

My trip to Perm · *Carole Richardson*

Last summer I went on a slightly different holiday to Russia, nothing at all to do with lacquer boxes, but our editor thought you would be interested in it, so here is an account of my trip to Perm.

The city of Perm lies in the western foothills of the Ural mountains, 700 miles from Moscow. And twenty-one hours by train, if like me you travel there on the Trans-Siberian railway. It lies roughly on the 57th parallel, which makes it a few degrees south of St Petersburg, and about level with Aberdeen. This means it is far enough north to be subject to some pretty severe Russian winters. Fortunately I was there in September, although even then on some days the temperature was getting on for zero.

It's the main city of Perm Region, but for a good part of the twentieth century you would not have known it existed, because during the Soviet era it was a closed city, as it was a centre of armaments manufacture. On our guided tour of the city we stopped briefly at a museum where some of the military vehicles and munitions were on display in an outside courtyard. Between 1940 and 1957 Perm was renamed Molotov, after Stalin's foreign minister and right-hand man.

But let me turn to more pleasant things.

Perm, according to its website, is the most easterly city in Europe, and the third largest city in European Russia, after Moscow and St Petersburg, with a population of over 1.5 million. But it's a world away from those two metropolises. It's a lovely spacious place, not frenetic or over-crowded, with wide streets where the traffic, if there is any, actually moves at a decent pace; there are lots of trees and parks; and it's a vibrant university town, full of friendly people.

For some of its length, the main street, Ulitsa Lenina, is lined with attractive and colourfully painted nineteenth-century merchants' houses, with trams trundling to and fro in front. There are other architectural beauties to be seen scattered throughout the city, including the original railway station, Perm One (not the one we arrived at, unfortunately).

One of these elegant merchants' houses, Meshkov's house, is now home to the Perm Regional Museum. On display there we saw examples of Perm animal style, artefacts dating back to the fifth and sixth centuries AD (although the tradition goes back much further). Folk craftsmen depicted animals and birds in flat plates of intricate brass or bronze tracery. As well as being decorative, they were probably used as totems, for magic, or as protective amulets.

Art and culture have always been associated with Perm, and the city has had links with some rather famous people. Boris Pasternak spent a lot of time here, and liked it so much that he based the town of Yuryatin in *Dr Zhivago* on it. We were taken to a building that is now the Pushkin Central City Library, and shown the reading room. This was the setting in which Pasternak is said to have envisaged Yury first catching sight of Lara again, after their long separation.

Another famous resident was Sergey Diaghilev, and there is now a Diaghilev Gymnasium in their family house in Perm. As well as a ballet school, the gymnasium contains a small museum, with several rooms still furnished as they were in his day. The walls of the elegant

salon are lined with a fascinating array of ballet posters and photographs, letters, designs for sets and costumes, while a display of ballerina dresses fills one corner. Everywhere throughout the building there are paintings and sculptures, including a colossal statue of the man himself.

However the Diaghilev is not the only ballet school in town. There is also the main, classical ballet school, third in importance only to the Bolshoi and the Mariinskiy. In fact it developed out of the St Petersburg ballet school, which was evacuated to Perm during the Second World War. We were lucky enough to be given a tour of the ballet school and watched some of the classes. When you watch from only a few feet away, you really understand how much effort goes into making it all look so effortless, especially for the boys, as you see how their leg muscles strain and tremble during the drills.

Since Soviet times, the city's art gallery has been housed in the old cathedral, although there are plans to return the building to its former use. The gallery's location does provide visitors with a unique experience, however. If you go all the way up to the top floor, you come face to face, literally, with the top tier of the cathedral's baroque iconostasis, which was never dismantled. A very unusual perspective! But there's another surprise on the top floor too.

High above, together with the paintings by Aivazovsky, Shishkin, Savrasov, Repin, and their fellows, the gallery's top floor houses a collection of wooden sculptures. These are no ordinary sculptures, however. They are large wooden images of Christian figures, which were used in place of icons by some of the ethnic peoples of the Perm region. They found it difficult to accept Orthodox Christianity when it arrived with settlers migrating from central Russia. They found painted icons hard to get on with, as they were much more used to carving their pagan gods from wood. So they compromised, and produced carved Christian figures instead. They were probably allowed to do this because they were so far away from anywhere. I have to admit they are a bit unnerving at first, but it's a truly unique collection of international importance.

Further afield, the countryside around Perm is very beautiful. This is a region of many rivers. Perm itself sits on the beautiful river Kama, 1,125 miles long and one of the most important rivers in Russia. However one day we set off in search of another, the Sylva river. We headed south-east, for about 60 miles. The last part of the journey was rather slow as it was on a typically bumpy dirt road along the bank of the river.

Our first destination was the Yermak Stone, a huge limestone cliff rising up from the river. Legend has it that Yermak, who conquered Siberia for Russia in the time of Ivan the Terrible, spent the winter in its caves before leaving on his campaign. We climbed a short, nearly vertical path up through the trees beside the stone, and were rewarded with a fantastic view of the river and the surrounding countryside.

After a rather nerve-racking, equally precipitous, descent we had a lovely Russian picnic lunch by the river (I think this was our third stop for refreshments of the day, and there were many more to come!). Then we kitted ourselves out in lifejackets and large waterproof waders, and clambered aboard an inflatable, catamaran-style raft for the next leg of our journey.

With four of us perched on each side of the raft, and one or two in between, we paddled our way down (or is it up?) the river. At any rate, we had the flow of the current to help us, and apparently we covered a distance of 9 miles. We were very fortunate in that we had the

best weather of the whole holiday that day, warm and sunny, with no wind. The river was wide, but very smooth and not very deep—so shallow, in fact, that we actually ran aground at one point! So it didn't take much effort, and we spent this lovely idyllic hour or so gently cruising down to the town of Kungur, where we enjoyed more refreshments on the river bank after we disembarked (champagne and oranges this time, if I remember correctly).

Kungur is famous for its ice caves, so we exchanged our waterproofs for the (very) warm clothing we had brought with us. The temperature in the caves is minus five degrees centigrade at best, so pretty chilly.

These caves are amazing. Some of them still had snow in them. We took the shorter route, which was about a mile, but they actually cover at least 3 miles. I'd never been into a cave system before, and even though there were walkways and bridges, it was still quite eerie. Some of them were illuminated with spectacular lighting effects, and one cave contained a crystal-clear pool that looked about a foot deep but was actually much, much deeper.

The whole day was finished off with a barbecue provided by our guides, and accompanied by a great deal of vodka. We'd enjoyed so much fantastic Russian hospitality that day, it was a good thing we'd had so much exercise as well!

Another day we went about 30 miles north of Perm to visit the outdoor museum of Khokhlovka. This is a museum of wooden architecture, similar to the one in Suzdal, but bigger, I think. There were many different kinds of buildings, including village houses, churches (one of which dates from the 1690s), a windmill, a watchtower, and even a fire station. But probably the most interesting and unusual was the salt works.

The Perm region was well known for the production of salt. Salt was made here for five centuries, and the Stroganovs were the major producers. In the city of Perm there is a sculpture called 'Permyak Salty-Ears', the traditional nickname for the local inhabitants who worked in the industry. The workmen carried the bags of salt on their shoulders. Over time the salt ate the skin of their ears away, and they grew larger and turned red as a result.

The Urals area is famous for its huge variety of mineral deposits generally, although many of them were worked out long ago. The city of Perm was founded on the copper industry, but the minerals visitors are most likely to see nowadays are the semi-precious stones worked into beautiful jewellery. There are lots of shops selling it in Perm, so it's very easy to be tempted. In fact, there's a great deal of Russian craft in this region, if you know where to find it. One day we were taken to a really out-of-the-way hamlet, where there was a wonderful craft museum and school. Children of all ages, from about 5 to 18, come here after normal school hours to be taught by masters in the crafts of birch-bark, embroidery, lace-making, belt-weaving, dress-making, doll-making . . . And they learn properly, not just for fun. So everything is perfect and exquisite. The embroidery looks just as good on the reverse as it does on the right side. And they all take it very seriously, which was lovely to see, as it means the crafts will live on for another generation.

I have so many wonderful memories of this holiday. It's definitely somewhere I'd like to go back to.