

My name is John and I'm retired (except for some freelance translation) and like to travel alone. I take lots of photos, look for second-hand books which become part of the journey, keep a log and collect fridge magnets. I try to give my trips form and meaning with missions and quests. This is Part 21 of my **Pilgrim Chronicles**.

Russia

Saint Petersburg and Moscow

It's September 23, 2019, the first day of autumn, and I'm off to Russia to begin an unusually well-planned trip: eleven days in Saint Petersburg and nine days in Moscow. I've even purchased the train ticket from one city to the other. The trip is also unusual because I will spend so much time in only two cities where I've already identified almost fifty places to visit and plan to take photos of their famously beautiful Metro stations. So far, the weather forecast for Saint Petersburg is problematic. I haven't travelled in nine months, the longest break since I started these treks eleven years ago, and it feels good to be writing in a travel notebook again. The only mission I have so far is to learn more about how communism was used to keep Russia mired in grim totalitarianism for seven decades.

I wonder if books and reading will play a part in this trip. For reasons unknown, I had stopped reading entirely two weeks ago, after I finished a poorly translated version of Mikhail Bulgakov's iconic novel *The Master and Margarita*. And what a slog that was, one of those Russian novels where every character has four names and you never quite figure out who's who, a satire of Soviet propaganda, bureaucracy and official atheism. With a four-hour layover in Paris, it will take a full twenty-four hours to get to my hotel in Saint Petersburg.

A taxi is waiting for me at the airport and it's a long drive against rush-hour traffic to the Statskij Sovetnik Hotel. I was careful to select better hotels on this trip, and good-sized rooms with a proper desk. The hotel address is on Zagorodnyi Prospect but the tiny entrance with a discrete sign is actually around the corner on Gorokhovaya. If I hadn't arrived in a taxi, I would probably have experienced the same frustration described by others on hotel review sites, walking up and down Zagorodnyi searching for a non-existent entrance. This will be the first example of the kind of Russian confusion and ambiguity I will experience over the next three weeks. I have time to check out the bustling neighbourhood before dinner at a fine kebab shop just down the street.

Actually, the first example of Russian complexity would have been the whole process of acquiring a tourist visa. In theory, I could simply have applied for a visa at my local Russian Consulate, but everyone on the Web advised against this. An official invitation is required, so I went to a travel agency authorized to help and they issued me a fake itinerary including fake reservations in hotels in each city. Then, I took these documents to another agency that specializes in submitting your application to the Consulate, a complicated application that requires a passport-type photo. I had the photo taken at a pharmacy only to discover that it wasn't the right size. Apparently, I should have told the pharmacy that the photo was for a Russian visa, not a passport.

I tried trimming the photo to the appropriate size before the lady at the agency trimmed the white edges even more carefully to fit in the little box on the application. She hoped the Consulate would accept the altered photo and they eventually did. Three weeks later my passport was returned to me with the temporary visa permanently affixed to one of the pages.

In the morning of Day 2, after a night of poor sleep in an overheated room, I finally get to walk in daytime Russia. It's forecast to be grey all day (a harbinger of things to come) so I'll use the day to orient myself in this big city and get some errands done. One of my appliances requires a particular adaptor, I need a book, a metro pass, a couple of pens, and I forgot to bring a good glass string which is essential when I'm taking pictures, leaving me stuck with a fat, ugly thing hanging behind my head.

I set off from my hotel at the top of Gorokhovaya, knowing that the Admiralty and the Winter Palace are at the bottom of the street. It's a nice thirty-minute walk, crossing bridges along the way at the Fontanka River, the Griboyedov Channel and the Moyka River. I turn right at the Admiralty and there's Palace Square, the historic heart of the city. The sun unexpectedly comes out for a few minutes in the square and I get a couple of shots after all.

I manage to find the main drag, Nevsky Prospect, and begin to slowly walk up the busy, noisy street, looking for lunch and the things on my list. It's grey again and chilly, but not windy so not bad. Lunch is good coffee and a cinnamon bun at one the cafeteria-style 'canteen' restaurants you see everywhere here. I will return to this place several times in the next ten days.

I'm quickly getting a sense of how foreign this city is and, unlike almost everywhere in Europe, how few people speak English (even though most of the music you hear in restaurants and other public places is English and much of the signage is in both Russian and English). I have no luck with my errands and head back to the hotel to rest a bit and regroup before taking my first ride on the Metro to look for an adaptor at the Galeria, a huge, garish shopping center where even the large electronics store has no adaptors.

Then I have my first typically Russian exasperating experience. I had wanted to see a documentary film, *Love, Antosha*, at the Angleterre art cinema, which like so many places here is almost totally concealed, this one within a large, posh hotel near St. Isaac Cathedral. I finally find the cinema entrance in the hotel/bar/restaurant complex, but a young man tells me the doors are actually the entrance to the screening room and I have to buy a ticket at the hotel reception desk where I am told the film is showing tomorrow, not tonight. When I check the theater's website later to verify, all mention of any films showing today are gone and there don't appear to be any scheduled for tomorrow either. I stubbornly resolve to find and see this film before I leave Saint Petersburg.



Fontanka River



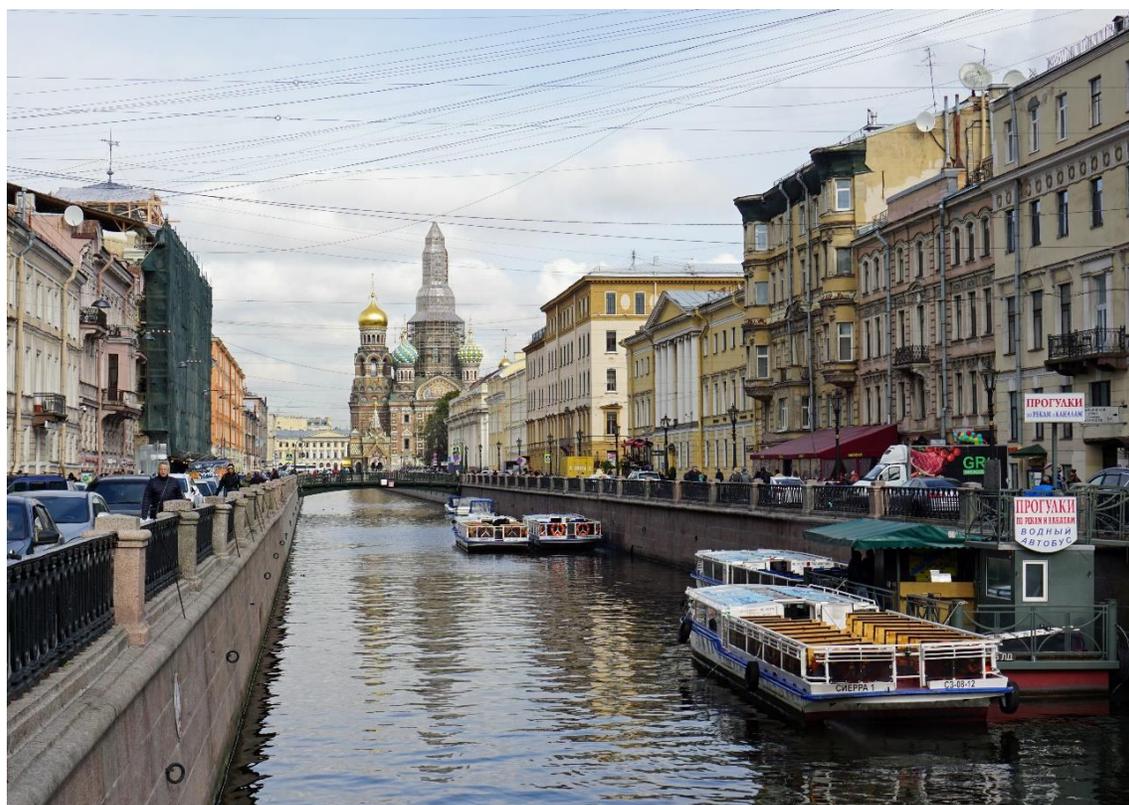
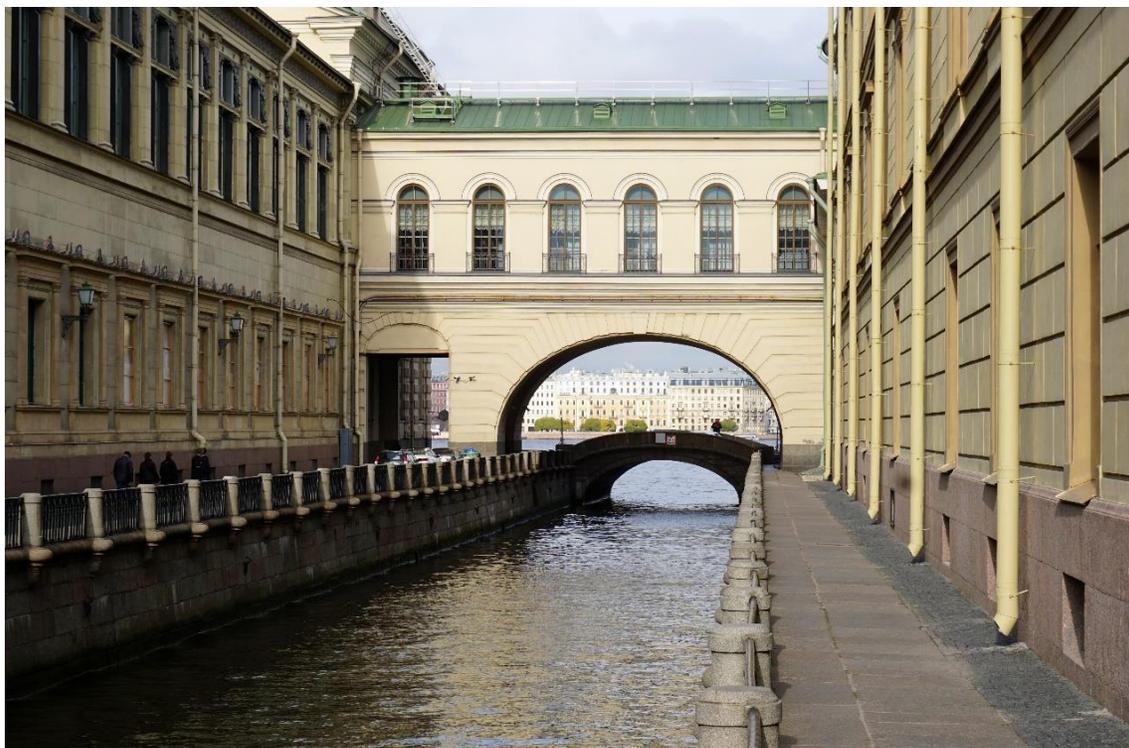
The Admiralty

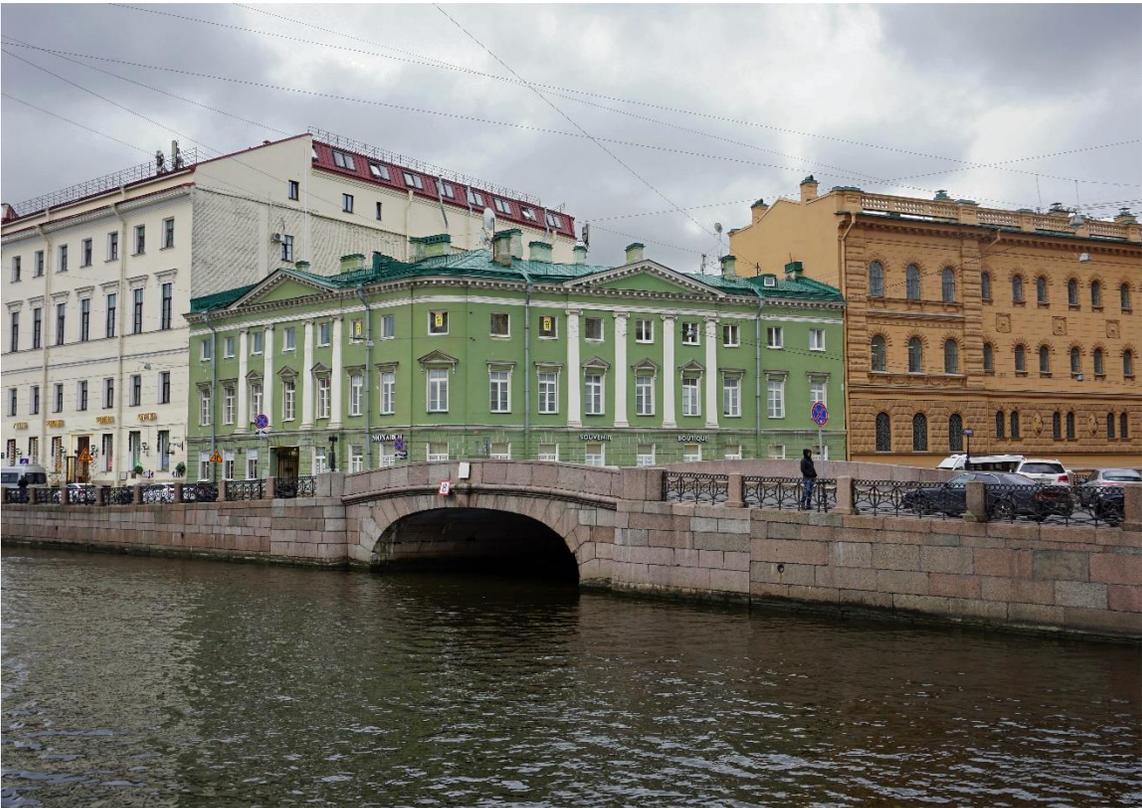


Palace Square, Winter Palace



Winter Palace





On Day 3 I drag myself out of bed at 9:45 after another terrible night of jet-lag semi-sleep. With hardly any sun in the forecast, it looks like the weather will be a problem in the coming week. There are security guards and metal detectors in every Metro station here. There are so many people in uniforms, even the Metro escalator attendants (all female) have their own distinctive uniforms and hats. I've never seen so many military-style hats, including the peculiar, oversized caps that look like small flying saucers on the young military recruits you see everywhere.

I'm mostly just walking today, using unfinished errands as a premise to wander. I think I might find an adaptor in one of the shops in the Moscow Railway Station (so named because it's where you catch the high-speed train to Moscow) but no luck. Back on Nevsky Prospect, I finally spot an optometrist shop where I buy a glass string that breaks less than a minute later when I try to attach it on the sidewalk. It only cost the equivalent of \$2 and I don't feel like returning to the shop so I just keep forging up Nevsky looking for the Fontanka River Embankment where I think I will find the Anglia Bookstore.

I happen upon the Necropolis of Art Masters, the final resting place of many famous Russians, including Dostoevsky and Tchaikovsky. The greyness of the day is getting to me and I'm already tired and my feet hurt but the cemetery and adjoining Alexander Nevsky Monastery look like something worth seeing. A middle-aged lady in a booth takes a break from plucking hairs on her chin to sell me a ticket to the cemetery and I get a few shots of the 'memorial art', including one of an extraordinary creature that looks like a lion. I tour the gardens surrounding the monastery and step into a couple of ornate chapels before taking a break with an excellent coffee and pastry in the café on the grounds. If I was home right now, I'd take a nap. But I keep walking.

Further up Nevsky, I cross a bridge over what I think is the Fontanka River (it's actually the eastern part of the Neva that loops around the center of the city) and fail to find the bookstore I'm looking for. I still don't realize my mistake, thinking my lousy hotel map is deceiving me, and for the second day in a row I miss *Love, Antosha*, because I can't find the street on which a different cinema is showing the film.



Nevsky Monastery



Necropolis of Art Masters





It's been a frustrating day. It seems like everything is meticulously hidden and made needlessly complicated here. In the evening I spend an hour looking at other options for *Love, Antosha*, made even more confusing by the fact that Google Maps doesn't seem to know the names of some Metro stations and identifies street names only in Cyrillic. Finally, I figure out where this second cinema is only to also discover that their version of the film is dubbed instead of subtitled. Who dubs a documentary? If it's grey again tomorrow, maybe I'll spend the whole day at the Hermitage.

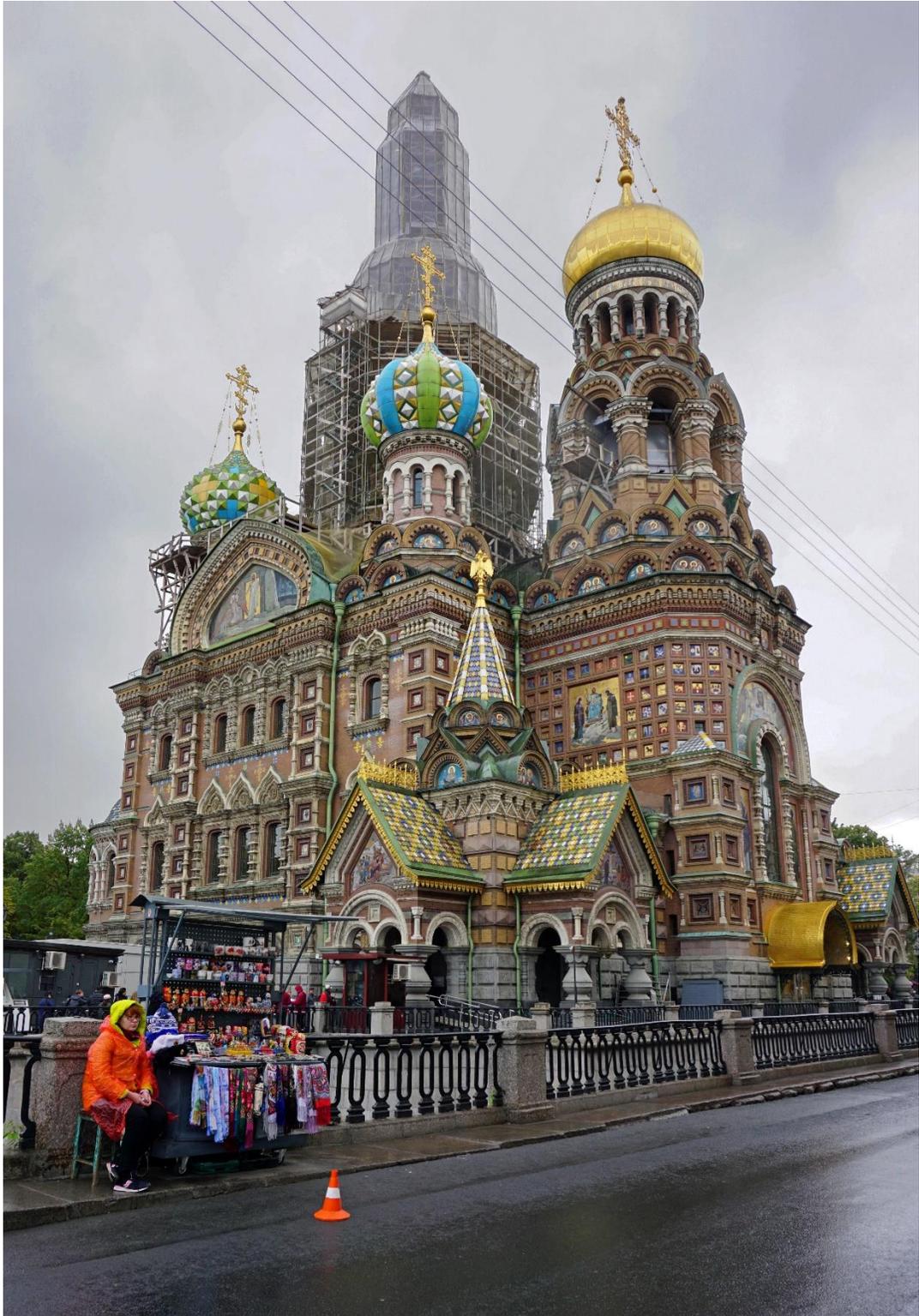
Grey is indeed the forecast for Day 4. Today I will find the Anglia Bookstore and try again to see *Love, Antosha*, which has become a minor obsession. But first, I'll walk down Gorokhovaya again and maybe visit the Hermitage. This is a big, noisy city with eight-lane roads full of speeding cars and trucks. On the way, the sun pops through a little hole in the sky and I photograph what there is to see. Two men on a scaffold painting a building, the Pont Rouge Bridge and department store on the Moyka River Embankment...

It's raining by the time I reach the Winter Palace where I try to buy a ticket for the Hermitage but give up after too many complications. The automatic ticket dispensers have English instructions on the screen but not on the device for credit card payment. Once the museum opens, I line up to buy a ticket from a real person but a long list of prohibitions on the wall discourages me. I'll come back on another rainy day.

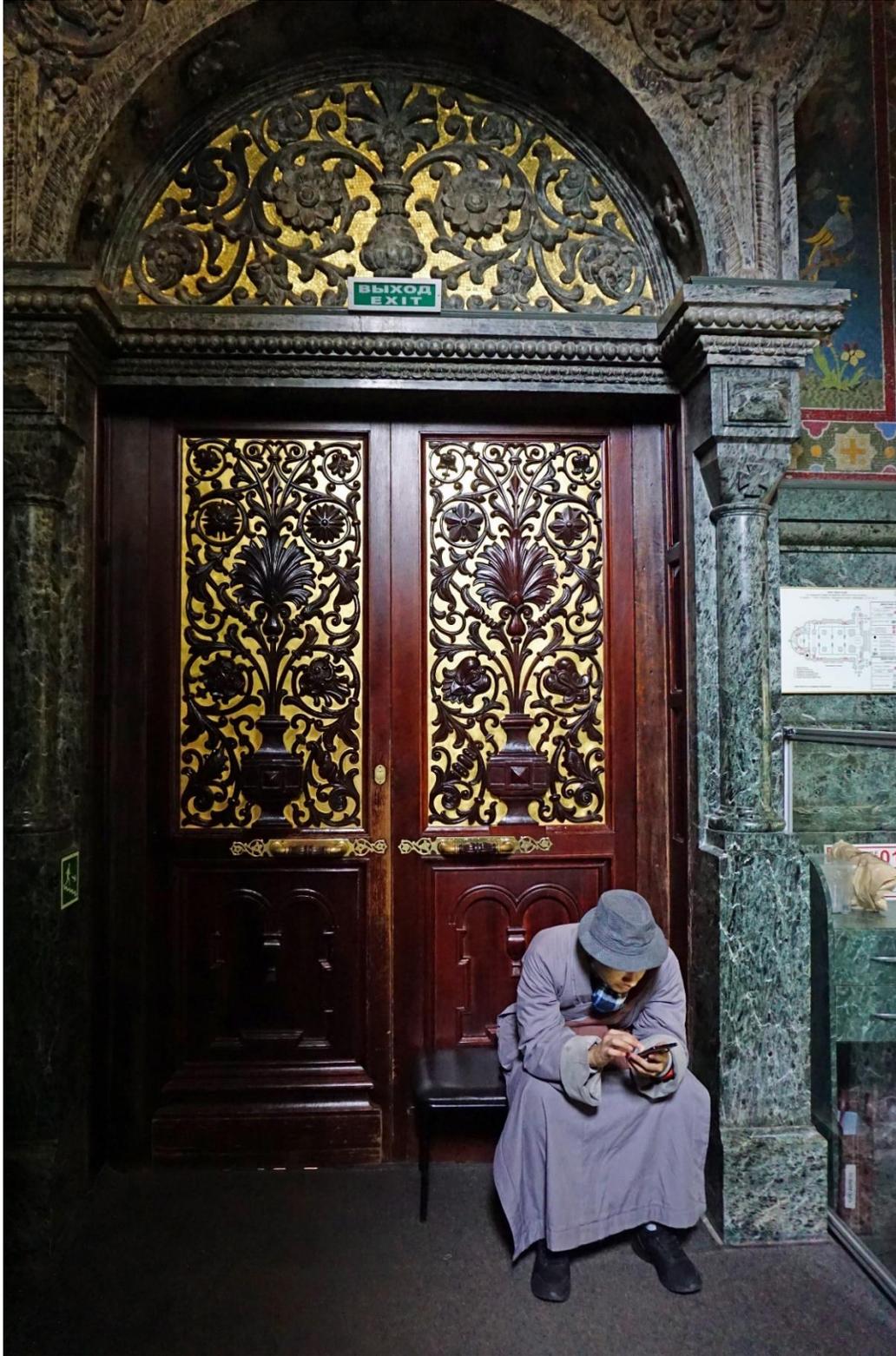
I pay thirty rubles to use a wizz-truck in Palace Square and then the rain stops and the sun makes another surprise appearance and I start to walk fast to get a few shots before it disappears again. I keep walking along the canal or river or channel, whatever it is, and it's raining again by the time I reach the Church of the Savior on Spilled Blood (built on the spot where Tsar Alexander II was assassinated in 1881) which is now a museum and major attraction here. Like so many other churches in this country it was de-sacralised during the atheist communist years and there was no public outcry to re-sacralise it after the fall of the U.S.S.R. It's full of tourists today, most of whom I suspect are cruise passengers let loose for just a few hours (no visa required).



Pont Rouge



Church of the Savior on Spilled Blood



Church of the Savior on Spilled Blood

Next, after much walking, I finally find the Anglia Bookstore where there's not much of a selection and I'm still not very motivated to read so I pick up a short novel: *The Earth and Sky of Jacques Dorme*, by Andrei Makine, that has impressive blurbs on the front and back covers. Then I make my way slowly by Metro to the Angletterre to buy my ticket for *Love, Antosha*.

The Admiralteyskaya Metro station near the cinema is the deepest of the incredibly deep stations here. I time the ascent up the main escalator, which is three minutes, ten seconds. The female escalator attendants in their blue uniforms and peaked caps, sitting in glass booths watching people go up and down, look like they are in a trance. Could there be a more boring job?

Finally, I have my ticket and I have time to kill so I explore the posh neighborhood around Saint Isaac Cathedral before settling for a quick dinner in one of the Burger Kings you see everywhere here. So far, nothing special has happened on this trip. I worry that my lack of interest in reading is also indicative of a lack of excitement about travel. The general lack of curiosity I see in so many people. What am I doing in a Burger King in Russia?

I'm one of less than a dozen people in the theater. The film is very good, though heartbreaking, a documentary about a brilliant young actor who dies in a freak accident at the age of twenty-seven. It's fascinating to see a life recorded in so many creative videos and images. His parents were professional ice skaters from Saint Petersburg who defected to the United States just before the fall of Soviet Russia. It's hard to remember after thirty years how weird and repressive this country used to be. Still is in some ways – there were no signs of the global climate-change protests here yesterday while 300,000 people marched in Montreal.

The interesting thing about coming out of a film in a foreign city is that, after spending two hours transported into another world, you've forgotten where you are. It's always a pleasant surprise and a bit twisted too, like waking up in a dream.



Admiralteyskaya Metro Station



St. Isaac's Cathedral

It's another grey start to Day 5, the streets and Metro quieter on a Saturday. First stop is Saint Isaac, another monumental church shut down by the Communists and now a museum. This one has counters selling merchandise throughout. It's 262 steps to the top which apparently has great views but I'm not up to climbing this morning, especially on such a hazy, grey day. I leave the church and keep walking until the dampness gets to me and my feet start to ache and I get back on the Metro to visit a large flea market at Udelnaya.

The flea market is depressing, in a poor neighborhood where I find myself wishing I was home, not a good thing, so it's back on the Metro again for three quick trains to Lenin Square where the grey is a little less dense when I emerge.

I sit down for coffee and pastry for the first time in a proper café where it takes five minutes and many many tries before I figure out how to connect to their WIFI. Once again, I'm impressed by how simple things can be made so complicated here. I'm looking for directions, but Yandex, the Russian equivalent of Google Maps, seems to have disabled Google and then has the gall to deny me access because they say my phone may have been hacked and I should click on a link to have them verify. I give up. 'Table service' at the café is surly – this will be the one and only time I try it in this country. I've been warned by the Web.

After taking photos of the large statue in Lenin Square and the River Neva across the busy road, it's back in the Metro to look for the Memorial Flat of the Yelizarovs, where Lenin lived with his sister's family when he returned to this city to orchestrate the Russian Revolution. I find Apartment 24 in a somewhat dilapidated building, a large, five-bedroom flat preserved and presided over by two older women who, not speaking a word of English, indicate that I should slip blue plastic covers over my shoes and follow them. The nicer lady gives the tour, speaking the whole time in Russian, as if I understand.

I'm not sure how to respond so I just nod my head and pretend to react to what I'm being told. The photos of Lenin's family are interesting, especially those of his two sisters, Olga and Maria, fierce-looking but attractive women. The apartment looks as if nothing has been moved in the last century, except for the kitchen which is not part of the tour, probably where the ladies sit sipping tea waiting for visitors.



St. Isaac's Square



Lenin Square



River Neva at Lenin Square



River Neva at Lenin Square



Lenin's apartment



Lenin's bathtub

Lenin seems to be still revered in this country, unlike his successor Stalin, images of or references to whom are scarce. And now Russians, who always seem to revert to autocracy, have Vladimir Putin. It's been said they prefer the security and order provided by a 'strong man' leader because of the chaos that followed the fall of the Soviet Empire and geography that provides no natural defenses. Over the centuries, they've been invaded from all sides: Europe, Scandinavia, the Mongols.... I've seen fridge magnets depicting a bare-chested Putin, touting him as the strongest leader in the world, a larger-than-life hero.

Dinner at the USSR Café, a retro Soviet-style canteen near my hotel, is cheap but not so good. Nevertheless, I will return several times in the coming week, trying something different each time. I'm in bed by nine, completely exhausted, hoping for a good night's sleep.

The sky is mostly clear in the early morning of Day 6, as it was last night, but the forecast is for more greyness and more rain. The day begins with a mass at the Church of St. Catherine on Nevsky Prospect. But I don't last long in my pew because I can't make out what the priest is saying. He has a heavy Filipino accent and is reading in a monotone from a script, all made worse by an atrocious echo in the cavernous church. I would feel like a hypocrite staying just for the Eucharist, so I leave after only a few minutes.

I jump on a random bus to see where it will take me. I spot St. Isaac in muted sunlight at one point but by the time the bus stops we are nowhere near the church and I wonder why the stops are so far apart, as they are with the Metro. It's also the end of the line for the bus and I find myself in a posh but deserted area next to the Moyka River, so I start to walk towards a nearby bridge and decide to get lost.

It's overcast again but the light is soft and dream-like as I cross the bridge, with boats in what looks like a harbor to my left and hardly any people in sight, aside from the odd jogger. Walking along the waterfront on the other side suddenly, in front of an old submarine docked next to the path, are what look to be about fifty young cadets, doing manoeuvres and racing each other up and down the path.

I keep walking aimlessly in the once again almost deserted neighborhood, then spot a souvenir shop where I find my St. Petersburg fridge magnet and get some rough directions to the closest Metro station from a young lady. "Walk back to the bridge and turn left."



It seems like a nice residential neighborhood when I turn left and once again the world takes on the appearance of a dream when I come across a strange, unkempt little park behind wrought-iron gates where there are a few ponies and horses and people walking their dogs. I take a couple of shots and continue deeper into the neighborhood.

There are more people about now and a small mall with an inviting café beckons, but there's no discernable way in. One door is blocked by an unattended ladder, the next opens into a tiny coffee counter but its own inner door to the mall is locked, and in back, where people seem to be setting up a market, the doors are open but two guards block the way saying something in Russian, so I just give up. What a country, once again making something so simple as an entrance hopelessly complicated.

Further down the street, there's another security guard (they are everywhere in this country) standing beside a building looking down at his phone. When he looks up, I simply say "Metro?", hoping he will point me in the right direction. "I don't speak English," he says, with no trace of an accent, before turning back to his phone. I don't mind, it's an interesting neighborhood now, so I just keep walking and eventually come across another trendy looking mall, this one with an entrance that is unhidden, unblocked and unlocked! Good coffee, friendly service and easy WIFI warms me up and soon I'm back on the Metro to 330-year-old Gostiny Dvor, one of the world's oldest shopping malls, where someone on the Web said they found an adaptor.

The mall is a massive, seemingly endless collection of small interconnected shops, and I find a glass string but after another failed attempt to find an adaptor, I head back to the hotel where I lie down for about thirty minutes. I don't fall asleep but after so much walking in chilly weather, simply being warm and horizontal for a while revives me and soon I'm feeling fully conscious of where I am, focussed on organizing the next day in Russia. Dinner is at the local kebab shop again.



Nine hours of good sleep and it's not raining in the morning of Day 7! There are actually spots of blue in the sky but by the time I get off the Metro at Peter and Paul Fortress the sky is leaden again and the site doesn't open till ten anyway and the nearby Museum of Russian Political History is closed on the last Monday of each month and of course this is the last Monday of September and I think maybe this is the day I'll go to the Hermitage but it's closed on Mondays too so what to do? I remind myself that what's important (maybe the only thing) is that I'm alive in Saint Petersburg and feel physically great today.

I return to Nevsky Prospect to visit the National Library of Russia where the list of prohibitions (coats, bags, cameras... books!) is just too much. Since the plan was to do some reading here, I'm quickly back on the street. There's a Starbucks across the street so maybe a familiar, grossly overpriced coffee and good WIFI will improve the morning, but after the usual rigamarole of entering your phone number and waiting to receive a code to access the WIFI, the screen where I might enter the code refuses to pop up and instead I keep receiving new codes every three seconds. The coffee is less than mediocre and the staff don't know why the WIFI doesn't work and the glass string I bought yesterday has to be re-tightened every fifteen minutes and once again I find myself wishing I were home. I tell myself to relax. It's warm (not hot) in the cafe, the chair is comfortable, I can read a bit of the Makine novel and I have access to a free and clean bathroom, a luxury in this pay-per-wizz state.

The novel is a love story of a young man who defects from Russia to France and struggles to understand his homeland. He tells his own story of growing up as an 'orphan' whose father was imprisoned like so many Russian soldiers after World War II simply for having been exposed to western influences. The image that will linger is the only passage I will underline: "The man in black leather was already there to spot the straying sheep, to guard against ideological contamination." Even amidst the horrors of war these insects, Russian inspectors looking for people to persecute or destroy, were eating away at the souls of the defenseless.

Next, I decide to try the nearby State Russian Museum, hoping there aren't too many complications or prohibitions. There aren't and, as always, the quiet, colors and form of an art museum are restorative, this one especially after all the frustrations of the morning. I like how relaxed and unpretentious the museum is, maybe because it's overshadowed by the Hermitage.



State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg

Back on Nevsky Prospect I've had it with the greyness and head back to the hotel. Tomorrow's forecast once again is for grey and rain throughout the day.

Day 8 (week 2) begins with heavy rain but with the possibility of a few moments of sun later in the day. A good morning to do the Hermitage.

I grit my teeth to pass all the hurdles and obstacles and I'm finally into what the Web says is the second-largest museum in the world, 400 rooms of art. I'm in the Winter Palace, the main part of the multi-complex museum where I give the early morning mobs a head start and take a breather in the museum café with the best coffee yet. I find myself wishing I had someone to talk to and realize I haven't had a conversation in a week. As far as I can tell, there are few English-speaking locals or tourists here (none so far in the crowded breakfast room of the hotel).

The museum is so large it's easy to find yourself alone in one of the rooms so early in the morning. The views from the windows of the square on one side and the River Neva on the other are wonderful. It's all very impressive but eventually it becomes harder and harder to avoid the herds of Chinese tourists taking pictures of themselves and I make my escape.

Outside, it's stopped raining but still grey, cold and windy, so I step into the almost empty General Staff Building across the square, also part of the museum where more modern stuff like the works of French impressionists and post-impressionists are on display. A room full of Renoirs, another of Van Goghs, three rooms of Picassos... soon I've had more than enough and begin to search for the exit. It would take days, if not weeks, to see everything.

Back in the square the sun suddenly makes an appearance and it's a rush against time along the Moyka River and Griboyadev Canal to the Church of the Savior on the Spilled Blood where I finally get a sunlit shot of the colorful building before entering the Nevsky Prospect Metro station where I know the Blue Line goes to Gorkovskaya station and the Peter and Paul Fortress. The train is waiting for me and it's one long stop under the Neva, all the while wondering if the sun will still be out when I get there.

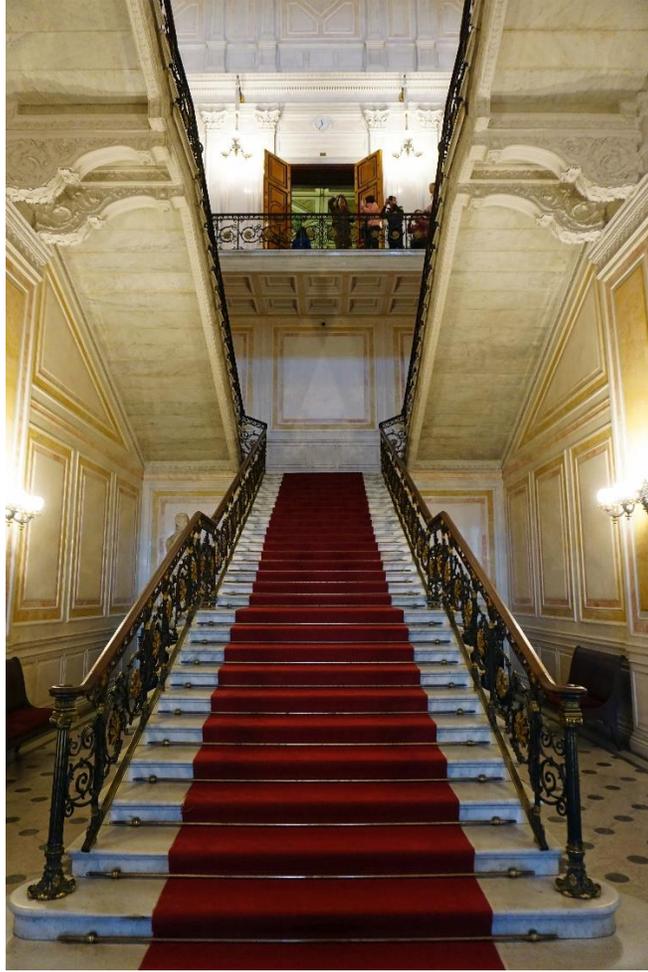
After a few minutes, the train comes to a stop in the tunnel somewhere under the river and it's instantly quiet and hot in the crowded car. I remember reading about flooding in the tunnels (one reason why they're so deep) when the Metro was being built and wonder if this is the end. No one else seems concerned but I'm relieved when the train starts up again.



The Tsar's throne in the Winter Palace (Hermitage)



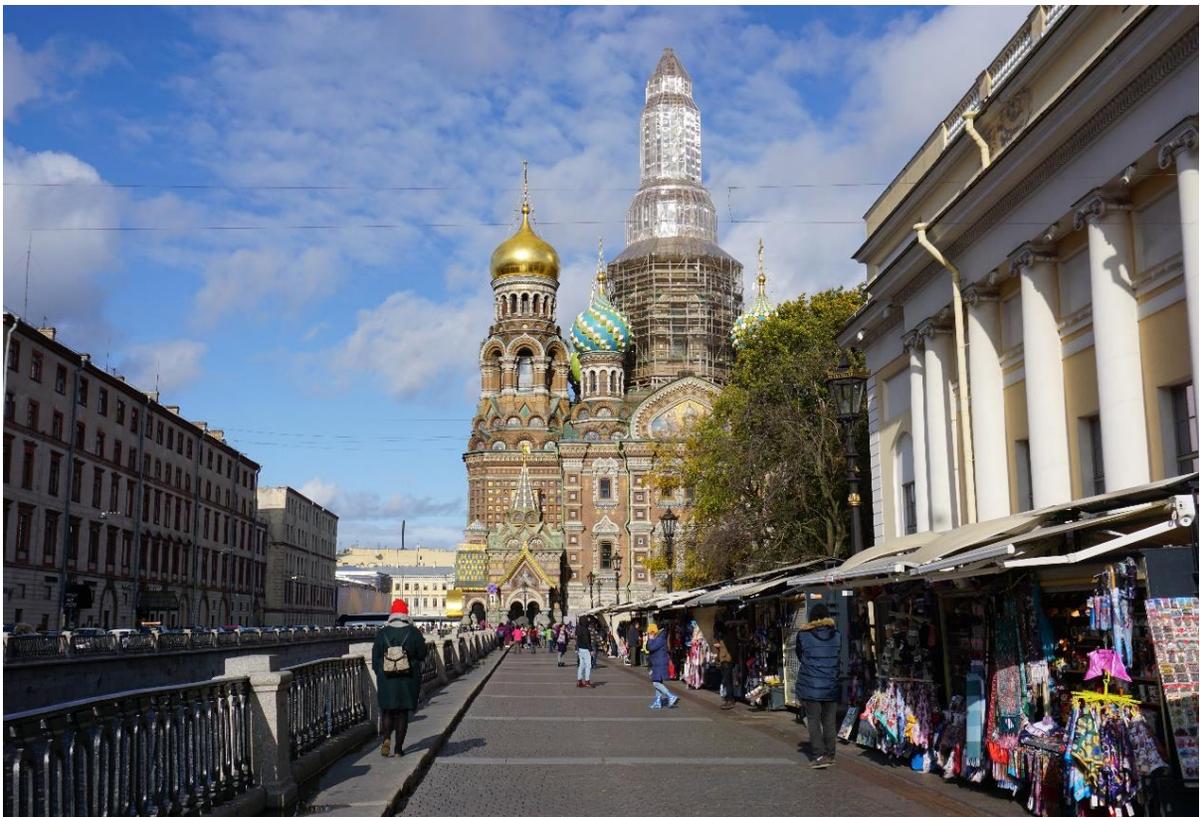
View of the Square from the Winter Palace



The Hermitage



The General Staff Building, Hermitage



Of course it's pouring rain when I emerge from the station so I decide to have something to eat at the Burger King between the station and the fortress, but halfway through my meal the sun comes out again and I ditch the half-eaten burger and giant soft drink and rush back outside. There seems to be a lot of blue sky now, but you never know. It's still extremely windy and the clouds are moving fast in the sky, as they will for almost all the rest of my stay in this country.

I get some nice shots in good light, then buy a ticket to walk on top of the wall of the fortress for the 'panoramic views' of the city across the Neva but, after getting one shot of Peter and Paul Cathedral with a dramatic sky in the background, the sun disappears again and I notice I'm the only fool braving the weather up here.

It starts to rain again so I make my way back to the Metro and back to Nevsky Prospect thinking I'll catch a bus to another destination but Google Maps fails me again so I decide to simply walk home because, lo-and-behold, the sun is out again. After eight days in this big city, it's comforting to realize I know where I am and where I'm going, easy enough if you start from Nevsky and simply follow one of the many waterways. I get some well-lit shots on the way, several from beside the Fontanka River. It's been a good day with the camera, the best yet.

Day 9 could be another weather adventure day. First stop is the Russian Museum of Political History which is well organized, with enough English to make it interesting and informative. They begin their history with the Bloody Sunday massacre of 1905 and there is no sentimentality about the Stalinist era of repression and terror that followed the Revolution. You get the feeling Russians will not let this happen again. On the third floor is Lenin's office and the balcony from which he spoke to the crowds during the Revolution.

The plan after the museum was to walk along the Neva east to cross a bridge and return to Lenin Square. The forecast was for the sun to make an appearance at one o'clock, but it starts to drizzle as soon as I leave the museum and before long I'm taking refuge in doorways from high winds and torrential rain. I end up waiting out the deluge at an overheated canteen at the foot of the bridge. The rain eventually stops so I start walking but it starts again twenty minutes later so I give up and spend the next couple of hours photographing Metro stations.



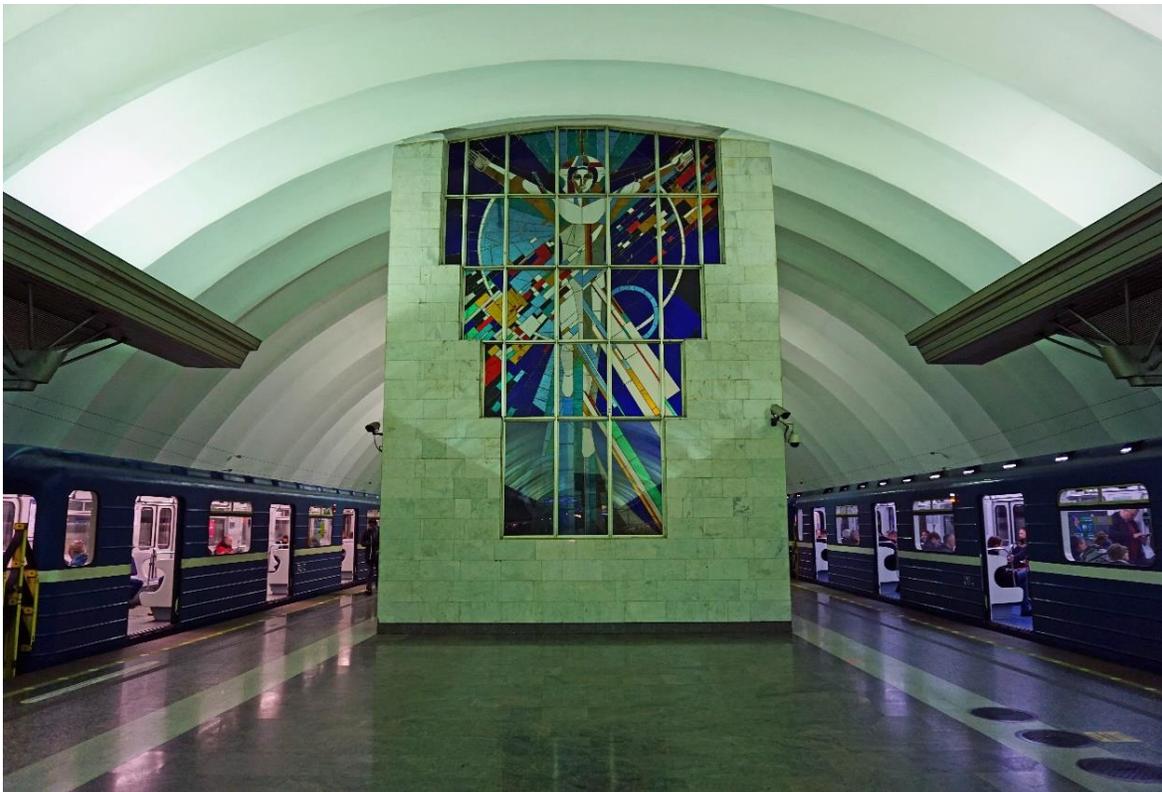
Peter and Paul Cathedral



Peter and Paul Cathedral



Fontanka River





Mezhdunarodnaya Metro Station



Then, armed with the usual flawed Google instructions I look for Yusupov Palace, where there is supposed to be a special Rasputin tour, and find only Yusupov Gardens, which you might assume to be part of the Palace, but nothing so simple. I'll look for it again tomorrow. In the evening I plan my search for the palace in greater detail, using landmarks instead of street names. According to the maps, all I have to do is turn left at the Griboyedov Channel when I emerge from the Metro, then walk along the water before turning right at the fourth bridge.

I finally realize I need to sleep with the window slightly open in this overheated country and I have the best sleep yet. Weather is becoming a major factor as yet another rainy grey day is forecast for Day 10.

I begin the day shooting a few more **Metro** stations up and down the Purple Line before I finally manage to find the elusive Yusupov Palace where a handful of tourists are trying to decipher the complicated instructions posted on the glass walls of the ticket booths while standing in front of three ticket sellers who not once look up from whatever they are doing. It turns out you can only visit the Rasputin exhibit in the basement of the palace as part of an organized tour, between five and six on certain days (not today).

I buy a ticket to the palace anyway, just to do something indoors, and begin the complicated process of finding the entrance and the cloakroom. I try not to be too put off by the usual over-the-top opulence of these ridiculous palaces and just appreciate the craftsmanship. I can't stop thinking about dirty old Rasputin getting poisoned in the basement and resolve to return tomorrow for the special tour.

Back on the street wind has joined the rain to just about thoroughly discourage me but an excellent coffee and maybe the best pain au raisin ever at a nearby bakery-café restores my mood. I take some more photos in the Metro and look for another book (unsuccessfully) before returning to the hotel.

It's been raining the entire day, maybe the first time this has ever happened in my travels, but it has finally stopped when I leave my hotel for dinner without an umbrella. Misha is the name of the man who has been feeding me in the USSR Café more than anyone else in the last ten days. At first, I wasn't sure, but I've come to love this retro Soviet canteen. On the way back a furious storm soaks me to the core. I will not leave my hotel without an umbrella again.



Yusupov Palace



USSR Cafe



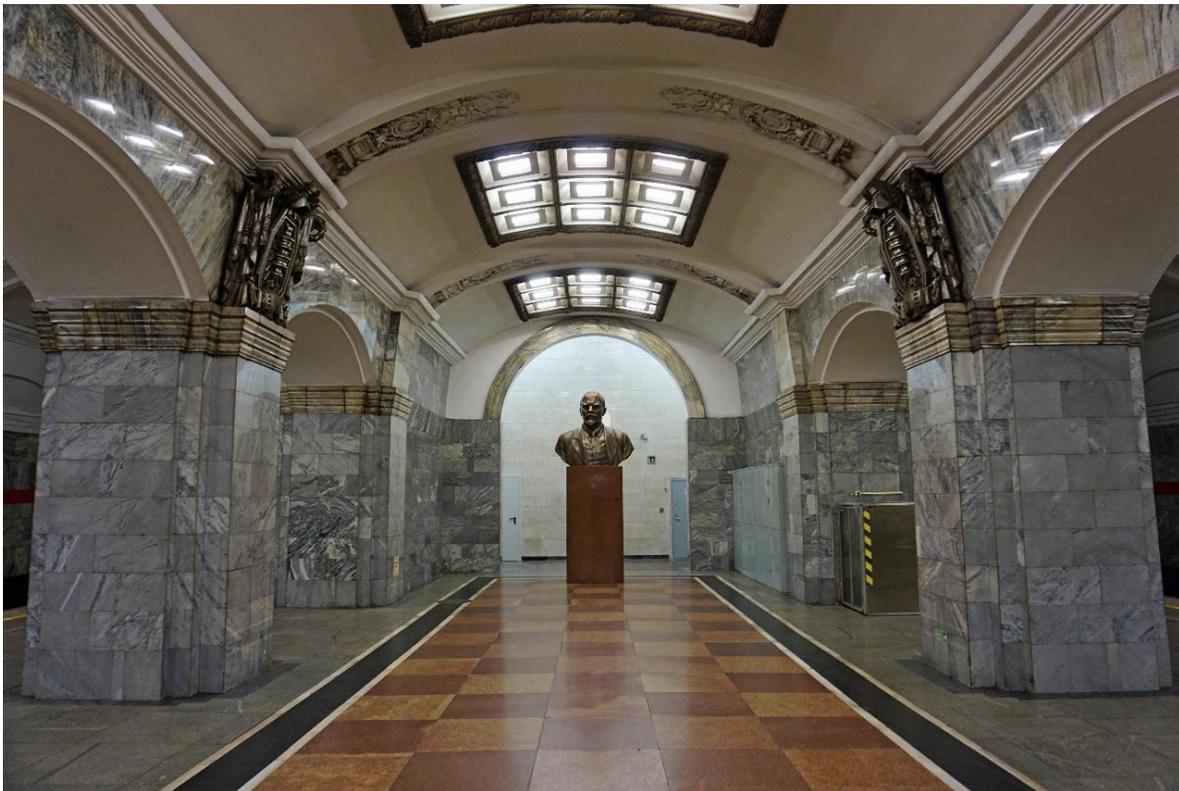
Pushkinaya Metro Station



Park Pobedy Metro Station



Obvodny Kanal Metro Station



Kirovsky Zavod Metro Station

The trip is half over on Day 11 and I have one more full day left in Saint Petersburg with nothing planned aside from Rasputin. The forecast is still grim: grey, maybe less rainy but colder - three or four degrees Celsius, feeling like zero. I resolve to find another book today.

First stop is Moscow Square to see the enormous statue of Lenin that stands in front of the Stalinesque House of the Soviets. Very austere on this cold, leaden day. I get a couple of photos and leave before I get depressed.

Then it's back to the bookstores on Nevsky Prospect where I pay \$22 for a book that has a Canadian price of \$16 on the back cover. It looks like it might be the perfect book for this trip: two short works by Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, a novella, and *Confession*, a spiritual memoir. It's a highly praised translation of the two pieces intended to work as a combo. I start to read the introduction in Saint Catherine Church up the street but leave when the sound of drilling at the top of scaffolding on a side wall produces an echo almost as annoying as the priest's drone last Sunday. I leave feeling I have found the book I was meant to find on this trip and finish the introduction over lunch.

Both of the short works were written during Tolstoy's mid-life existential crisis when he asked himself, "What is the point of living if we are to die?" The book is described as "the blending and interchange between fact and fiction."

I consider returning to the hotel to read but there's no comfortable chair in my room so it's back down Nevsky to the same café-canteen I visited days ago where I have the same excellent coffee and cinnamon bun. It's funny how I travel so far to escape routine then take such pleasure in creating new ones in a completely foreign place. Twice now the sun has poked through a filtered hole in the sky but for seconds only.

I return to the hotel briefly before setting off for the Rasputin tour at Yusupov Palace. On the way, the sun pops out just long enough to get one shot of a green bridge over the Griboyedov Channel before it disappears again behind the buildings on the horizon. Yet another tease. As expected, a whole series of complicated manoeuvres and attempts to communicate are required to join the Rasputin tour.



The House of the Soviets at Moscow Square



Kazan Cathedral on Nevsky Prospect



Green Bridge over the Griboyedov Channel

The tour begins with a twenty-minute video that tells the story of the aristocratic conspirators who tried so hard to kill the mad monk in the basement before having to strangle, beat and shoot the bastard who just wouldn't die. Then it's down to the basement room where the event took place and the scene is recreated with wax figures of Prince Yusupov standing and Rasputin sitting at the table about to eat the poisoned cake. Not a very interesting climax to the tour.

After one last dinner at the USSR Cafe, it's back to the hotel for one last night in Room 206. The weather forecast for Moscow could hardly be worse with a total of two hours of sunlight predicted for the next five days, cold and windy, and even the possibility of snow. Oh well.

I'm up at six on Day 12. My train to Moscow leaves at two so I have a few hours to take some last shots in a morning that is finally forecast to be sunny. The still-dark sky is clear when I walk over to McDonalds for breakfast but by the time I'm packed and ready to wander at eight it's overcast again. One last letdown. I'll wander anyway, and hope.

I walk straight down Gorokovaya as I did my first morning here, with the golden spire of the Admiralty at the bottom of the street. I walk slowly, to kill time, absorb my surroundings and imprint this central part of the city in memory. I turn right at the Admiralty then left at the Winter Palace, crossing a bridge to the strange red Rostral Columns that loom over the River Neva, then right across another bridge towards the Peter and Paul Fortress. I feel like I'm approaching familiar places from the opposite direction, moving counterclockwise.

After nearly two hours of walking I'm frozen solid by the time I step into the Burger King in the small park near the Fortress where I take a few minutes to warm up with a free wizz before taking the Metro the one long stop under the river to Nevsky Prospect to linger in my favorite café-canteen one last time. Then it's back to the hotel to pick up my bag and catch a cab.

I finish the *Earth and Sky of Jacques Dorme* in yet another Burger King in the Moscow Train Station. And then, just as I'm boarding the train, the sun in one last taunt finally comes out and it's strange to see so much blue sky in this city I'm about to leave. The four-hour ride on the high-speed train is smooth and quiet. I doze off more than once in between reading *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*.



The Winter Palace



Peter and Paul Fortress

Ivan Ilyich is a successful man in his forties who becomes so ill that it's obvious he is dying but he simply cannot grasp the concept of mortality. It didn't help that those around him, friends and family, would deliberately deny reality as well and pretend he wasn't dying: "This lie... more than anything poisoned the last days of Ivan Ilyich's life." The countryside racing by in the window looks a lot like Canada in the fall: endless trees, the odd lake, and every now and then a town. I look for an adaptor on arrival at Leningrad Station but strike out again. Maybe I'll have better luck in this massive city of twelve million.

Getting to the Maxima Panorama Hotel is easy on the Metro. Room 702 on the seventh floor is even hotter than my room in Saint Petersburg so the first thing I do is open a window. This will be my home for the next nine days, a nice room with a great view. There is so much in the immediate neighborhood. The entrance to the Avtovazodskaya Metro station is just feet away from the hotel and the entrance to a small shopping center full of shoe and phone stores and kebab-type food counters is even closer, so close it feels like an extension of the hotel. I have a doner wrap for dinner and it's pretty good.

I linger in the weird little shopping center where every phone shop has the same adaptor which doesn't seem any different from the ones I've already got but I buy one anyway and when I get back to my room it works. Problem solved! I iron some clothes and put everything in order in my new home before fireworks light up the night sky in my picture window. I think an international soccer game has just ended in a nearby stadium, but I accept the show as a personal welcome, an auspicious start to my stay in Moscow.

Sunday, Day 13 is going to be cold, wet and windy, it may even snow. I'll dress as warm as I can and finish *Ivan Ilyich* somewhere warm. Red Square is only three Metro stops away, so it's the obvious first stop. English mass is at 3:00 at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception.

Nothing opens until ten at Red Square where it's uncomfortably cold and wet. I take a few shots from outside the Kremlin walls and then keep warm for a few minutes in the crowded ticket and tours office. When the square opens, it seems like no one is lined up to visit Lenin's tomb yet but the way the entrance is obscured is clever, with arrows pointing in the wrong direction and the long lineup nowhere to be seen. I'm too frozen to linger anyway, so it's back in the Metro to see if I can find one of the bookstores on my list of places to visit.

I'm surprised to see male escalator attendants here and my first impressions of Moscow are that everything looks a bit shabbier than in Saint Petersburg, including the people, one of whom is taking up a whole row of seats in the Metro car, lying on his side sound asleep. When I emerge from what I think is the proper station, the scene is grim, a shabby suburban outpost. There are directions to a palace in my notes but no signs of anything resembling a bookstore (my mistake). I head back to the hotel for a free wizz and to maybe wait out the rain.

I ask one of the nice young clerks at the reception desk about turning down the heat and a technician comes to my room only to tell me (with gestures) that the air conditioning unit is not working and he can't do anything about the heat which is centrally controlled from a faraway place. I guess I'll be sleeping with a window cracked open again. The hotel WIFI is also practically useless.

Back outside, the Moscow Bookstore, said to have English books, is only four stops away. The rain and wind, mixed with sleet, is blowing sideways now making it hard to keep the umbrella from crumpling. I don't find a book but I find a new pen and when I leave the store the wind and rain and sleet are swirling now and it's impossible to use the umbrella. I've reached my limit of tolerance, so it's back to hotel again to read some Tolstoy, foregoing mass at Immaculate Conception. Directions to the church are too complicated to attempt in this weather.

Moments before he dies, Ivan Ilyich finally comes to understand and accept his predicament and sees clearly the pointlessness of the bourgeois, materialistic life he has led. Fear is overcome. "He searched for his old habitual fear of death and didn't find it. Where was death? What death? There was no fear because there was no death. Instead of death there was light. 'So that's it!' he suddenly said aloud. 'Such joy!'"

Late in the afternoon I venture out again to fight the wind and rain to look for the nearby hockey arena. It's a bleak fifteen-minute walk, much of it beside a noisy ring road and then through an underpass and there's the arena and there's a box office where, with shrugs and gestures, I manage to buy a ticket for Tuesday's KHL hockey game. One thing accomplished today. By the time I fight my way back through the elements I'm feeling shaky, so I skip the cryptic food options and settle for McDonalds in the shopping center next to the hotel.

Not a good travel day. In the evening I plan some indoor activities to counter bad weather in the week ahead. Four hours of sunlight are forecast for the remaining seven days of the trip. The WIFI is next to useless, the only English channels on the TV are news channels reporting one disaster after another, no photos to edit... I'm stuck here in this drab, foreign place but I'm reading again and Tolstoy's *Confession* is bleak but wonderful. The long essay is a non-fiction treatment of the same themes found in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. As I read about the Count's struggles with suicidal urges in middle age triggered by his questioning the meaning of a life that inevitably leads to death, a dark mood that will linger for a couple of days descends.

I try to leave the window open a crack but the wind keeps blowing it wide open so I devise a method to half-lock it with a folded postcard jammed into the crack, a method I will use for the rest of my stay at the Maxima Panorama Hotel.

It's not raining in the morning of Day 14 but the sky is misty grey and I can hear the wind blowing outside my window. I looked up my name in city directories last night and found Luigi L. Street near the Sokol Metro, one the photogenic stations on a list I just compiled. As far as I can tell we are not related, but Luigi L. is the most common name in my family and my father was an avowed communist so perhaps there is a connection. Luigi was the leader of the Italian Communist Party from 1964 to 1972 and one of the partisans who tracked down and executed Benito Mussolini near the end of World War II. By the time I'm ready to leave my room it's raining again, but lightly it seems because only a few people are holding umbrellas on the streets below.

The morning is efficient with visits to two places on the Green Line. Moskovskiy Dom Knigi is an excellent bookstore where I find a fridge magnet and *Conversations with Stalin*, by Milovan Djilas, an insider's account of one of the world's all-time evil bastards. Once again, the tiny paperback is grossly overpriced, but what can you do? The store is in a posh neighborhood close to Red Square, the famous GUM department store, and the Bolshoi.



The Kremlin



The Bolshoi

Next, it's a few Metro stops north to Sokol station to look for Luigi L. Street, which is easy to find but there's not much to see. There's a plaque on the building where he lived for some time but it's in Cyrillic, as is the street sign, so both are unintelligible. Then it's back to the hotel to warm up with coffee and an excellent pastry sitting at my desk in front of the large picture window. I had taken a chance at a local bakery, choosing something unfamiliar that looks like a cross between a croissant and a poppy-seed bagel, and it pays off.

Suddenly, I look up and there's blue sky in the window! I'm downstairs on a subway train in less than three minutes but by the time I get to Red Square it's darker than ever and there are even a few snowflakes in the air. I linger a while thinking (magically) that the sun may come back, asking myself if I imagined a blue sky, but eventually give up and leave by the exit near the GUM only to wander aimlessly. When I feel my eyeballs starting to freeze I slip into a small church to warm up and do some reading.

In his spiritual memoir, *Confession*, Tolstoy says, "People live... on the basis of principles which not only have nothing in common with Christian teaching but also for the most part are in opposition to it." He had stopped saying his prayers, fasting and going to church at the age of sixteen after which his religious faith slowly transformed into a faith in self-perfection, a view of life shared by fellow artists: "Life in general moves on by development and the main part in this development is played by us – artists, poets. This belief in the meaning of poetry and the development of life was a religious faith, and I was one of its priests."

The myth of progress, the idea that *we are being carried along somewhere*, replaces the myth of spiritual salvation. He describes faith in personal and social progress as a "generally prevalent superstition" that eventually leads to despair and, in his case, to suicidal thoughts in middle age. With agony, he "searched for explanations... as a dying man searches for salvation, and I found nothing." It's easy to believe in this idea of progress when you yourself are young and developing, he says, not so easy when you stop developing and your teeth start to fall out.



Tolstoy's description of his crisis is fascinating but I can't read much without starting to fall asleep, as if eyeballs once thawed want to be left alone. I fantasize about a tiny room off to the side with a little cot where I could take a nap bathed in the soothing aroma of incense and the sounds of soft footsteps and hushed observances in the nave. I'm thinking I should decide on a destination before I go back out into the windy greyness. Maybe I should grab some holy water from one of the two vats next to the bench I'm sitting on at the back of the church, one the size of a hot water heater. Then a man approaches and fills one of the small plastic cups on the table and drinks it. Should I? I decide not.

The afternoon is ebbing away and I shoot a few Metro stations before heading back to the hotel where I explore my neighborhood a bit more and visit a shiny new shopping center a couple of blocks away. Half of the center is unoccupied, the most interesting shop being one that sells military-style clothing. Uniforms seem to be a fetish here. Dinner is cold cabbage rolls in the food court.

There are small patches of blue in the sky in the morning of Day 15 with some light snow predicted. Maybe today is a Hop-on-Hop-off bus day. I take the Metro to Gorky Park where I get one shot before leaving. I'll come back to explore the whole park on a nicer day (wishful thinking). Across the wide road is the Park of Fallen Monuments, a graveyard of Soviet statues. I get a few shots in a few moments of unexpected filtered sunlight before rushing back to Red Square where the sky is actually blue now but the square is closed for some mysterious Russian reason. A Hop-on-Hop-off bus is parked nearby and I ask the guide why the square is closed. He has no idea. I buy a ticket.

Of all the Hop-on-Hop-off buses I've hopped onto in my travels, this is by far the most expensive, \$46 for 48 hours, but I cough up and soon we're stuck in traffic and I'm wondering what's the point. There are three different bus routes, the Red Line, the Green Line and the Orange Line. I'm sitting on a Red Line Bus which is the only one that passes regularly and seems to be limited to a tight circle around Old Moscow. The attractive young lady guide is rude, exasperated by my questions that are taking her away from her phone. I get off at the stop beside the Monument of the Conquerors of Space near the Vdnkh Metro station, sarcastically apologizing to the guide for disturbing her. I get a shot of the monument then pay 50 rubles (\$1) for a wizz in a disgraceful toilet.



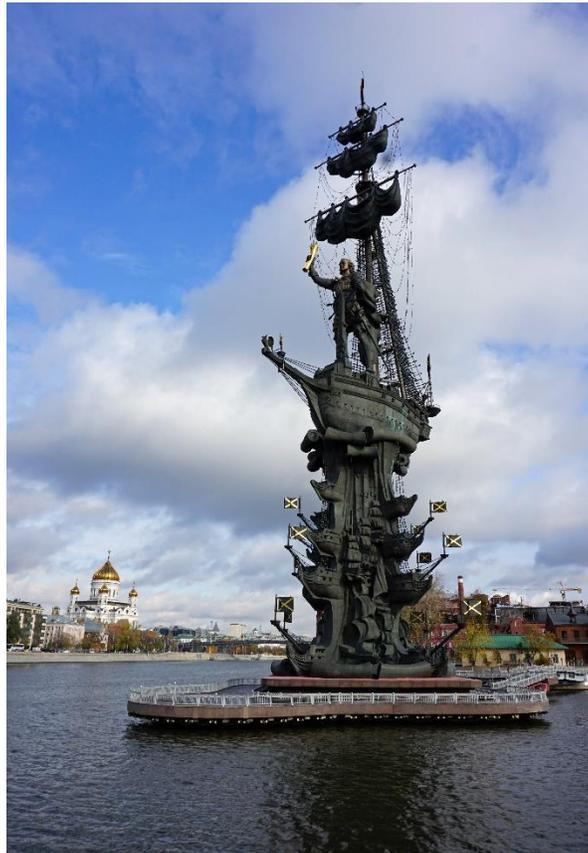
Park of the Fallen Monuments



Park of the Fallen Monuments



Moscow River



Peter the Great





Gorky Park



Monument of the Conquerors of Space

I catch the next Hop-on-Hop-off bus but soon get tired of sitting in traffic and ask the guide to let me off at a Metro Station to search for Patriarch's Ponds, which is really hard to find but when I do it's worth it. The sun is still out and it's a beautiful little park with a free toilet!

This is the site of the opening scene of *The Master and Margarita* where two men discussing the official directive to write a poem that disclaims the existence of Jesus meet the devil and one of them ends up being decapitated by a tram moments later. Not for the first time I will see young people who look like literary devotees lingering in such a place. I get a shot of two of them at the pond.

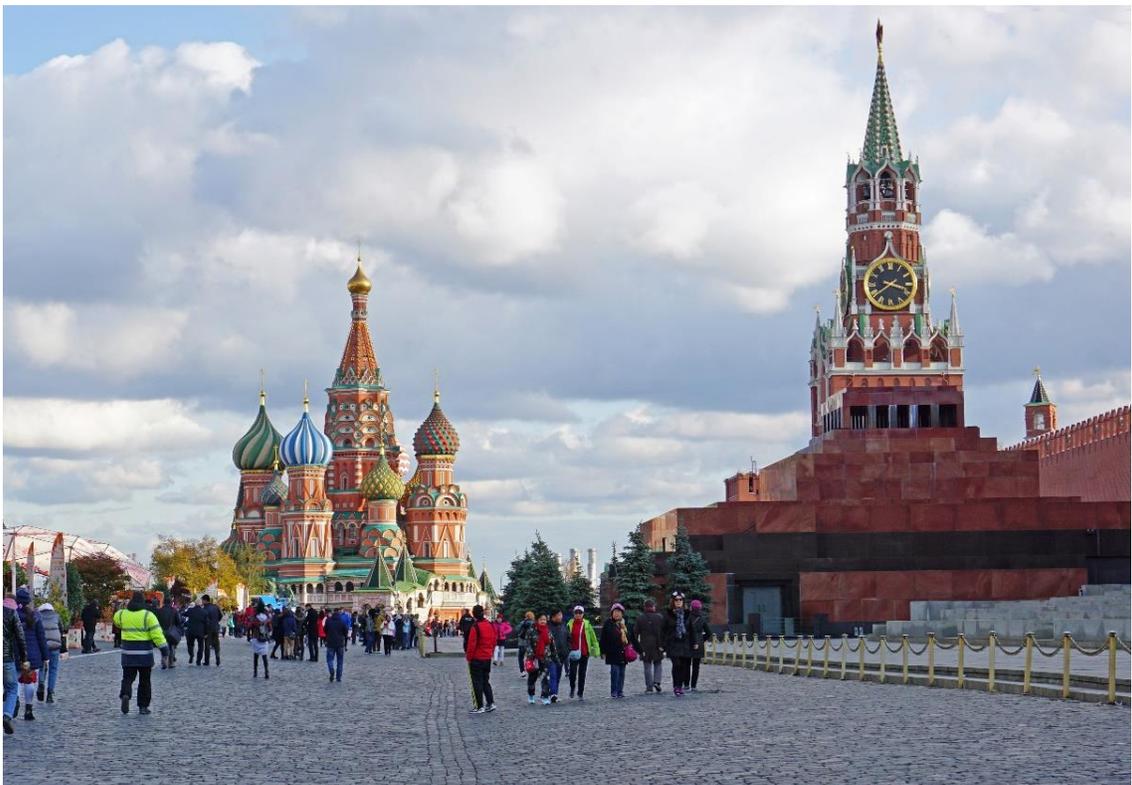
The line between good and evil, Jesus and Satan, is fluid in Bulgakov's book, suggesting it's pointless to deny the existence of either. I will get a sense throughout the trip that unofficial atheism still prevails here, something in the air, something akin to despair. Even the churches that were resacrilized, like Saint Catherine in Saint Petersburg, feel more like museums. The Bulgakov museum is nearby but I give it a pass.

Then it's back to Red Square. I've had nothing to eat or drink in eight hours, but I can't stop moving. I must take advantage of the sunlight as long as it lasts. It takes a while to get through security, which is frustrating because Saint Basil at the other end of the square is nicely lit at the moment, but once in I finally get some decent shots in this iconic place. I try to exit on the opposite side of the square but for some Russian reason the exit is closed today. I'm done chasing the sun anyway, so it's back down into the crazy, noisy Metro three stops to my room, picking up a coffee and muffin in the little café counter beside the hotel on the way to tide me over while I take some precautionary backup steps to make sure I don't lose today's photos. Then I slow everything down and have a good dinner before the hockey game at 7:30.

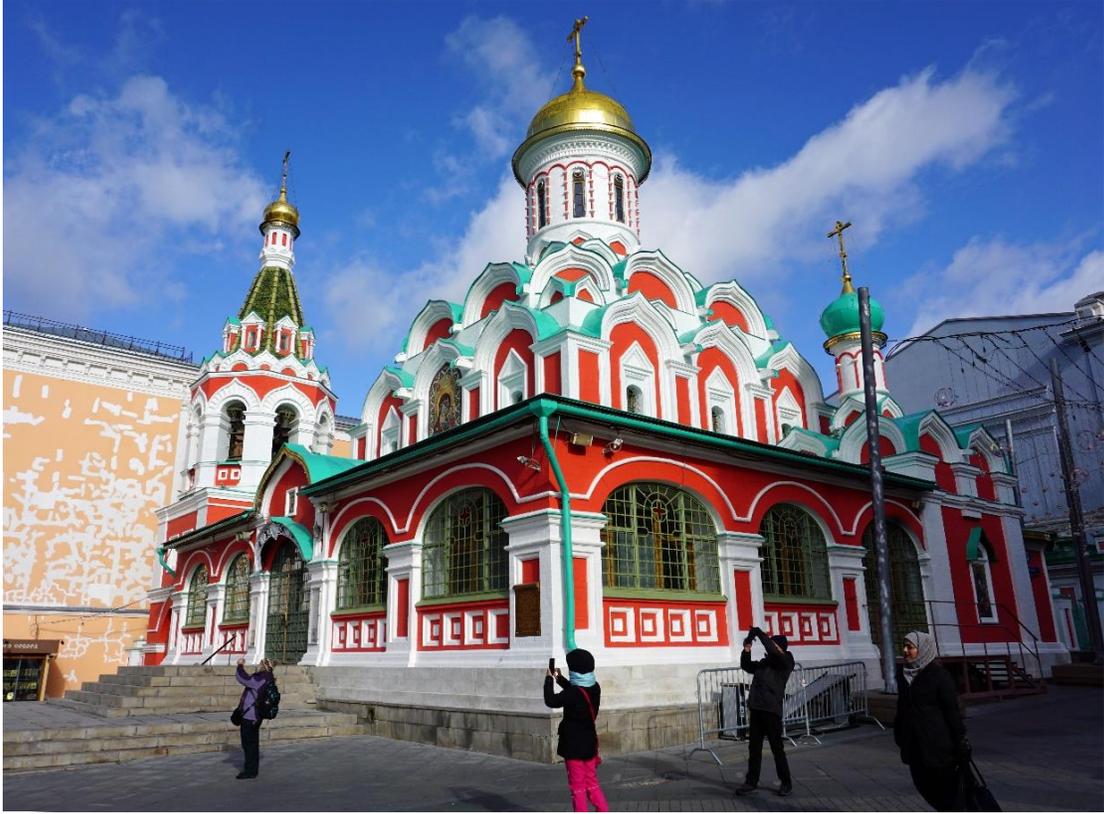
A sporting event in another culture is always delightfully weird. Security is tight at the arena and everyone gets frisked on the way in. The arena is only two-thirds full and the crowd is strangely subdued with no booing or extreme reactions of any kind. With cheerleaders dancing right next to me at every break in the action, local team heroics, and a strange 'New York hot dog', it's a much-needed fun experience. I was too irritated and anxious today. I should have felt more appreciation for the sun which I may not see again before I leave.



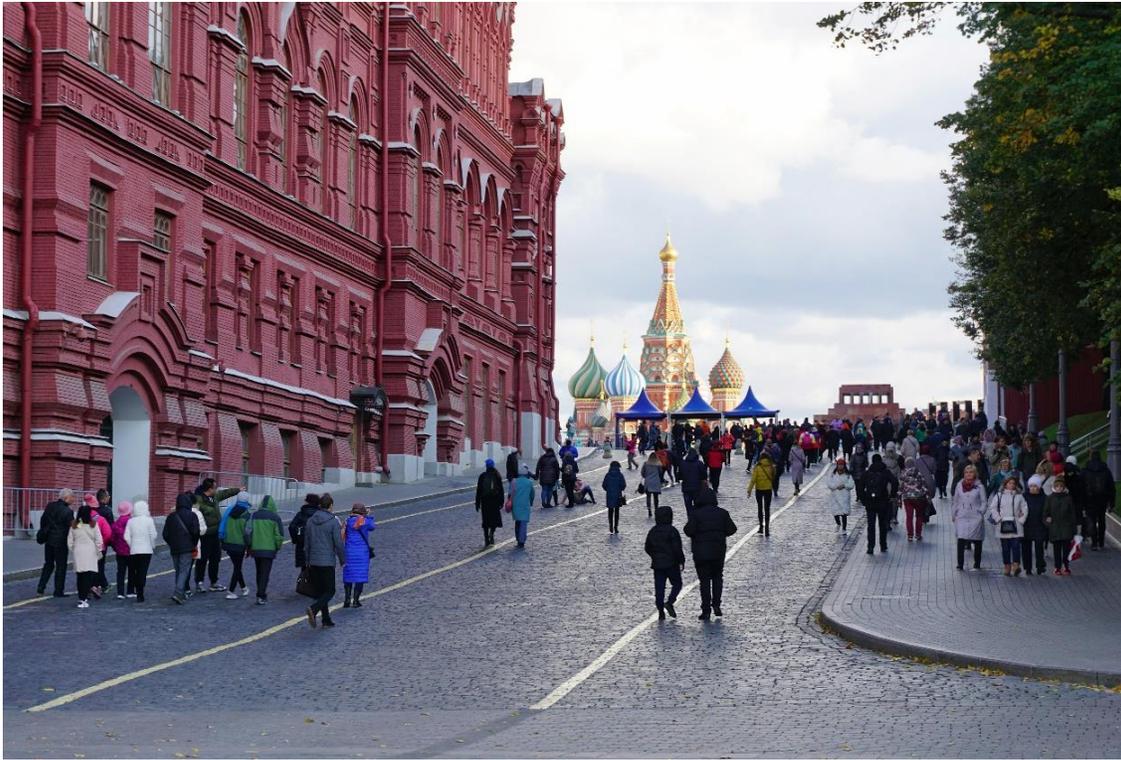
Patriarch's Ponds



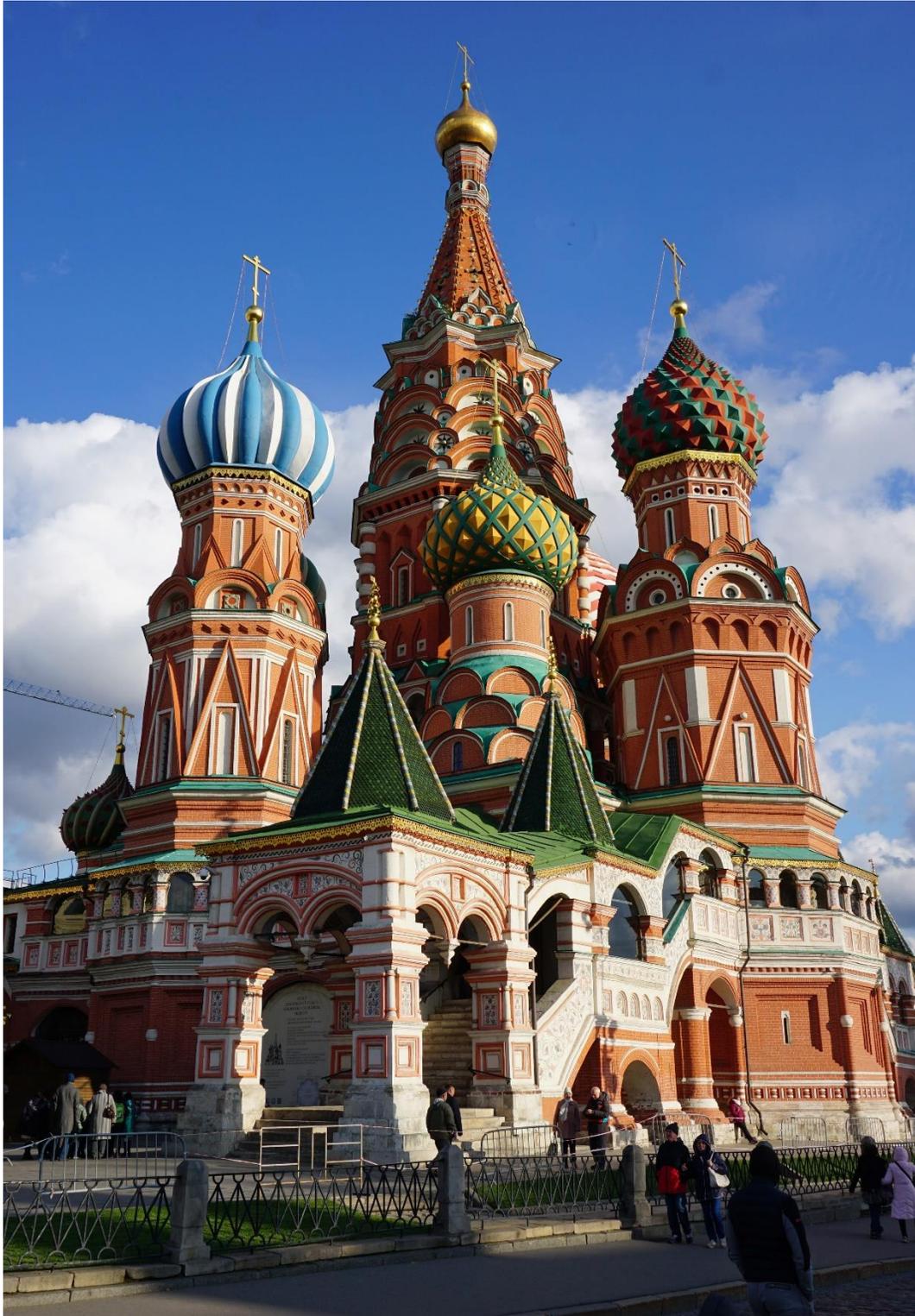
Red Square



Kazan Cathedral, Red Square



Red Square



Saint Basil, Red Square

It's overcast but a little less grey in the morning of Day 16, with rain forecast for the afternoon. Maybe the sun will defy the predictors as it did yesterday, but I'm not stressed about it anymore. I've got some well-lit shots now, proof that the sun sometimes shines in Moscow. Today I'll go to Victory Park, the Institute of Russian Social Realist Art, and finish Tolstoy.

Rush hour is a little less crazy at 9:45 but debarking herds still come at you like a swarm of ICBMs. People have a different sense of personal space here and sometimes I think if I get jostled or stepped into one more time I'm going to punch somebody and end up in a Gulag. Young girls are the worst, stepping in front of you as the train doors open, rushing for a seat so they can get back on their phones.

First stop was supposed to be Victory Park but it's not where I thought it would be and I end up at the Kiev Metro and Train Station, a bustling area where I step into an ultra-modern shopping center across the road for the WIFI. The shopping center is over-the-top garish but virtually empty, cold and sterile with not a single bench. I take advantage of the free wizz op in a beautiful washroom before setting off in search of the Hop-on-Hop-off Orange Line. Maybe I'll finish Tolstoy on the upper deck.

At the Revolutionary Square Metro station, I want to take some photos of the famous statues that people traditionally fondle as they rush by but, as always, the station is full of Chinese tourists taking pictures of themselves fondling the statues. I'll have to return and decide which statue to fondle myself. I return to the spot where the Orange Line is said to appear at Red Square and hop onto an idling Red Line bus to warm up in the meantime. But it's too cold and I'm feeling too comfortable where I am to get off and wait thirty minutes for the Orange Line bus so I settle in to do the entire Red Line circuit to get some ideas of where to walk if the weather should ever decide to be reasonable again.

By the time the bus finishes its loop and returns to Red Square it's raining hard, the wind has picked up, turning umbrellas inside out, and I'm not going anywhere. From my perch on the upper deck I look down at the poor souls on the sidewalk, tourists like me, trying hard not to feel cold (one older man glancing up and down at his phone with that where-the-fuck-am-I look I'm so familiar with) and I have to admit their discomfort makes me feel even warmer and smugger, the opposite of where Tolstoy is going in the final pages of his *Confession*. Is this selfish pleasure what he means by evil?

In the throes of a midlife crisis, Tolstoy tries to go back to church but eventually gives up on the toxic orthodox dogma of one true religion. “I have no doubt that religious teaching holds truth but also no doubt that it holds falsehood, and I must find truth and falsehood and separate one from the other.” He holds onto faith in God as the life force and the only way to find the meaning and potential of life. “To know God and to live are one and the same. God is life.” He comes to base his faith solely on the raw teachings of Jesus and an idealized notion of peasant purity and piety that he will aspire to emulate for the rest of his life.

Eventually I leave the bus and take the Metro to Novokuznetskaya station where the map posted outside the station doesn’t extend to the bookstore I’m looking for and I’m stymied again at every attempt to connect to WIFI. I end up in a little restaurant where I try Russian dumplings for the first time and they’re great, as is the coffee, and then with no WIFI connection Google randomly decides to show me a good map in my own alphabet. I linger in the restaurant a while, a respite from the rain in an interesting neighborhood with Disneyesque Saint Basil visible at the top of the street.

I like the neighborhood around the station very much and eventually find the bookstore which seems to be two or three shops in one – Bookhunter/Bookbridge/Language 360 – which is confusing, but the selection of English books is excellent and I find three titles easily, choosing only one: *Rasputin: a Short Life*, by Frances Welch.

Next, I try to find the Institute of Russian Socialist Realist Art, which I think I see on my phone but when I find it, after getting lost at least three times, it’s actually a museum of education which can only be visited as part of a tour. My mistake this time. I return to the hotel with a plan to meticulously plan where I want to go and how to get there for the next four days. It’s been a good if not productive day in the rain. I got lost in some interesting places and found what looks to be another relevant book.

The forecast on Day 17 is the same as yesterday: grey in the morning, rain in the afternoon. The plan to plan last night was derailed by vodka. I think I was drinking vodka and orange juice like it was wine and drank too much because I laid down at one point fully dressed and opened my eyes eleven hours later. I'm still feeling wobbly this morning, making the rushing masses in the Metro hard to take. First stop is Alexander Sad Metro station where I know from yesterday's bus tour I can walk across a bridge with good views of the Kremlin.

Once on the street, I spot the Russian State Library and decide to attempt an entry. I'm met by a security guard who points to a sign that says visitors need a pass which can be obtained at the Information Desk on the first floor which turns out to be hidden behind an unmarked door to my right, where the exasperated information lady behind the counter eventually finishes her phone call and grudgingly hands me a pass.

The second checkpoint is where you surrender a long list of items that includes maps and books. The cloakroom lady asks me to open my bag and confiscates a cheap, crumpled, hotel map, along with my book and coat, handing me two separate plastic tags to retrieve them. Finally, I show my pass to one last person, a grumpy librarian in a glass booth guarding the turnstile, and I'm in! There is hardly anyone here. I wander around and enjoy myself thoroughly, everything so familiar (having worked in libraries for thirty-five years) and yet different. Even the workers look familiar, like there is a certain type of person for this job, or maybe years of constant exposure to books changes the way people look.

Next, I walk across the Bolshoy-Kamenny Bridge and take some shots of the Kremlin but the light is bad so I know I will need to return later to what I have identified as a perfect perspective point on the bridge. It begins to rain on the other side of the bridge. I continue walking and eventually end up at the Novokuznetskaya Metro station.

Once again, I set out to find the Museum of Russian Social Realist Art, which will turn out to be the most complex endeavour of the trip, with Google obstructing and confusing me along the way. The building housing the museum will also be the most cleverly concealed site of the trip, which is saying something, hidden in a sprawling complex of former industrial buildings with no signs or even address numbers at the gated entrance which I keep passing walking back and forth looking for non-existent clues or signs.



Russian State Library, Moscow



Saint Vladimir

I am determined to find this place which I am certain will be empty (who can find it?). For some reason, the blue dot on Google is now tracking my steps toward or away from my destination, so I decide to walk in circles until I get the dot moving in the right direction. The dot eventually takes me past the gate into the complex where I ask a security guard in the parking lot about the museum. He waves his hands and I think his gestures are meant to say there is no museum here but he must have been saying something else, which is, as I will keep searching and soon discover, that the museum is closed today. It's supposed to be open but a small sheet of paper on the window says, *The museum is not working. We bring apologies.* Another Russian experience to remember.

My notes tell me that if I walk to the nearby Moscow River, I'll find a bridge with a monastery on the other side. I don't see the bridge immediately and after fifteen minutes of walking in the rain beside the drab river on a drab day, I realize I've chosen the wrong direction, so I turn back. There are buses going by but I let them pass and eventually spot the monastery but decide not to climb the steps up to the bridge, so I just continue walking. Why not? I'm practically alone beside the river and why not take some photos in the rain. Unexpectedly, I will like the shots I get on this afternoon walk, shots that don't convey the extent of the cold and wet.

Finally, I end up back on the same street near the Novokuznetskaya Metro station where I began today's pointless trek, and where I had dumplings yesterday. I decide to pay for an overpriced coffee to sit in a warm café assuming at least the WIFI will work, but after the usual nonsensical, 12-step sign-in process, it doesn't, and the staff pretend to be mystified as to why. The \$4 coffee is not nearly as good as the \$1 coffee at the tiny shop beside my hotel.

The rest of the afternoon is just as pointless, going in the wrong direction on the Metro then turning back to visit the Izmailovo Flea Market. When I get there, it's raining so hard I give up and head home to take care of some business, including getting proper directions for the places I still want to see. I read more of the entertaining Rasputin book and discover that the mad monk's flat in Saint Petersburg was on Gorokhovaya, just a few doors down the street from my hotel. I wish I knew this last week.



Nicholas and Alexandra, the Tsar and Tsarina at the beginning of the 20th century, became obsessed with the lecherous Rasputin who used his beard as a napkin, had rotten teeth and foul breath, and smelled like a goat. Despite persistent gossip that the monk was bonking the Tsarina, the royal couple maintained their relationship with a man who claimed to have the power to help their hemophiliac son and heir to the throne, Alexei. They consulted him on every aspect of their lives, even affairs of the state. He had a profound influence on the whole country and became so renowned that even long after his death, someone would periodically claim to possess the man's notorious dick, and "several claimant penises were to appear."

Day 18 will be yet another grey day with maybe less rain, a little less cold, and maybe the sun will show itself at four, just at the point when it's too late to matter at this time of year. Before I leave, I see umbrellas on the streets below and with the strident sound of tires racing along wet roads I don't feel like leaving my room, but I do anyway.

First stop is the Lubyanka Metro station, the ugliest and most guarded I've seen so far. The whole area is uninviting and the building itself, a prison and former headquarters of the KGB, is nicely painted now but still exuding dread. How many people were tortured and killed here and what goes on in this place now? I linger for just a few minutes and take one inexplicably out-of-focus photo of the building which I will later discard.

Next stop is the Tolstoy Museum, which is not, as I thought it would be, the house where the author lived while staying in Moscow (that's another museum). After the usual rigamarole of finding the ticket office and the cloakroom, I find myself alone in the museum. Everything is in Russian but there are English cardboard printouts for each room that provide a general summary of what you're looking at.

It's an old, hardly renovated house with lots of photos, paintings and sculptures of the man himself, quite the celebrity in his day. What impresses is how serious his 'conversion' to peasantry was later in life – a rejection of his own privileged status as a count and idealization of the peasant classes who supported the rich (like himself). Approaching the end of the tour I realize I didn't see one image of the great man smiling. I retrace my steps to double check and manage to find one in which he's not scowling or seemingly contemplating suicide.



Tolstoy Museum

Next stop is Victory Park, an expansive area commemorating the Great Patriotic War, which is how Russians refer to the Second World War. The entire area is under reconstruction, which is disappointing but good to know so I can at least strike it off my list of places to rush to in the unlikely event of sunlight. For the third time on this trip I get some shots in leaden light that I will like anyway, a pleasant surprise. I take a break from the chill in a tall, skinny church in the park to read a couple of chapters of Rasputin.

The book is a fun read, salacious but also relevant to the trip. To explain how it was possible that members of a royal family could relate to a peasant monk, the author says that many Russians “had taken up Count Tolstoy’s view that peasants were closer to God.”

The next stop was going to be the Moscow Museum and Documentary Film Center but when I emerge from the Park Kultury Metro station, I feel the shock of sun on the back of my neck so it’s back down into the tunnels where I need to make a quick decision about where to go first. A good part of the sky is blue now but that means little. I decide to go for the good shot of the Kremlin from the spot I found yesterday on the Bolshoy Kamenny Bridge.

Alexander Sad station is only two stops away but it’s part of the three-line, three-station intersection that can take ten minutes to navigate. It’s where I’ve gotten lost before and this time is no different. When the train arrives, I immediately spot a sign for the Kremlin exit but after tunnels, stairways, another tunnel, a different station, another tunnel, more stairways, I see the same old lady panhandling and realize I’m going in circles so I pay extra attention and at one point there’s a staircase behind me on my right rising in the opposite direction and there’s the Kremlin exit. All I had to do was somehow intuit that I needed to turn around and look behind me. What a brilliant manoeuvre! I have to hand it to the Russian who designed this ruse. It must have been the highlight of his career, sending tourists looking to escape the Metro in a senseless, perpetual loop.



Victory Park, Moscow



St. George Church, Victory Park



St. George Church, Victory Park

On the surface, the situation is precarious. I get a shot of a brightly sunlit building in front of heavy black clouds, behind glistening, still wet paving stones but will the sun, coming and going now (mostly going) cooperate on the bridge? I head for the bridge regardless because the fast-moving clouds seem to be going in a promising direction. Halfway across, quickly approaching the spot with the best view, the sun shines brilliantly on the Kremlin and the palace with a perfect background of dark clouds. But the light is shifting fast and by the time I arrive it's gone. I missed it by seconds, all the fault of the joker who hid the exit sign in the Alexander Sad station.

I decide to wait on the spot as long as there is hope. There's another good-sized hole in the clouds that might just move into place. And it does, fifteen minutes later, and I've got my shot and it feels like a victory.

The sun quickly disappears again and I need a wizz but I'm happy and I know where I am – I know how to get to the neighborhood I like so much on the other side of the bridge near the Novokuznetskaya Metro station where I'm sure to find lunch, and in a park along the way there's a pay-per-wizz booth which I decide to give a try. The instructions look complicated but I'm feeling up to it. The contraption tries its best to obstruct, accepting only fifty-ruble bills or five ten-ruble coins, but it's my lucky day and I actually have exactly five ten-ruble coins.

I linger in the booth, getting my money's worth, warming my hands with the powerful hand dryer, and I hold the door open when I leave hoping to pass on my good fortune to someone else, but there's no one in sight. I continue to walk but the sun never returns. I spend the rest of the afternoon leisurely strolling until I realize that after eighteen days of walking, I'm at that point where the body – the feet, the hips and the back – are reaching their limits. In the evening I start to prepare for Monday's trek home, have a shawarma sandwich on the crowded Friday night street below my room, then ride the Brown Line for more **Metro** photos. A busy day ends with Rasputin.

Rasputin “removed the last vestiges of the halo from the Tsar's family.” The author quotes Alexander Kerensky, a key figure in the Russian Revolution: “Without Rasputin there would have been no Lenin. The spread of licentious tales and rumours had done more than anything to puncture the belief of the peasantry in the sacred nature of the monarchy.”



The Palace and the Kremlin from the Bolshoy Kamenny Bridge

It's yet another grey sky in the morning of Day 19. If I never come back to this country, I will always associate it with greyness. Rain is forecast for the afternoon. I'm thinking this may be a museum day but there are actually a few blue patches in the sky when I leave the hotel.

The city is much quieter on a Saturday morning, as is the Metro where there are fewer people and the trains are quieter too, not moving so fast maybe. First stop is Revolutionary Square Station which is already full of Chinese tourists taking pictures of themselves. I take a couple of shots and fondle a couple of statues before moving on. Next stop is Gorky Park where large sections are fenced off for maintenance but it's still beautiful with autumn leaves falling like snow and a path beside the Moscow River.

At one point, sitting on a bench overlooking the river, the sun comes out for a magical moment, shining warm white light on a massive building on the opposite bank. I get a good shot before random drops of rain start to fall, leaving blue splotches on the open notebook beside me, a fitting souvenir. Light rain will come and go for the rest of my walk in the park, maybe the nicest morning of the trip with the sun sort of coming out now and then to soft-light a few shots.

Lunch is coffee and a slice of strange pizza I half-eat at a counter on the other side of the Krymsky Bridge near the Park Kultury Metro station. It's started to rain heavily again but, coincidentally, another Tolstoy museum (this one in his Moscow house) is only a few minutes away but so well concealed it would have been impossible to find if the little blue Google dot on my phone wasn't tracking me again. I still don't know why sometimes the dot follows me but usually doesn't.

I love the house and the huge woodsy garden in the back. It looks like the perfect home: big, warm, unpretentious. The Count seems to have had a rich family life (only later will I discover how miserable it actually was). There are more matronly attendants than visitors today and a sign says the desk in Tolstoy's study is where he wrote *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. In a nearby nook is the worktable where the aristocratic Master practiced cobbling shoes.



Revolutionary Square Metro Station



View from a bench in Gorky Park



Gorky Park



Tolstoy's Moscow house



Mr. and Mrs. Tolstoy in their backyard



The Ivan Ilyich desk

I spend some time walking around the garden where ten trees are identified as having existed when Tolstoy lived here over a hundred years ago. In the gift shop I buy a little box of ten postcards, each with one of his sayings and a sepia-toned photo, in one of which he seems almost on the verge of smiling. Later I will read on the Web that Russians don't normally present themselves with a smile. A grumpy-looking lot.

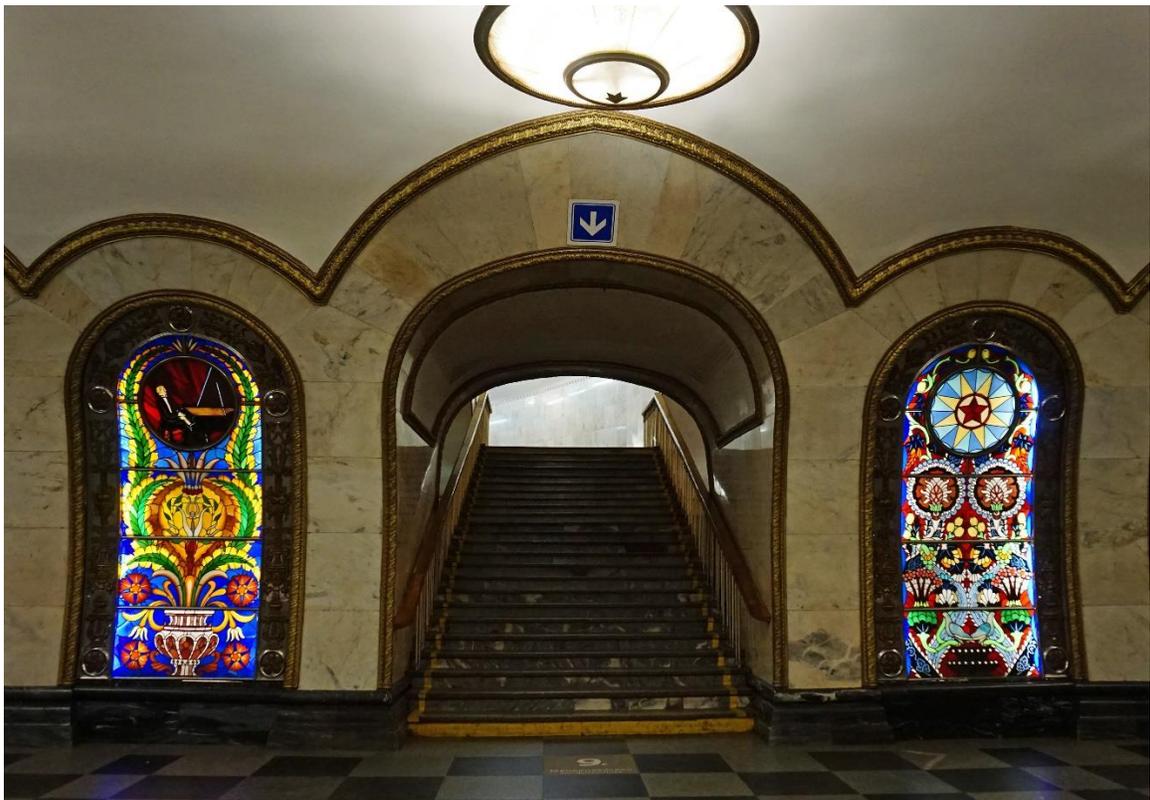
Next, despite the rain, I decide to try the Izmailovo flea market again. It's raining hard when I get there, just like the other day, but this time I don't turn back. I should have because there's nothing of interest and when the wind picks up, making the umbrella useless, I decide I've had it with the weather on this trip. I escape into a nearby overheated shopping center to eat something in the food court and read some Rasputin before heading back to the Metro.

In the evening I finish the Rasputin book and what a crazy story it is, with such a sad ending. Nineteen months after the mad monk was murdered, the entire royal family was executed by the Bolsheviks.

I'm up at 5:30 on Day 20 and can't back to sleep, so I begin the Djilas book. Milovan Djilas was a vice president of Yugoslavia who met with Joseph Stalin several times during and after World War II. In his first book, *The New Class*, he had "argued that communism was a sham. Instead of creating a workers' paradise, the leaders of the Soviet Union and of the Soviet Bloc states had conferred a whole new set of privileges upon themselves."

He became disillusioned with Soviet communism and wrote this second book in 1961. Djilas describes Stalin as a callous tyrant surrounded by sycophants and recounts long meetings with endless drunken toasts well into the early hours of the morning. He says the "idolatry of Stalin's personality, as well as more or less everything in the Soviet Union, acquired irrational forms and proportions."

The forecast for the last day of this wet and grey trip is more of the same, with possible clear skies in the early morning and late afternoon when it doesn't really matter. Oh well, at least the hotel WIFI is working this morning - after so much aggravation I had given up on it. Maybe the weather will surprise as well. There are still places I'd like to see but not in the rain. My skin has had enough exposure to damp and cold. Whatever the weather, I resolve to have a good, calm last day, to be as present as possible in a part of the world I may never return to.







The temperature is a balmy nine degrees when I leave the hotel at 8:45, and the Metro is relatively calm on a Sunday morning, people moving at a normal pace for a change. My own station, Avtozavodskaya, is practically empty when I enter and still a woman manages to tap my hand with her bag as she passes by, as if this sort of contact is an integral part of the experience. How many Muscovites have I touched in this way in the last nine days?

First stop is the Novodevichy Cemetery and Convent. The convent is under renovation and the cemetery is interesting, but the light isn't, and I might have enjoyed lingering longer but for the infernal sound of leaf blowers in a city obsessed with cleaning public places. I can see the photogenic State University at the top of a hill and when I get back to the Metro the sun is (sort of) present and it looks like I can walk up the hill but after fifteen minutes I reach a bridge with no pedestrian access and realize it's impossible and start to head back.

I decide to spend the next few hours before three o'clock mass in my favorite neighborhood around the Novokuznetskaya Metro. I walk up Pyatnitskaya Street to the small bridge with a view of the back of Saint Basil and spend a lot of time in the vicinity waiting for the sun which is now popping in and out of large holes in fast-moving clouds. I get some shots, including one of the lovely Novokuznetskaya Station in sunlight before I start to make my way slowly to the Church of the Immaculate Conception.

I get lost, stupidly mixing up two sets of directions, but eventually find the church where English mass is being held in a small, claustrophobic, dangerously overheated room in the crypt. Even after I step outside to take off my coat and sweater, the heat is still unbearable. The tiny room is packed with women, all Filipino and African as far as I can tell, singing one hymn after another. The African priest is audible but children down the hall are making a racket playing foosball and the doors, I presume, can't be closed against the noise because of the heat. I leave immediately, another failed attempt to attend mass on this trip. Not meant to be.



Next, I take the Metro up to Sparrow Hills where the views of the city are nice but the light is fading and I'm too tired to explore. I'm done being a tourist for now and thankful that, for once, I wasn't rained on today. I head back to the Maxima Panorama Hotel for one last walk around what I've come to regard as my neighborhood. I feel like I'm barely making it through this trip. These walking treks are getting more difficult as I get older. I figure I've walked over 300 kilometres in the last twenty days.

I'm in a taxi at 5:30 the next morning and it's an interesting forty-minute taxi ride in the dark through the entire city to the airport on the other side with a full moon in a cloudless sky. The airport itself is ridiculous: four checkpoints and the grumpiest, most miserable-looking employees I've ever encountered. The rip-off prices once past security are the worst too. Six dollars for a tasteless coffee served by a rude, angry woman. I tell myself I'm just renting a table with the coffee cup as a prop to work at organizing my photos for the next hour. It takes about ten attempts to get my 'official code' to access the airport WIFI. There are things I will not miss about this country.

On the way home I will finish the short Djilas book in which the author says that Stalin "became himself the slave of despotism, the bureaucracy, the narrowness, and the servility that it imposed on his country," and "it is indeed true that no one can take freedom from another without losing his own." He says Stalin was the greatest criminal in history, "one of those rare terrible dogmatists capable of destroying nine tenths of the human race to 'make happy' the one tenth." The Soviet regime lasted seventy-two years and the greyness of official, state-imposed materialism still lingers in the air. I think it had an effect on me, turning me into a temporary atheist unmotivated to sit through a mass.

The journey home with a four-hour layover in Amsterdam is as uneventful as the trip, with not a single bump of turbulence in eleven hours of flying. I breeze through customs when I land, my bag arrives promptly on the carousel, a cab is easy to find and there's hardly any traffic in what should be afternoon rush hour but today is a holiday, Thanksgiving.

As always, resettling and unpacking is much fun. Four books, a few pens, a notebook, the weird Tolstoy postcards and two fridge magnets is all I've brought back. As always, I embrace the warmth and familiarity of home, aware also for the moment that foreign places are different but the same too, the important

thing being to live where I live, to be as present and mindful at home as I am in pilgrim mode.

And, as always, a narrative of the trip begins to emerge in the process of unpacking. What did I learn from the fourth and last book that I finished in Amsterdam? “Men live in dreams and in realities,” says Milan Djilas. Did I really lose my faith momentarily in formerly godless Russia, the first country ever to officially turn its back on God? A few days later I will read in a book about the Shining Path Maoists in Peru that communists and Christians “each possess sacred texts and chosen prophets together with missionary impulses, doctrinal obsessions, and the promise of human salvation.” Communism focuses on the material (the impermanent), Christianity on the eternal (the unknowable). Both are easily poisoned by dogma.

Religious and materialist dogma do the same thing: they neutralize the spiritual, stunt the flow of grace and put our souls at risk. We are here to turn matter into spirit, not spirit into matter. Because every living thing dies. As sure as teeth eventually fall out, our bodies die too.

There is great danger in a blind belief in the kind of eternal progress and development that leads to utopia. Something always goes wrong. Like Tolstoy, the Communists idealized the peasants and the working class, and would proceed, once in power, to starve, torture and murder millions of them. I can't say I understand the communist regime that blighted this country for so long but I clearly see the dangers of rigid ideologies and imaginary utopias.

And what about Tolstoy's crucial question: *What is the point of living if we are to die?* Tolstoy became the central theme of the trip. He was more than just a writer, he was a celebrity, a man whose life influenced so many people, especially later in life when he stopped writing fiction and espoused morality and non-violence. Gandhi was deeply influenced by him, as were the Russian communists.

Tolstoy begins as a young noble whose life and education include immersion in Russian Orthodox Christianity. At sixteen, he gives up religion and takes on the lifestyle of the intellectual artist/poet, a lifestyle whose guiding principle is the myth of progress, the myth that the world is moving towards something better (the individual towards personal perfection) with the poet showing the way.

In mid-life, the myths of progress and self-perfection start to crumble at the time when the body itself stops developing, stops moving forward towards something better, and begins to fall apart. Tolstoy then returns to the Orthodox Church but soon leaves, rejecting as a toxic lie the one-true-religion dogma that corrupts organized religion. Finally, his faith evolves into a way of living based on what he believes to be raw Christian values.

It's a lovely and logical path except for the way he then idealizes the peasantry and the peasant way of life. He would wear peasant clothes for the last half of his life, sometimes working in the fields alongside his former serfs, or making shoes for his family on the bench next to his study in Moscow. He objectifies the peasant, indulging in the reverse idealism of a sentimental past, purer and simpler, when in reality peasants are no better than anyone else and an idealized past is just as delusional as an idealized future. He idealizes himself too, proclaiming principles he rarely lives up to. He renounces private property and wealth but simply hands them off to his wife and family, never actually getting around to giving up the lifestyle of the rich and famous.

This trip was different in many ways. Instead of jumping around and constantly researching and planning the next move, I lingered for longer periods in only two places. I finished reading all of the four small books I picked up (none of them used), I didn't have a single conversation, and there were none of the special moments of connectivity I usually find on a pilgrimage. No translation jobs, no mishaps, no significant dreams, no turbulence.... Very different.

But, significantly, my interest in books and reading concentration were revived, and I learned some things about taking photos in the dark. One of my favorite shots was taken on a dismal day, a shot of the River Neva near Lenin Square in Saint Petersburg where a young woman is sitting watching the river and a row of orange flowers in the foreground adds an element of life to a leaden landscape.

If you look close enough, there is something to catch the eye in any scene. And if the elements become too harsh on a photo walk - the rain and cold and wind - you can always slip underground to lurk in the Metro, waiting for a good shot, dodging Muscovites and blocking your ears when the screeching of steel wheels on steel rails gets to be too much.

Maybe my photography will change, maybe less dependent on sunlight that in a photo can be like a smiling face – nice and pretty but what’s underneath? Darkness, like the devil, can’t be denied. Maybe Russia has made me a little more comfortable with the glumness of ambiguity. Ultimately, of course, it’s a matter of balancing light with dark.

After three weeks of looking at the sky, hoping and waiting for the sun to appear, tomorrow there will be nine hours of sunlight here at home, in Montreal.

