



THE RUSSIAN ART TRIP BEST EVER?

Fine Art Connoisseur's eighth annual adventure abroad, the *Russian Art Trip*, delivered what it promised and much more. Conceived by FAC publisher Eric Rhoads, the 10-day tour last September proved an ideal way to mix world-class art and architecture with five-star comforts and a delightfully cohesive group of 44 passengers who shared with each other their passion for beauty, quality, and learning. This was the magazine's first travel program conducted entirely on dry land; although we still love cruises, this land-

only strategy went so well that we will stick with it indefinitely.

Russia is one of the world's most fascinating and artistically accomplished countries, but going there has never been straightforward, even before its current disputes with the U.S. Right from the beginning, there are hurdles: for example, most tourists must obtain an (expensive) visa in advance. Surprisingly few Russians, even in the largest cities, speak English, and their Cyrillic alphabet is difficult for foreigners to decipher. Moreover, patronizing five-star hotels and restaurants is not cheap because plenty of wealthy Russians can afford these amenities.

Having said all of that, many of our travelers came home saying this was the best trip of their lives. The outstanding quality of Russia's visual art — both historical and contemporary — simply amazed them, even those who had visited before. The group was particularly taken with Moscow; some had anticipated a dour sprawl of barren avenues, but found instead a multi-textured capital sparkling with colored lights and whirring with cranes renovating almost every quarter of the city center.

This impression of vitality was intensified the day we arrived because our elegantly minimalist Four Seasons Hotel was surrounded

(LEFT) Dawn Black and Laurie Rhoads at St. Basil's Cathedral ■ (RIGHT) In front of Moscow's Tretyakov Gallery





(TOP ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT) Artist Kolya Dubovik guided us through the Surikov Institute, where he studied. ■ Like his son Kolya, the artist Nikolai Dubovik was invaluable in arranging several private visits. ■ (BOTTOM ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT) Peter Trippi gave an illustrated lecture about Russian art and history at the Surikov Institute. ■ David Orcutt traveled in comfort on the high-speed Sapsan train from Moscow to St. Petersburg. ■ Folk musicians performed at the Podvorye restaurant.

by a popular street festival celebrating Moscow's 870th anniversary. Overlooking the walls of the Kremlin, the Four Seasons is located only one block from Red Square and the Bolshoi Opera. Once inside our soundproofed rooms, we rested and changed in time to gather for a jolly cocktail reception in the hotel's chic bar. There everyone introduced themselves and learned what we would be doing the following day.

THE BEST OF MOSCOW

That next morning, which happened to be September 11, our professional guides walked us through the verdant Alexander Gardens and right into the Kremlin. Cold War babies were surprised to learn that — unlike the Pentagon — almost anyone can walk into the Kremlin, which is essentially a hilltop park rich with magnificent cathedrals and museums, though there are also closely guarded government offices. We arrived early to enjoy a tour of the Armory and Diamond Fund before the public arrived; these are treasure houses filled with extraordinary decorative artworks, including jewels, Fabergé objects, and some of the world's greatest silver. We concluded with tours of the medieval Dormition and Annunciation cathedrals; with their colorfully painted screens and glinting gold trims, Rus-



sian Orthodox churches never disappoint, and this pair are among the most important, nestled inside Russian Orthodoxy's Vatican.

Lunch was in a café facing Red Square — the first of the tour's many unexpectedly delicious restaurants, including one specializing in tangy Georgian cuisine and another designed entirely by a metal sculptor. After lunch we toured onion-domed St. Basil's Cathedral, then the impressive State Historical Museum. The day closed with my first overview lecture, illustrated with slides and maps, and the presentation of commemorative T-shirts to our repeat travelers. Eight-time veteran Roger Rossi was formally crowned Tsar and would take advantage of his regal privileges often.

The next morning saw us explore the Tretyakov Gallery, again before the public arrived. Devoted to Russian art, it offers one surprise after another, particularly the immense size of many canvases. After lunch we visited the Zamoskvorechye gallery, where we were welcomed by the artists Kolya Dubovik

One of the nine Imperial Easter Eggs at the Fabergé Museum



(TOP ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT) Rembrandt's painting *Danaë* at the Hermitage ■ Our visit to St. Petersburg's Repin Institute was organized by Ulrich Gleiter (left), who introduced us to his former instructor there, Yury Kalyuta. ■ In his St. Petersburg studio, Nikolai Blokhin begins a portrait of Eric Rhoads. ■ (BOTTOM ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT) Lani Emanuel, Jill Stoliker, Betsy Fischer, Mary Burrichter, Natasha Vorotnikova, Jane Barton ■ Wen Newman, Cara Rhoads, Charla and Bob Nelson ■ Marcia Wegman, Patricia Gray, Gwen Gutwein, Anita Gildea, Debbie and Dennis Getter

Bigger has always been better in Russia



(LEFT) At the Tretyakov Gallery, A.A. Ivanov's *The Appearance of Christ Before the People* (1837-57) was one of many gigantic paintings. ■ (RIGHT) At the Repin Institute, graduate Ruzanna Teterina stands alongside her enormous diploma painting.



(LEFT) Claudia Clayton and Bob Wrathall ■ (RIGHT) Hermitage director Dr. Mikhail Piotrovsky welcomed Peter Trippi (right) and Eric Rhoads to his office.



Hats proved a source of constant amusement



(CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) Dusty and Dawn Black wear hats marking Moscow's 870th anniversary. ■ Rick Dickinson ■ Mary Ellen Hibey and "Tsar" Roger Rossi, also known as Ambassador of International Art Travel ■ Linda and Larry Blovits ■ Katie and Libby Whipple keep warm on the open-air tour of St. Petersburg's canals.

In Moscow, many guests acquired artworks made by the Kugach family of artists



(TOP ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT) Dick and Anne Keigher ■ Dick Hibey ■ Debbie and Dennis Getter ■ (BOTTOM ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT) Greg and Gale Meador with Ivan Kugach (right) ■ Mark and Michelle Jung with Mikhail Kugach (center) ■ Barbara Lynn Pedersen

and his father, Nikolai, who worked tirelessly to ensure our stay in Moscow was a success. On view at this gallery was a handsome selling exhibition of recent paintings by Kolya and his contemporaries. We concluded our day at the “New” Tretyakov Gallery, where we admired – sometimes puzzled over – masterworks of Soviet Socialist Realism, several depicting Stalin as a man of the people. In the evening, some of us attended a sumptuous production of Mussorgsky’s opera *Boris Godunov* (1873) at the Bolshoi.

The following day, the Duboviks swung open the doors of the famous art academy, the Surikov Institute, where both studied. We were privileged to explore much of the building while meeting officials, instructors, and students who showed us their creations and processes. Our visit there closed with my second illustrated lecture, and then it was on to the Museum of Russian Impressionism, established recently by a private collector in a former chocolate factory. Due to space restrictions, the group was broken into two and visits were

alternated between the museum and the storage space of the well-known Kugach family of artists. There Mikhail Kugach and his son, Ivan, explained their visions while unpacking dozens of canvases for us to admire, and in many cases, to buy.

On September 14, we headed to the 19th-century studio house of Viktor Vasnetsov (1848–1926), the great painter of Russian legends. This offered a taste of old Moscow, when what are now urban neighborhoods were forests and fields. We then headed to the Institute of Russian Realist Art, a privately funded museum filled with spectacular paintings from every decade of the 20th century. After lunch came the enormous Cathedral of Christ the Savior, the replica built in the 1990s on the site of the 19th-century landmark barbarically demolished by Stalin in 1931. Having ogled the sumptuous gilding inside this, the world’s tallest Orthodox church, we crossed the street to the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Art annex devoted to superb 19th- and 20th-century paintings by such French mas-

ters as Monet and Picasso. The day closed with a festive dinner cruise along the Moscow River; much time was spent photographing the floodlit spires of the Kremlin and Red Square.

Alas, we could not remain in Moscow forever. While some shopped for souvenirs, others joined me at the historic Hotel Metropol, where we met with a group of talented American artists on their way to the countryside for two weeks of painting outdoors. Garin Baker, Ken DeWaard, Stapleton Kearns, T.M. Nicholas, and Steven Wood were accompanied by their Russian colleague Irina Rybakova, and we all agreed to remain in touch once home. Having been delivered to the Leningradskiy station, we boarded a spotlessly clean Sapsan train and sped the 440 miles to St. Petersburg in only four hours. Within 30 minutes, we were settled at the classic Belmond Grand Hotel Europe, which overlooks the city’s main shopping boulevard, Nevsky Prospekt, and also the Arts Square, home to the Philharmonic and State Russian Museum.

RUSSIA'S NORTHERN CAPITAL

Autumn had already arrived in St. Petersburg, but we determinedly shivered through an instructive canal-boat tour of central St. Petersburg. This allowed us to understand the imperial capital's unique architectural history and geography: essentially it is an Italian-designed city willed into existence from 1703 by Tsar Peter the Great because he wanted a sea-going port facing Europe. We proceeded to explore the 19th-century cathedral of St. Isaac's, then the Baroque cathedral within the Peter & Paul Fortress, where most Romanov rulers are buried. The afternoon was spent discovering two suburban palaces where some of them spent their summers: Pavlovsk and Catherine Palace were both painstakingly restored after severe damage by Nazi occupiers during World War II. The day closed with a vodka-fueled dinner at the Podvorye restaurant, where quaintly attired singers regale guests with folk songs.

Another suburban expedition opened the next day. This started with the recently restored Chinese Palace on the grounds of Oranienbaum; there Catherine the Great commissioned spectacular interior decorations that escaped German vandalism. Next it was to Peterhof, which Peter the Great modeled on Versailles, complete with gilded fountains that lead from the house down to the Gulf of Finland. Having explored its verdant gardens on a sunny afternoon, we boarded a hydrofoil that sped us back to St. Petersburg in 35 minutes. This gave us time to visit the new-ish Fabergé Museum, filled with *objets*

de luxe including nine of the Imperial Easter Eggs once owned by the American publisher Malcolm Forbes.

It would be unthinkable to visit St. Petersburg without seeing the Hermitage, so we arranged to see it on a Monday, when the public cannot enter. Needless to say, it was a treat to admire masterworks by Rembrandt, Rubens, and others, and also grand chambers used by the tsars for official functions. The afternoon was spent at the State Russian Museum, known for its native treasures ranging from medieval icons to 20th-century modernism. Although it was not technically our last night together, we decided to host our farewell banquet this evening at the opulent palace of Grand Duke Vladimir, a few doors from the Hermitage. Our party occurred in its former theater, where we were joined by the German-born, Russian-trained artist Ulrich Gleiter and his Russian wife, Ruzanna Teterina. This was appropriate, because they were arranging our private visit to the Repin Institute (Academy of Fine Arts) the following day.

That final day began with free time inside the Hermitage's vast General Staff Building, which now contains a chic redisplay of its French modern art treasures, including Matisse, Cézanne, and Picasso. After lunch we were welcomed at the Repin Institute by its vice rector Andrey Sklyarenko, and also by the distinguished painter and academician Yury Kalyuta, who once taught Ulrich there. We moved on to the studio of yet another well-known talent, Nikolai Blokhin, who proceeded to begin his portrait of Eric Rhoads while we watched.

That evening, some of the group headed to bed in order to catch early flights home the next morning, while others of us enjoyed Tchaikovsky's opera *The Queen of Spades* (1890) at the new Mariinsky Theatre.

KUDOS

As always, it was bittersweet to part with friends old and new. This was an exceptionally merry group, their mood surely lightened by our peerless travel coordinator, Gabriel Haigazian (CTP Group, California), and his colleague Howard Wise. We are thrilled to confirm that our team's next trip will explore Italy this coming October — again entirely land-based. Italy is synonymous with great art, architecture, dining, and music, so we expect to have a marvelous time. This will entail multi-day stays in Tuscany and Rome, which can be expanded with an optional pre-stay in Milan and/or an optional post-stay along the Bay of Naples. For details, please contact Gabriel Haigazian via 818.444.2700 or gabriel@thectpgroup.com. Our official website, italianarttrip.com, will be active in mid-January. ●

PETER TRIPPI is editor-in-chief of *Fine Art Connoisseur*. All photos courtesy Eric Rhoads.

The palace of Grand Duke Vladimir formed the perfect backdrop to our farewell banquet in St. Petersburg



(LEFT TO RIGHT) Liza Guest ■ Kathy Jackson ■ The palace's theater became our dining room.