

# The Baltic's and Russia

## Rasmussen Travels

June 15<sup>th</sup> - 30<sup>th</sup>, 2005



### Wednesday - June 15, 2005 - Helsinki, Finland

We left a day early so as to get rested before the tour started. We were to leave Des Moines @ 1:30 PM – but for a reason unknown to us, we left late. We made up the time however and arrived in Chicago early. Doug had looked at the tickets wrong and had us going to Gate G .... When we got there and nothing seemed to match up, he looked at the tickets again and found we were to be at the B gates. We were supposed to leave on Lufthansa Airlines at 4:40 PM but did not leave until after 5:00 PM. (This was the long stretch of the trip, from Chicago to Munich, Germany.) We had dinner and then began a napping pattern of short naps. I could not sleep so I read and watched a movie. We drank lots of water, walked, and went to the bathroom several times. We finally arrived in Munich at 8:00 AM on the 16<sup>th</sup>. We had a three hour lay over before we caught our next Lufthansa flight to Helsinki, Finland. We ate rolls and drank coffee in a café area, people watched for awhile, and then decided to walk to our gate. No one else was there so Doug laid down on three chairs and went right to sleep for an hour. After that hour, others started coming and he awoke. We left Munich at 11:45 AM and arrived in Helsinki at 3:00 PM.

**Finland is part of the Euro currency system and the Euro \$1 was worth \$1.25 in USA money**

### Thursday - June 16, 2005 - Helsinki, Finland

3:00 PM arrival in Helsinki, Finland and Doug thought we should go to the domestic terminal but we recognized no one on our flight and finally decided to walk to the International Terminal. It was a long walk and when we arrived, we could not get into the baggage area. We did find our Tauck Tour driver so he helped us get into the international area, we collected our bags, and he took us to his Mercedes Taxi. We asked him several questions and he talked to us all the way to the hotel. He said the following:

- 1) Helsinki has a population of around 555,000.
- 2) Finland has a population of around 5,200,000 with a land mass smaller than Montana in the states.
- 3) Natural resources – Timber, copper, zinc, iron ore, and silver
- 4) They export – Machinery, equipment, chemicals, metals, timber, paper and pulp.
- 5) Life expectancy is 74.3 for males and 81.6 for females
- 6) Religion – 89% Evangelical Lutheran, 1% Russian Orthodox, 1% other and 9% none
- 7) Finland has over 180,000 lakes
- 8) Finland was part of Sweden for centuries – then Russia took it over in 1809. In 1906 it became free and granted women the vote (First country to do so.)

As we passed the harbor I asked what the huge four story ships were in the harbor and he explained that the Baltic Sea freezes in the winter and to keep the ships coming to their port, they used the ice breaker ships to chop up the 2.5 meter thick ice.

He also said they were in the midst of the “White Nights” time. He said the daylight lasted until midnight then it would be dark but light again by 3:00 AM. June 21<sup>st</sup> would bring them an entire day and night of daylight and then some darkness would come again ..... but they would basically have six months of long day light days. (If you look at a map, you can see the bottom of Finland is in line with the bottom of Alaska.)

He pointed out the large City Market next to the bay and said we could buy anything from food to clothing there. We saw a brick church on top of a hill with a gold dome and he said it was the Russian Orthodox Church and well worth looking at the inside of it.

The architecture through the city reminded us of Europe with some Flemish styles thrown in, quite ornate. We reached Hotel Kamp and when taken to our room, found it more than nice .... It was beautiful, homey, and big. We unpacked for the days we will be in Helsinki, and then Doug laid down and immediately fell asleep. I showered, changed clothes, and felt refreshed. Doug awoke and did the same.

We decided to walk across the street to the Esplanadi Park to see what was happening. Wow - all the locals were in the park soaking in the sunshine.



There were various music groups playing, a lady and her cats and dogs gave a show of tricks, the cafes were full of coffee drinkers, the people were sitting



everywhere on benches, blankets on the grass, without blankets on the grass and smiling, laughing, talking and enjoying themselves. Doug and I had our cameras with us

so took various shots of the architecture and performers. We looked at several menus but did not find anything that sounded good so we decided to go back to the hotel dining room.

We went to the restaurant early and were waited on promptly. Service was slower than the USA which allowed us to visit with our waitress a bit. Her English was superb and she told us she had been taking English since she started school. We remarked that her pronunciation was great and she said she spoke English every day. I ordered fettuccini with three cheese sauce and Doug ordered Carbonara with dried Reindeer meat. (The meat tasted very much like “jerky”) We decided to split a **Banana Split**. When it came we were surprised, at it was a fried banana cut in half with one scoop of ice cream with strawberry

drizzle over the top and then we were handed a shot glass of chocolate sauce to pour over it. We laughed about “assuming” once again.

We returned to our room, both read our books, Doug fell asleep, I read until 10:00 PM and finally slept. I awoke at 2:09 AM and was up until after 5:00 AM before finally falling asleep and sleeping until 9:00 AM. (Jet lag ... yes, and trying to recycle the body.)

### **Friday- June 17, 2005 -Helsinki, Finland**

Doug got up at 5:30 AM, did some computer work, got dressed and then read until I awoke.

I got up and dressed right away. Then we took off for the dining room buffet breakfast. It was really good and had many, many choices and cost a whopping 29.00 Euro dollars each. (The American dollars are worth less than the \$1 Euro on this date so we commented we would have to reign ourselves in on the days we needed to pay for our own meals.)

We had our cameras in hand and planned to spend the day walking the areas we had seen on our drive to the hotel the day before. First we headed to the Market Place, looked at the booths full of goods and took pictures. Second we walked up the steep hill to the Russian Orthodox Church and took pictures outside and then walked to an area overlooking the city where we found more pictures to take. When we moved inside, we were in awe as the inside had recently been refurbished and the gold gilt and Russian Icons were everywhere. You could not use flash, but that did not hurt us as we both



set our cameras for low light and took many very good pictures. We then walked to the harbor; Sandy found an artistic colored plaster on the side of one of the buildings that appeared to have



several hooded figures pulling in sea nets.

Third we walked down to the boat harbor and took pictures of the Ice Breaker Ships, many sail boats, and the buildings of the city from this vantage point. As we returned, we took a little time to see what the vendors were selling in the Port Square.

Fourth, we walked back to the Esplanade Park, walking through it to get ourselves oriented to this part of the city's layout and watch the locals soak in the sun. We walked down the street east of our hotel, which was a shopping street and looked into the windows for products periodically as we took pictures of ornate building architecture and sculptures. We returned to the hotel and met Kate, our Tour Director. We quickly found out she lived in Yogyakarta, Indonesia and so our talk revolved around Indonesian experiences. She is American, was a teacher for many years before deciding to change careers. On a

special program, she taught Indonesians how to run an American program for a company in Indonesia. She fell in love and married an Indonesian man. The marriage lasted just two and a half years but by that time she was comfortable in her Indonesian style of living. She took classes on tourism and started tours in Spain. Soon she heard about Tauck Tours and joined that group and has been very happy with them for eight years. She continues to live in Indonesia as her money goes a long way and she has had the same husband and wife servants for 23 years. She said the rate was still 8600 Rupiah to \$1.00 American. (When we lived there in 1998 to 2000 it was between 8600 and 16,000 Rupiah to \$1.00 American .... Obviously the economy has not changed that much and Kate said Indonesians are still quite corrupted because the government does not treat them much different than when we were there.)

We then returned to our room at 2:00 PM to take a nap. Both of us fell asleep immediately and Doug woke up and tried to optimize our slow running lap top. He then woke me up at 5:15 PM saying it was time to get ready for our 6:00 PM Happy Hour cocktail party preceding our Welcome Dinner to meet our fellow Tauck Tour Travelers. We arrived early, chatted with Kate a bit before the first people arrived. The first person we met was 82 year old Alma, a widow, who was hard of hearing but decided she would rather travel than sit at home and vegetate. Then we met Bill and Emily from California. The four of us had much in common as they too had lived over seas in the mid east in a Muslim atmosphere. Our conversation was about how we lived among Muslims. Then we met Don and Nancy North Carolina. We found out that Nancy was an artist and sold her paintings over the internet. Then we were called to dinner. We were escorted to a different room, and sat with Ed and Alice from Virginia - Mike and Jeanne from London, England - and Alma. The dinner was excellent and we enjoyed our chat. Then we headed for bed.

### **Saturday - June 18, 2005 -Helsinki, Finland**

We headed for the dining room for our buffet breakfast, which was now on the tour bill instead of our bill. It was great as we knew it would be. Kate told us all to meet her at the front door of the hotel to take off for our City Tour at 9:00 AM. She introduced us to our City Guide outside as we boarded the bus. As we drove around, we found out that Swedish King Gustav Vasa founded Helsinki. This King was both king of Sweden and ruler of Finland. Helsinki had been the capital of Finland since 1812. After being part of Sweden, Finland became part of Russia in 1809. Finland has been independent (of both Sweden and Russia) since 1917.

**Bus Tour:** Our first sights consisted of the Market Place, the Train Station, the port, and a stop at the sight of the 1952 Olympic village.

<sup>2nd</sup> We stopped at Carl Ludwig Engel's "Senate Square" where we got out and climbed over fifty steps to reach the top of the hill where a White Lutheran Cathedral with aqua colored domes rested. We also went inside the Cathedral. As we returned to the lower square, the guide pointed out Katajanokka District (rest of the square) with stone gates, bay windows, and dreamlike turrets in Art Nouveau designs.

3<sup>rd</sup> we drove around the Esplanade Park as the guide explained about the “White Nights”, people loving the sunshine, the various eating areas in the park as well as various vendors performing in the daylight hours.

4<sup>th</sup> We went to another town park that housed the monument to Jean Sibelius 1865 - 1957 – Finland’s most well known composer and musician. The monument consisted of 100s of pipes projected vertically in the air and attached to each other. Each pipe was both smooth and texturized with more metal. To the right of the pipes sat a metal head of Jean Sibelius mounted on red and gray rocks with trees surrounding the area. It was mesmerizing to look at as we had not seen anything like it before.



5<sup>th</sup> We were taken to the Church in the Rock called Tempeliaukio Church and built in 1969. There were lots of tourists and locals in the church. A hole had been blasted in the rock, then a batch of angled glass windows were added to the top with a final covering of coiled copper ceiling. The acoustics were great as we also were able to hear the choir practicing for a Sunday performance.

**On Our Own:** As we headed back to the hotel, Kate told us to refer to the special paper she had made up for us in reference to having lunch. Doug and I chose to stop at a huge department store café. We were not impressed with the food but it was interesting to see how busy the store was and we walked several different floors to look at the goods and prices. Helsinki was purported to be the world’s most expensive country to live in, in 1990 and the prices seemed to support that still.

After lunch, we decided to relax in Esplanade Park and “people watch”. We enjoyed listening to a group of four Mexican boys playing Canadian Indian Music. We liked it so well we bought the CD called “Karu Manta – White Buffalo Spirits”. Then we watched a man play classical music on a xylophone. He did not have a CD or we would have bought it as he was marvelous also. We did put money into his offering box. We walked several more streets and took loads of pictures of varied sights.

We looked into four cafés but then decided we would return to our hotel restaurant for dinner. Once again we had a good meal. We returned to our room to read books, watch a little TV. ***Side story:*** As I tried to flush the stool, I hit the bidet shower head nozzle on the wall, which began spraying two walls and the floor. (Thank goodness for those drains in the floors.) After getting that all shut down and drying the area, I knocked the phone off the wall!! I kept thinking, “I hope this is not an omen” ha I finally crawled into bed, after reading that Finland was the least corrupt country in the world! ... and nodded off to sleep. 7:00 AM would arrive earlier than I thought.

### **Sunday - June 19,2005 - Helsinki, Finland to Tallinn, Estonia**

No time for breakfast this morning as we had to catch the ferry to Estonia at 7:00 AM. We were off on the bus and loaded onto the ferry and then taken to Business Class for our ride and breakfast. There were many long booths in our

section and we joined Gerhard and Denielle. They were in their mid 40s and did not join in group activities much but like us, they were avid picture takers so we talked about cameras, shots, etc.

Soon a gal came over to give us two choices of breakfast, and we all made choices and the meal was delivered to us. We ate and visited. We rode a "SuperSeaCat" hydrofoil which was a smooth ride. After we ate, we decided to go out to the deck and I took video of another SuperSeaCat heading toward Estonia which would become part of our DVD for future reference. The ride took one hour and 45 minutes.

Just before arrival in Tallinn, Estonia, "Kate" explained we would walk a very long covered wood bridge from the ship to customs. She told us what to expect as we went through customs. Then she told us we were to be divided into two groups called "Vodka" and "Caviar" so as to have two city guides. Customs turned out to be quite simple and organized. We walked out of the station to a City Guide holding a "Tauck Tour" sign and we all surrounded her as she then explained our path for the next couple of hours. We were split into the two groups before boarding the bus. Our "Caviar" group received 6 foot 4 inch "Kooli" as our guide. (*She was thin with long dark hair and spoke in a deep voice with much expression and was easy to understand*). The bus drove up a hill and dropped us off. Our two hour long walk of the "Old City" was followed by history lessons from Kooli.

When we reached the Russian Orthodox Church (with looks of a wedding cake in its decorative architecture) she said they were celebrating one of their holidays but we were welcome to go inside and we did. It was wall to wall people, mostly Russian women in babushka scarves and old style dresses. Tallinn currently had a Russian population of 47% which did not please the rest of the Estonian people. They hated their oppression from the Russians and wished the Russians would go back to Russia. (This is what Kooli told us.) She said that if Russians want to become a citizen, they must learn the local language and pass language history tests. (Estonia is considered the 33<sup>rd</sup> least corrupted country out of 133 countries.)

Kooli told us about one of their customs .... *Flowers are a universal greeting, but only odd numbers of flowers should appear in a bouquet of celebration as the even numbers are for mournful occasions only.* (Another country - different customs.)

Our two hour walk was over cobblestone streets with old but painted buildings with unique windows and doors. Everyone took pictures like crazy. One spot on a hill looked over the old town below with all the red tile roofs, clear



to the port. One shop window was filled with Amber items. Some locals milled the streets as it was Sunday - church and visiting day. We were impressed with the cleanliness of old town. Our last stop was at an old Church with a claim to fame for its superb art work in the side chapel. (We did not hear who these oil paintings were painted by but the church was very old and in run down shape. It appeared dingy inside, which did not allow for a good view of the paintings but it was obvious the locals were very proud to have them in their village.)

Finally, Kooli told us goodbye after pointing out various places we could purchase lunch on our own. Many of us decided to go to "Grandma's Place". We walked down an alley then down a flight of stairs to a dungeon like area with long and short tables with the cement walls painted in a soft cream color. We sat with Don and Nancy, Val & Alice and Bill & Ellen. We all ate varied dishes and liked the food.

We had the afternoon to ourselves so Doug and I took off walking several different blocks to capture different photos and then went to the Domina City Hotel. We laid down to take a half hour nap which turned into two hours!! We had signed up for a dinner at Olde Hansa Inn in the style of a "Medieval Royal Feast". We sat with Don & Nancy, Kelly and Duane and NO Utensils!! The food was wild game - well cooked and seasoned - everything was very good. We had a great time together. Of course we drank house wine and joked about a party of 100 Germans who were also on tour as they entered the building to start their feast. They kept coming, and coming, and coming and filled up the entire third floor of the old building.

We returned to the hotel right after eating and visiting as Doug's stomach was really hurting. It was still light out (White Nights) so I took my camera and went walking to take pictures, while he slept. I was gone for an hour and figured I covered about a mile. I found the original City Gates and City Wall which I told Doug about when I went back. He was up and feeling better and attempted to load the "slow running" lap top with our "Picture Take" of the day, after looking the shots over that I had just taken. I needed to charge my camera battery and hooked it up while Doug finished loading the pictures. He went to sleep while I sat up to read as I waited for the batteries to charge. I finally went to bed at midnight. The streets did not quiet down until 12:30 AM, and I knew this due to the digital clock and because there was no A/C and our windows were open.

**Facts about Estonia:** Population is approximately 1,400,000 - 28,040 square miles which makes it smaller than New Hampshire and Vermont combined - 26.5% of the land is planted in crops - Natural resources are Oil shale, Peat, Phosphorite, Clay, Limestone, Sand, and Dolomite - Agricultural Products are potatoes, vegetables, fish, livestock & dairy products - Exports are machinery & equipment, wood & paper, textiles, food products, & furniture - Life Expectancy: Males @ 64.4 years and Females @ 76.5 years - Unemployment as of 2001 was 12.4% - Religions: Evangelical Lutheran, Russian Orthodox, Estonian Orthodox, Baptist, Methodist, and Jewish - **Money they use is called Estonian Kroon (Or EEK) It takes 10 Kroons or EEKs to equal 80 cents in USA money**

### **Monday - June 20, 2005 - From Tallinn, Estonia to Riga, Latvia**

We did not have to get up until later as we did not have to be on the bus until 9:45 AM for our first leg of driving from Tallinn, Estonia to Latvia. Kate gave us a history lesson on the bus ....The capital of Latvia is Riga with a population of 900,000, consisting of 47% Russians, 38% Latvians, 9% Belarusian's and Ukrainians and 2% Poles. The country of Latvia has 2,350,000 population -

The country is slightly larger than West Virginia – Natural resources are Peat, Limestone, Dolomite, Amber, Hydropower, and Wood – Agricultural Products – grain, sugar beets, potatoes, vegetables, beef, pork, milk, eggs, fish – Exports : Wood, wood products, machinery & equipment, metals, textiles, and food products – Life Expectancy: Males @ 63.4 years and Females @ 75.5 years - Unemployment as of 2001 was 7.6% - Religions: Lutheran, Roman Catholic, and Russian Orthodox - Mikhail Baryshnikov was born in Riga in 1948 as his father was a Russian Air Force officer there lecturing in military topography - The VEF Minox camera (the world's first miniature camera) was invented in 1937 by Walter Zapp, a Latvian Jew living in Riga. (During World War II secret agents used this miniature camera to photograph documents.) 96% of the people read a newspaper every day – they win the most avid reader award. Latvia ranks 57<sup>th</sup> out of 133 countries in corruption – The Latvian language is 4000 years old and closely related to Sanskrit (The language of Hinduism) Latvia gained independence in 1991.

We stopped at a gas station for a potty stop as well as ice cream treats. One stool for all of us women made us all hurry! Then we were on the road again to drive along the coast line periodically as we headed for Parnu, our lunch stop. Kate described the hotel as a “functional Scandic design” .... But they had a good barbecue lunch in a room near the beach. All of a sudden she interrupted her story and said “Stork – Stork” then pointed to a field. That was the beginning of many Stork sightings through both Latvia and Lithuania. (The people put 20 foot poles in the air with a 10 foot base at the top and the Storks come to build their huge nests. We also saw some nests in trees. We usually saw two babies in each nest.)

As we rode along we noticed lots of dairy cattle in unfenced fields. Then we looked harder to see they were chained to a steel pin. Before long we came upon huge fields of yellow flowering plants and Kate explained this was called “Rape Seed” plants but we would know it by the name of Canola Seed, which is better for lowering cholesterol. The Canadians also grow it but did not like the “Rape” seed name so changed it to be Canola which stood for Canada Oil.

OK – back to the functional design hotel. We were beginning to catch on to her teasing us, so as we came to the hotel we understood her comments. We were immediately taken into the dining room near the beach..... The beach was invisible because a big yard + two rows of trees obscured the view, but it was a big functional room with the food all laid out for our consumption. Since they were not done barbecuing, we took a short walk to the beach to see beige sand, and a gray sea with waves and many locals enjoying the beach, although it was very windy. The hotel had been built by Russians – very, very plain and square and seemingly without a personality. We returned to the lunch room and they brought in the barbecue – there was not any sauce like we use, but the fish, pork, and sausages had been cooked on a grill. They also had 5 different salads, green bean casserole, parsley potatoes, bread and a Mousse type dessert on top of ginger cookie like crust. (Doug and I travel **to learn** new things, and we **were learning**, once again.)

We boarded the bus and continued on to Riga. At one point the highway skirted along part of the Gulf of Riga but we had to look very hard to see it as the bushes and trees blocked a clean view. We arrived at 4:30 PM. Traffic was horrendous and we thought the entire population of 900,000 must be driving around. We drove through an area of Art Nouveau buildings that seemed to be collapsing before our eyes; the area was so run down. After making it through the constant start and stop traffic we arrived at the city wall and gates to "Olde Town". To our surprise we saw clean, neat, and renovated Art Nouveau buildings and town squares. Kate told us they were trying very hard to cater to tourists and it showed. We got off the bus and Kate had us all follow her to the first square and showed us how the various streets left the square --- Which helped orient us to the area. We were all having dinner at the hotel at 7:00 PM so everyone took off in different directions to explore. Doug and I walked many different streets taking pictures.

We returned to the hotel and had just enough time to go to our rooms to clean up and dress a little nicer for dinner in the hotel dining room. It was a beautiful room, tables were all set in gorgeous linens, and we sat at a long table with Kelly and Duane, Debbi, Alma plus Alex and Liz. Kelly is a furniture and room designer. Duane is a retired dentist. They sat across from us and we learned that Kelly had a surprise planned for Duane as it was his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday so we all were given two glasses of champagne to celebrate. It was a very happy room!! Of course we then had our three course meal with wine and the food was exceptionally good. Our evening was full of smiling faces and our group was clicking in rhythm. When we were done with the evening, we fell into bed at 10:45 PM.

**Latvian money is called LATS - One LAT was worth \$1.84 in USA money**

### Tuesday - June 21, 2005 - Riga, Latvia for the day

We slept well, dressed and went to the Garden Room in the hotel for our breakfast buffet. Kate reminded us that we were to have lunch and dinner on our own today and refreshed our memories as to the city square. Then she told us they were taking us to a Jewish concentration camp in the early afternoon if we wished to go. Doug and I plus eight others declined and had an afternoon to our selves. Kate reminded us to meet at the front door of the Grand Palace Hotel for our City walking tour.

We were broken up into our two groups, and our Caviar group followed the City Guide as she pointed out former Palaces that were now government offices, homes of Ambassadors, Churches, and Theaters around the hotel area. We loved the architecture, cleanliness, colors, and busy atmosphere. We all snapped away, enjoying the locals playing flutes, lutes, trumpets, and accordions at the various tunnels, churches, etc. along the way.

On the second leg of the city tour, we boarded the bus for a ride to the open air and inside market place. The first building we were taken into was a fish market. Originally the building was built to house Air Ships (Blimps) but they never did get the air ships. The next building housed a meat, fruit, and vegetable market. Then you walked outside to find more fruit, vegetable, nuts,

and other food markets as well as jewelry, clothing, trinkets, toys, flower, and parts markets. It was overwhelming. All of a sudden we did not look at these countries as “short on food” any longer. Everyone agreed that this tour through the market place was a real eye opener.

We boarded the bus to head for an area of Art Nouveau architecture in the



midst of renovation. We got off the bus to walk a three block area. We took many pictures and were fascinated by the art work. Our guide



particularly mentioned a favored architect by the name of Einstein. (Pronounced Ian - Steen)

When the tour was over we were on our own for lunch. Doug and I headed to the square at one of the open air spots, as did many others. We joined Bill and Emily. Bill, Emily, and I decided to have garlic bread and cheese platter with either ginger ale or cokes for our lunch. Doug had a grilled chicken sandwich with French fries. None of us got our food at the same time - the cheese platter looked nothing like the picture in the menu and the garlic bread was rye which had been toasted and put in tinfoil to be heated. We all could not help but laugh and began talking of other eating experiences when we lived outside the USA. We had been warned of slow service and we certainly experienced it but did not care as we just enjoyed being outside.

After lunch we left Bill and Emily and Doug and I found the place where Kelly told us to purchase Amber. We felt it was good pricing for wonderful quality so we bought three necklaces ... one for me and one for each of the girls. We then located the Italian restaurant that Kate had recommended and agreed that was where we would go for dinner in the evening.

We walked the City Park and old town streets and took many pictures. We ran into Tom and Corinne who asked where we were eating and told them the Italian restaurant and they said, well we are heading that way to make reservations and they would include us also. So we were set for the evening. We had fun on our own taking whatever amount of time we wanted to take photos.

We returned to the hotel and decided to go into the hotel bar for cool drinks since it had been in the 90's again. We were the only people in the bar and the young man who waited on us stayed at the table to talk to us about the USA, asking lots of questions. Then we, in turn, asked him questions. We found out he was from a little village, had just finished High School, hoped to have a job where he could travel, would love to be able to go to the USA some day but also was heading to his village to be with family the next weekend for a special celebration day. He smiled quite a bit, his English was very good, and he signed up for University in the Fall. We spent a half hour chatting with him.

Later, we returned to the hotel to freshen up and change into dressier clothes and then walked to the Italian “Monterosso” restaurant. We ate with Tom & Corinne Miller, Ed & Alice Marion, & Roger & Doris. We sat across from

Roger and Doris and learned more about them. (Roger & Doug talked investments – Roger teased me about the “Yeah – Right” saying I used which I was not aware of and we all laughed.) We all decided the food was wonderful and we had no complaints. We felt good and all walked back to the hotel very slowly as we chatted.

Then we were off to our room to put pictures on the “still running slow” and now with more balking, lap top. (Hmmm I believe Doug cursed a few times.) We looked at our various pictures and found out we had taken over 52 on this day. We finally hit the sack at 11:45 PM.

### Wednesday – June 22, 2005 - From Riga, Latvia to Vilnius, Lithuania

We went to the Garden room to eat breakfast while the Lorikeets screamed. We boarded the bus at 8:00 AM to drive to Vilnius, Lithuania. Shortly after we got outside of Riga, Kate announced we were going to make a couple of surprise stops today but would not give us anymore information until we arrived at them. The first surprise was to be before lunch and the 2<sup>nd</sup> surprise with be mid afternoon. Around 10:00 AM we stopped in Latvia at a quaint little café in the country. Carved animals and people greeted us behind curved wood and iron fences. We took time to look at a tree house, 2 level terrace, pond complete with a carved turtle and then walked into to use the bathroom They had one stool for all the ladies, it took us all 30 minutes to get done as there was a rush to get OUT of the bathroom due to the swarming mosquitoes!!! Of course many of us took pictures of this “fantasy type land”. After we crossed the border into Lithuania, where we had to stop to have our passport pictures matched to our faces by two officers, Kate announced the upcoming First Surprise of the day.

We soon turned the corner off the main road and headed about one mile as Kate began explaining about Russian oppression of Lithuanians and “The Hill of Crosses”. She told us to count the crosses as the one who guessed the correct number would win a prize. Since 1325 AD, although oppressed by the Russian Communists and not allowed to worship in a church, this area was used as a cross placement by those who would not be completely oppressed. The people would carve all sizes of crosses in all kinds of wood and place them on this hill. The Communists would then bull doze the crosses into the ground. But low and behold, the next day, more crosses would appear. Crosses were placed upon crosses and they kept appearing all the time. Lithuania became independent in August of 1991. Now it has become a reminder to the people that they must not be oppressed again. Lithuania is one of the most tenaciously Catholic countries in Europe. We all walked around and among the crosses .... The carvings were haunting and wonderful at the same time. It was quite awesome to hear how hard they fought to keep their religious ideas alive. This visit led to a lot of chatting on the bus. Soon, Kate asked various people how many crosses. About 15 people gave out various numbers, and then Kate



said “Well, no one wins but also no one loses as there are crosses still added each day and no one knows the real answer but the people did not lose their religion.”

We drove a few more miles and dropped off at Seduvos Malunas restaurant in Seduvos, Lithuania. We were all seated at tables in an octagonal building and served Chicken with carrot sauce, mashed potatoes, cabbage, and ice cream with apple cake along with our coke. After lunch we had enough time to stroll their gardens to admire the flowers, carved wood animals and people, buildings and the windmill before boarding the bus.

We arrived in the city of Vilnius and Kate told us our next surprise was upon us. They took us to the KGB Museum. A very passionate guide took us to the lower level where we were show the torture rooms. He explained how the Communists tortured people to gain information and told as about the horrible atrocities against the Lithuanians. One wall showed pictures of people after they had been brutalized and was shown to each new prisoner to make them submit information faster. He told us that his father took him to the museum when he was a young man and he saw his 3 year old picture on the wall – he asked his father why he and his family were in that picture – his father told him “The people in the line to the right did not go to church on this day, the people to the left did and they were gunned down and killed, so the rest of us knew what would happen to us if we went to church.” He also said “I hope you will take my place at the museum one day and tell people we never want to be oppressed by Russian Communists again.” He said he was so impressed by what his father had told him that he knew from that day forward that he would work at the museum. To see the torture rooms was an eye opening experience. I found it very interesting, once again learning that man’s inhumanity to man can be a horrible thing.

Once we were back on the bus, Kate told us we were going to an “alternative” hotel because we could not get into the normal one they book us into, due to a mix up!! We reached the hotel and once we walked in we felt like we were in a bad 1950’s movie. Our room had to be one the ugliest we had ever seen. There were no pictures on the walls, no decorating or scheme to things and furniture was just plunked in the room. It reminded us of the “functional hotel” in Parnu but done in colors instead of just white. The rest of the people complained about their rooms being so small that they could barely get out of the bed.

That evening we were to dine in the hotel dining room and each table was staggered time wise to facilitate better service. NOT!! We arrive 30 minutes after the first table and they had bread and wine only. Each table thereafter arrived each 20 minutes. We did put our orders in, then we waited, waited, and waited. One and a half hours after we sat down, I got up and went to where I saw the **one waiter** for the room put the bread baskets and picked one up and took it to our table. Two hours after we sat down the appetizers came to the table. Doug got up and went outside to a store and bought a bottle of wine for our table of six to drink. Two hours and 56 minutes later we received our entrées which most of us could not eat as the meat was very tough. We sat with Dave and Judy from

Australia and Val & Alice from New York. It became so ridiculous that Val went out and bought another bottle of wine and we all decided to forget dessert because we had just had it for the night and left to go to our various rooms at 11:05 PM. This was such an amiable group that no one became screamingly angry and just chalked it up to life's experiences. Everyone did however place their complaints in the evaluation sheet as Kate suggested we do at the end of the trip. *(Two months after we had returned home, we each received a \$250.00 check along with a letter thanking us for our patience and hoping the experience would not scare us away from another Tauck Tour. Is it any wonder we like this Tour Company? The word honorable springs to mind.)*

**Lithuanian money is called LITAS and one LITA was worth 37 cents USA money**

### Thursday - June 23, 2005 - From Vilnius, Lithuania to Moscow, Russia

The breakfast was buffet style the next morning which meant we all ate as we picked up our own food. It was not exceptional but we all decided not to talk about it. Today was a new day. We boarded the bus at 9:00 AM for our City Tour. Once again we were taken to the old part of the city and a walking tour was given by two City Guides. We broke into our separate groups and started out.



We walked the narrow winding streets through the University grounds, then shops, and came to an old brick church with double steeples. We continued the walk for many different blocks in and around the University. We finally made our way to a huge open area in the center of many large shopping buildings. We stopped into the hotel we were supposed to stay in and had iced coffee and dessert. Alma walked in also and we told her to join us. We chatted and learned about her previous married life and her traveling experiences. She had traveled with Kate before and liked her. After our short visit, Doug and I walked out

to take pictures of the area before boarding the bus once more for a ride to Trakai Palace.

We ate our lunch in a special dining room with a glass wall that looked across the lake toward Trakai Palace. Michael and Jeanne (London) joined us for lunch. He seems to like Doug very much although Doug does not know why.



Michael could be the stereotypical English man > very proper in his carriage, exacting in his English use, not much time for talking to women. He looked so much like Basil Rathbone ----The English actor that played Sherlock Holmes for many years ----That it was really hard to believe he was not that same person. He took two pictures of Doug

and I on the deck of the café with the Palace in the background.

Lunch was excellent and then we had time to walk across the long bridge over the lake to the palace on the island. They had done an excellent job of renovating the palace. Once again we found a huge picture taking opportunity. After a 45 minute time period we were called back to board the bus for our trip to the airport for the flight to Russia.

We reached the airport in enough time to board the plane after waiting a mere 25 minutes for everyone to be cleared by ticketing. The flight left at approximately 5:50 PM Lithuanian time and we arrived in Moscow around 8:30 PM. It took awhile to get through customs and then the ride was fairly long to the middle of the city. White Nights once again allowed us to see everything. We were ushered into the Kempinski Hotel, found our room was quite large and beautiful and a lunch awaited us in our room at 9:30 PM. We ate, then I walked behind the curtains to see what our view was and called Doug to the window as we faced St. Basil's Cathedral and the Kremlin and both were back lit by a pink hue of twilight. I grabbed my camera and started taking pictures of St. Basils, the Kremlin, the bridge, and the 6000 room hotel across the river. We went to bed at 10:30 PM. **Russian money is called Rubles - It took 50 Rubles to make \$1.80 in USA money**

#### Friday - June 24, 2005 - Moscow, Russia

We went to our lavish buffet breakfast in the Kempinski and everyone was talking about the five star hotel. The breakfast was wonderful and very varied in its choices.

After breakfast we went to a special room where a former government official talked about Russia and how it had progressed in the last 10 years. He welcomed us to his country and spoke positively about the future of Russia and talked most of the time about the changes. When the question period arose, he did not directly answer some of the questions, skirted touchy issues, but had pleasant body language as he gave us his planned answers. We agreed that he must have been a great politician. It was a nice gesture to welcome us to his city and we were impressed by it.



Kate announced that we would meet at 10:30 AM north of the hotel to catch the bus to go to our first metro station. She wanted to show us how clean and beautiful the stations were and we were all going "what". Ahhhh but we soon learned to trust her judgment as we made our way to three different metro stations and could not believe the cleanliness, beautiful art work, as well as the wonderful chandeliers. We were told we would not find any trash cans in the metro which was to avoid bombings by terrorist groups. Most people carried a plastic bag with them which they put their trash into as they traveled along. We understood they took their trash home to get rid of it.

Each Metro station was different and all were beautiful... One had a 10 foot tall oil painting with marble benches and curved marble walls, another had plaster filigree frames around individual paintings about 2 foot by 3 foot in size and chandeliers, another had sculptures on the ornate ceramic tiled walls with different shaped chandeliers. The trains were not much to look at but the cleanliness of the stations was amazing.



After our Metro Tour we were taken to one of the "Locals" shopping areas. We were given an hour of free time to shop and eat and we chose "MyMy" café, as did David & Judith. We sat together and then saw several others in our group come in later. We ate "Lasagna"

which tasted just like goulash to us and it was good. After that we walked three blocks of the market area, milled in and out of stores, milled in and around the outdoor vendor stalls, and then sat down for a bit to "people watch".

We boarded our bus to go back to the Kremlin for our afternoon tour. The lines were very long to go through the first gate and it took us 30 minutes to get through the entry gate. Then we walked over an entry bridge and were met inside by another City Guide who split us into our Caviar and Vodka groups and started us out on the outdoor part of the tour. We first learned that the grounds were on 64 acres of land. We stood in front of the State Kremlin Palace as our guide began explaining what we were seeing. Soon the cadets came out of Cadet Housing, in full uniform, for a march around the Kremlin grounds. The government buildings were pointed out to us as were



cannons, bells, bell tower, and six churches. All the onion top domes glowed in the sunlight with their gold gilt paint. As we entered the Cathedral of Annunciation we were immediately in a very red, warm, glowing room. The walls were red, the oil paintings were inside gold gilt wood frames, and the Iron Gate leading to the Priest's quarters was also gold gilt paint. Soon we heard music and two women and two men sang religious songs in a chanting style. Doug found their music CD and purchased it as he wanted to include the music in the DVD we would make of the trip. Then they took us to the "Armoury" which housed one of the top museums in the world. [The cost to take pictures was 50 Rubles or \$1.80 each] Its collections definitely rival the Louvre' in Paris and the English top museums. We were impressed with the displays, cleanliness of the collections, and the beauty.



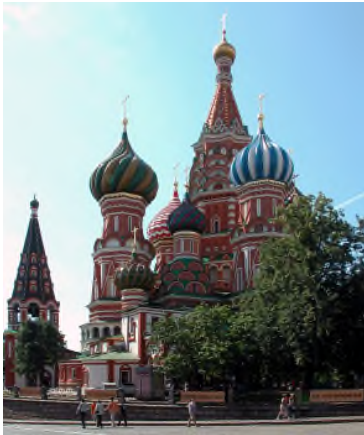
We learned that "Kremlin" means castle and fortress. We had thought only Moscow had the "Kremlin" but we found out there were many Kremains

throughout Russia because there were many fortress type castle areas in various towns. Our time was up and we met at the entry door of the Armoury where the City Guide met us and took us through an exit gate, to the street, to board the bus to return to our rooms for 1 ½ hours before boarding the bus again for the Moscow Circus.

We took off for the Moscow Circus and found bus parking was very limited so they let us out on the street to pass over six lanes of traffic to get to the permanent Circus Building. Thank goodness for stop lights. The “Moscow Circus” is not like our circuses ..... the only animals were just a few Orangutans and Monkeys in one skit .... The show revolved around various people action skits.... There were a few acrobatic performances. We likened it to Vaudeville Acts. The seats were really hard so it was hard to enjoy but some little Russian children behind us giggled and giggled and we had fun watching them enjoy the acts.

We had just eaten popcorn and cokes at the circus so when we returned to the hotel, Doug wanted something substantial to eat. Kate had warned us that the hotel café food was very expensive but he did not care. We ran into Tom and Corinne (California) who were also starving so at 10:00 PM the four of us shared a table and ordered hamburgers and French fries which also came with a cold slaw and cokes. (Comfort foods) Doug and Tom also ordered dessert. That meal cost us \$80.00 .... But it tasted great. After eating and visiting we all returned to our rooms for some much needed sleep.

### **Saturday - June 25, 2005 - Moscow, Russia**



We all smiled when entering the hotel dining room for breakfast. We loved their layout and the food. When we left I took pictures of four oil paintings of different scenes in Moscow that the hotel had hanging in the entry hall to the café. The pictures turned out great and some of them were painted in the winter time which would be a different view than what we saw.

After breakfast we were rounded up once again to board the bus, as it took us across the Moskva River to pose in front of St. Basil's Cathedral for our group picture. At the same time our City Guide told us that St. Basils Cathedral was actually made up of six different cathedrals. She also said one of the leaders considered tearing it down until he heard from President Reagan who said the USA would buy it and reconstruct it in the USA ..... they then decide to keep it!

After this chat we were reminded that we should pick up our passports from the hotel safes so we had them for the trip to St. Petersburg. After accomplishing that task I purchased postcards to send to various people, spending 111 Rubles or \$4.00 American and had the hotel mail them.

Next we boarded the bus to Tretyakov Museum. Once again we were in a superb museum. This time people chose to either tour the Religious Icon Gallery or The Masters Painting Hall. Doug and I chose the masters paintings as did half the group. Once again we enjoyed the sights thoroughly and were amazed at all the paintings they had amassed in their collection. It seemed like the time went too fast for the viewings.



The bus collected those that wanted to return to the hotel as we were to have lunch on our own. Doug and I decided to go to a café five blocks south of the hotel called the “Coffee Bean”. We each had an onion and cheese quiche with iced coffee. Then we had lemon custard for dessert. This cost us \$20.00 for the two of us. Bill and Emily walked in half way through our lunch, put in their order for the same thing after asking us if we liked it, and then joined us.

We left before they did and decided we wanted to walk to the bridge over the Moskva River to take some pictures. We walked across the bridge then under the bridge and took many unique photos facing both east and west as well as of the hotel, a business building next to the hotel, and many other varied subjects. We also took pictures of Wedding Couples who were walking across the bridge or took limousines to St. Basils Cathedral for their wedding pictures. (We saw at least 7 wedding couples.)

**Stalin’s Sisters or Seven Sisters or The Wedding Cakes** – as we drove around Moscow, the City Guide would point out various ornate skyscrapers. There are seven large skyscrapers that Stalin requested to be built to mark Moscow’s 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Stalin had decided that Moscow suffered from a “skyscraper gap” when compared to the USA and ordered the construction of the seven behemoths to jump-start the city’s skyline.

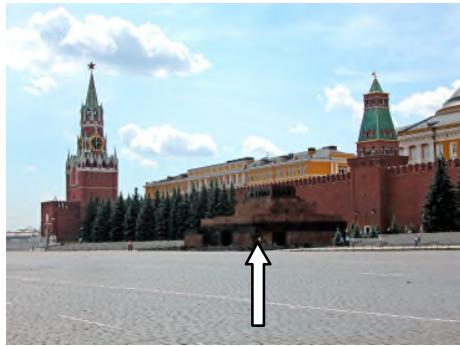


Vyacheslav Oltarzhevsky was one of the main architects because he worked in New York during the skyscraper boom there in the 1930’s. (Fortunately, he’d been released from Gulag [prison] in time to help!). They are widely scattered throughout the city and provide a unique visual look. The above names are three of many different things they are called in Russian.

It was in the high 90s and very humid so we finally decided to return to the room to cool down. Kate had suggested dressier clothes for the evening dinner so we cooled down and then dressed. Our dinner hour was from 7:15 PM to 10:30 PM. We had dinner in the hotel dining room with Don and Nancy. We had good conversations, talked to others as they passed our table. After returning to the room we finally decided to call it a night at 10:35 PM. (Yep, a quick 5 minute talk about the day before nodding off.)

### Sunday - June 26, 2005 - Moscow, Russia - St. Petersburg, Russia

Today was our last day in Moscow. I managed to get postcards sent to Sharon, Jean, and Keiron. (Cost was 111 Rubles or \$4.00 in US dollars) We had to have our bags ready by 7:30 AM as they were going to St. Petersburg by truck as that was both safer and faster than putting them on the train we were taking to St. Petersburg later. We all lingered over breakfast a little longer. *Surprise - I poured myself some grape juice .... I thought .... But when I drank it, it tasted very earthy, I did a double take and when someone else tasted it they said ...."Oooops this is beet juice". Needless to say I could drink no more and no one else wanted it either.*



We boarded the bus for our drive to Lenin's Tomb. It was located outside the walls of the Kremlin but inside metal gates leading to Red Square. The line was 1.5 blocks long to get in so Kate had our City Guide pay extra money to let us in sooner. (Yes folks, bribing still takes place.) We were soon told to come to another section where a guard ushered us in behind some school children. We did not know what to expect but the Guide told us "No talking at all is allowed inside, it is quite dark so watch the steps carefully, no picture taking allowed, Guards with guns are stationed every so many feet, you will not be able to stop, you must continually move, you will go down a long flight of stairs as the tomb is below ground level, and you will have to come up the same amount of stairs after going around Lenin's body." Well, she was "right on with her instructions". One of our guys whispered something to another and he was immediately given "the look" and was told "Silence". At one point my foot slipped on a step I did not see, but I caught myself in time. It was a very interesting hushed affair. The mood set was one of respect added to the awe of seeing Lenin's body.

Outside the City Guide told us that 50% of Lenin's body is now made out of plastic due to deterioration ..... so the low light and cool temperatures were needed to help preserve the flesh. Then we were walked through the memorial garden of the country's dead political, military and social leaders.

Kate announced we had some free time so we were told we could go to the GUM store or shops surrounding the area for one hour before boarding the bus once again. We had always heard about the long lines for food in GUM and wanted to see it for ourselves. WOW - First it is not a department store it is a mall .... Second, the last 10 years of progress saw it remodeled in grand Victorian style with many western shops along with local crafts now sharing space. It was Air Conditioned so we stopped to have a cold drink and people watch as Bill and Emily joined us. (My coke cost 112 Rubles or



approx. \$3.92 and Doug's beer cost \$8.75) It was a pricey place and the guide later told us the locals go elsewhere to shop due to the high prices. We walked out of the mall and found a man selling "Moscow book of buildings with a city map" so I bought a book for details later when putting names to pictures. We walked across to a small shop and found beautiful painted eggs and boxes in the Russian miniature style. It seemed expensive and I did not purchase anything and was almost sorry... until later.

We had one last chance to purchase something in Moscow. We left Red Square through gates that led to a park area and a young Russian boy who spoke excellent English tried to sell me an army hat filled full of various Russian pins commemorating everything from Olympics to Military marches and a book full of Russian Stamps all for \$31.00 American. (It was all quoted in American money - Rubles were not even mentioned.) But I said no it was too expensive and walked away. He sold a hat with pins for \$25.00 to Val & Alice .... I walked back after Doug said he thought both would make great mementos of the trip .... Told the boy I had to have a really good price and he said "You must not tell the others I give you good price ----- For you, the stamps and hat for \$25.00." So I bought them both. The stamps were beautiful.

We then boarded the bus for a visit and lunch in Stalin's bunker. (In 1933 Stalin could see that Hitler was going to become a powerful threatening enemy. He had his people begin to build an underground tunnel and bunker system to



hide tanks and weapons as well as people from the Germans. His foresight was amazing.) We pulled into the largest market place in Moscow which was full of people shopping. Our City Guide told us this was where most of the locals shopped as the prices were much better. After 5 long blocks of vendor shops, the bus pulled to the back side of a non-descript looking gray building. We followed the City Guide into a double door, and walked down cement steps for about 20 feet, then walked into a beautiful marble and tile hallway with chairs, couches, paintings, and rugs toward another double wide entry that took us into the round conference room. There was a round table, without a middle in it that would easily seat 50 people. On one part of the table was an opening to walk into the middle of the floor surrounded by the table. The speaker could be heard by anyone in the room due to the acoustics of the ceiling, walls and floor. The city guide had each of us walk into the middle to test it and we were amazed to find that you could just talk in a normal tone yet everyone could hear you.

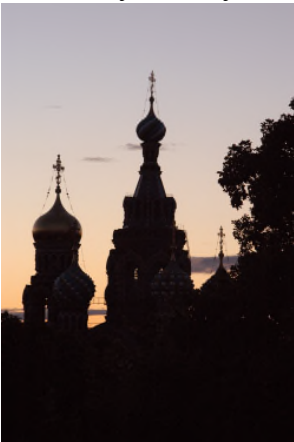
Next she led the first small group into Stalin's office. It was modestly sized with desk, chairs, bookcases, maps of strategy on walls, and a game table.

Last, we were led into the dining room which amounted to paneled wood walls half way up and then plastered walls and long rectangular tables and chairs where many could partake of meals. Surrounding the outer walls were mementos of Stalin, busts of Stalin, Statues of Stalin as well as miniature tanks, cannons, guns ----- all things that would remind you that this was a place of

power and strategy. We all found this to be totally interesting. It has been shut down for years but Tauck Tours convinced the government to show off the area to its tourists so as to build the tourist trade in Russia, and they agreed. It turned out to be yet another highlight to many of us. The lunch was "Georgian" style - Georgia is considered the most European part of Russia. The food was excellent.

Kate called us all to the bus once again. We said goodbye to Moscow as we rode to the train station. The City Guide warned us to watch our belongings as the train stations were the pick pocket's favorite place to work. Soon they took us to the "Aurora" Train and we entered car #4 for our ride to St. Petersburg. The ride was smooth and we noted the countryside appeared much poorer than the cities. (Some of what we observed: Brightly painted clap board houses or non paint houses in need of repairs - run down factories, many closed factories - very few vehicles - most people were getting off the train and walking to a small village - but almost all houses shared a huge garden plot. We saw many people working in the shared garden space - we saw ponds of water - many creeks - lots of trees - but not many fields with crops.) We were happy to see the countryside as it was different scenery than the city. Kate came down the aisle with a bottle of "Standard Vodka" and gave each person a shot glass and told us to throw it down our throats fast as that was the proper way to drink it. (Hmmm this was before the dinner .... Was she trying to make the meal more acceptable to us? Ha) I was very surprised to find out how smooth the Vodka was .... No burning sensation at all. (By the way, they all pronounce it "Wad-Ka") We ate a pork meal on the train for dinner. Kate had warned us that is was nothing to get excited about, and once again she was correct.

After our five and a half hour ride we arrived at the St. Petersburg train station. Irina (pronounced EE-REENA) met us and warned us to hang on tightly to our belongings as the train stations were full of pick pockets. Then she guided us through the station to a waiting bus. We had arrived at 10:00 PM and you guessed it, it was daylight. (White Nights) As we rode the bus to the hotel, Irina pointed out various sights, told us what they represented, and where they were located on our maps if we wished to go see them. At once we noticed the city reminded us very much of being in Europe rather than Russia. You could definitely see, by the designs of the buildings that Peter the Great did indeed



bring in many European architects to build his city.

We reached the Grand Hotel Europa at 10:30 PM. Our room was not as large as the one in Moscow but very nicely done and a lunch awaited us once again. We unpacked for our four day stay, ate our lunch, and then Doug hit the sack. I looked behind the curtains and found the "white nights" giving off a light pinkish glow and began to take pictures out of the hotel windows of the architectural sights. I read awhile and finally went to sleep around 11:30 PM. (This day seemed long with all that we saw in Moscow and the countryside before arriving in St. Petersburg.)

### Monday – June 27, 2005 - St. Petersburg, Russia

We ate breakfast in a gorgeous room. It was like walking into a theater with stained glass windows, balconies, a harp player, and wonderful art deco designs in the plaster. The buffet was a hit with everyone. Kate joined Doug and I for breakfast and she asked where all we went in Indonesia while living there. We asked her about the area she now lives in.

At 9:00 AM we met the bus at the hotel's front door for our city tour through St. Petersburg. As we drove through town, Irena described what we were seeing. Our first stop was at the "Spit of Vasilevskiy Island" where we took pictures, looked at vendor's trinket booths, listened to band music and looked across the river at the Winter Palace. (The band played the Star Spangled Banner and the Australia national Anthem as we walked by them.)

After this short break we went on to "Peter and Paul's Fortress" where we visited the Cathedral, grounds, dock, and fortress wall. The inside of this Cathedral was full of beautiful colors, gold gilt items, and many marble and quartz sarcophagus containers holding the remains of royalty. It also held oil paintings, statues, faux painted pillars that you would swear were real marble and fantastic chandeliers. We could not help but Oooo and Ahhh. As we exited, lo and behold we found more vendor carts on the streets selling the latest trinkets!

Our next stop was near the river to view the "Aurora" Battleship which was permanently docked on the Neva River. It was built in 1900 for the Russo-Japanese War. A firing from its forward gun October 25, 1917 demoralized the Winter Palace's defenders and marked the start of the October Revolution. (During World War II the Russians sank it to protect it from German bombs.) Now it is restored, painted, and a living museum. As we left this area we observed the cadets out for a march.

On the road again we drove closer to the bright colored onion domes we had seen from a distance and found out this was the "Cathedral over Spilt Blood" or the "Cathedral of our Savior".



It was built to honor all Russians in all their endeavors. We were dropped off for a visit and immediately took pictures of the outside. Soon Irena called us to join her as we were going into the Cathedral as a group. All of those who wanted to take pictures had to pay 100 Rubles (or \$3.60 American) so both Doug and I paid along with half our gang. Inside the Cathedral was grand ..... Ceilings and walls appeared to have religious scenes painted on them, but as you looked close you could see it was all created by beautiful colors of mosaic tile. It really did take your breath away.

The floors were patterned in different kinds of marble. It was hard to take in all the detail and we decided to let the pictures do the talking. As we walked out the back side of the Cathedral we took pictures of the canal and the brick pillars of the Ballet School.

Back on the bus we swung around a statue called the Bronze Horseman, a monument to Peter the Great. Next they pointed out the monument to Emperor Nicholas, also on a horse. Then we made a stop in Survorovskaya Ploschad, a beautiful park holding the eternal flame to honor all Russians.

On the way to the hotel, Kate announced we were to have lunch on our own and the afternoon to ourselves and then dinner in the hotel dining room. Doug and I saw a Pizza Hut on the drive into the hotel so we headed off down the street to find it ..... Along the way we took pictures of buildings that fascinated us, statues, walked in a small park, and even walked into a McDonalds to look around. We finally gave up on seeking out the Pizza Hut and walked back to the hotel and ate hamburgers outside in the Garden Hotel café. The food was great.

We learned the latitude of St. Petersburg is the same as parts of Greenland and Alaska. The City of St. Petersburg consists of 72 islands separated by 65 rivers, channels and streams. The population was over 5 million now with over 100 nationalities and ethnic groups. It is the home of 41 higher learning institutions, 450 research institutes and 2,500 libraries with over 150 million books and journals. The seaport is Russian's largest and freezes in the winter, but is maintained navigable by icebreakers. (We never learned any of this before and we wondered how much we would retain.)

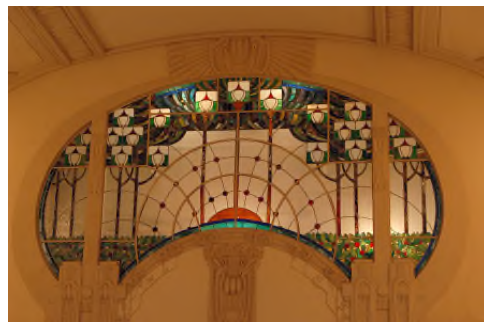
After lunch we decided to go to the huge mall across the street. We had to walk down a sidewalk ramp that led us down stairs to a walkway underneath the street to get to the other side to walk up stairs to street level again. (Why? It is too dangerous to cross the street as the traffic is horrendous - very interesting.) The mall did not impress us but we did manage to walk the entire block of it. I could not find that "one thing" that would make us remember Russia. We returned to our room, took pictures off the cameras and loaded them onto the laptop, which was still running slow. Then we took naps.

We were up in time to freshen up and change clothes for our dinner in the hotel dining room with Ed and Alice plus Kelly and Duane. The food was good, service was great as was the wine and we enjoyed visiting with each other. We headed off to the room at 9:45 PM. We both went to bed right away. I woke up at midnight and looked out the window - Yep, it was still twilight light. I was wide awake so I read awhile and then went back to bed.

### **Tuesday - June 28, 2005 - St. Petersburg**

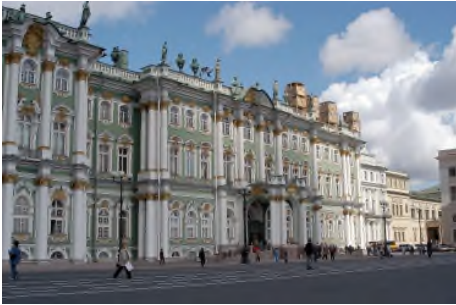
We ate breakfast in the Hotel's beautiful stained glass room again. Both the sights and food were wonderful.

We departed for the Hermitage Museum at 9:00 AM. On the way their, Irena told us the state symbol was the two headed eagle and it first appeared in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. It came to Russia from Byzantium with Sophia Paleolog, who became the wife of Ivan III. It remained the symbol of the Russian monarchy and Russian state for more than four hundred years, till the October Revolution of



1917, when it was thrown out along with the monarchy. But it regained its status in November 1993 by order of President Boris Yeltsin. There are different interpretations of this symbol. The most common version says that the two heads of the eagle symbolize that Russia consists of two parts, European and Asian, and that they are of equal importance for the country.

Our ride was short and while waiting to go into the Hermitage Museum, I bought a packet of postcards of the Hermitage rooms as we did not know what we would see and if we would remember all the names. Thank goodness, as it helped us figure out the proper words. Our tour took three hours and we saw only one twentieth of the collections. Our City Guide explanations were too long so we soon broke away from the group (as did many others) to get the pictures



we wanted to take. We saw many different beautiful items and were amazed at the wonderful condition of all items. We saw so much that it was quite overwhelming. We could not begin to name a favorite room.

After the tour we headed to the "Senate Bar" for lunch on Tauck Tours. We sat with Bill and Emily and thought the meal was very good. The guys enjoyed their beers as much as the meal. We chatted about their time spent in the Mid-east. They too had taken the assignment to have the excess money put into their retirement fund so as to retire early. After we ate, the City Guide once again warned us about the pick pockets and told us when we were on our own to watch the park that was near the hotel as it was a favorite place for gypsies and it was not unusual to use their children to help them relieve you of your money.

We had decided to walk the various shops in the area looking for treasures to buy. We found many different things but Doug and I finally headed for "Northway" store which was supposed to have excellent quality for a reasonable price. We walked six blocks and could not find it so walked back to the Senate Bar to catch the bus back to the hotel in one hour. When we went past the park near the hotel, we indeed saw a mother gypsy and her two children working the people walking through the park. Later we would hear from one of our group that one of the children reached into a purse, but they caught them. We decided to rest awhile before going to dinner in the Garden Café of the hotel and before the evening ballet performance. I was so tired that I fell asleep sitting up in the wing backed chair while Doug loaded yet more pictures onto the laptop.



At 7:15 PM we left for the Hermitage Ballet Theater for the performance of "Giselle". The theater was small, intimate, and colorful. The ballet performance was very good and Doug was able to take many good "low light" pictures. We sat next to and visited with Tom and Corinne. She made me laugh when she said "look at that cute butt on the lead man"! These were students of



Ballet and the Hermitage Theater caters to showing their performances. On the ride back to the hotel, we found out the Hermitage is one of the world's most richly endowed museums and contains magnificent art treasures..... Yet only one-twentieth of its collection can be put on display at any one time. We returned to the hotel at 10:00 PM. We read a bit and then turned in at 11:30 PM.

### Wednesday - June 29, 2005 - St. Petersburg, Russia

Another great breakfast in the Stained Glass Dining Room, as we called it. We sat with Ed and Alice. Kate had told us to be ready to board the bus at 8:00 AM for our trip to Peterhof.

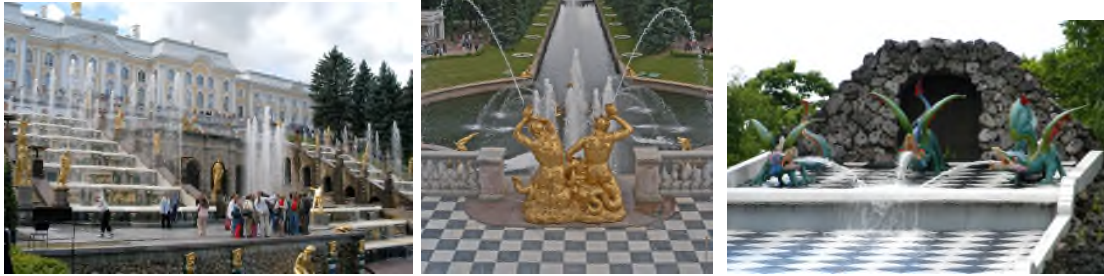
Before we left town, Kate said that many people had requested a stop at the Jewish Synagogue. We took pictures both inside and outside. This was the one synagogue the communist had never closed. The colors of two tones of gold, two tones of blue, and white surrounded the pulpit.



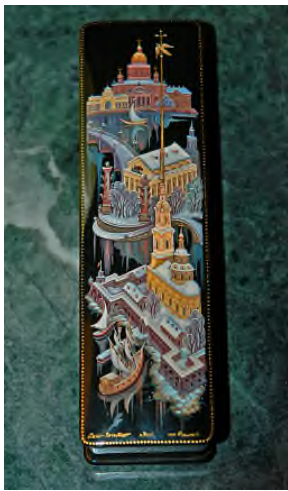
We were on the bus once again for 1 1/2 hour ride through the countryside to Petrovoretz where the Summer Palace and its gardens reside. Just before our turn into the Palace grounds we saw a five story tall Russian Orthodox Church. Once inside the Palace Grounds, the bus dropped us off, to begin our tour. We first walked through the front yard gardens, filled with trees, bushes, flowers, ponds, fountains, and statues. We entered the Palace and began our indoor tour. Once again we admired the collections of art of all kinds and the architecture of the building. The gold gilt was everywhere imaginable.



We spent two hours inside the palace and then ate a half hour lunch in the Gallery Restaurant. Our lunch was Beef Stroganoff, parsley buttered potatoes, salad slaw, and fruit dessert with our choice of drink, very organized and tasty. Then we were off to visit the back yard gardens. WOW! Just when we thought we had seen it all, we were surprised with more opulence to tantalize our minds. The fountains, flowers, statues, bath houses, gazebos, walkways, etc. were fantastic. (This covered several acres of ground.)



All of us enjoyed our 1 ½ hour walk through the grounds. It was another hot day but being outside allowed us to be under the shade of the huge trees and catch the small breeze now and then. Our City Guide organized us to walk to the dock to board the Hydrofoil for the 35 minute ride back to St. Petersburg.



We had free time of two hours before we were to meet the bus so Doug and I took off to find that “Remembrance” of Russia. We tried one block and four different stores without any luck. Then we ran into Tom and Corinne who told us about a shop in the opposite direction. We walked in and could see immediately that this was the place. It took us a mere 30 minutes to pick out our Paper Mache’ painted Russian Box, costing \$319.00 American. We both loved it. They put the certificate of authenticity in the box and packed it for traveling. Then we went back to the hotel bar to drink iced coffee. Next we went to our room to dress up for our farewell dinner.

We met the bus downstairs at 6:30, rode to the ship, boarded and began the thirty minute cocktail party. Many toasted **Kate** and told her how much we enjoyed her guidance on our tour of the Baltic’s and Russia.

Soon we were called to be seated to dinner. Everyone took a place and a Russian



Folk Dance and singing team entertained us during and after the meal.

When we were done eating, they even made us join in the happy music by handing several of us wood castanets --- Russian style. Doug bought one of their CDs as once again we planned to use local music in the DVD we would make. Finally, the evening was over and we left the ship, but then

the bus became the new happy place.

Doug and I decided to go to the bar in the hotel for a nightcap and asked several to join us - eight couples did. We filled the bar and had a few drinks,

laughed, chatted about our experiences and just had a general good time. We finally returned to our room at 11:45 PM.

#### **Thursday - June 30, 2005 - Leaving St. Petersburg, Russia**

We ate our last buffet breakfast at the Grand Hotel Europa. We said goodbye to many as they came into eat for the last time also. Kate came in and joined us for one last meal together.

I had taken my camera to catch the last important shots of all the stained glass in the breakfast room as well as catch a last picture of Bill and Emily. We then went to our room to arrange and pack for the long trip home.

We headed for the airport via hotel van and Debbi joined us as her flight was leaving a bit before ours. She was also heading for Illinois but on a different flight. Since we were flying internationally, we had to be there two hours ahead of time. We gave Debbi our Russian money as she wanted to eat something before boarding and was short on change. We charged our lunch of potato chips and cokes at a bar.

Soon we boarded and flew off and I was able to take pictures of St. Petersburg and the Baltic Sea and unique cloud formations from the airplane window, as we said goodbye.



On the return flight by Lufthansa Airlines, we flew to Frankfurt, Germany instead of Munich to change planes for the rest of the ride to Chicago and then Des Moines. Security in Frankfurt was a very tight affair. Everything had to be emptied from our pockets, shoes off, no jackets, computer turned on, cameras turned on, and cases were gone through. They even had Doug empty paper from his secret pocket. After we were cleared there was a boy in his 20's with a group of four who was singled out and he had to step to the side as they went through all of his suitcases, item by item. (We wondered if there was a "high alert" of some kind.) They were very thorough. We finally boarded the plane.

We flew west in daylight all the way. We looked at the pictures still on each of our cameras. We watched a movie. We ate and read and Doug took short naps. The flight was uneventful and we arrived in Chicago on time. We whizzed through customs without any inspections. We called Phil & Chontel to say we were on our way home and asked where they parked our car.

We caught the small United Express plane to Des Moines and both fell sound asleep for that 45 to 60 minute ride. We had to walk outside to get to the airport and up the stairs to the second floor. (They had added this new gate for

the small flights.) We were both a little groggy from our long nap but happy to be on the way home.

We arrived at the house at 11:30 PM and decided the unpacking could wait as we were going to bed. Zack talked to us, crawled up on the bed and slept below my legs all night. He yowled to go out at 4:00 AM and I let him out and then we both slept until 8:00 AM.

That was the end of this trip ----- on to new adventures,  
into the future.