

Russia-An Unexpected Perspective

Russia's vivid colours, over-the-top ornamentation and extraordinary history come to life in the magically muted light of the White Nights.

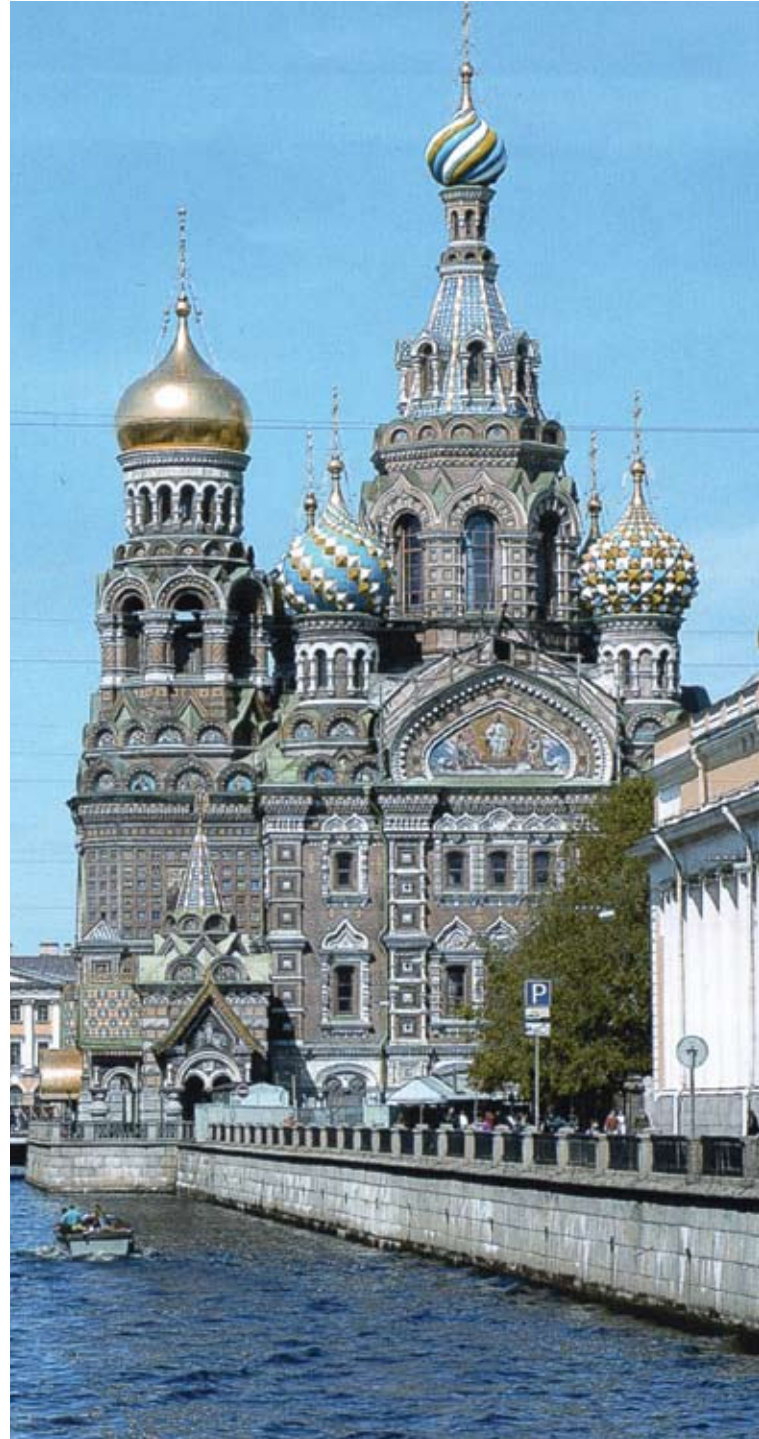
BY KARA KURYLLOWICZ

Visiting Moscow with your eightysomething Russian-speaking father makes as much practical as sentimental sense when you're fortysomething, Canadian-born and can't decipher even exit signs in the Cyrillic alphabet. Moscow was appealing as the gateway to Yalta, which would take us that much closer to the tiny coastal town of Feodosia on the Black Sea, where my grandmother and her siblings snatched apples from the orchards of the great seascape painter, Ivan Aivazovsky.

But almost immediately, a new perspective dawned thanks to downtown Moscow and the closet-sized hotel room, with its astonishing view of Red Square, vivid and sharp during the day, yet magically muted in the soft, bright night light you get from late May to early July, when the sun never truly sets this far north.

In Moscow, my father, remarkably unaffected by the lack of night, was forever hauling his bleary-eyed daughter off to see the sights that fascinated a man who'd flown Spitfires in the British RAF's Polish squadrons and been a POW at Stalag Luft III. At Star City, the cosmonaut training centre about 40 km. northeast of Moscow, we personally experienced the space capsule's close quarters, complete with the treadmill to which the weightless cosmonauts were tethered. Back in the city, he hauled me off to the austere KGB Museum, where I was more intrigued by the stilted, awkward communication between a group of American men and Russian women. As they relied on tentative smiles rather than a shared language, I wondered whether these "brokered" unions would ever become more than a marital transaction.

Fortunately, on the grounds of the Kremlin, we were equally taken with the Armory Museum, home to the extraordinary treasures and gifts accumulated by Russian princes and tsars. While the crowns and armor are suitably impressive, as are the exquisite Fabergé eggs and the equestrian regalia including saddles, harnesses and over-the-top carriages, the garments belonging to the likes of Catherine the Great made it personal. I wanted to know more about these legendary leaders. Consider the exquisite, impossibly petite gown belonging to the minor German princess Sophia, who became Catherine shortly before her conversion to the Orthodox religion and subsequent marriage to the Grand Duke Peter at just 16. It's a sharp contrast to the weightier fashions she wore as she matured, becoming known as the Empress of All the Russias and eventually adding 200,000 square miles to its territories. Ironically, she was recognized as much for her string of lovers as for her keen intellect and contributions to Russia's history and culture. ⇨



The Cathedral of the Resurrection in St. Petersburg marks the spot where Alexander II was fatally wounded in an assassination attempt on March 1, 1881.

Catherine remains the fodder for many a father-daughter conversation, but if you aren't blessed with a Russian-speaking father, and don't want to tackle Russia solo, there are options. For many, the river cruises that ply the Volga and Svir Rivers between Moscow and St. Petersburg are the ultimate convenience, with lectures and guided tours. But the real upside may be the visits to the quaint but ornate riverside villages. It's a window into a different Russia, particularly Uglich, founded in 1148 and used by Ivan the Terrible as a base for his campaigns against the Golden Horde, and Kostroma, considered the home of the Romanov royal family. Yaroslavl stretches along both banks of the Volga, and Goritsky boasts the Monastery of St. Cyril on the White Lake, one of Russia's oldest and most famous. Walk around the Island of Kizhi to see the wooden architecture that's typical of northern Russia brought to life in wooden churches, bell towers, peasants' homes, granaries, barns, windmills and bathhouses. Mandrogi, a small village rebuilt on the bank of the River Svir, lets you experience Russian life in the provinces as you watch artisans and craftsmen at work.



Goritsky boasts the Monastery of St. Cyril on the White Lake.

St. Petersburg, the world's northernmost city with more than 1 million people, is where you'll most fully experience the legendary White Nights. Created by Peter the Great on the Baltic Coast, the country's second largest city was meant to rival Venice and is spread over 42 islands in the Neva River's delta. Previously known as Petrograd and Leningrad, it boasts the Hermitage, housed in six magnificent buildings, with more than 3 million items in its collections. Although heavily damaged during World War II, when 1.2 of the city's 3 million citizens died due to starvation, infection, bombings and stress, much of the city has been rebuilt and it is extraordinary.

If you're intrigued, give yourself plenty of time in both Moscow and St. Petersburg and prior to departure, immerse yourself in the histories of the key players as well as their cities and their people. As knowledgeable as your guides and lecturers will be, there is only so much they can convey in the time available and the more you know, the better you'll appreciate Russia's many facets. [UL](#)

River Cruises: www.cantrav.ca, www.exclusivetours.ca



A picturesque view of a St. Petersburg canal.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CANADIAN TRAVEL ABROAD
The Island of Kizhi's extraordinary wooden architecture.