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- [Cottage Grove](#)
- [Newport](#)
- [Springfield](#)



Graham Kislingbury

Graham Kislingbury, the Democrat-Herald's managing editor, had never been out of North America -- until Oct. 4th. He spent the next 11 days in Moscow and St. Petersburg, Russia, on a [Friendship Force](#) trip arranged by Jim Tolbert of Albany.



October 4, 2005

The Moscow I read about in books and newspapers and saw in movies when I was growing up was a drab place. Few cars could be seen on the streets. As we drove along Leningradsky Street today, we found ourselves in traffic rivaling that of any big American city. In the mix of vehicles were late-model Renaults, BMWs, Volvos, Toyotas, Fords and other makes I had never heard of.

The vast city of more than 9 million people was busy and bustling on this unseasonably warm and sunny October day. Judging from the new retail outlets and all the construction going on, business and development appear to be booming.

This is not the city that John Yost, one of the people along for the Friendship Force trip, remembers when he first visited here in 1966. On that occasion, Yost innocently took photos of an older neighborhood only to wind up being arrested, then held at the KGB headquarters for half a day. Today, Moscow looked colorful and anything but drab. And none of us who took pictures had to answer to the KGB.

In southeast Moscow, we stopped at a square, where we we received a warm welcome from our host families, who were carrying signs and roses. Jim Tolbert and I immediately recognized a number of the students and teachers from Moscow School 1256, who had visited Albany in February 2004 and last April. They were now welcoming Americans into their homes. I learned

that Polina Romanova, who stayed with my family in April, and her mother, Olga, were my hosts. Jim and I also reunited with teacher Helen Alekseeva and students Pavel Bychkovskiy, Kseniya Egorova and Vladimir Terekhov.

It was a great way to start a weeklong visit in Moscow. On Wednesday, we will "teach" at School 1256 and another Moscow School.

PICTURES



Photo by Graham Kislingbury

The Triumphal Arch, celebrating Napoleon's defeat in the 1812 war, is located between two busy boulevards near downtown Moscow.

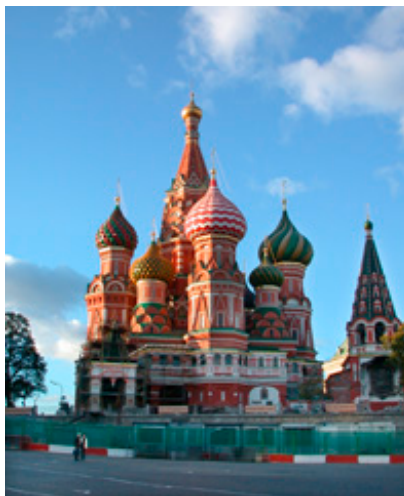


Photo by Graham Kislingbury

The historic St. Basil's Cathedral at Red Square is undergoing a major renovation. The cathedral was completed in 1561.

October 5, 2005

It's around 8 a.m. as my host student Polina, her friend Jane and I wait at the city bus stop for a familiar face. Helen Alexeeva walks up moments later. Alexeeva, an English teacher at

Moscow School 1256, was among the teachers who took groups of students from the school to Albany in 2004 and last April. We ride the bus about a mile, then walk past a market, over a pedestrian rail and through a park to reach the school. The building conjures thoughts of Albany's Central School -- an old school that's well loved.

This is a special day: International Teachers Day. Many parents arrive with flowers and gifts of appreciation. Many little girls wear traditional lace ribbons. Some of the boys don coats and ties.

The school has an enrollment of 540 students in forms (grades) 1-11. It's one of the few schools in southeast Moscow that emphasizes English.

Three of us on the Friendship Force tour from the United States -- Carol Patterson of Fort Wayne, Ind., and Jim Tolbert and I from Albany -- are billed as guest teachers today and the rest of the week.

This is a getting-acquainted day. We introduce ourselves many times, talk about life in America and field lots of questions. We've brought smalls gifts, including Democrat-Herald and Gazette-Times pens. The supply is gone by noon.

At mid-morning, there's a breakfast break in the cafeteria, which also has a small canteen. Meat pies and cabbage pies are served, along with tea and some sweets. Lunch at 1:30 features a tasty cabbage soup, vegetable salad, whole tomatoes, white bread and more tea.

The abbreviated day concludes with a concert of song and dance by the students. The dance instructor and his partner end the show with a dazzling tango. On Wednesday, the partners head to London for an international competition.

PICTURES



Photo by Graham Kislingbury

Helen Alexeeva, left, an English teacher at Moscow School 1256, walks toward a bus stop Wednesday, Oct. 5, in southeast Moscow. During his weeklong stay in Moscow, Graham Kislingbury stayed with a family in the gray building in the middle of the photo.



Primary students await the start of school on Wednesday, International Teachers Day, at Moscow School 1256.



Photo by Graham Kislingbury

Students stand as the teacher enters a classroom at Moscow School 1256.

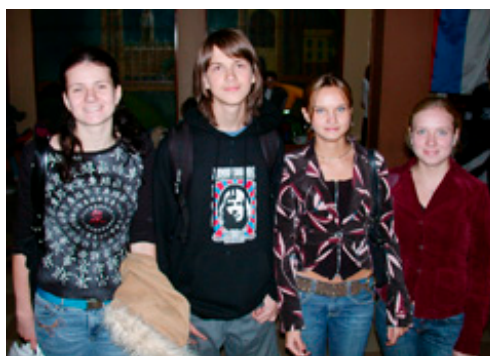


Photo by Graham Kislingbury

On his first day at Moscow School 1256, Graham Kislingbury got together four students he knew for a quick photo. From left are Elena Avramovsky, Anton Marchenko, Polina Romanova and Jane Shantseva. Elena, who stayed with Kislingbury's family in February 2004 in Albany, now attends Moscow State University. Anton has been a penpal with Kislingbury's daughter Anna since 2004. Polina, who stayed with Kislingbury's family last April in Albany, was his host student during his visit to Moscow. Jane has been a friend of Polina's for 11 years.

October 6, 2005

Russians take pride in being great hosts. I hear that wherever I go in Moscow, and it's true.

Tonight I was invited to dinner at the eighth-floor apartment flat of Elena Avramovsky and her parents, Milan and L'ya, in southeastern Moscow.

Elena, who stayed with my family in Albany in February 2004, is now a first-year student at Moscow State University, where she plans to major in journalism.

When I arrived around 4 p.m., L'ya had dinner on the table. Red fish, pork, boiled potatoes, pickles, tomatoes, cabbage salad, a mushroom dish, and red caviar spread on bread.

I normally limit my alcohol consumption to an occasional beer or glass of wine, but I've made exceptions this week. We started tonight with a vodka toast, followed by some sparkling water.

Milan, who works in construction management, arrived a short while later and we had another toast.

It was a wonderful meal and great conversation, with Elena serving as translator.

My host family during my stay in Moscow, Olga Romanova and her daughter, Polina, have been exceptionally hospitable.

They also live in a two-bedroom flat, about a mile from the Avramovskys. When I arrived Tuesday evening, we were joined for dinner by Olga's friend Luca and Polina's friend Jane.

Olga served fried fish, red fish, potatoes, a cabbage salad, green salad and more. It was all delicious. Luca led the vodka toasts, of which I counted six.

The dinner and a fun conversation around the table in the kitchen continued for two hours before we decided to move into the living room for karaoke.

Luca sang "Moscow Summer Nights." I did a fairly respectable "Light My Fire" by the Doors.

Luca, who has an exceptional voice, was deemed the evening's "Karaoke Queen."

PICTURES



Graham Kislingbury snapped this photo during dinner Tuesday evening, Oct. 4, at his hosts' apartment flat in southeast Moscow. From left are Luca Rusova, hosts Olga and Polina Romanova, and Jane Shantseva.

October 7, 2005

"Do you like football?" a student asked me this morning during a sixth-grade English class at Moscow School 1256.

"What you call football, we call soccer," I told him, acknowledging that I do like it.

"It's not soccer. It's football!" he insisted, drawing laughs.

Later in the morning, I kicked the "football" around with a group of high school students during their P.E. class. Nobody, including the teacher, seemed to mind that anarchy prevailed during the ragtag game that followed. It was the kind of unorganized game that I like.

One smiley student, Nastya Anastasia, made sure that my jacket was out of harm's way. She then told me how much she likes tennis, which has grown in popularity here since the days when Boris Yeltsin was in power.

Nastya said she and a number of other students will skip school Monday to watch one of her heroes, Russian tennis star Maria Sharapova, who is scheduled to play in the Kremlin Cup exhibition in downtown Moscow.

"She's very good and very beautiful," Nastya said.

The school doesn't have teams, but someone noted that four of the girls on the field are on one of the best club teams in the southeast Moscow district.

Volleyball, basketball, hockey and equestrian events are also popular.

In the late afternoon, Nastya and nine other classmates escorted me and Carol Patterson, a Friendship Force member from Fort Wayne, Ind., to a tour at the Kremlin via the Metro subway system.

This is my third trip on the Metro, an efficient system that I'd rate a step above New York's subway system. I have trouble with the phonetics of the Russian when each subway station is announced. But now I've figured out that we're on the lime green line and need to transfer when we reach the purple line that lets off near the Kremlin in downtown Moscow.

One of the students gives me an MP3 player and I listen to Russian rap until we reach the Kremlin station. It's a pleasant sound that makes the 20-minute ride go faster.

Carol and I are supposed to meet up with a group from the Friendship Force for the tour but we have about 40 minutes to kill. We're just having a good time with the kids wandering around the west side of the vast brick-walled Kremlin.

It's a Russian tradition for newlyweds to leave flowers at monuments after their wedding ceremony and before their reception. We walk behind one such couple and the students joyously chant, "Gorka!" ("They ought to kiss.")

We stop at the World War II monument and pause for a minute. The Soviet Union lost more than 20 million people during the war.

I ask if any of the five boys plan to do military service. All say no.

Most of the students stick around to take the Kremlin tour. Afterward, Sasha Voztolomeev helps me with the cell phone I've been given. I'm supposed to meet Dmitry Kahlilov, the father of my host student, for dinner, and give him a call in the late afternoon. I can't read the Russian on the phone, so Sasha, like every technically unchallenged student in Russia and the United States, quickly got it converted to English before heading back to the subway station.

I sure like Sasha and all these other kids.

PICTURES



Photo by Graham Kislingbury

A just-married couple walks toward a monument near the Kremlin Wall as students from Moscow School 1256 briefly follow them chanting "Gorka" ("They ought to kiss.") on Friday in Moscow. It's a tradition for newlyweds to leave flowers at seven monuments.



Photo by Graham Kislingbury

Students from Moscow School wait to board a Metro subway train to the Kremlin on Friday afternoon, Oct. 7.



Photo by Graham Kislingbury

Students play soccer during their P.E.class Friday at Moscow School 1256.



Students from Moscow School 1256 gather with American visitors Graham Kislingbury and Carol Patterson on Friday, Oct. 7, near the west side of the Kremlin.



Photo by Graham Kislingbury

A Friendship Force group from the U.S. and Canada tours Red Square.

October 8, 2005

Dmitry Khalilov greets me near Red Square at dusk Friday and leads me to a small car driven by an employee from work.

Kahlilov, whose daughter and former wife, Polina and Olga Romanova, are hosting me this week, is a corporate attorney and senior manager with Ernst & Young, an American accounting firm.

As we drive along a broad avenue, Dmitry points out the company's attractive new Moscow building. Not far from there is a striking new five-star hotel next to a new concert hall.

"It's the biggest concert hall in Europe," Dmitry says.

Tonight, our destination is an older establishment, The Black Cat restaurant, whose theme is based on a much-loved 1940s Russian movie of the same name.

There's lots of memorabilia, and the movie runs continuously on a TV across from where we are sitting. The movie was set in Stalinist times, and restaurant staff wear costumes similar to those I can see on the TV. Waiters don military-style uniforms; waitresses have their hair in pigtails.

Even the entrees listed on the menu look like a script that has tongue-in-cheek references to Stalin and the Communist Party.

After we order, I ask Dimitry about his life and the changes that have swept his country since the end of Communist rule in the early 1990s.

Dmitry, 33, grew up along the Black Sea and moved to the Moscow area about 18 years ago. The breakup of the Soviet Union several years led to creation of the country now called the Russian Federation.

"It was something new and changed us forever," he said.

Gone are the days of seeing long lines for food and consumer goods, all of which seem to be plentiful everywhere you go today.

"We are more free, more open and have more opportunities today," Dmitry added. "We can travel around the world. Fifteen years ago that was a problem. Now it's easy."

The genie is out of the bottle in Russia, and it would be hard to put it back.

"It's a completely new country," Dmitry said.

We are soon reminded that one thing hasn't changed. Russia's rich musical heritage remains intact.

A group of gypsy musicians enters the room and sings Russian folk songs that everyone seems to know. I don't understand a word of it, but I love the sound and hum and clap along.

Like everyone I've met this week, Dmitry is a wonderful host who treated me to an evening I'll never forget.

PICTURES



Dmitry Kahlilov, shown near Red Square at dusk Friday, Oct. 7, is an attorney and a senior manager in the Moscow office of Ernst & Young, an American accounting firm. The company has a large new office in downtown Moscow.



Photo by Graham Kislingbury

A gypsy band performs a Russian folk song Friday night, Oct. 7, at The Black Cat restaurant in downtown Moscow.



A couple sings along with musicians Friday night, Oct.7, at The Black Cat restaurant in downtown Moscow. The restaurant's theme is based on a famous 1940s Russian movie of the same name. Restaurant staff wear costumes similar to those used in the movie.

October 9, 2005

My daughter Anna has been a penpal with a boy from Moscow since last year. The two have exchanged countless e-mails and photos.

Anna, 14, is a freshman at West Albany High School. Anton Marchenko, 15, is in the 10th form (his sophomore year) at Moscow School 1256 where I have spent a lot of time this week.

Knowing that I would meet Anton and that he's a skateboarder, I decided to bring him a new Red Cement skateboard from Albany.

I spent time with Anton earlier in the week and had this crazy idea of presenting him the skateboard at Red Square. I mostly wanted to see if we could skateboard there without getting arrested.

I had walked through Red Square twice since I got here. A tour guide said the "Red" actually means a place of beauty and has nothing to do with the color that symbolized the country's seven decades under Communist rule. I even picked out a spot for the skateboard ceremony in the geographic center of the square. It's halfway between Lenin's tomb, a cold steel structure harkening back to the bad old days, and GUM, a trendy, upscale mall with 1,000 shops housed in a historic 19th century building. Take a guess where thousands of people are flocking these days.

On Saturday, I called Anton and he said to forget about Red Square. His dad, a Moscow cop, informed him that skateboarding is prohibited there and we would indeed be arrested if we tried. I guess Moscow is no different than any place else. Think of all the "No Skateboarding" signs we have in Albany and elsewhere in the mid-valley.

I was mildly disappointed, but by today I was glad that we wouldn't have to take another long subway ride downtown. And besides, the cobblestones of Red Square would be just about the worst surface in town for skateboarding.

It was a beautiful day today. Sunny, about 70 degrees and no wind. Anton and I got together on a smooth asphalt path near the school. I demonstrated for him the "mongo" style that

ancient skateboarders still use. You put one foot on the back of the board while pushing off the ground with the other foot. Nearly all kids place one foot on the front of the board.

I was tired today, so after I took a tumble and whacked my left wrist, I decided I had had enough. Like the kids I know at the Albany Skatepark, Anton was a natural on a skateboard. And like the Albany kids, he doesn't wear a helmet.

Our skateboarding adventure lasted less than five minutes. As we walked toward his home, Anton told me Moscow could use a lot more skateparks. There's one big skatepark, but it's a long subway ride from his home.

Anton lives in an apartment flat near his school. When we arrived, his parents welcomed me and immediately pointed to lunch that was all set out on the living room table. They introduced me to their small dog, Cindy.

"Cindy Crawford," Anton's mom said, giggling.

We looked at family photos and talked about Anton and Anna. They want Anna to visit Moscow. I want Anton to come to Albany.

When it was time to leave, the Marchenkos presented me with a huge bottle of vodka that probably weighed more than the skateboard. They walked most of the way back with me toward the flat where I'm staying. Cindy Crawford came along, too.

PICTURES



Photo by Graham Kislingbury

In southeast Moscow, Anton Marchenko heads home Sunday, Oct. 9, with his new skateboard from Albany. Marchenko has been a penpal with Graham Kislingbury's daughter Anna since 2004.



Photo by Olga Romanova

Anton and Graham talk Sunday before Anton Marchenko tried out his new skateboard.



Photo by Graham Kislingbury

At his family's flat in southwest Moscow, Anton Marchenko wanted to show what his dad Sasha's Moscow police uniform looked like.

October 10, 2005

The time in Moscow is winding to an end. Tomorrow afternoon we're supposed to get on a train to St. Petersburg. I don't want to go. I'm enjoying it here too much.

And I never imagined October in Moscow with Southern California weather. I wore a T-shirt and shorts this afternoon while walking and jogging around the lake near the apartment flat where I'm staying. It reminded me of Green Lake in Seattle and Waverly Lake in Albany. All three are lakes you don't want to swim in. Here, however, I saw two people stripping off most of their clothes and bathing in the lake with bar soap. Also catching my attention were the long fishing poles guys were using. They seemed longer than surf-casting rods.

An hour later, I headed to a farewell party at Moscow School 1256 for our Friendship Force group. Students sang and danced and a professional trio with a cellist, violinist and pianist performed a number of Russian classics.

Throughout the week here, our Russian hosts have been singing the praises of Jim Tolbert, the retired Linn-Benton Community College instructor who organized this trip. Tonight's gathering was no exception.

"Jim Tolbert is really a wonderful man," said Natalia Guskova, president of the Friendship Force of Moscow. "He visits us and keeps coming back."

The tireless 72-year-old globetrotter has made 12 trips to Russia since 1998 and he's already planning to return again next February and June. Since 2000, he has brought more than 114 people from the United States and two from Canada.

If you had asked me two years ago what countries I wanted to visit, Russia never would have made the list.

Tolbert and members of the Kiwanis Club of Albany arranged for students and staff from Moscow School 1256 to come to Albany in 2004 and again last April. After my family hosted two of those students, Russia became the only place I wanted to visit.

I thank Jim Tolbert for that and for planting the seeds of so many new friendships

PICTURES



Photo by Graham Kislingbury

Jim Tolbert, left, briefly dons a military uniform that Igor Egorov pulled out of a closet during a dinner party Saturday, Oct. 8, at Egorov's home in southeast Moscow.

Egorov, a marine veteran of the Soviet Union, toasted his guests.

"We want to live in peace with the rest of the world," he said.

Tolbert, an Albany resident, is leading a Friendship Force tour of Moscow, St. Petersburg and Novgorod, Russia.



Photo by Graham Kislingbury

Nelly Muromtseva plays "Moscow Summer Nights" as others sing along during the party Oct. 8 at the home of Albina and Igor Egorov. Standing from left are Yuri Egorov, his daughter Kate, Elena Goncharova and Helen Alekseeva.



Photo by Graham Kislingbury

A teacher plays a balalaika while leading children in a traditional song for Jim Tolbert and other American and Russian visitors Monday, Oct. 10, at Moscow School 1471.



Photo by Graham Kislingbury
Children sing and prepare to present bread to visitors Monday, Oct. 10, at Moscow School 1471.



Photo by Graham Kislingbury

Dimitri Rackin, accompanied by music teacher Nellie Muromonsteva, sings "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" during the program Monday evening, Oct. 10, at Moscow School 1256. Rackin, who graduated from the school last year, Muromonsteva and other students and teachers, stayed in Albany in 2004.



Photo by Graham Kislingbury

English teacher Helen Alexeeva and American visitor Jim Tolbert listen to a musical performance Monday evening, Oct. 10, at Moscow School 1256.

October 11, 2005

I made one last visit to my favorite school in Moscow today. English teacher Helen Alekseeva recommended that I attend School 1256's history class, knowing that it's a subject I enjoy. The history teacher didn't speak English and I forgot to jot down her name, but I learned that she was born in 1954, a year after Joseph Stalin died. I was born in 1953.

We tell the students that we both grew up during the Cold War. As a little kid, I had the same fears about the Soviet Union as she apparently had about the United States.

So we spend the next 45 minutes talking about those years, especially the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962. We tell the kids that the two countries came within a whisker of nuclear war over Soviet missiles that were being installed in Cuba, a mere 90 miles from the Florida coast. After 12 tense days, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev "blinked" as we were told at the time, and he ordered the missiles pulled out of Cuba. As part of the deal, the U.S. pulled missiles out of Turkey several months later.

Most of the kids in the class were babies in the early 1990s during the collapse of the Soviet Union and subsequent creation of the Russian Federation.

The teacher said that many retired people with meager pensions long for a return to the authoritarian times they remembered under Stalin, Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev, when the government took care of their needs. During my week here in Moscow I haven't heard younger people express any such longings.

When the class ended, the teacher then took me downstairs to the mid-morning tea and breakfast in the faculty room. The teachers gathered, then about a dozen students joined us, including my host student Polina, her friend Jane and my daughter Anna's penpal, Anton.

They had all come to say goodbye to Jim Tolbert, Carol Patterson and me. They gave us several gifts to bring home. I told them that being in the school with them, visiting people's homes and getting to know the neighborhood were the best parts of the visit.

Several hours later all 12 visiting Americans and our Russian hosts were saying goodbye at the Leningradsky Station, where we were catching the 4:30 train to St. Petersburg.

Kseniya Egorova, a college student who visited Albany twice since 2004; her mother, Stella, and grandfather Yuri were among those who came to the station. Yuri, a funny guy, poked me and pointed to a bust of Lenin. Got to have your picture taken in front of Lenin, he told me. Several of us walked over and snapped some shots. I've thought all this week that Lenin must be turning in his tomb to know that a new revolution is sweeping Russia. Not quite the one that he had envisioned.

I said my goodbyes to Jane, Polina and her mom, Olga, who had been a wonderful host. Then as I got on Car No. 10, my eyes began to well up. I started slinging our heavy suitcases packed with too much stuff into the overhead bins. Anything to get my mind off a train trip I didn't want to take.

Yuri came onboard for a moment and saw that I was having a meltdown.

He put his arm around me and started singing what sounded like a pop song from the 1960s. I could only understand two words and he repeated them about five times, finally getting me to smile.

"Arrivederci, Moscow!"

PICTURES



Photo by Graham Kislingbury

The history teacher at Moscow School 1256 talks about the Cold War during a morning class Tuesday, Oct. 11.



Photo by Graham Kislingbury

The custodian stands near the entrance to Moscow School 1256 on Tuesday morning, Oct. 11.



Photo by Graham Kislingbury

Kseniya Egorova and her grandfather, Yuri, pose in front of

a bust of Vladimir Lenin before saying farewell to their American friends
Tuesday, Oct. 11, at the Leningradsky Station in Moscow.

October 12, 2005

St. Petersburg is often called the Venice of Russia. The city is as beautiful as people in Moscow told me it would be. It has 42 islands, more than 400 bridges and countless palaces that are now museums.

Our tour guide is Ludmilla Dyatchenko, a lifelong St. Petersburg resident with a sharp wit.

"I'll be your mother hen for the next three days," she informed us.

As the bus driver, Slava, negotiated the busy boulevards, Ludmilla pointed out that the city has not taken down its statues of Lenin, Stalin and the founder of the KGB.

"We want to be on the safe side," she said. "You never know who's going to win the next election."

As we toured the ornate Yusupoff Palace, my mind was still in Moscow. Then Ludmilla got my attention, telling us we were going downstairs to see the room where in 1916 a group of men conspired to kill Grigori Rasputin, the influential religious mystic and faith healer. Rasputin didn't go down easily, we were informed, but the bumbling conspirators ultimately prevailed.

Back on the bus, Ludmilla returned to a present-day problem in this city of 4.8 million people: Lack of affordable housing. About one-third of St. Petersburg's residents live in communal flats. Multiple families, sometimes as many as 10, share just a few flats, she told us. With meager incomes, many people can't afford their own flats, she said.

One guy who grew up in a communal St. Petersburg flat and eventually got his own flat is Vladimir Putin, the Russian Federation president.

A few hours later, I did a double-take in the hotel lobby when I heard the bar band playing a Santana tune. I had to go see for myself. The guitarist, wearing a fox pelt around his neck, is a veteran musician and sounded remarkably like Carlos Santana. During a break, I told him I enjoyed his band, and that I had just seen Santana in Portland three weeks earlier with my daughters. His English was pretty good.

"Say hello to Carlos Santana the next time you see him," the guitarist said, shaking my hand.

A few minutes later, he took off his fox pelt and laid it across a chair. Two little girls asked if they could look at it. He obliged, then smiled as he watched the girls pet the pelt.

PICTURES



Photo by Graham Kislingbury

Tour guide Ludmilla Dyatchenko describes the St. Petersburg Synagogue, the second-largest synagogue in Europe, on Oct. 12.

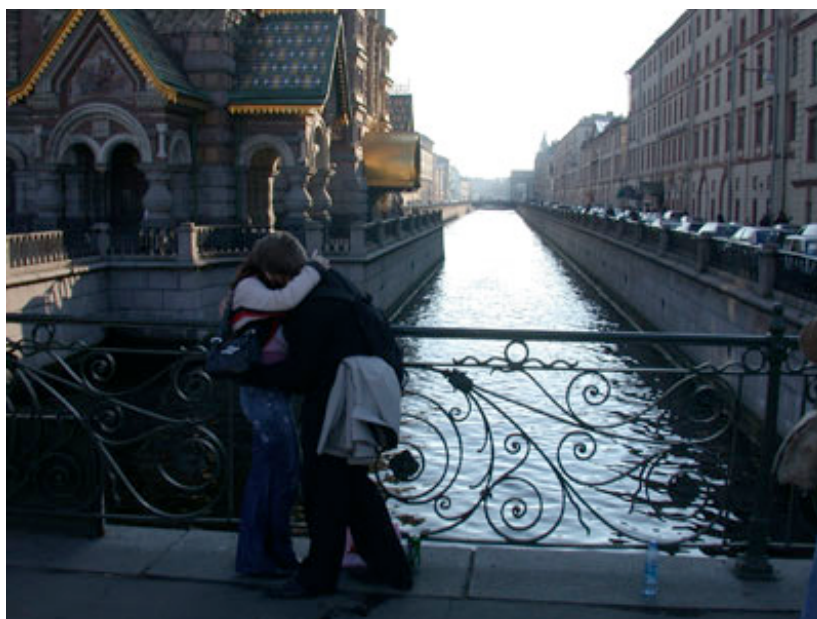


Photo by Graham Kislingbury

A couple embrace Oct. 12 by one St. Petersburg's many canals.

October 13, 2005

We rode south of St. Petersburg to the suburb of Pushkin, named for the Russian poet Alexander Pushkin, who lived there in the 19th century.

We view the over-the-top Catherine Palace. How did this palace and others survive the Russian Revolution of 1917? I wondered.

"Don't think the Bolsheviks were so stupid to ruin everything," Ludmilla said. "A lot of beautiful palaces were turned into museums. The official attitude of the state was to preserve as much as possible."

The palace was also home to invading German soldiers in World War II, she told us.

What was most striking on this sunny day were the palace's beautiful grounds. It looked like the height of fall foliage in New England.

Later, we drove back to the city's World War II memorial, just across the street from our hotel. Lining the walls inside are 900 illuminated cartridges for each day of the siege from 1941-44, during which the Germans surrounded and bombarded the city. St. Petersburg lost 1,000,000 people, 600,000 from starvation, during the siege.

The city, however, never surrendered to or was occupied by the Germans, who finally began their retreat in January 1944.

Heading back toward downtown, Ludmilla lamented some of the sweeping changes that have happened since the breakup of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s.

"Life is much worse now," she said. "My neighbors, my friends were happy. They had free medical care, free education. We don't have those possibilities because the system is different. We want our children to be well educated. That does not mean pushing a button and learning how to play the computer."

She is disappointed that there is less emphasis on Russian history and literature and kids no longer have to wear uniforms.

"There's been a decline in health care and education," she said. "If you don't have those, what do you have?"

Just as Ludmilla started talking about rising drug use among youths today, she pointed to three teenagers on a sidewalk next to the bus. They appeared to be sniffing glue.

It's too bad Ludmilla didn't get to meet the kids from Moscow School 1256. They don't wear uniforms, but they sure respect their teachers and are taking strong core classes, including history and literature.

PICTURES

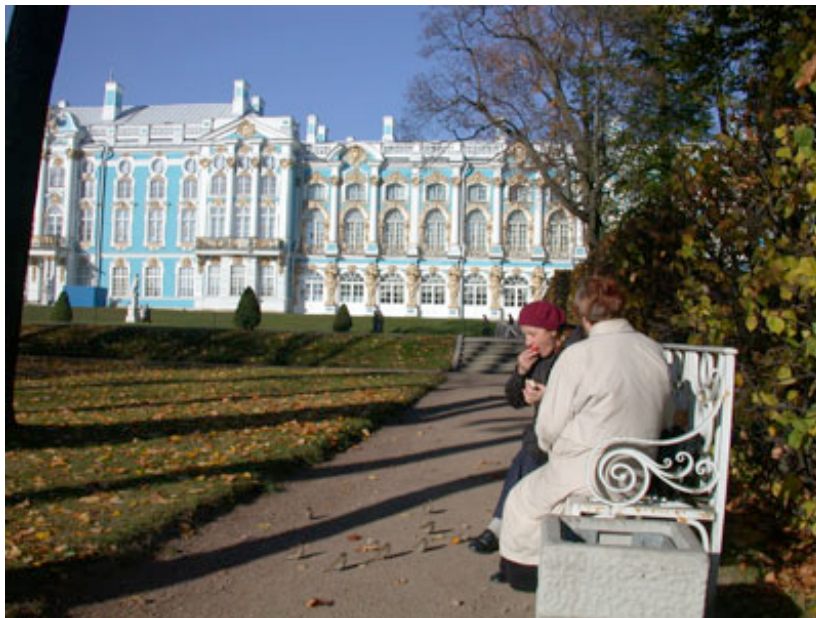


Photo by Graham Kislingbury

Visitors enjoy the morning sun Oct. 13 near the vast palace at Pushkin.



Photo by Betty O'Keefe

Graham Kislingbury laments another place, the palace at Pushkin, where skateboarders and in-line skaters are not welcome.



Photo by Graham Kislingbury

One of the museum staffers nods off during morning tours Oct. 13 at the palace in Pushkin.



Photo by Graham Kislingbury

Tourists look at the exterior of the World War II memorial in St. Petersburg

October 14, 2005

"This is your last day with your mother hen," Ludmilla informed us as we got on the bus. "Tomorrow we have rain and snow."

No snow, but she was right about the rain. It would arrive Saturday morning.

Today we toured four of the five buildings of the Hermitage State Museum (Catherine the Great's Winter Palace), St. Isaac's Cathedral and the Church of the Resurrection.

The Hermitage, the busiest of all the museums we saw in St. Petersburg, used to have a bad mice and rat problem, Ludmilla said. The museum found a successful old-fashioned solution: cats. Eighty-five cats, who have their own veterinarian, reside in the basement of the Hermitage. No more rodents.

Ludmilla offered more social commentary on the bus, telling about problems with deadbeat dads, medical services and retirement homes. ("People who have been let out of prison are put in retirement homes with nice single women," she said.)

We all wanted to know about people with disabilities, having noticed the glaring lack of ramps and other aids that are now required in the United States.

"They have no chance. They will sit by a window," Ludmilla said. "They're trying to introduce things for them, but the attitude is not very good. People don't want to be upset with other people's suffering."

Military veterans are a growing part of the disabled population.

"It's a tragedy losing men who became handicapped in Afghanistan and Chechnya," she said.

That very morning, Ludmilla said, Russian security forces were battling militants in the city of Nalchik. She wondered how many more men would become disabled as a result.

The tour of St. Petersburg ended in the late afternoon with a light dinner on a ship permanently docked on the Neva River.

Joining us there were children from three of the city's orphanages, or children's homes.

The kids, who attend city schools, were outgoing, bright and talented. The hosts for the party were a lady dressed like Catherine the Great and a guy we assumed was portraying a jestful Peter the Great. They led everyone in dances and games. The kids then performed a number of dances of their before everyone went home.

We all got the impression that these kids lived in fairly nice places run by people who genuinely cared about them and liked their jobs.

PICTURES

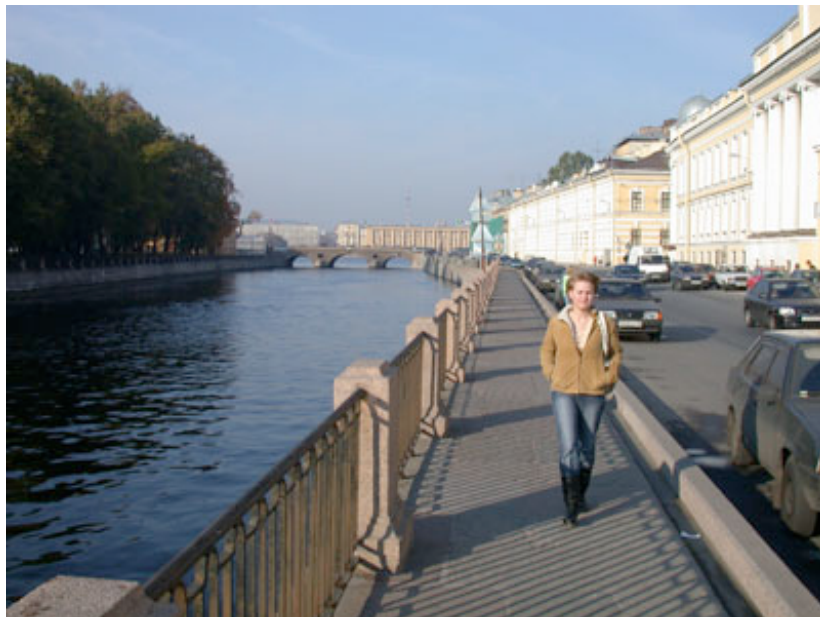


Photo by Graham Kislingbury

A woman strolls along a St. Petersburg canal Oct. 14.



Photo by Graham Kislingbury

Girls from a St. Petersburg children's home dance during an afternoon performance for American visitors Oct. 14 on a restaurant ship docked along the Neva River.



Photo by Graham Kislingbury

A girl from a St. Petersburg children's home holds leftovers from a party Oct. 14 on the Neva River.

October 15, 2005

Saturday was a travel day. Nine members of our Friendship Force tour went by bus to the city of Novgorod, where they will live with families until Oct. 29. Three of us flew back to the United States. I spent Saturday night in the Astoria district of Queens at the apartment two young women from Albany. Diana Schultz and Sarah Edminster moved there recently to attend the American Academy of Dramatic Arts on Madison Avenue. (A story about them will appear on the Democrat-Herald's People Page.) On Sunday morning, we had breakfast at a diner, walked along the East River and toured the neighborhood. What a great view of the Manhattan skyline.

I've been so lucky to spend time on the same trip in America's and Russia's largest cities. Each is unique, but both have many similarities. I headed back to John F. Kennedy Airport in the mid-afternoon, riding three different subway trains through Queens. People were remarkably helpful and hospitable in the subway, just as they were in the Moscow Metro. One guy, noting all my stuff, stood up and gave me his seat.

The flight to Portland arrived at 11:02 p.m. By the time I got my bags, I had missed the last Max train of the night, and the TriMet buses were no longer running. I had left my pickup truck at a friend's place near Clackamas Town Center, so I joined the long line of people waiting for taxis.

A half-hour later on I-205, I started telling the taxi driver about the great trip I had to Russia. He seemed interested and asked questions. Noticing that he had an accent I couldn't quite discern with the freeway noise, I asked him where he was from.

"Russia," he said, "near the Black Sea."

What are the odds? I asked myself. And what a fitting way to end the most mind-blowing trip of my life.

PICTURES



Photo by Graham Kislingbury

Sarah Edminster, left, and Diana Schultz, both from Albany, have a great view of the Manhattan skyline from the rooftop of their apartment in Queens. The two moved to New York City recently to attend the American Academy of Dramatic Arts.

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