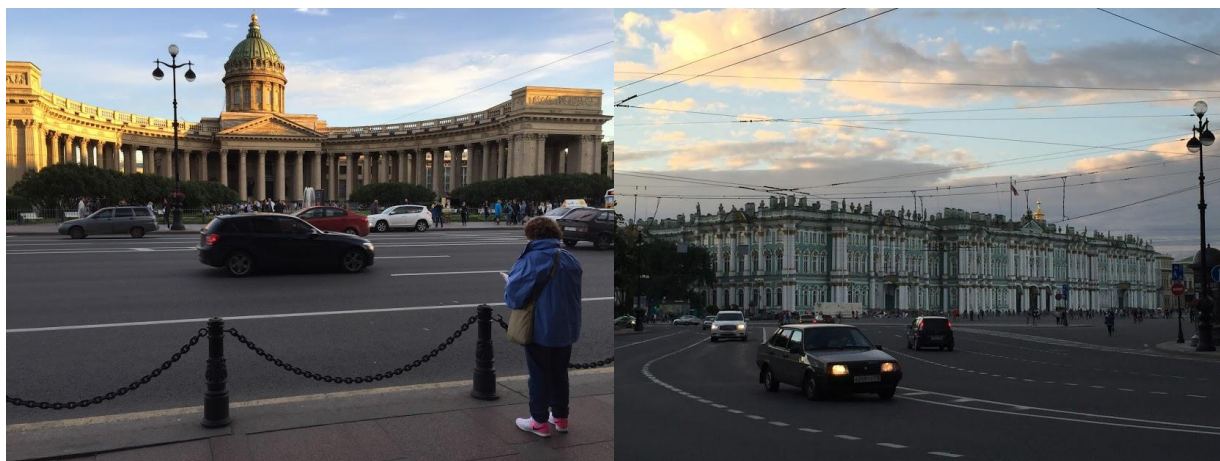
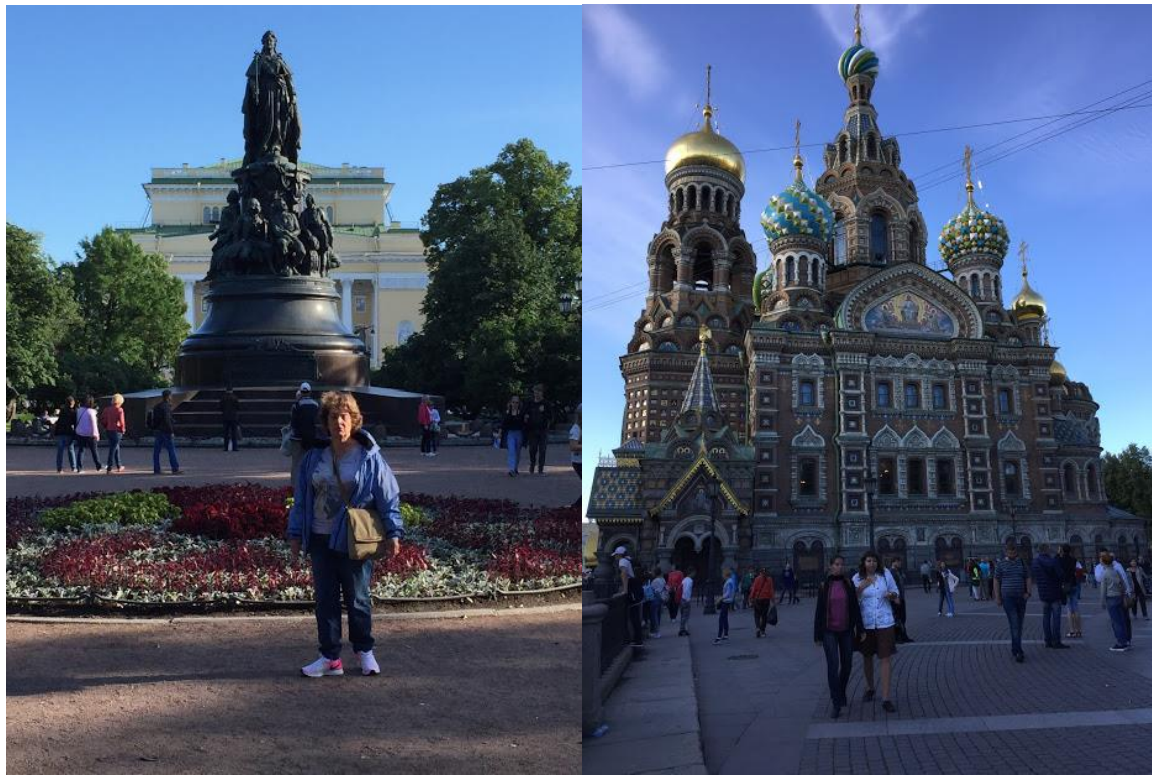


# St. Petersburg, Russia



July, 2016

Grand and grandeur best describe Saint Petersburg the Paris of the North. The boulevards are wide, the buildings magnanimous the parks are vast and the monuments awesome. We did well by arriving on Saturday to start with the obligatory Nevsky Prospect walk through the historic city. The boulevard is swamped with people of all ages (mostly locals) buskers and musicians (classical, rock and even rap) on every corner. On this five kilometre walk (one way) you see all the major (must do) attractions including the Hermitage, St. Isaac, the Russian museum and the spectacular Spilled Blood church. We didn't go into any of them today. Some of our better pictures were taken after 10:30PM as it is White Nights in Saint Petersburg. From a first look and feel the city is all that it is cracked up to be.

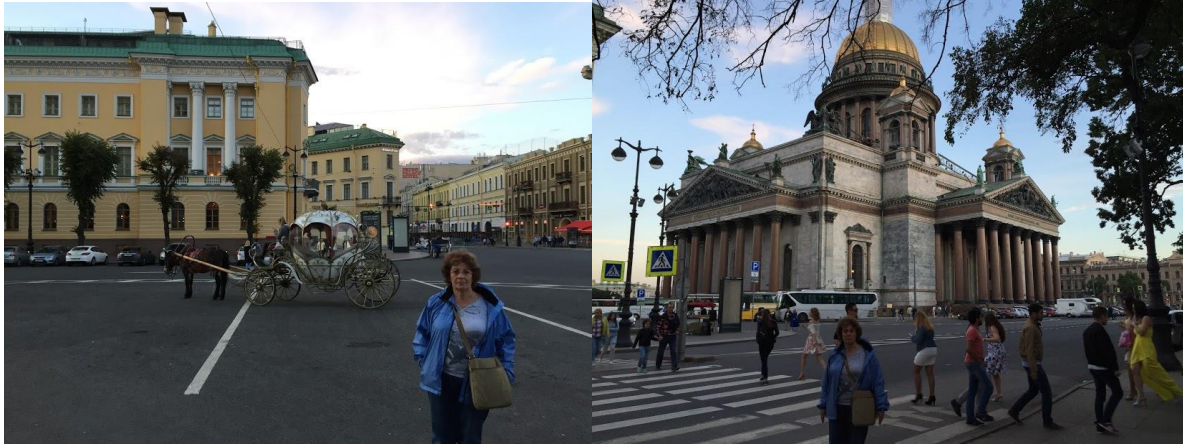












July 10

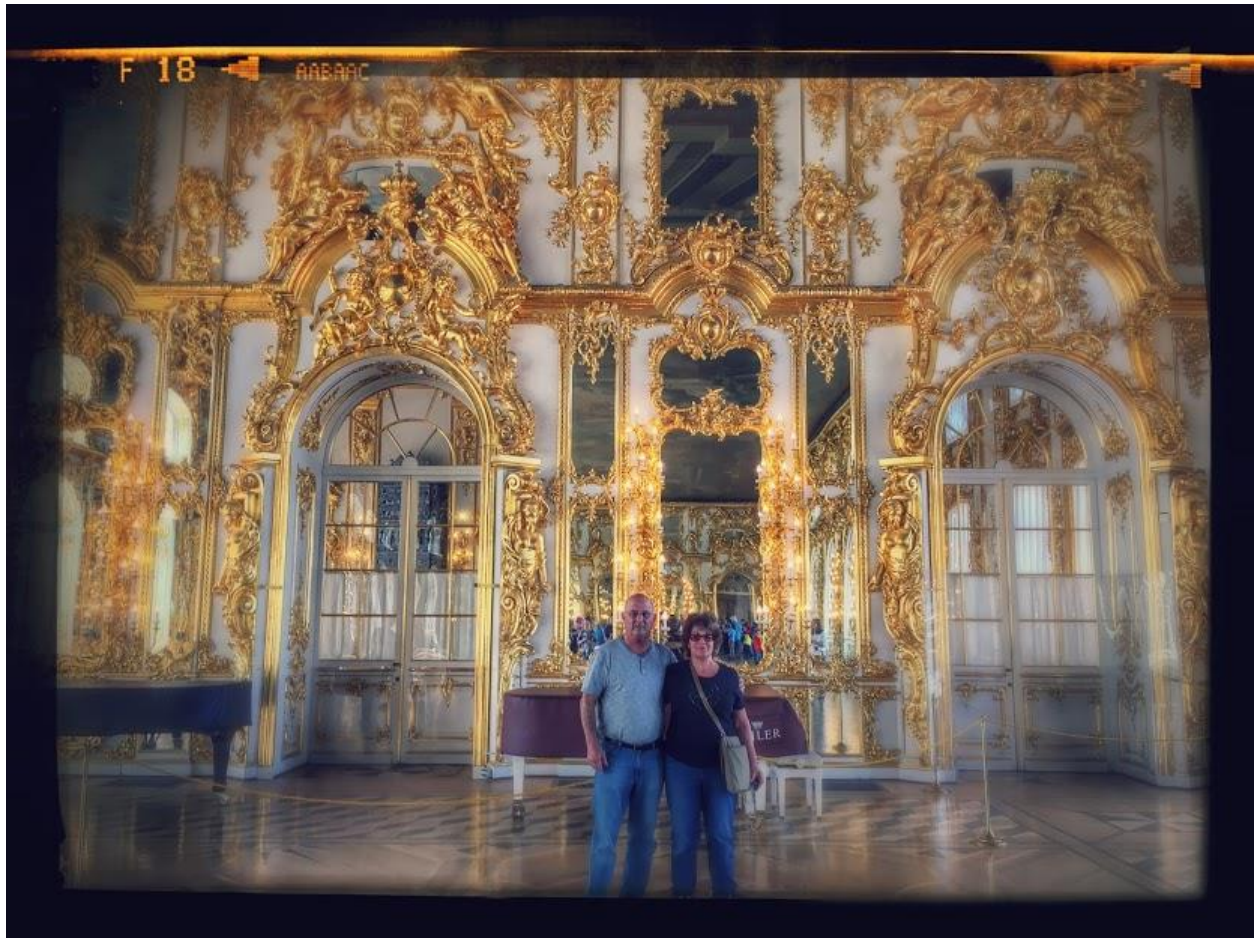
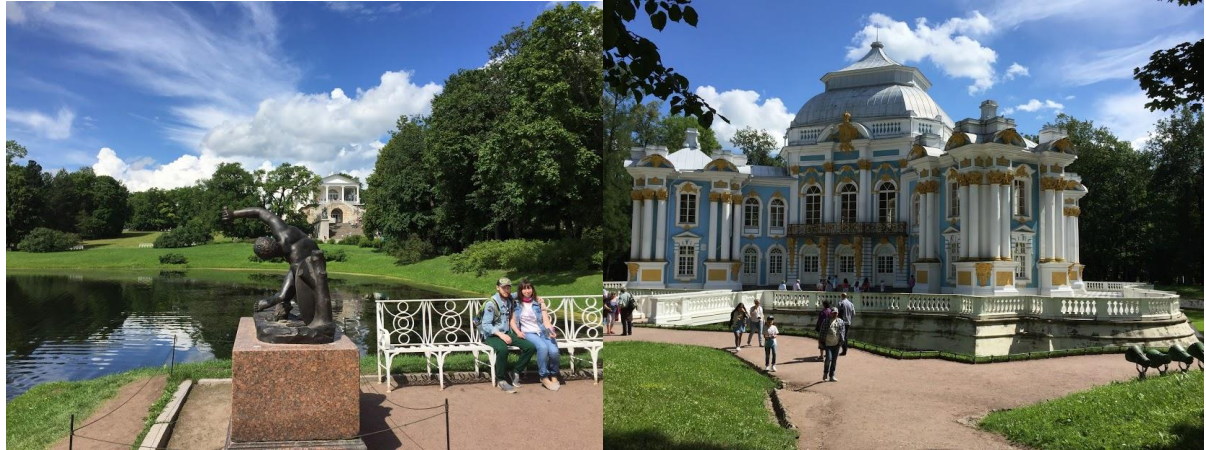
Jet lag kicked in and I woke up at 3:35 AM. Our room has a skylight and to my amazement the sun was already out. Last night when dusk set in around 11:00 PM we shrugged it as "White Nights" of course. But "Bright Mornings" at 3:35 is just ridiculous. Turns out that this is nature's compensation for the 3 light hours a day (!) in mid- Winter.

Russian Tsars lived it up. Today we went on a day trip to Pushkin town to tour the summer palace and grounds of Katherine the great. We must be jaded. As impressive as it is there is a sense of "Been there done that".

Same can be said about the palace of Paul in the town of Pavlovsk except that the "grounds" are a 600 hectare forest turned park with beautiful landscapes with ponds, streams, pavilions and life size bronze statues whimsically placed throughout the park.









What was really useful was Luba's (our guide) reciting the history of the Russian Tsars era all the way to the Bolshevik Revolution, the Birth of the Soviet Union, the Nazi occupation and subsequent liberation of what was then Leningrad and after the fall of the Soviet Union now St. Petersburg. This was a refresher of our high school history lessons which amazingly were still hidden in the basement of both our memories but that just as amazingly evaporated in detail as soon as we hit our hotel room. Mom always says "you get what you pay for". As a result of this mantra we must have gotten a hell of a lot and indeed we have had. Once again this was a private guided tour and it allowed us to spend time talking with Luba a close to 40 years old maid living with her parents and brother and a fourth generation born and bred St. Petersburgian, about everyday life in Russia (nothing political). Afternoon nap has now been extended to more than four hours. Have we been travelling too much or is it just that we are getting old? Now we're off to watch the final of Euro 2016 between France and Portugal likely in an Irish bar down the street because they are everywhere we have ever been to.

July 11

The interior of the "Spilled Blood" church is just as spectacular. The walls and ceilings feature paintings of Russian Orthodox saints. The area is surprisingly small so we were in and out in minutes. The entrance fee can be spared by buying post cards, but of course we all need to take our own photos so that we can send them to the cloud.





The St. Isaac Colonnade is 43 meters high and spiral 268 steps to climb. Once again the top down 360 view of the city of St. Petersburg is probably worth the climb unless as the sign warns you have a coronary disease (I do) or that you are under 14 or that you are intoxicated. I checked my breath and figured that two out of three ain't bad and made the climb to the top for more photos although this time a shorter trip to the cloud.





Uber is not going to make it big in St. Petersburg. It turns out that all you have to do to fool a tourist into believing that you're a legitimate taxi is paint around your vehicle a checkered stripe. It worked for us although for a while we were wondering if we were going to be dropped off at our destination or just being dropped off. They don't accept Trendspttr or Ketty warrants in Russia. We ended up paying for a very long trip \$6 which we thought was a steal. On the way back the (seemingly legit Taxi) driver asked for \$20 for a much shorter route. I told him that I only paid \$6 going there. He looked at me asking (without uttering a word) "What are you going to do about it" so I handed him the \$20 but I'll be damned if I tipped him.

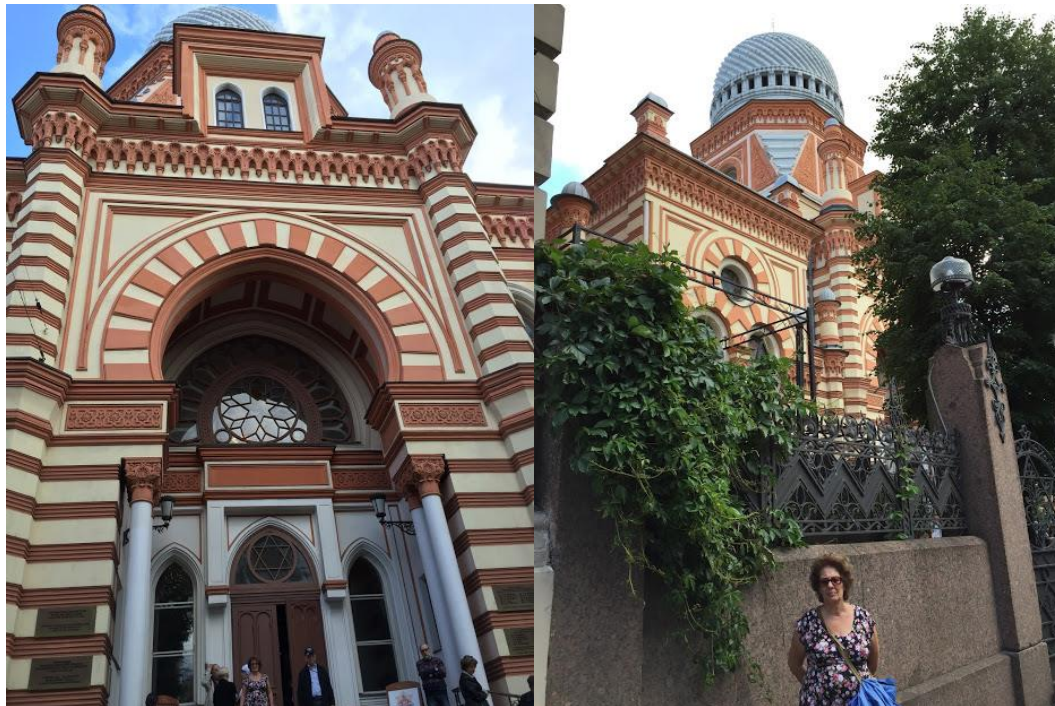
Verdi's Rigoletto at the new Mariinsky theatre was worth seeing if for no other reason for the angelic voice of Gilda the Mezzo Soprano Olga Trifonova. We were discussing in Hebrew the synopsis we read during the intermission in English after listening in Italian with Russian sub-titles. But it's not hard to follow: he falls in love with her, she falls in love with him, her husband or her father is mad and seeks revenge and at the end she dies... [Opera name here] All cynicism aside though the music, costumes and of course the wonderful voices are worth the price of admission. It may not have been as exciting as last night final of Euro2016 which we watched in a bar with three waitresses and two guests (ourselves). Portugal won?!



July 12

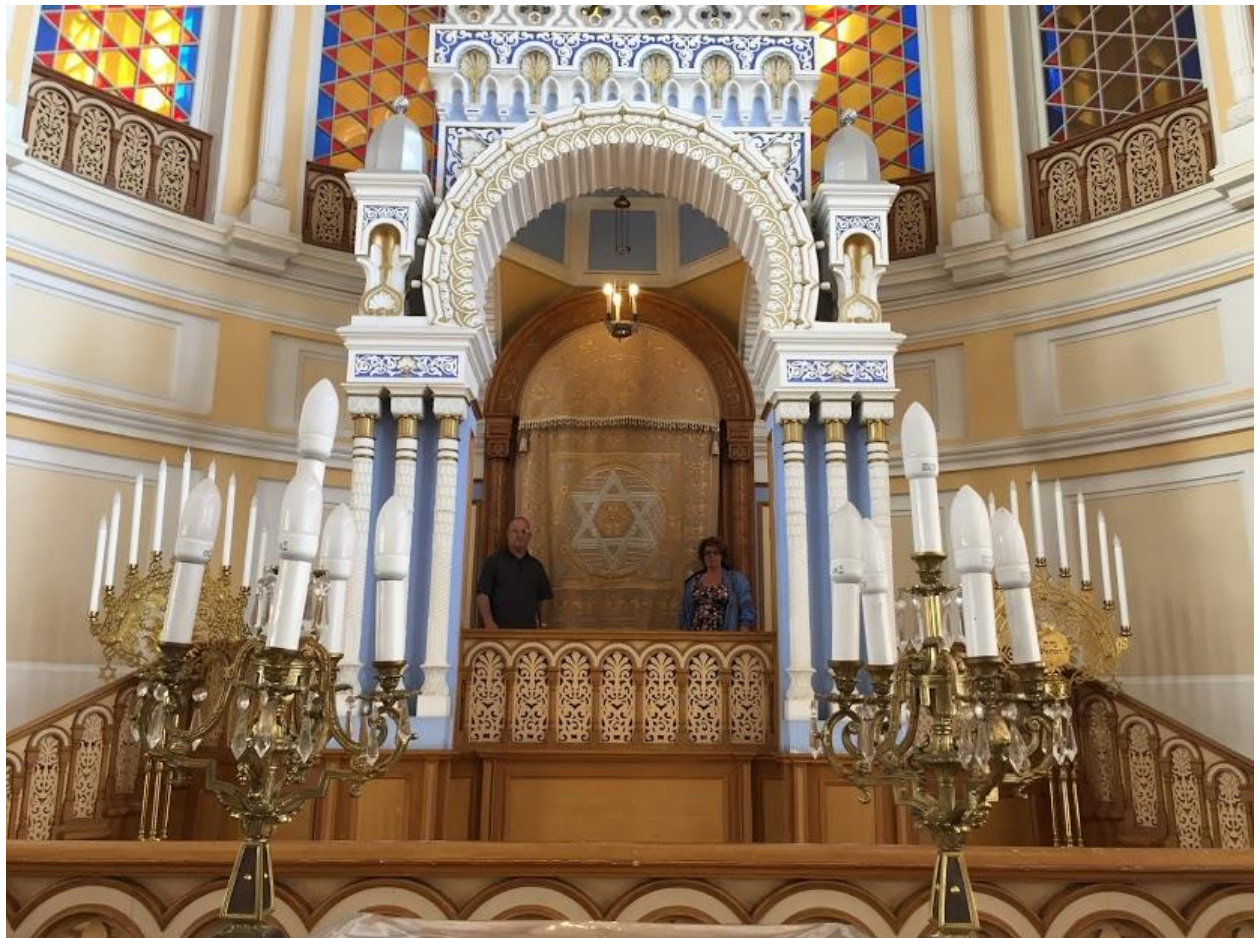
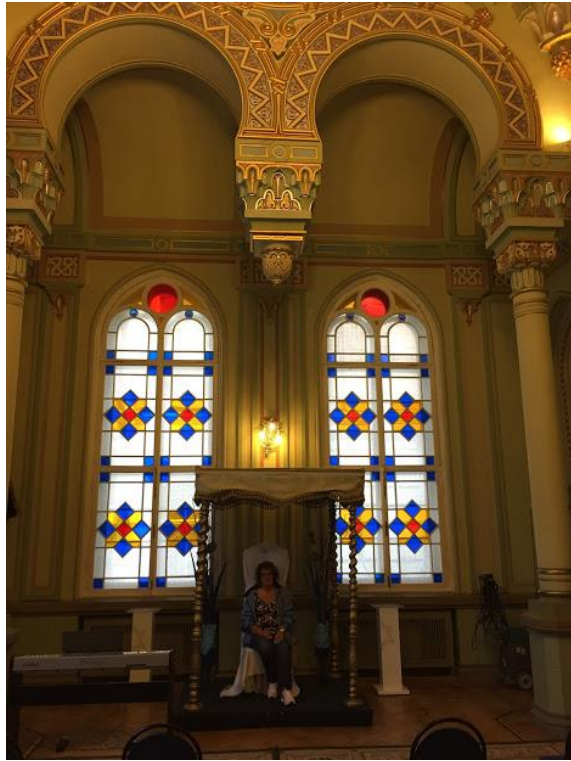
As if we learned from last night. We're trying to hail a cab to the Jewish Synagogue. An unmarked car stops and as experienced tourists we waved him off. He then places an orange triangle (which he bought at the Dollar store) claiming he was a taxi. We knew better this time and said how much? \$20? No way. How about 10?. No way. 4?. OK. On the way back by bus we paid \$1.5 for two.

The Moorish style Jewish synagogue seats 1400 and is the second (to Budapest) largest in Europe. We learned from Arena that the Jewish community is 90,000 strong, active and thriving. Private Hebrew schools are plenty but expensive especially now during what Arena defined as an economic crisis. Yet many Soviet era Jews returned to the faith and surprisingly the millennials are just as drawn to Jewish traditions. Overt or violent Antisemitism is virtually non-existent but like everywhere else in the world is under the surface and on the Internet.



One noticeable fact, an almost understandable yet rare in Europe, a total visible absence of Muslims The interior of the synagogue is very dignified, elegant and yet accommodating. In the Lobby there is seemingly the first of its kind ATM like kiosk for Tzdaka donations and for special blessings. (Me She Berach). Automated Shnor Machine who knew?





The Hermitage museum is so big that it is impossible to see it in one day and if you wanted to see it all it could take 5 days. Today we "did" the general staff building exhibition of the impressionists and post impressionists.



They are all there: Monet, Picasso, Van Gogh, Matisse, Kandinsky, Degas, Cezan from Serie A and a whole bunch from Serie B. The Hermitage complements the set of world famous museums we visited around the world. Museum walk is hard work for old people. 3 hours into it and we are pooped. Tomorrow we go back for day 2 and would still miss more than half of the exhibits.



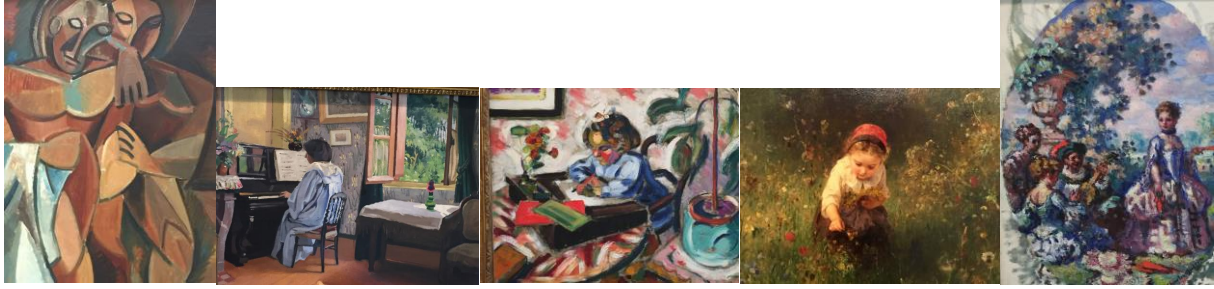




July 13

Second day at the Hermitage we focused on the legends of the painting game: Rembrandt and Leonardo Da Vinci the Pele and Maradona of the masters.





The Russian Tsars really lived it up. The imperial apartments are sumptuous and majestic. Once again you can't but think that melting some of the gold could feed a nation. The Hermitage overwhelms your senses and the cacophony of more than 50,000 concurrent visitors (my estimate - could be higher) is not too helpful. But a must see it is, without a doubt.



A Canadian report will not be complete without commentary on the weather. Temperature is mild ( low to mid-Twenties) everyday however, literally every 10 to 15 minutes it changes drastically and suddenly to hot and sticky, cold and windy or stormy downpour. Never seen it change so frequently. We think that we finally beat Safta into submission. As of this afternoon: no more Castles, no more Cathedrals, no more Museums, no more statues and monuments, no more parks and gardens other than to rest and no more flights over 3-4 hours max. Zman Lanuach. Mind you the mystery kitchen drawer where Safta keeps her



bucket list is still half full. Knowing her it is a temporary respite. White tigers in India - here we come (?)  
It's half time at the Mariinsky theatre performance of the ballet Giselle and the players are having their orange slices in the dressing room.



All kidding aside the performance is phenomenal. The harmony between the orchestra's music and the ballet dancers' choreography is so precise that it makes you appreciate the art form. The story itself unfolds without a word being spoken (Mr. Obvious) and actually captivates you. Who knew that I like ballet as much? The second half was even better while with the dark cemetery set design contrasted by the pure white 24 female

dancers and the 2 phenomenal principle dancer and prima ballerina. I learned it may be reminded that unlike the symphony or the opera during the ballet the crowd claps in approval not only at the end of each dance but in appreciation of difficult and athletic dance moves while the music is on. I counted more than 20 such instances and joined in the applause. The audience is naturally knowledgeable and just to underscore how phenomenal was this performance there was a standing ovation lasting (I timed) 15 minutes after the curtain came down and the performers were called back at least 20 times. This performance we are sure to remember for a long time.



We're back for the third time to the Jazz Bar/Restaurant literally across the street from our hotel. The food is excellent and the Jazz vocalist excellent. St. Petersburg looks and feels very Western. Music in every restaurant or bar is American, many speak English, dress like New York or Toronto (young and old) Post-communist Soviet Union is alive if financially not well.

July 14

It's funny how sometimes or in our case many times when you don't research and plan your itinerary too strictly, things fall into place nicely. Almost arbitrarily we decided to go to Peterhof on this our last day in St. Petersburg. The palace itself is the most impressive of them all if not by size or opulence than by its elegant interior beauty. However the main attractions are the many waterfalls and cascades in this huge and manicured park by the Baltic shore. The photos will do the talking. Tip: Do not leave St. Petersburg before you visit Petethof some 39 kilometre from the city centre.









One final impression, St. Petersburg feels extremely safe in this age of global terrorism. There is an almost total absence of law enforcement presence in this very crowded city. Even at the airport where there are now two perimeters of security checks there is a total absence of police or military personnel. We Westerners were led to believe that Russia is somewhat of a police state. Unless they are all undercover we didn't see any.