

**Friendship Force of Central North Carolina
Journal of Ambassadors:
Moscow Home Stay
Journey of the Czars-The Golden Ring
Saint Petersburg, Russia
June 10-26, 2015**



Day 1, Wed, June 10, Moscow, Doris Kiszely

Fifteen of us met at the Sheetz to board a bus to take us to Charlotte Douglas International Airport to begin our Russian sojourn. After many months of planning and an untold number of emails, the day had finally arrived. Martha had her planning bible in a purple binder that held all the necessary facts and figures about our trip.

Today is Danny Crump's birthday. We wanted to acknowledge his special day so we decided to celebrate in a truly NC manner. Ray picked up Krispy Kreme donuts and the appropriate hats to accompany the party. We sang to his continued good health and wished him the best for the future.

We met up with the Holsingers and Sandy White in CLT. With our documents checked, boarding passes in hand, we headed for security and our gate. We had plenty of time so everyone just did their own thing. Some walked, some got a bite to eat and others just took the time to get better acquainted with everyone.

Boarding was the typical cattle call at the gate. We were spread out in the plane, but all were in the rear. The flight was long, but on time. We met up with our Brazilian ambassadors (Edinaldo, Martinelli and Silvana) when we reached Munich. The flight from Munich to Moscow was just a couple of hours and the seating more spacious than the first leg of the trip. Lufthansa tried to make us comfortable with service. All in all the getting to Russia was okay. Anymore, I just look at flying as a means to an end.



Upon landing at **Domodedovo Airport**, we headed for passport control to have our documents checked. We all got in the proper line and were waiting for our turn when we were inundated with Uzbeks that just got off another plane. Unfortunately, they had never heard of using a queue. We were quickly in a crush of people who just shoved their way in any way they could to get ahead of everyone. It really seemed chaotic and a bit unnerving. Martha finally went to one of the officials and voiced her concern and displeasure about the way we were being herded. It turns out they moved the majority of the Uzbeks to another area for processing.

We breezed through customs after we retrieved our baggage and met up with Linda White, Joyce Elferdink, and Phyllis Donnelly, then were met by the ED of **Friendship Force Moscow**, Natalia Guskovo. After many introductions we were put on a bus to be taken to the pickup point, **Moscow Books**, the book store across from the **Biblioteka Lenina**, to be met by our hosts. The bus ride was well over an hour due to the congested traffic in Moscow. Natalia Panina, our host, was there to greet us and ushered us into a waiting taxi. I felt like I was back in Mumbai or Beijing because the drivers were so aggressive. There are very wide avenues in Moscow but no matter how many lanes there are, the drivers will squeeze more cars between the lanes. Rather nerve-racking even in the back seat.



When we got to the apartment, we were greeted by Mila, Natalia's daughter. She showed us around the apartment then informed us that the entire apartment was for our use. We were pleasantly surprised by the generosity. Mila fixed us a light dinner and then bid us goodnight.

Day 2, Thurs, June 11, Moscow, Doris Kiszely

Mila came to get us at the apartment and then we went to her flat to have breakfast. She served us oatmeal and some cottage cheese as well as some sweet bread. The preparation of chai, the Russian word for tea, is done with some ceremony. They use loose black tea they brew in a small tea pot. They then pour a small amount of the brewed strong tea into a teacup and add boiling water to the cup.

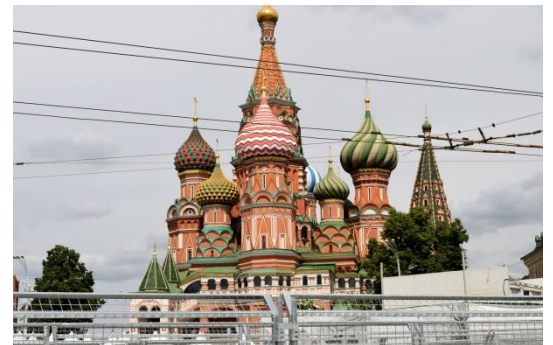


After we ate, Natalia came to escort us to the **metro** to meet the rest of the group. The ride on the metro was very crowded, but also civilized. I made note that as soon as a person with some years under their belt got on the car, a younger person, male or female, relinquished their seat for the older person. I also saw a young person give up their seat for a pregnant lady. Most people on the cars are “plugged-in” on tablets or smart phones since there is Wi-Fi on all the trains. I enjoyed people watching during our journey to the city center. The wardrobes are modern with many graphic designs on the clothing. There were many jeans with strategic tears.

The young girls still are wearing platform stilettos on their feet. Ouch!

We met at the same book store where the bus had dropped us on our way from the airport. We were met there by Natalia, the ED, and several FF members serving as day hosts. We boarded a very comfortable touring bus and proceeded to have a quick glimpse of Moscow. One of their members provided us with commentary along the route. They began with a brief history of Russia and then answered many questions about current topics of interest. Our guide pointed out buildings of significant importance such as the Friendship House where at one time Friendship Force held its meetings. She gave us numerous facts along the way such as: the legal population in Moscow is 12 million, but when you add the temporary and illegal immigrants it actually is closer to 20 million.

We drove by **Pushkin Square** and **Red Square** (hundreds of years ago the Russian word for “red” and “beautiful” were the same. So the name of the square was really “beautiful square,” not “Red Square.”). We stopped in an area where we could see the Kremlin and **St Basil’s** in the distance so we could take photos. The Kremlin and St Basil’s were closed today in preparation for the holiday tomorrow that commemorates the Independence declared by Boris Yeltsin at the end of the Soviet Union and the beginning of the new Russian Federation. We drove alongside the Moscow River for some interesting views.



Our visit to the **Cathedral of Christ the Savior** <http://www.moscow.info/orthodox-moscow/cathedral-christ-saviour.aspx> and the gardens was definitely a highlight for me. The Cathedral has an interesting history which adds to the magnificence of the structure. The many murals and frescoes are beautiful. The icon altarpiece is a work of art all by itself. The garden area, with its many flower beds and playful fountains, was very inviting. I would have been a happy camper to be able to sit by the fountains and enjoy the scenery.

After re-boarding the bus we were off to drive by the statue of Leo Tolstoy and the Convent and Cemetery of the New Maiden, also known as **Novodevichiy Convent and Cemetery** https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Novodevichiy_Cemetery. Many famous Russians are interred here including Chekhov, Rostropovich, Khrushchev, and Boris Yeltsin.

We were taken to one of the highest spots in Moscow to get a panoramic view of the city, but unfortunately, construction prevented us from getting a proper look see. The drive took us along the campus of Moscow State University. The bus brought us back to the starting point. We walked to the **Cafe Anderson** <http://cafe-anderson.ru/eng/> for a lunch of salad, asparagus-mushroom soup, delicious bread and a serving of pasta with meat balls. It was very delicious food, but too much for a lunch. After eating the group divided. Some went to tour the **Bolshoi Theatre** and the rest went to the **US Embassy** for a pre-arranged meeting with Amy Steinmann, a Foreign Service Officer, who is responsible for sending the delegates to us at Piedmont Triad Council for International Visitors (PTCIV) for International Leadership Programs. We also met with the head of the Open World Program for Russia. We were able to learn much about the selection process for both programs. At the conclusion, Barbara Guess asked about a tour of the



compound. Amy gladly showed us around. It was surprising to all of us to learn how completely self-contained the compound is. Most of the people who work there actually live within the compound. They have their own mini city with most services they would require to make life comfortable.



For the rest of the group who visited the Bolshoi Theatre it was a beautiful experience. The crew was setting up for LaTraviatta. Bolshoi means ‘big’ and when it was built, it was the largest theatre in Europe.

At the end of the day we were met by our hosts and made our way back to their homes. We rode the metro back with Natalia and then to Mila and Dimitri’s home for dinner. Ray gave Andrei his NC Hurricanes shirt which brought a big smile and “Thank You Very Much” in English. We gave Dimitri and Mila little gifts and they said goodnight.

Day 3, Fri, June 12, Moscow, Connie Dubois, Russia's Independence Day

Most ambassadors traveled via the metro on an easy holiday ride to the **State Tretyakov Gallery/Museum** <http://www.tretyakovgallery.ru/en/>. At 10am, we joined a fairly large queue at the museum entrance.



Natalia, the Moscow ED, arranged for our tickets and audio headsets. What a treat to have English when in Russia! We did have to share the audio and I partnered with Karlyn. Once in the galleries the large crowd confused us as to where to start the tour. It was difficult to operate the audio so we both could hear and cover as many paintings as possible once we concluded that you could start anywhere.

The audio dissertations were fairly lengthy and it appeared that what I could view and listen to was considerably less than I wanted. I began to roam the room studying other paintings in the room while listening then glancing occasionally at the selected painting when the audio referred to it. I could also find the next numbered painting on the audio in the room as there were usually no more than 3 per room and the audio was in no particular order which enabled the person touring to connect with a vast number of artists’ paintings of which this museum had many.

The Tretyakov owns and houses the largest number of paintings anywhere by Russian artists. Only museums that have many paintings from one painter or have their own paintings in a special exhibit by class can employ this audio technology. So off I went from room to room many times laughing my way out of the room because the audio was that entertaining. Touring was like eating at buffet tables that were scattered about the room for convenience.

This art collection was outstanding, showing the depth of Russian artistic excellence and the enormous numbers of paintings collected by one person, Pavel Mikhailovich Tretyakov. In 1892, Pavel's collection numbered 3300 works of art in his own gallery which he bequeathed to the city of Moscow together with 82 paintings from his deceased brother's collection. From then on the collection continued to grow. During bad times cleaning and restorations of the paintings took place to provide the art seen today. What especially intrigued me was the quality of information on the audio and the way the audio for each selection in the 30 or so rooms could be accomplished. One could not do this in the hour and 30 minutes our visit allowed if sharing the audio headset. Thank you, Karlyn.



Several pieces for which the audio gave me a chuckle were:

Livitsky's Portrait of Prokofiy A. Demidov -1773 was the son of a very rich mine owner, a generous benefactor to the Moscow Friends Hospital and a lover of plants and botany. He was a bit of a curios fellow. In the painting he is pointing to the hospital at the left and his potted plants. He leans on the dull watering can wearing satin and silk. The audio tells that he needed eyeglasses in his old age so he insisted the entire household wear them, including the cats and the dogs.

Vasily V Purkirev's An Unexpected Match - 1860. This painting depicted an era when a typical everyday occurrence was seeing a wealthy old gentleman insisting on taking a very young wife. The bride's expression in the painting caused such a controversial stir forcing the viewer to blush and shudder that



several oldsters about to marry young wives re-examined their situations and changed their minds. The artist has painted himself in the picture immediately behind the bride and done so due to events involving him and his fiancé.



Antropov's 1790 Portrait of Peter III, husband of Catherine the Great. He thought himself to be of extraordinary good looks and perhaps the best looking man of his time. He made sure his portrait included the scepter, the orb and the crown seen lying on the table beside him while he is shown dressed to attest to his nobility.

Afterward several in the group enjoyed a delightful lunch in the little Tretyakov museum cafeteria, then about half the group walked to the metro for the trip to **Kolomenskoe Park** which was a short metro ride and well worth it as we enjoyed having a great excursion for the remainder of a lovely day.

The highlight in the park is the re-built wooden Palace by Tsar Alexis II, Peter the Great's father.

The Palace, when built in about 1568, was situated a few miles from the spot that the palace replica is situated. The original was built using no saws or nails and eventually became a 250 room palace. Peter the Great was born there as were more royalty; most being schooled there over the next 100 years. Change occurred when the Russian capital was moved to St Petersburg and the wooden palace fell into serious



disrepair. Catherine the Great had the palace and most other buildings on the grounds dismantled. However a miniature replica and building plans were saved. In the 1990s, the city of Moscow decided to rebuild the wooden palace in the fairly new **Kolomenskoe Park**, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kolomenskoye>.

Prior to the decision to build, other buildings were re-built and still others moved into the park such as the **Church of the Ascension**, the bell tower and gate and water tower that we were available to view on

our way to the Metro where we did happen to catch a small group of vocalists performing, adding to the Independence Day festivities.

After dinner back at my host's home, the entertainment for the rest of **Independence Day** was the televised Red Square Production. The production was lengthy, but enjoyable and I was hit with the revelation (as the TV cameras kept panning the audience) did Stalin do the country such a disfavor when he closed the borders of Russia? The isolation of a large country such as Russia had some positive results. Look at the photo below and see a homogenous population representing those who seemed to me, to be mannerly, obedient, eager to work, and loyal to their country where racism seems not to be an issue.



Saturday and Sunday were free days with our hosts. Many ambassadors submitted essays on what they did on those days.

Day 4, Sat, June 13, Moscow, Sandy White

I had another enjoyable lazy morning then a metro ride to Sovolyovskoye metro station, which is also the location of a train station. Met Terri and Stan with their hostess Elena and we rode about a half hour north to Sheremetyevo station. Alex



(husband of Irina, Martha's hostess) met us with their Volvo SUV and drove us to their dacha. Also joining the house party were Marina and Sasha, a couple of film critics, who are friends of Irina and Alex.

At the dacha, we feasted nonstop on fresh vegetables and fruit, followed by smoked salmon, beer, wine and vodka. We had delicious Georgian bread and a cold soup

made from chopped raw vegetables and boiled eggs with kvass (a Russian drink made from fermented black bread) and topped with smetana (Russian for sour cream). For dinner there was still more food—turkey shashliki (shish kebabs) and grilled vegetables-eggplant, peppers, squash. For dessert we had chocolates and ice cream.



Fortunately we had opportunities to walk off a few of the calories with a couple of long walks in the woods. We also melted away some fat in the vannaya (sauna). The men went first, then the ladies.

Day 4, Sat, June 13, Moscow, Doris Kiszley

We got a later start today since it is a free day to spend with our hosts. Mila fixed us pancakes which actually are like crepes or blinis. Dimitri didn't join us for breakfast instead he had walked to the garage where they store their car.

During the week transportation is done via the metro because there is so much traffic congestion. We were informed that we would be going outside the city to a dacha that is owned by a friend of theirs to celebrate a little girl's 8th birthday. So off to the country we went. Traveling around Moscow by car is always an adventure. We have not seen a posted speed limit anytime we have been in a car. The cars whiz by at breakneck speed. We arrived safely and were quickly introduced to Katya and Stas, the parents of the little girl, Zhenya, and their 5 year old son, Sasha. Quickly more folks arrived -- friends of Mila from university and relatives. I was introduced to so many people that I couldn't keep anyone straight. The dacha actually belongs to Constantine Stoletov, who is Katya's father. There are many fruit trees as well as lovely flowers growing around the dacha. Apple and pear trees, gooseberry and blueberry bushes, even some grapes are growing. There were a bunch of kids there and they all got along and found games to play. The dads got involved with playing volleyball with the kids several times during our visit. The celebration was held outside under the trees. We had what I would describe as a groaning table. Several salads, olives and pickles, boiled potatoes, eggplant salad, smoked salmon, kabobs of chicken and pork, plates of sausages and cheese all spread down a long table. We were served compote to drink at first and then we were offered wine. There were many toasts during the meal to the birthday girl and to all who were at the table.

As I thought the evening was winding down, Constantine came out of the dacha carrying a guitar. He had a special song to sing to his granddaughter on her birthday. Then several around the table encouraged him to play other songs which they sang along to. There was a little dancing, both Russian and Chubby Checker's "Let Twist Again." We were welcomed into their home like a family member. It was wonderful. It was a rich and endearing experience. I took many photos and some video as well to help remember this amazing day. We piled back in the car and Dimitri had us back at the apartment within 45 minutes. It's amazing how quickly one can get around without heavy traffic.

I am surprised. The relationship of Russians and vodka is well known, but we have been here for four nights and we have yet to be offered any vodka.

Day 4, Sat, June 13, Moscow, Karla Shanahan

My host, Vladimir and I, stayed in the city over the weekend. His apartment is close to the city center so we walked, took



the bus and metro. We went this morning to the **Novodevichiy Convent and Cemetery** https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Novodevichiy_Cemetery . The convent was founded in 1525 and also served as a defensive fortress. It includes several churches which were reconstructed in Moskva baroque style. The convent was a university for nobility. In 1812 it was occupied by Napoleon's troops and was used later as a female prison before it became a museum during communism. The grounds are beautiful; however, the most impressive sight was the cemetery.

The cemetery opened in 1898 right next to the walls of the convent. It soon became the burial place of choice for Russia's leaders, cultural and political and other important persons. Anton Chekhov, Nikolai Gogol, Nikita Khrushchev, Boris Yeltsin have impressive tombs among Russian authors, musicians, playwrights, poets, actors, political leaders and scientists.

We walked and walked among the tombs in a park with unusual vegetation, huge trees and a cherry orchard. It became a UNESCO World Heritage site and truly is the most beautiful site you can imagine. After coffee and a pastry in the park we took the metro and went to the **All Russian Decorative Art Museum** http://www.inyourpocket.com/Moscow/All-Russian-Decorative-Art-Museum_37556v . It is a rather small museum with a great department of Russian Lacquer paintings. I learned the famous lacquer paintings originated in Russia, when the icon painting was no longer allowed and the artists switched to lacquer. In 1924 there was an important exhibition in Paris of lacquer paintings. The subjects included all daily life, landscapes and political and cultural events and they have an extensive collection of Stalin.



Day 5, Sun, June 14, Moscow, Karla Shanahan

In the morning we visited the **Izmailovo Market**. <http://www.mydestination.com/moscow/6182686/flea-market-in-izmailovo> It

is an area of stands with various foods for sale surrounded by buildings-churches and different towers and even the Kremlin. It is sort of a Disney Wonderland. I understand it is popular for weddings and special family outings. In the late afternoon, Vladimir took me to the Bolshoi Theater <http://www.bolshoi.ru/en> - the new stage adjacent to the original. It was built in six months to host performances while the main theater was being renovated. I attended the Bolshoi Ballet "Hamlet", music by Dmitri Shostakovich. It was the world premier and certainly one of the highlights of my visit to Moscow.

I would like to share something I found so touching. Vladimir's flat was built in 1926 and has 62 apartments. He owns his flat which he inherited from his parents. The residents established a marble plaque on the wall at the entrance with the 24 names of the residents who lived there and died in WWII. There is a shelf where they leave flowers. Vladimir told me there are only 3 other apartment houses which have a memorial like this.

Day 5, Sun, June 14, Moscow, Terri & Stan Holsinger

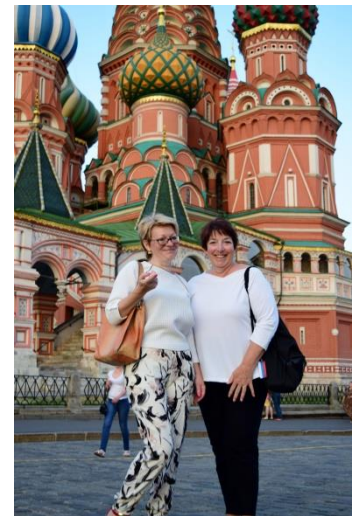


Our host, Elena Bakunina, took us by metro to the **Exhibition of Achievements** of the People's Economy. We saw restored buildings from the 1935 agricultural exhibition; there was everything from street markets, face painting, bike rentals, classic car exhibits and beautiful fountains. We met Elena's friends to tour the exhibit. She had tutored their children. We then rode in their Toyota Land Cruiser to a downtown restaurant <http://www.glavpivtorg.ru/> for a sumptuous meal. That was our treat for Elena. After eating and many toasts, her friends brought us back to Elena's flat. We headed out a little later to see Moscow at night including **St Basil and Gum**.



Day 5, Sun, June 14, Moscow, Phyllis Donnelly

After a good night's sleep at our host's dacha, we woke to a wonderful breakfast of delicious hot millet porridge then blini served with sour cream and two homemade preserves. We guests were taken by Arlem for a small boat ride on the river. Danny and Lundee enjoyed a swim in the river. This swim was taken in spite of the fact that a snake made its presence known beside the boat during the ride. Brave! After the swim they showered in an outdoor shower. Larissa served a wonderful lamb soup for lunch together with a lovely salad and chicken pot pie.



Vladimir drove his wife, Joyce, and me to the train to Moscow in the late afternoon. Along the way, in contrast to our drive to the dacha in darkness, we were able to see many lovely scenes of Russian countryside including the church with the cemetery where members of Larissa's family were buried. A wonderful weekend made so by a warm and hospitable family with a valiant interpreter in the person of 17-year old son, Arlem. He gave great consideration to the old people, staying with the parents. The day came to an end with our arrival back in Moscow.

Day 5, Sun, June 14, Moscow, Sandy White—another lazy morning. In the afternoon I met up with Martha Brown and our old friend, Ed Roslof (aka my ex-husband). He is an American who has lived in Moscow for many years. Had a great visit with him over a light supper at **Shokoladnitsya** (Chocolate Shop), followed by a stroll around the Patriarch Ponds neighborhood. This area was the setting for the subversive Soviet-era novel, "The Master and Margarita" by Mikhail Bulgakov. There are signs in the neighborhood indicating where scenes from the novel took place.

Day 5, Sun, June 14, Moscow, Doris Kiszely

Today we were able to sleep in. Mila came for us at 10:30 for breakfast. I am leisurely sitting at the kitchen table having a cup of chai and munching on cherries. Some of our apples are from Moldova. We will spend the day with Mila and her

family. Our excursion today is to **Kuskovo Architectural and Park** http://kuskovo.ru/en/history_of_the_museum/ Mila said she was feeling better after having an episode of sickness during the night. Dimitri did a marvelous job navigating the heavy traffic with many driving erratically.

The weather was warm with bright sunshine so we opted to walk in the shade whenever possible. The Palace and surrounding buildings are a unique monument of Russian estate culture of the 18th Century. The estate became known as the summer entertainment residence of one of the richest people in Russia: Count Pyotr Borisovich Sheremetyev. He



was the son and heir of the first Russian count, Boris Petrovich Sheremetyev, one of Peter the Great's Field Marshalls. Pyotr Sheremetyev devoted over 50 years to the creation of the estate. The estate used to gather as many as 25,000 guests on days of celebrations.

The Palace was built between 1769 and 1775 by architect K.I. Blank. Each room was decorated in the height of fashion for the time and it appeared that no expense was spared to create this masterpiece. There was a very large greenhouse that was converted to a museum housing beautiful china, small carefully crafted ceramic pieces and many precious collectables. It is called La Grande Orangeries' de Pierre. The grounds were manicured and there were flower beds all around the estate.

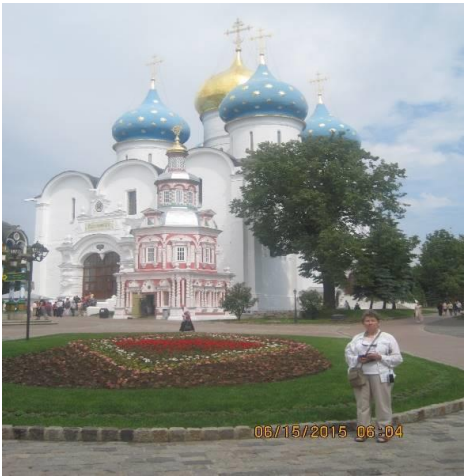
I was fascinated with the grotto which gave you the feeling you were under the sea. It was cool inside with very thick walls. It is decorated with seashells that are part of the walls and ceiling. There are round windows around the dome of the building which have translucent glass that has sea creatures on them, adding to the underwater fantasy.

The houses around the estate represented Italy, Holland and Switzerland. There is a large man-made lake on the estate which provides a pleasant view from the palace. We watched several boats being rowed around for enjoyment. There is an opportunity to take a carriage ride around the property if one desires. We saw two brides in their beautiful gowns posing for their photos. I got a kick out of all the posing for selfies and glamorous poses of several of the young folks. I took many photos and enjoyed the afternoon with Mila, Dimitri and Andrei. We had to stop on the way back to pick up medication for Mila and then went to a local restaurant for an early dinner. Ray and I both chose pizza and beer. I chose a Russian beer and Ray chose a German beer. It had a nice flavor and it was good and cold. We returned to the apartment and relaxed for the rest of the evening.

Day 6, Mon, June 15, Moscow to Sergiev Posad, Barbara North

After a variety of experiences over the weekend, we were once again together as a group as we climbed into our bus for the 60 mile ride to visit the **Trinity Monastery of St. Sergius** (Troitse-Sergieva Lavra) founded in 1340 in Sergiev Posad. It is the most important Russian monastery and the spiritual center of the Russian Orthodox Church. Nikita Bekasov (Никита Бекасов <bekasov1@gmail.com>), who was an Open World delegate to North Carolina in 2007, accompanied us on our trip today and while riding on the bus he shared a story about his grandfather participating in a battle at Sergiev Posad in WW II when the Nazi army was marching to Moscow.





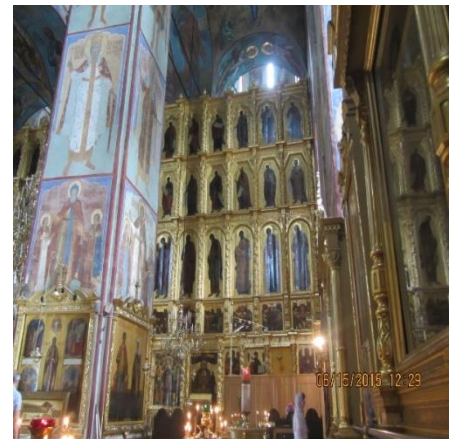
Before entering the monastery we were reminded that church etiquette requires men to remove their hats and women to wear below-knee length skirts or slacks and something to cover their heads before entering the churches. The monastery has a theological college, a chorister school and an icon painting school. Currently it is home to over 300 monks and approximately 1000 young people attend school there. You enter the monastery through the archway of the **Gate Church of St. John the Baptist**, which is decorated with frescoes telling the life of St. Sergius. The dominating structure on site is the massive, blue-domed, and gold-starred **Cathedral of the Assumption** in the center. Its

interior contains frescoes and an 18th century, 5-tiered iconostasis. The magnificent frescoes of this Cathedral were created in 1684 by 35 painters in 100 days. Built in 1559 this 6-pillar structure took 26 years to construct under the commission of Ivan the Terrible. From Cathedral Square, you can also see the **Cathedral of the Holy Trinity**, constructed of white sandstone with blue domes, built in the 15th century over the tomb of St. Sergius; the 17th century Refectory and **Church of St. Sergius**; and the **Chapel-at-the-Well** built in 1644 above a fountain that's said to work



miracles. The colorful tent-like canopy over the cross-shaped fountain, which receives water from the spring, was built in 1872. The greatest icon painters of medieval Russia, Andrei Rublev and Daniil Chyorny, were summoned to decorate the Cathedral of the Holy Trinity with frescoes. A continual service in memoriam to St.

Sergius is held all day, every day, in the Cathedral of the Holy Trinity and we were not allowed to take pictures, but were able to hear some beautiful responsive singing while in the church.



Towering next to the chapel is the five-tier baroque **Bell Tower** which is higher than the Kremlin towers. It houses 26 bells, the largest weighing 70 tons. It takes 4-6 men to ring the bells. In 1993, the monastery was designated a UN World Heritage site. While in one of the churches, the women in our group learned an additional point of church etiquette from one of the monks: it is considered a sign of disrespect for women to cross their legs while seated. Outside the grounds a vendor was selling *kvas*, a nonalcoholic drink made with fermented rye bread, for 20 rubles (about 40 cents.) A member of our group was heard saying, "it cost as much to buy it as it did to get rid of it," referring to the cost of using the public toilets. After the tour of the monastery, we all scattered to eat our bag lunches prepared for us by our hosts. It threatened rain today for the first time during our visit to Russia, but we managed to escape significant rain until the ride home on the bus later in the afternoon.

Lana, our host, greeted Jim and me with umbrellas when we returned. We stopped at the nearest McDonald's for a coffee break before visiting an inner city garden where there was a beautiful peony show. We then visited her husband's (Dima) office to view portfolios of his latest "Smart Home" project and to take an architectural walk of his office's neighborhood.



Day 7, Tues, June 16, Moscow, Martinelli & Edinaldo

After a very good and large breakfast Russian- style, we went to the metro (underground) as it is very close to our host's house. On such a beautiful metro we had to travel quite a lot passing many stations, all very well kept, until we arrived at the Moscow Kremlin, where we met our group. It was a rainy day so we lined up with umbrellas waiting to go through security.

We started our visit looking at the treasury of the Russian Tsars in the **Armory Museum**. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kremlin_Armoury . This museum is very well arranged showing many precious objects.



The carriages are fascinating and prove the luxury of the court of those days. They keep even the cloth used in their houses. The collection of men's and women's clothing used at coronation ceremonies was gorgeous.



It is quite impossible to tell about the silver collection due to the number and quality of the pieces displayed. After looking at all these marvelous things, we visited the churches inside the Kremlin and we admired the beautiful orthodox icons as well as the paintings on the walls.



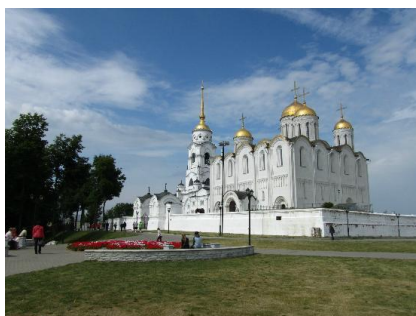
After leaving the Kremlin and Red Square, we stopped for an American coffee at an enormous book store near Lenin's Library. Then we took the metro to catch the boat for our farewell party on a cruise ship on the Moscow River.

Our farewell party was so nicely conducted by our two ED's, Martha Brown and Natalia Guskova. They both were efficient, organized and simpatico. There was a wonderful program featuring a man and his family playing accordion, dancing, engaging our ambassadors in playing bells, dancing and singing. Dinner was delicious. Finally to end the day we did catch the metro back home and went to sleep and dreamed with nice Russian angels.



Day 8, Wed, June 17, Suzdal via Vladimir, Karlyn Shankland

We're up early this morning and our hosts brought us to the **Cosmos Hotel** <http://www.hotelcosmos.ru/eng> to say goodbye while we head off via bus to the tourist mecca, The Golden Ring. The Golden Ring is a modern name given to the ancient towns that form an elliptical circle northeast of Moscow. These are quiet, sleepy towns with remnants of kremlins, with active monasteries and some of the oldest and most beautiful churches in Russia.



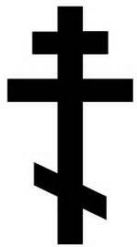
For landscapes we are treated to lovely green meadows choked with Queen Anne's lace. Forested areas appear with cottonwood trees scattering 'snow' all about. Russia has a volatile history—revolution after revolution with ever continuing blood, gore and death. Defense consists of heavily walled fortresses, stone walls and, of course, the **Golden Gate** at the entrance to Vladimir (pronounced vla-dee'-mer).

Prince Vladimir established the first settlement here in 1108 and it became the capital of Russia in 1169. (The capital was moved to Moscow in 1327.)

We visited the **Cathedral of the Assumption** and the little Cathedral of St Demetrius with sculpted white stone walls. According to our guide, Natalia, the onion domes of Russian churches have these color symbols: black-sin, evil, sorrow; green-faith, spiritual; white-light; blue-Madonna; gold-Jesus Christ. We observed traffic still passing under Vladimir's Golden Gate.



During the Soviet years, Vladimir grew into an industrial and cultural center and much of its wonderful old architecture has been preserved.



The **Russian Orthodox Cross** has a horizontal bar near the top and a shorter tilted horizontal bar near the base.

We can recall the American pilot Gary Powers who was caught flying and spying in Russian territory. Powers was imprisoned in **Vladimir Prison** for two years as an American spy. In fact, many POW's were imprisoned in Vladimir during WW II. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1960_U-2_incident

After lunch in Vladimir (ala potatoes) we traveled into Suzdal. We checked into the **Pushkarskaya Sloboda Hotel** <http://www.pushkarka.ru> comprised of 6 buildings, four restaurants, 3 bars, a banya, 2 sauna, AC, cable TV, WiFi and breakfast buffet. We had dinner at the hotel. Well, good night, z-z-z-z-z-z

Day 9, Thurs, June 18, Suzdal, Stan Holsinger

Suzdal was founded in 1024 though there is some debate on the date. The Grand Duke Yaroslav the Wise of Kiev, held court on the banks of the quiet Kamenka River according to tradition. Hence the town was named Suzdal, meaning 'place where a trial is held.' Suzdal's UNESCO-listed monuments have been remarkably preserved over the ages and are an open air museum.

The Pushkarskaya Sloboda Hotel rooms had real showers with curtains – yay! Weather was great, cooler than Moscow, but sunny and no rain.



Buffet breakfast in main dining room – fruit, meat, cheese, eggs two ways, pancakes, yogurt, espresso, porridge. Our local guide for the day was Nadya, which means 'hope'.

We visited the **Museum of Wooden Architecture**. Most of the buildings have been moved from other sites. The first building was 18th century Church of the Transfiguration constructed of notched pine logs with hemp rope as insulation. The church was moved to this site in 1968, caught fire in 1990 and was reconstructed in 2005. Now the church has only 30% of the original logs. The church is notable for its low door openings and typical standing only sanctuary.

Next we visited a middle class peasant house from the 19th century. The belief was the first to enter a new dwelling would be the the first to die. Even today homeowners borrow a cat for this occasion and let him enter the house first.



Nearby was installed a **water wheel well** of the mid-19th century. The large wheel had steps inside which people walked, forcing two large buckets to raise water. The museum has two **18th century windmills**. They were a type which could



be rotated to catch the wind with the wings moving a small tent-roof and the windmill blades.

Suzdal is on the Kamenka River about 200km from Moscow. Reconstruction was started in 16th century by Catherine the Great. Suzdal has an annual cucumber festival on July 16; there are 33 churches, 6 monasteries, 800,000 annual tourists, 11,000 population and 10 museums.

Next we toured **Saint Euphynius museum/monastery/fortress** – a walled complex of about 10 buildings. Founded in



year 1352, the fortress was first constructed of wood during the 16th C, then in stone in the 17th C. On entry, there is a five-domed **Cathedral of the Transfiguration of the Savior** with four emerald green domes and one gold dome. Inside the 17/18th century church, the icons are stylistic and intended to signify virtues. The west wall tells the story of Jesus with pictures of interior objects. The floor mosaics are original.

Outside, we were serenaded by bell ringing from the tall rectangular brick- colored bell tower. The bell ringer could be seen as he rang the twelve bells. Back inside we were presented a concert by a **choir of five monks**. The singing was done with surprising volume, resonance and



voice range – very neat and quite moving! Regarding the onion domes, our guide indicated that – gold represents Jesus, blue – Virgin Mary, green – Holy Spirit or trinity and black – sadness. Also the number of domes is significance, 1 – Jesus, 3 – Trinity, 4/5 – Evangelists.



Before lunch, we stood on a hill overlooking the Kamenka River and a huge white-washed convent complex inside a kremlin wall. Lunch at a local restaurant was inspired by a 300-year old menu: salmon/peas/egg/potato salad, beet and potato. Ralph tried the local mead in a clay pot. Next: baked potato and chicken stew with white and black bread – no butter; followed by dessert of pancakes (blini) with cranberry jam and hot tea (chai) or coffee.

After lunch we visited the **Spaso-Evfimiev Monastery and the Suzdal Kremlin**. In the entry of the **Cathedral of the Nativity of the Virgin** we saw 13th century gates made of copperplate treated with mercury dye then scraped, carved and worked to show church festivals. Inside the original icons and chandeliers were in place. 40 million rubles were spent for restoration and a heating system as a gift from when Putin visited. The floor was covered with iron tiles. The exterior featured five blue domes with gold stars.

In the Archbishops Palace we were asked - why so many steps? Answer: The road to God is never easy. There we saw a surprising accurate 18th century map of the world. Two very ornate blue and white ceramic furnaces were in evidence; plus three portraits of Peter the Great. We were given a quick Russian history lesson particularly in regards to the first Russian Emperor and the Romanovs. Outside the kremlin, fancy horse carriages were lined up and available for those wanting to ride.



Due to a couple of bone-headed decisions, I got separated from the main group and went back to the hotel with Jane and Ralph and unfortunately missed the end of the tour.



We had dinner at a monastery which included kvass with thyme to drink, lettuce, tomato, red pepper and onion salad, fish soup, cheese and potatoes served in a small crock and the entree was a large crock with a flaky, pastry topping and potato, mushroom, lamb, carrots (and a bay leaf) in a cream sauce. For dessert there were thick pancakes with coffee or chai.

Suzdal was where we first saw the ornate and elaborate wooden window framing that adorned many of the modest wood row houses in the Golden Ring towns. The houses were frequently painted in contrasting colors, such as a green house with white

windows, which was very decorative.



Day 10, Fri, June 19, Ivanovo, Tomoko Thornburg

8:29 sharp we left the Pushkarskaya Sloboda Hotel complex under perfect weather, 16C temperature and 50% humidity. Everyone appeared to be refreshed and content. 10:20 we arrived in Ivanovo, an industrial city 80 miles north of Suzdal, 158 miles northeast of Moscow.

Our local guide, Irina, hopped on our bus to show us major monuments such as the central square where the first



Russian revolution occurred in 1905; as the workers' living conditions were appalling, the strikes were frequent. We then visited the "Ship House" and the "Bullet House." After the driving tour we went into the **Museum of Industry and the Arts** which houses the collection of a textile entrepreneur, Dmitri Burylin.

A letter from Tolstoy's wife concerning her husband's health indicated how close a friend Burylin was to Tolstoy.

We then visited the **Museum of Ivanovo Chintz**, which was the house built originally for Dmitri Burylin and his family. This museum presented cotton fabrics created through the years including the machines and the manufacturing



13:10 Lunch was at a local restaurant: a colorful salad, salmon soup, plain grilled chicken breast with mashed potatoes, completed with a piece of tiny cream cake.

14:30 on the road again to Rostov

17:00 Arrived in Rostov, one of the oldest cities in Russia founded in 862 on 5000 year old Lake Nero. First we visited the kremlin which is one of the greatest contributions to Russian culture, according to MIR.

In the kremlin there were five churches built between 1590's and 1770's. The colors on most of the onion shaped domes have meanings such as; gold: royalty, white: purity/spirituality/dignity, blue: Virgin Mary, green: Holy Spirit and red: Beauty. The silver does not symbolize any special meaning. On the gate tower, the bells were ringing. The young (everyone is younger to us now) bell ringer came down and talked to us. He said he went to a bell ringing school for two months. We also visited Finift **Museum of Enamel**, displaying examples from Rostov's 250 years of enamel art.



As we were leaving, some ambassadors found a moment for purchasing souvenirs at a nearby shopping area.

Natasha warned us not to expect the good accommodation as we had at the prior hotel in Suzdal, but it had its own charm; i.e., the water from the faucet ran brownish. The dinner at a local hotel's dining room came with entertainment: music, historical costume modeling and dance with audience participation.



Some gentlemen enjoyed posing for two shots with the young and pretty lady model. The menu consisted of salad, fish soup, rehydrated cod covered by lacy egg with well-done cauliflower and broccoli—all ending with a donut. Again it was an eventful day.



Day 11, Sat, June 20, Pereslavl-Zalessky, Mary Giddings

Our day started at 9 am learning how to say “I love you” (yellow blue vas) and sang the good morning song. We drove for one hour to Pereslavl-Zalessky, founded in 1152. Pereslavl-Zalessky is called a town of churches. It is 60 hectares with 2 convents, 2 monasteries, 8 churches and 45,000 people.

Peter the Great as a child was very curious. He found a boat in his grandfather's shed and went on his first boat ride in Moscow. At the young age of 10 he was a Czar, but had to rule jointly with his brother, Ivan. We



saw a boat that Peter the Great had built. Approximately 100 boats—called ships, were built here. The boats took a long time to build. In 1692 a flotilla set out to combine land and navy forces which were very important. Problem was there was no way to get to the sea from Pereslavl-Zalessky. The nearest big lake is in Pereslavl-Zalessky, but it is connected by small rivers that are not big enough for the boats to go to the White Sea in northern Russia. So the boats that were built in Pereslavl-Zalessky were left there. A decree was made to save the boats, but they had deteriorated. The mayor put a boat in storage and it burned—only one boat that survived was left on the hill we observed and the building was built around it in 1803 with money from the community. The boat was 7 meters long and 3 meters wide with five oars on each side.



The Church of Transfiguration took five years to build with limestone from Moscow which had to come by boat. A monument to Aleksandr Nevskiy, a respected Russian saint and soldier who was born in this town, stands in front of the church. We had time to shop and buy from outdoor vendors.

At 12:45 we had lunch at the **Panorama Restaurant in the Victoria Plaza Hotel**. At 2:30 we were off to Moscow. At 5:00 we had dinner at **Jon Joli restaurant** [Jon Joli Pektobah](#) a Ukrainian restaurant where we had delicious Georgian pizza. At 7:50 we took the high speed train to St. Petersburg arriving at 11:45 p.m.



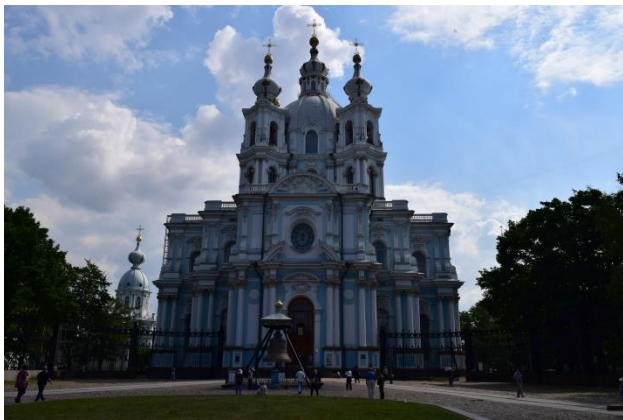
Day 12, Sun, June 21, St Petersburg, Sandy White

Arrival in St. Petersburg—It started at midnight, when we unloaded our bags from the **Sapsan** (high-speed train) and walked AT LEAST a mile to get out of the station and to our bus with Tamara, our new guide. A short bus ride brought us to the Cronwell Hotel, where we all checked in and crashed.



Morning touring—Later that morning, after we had all slept in and/or breakfasted at the “favourite” restaurant in our hotel, we boarded the first of several tour buses we would take this day. To establish continuity with our MIR guide from Moscow, Tamara led us in a brief round of the “poka poka” song. As we rode, she gave us an overview of the history of St. Petersburg:

- Founded by Tsar Peter I (“the Great”) in 1703
- Built as a seaport (because Russia was previously landlocked)
- No building higher than the Hermitage
- Served as the capital of Russia from 1712-1918
- Renamed Petrograd in 1914, then Leningrad in 1924
- 1991 the name reverted back to St. Petersburg
- Now 5.5 million people (second largest Russian city after Moscow)

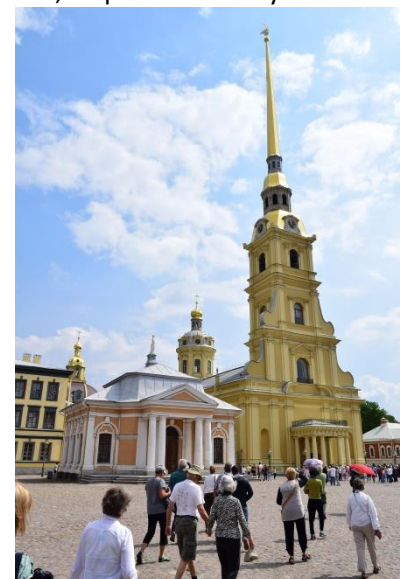


We stopped for a few minutes at the **Smolny Convent and the Church of the Resurrection**. The name comes from the word for tar, reflecting the first use of this site to store tar for the shipbuilders. Tsarina Elizabeth commissioned the convent and church, designed by the architect Rastrelli, who also designed the Winter Palace. She intended to use the convent in her old age, but she died before it was completed. Her successor, Catherine II (“the Great”) did not want a convent, so used it as a school for girls. Smolny briefly served as the headquarters of the Soviets from 1917-1918, when they moved to Moscow.

Back on the bus, we learned more history: there were two major Russian royal families: the Ruriks (in power from the 9th century until 1598) and the Romanovs (1613-1918). Russia underwent multiple revolutions: one in 1905, and two in 1917. The February 1917 revolution led to the formation of a provisional government. The October 1917 revolution brought the Bolsheviks, led by Lenin, to power. In July 1918 the Tsar Nicholas II and his family were murdered by the local Soviets in Ekaterinburg because the family was going to leave the city.

We drove past the Finland railway station, where Lenin returned from exile in 1917 to consolidate power. Then we stopped at the Rostral Columns on Vasilyevsky Island on our way to the **Peter-Paul Fortress and Cathedral**, located on Zayachy (Hare) Island. Here Tamara handed out earpieces and receivers so we could hear her as we walked through the grounds.

While we were waiting to enter the cathedral, a couple of shocking events took place: we heard a loud cannon shot (planned), and Ralph had his wallet stolen (unplanned). While Martha, Ralph and Jane headed off to deal with the missing wallet issue, the rest of us entered the Peter-Paul Cathedral, which is very different in appearance from the ancient churches we had been visiting in the Golden Ring cities. The art is much more European than Byzantine—Peter the Great wanted it to be more like Dutch buildings, and the canopy is similar to that of St. Peter’s in Rome.



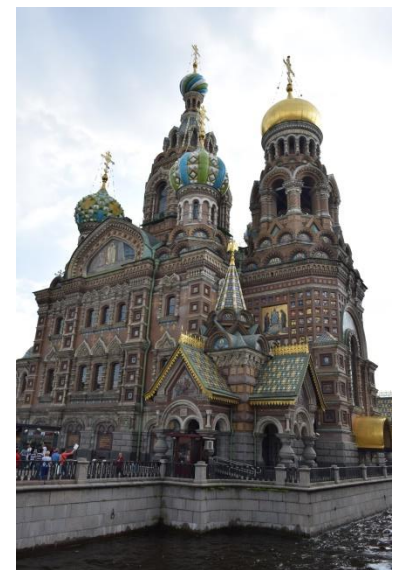
Nearly all the Romanov tsars are buried in the cathedral: Peter the Great, Catherine I and Catherine the Great, Elizabeth, all three Alexanders, Paul, Peter III, Anne, and both Nicholases-- the remains of Nicholas II and his family were re-interred here in 1998. Only the graves of the tsars and tsarinas bear the double-headed eagle, but other royals are also buried here and in a chapel that was built to hold the overflow. As we left the Fortress, we heard the carillon, which plays every 15 minutes, and we saw some of the sunbathers who frequent the beach outside the fortress.

Lunch at “Na Zdorovye” Restaurant--This quaint restaurant served one of our most unusual meals. It started with jellied meats, then fish soup, black bread, and meat and rice in a bread dish that was as tough as marble(so was the meat). (Be sure to check out Tomoko’s video of this last dish.) The dessert—jellied berries with cream—redeemed the meal, at least in part. Several people bought craft items sold by the restaurant.



Back on the bus--as we left, we passed the Field of Mars and the Summer Gardens. Our next stop was the **Church of our Savior on the Spilled Blood**, so named because it was built on the spot where Tsar Alexander II was assassinated in 1881. The tsar, who survived several attempts on his life, was finally killed when he got out of his carriage to investigate a bomb that went off. An assassin threw another bomb and he was killed. The church’s very colorful exterior is reminiscent of St. Basil’s in Moscow, and the interior features many mosaics that look like paintings from a distance. Also impressive are the “Holy Gates” featuring intricate enamels; these had to be recreated from old black-and-white photographs.

The church has withstood many challenges. Before World War II the authorities were planning to tear the church down. During the siege of Leningrad, it was used as a morgue; it was also struck by an artillery shell. After the war, a local theatre company stored their props in the church. Finally, it underwent nearly 30 years of renovations, finally reopening in 1997. The church is only used for special occasions now.

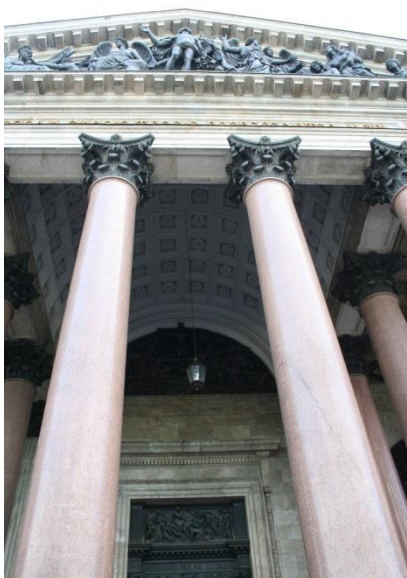


Next we drove along **Nevsky Prospect**—the main street of St. Petersburg, where we passed the palace of the Stroganov family (who made their fortune in furs). Tamara had warned us that there are 400 palaces in the city, said we would be “palaced out” if we tried to see them all.

We also passed the Admiralty—**Naval Academy** (formerly a shipyard); **the Astoria Hotel**, where Hitler planned to hold his victory dinner; and a statue of Nicholas I. Then we arrived at one of the city’s most famous landmarks.

St. Isaac’s Cathedral—Part I

St. Isaac’s is the largest cathedral in Russia. It was built between 1818 and 1858, and dedicated to the patron saint of Peter the Great. The church was built and rebuilt several times, as earlier versions burned. The construction posed many engineering challenges, which were solved by using 25,000 pine pilings for the foundation. A model shows how the many columns (each weighing 110 tons) were rolled up a ramp with ropes; it took two years to install them all.



The floor is made of several types of marble, and the columns are made of malachite and lapis lazuli. There are 70 mosaics and extensive gilding. The gilding was done by the open fire method (involving gold and mercury)—60 men died in the process. In 1922 the Soviets converted the cathedral to a museum of art; it is now used both as a museum and a church.

A break, then a feast--We drove back along Nevsky Prospect to our hotel. On the way we passed the **Kazan Cathedral and Gostiny Dvor** (large historic shopping center).

After a brief break, we walked to the **Yusupov Palace** for an enormous feast: hors d'oeuvres, juice, cold meat, borsch, bread, mashed potatoes, suckling pig, pastries, and tea or coffee. (Note: this was only one of Yusupov's palaces—a different palace on the Moika Canal was the site of the murder of Rasputin.) Ilya, a friend of several in the group who visited North Carolina with an Open World delegation, met Martha, Ralph, and others at the restaurant.



Another break--On our way back to the hotel for another break, Silvana (our resident physician) accompanied Lundee and Danny to a drugstore in search of some medication. Sandy came along to help with language issues. Much hilarity ensued, but we finally made our purchases. Everyone got a little bit of rest before we left on the last leg of our adventure for the day.

St. Isaac's—Part II--At 11:30 p.m. we boarded the bus to go back to **St. Isaac's Cathedral**, this time to climb the

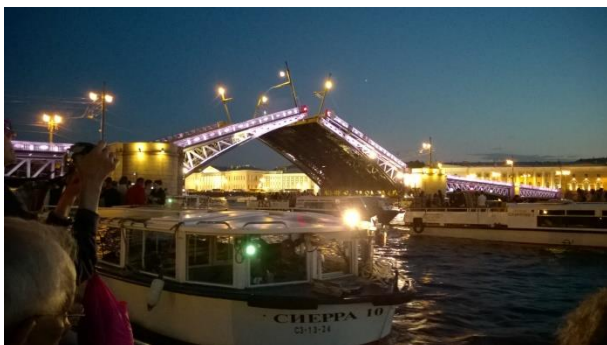


colonnade. 19 brave souls from our group made this trek, up the 200 steps (inside and outside of the cathedral) and down the other staircase. They reported an amazing view of the city. Those who waited on the bus valiantly attempted to stay awake, pending our trip to the boat.



The grand finale!--On the bus, we drove past the Maryinsky Theatre (where the Kirov Ballet is based), and also the more famous Yusupov palace (the one where Rasputin was killed). Then we drove to the embankment of the Neva River, where we boarded a boat for our **White Nights cruise**. Seating was inside or out, and the cool air made many people accept the offer of blankets.

Along the embankments were most of the citizens of St. Petersburg. Those that were not standing alongside the river



were with us, on boats plying the waterways to celebrate the White Nights, which last from May to July. Many students held graduation parties on board party boats that passed us, music blaring.



Neva is a Finnish word meaning “big water”; the river extends from Scandinavia to the Caspian Sea. It is navigable from April through November, and then it freezes. St. Petersburg, often called either the Venice of the North or the Amsterdam of the North, has 41 islands; 67 rivers and canals; and 300 bridges.

There are four main drawbridges that went up on our journey along the river. The first bridge rose at 1:30 a.m.; then there were fireworks and more bridges going up to allow barge traffic to pass. It was magical and beautiful, as we passed palaces and grand gardens, but we were getting sleepy. We made it back to the Cronwell by 3 a.m. **And thus ended the longest day of the year!**

Day 13, Mon, June 22, St Petersburg, Ray Kiszely

I feel like I’m experiencing jetlag and sleep deprivation after only a few hours’ sleep following last night’s Neva River Cruise. It’s about 8:30 am and when I enter the breakfast room of our hotel, only Mary and Fred Giddings are there. Both look as sleepy as I feel. I got some coffee and sit down to begin our day’s Journal.

Soon Danny Crump arrives followed by Tomoko. Our FF group is coming to life although the conversations are in low tones. We all seem to have enjoyed last night’s experience.

My breakfast is light - a fried egg, some steamed veggies and ‘vitamin salad’ that is actually cabbage salad. I’m feeling stronger already. Adding genuine Tabasco sauce to my egg tasted like “back home;” hotter than *Texas Pete*, but really good. When FF of Central NC travels we should be prepared to give *Texas Pete* to our Hosts.

I had breakfast with Martinelli and Edinaldo and learned that starting today in Brazil it is St. John’s Feast Day. Shops close and, I assume after church services, the party begins. The most popular adult beverage in Brazil is ‘Chacaca,’ often mixed with fruit juice from the Jenipapo. An indigenous Brazilian tree with fruit that is quite sweet. The benefit of traveling with FF Members from another culture is wonderful!

The breakfast room is now filled with FF Ambassadors chatting about everything under the sun, which hardly sets at this time of the year in St. Petersburg.

We have a bit of time to relax now, Tamara Dubko, our MIR tour guide, will meet us in about two hours, a chance to catch up on my journal. It is now about 11:00 a.m. and the Tea Room in the hotel has opened. It is a nice room with flowers on the tables with gold colored covers, and white porcelain service. It makes you feel most welcome. There is a large TV playing in the Tea Room, the sound is turned down, but the EuroNews channel is featuring a story on a battle reenactment of Waterloo. I wonder if the date of this famous battle is recalled on this day?

Our tour is late getting started so Martha has an info briefing on events occurring today and tomorrow. She also reminds us about our personal and group safety. We are on the bus at 1:10 and on our way to lunch. Partly cloudy, pleasant temperatures, about 72 degrees, shirt sleeve weather. Lots of chatter on the bus, the mood is light.

As we drive, Tamara reminds us that many of the churches we see were used as warehouses during the soviet time. Apartments owned by the government were rented to tenants. In the 1990’s during the change to a market economy-apartment privatization took place. If you had lived in your apartment for ten years you would now own your apartment, free of charge, just pay the tax. An interesting concept that needs more information to fully understand what happened 25 years ago.

The fuzz from the many cotton wood trees blows in the breeze, sort of like summer snow. Some places have little piles of cotton fuzz that look like snowdrifts. Chestnut trees are also very prolific in small parks. Are they the edible kind? We also see a large new apartment complex under construction with at least 6 high cranes poking out of the horizon.



We saw a beautiful **1939 building**, designed by an architect named Trotsky; it is a limestone city hall with a hammer and sickle of the Soviet Era still carved in the façade. Many carvings on the top of the building depict many different types of



workers of the revolution. Tamara tells us that because of its height, the rooftop was used during WWII as an observation point for Nazi planes in 1941. She says we will cross what had been the front lines in a few kilometers. A moment later we come to a very large monument in the center of a giant traffic circle. A tall obelisk and bronze statues artfully arranged to depict fighting soldiers, a commemoration of the siege of Leningrad during the Second World War.

Tamara continues to tell more history. Finland was an ally of Nazi Germany during the war and German troops came through the Russian/Finland border during the winter months of 1941 surrounding Leningrad. The soldiers and citizens of Leningrad

had no food, no fuel, and many people froze to death. One million people died from starvation and bombing during this 900-day siege. An estimated eight hundred thousand were evacuated to other parts of Russia. The siege was lifted on the 24th of January 1944.

At a little after 2:00 p.m. we pass through Tsarskoe village. This is a nice, neat and clean small city of well-kept houses and lots of tour busses, too. **The Palace of Catherine the Great** is our destination following our lunch. We observe that there is a major road repair project, new granite curbstones being installed for several kilometers on this tree lined street. Tamara comments that there are only two seasons in this region: winter and road repair. Sounds like the same seasonal calendar we learned about on our visit to Fairbanks, Alaska a few years ago.

We've arrived at **Podvorye Ресторан**

(<http://www.podvorye.ru/index.php?lang=eng.>)



Many rustic looking buildings made from wood and mostly unpainted. The restaurant is nicely decorated and the staff is ready for us. Places have been set with salad plates and several choices for us. We were served sliced cold pork, fresh cabbage kraut, tomatoes, pickles, and a nice combination to start

our lunch. Russian red wine and chilled white wine bottles are open and ready to serve, as well as icy cold bottles of Russian vodka.



Vodka consumption manages to relax our inhibitions and when the musicians come to our table to play for us we are all clapping along with the beat of the music.

Lunch is served: mushroom soup, borsch with sour cream, cabbage rolls with carrots. There was a nice dessert of thin rolled pancakes (blini) with lingonberries and sour cream. Did I mention the sour cream? At every meal it seems.

Everyone is in good spirits, it's about 4:30 pm and we are back on the bus and headed to **Catherine the Great's summer palace**. In ten minutes we are at the gates of the palace grounds. Tamara walks at a very brisk pace ahead of us to get

our entry tickets. The palace comes into our view and it is spectacular. Beautiful blue and cream colors highlighted with a dull gold. Photos are required for a complete sense of the stunning architecture of this building.

<http://www.saint-petersburg.com/pushkin/catherine-palace.asp> . Before our tour inside can continue we need to put little plastic booties over our shoes to protect the wood parquet floors. The rooms are decorated in period correct furniture, though not necessarily items belonging to Catherine. Blue is clearly her favorite color, highlighted by lapis lazuli topped tables and a matching fireplace mantel and fire screen. The floor itself is a work of art with inlaid wood of various colors and mother of pearl. The original chandelier is exquisite; nothing but the best for Catherine. Oh, and 55 rooms, too; lots of space for parties and guests to stay for a while.



The next room has magnificent ceiling paintings and an original carpet with the design of eagles and military theme flags and cannons. Room after room of fluted columns with golden lions and double headed eagles - the symbol of the powerful Russian Empire. Blue porcelain heater boxes are in every room; they are floor to ceiling and beautiful. Gold leaf is on every available, artful surface. Most fireplaces are covered in marble. Many mythical creatures are side by side with lions and eagles in every art form.



The ballroom has candelabra with 696 candles and restored to near original condition. The ceiling is decorated with paintings depicting symbols of navigation and glorifying the gods of war. Fine arts and sciences appear to be vaulted as you stare at the ceiling and walk. You get the feeling that the ceiling is going up.

I took many notes on each and every room that we toured. The glamour and elegance is undeniable. World-class collections of oil paintings of many members of royalty, some painted by the best artists of the period. Military uniforms and gowns displayed in glass cases are in near perfect condition. I won't describe the rest to you, it would be redundant.

Did I mention overbearing in its gold and opulence? How have we managed, as a world of human beings to gather so many riches among so few?

Finally we get to the bootie removal room and into the gift shop. Tamara announces that we have 10 minutes for shopping. I'm sitting while finishing up my notes on this experience and watching my Asian touring friends remove their booties and enter souvenir heaven.

Back on the bus it is 6:30 pm. and we are on the way to our **Russian cooking class**. We arrive at the **Café Claret**, <http://claretcafe.ru/en> in about half an hour. The classroom is ready for us. Everyone sits down and the chefs introduce themselves to us. Both are graduates of St. Petersburg Culinary Institute. They tell us that the foods we will prepare are those that we will eat for dinner as well. The front of the room has four tables together to form a banquet size area for food preparation. There are bowls filled with ingredients and hot skillets on the far end of the table.

The chefs are wearing white jackets and have put on latex gloves for their work. Everything is ready so here we go. The head chef says she will share the secret of Russian cuisine. Start with mimosa salad for special celebrations. Eggs, carrots, salmon and cheese with mayonnaise. Lundee Amos is the first to assist our chef with the preparation of the salad. She does a great job and gets a round of applause for her efforts.



The appetizer is next, and can be served at any meal. Pancakes made with potatoes. Although the potato is native to South America it is interesting to note that the average Russian consumes ½ kilo every day. (I had already noticed that with all the food I’ve consumed since arriving in Russia).

The batter is made with shredded cooked potatoes, mixed with sour cream and egg yolks, a little cooked chopped onion and seasoning. Poured on hot oil coated pan and they are ready in about two minutes. Silvana becomes our next student/chef. She dons her latex gloves, as you would expect an experienced physician to do. Silvana has a very serious look on her face as she follows the directions carefully and after a few minutes we are sampling her handiwork. They taste great! Thank you, Silvana.

Next course “golub”, a cabbage roll filled with pigeon meat. The filling could be any meat available or other vegetable, then wrapped with a cabbage leaf. Ours this evening will be ground turkey. The leaves we are using are Chinese cabbage, because the leaves are long and slender. The cabbage is parboiled and the pre-cooked turkey and half-cooked rice make for a tasty filling. Fred Giddings becomes our next amateur chef packing each leaf with a spoonful of the mixed ingredient. A simple task but Fred takes it seriously and does a good job. Tomoko also gives it a try and looks like she really belongs in the role of chef. Full disclosure compels me to say that Tomoko gives Japanese cooking classes back in North Carolina. Both Fred and Tomoko receive a round of applause.

The final course, our dessert will be blini, Russian pancakes. The chef demonstrates the mixing of ingredients: milk, wheat flour, sugar, salt, whole eggs. Beaten and poured in a hot pan with sunflower oil. Linda White is our assistant chef and is busy working on her pancake flipping skills; Terri Holsinger joins her at the table. Both assistants have a serious look on their faces. Danny Crump also gives it a try and looks like an expert, though he claims to be a neophyte.



Following the cooking demonstration and active participation by our Friendship Force colleagues we go next door to the restaurant for a meal that includes all the items our assistant chefs prepared during our classes.

The meal was enjoyed by all and was a very nice end to a very full day of touring and immersion in Russian culture.

Day 14, Tue, June 23, St Petersburg, Fred Giddings

We will spend the day with the theme of Russian literature and start with a lecture given by a lady from the **Russian Academy of Literature**. This is a good day to discuss Dostoevsky because it is rather overcast with rainy weather. He had a mysterious Russian soul. Many people say, "Why did the character in *Crime and Punishment* commit murder?" They say, "Because he is Russian." Some think that Dostoevsky was crazy. He had an emotional illness thought to be epilepsy. The first to bring Russian literature to the world was Pushkin. Tolstoy was after Dostoevsky. Dostoevsky stayed more in the city of St. Petersburg than others. He came to St. Petersburg at 20 and entered a military engineering school. He did not want to be in the military. His first novel was a long short story of poor people in St. Petersburg. He lived in the poor area of Moscow and had financial problems. His second novel, *The Double*, was not successful. He and some other men were arrested for plotting against the government. They were sentenced to death, but the sentence was commuted by the Czar. They were sent to a prison in Siberia. After five years in Siberia he went to Moscow, got married and his first wife died of tuberculosis. His novel *Crime and Punishment* was written about a market near his apartment. *Crime and Punishment* is a detective story. He needed money, so continued selling books. After Siberia, he could not find a job. He lived with a new wife in an apartment and it was a happy love story. His novel *Brothers Karamazov*, was about the problem of neglecting God; it was a new idea of the time. His last wife and he had four children, two daughters and two sons. He had a problem with gambling and lost his money.



Dostoevsky is considered the first Russian philosopher. While in Siberia he was only able to read the Bible, which led him to believe the destiny of man comes only from God, not man. After the lecture we walked to the **Dostoevsky apartment and museum**. <http://www.saint-petersburg.com/museums/dostoevsky-memorial-museum/> We had a tour of the museum and in the apartment we saw his original hat and writing on a box from his daughter.



We had lunch at the **Idiot Café** <http://idiot-spb.com/eng/> . It consisted of bread and butter, salad of carrots, cheese and nuts, soup with vegetables and dark beef broth. Main course was potato gratin of cheese and fish which most people enjoyed. Dessert was baked apple slices with tea and coffee.

After lunch the guide wanted to show us the two faces of St. Petersburg. She showed us **the inside courtyard** to the place where poor people lived in Dostoevsky times. She told us the story of the killing of the old lady in the *Crime and Punishment* book of Dostoevsky.



We went back to the hotel by 5 pm to be read to and walk to dinner by 6:00. We went to dinner at the **Cat Café** <http://www.cafe-cat.ru/# => . We had chicken with walnut sauce, beef kabobs, salmon, ground beef roll ups, cheese pizza bread, walnut cookies, tea and coffee. Everyone loved the food. Lundeey gave out red noses.



We headed back to the hotel to get ready for the evening activities. Tonight three people went to the ballet, three people stayed at the hotel and 19 people went to the Folk Music show. The Folk Music show was a lot of singing and dancing, very physical Russian kick dancing and many costume changes. It was beautiful and entertaining.

We returned to the hotel about 11 pm where Joyce and Sandy had organized a booze and birthday cake party. After a toast with cake, people left and the day was done in the land of the white nights.

Some observations of the day: people mentioned too much food and how tired they were. If you did not get to the bathroom at the Idiot Cafe you missed a very unique experience.

I will now go to bed with my black jockey shorts across my eyes as a night blindfold. Sleep tight.

Day 15, Wed, June 24, St Petersburg, Danny Crump & Lundee Amos

Our next to last breakfast began with the discovery that hot chocolate has been available every day at the Cronwell Hotel <http://stremyannaya.cronwell.com/en/>. Yummy! Every day Karlyn has taken coffee from the dining room to her room. Well! As she was waiting for the elevator, a waitress found her and said 'no, no'. We sang 'Old Black Magic' for Russians and they smiled.

Headed now to **Peterhof, Peter the Great's Summer Palace** <http://www.saint-petersburg.com/virtual-tour/summer-palace/>. We boarded a hydrofoil (by walking through 3 other boats first) at 9:30am for 45 min ride. We got to the boat early so most of our group got seats in the front section. On the ride over many sites were pointed out including the new soccer stadium and a new dam across the narrow point of the Gulf of Finland. This dam has helped remove the danger of flooding in St Petersburg. The city is made up of 41 islands, over 300 bridges; barges wait here in afternoon until bridges go up. Water is polluted; 3 hrs to Finland border; cruise ships are in port daily with 2500-3000 passengers; you don't have to purchase visa if you arrive by cruise ship; Gulf of Finland is part of Baltic Sea; In 1700 brought 100,000 trees-most died; in 50 years more trees added with fresh water from shallow canals.



We had a magnificent view of the palace as we walked from the boat. We arrived before the fountains were turned on at 11:00. One man turns 2 valves to start all the 200 fountains with no pumps- just gravity fed. There were thousands of people on staircases and walks to watch the start. Tamara pointed out various fountains. One in particular was a golden woman pulling water into a pond. She was the Greek daughter of a god being punished for killing her rapist husband. She has to haul water for an eternity. We continued through the gardens. We went around "**Monplaisir**", (<http://www.saint-petersburg.com/peterhof/monplaisir.asp>) Peter the Great's small, summer palace. We were able to look through windows at original 17th C paintings. We had a foggy distant view of St Petersburg.

We walked past the Adam statue; the Eve was on the opposite side. The statues were buried during WW II by Russian Museum officials and recovered post-WW II.

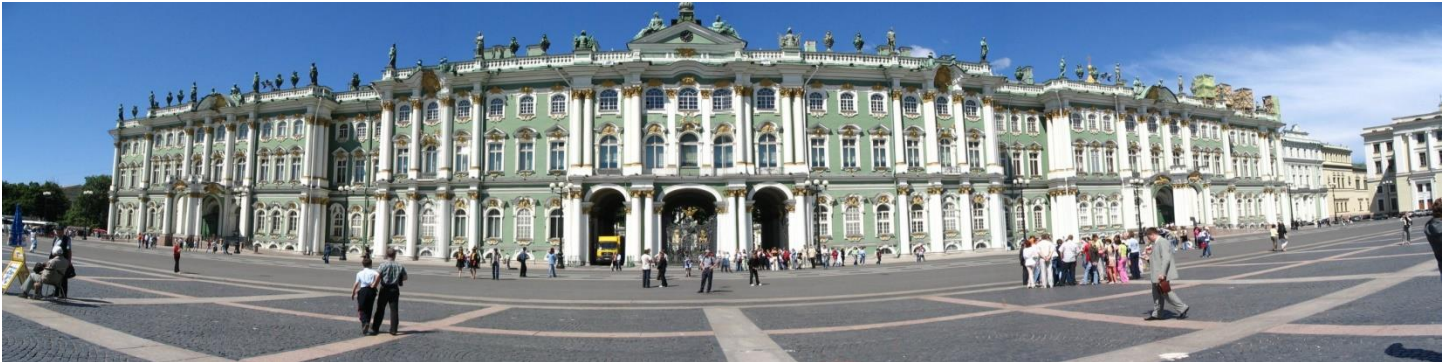
Lunch was soup and fish with rice and was served in the **historic greenhouse**. We walked uphill for a beautiful, high view of the greenhouse. Catherine came to Russia when she was 14-years old from Prussia with her mother who was a spy for Prussia and England. Mother was caught spying and left Russia. Catherine was left on her own at 15-years old. She had a baby 7 years later and mother-in-law Elizabeth took care of baby until she died. It was questionable who fathered her child. Catherine's noblemen killed her husband, Peter III, after a card game and drinking. She gave that noble a castle after he confessed. Catherine's nobles were loyal. Catherine had many children and many lovers. She died at 68 years old.



We walked around the upper backyard gardens. Gilded fountains are synchronized to music for 12 minutes. Adults and children enjoyed the challenge of the water spurts. It was raining and umbrellas were available for sale for \$43 and ponchos for \$2. Tamara said, 'no matter the weather, the summer palace is crowded.' We paused for a group photo by Tamara. She also styled and profiled for our photos. New Year is a very big celebration with fireworks and champagne.

Russian Christmas by old Roman calendar, orthodox Christmas is January 7, 23 February is Soviet Army Day (like Veterans Day), March 8th is Women's Day (women get gift and flowers), May 9 is Victory Day for WWII Independence Day

We took bus back to St Petersburg to **The State Hermitage Museum**. It was founded in 1764 by Catherine the Great for



her personal art collection. (<http://www.hermitagemuseum.org/wps/portal/hermitage/?lng=en> photo by Cathy Locke) It burned in 1857, rebuilt in one year. Main staircase of iron replaced with marble. Peter III first occupied. There were 222 candles in the candelabra. Jasper is mined in Siberia and there are 200 different colors. 1812 Room walls all lined with portraits of generals or military men. Gold gilded church where Nicholas II was married. Tamara led us through a 2-hour tour with our receivers and headsets. Highlights were paintings by Raphael, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo and Rembrandt. Nicholas II married in this church on birthday of his mother while still mourning his father's death. Napoleon came to Russia in 1812. State emblem of Russia is doubled-headed eagle on ceiling, never on floor so you can't stand on emblem. Three million items and if you took one minute to look at each item, it would take 12 years to see it all. Saw room where Czar Nicholas and family were arrested. Group split; some rode city bus back to hotel and others walked and shopped.

Day 16, Thurs, June 25-26, St Petersburg to Munich, Jane Cauthen

It is our last day and we are standing, with luggage, at the entrance of Cronwell Inn, St. Petersburg, waiting for our ride to the airport and departure to overnight in Munich. Some of our group, including Connie, Edinaldo, Joyce, Linda, Martinelli and Phyllis left earlier that morning to go in different directions and we were missing them.

There was clear evidence in Martha's face that this was the beginning of the end for this excursion. Indicators included a glowing smile and relieved expression during coffee that morning that was continuing during the wait. Was she pleased to be returning home? Whatever the reasons, she certainly deserved the relief from the great and successful job she had done with the preparation, management, support, and care of this Friendship Club group. From all reports, it had been a meaningful experience for all.

While waiting for the bus, Barbara N. was hit from behind by a door suddenly opening. A severe cut on her ankle began bleeding. Martha was informed and her relaxed smile and relieved expression disappeared. She sprang into action and organized excellent care from our doctor and nurse, Silvana and Doris. Then Barbara continued with her usual courageous attitude. Ray offered a positive response: "Good that it did not happen earlier."

Responses regarding this exchange and tour that were received during a break at the Munich Airport on Friday included: it has been a true and fun experience of Friendship Force; meeting families and making friends in Russia has dispelled some American myths; they are very much like us as warm and friendly human beings, and are no different from any other cultures; some support their government and some are opposed; it was a real revelation that the propaganda about Russia proved to be false; they were most gracious and did so much for us that we felt like part of their family;

going to their country homes (dachas) during the free days served as a place to get away from the hustle and bustle of the city, though traveling in the city was very interesting; the good food that offered so much variety and the music would be missed. Fred who also said that he liked getting to know the North Carolina people, Karlyn and Sandy contributed to these responses.

One might think that there wouldn't be much to write about during our last hours together. There were the usual hugs, farewells, and best wishes as we were all going our separate ways. However, we had a "blast" on our trek from Charlotte to Greensboro. Sounds like fun? No! A tire blew out on our bus. We needed to wait for a replacement. Danny did well with keeping us entertained with one of his stories.



Many thanks for a great tour go to our MIR guides, Natalia (below) and Tamara (bottom ride), as well as our bus driver throughout the Golden Ring, Valerii (Karla's dance partner.)



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