

From Russia - 'In' Love

with

Magellan/A&K/Etihad

13-19 November 2013

Death by 1000 Palaces and stunning meals - but what a way to go!

13 November, 2013 - St. Petersburg

After a long, but comfortable trip on Etihad (were Business Class seats ever more welcome?), a transit in Moscow, (the \$8 cup of tea got our attention!) AND a domestic flight on Trans Aero, we eventually reach St. Petersburg. The Melbourne contingent had already been on "celeb. watch" having travelled with Elizabeth Hurley from Melbourne to Abu Dhabi. She, of course, was in First Class but was forced to do a "perp walk" through Business at both ends of the trip, so we could observe: for the record, a Kelly bag, a Louis Vuitton carry-on, and no sign of the ring!

We are warmly greeted by Natalia, A & K's GM in Russia, and transferred to the Grand Hotel Europe. This is our first interaction with A & K's in-country Russia operation, and sets the scene for consistently wonderful product, service, and guides throughout.

As tired as we are, we enjoy the ride (albeit in darkness) to the hotel, processing our first impressions of a city and country which are new to us all. The lack of English signage and unfamiliar alphabet immediately make things "exotically foreign". We're in a state of tired, excited anticipation as we check in.

Our first hotel stay is at the utterly lovely Grand Hotel Europe, where we are warmly welcomed by Anna - name significant because four of the first five ladies we meet are named Anna! - We are blessed with gorgeous suites, a coffee table groaning with welcome goodies, and a very inviting bed (for me, the first I had encountered in almost 80 hours). The hotel is the oldest in Russia, both very grand, and very European.

Somehow we must ignore our beds, spruce up, and remain awake to enjoy the dinner hosted by the hotel - a medley of Russian dishes (prepared by the chef from New Zealand), and all of them to die for. I'm talking caviar, Siberian crab, borscht, beef stroganoff (wagyu of course!), and a scrumptious modified tarte tartin. The room was amazing, and its vaulted frescoed ceiling provided perfect acoustics for the small orchestra playing on the stage - naturally!! Meanwhile, our poor hosts find themselves entertaining a bunch of zombies, alternately picking at the amazing food, or falling asleep in it. As always in such situations they graciously acknowledged our tiredness, and were probably as relieved to have an early night as we were.

Our welcome to Russia has been a warm and impressive one, and the bar is set.

14 November, 2013 - St. Petersburg

Breakfast was in the same stunning room as dinner, and included champagne, caviar and a concert pianist: all luxury indulgence for us, but entirely normal in these parts.

St. Petersburg's reputation precedes it, so we know it's a beautiful city however, Lena our local guide, and Natalia of course, bring it to life in their special A & K way. The city is built on 42 islands, so its "water, water everywhere", with dozens of bridges and seemingly 1000 palaces, making up the landscape. The day is cold and gloomy but we are certainly not! We have our first encounter with the Romanovs in their rather ornate "burial ground" inside the Cathedral of St. Peter and St. Paul within the fortress of the same name which dominates the man river bank.

This is the beginning of Lena's tutelage on the various Tsars, Romanovs, Yusupovs, Ivanovs, Catherines, Nicholas' etc. We earnestly try to take it all in like a bunch of mature age history/art students on a field trip, relieved there is no exam at the end. Next stop is the stunning St. Isaac's Cathedral with its massive gilded dome, and incredibly ornate interior. In the Russian Orthodox way, the church is devoid of seats save for a throne for the Tsar. We learn that church-goers must stand during services - sometimes of 4-6 hours duration. We become aware and appreciative of the fact that this is definitely not the tourist season. We seem to largely have the place to ourselves, and make mental notes that the busy summer season is to be avoided - Lena regales us with stories of long queues and crowds.

It is only mid way through the first day, but there are wallets twitching! There is not a skerrick of free time in our programme and we are already nervous that we won't get to contribute to this "new market economy". A gentle approach to Lena is rebuffed with "it's actually cheaper to fly to New York and shop there". Now she is on to us, and for the remainder of our time in St. P. her duties include keeping us out of souvenir shops - she was brilliant at it!

Our next stop is the Astoria Hotel, and its adjacent sister property, the Angleterre, just a short street crossing from St. Isaac's. This is our first (of many) reminders that the anti-smoking movement has failed to impact upon the Russians. We are told later in Moscow, that men and women of all ages and, commonly, children smoke like chimneys, and previous anti smoking campaigns and legislative changes have had no effect at all. By the way, fags are full strength and about \$1 a packet.

Anyway, our inspection of the Astoria commences with a spin through its famous bar, where we were jointly confronted by a wall of smoke and nude photographs above the fireplace in the next room- the latter like some kind of prize perv for enduring the smoke to get there. A reminder to us, and probably a surprise to our hosts, of how vehemently anti smoking we are.

The hotel is lovely and seems to enjoy an iconic status among celebrities, with the names of those who have stayed (The Rolling Stones, Kylie Minogue and Madonna among them) quaintly displayed on small brass plaques adjacent the lift. I think we all decided (not for the last time on this trip) that we could cheerfully set up house, and in this case "shop" as well, because there was gorgeous office, in the Presidential Suite, just as Madonna once did.

We briefly step on to "planet 4 star" and take a look at the adjoining Angleterre which provides a perfect budget balancing combination of 4 star rooms, with access to the 5 star accoutrements of the Astoria - smokey bar and nude pics among them.

Lunch is amazing, and we are further acquainted with Russian specialties - the Olivier Salad is a favourite with all of us. By now our pre-conceptions of Russia are becoming hard to recall but chief among them would have been terrible food: thus far every meal has been the polar opposite.

Our day continues with a visit to the Yusupov Palace - one of so many examples of how the wealthy lived pre the Revolution. Typically these massive baroque piles were occupied by four or five people and platoons of servants. This one is famous because Rasputin was "offed" in the basement.

We then did something very special, and visited the home apartment of Yuri Petrochenkov and his wife Nelli. Yuri is an artist who specialises in ceramics, including his version of "Faberge eggs". He is absent, so we are warmly hosted by Nelli. The apartment is accessed via a non-descript door at street level and is four storeys up a functional stairwell, or a skinny lift - take your pick. It was wonderful to see something of Russian domestic life. Nelli has a great kitchen lined with pretty bric a brac. The other rooms are filled with the couple's various collections of Russian art (more of which later) and other pieces, and of course Yuri's work. How lucky they are to have such high ceilings and room to put it all. Nelli provides a scrumptious afternoon tea which, mercifully, serves as dinner for those of us going to the ballet this evening.

The shopping "push" has determinedly intensified, and nowhere with a cash register is safe. How lucky we were that Simone needed to purchase some stockings to wear to the ballet - a wonderful excuse to storm the supermarket next door to Nelli's entry door. Lena found us though and, in what must surely be a first for a bunch of agents on an exotic fam. trip, a whole day passed without us purchasing anything!

St. Petersburg is a long way north, winter is coming, so the days are short. It is still completely dark at 9.00am and night falls in the late afternoon. It's cold outside and absurdly over-heated inside - everywhere. Given the pace of our programme, and the premium A & K experience we are enjoying, we are always transported door to door in total comfort. The cold doesn't bother us at all, but the indoor heating does.

The ballet is at the Mariinsky 2 Theatre, a marvellous new facility adjacent the old. We gather it hasn't been warmly received by the locals, many of whom prefer the old (still functioning) Mariinsky next door. Still there are enough of them out and about tonight, to fill the massive theatre for a modern performance of Cinderella which, we somehow manage to remain awake for, and enjoy, from our wonderful centre seats just four rows from the front.

By now we are well acquainted with Cloak Rooms - an intrinsic part of winter life in Russia. Every place has one - only the size varies. They are supremely organised and presided over by pleasant attendants, and no money changes hands. In a couple of them, the coat is returned with smiling assistance to put it on. At the ballet, the cloak room queues were long, and we noticed a lot of queue jumping. Later we learned that for 50 rubles (about \$1.75) you can hire some binoculars, and the hire comes with "no queuing" to get your coat at the end of the performance. We were told people frequently hire the binocs just to avoid the coat queue, and don't bother to use them!

We return to our hotel and a truly "wow" experience - there on the table inside our door was a beautifully presented gift of authentic ballet shoes and chocolates. The shoes were obtained by the hotel courtesy their arrangement with the Mariinsky Ballet. At an impossibly small Size 5, the shoes are definitely for decorative purposes only, and we all remain Cinderellas. A beautiful gesture from the hotel, and one of several "pinch me" moments on this trip.

We are also becoming accustomed to friendly people with their "Viktor and Sveta" accents, who seem to go about their lives and work with pride and enthusiasm, in a country which is very different from the one I, and most others in the group recall as a place of terrible oppression and poverty, and somewhere we were terrified of, during the Cold War. Our A & K hosts also well recall those times and their commentary and stories are so interesting.

15 November, 2013 - St. Petersburg

Sadly we must leave the Grand Hotel Europe. There couldn't possibly be anywhere nicer to stay, or could there?

After the caviar/champagne/concert pianist breakfast, Natalia hosted a presentation of A & K's programme in Russia and adjoining states - a revelation to us all, as we became acquainted with the various "Stans" and other previous Soviet states. For such a bunch of experienced agents and travellers, it was refreshing to be, and learning about, somewhere totally new to us.

Today we take a drive into the country to the town of Pushkin which is home to Catherine's Palace. Alexander Pushkin is a familiar name to us all but it was a revelation to learn that he was descended from an Abyssinian slave purchased in Italy, so he was 1/8 black. Later in the trip we learned he hated the portrait of him in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow because it depicted his swarthy skin, his African nose, and his tight black curly hair - all legacies of his forebears. We also learned that French was his first language and often his written Russian was incorrect, and subject of a bit of derision by the cultured class.

Back to the palace. It's a glorious frosty morning, so the gilded "onion domes" are glinting in the sun. The palace is amazing by any measure however, we were stunned to learn that it was all but destroyed in the war, and reduced to a ruined, looted shell. In the years since it has been painstakingly restored to its former baroque splendour - including the amber room which resembles a jigsaw of a bazillion pieces of amber, completely rebuilt from old black and white photographs. It's impossible not to be completely awed by the palace, and by the precious artisans and their work which restored it, and I guess, the divine intervention which saved it from obliteration, and loss forever.

We see the first of many brides for whom the various palaces of St. P. provide an extravagant ready made backdrop for photos.

We are now connoisseurs of all forms of parquetry and marquetry of which we see amazing examples throughout the entire trip.

To Lena's horror, we barnstormed the small street market outside the palace, and the shopping drought was broken.

Lunch is at a "log cabin style" country restaurant seemingly in the middle of nowhere, and we loved it. Nothing like some vodka in the middle of the day to keep you warm and functioning well - or so the Russians tell us! With the shopping genie well and truly out of the bottle, more purchases were made at the restaurant souvenir counter (I told you we were desperate!).

Back in town we inspect the lovely Taleon Imperial Hotel, a nice riverside boutique property housed in what was once a relatively small palace. Many of the old palace rooms remain more or less as they were, but well used today.

We quickly stop by the Stroganoff Palace (where Beef Stroganoff was invented for its owner), and visit a local restaurant, with its fantastic cellar dining rooms (one including a bed!)

It's time to check in to our home for this evening, the just opened Four Seasons Lion Palace. As the name suggests the building is a big old triangular palace which occupies a dress circle position across the street from St. Isaac's (so close to my window I couldn't take a proper photograph). The building has been completely renovated/restored/converted and now houses a truly superb hotel.

If, with a gun to my head I was forced to name a favourite from this trip, then this would be it. But not necessarily because of the hotel - Four Seasons properties are always stunning, with the very best in service, amenities, and F & B. But, at the Lion Palace, you truly feel as if you are living in a palace, from the moment you walk in. Access to rooms is via the massive central staircase - that feels grand. Even grander are the corridors leading to the rooms - so wide, they are fully furnished, in the centre and down the sides. You never see a soul in them, so it feels even more like rattling around in a palace like the Royals do. Walls are massively thick, so you have quite an alcove leading to your room door. Then upon entry there is a huge vestibule leading to the room itself which is just gorgeous. Ceilings are impossibly high which must be a hotel decorator's dream when it comes to light fittings, curtains etc.

There is a beautiful library bar (real books), with walnut cabinetry, a stunning Italian restaurant complete with fireplace, and a yet to open Asian fusion restaurant cutely named SinToHo (Singapore/Tokyo/Hong Kong).

Whoever presided over the Lion Palace decor would have scored a once in a lifetime gig I think.

Dinner is in the hotel, and (as is now the norm) was a superb meal.

How sorry we are to be staying only one night however, Moscow awaits and we must move on.

16 November, 2013 - St. Petersburg/Moscow

Everyone knows The Hermitage is St. Petersburg's premier attraction, so we are thrilled to take the short 9.00am walk in the dark, and light rain, from the hotel to Parliament Square where The Hermitage dominates one side. But first we have a shop to visit! Lena and Natalia have "caved", and arranged early opening of a souvenir shop close to The Hermitage. Once again we brandish our wallets and barnstorm however, disappointment awaits. While we manage to purchase a few trinkets, this is not really our kind of shop - we need some good old tourist market stalls - and our semi frenzied states remains.

We are so privileged to have The Hermitage to ourselves courtesy the early hour and off-season. Lena expertly gives us a "highlights" tour, including the various old masters, and the fabled gold room. This is definitely not a "stones and bones" museum, and we thoroughly enjoy our visit.

One more hotel inspection and lunch - this time at the Moika 22 Kempinsky.

A lovely property with a fantastic roof top terrace where we had lunch (inside I hasten to add), prepared by their Michelin chef. Yet another amazing meal.

I should say at this point that along with our frustrated shopping was the similarly tantalising Church of the Spilled Blood. A sort of twin to St. Basil's in Moscow, it first appeared, in its pretty, illuminated, onion domed glory, as a vista from some of our room windows at the Grand Hotel Europe - always viewed in the dark because we were never there when it was light. Later as we toured around town we would see it in the distance. It became a bit of a magnet to us but was not on our programme. Having negotiated a photo stop en route to the train this afternoon, we then discovered during lunch that it was very close to the Taleon Imperial Hotel, and beautifully photographed from the terrace - with an especially good view if you mounted a worker's grid hanging off the building, were not scared of the long (transparent) drop below, and could hold on in the strong Arctic wind - several of us did just that. Of course we took some ground level shots later as planned.

All of us have loved St. Petersburg, every aspect of which has been truly wonderful. We have learned so much from Natalia and Lena who, aside from sharing their own knowledge and anecdotes have graciously answered our many questions.

We observed the lack of Russian cars on the roads, and now know that this is because all other cars are of superior quality to the poor old Russian Lada. St. P. is also has a major vehicle assembly industry for a number of foreign brands, and those are popular.

While the city is clean and well cared for, cars are universally filthy - often so much so that their colour is unrecognisable. I later learn from friends in Moscow that a car can reach that state within just one day of washing, with the dirt somehow "spewed up" by the roads. We notice a lot of sushi restaurants and then learn that it is common to have pizza and sushi sharing a menu.

We learn that Aeroflot has morphed into a quality airline which is the preference of Russians and expats. alike, and preferred over foreign carriers to the US and elsewhere in Europe. This truly is a trip of surprises.

We transferred to the railway station, and boarded the Sapsan "bullet" train to Moscow, a four plus hour journey in excellent comfort. Our tickets were Business Class and included an in-seat three course meal and (one) alcoholic drink. It's the perfect way to travel between the two cities.

We had been warned that Moscow and St. Petersburg are very different, and we can immediately see that is the case, but certainly not in a negative way.

It's the weekend, so the legendary Moscow traffic we have been told about, is not evident, although the huge 12-lane roads are certainly full to the brim. It's cold, and raining lightly - but never enough to dampen our spirits. Our home for three nights is Moscow's premier hotel - the relatively new Ritz Carlton. We have superb rooms with use of the Club Lounge - if only there were time for a quiet bevvy between gigs! Instead we staggered in 15 minutes before closing time each night and well, did the best we could!

We are adjacent Red Square, and rain and fatigue notwithstanding, we step out to explore. Immediately we see the square is not square, nor is it flat, and nor is it overly large. I think we were all expecting something like Tiananmen Square in Beijing. The amazing and massive GUM

Department Store (completely festooned with fairy lights) dominates one side of the square, the Kremlin Wall and Lenin's tomb the other, with St. Basil's at one end. What would usually be open space in the (non) square is mid transformation into a massive Christmas Market and skating rink, so there is a lot of construction fencing, cranes and other equipment about. We snap approximately 1000 pics of St. Basil's (who knew it is actually on a little hill?), and then explore GUM in the short time we have to do so before 10.00pm closing. A real shop at last! Sadly, by now we know there are no bargains in Russia - especially Moscow, and our foraging is confined to souvenirs. By this stage we don't mind so much, although there is still the fur hat issue to be resolved - none have been purchased and they are on every one's list.

New city, new guides, and we once again lobby for a "bit of a shop". The lovely Tatiana promises to deliver and she does - with a short stop in the Arbat Street tourist precinct, which is lined with shops selling exactly what we want to buy, and we do.

17 November, 2013 - Moscow

This morning we enjoy a city sights spin which commences with an excursion on the Metro - 188 stations, 9 million users per day (far more than London and Paris combined), trains every 40 seconds, and less than a dollar for a single journey anywhere on the massive network. Many of the stations are palatial, and gallery-like with frescoes, sculptures and chandeliers, and we visit three of them. Each was amazing - but especially so was the station at Revolutionary Square with its 80 sculptures, some including dogs with very shiny noses, as passing commuters pat them for luck. Trains stop for less than a minute, so getting on and off is "go, go go". We continue our journey around the city, where a new modern skyscraper district is still under construction. We see the lovely Moscow River, and famous Gorky Park. At all times the massive Kremlin complex dominates. It is surprising to see that Moscow is undulating in parts. It is also a very beautiful city.

We visited the Tretyakov Gallery of Russian Art - truly a revelation to all of us. We were all amazed at the collection of icons, and the work of the Russian masters which absolutely should rank with those we are all familiar with, and which we saw in The Hermitage. This should be a must on every Moscow visitor's itinerary. The sweet European custom of lovers placing padlocks on bridges has a new twist in Moscow with two avenues of "padlock trees" instead.

Lunch was at the Ararat Park Hyatt, where we had a fabulous Armenian meal.

We drove passed a massive sporting precinct which included the Olympic Stadium. We then go to a lookout point on top of Sparrow Hill, to look over the city. There we encounter the confronting sight of a young man inside a cage, just large enough for him to sit in, and high on a wooden pedestal. He had been there since mid-day, and determined to spend 800 days in sympathy with his father who had been jailed the same day for 800 days. It was freezing, and he was refusing all offers of food and warmth. It was so cold he would have been lucky to last the night, and it wasn't hard at all to think his father would have been more comfortable than he was.

18 November, 2013 -Moscow

The busiest day of the trip begins with a brisk walk in the morning sunshine, (belying the near freezing temperature!) to The Kremlin, a massive walled complex of palaces, cathedrals, and

gardens, which also houses the Government working offices, and the modern Congress building built in the 60's. It is reminiscent of The Vatican and seems to function similarly as a "city with a city".

A & K have arranged access to the Diamond Fund a quaint name for the stash of gold, platinum, and precious jewels which are separately owned and administered by the state but housed within the Armoury museum. Heavily guarded (lots of guys talking into their wrists! and telling us to be quiet), and very dark, it was amazing to see, and we were privileged to do so. That done, we moved onto the Armoury which has absolutely nothing to do with armour/artillery - creating certain disappointment for those with interests in such things queuing for hours to see it - it is simply the name of the Kremlin museum. There are nine display rooms filled with treasures from wedding dresses to carriages, but especially interesting was the Faberge egg collection - who knew there were only 54 of those made!

Our final hotel inspection for the trip was the Baltshug Kempinski located across the river from Red Square with fabulous views to The Kremlin and lovely St. Basil's (albeit including the car-park which exists on that side of it). The hotel is superb and once again lunch was likewise.

Some observations:

We see many men waiting at airports and railways stations flowers in hand - often a single, massive rose. We learn that Moscow is home to at least 8 million illegal immigrants from the "Stans" who typically do the "dirty" work the Muscovites prefer to avoid. We learn that everyone lives in apartments in Moscow - there are no houses as we know them (except in the quite pretty subdivisions springing up a long way out of town near the airports).

The most coveted apartments are those built in the Stalinist era, but we also learn that even quite humble abodes boast impossibly high ceilings - a status symbol. The airports are a travel trivia organiser's dream with taxi-ways lined with aircraft from airlines we have never heard of!

We move on to the Bolshoi Theatre where we are privileged to "play" in the stalls, and one of the several dress circles, before going backstage to the rehearsal area. Another "pinch me" moment.

We end the day with a visit to a Cold War Bunker, in the centre of the city, and built as an emergency command post during the Cold War, in the event of American invasion.

Of course, the Americans were similarly scared of the Russians (weren't we all!!), and bizarrely I was at The Greenbrier in the USA, less than two weeks ago, where another of the 10 such facilities in the world exists, touring their version of the same thing.

A & K hosted our farewell dinner at the famous Cafe Pushkin - a Moscow institution, and all at once our trip is almost over. One of our guides said that Russia is an enigma wrapped in history with a riddle inside. You can say that again.

We have seen and experienced so much, and encountered many characters straight from "central casting" along the way. Absolutely all our (constant) surprises have been happy ones.

19 November, 2013

Time to pack up and move on, but not before a quick last minute trip to the GUM Food Hall for vodka and chocolate to take home. I pause to recall the scenes at this very same place in the 90's where people would queue for days in the hope of purchasing some food. These days it's Harrods lite!

So there you have it. Just when a bunch of experienced, accomplished agents think there is nothing new under the sun, up comes thus amazing place which we have all discovered for the first time, together. Truly a privilege.

Footnote:

The Protester: The following published on 21 Nov. It seems our prediction of him managing 8 hours rather than 800 days was correct.

Denis Styazshkin / LiveJournal

Pyotr Farber sat in a cage for almost 12 hours in protest of the case against his father.

Pyotr Farber held a solidarity protest at Vorovyovy Gory on Monday for the case against his father Ilya Farber, a rural teacher sentenced to seven years imprisonment for exceeding authority and bribery.

The young man protested what he believes was a wrongful conviction by sitting inside a locked cage with the inscription "800 days" in wrought iron letters on the front, representing the number of days his father has been imprisoned, Novaya Gazeta reported. Farber's protest continued for almost 12 hours until emergency workers cut the padlocks on his cage and he was taken to a local police station. During the entire duration of the action Farber had neither food nor water and was buffeted by gusts of wind in a cold autumn drizzle.

He spoke to no one during the duration of his time in the cage, his friends said.

In 2010 Ilya Farber moved from Moscow to a village in the Tver Region, where he began working as a local teacher and director of a country club.

He was accused of extorting a bribe from a director of a construction firm repairing the club's building. In August 2012 Farber was found guilty and sentenced to eight years in prison. The Supreme Court cancelled the decision on appeal and sent the case back for review. In August of this year an Ostashkov court again found Farber guilty and sentenced him to seven years. A regional court has since sent the second decision in Farber's case for another local trial.

Farber has maintained his innocence and denied all accusations against him throughout the entire period of his prosecution.