

St Petersburg and Fedoskino holidays Sept.2011 · *Carole Richardson*



Catherine Palace, garden side

A group of eight ladies enjoyed a wonderful trip to St Petersburg in September 2011. We were fortunate to be able to see all the major sights as well as many lesser-known ones. We loved exploring the streets with their baroque and neo-classical palaces, interlaced with bridges and canals. Our hotel was situated just off the main street, the long, wide Nevsky Prospekt. We walked up and down it many times, and always enjoyed crossing the Anichkov Bridge, guarded at each end by beautiful bronze sculptures of wild horses and their powerful tamers. St Petersburg is so full of amazing sights. The Hermitage and the Russian Museum bowled us over with their stunning interiors and their amazing collections. The many churches and cathedrals—the Church on the Spilt Blood, its interior walls entirely decorated with beautiful mosaics; St Isaac's Cathedral with its towering golden dome that's visible for miles; the Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul, the burial place of many of the tsars, and home to the shrine of the last Romanovs.

Out of town, we visited the palaces of Gatchina and Peterhof, and of course the stunning Catherine Palace at Tsarskoe Selo/Pushkin. With its fabulous Amber Room, this was actually the last excursion of our holiday, and made a fitting climax. It was on Dianna Goodwin's mental list of 'must-dos' and she was not disappointed.

'Not quite as large a room as I had somehow supposed it to be; I was shocked that just two small pieces of the original decorations had survived being plundered by Nazi soldiers during the Second World War. The restoration (completed in 2003) has been lovingly and painstakingly carried out from black-and-white photographs, observing designs produced by Rastrelli in 1755. It is still an absolutely amazing sight to behold.'

A highlight for me was the simple dacha of the artist Ilya Repin at Repino, which couldn't have been more different. In a beautiful (and artistically inspirational) area of pine forests and sandy beaches on the northern shores of the Gulf of Finland, the artist himself developed the original two-room village house into the highly individual house and artist's studio it is today. Room by room, he must have done it, to judge by the crazy roofline.



Repin's dacha

Although our mini-cruise to Kizhi was unfortunately cancelled, the replacement cruise amply made up for the disappointment. We visited two church islands on Lake Ladoga, Valaam and Konevets. Valaam is home to a church and monastery that is every bit as important to the Russians as Kizhi, but much less well known abroad. But it is fortunate in having plentiful funding from Finland to help restore the ravages of communism and the Second World War.

By contrast, our other destination, Konevets is having to do the same job with very meagre resources. But the island's wild beauty, and the faith and dedication of its brethren, made a deep impact on us all. Chris Cowley describes part of the visit:

'The lower church had been largely restored, with copies of most of the original icons. (In 1939 the monks were forced to abandon the island, escaping across the ice with their sacred icons to the monastery of New Valaam in Finland.) The upper church, however, had been made watertight but the wall paintings were in a very sorry state. A lone monk was singing in the upper church in an attempt to raise money from visitors. I felt moved and humbled in this place; both the buildings and the island project a deep spirituality.'

It was certainly a holiday of many contrasts. But it was these contrasts that helped to give us a greater appreciation of everything we saw.