

GOING ASHORE EXPERIENCE:

THE PETERHOF ST. PETERSBURG, RUSSIA

By Richard H. Wagner

St. Petersburg is a city of palaces. In the historic city center, there seems to be one on every street. However, the czars and nobles also wanted places to escape to during the summer. Consequently, there are a number of palaces in what has over the years become the suburbs of St. Petersburg. One of these is the Peterhof Palace - - a world class palace that provides a very worthwhile experience for anyone interested in architecture, art, or history. Moreover, the grounds of Peterhof are a visual delight on a summer's day.

I went to Peterhof on a shore excursion organized by my cruise ship. It involved a coach ride of perhaps 45 minutes. (It is also possible to get to Peterhof by sea via hydrofoil). Along the way, the view from the coach consisted mostly of industrial plants and Soviet era apartment blocks - - not very scenic but interesting from a sociological standpoint. As we got closer to Peterhof, the residences became larger and our guide pointed out one palace where a Russian president had met with an American president.

Peterhof dates back to the early days of St. Petersburg. In the first years of the 18th century, Czar Peter the Great was in the process of not only building his new city of St.

Petersburg but also a base for his new navy at Kronstadt. In traveling between the two projects, he discovered the place where Peterhof now stands and built a small wooden retreat.

However, Peter soon began to develop new ideas for this location which he noted in his journals. In 1710, work began to transform his ideas into an official residence. This work was renewed with increased vigor after Peter returned from a trip to France in 1717, where he was impressed by the palaces and fountains at Versailles. He now wanted to create a Russian version of Versailles to impress both foreign visitors and his own nobles.

To assist in this effort, Peter brought in the French architect Jean-Baptiste Alexandre Le Blond as well as numerous French and Italian artists and craftsmen. In order to create the fountains that he envisioned, he had thousands of soldiers work on channeling water from 24 km away.

After Peter's death in 1725, Peterhof lay almost abandoned until his daughter Empress Elizabeth came to the throne in 1740. She decided to make the palace even grander and engaged the architect Bartolomeo Rastrelli. Although subsequent rulers made additions and

alterations, the Grand Palace that we see today is largely Rastrelli's work.

World War II was devastating for Peterhof. It lay within the territory captured by the Nazis. Although the staff were able to evacuate some of the treasures and hide others before Peterhof was taken, much was looted or destroyed by the invaders. After the war, using photographs and original plans, Peterhof was superbly restored.

Peterhof can be divided broadly into three areas. The Grand Palace sits atop a ridge approximately 100 meters from the Bay of Finland. Between the Bay and the Palace are the Lower Park. On the opposite side of the Palace is the Upper Park. The Grand Palace itself is the third area.

To get to the entrance to the Grand Palace, our tour group walked along a path that ran along the edge of the Upper Park. Originally, the Upper Park was a working garden. Its acres were used to grow vegetables and its ponds used to supply fish for the czar's table. However, in the 1740s, the area was re-designed as a European formal garden including flower beds, mirrored ponds and gazebos. That is the way the area looks today.

The Grand Palace is a long relatively narrow structure done in a late Baroque almost Neoclassical style. When Rastrelli re-designed the palace, he retained Peter the Great's original house but added wings with gilded copulas that shine in the sun. This contrasts nicely with the pale buff and white colors that predominate on the building's exterior. While the building is indisputably grand, it is not overly ornate in its exterior decoration. This makes it all the more impressive.

While we waited to enter the Palace, we were serenaded by a small brass band. Due to Russian visa laws, foreign tourists usually travel in groups. As each group approached the band, it would strike up the national anthem of the country that the band perceived to be each group's country of origin. Thus, for a group on a

Cunard shore excursion, the band played "God Save The Queen." For the next group, they played "The Star Spangled Banner" but upon being told the group was actually from Texas, the band obliged with "The Yellow Rose of Texas."

There are only about 30 rooms in the Grand Palace. In contrast to the restrained decoration outside, the interior was a riot of opulence. For example, the Ceremonial Staircase near where visitors enter is alive with gilded statues and topped by a ceiling fresco which is an allegory of Spring by Bartolomeo Tarsia.

As lavish as the staircase is, there are even grander rooms ahead. The two tiers of windows and the mirrors in the Ballroom (Dance Hall) flood the room with natural light. Gilding embellishes the walls giving the room a golden glow. It's not hard to imagine courtiers, diplomats and grandees swirling across the parquet dance floor as the Empress Elizabeth looks down from the epic painting that covers the ceiling.

Along the same lines, the Audience Hall is a double height space designed by Rastrelli. It was used for smaller receptions with the Empress Elizabeth. The Throne Room, the largest room in the Palace, was used for grander receptions. This room was re-done in 1777 by Lukas Pfanzelt in a more neoclassical style. The painting behind the throne is of Catherine the Great.

Another interesting room is the Picture Hall, which has 368 paintings of women of various ages and in various garbs so closely packed together that there is no wall space in between the pictures. They were all painted by the Italian artist Pietro Rotari and were purchased by Catherine the Great after the artist's death. But what is remarkable about them is that if you look closely, you'll see that the same model was used for all the paintings. Thus, the wall is covered with 368 paintings of the same person.

There are also a series of relatively more intimate rooms that are open to view. These

were places where few members of the court were permitted and were where the royal family lived. Most are quite luxurious. Only the Oak Study reflects the more Spartan décor of Peter the Great's era.

After touring the Grand Palace, we went out to the terrace that runs along the length of the northern facade of the Grand Palace. Inasmuch as the ridge that the Palace is on is 16 meters higher than the Lower Park there is a stunning view of the pleasure grounds below the Palace. While the Upper Park is nice, the Lower Park is spectacular.

When people speak of Peterhof, they inevitably talk about the fountains. There are more than 100 fountains in the Lower Park. Those in the Lower Park are fed by the ponds in the Upper Park. Since the Upper Park is higher in elevation than the Lower Park, the fountains in the Lower Park are able to spray their plumes of water without use the pumps. There is one exception - - the jet for the Sampson Fountain comes from an aqueduct that brings water from miles away.

The Sampson Fountain is the centerpiece of an array of 64 fountains that includes 250 statues and reliefs. Water flows down the marble stairs of The Great Cascade past cavorting gilded pagan gods and nymphs to a large pool. In the pool is a statue of Sampson ripping open the jaws of a lion, releasing a jet of water that shoots 21 meters into the sky. Beyond

that is a canal leading to the sea. It was originally a marine approach to the Palace but became purely decorative after the installation of the Sampson fountain.

As you walk the grounds of the Lower Park, you encounter a variety of other fountains. Most are just for ascetics but some reveal Peter's sense of humor. Step on the wrong paving stone and the fountain will spray you.

The gardens themselves are predominately French-style formal gardens. However, Catherine the Great also added a section inspired by the English landscape gardens.

In the grounds, there are also a number of smaller buildings. These include not just such country house staples as an orangery but also smaller palaces. Peter built several of these including Monplaisir Palace, Marly Palace and the Hermitage Pavilion as entertainment palaces where he could get away from court life. Subsequent czars and czarinas built additional palaces and buildings.

There is more to Peterhof than can be seen in one visit. However, you can see enough to make it a worthwhile endeavor. The house and grounds have been lovingly restored. As Peter had hoped, the entire complex is impressive from its ornate palatial rooms to its superb park.