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Travel Adventures - Part 2:

St. Petersburg, Russia

by Noella Ballenger

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There are a number of canals in St Petersburg and many old beautiful buildings line these waterways. Yes, you can get good shots from a moving bus!

We left Helsinki by train for St. Petersburg. And again, I was frustrated by windows with reflections and far too much interesting scenery passing by too quickly, but fortunately, the train portion of our trip lasted only about 4 hours. It didn't take long to refocus - I was looking forward to some exciting and different things to see and do.

When we arrived, we were met by a couple of our tour guides and given a short tour of the city, while making our way to the cruise ship – a visual prelude of what was to come.

In our last travel adventure article, I told you about our “pre-tour” trip to Finland and Estonia. And now we continue on to Russia – St. Petersburg and Moscow.

I was traveling with my sister, Sunny Asch and our friends Anne and Stan Westfall. They are all good photographers and are observant and terrific at seeing images that others would pass right by. What a joy to be sharing with you this wonderful experience and some of their photographs as well.

The trip we were about to embark upon was taking us by cruise ship for 3 full days in St. Petersburg, then 7 days on the rivers, lakes and canals while making our way to Moscow and then another 3 days in Moscow.



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This is our “Russian Mother” Tatiana. She guided us the entire time we were in Russia and was terrific!

would have for the entire trip. I truly don’t believe you could go wrong with any of them, but we selected a wonderful lady by the name of Tatiana. Once we were settled on her bus, she told us that she would be our “Russian Mother” for the next few weeks. She was fantastic with so much information at her fingertips and a way of making Russian history and art come alive. She even struggled not to laugh as we practiced a few Russian words.

We all make initial observations - what was my first impression of St. Petersburg as we drove through the streets? I liked the people that I saw from the bus. They looked busy and happy. The buildings in the city went from stunningly beautiful churches, museums and statues to buildings that had seen better ... far better days. But I was surprised by the feel of commerce and prosperity that I saw.

We got settled on the ship and for the next few days we would be quite busy seeing a lot of what this wondrous city had to offer - a city that I can only be described as “unbelievable.” *A side note to consider for your next travel adventure: A wonderful advantage to the cruise ship style of travel was that we only had to unpack once - just think of all of the extra time to spend on photography!*

The next morning we were told to be out on the dock promptly by 8:30 to begin our official city tour and to select one bus and tour guide and that would be the guide that we



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Don't miss those shots from the bus - just one of the many lovely older bridges over the Neva River.

So, as with our tour of Helsinki - off we went on yet another bus and fortunately, I had a window seat. Again, we went by so many interesting locations, but I realize that I will have to explore these sometime on my own on another trip, because, as in Finland, tour buses don’t always stop at the picturesque, but at the convenient locations. And there is never enough time. So, putting on my “opportunistic photo guise” once again, I began to shoot from the window of the bus, through the glass and at speeds that could dazzle. These were all of the adverse conditions anyone could imagine, but there are a

couple of key factors in being somewhat successful in doing this. Let’s go over

them.

1. If you are with friends, have one of them sit on the opposite side of the bus from where you are sitting. That way you won't miss out on those special photos from either side of the bus – you can hand them your spare camera to shoot for you. It can be a bit offensive, but if it is a shot you just must have, you can jump up and lean over your neighbor – what we photographers will do to get the shot! Of course, apologies are always in order.
2. Wear dark clothing ... it lessens your own reflection in the window.
3. Try to shoot at a slight angle rather than straight out the window.
4. Bump your ISO up just a bit. I shot almost always at ISO 200-400. This allows for slightly faster shutter speeds to be used.
5. Keep your f-stop in the f8 – f11 range if you can. That also helps keep the shutter speed up or switch from Aperture priority to Shutter priority and set the shutter at 1/250-1/500 of a second to help stop action.
6. Aim a little higher than you might ordinarily. In other words, don't try to include the "grass at your feet". The photo will be blurry from the movement of the bus and you will be disappointed in the shot.
7. Don't allow your body to lean on the window sill or arm of the chair. You will pick up the vibration of the bus if you do that.
8. SHOOT, SHOOT AND SHOOT SOME MORE. It is much easier to toss shots that don't work than it is to have regrets that you didn't take them.
9. I've said it before and I'll say it again, don't be inhibited by people who look at you as though you are nuts! You will come home with the great shots and they won't.



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The St. Peter and St. Paul Fortress's are the center of Historic St. Petersburg.



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We were fortunate once again to get these two nice shots as we cruised around on the tour

bus.

In St. Petersburg there are some stunning places that are a “must see” for anyone who travels there. These are Catherine’s Palace, Peterhof, the Church on the Blood, St. Peter and St. Paul’s Church and the Hermitage. There are many other places as well, but these stand out in my mind as the most beautiful and interesting of all of the locations in St Petersburg.



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Catherine’s Palace was almost totally destroyed in WWII. It has been rebuilt to its former glory for the most part although restoration work still continues.



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Peterhof Palace was built for Czar Peter the Great. He wanted it to be a waterworks display. The Grand Staircase is a giant collection of gold leaf statuary with many fountains.

Photographing the special sights in this city made me want to really photograph a story - a history in their buildings and art. The art works we saw were fabulous, but equally important as “art treasures” were the buildings themselves that housed these treasures. So it was important to me to break my shots down into sections. First I wanted the overall shots - what you as a general tourist might see. Then I needed to go to “pieces and parts” and the pieces and parts I wanted were bits of everything that would explain - tell a story or set a scene. It may have looked random to others, but there was a method to my madness.

This small fountain in a side area of Peterhof



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Palace had not been turned on for the day yet. Water accumulates in a distant storage area and then it is gravity fed throughout the day to make the fountains run.

So here are some tips to capture the flavor of where you are visiting.

1. Dig out those basic 5 “W’s” of journalism ...who, what, where, when, why ... and add how. Try to answer some of these questions in your photography. You might not get all of them, but you could get some and that will make the trip story more meaningful.
2. Add people when you can, but maybe consider having them look natural rather than standing rigidly in front of this sight or another. People are my weakness and I have to force myself to include them, but I do try.



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Two ladies enjoying a sunny moment feeding the local pigeons.

3. Try to remember what made you want to come to this particular location and photograph those icons. Then set about photographing things about the culture, the traditions, the food, the signs, and the people. Wear many photographic hats.
4. Be prepared, but expect the unexpected. However, having said that, there are times when preparations don’t work either, because you have only a single shot opportunity and the moment is gone. Just do your best. If the image is needed for the story, then a photo which is slightly soft or has

camera movement might be acceptable when it wouldn't be otherwise.

5. Do your research - before you go and when you are there, stop and look at travel brochures or postcards in the hotel. Don't just look for what they say or where they say to go, but also look at the photographs that were commissioned to sell the location. They can tell you a lot.
6. Explore and be open to new ideas, new sights and new places. Don't look for the familiar - what you have at home isn't why you came.

The castles, museums, churches and other locations we visited were stunningly beautiful. It wasn't just the works of art, but the buildings and grounds themselves that were lovely and you had terrific photo opportunities. So how can you best showcase these kinds of locations while you are touring at a fairly moderate pace?



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A small band greeted our bus at the entrance to Catherine's palace.



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The ballroom in Catherine's palace. One way to minimize the impact of too many people in the tour group is to lag behind or move ahead of the group. Most tour guides don't like you to do this, but if you are quick and then considerate, they tend to be cooperative as well.

First, Russia was wonderful in allowing photography without flash or tripod in most locations when you purchased a permit. Only in the Kremlin Armory, where the precious jewels, dresses etc. were located, did they prohibit all photography. The photography permits were very reasonably priced and having one allowed you to take all the photographs you wished.

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