. I particularly liked the sculpture of Yuri Nikulin, a comic actor much loved, with his Great Dane beside him, and another of a dapper fellow in bow tie and cocked hat, legs crossed, I am not sure who he was.

I check into my hotel which is just round the corner from the Bolshoi, so very central. Later that evening I meet

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my friend Sergei Kachkin, a film director from Perm in Eastern Russia now living in Moscow, who I met five years ago in Goa at the Indian International Film Festival. We go out to eat at a delightful garden restaurant called “*Simple Things*” near the Tchaikovsky Auditorium now sadly closed for the Summer. He says Moscow never sleeps and indeed we get back to the hotel after 3am! He is giving a MasterClass the next day and wants to take me with him, but I have Milla and a full programme so that is not possible, but maybe we will go the the Ballet tomorrow evening.

Today it is a tour of the Kremlin. We see the Armoury, an extraordinary museum of opulence, not as well organised as in St Petersburg but there is so much here, gold, jewellery, more Faberge eggs and many beautiful Icons. The Kremlin is a kind of fortress and within in it as well as the main palace are seven Orthodox churches - one of them, the *Dormition Cathedral*, dating from the 15th century, is traditionally where the coronations of the Tsars took place. Milla pushes and shoves her way round, barking at everyone to let us pass, we are all sure she has been in the Army – she does get us round though and not without

good humour, but none of us would like to be on the wrong side of her!

This evening I go to the Ballet with a friend, not Sergei as he is held up in the country. It is *Romeo and Juliet* by Prokofiev which is wonderful though sadly not at the Bolshoi itself which does not re-open until September, but in the New State Bolshoi next door. A truly moving lyrical performance of one of my favourite Ballets. Mercutio and Thibault are beautifully danced but my last Juliet was Darcey Bussell at Covent Garden so a hard act to follow!

We go to the nearby Shisha bar for a bite to eat and smoke a waterpipe afterwards, which I always enjoy. I am not a true smoker but learnt to love Shisha in Egypt.

The next day brings a visit to the magnificent Tretyakov Gallery. Built by the brothers Tretyakov who were fervent collectors of artworks, this is an outstanding gallery. Ludmilla from the “*Volga Dream*” cruise has prepared me well, and it is a pure joy. Here are collected all the artists newly introduced to me – if my readers do not know them let me introduce some of my favourites to you, and if they do, I hope this stirs some glorious memories.

Ilya Repin was a Realist and painted largely historical and social works, subjects like the “*Barge Haulers on the Volga*” and “*Religious Procession in Kursk*” and battle scenes. He painted over 540 canvases in a prolific career including the harrowing “*Ivan the Terrible Holding his Dying Son*” the infamous Tsar having killed him in a fit of anger. The horrific expression in his eyes haunts me still. Being a long standing friend of Leo Tolstoy who in later life became almost a recluse, Repin was the only artist he would allow to paint his portrait, which he did many times. Repin’s portrait of Mussorgsky in 1881 who died of alcoholic poisoning just four days later is a masterpiece of interpretation of character, moody, brooding, brilliant.

Isaak Levitan was the son of a poor Jewish family who early showed signs of talent. He painted lovely rural scenes, lyrical pastoral landscapes like “*Over Eternal Peace*”. Levitan was the same age as the writer Tchekhov and they became fast friends. It is said he was in love with Tchekhov’s sister though they never married and he died at the age of just forty. Tchekhov died four years later in 1904.

Ivan Kramskoy was a fine portrait painter, of himself and many others. The one I particularly like is simply called “*The Unknown Woman*”. Her



St Basil’s Church in Red Square

imperious, fiercely proud expression jumps out of the painting and the story is that she was the beautiful mistress of many of the aristocrats at the time, but as such could never be accepted in society. Under her undaunted defiant stare one can detect the sadness at her station in life, deserved or not.

I love Karl Bryullov's painting of two girls, one astride a bold bucking black horse that seems to leap out of the picture. He lived in Italy for several years and many of his works are set there.

Vasily Surikov was another painter of social scenes such as "*The Streltsky Execution*" showing Peter the Great's proclivity for executing his victims in public outside St Basil's Church in Red Square, also "*Crossing the Alps*" and "*Boyarin Morozava*" an aristocratic lady being dragged away for protesting her faith.

Last but not least, Mikhail Vrubel, most like the Impressionists of all the Russian artists I have seen and probably my favourite. His superb flower paintings, "*The Lilacs*", "*Chrysanthemums*", the "*Swan Princess*", as well as his "*Demon*" works are modern, disturbing and memorable, and essentially romantic. He bordered on Art Nouveau, as seen in his fine painting on the Metropole Hotel in Moscow, "*The Princess of the Dream*".

After this infusion of culture Milla whisks us off for a ride on the Metro. The Metro in Moscow is one of the most extraordinary and magnificent in the world. I had heard about it but was still stunned by the amazing artwork. It was begun in 1935 during Soviet times under Stalin – no one can say he did not have vision for his country! Work was suspended during the War then started again in 1951. It is extremely deep, the escalators seem to go down into the centre of the earth and very complex too, with fourteen different lines. Everything of course is written in Cyrillic so it is difficult to guess where we are, were, or are going – Milla shepherds her little flock around briskly, better keep up or be lost for ever!

One of the most memorable stations is the glorious *Komsomalskaya* which has an imposing Baroque moulded yellow and white ceiling and Corinthian columns stretching away into the distance, lit by crystal chandeliers. It is centred around a large octagonal dome topped by a cupola, and the walls are lined with mosaics depicting historical scenes. The *Mayakovskaya* station has Art Deco columns with mosaics on the ceilings lit by delicate conical lights – a deceptively simple design. The 34 mosaics depict "*24 Hours in the Land of the Soviets*". It is one of the first "*Deep Column Design*" stations in the world and is 33 metres below the surface.

Novoslobodskaya station is another beautiful artwork, this time 40 metres deep. It is best known for the 32 decorative stained glass panels each with a brass surround and lit from behind, which are set into the station pylons with pink marble from the Ural mountains covering the arches between. At the end of the platform is a huge mosaic by Pavel Korin taking up the whole wall entitled "*Peace Throughout the World*". The last one that stays in my memory is "*Ploshchad Revolyutsii*" remarkable for the 76 bronze sculptures lining the main gallery. These arresting works by Matvey Manizer depict the People of Soviet Russia – farmers, soldiers, writers, industrial workers – the Common Man. The Metro must be one of Joseph Stalin's most lasting and visually exquisite legacies.

That night will be the last our little group spends together and the end of the official tourist sight-seeing. The first time one travels to a new country or city one is always a tourist, although this seems to be a dirty word these days. But it is essential to see the great sights and only after that can one become a true traveller, simply meeting up with people and wandering the lanes – so the next part of my visit to Moscow will be different but no less fascinating and intriguing. I hope my readers will enjoy following me there ... □