

GOING PLACES

JOHN COONEY



ST PETERSBURG'S GOLDEN, GUSHING FOUNTAINS



Have you read the book, 'The Bronze Horseman'? Well, guess what? Some two years ago, on a certain sunny Wednesday in June, I SAW him, in all his glory, up there on the back of his rearing stallion. Tsar Peter the Great, he was called (Pyotr Alexeyevich Romanov to be precise, or **Пётр Алексеевич Романов** if you prefer it Russian). And, without him, there would be no St Petersburg. And no tourists like me eyeballing his big bronze statue.

In 1682, at the ripe young age of 10, Pyotr Alexeyevich became Tsar of All Russia – proof that, so long as you're born into a royal family and can stay on a horse, you can be just about anything you want.

He grew up to be Peter the Great – a six-foot-eight-inch giant and a high-achieving ruler, crushing tribal rebellions, waging war against the Swedes, amassing staggering wealth, turning his Tsardom into a major European power, and packing his first wife off to a nunnery so he could marry again.

Oh, he also chose a swamp in Russia's northwest corner as the location for what some still regard as the most beautiful city in the world: St Petersburg.

Which is where I was that Wednesday when I saw him ...

Peter the Great's Imperial Capital was dubbed 'the Venice of the North' – thanks to the Neva River which runs widely through the middle of town, and the canals that crisscross the city every which way.

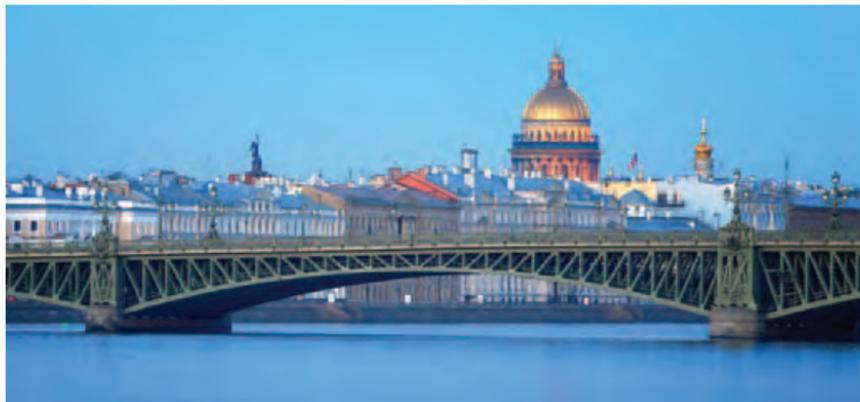
In fact, St Petersburgers (or whatever the locals are called) will tell you proudly that they've got more than 500 bridges.

We didn't get to count them the day our ship docked at the nearby cruise-terminal. But we did get to explore what was once the pride of the Romanovs, with photo-stops at several historical and political landmarks: St Isaac's Cathedral with its gleaming gold dome ... the sparkling Peter & Paul Fortress, built to protect the

Tsar from the Swedish navy ... and the old steam battleship Aurora where (centuries after Peter ruled the roost) the Bolsheviks announced their socialist revolution.

We dined on wine and stroganoff (when in Russia, do what the Russians do). We clapped along with some lively, foot-stomping Cossacks as they sang and danced and whirled and twirled the night away, all decked out in their traditional finery. And we went to bed that night dreaming of glorious days gone by ...

Russia's tsars all had a thing for obscenely lavish palaces. Which is one reason why the peasants





came to hate them, I guess. But those same palaces – stunningly restored, with their gold-and-glitter facades, decadent interiors and priceless works of art – today attract tourists and tourist-dollars by the shipload.

Peter the Great was responsible for more than his fair share of these edifices – like the magnificent Hermitage (his vast winter residence) and sensational Catherine’s Palace (which he built as a hang-out for wife No.2). But we Kiwis escaped the city the following day, driving 26kms west to explore his summer estate on the shores of the Gulf of Finland.

Petrodvorets (or Peterhof), is actually an ensemble of ornate palaces, fabulous gardens, and gushing, golden fountains – probably St Petersburg’s most inspired attraction, and a must-see (in the opinion of me).





We'd already spent hours roaming around inside other palaces, so here we just kicked-back in the gardens, meandering along the paths, soaking up the ambience, and imagining what life might've been like for the 18th Century's wealthy bourgeoisie. It was a gorgeous warm day, and crowds of Russians were doing the same thing: kids playing hide-and-seek amongst the hedgerows, picnickers reclining on the lawns, young lovers kissing under the trees, and actors in costumes role-playing for the cameras.

But the fountains! You wouldn't believe the fountains ...

There are 144 of them, I'm told, all built back in 1721 ... all gravity-fed (not a pumping-station to be seen) ... and all squirting a combined 36,000 litres of water per minute high into the air. And surrounding the fountains are tumbling

waterfalls, flowing staircases and marble-and-gold statues galore.

We paused on the Palace Balcony, marvelled at the Grand Cascade, ogled at Samson's Fountain, cooled off in the wafting spray, took far more photos than anyone back home will ever want to look at, and headed back to our floating hotel feeling vaguely grateful.

Tsar Peter the Great – we owe you! ❁



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