

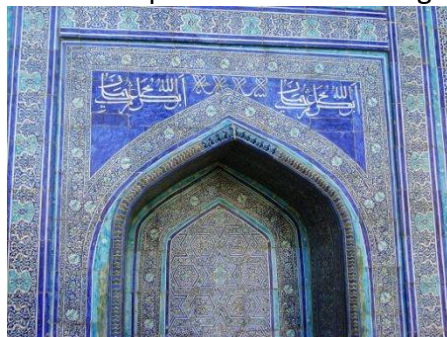
Dear Friends and Family,

So you ask why travel to several countries of the former USSR for six weeks? Partly because my curiosity was peaked after my three-month stint in Moldova with Peace Corps in 2007, partly while there are still Peace Corps friends in several of the countries, and partly because as I kept adding countries to my airline ticket with One Travel the price was not going up! Uzbekistan was calling me for the handicrafts, but it really turned out to be about the 3 M's: Mosques, Madrassas, and Mausoleums (with a few palaces thrown in for good measure). I elected to go with an organized tour (Advantour which was 'guaranteed to go') and go we did, even though my "group" was one very compatible Swedish gentleman and me! We covered Khiva, Bukhara, Samarkand and Tashkent in 8 days, including one flight segment. We met many people doing custom tours (many also with Advantour) at a more leisurely pace, which for a once in a lifetime visit, I recommend. Our first tour guide, in Khiva, of course learned his English from a succession of 7 Peace Corps Volunteers before PC left Uzbekistan in 2005. Each of the city guides spoke excellent English (2 were young in their 20's and two older in their 40's). Also, hotel staff, restaurants, and many artisans had good English. At a 3* level all accommodations were more than satisfactory. In Khiva we were regaled with music our entire visit as groups were practicing for National Day celebrations, September 1st, ten days later.



As Uzbekistan is a Muslim country and it was the month of Ramadan, I was worried that our experience might be limited. But, unlike Morocco, food was readily available all day long, Uzbeks were eating, and we encountered only a few people fasting. People spoke of being Muslim "In their hearts", even when not rigorously observant. In the architecture beginning about the 17th Century you begin to see re-introduction of traditional Uzbek themes

such as the birds of long life and good luck, and the sunburst with a face. But, primarily the decoration is non-representational in magnificent cobalt blue and turquoise colors.



We ate well. Breakfast was included at all hotels (actually for my whole trip) and was very

generous including sliced meats and cheeses plus salads, fruit, yogurt and of course breads and local pastries - enough to last all day (and add up to a few pounds of weight gain over 6 weeks). However, being a tea-drinking country, an espresso coffee was an extra charge (brewed was generally included). Unless you are a vegetarian (and even then) shashlick (kebab) is available everywhere as well as a national soup of carrots, potatoes, a bit of cabbage and sometimes meat or dumplings or beans or pasta. It was also fall and excellent pumpkin soup was on many menus. One local wine was called Omar Khayam!

Khiva is mostly a restoration from around the 19th Century with about 2000 people living within the walls, which are a very interesting sinewy design unlike anything I have ever seen – almost as if enclosed by white ocean waves. Before even entering the walls our first encounter was a statue of Mohammad Bin Musa Al-Khwarizmi, the Arab who created algebra in the 9th Century.



Bukhara was without doubt my favorite city in Uzbekistan. It has a very lively atmosphere, a wide variety of active and master artisans (metalwork, embroidery and 7 position Koran holders carved from a single piece of wood are pictured here).



The Old City is truly ancient (14th C). The mulberry trees surrounding an ancient water source were planted in 1477.



There are fairly tight controls on Uzbek citizens including freedom of expression and movement. I was asked by an artist in Samarkand to help translate to English the dedication to a book being published of his works. He also showed me the folio of his “unsanctioned” work which was wildly creative and symbolic. There are traffic checkpoints every 100 km or so, but clearly our driver had filed our travel plan as we never had to stop. We felt 100% safe everywhere!

There was a somewhat standard palace design taking into consideration the desert sun and prevailing breezes. It is laid out in an E-W/N-S cross. On the south side of the open central court is an elevated terrace (called an Aiwa) with a roof high overhead beautifully carved and painted as are the supporting columns. This is where guests/dignitaries are received in the summer, with the roof providing shade and the terrace capturing any breezes. Behind this are the apartments for the four wives. On the north side, receiving the heat of the sun are the quarters of the harem.



The summer palace of the last Emir (outside Bukhara) may well be the biggest hodgepodge of architectural styles and decorative arts I have ever seen!

In Samarkand last year the President decreed that the street that was historically the gold vendors’ shops be converted into a Champs-Elysees/Rodeo Drive type boulevard. And, so it is, with many European shop names as well as high end local products.

Most of the ancient architecture has been restored during the last 40 years and is beautiful!



The central market was huge and well stocked. The fruit was displayed inverse to what I am used to.



We even attended a wine tasting in Samarkand.

By the way, the car we were touring in is a Chevrolet built in the Ferhana Valley in eastern Uzbekistan.

Between the cities the terrain was either desert or “badlands” type of scrub with a few hills. But the road was paved.

Tashkent, the capital, is in some ways, the capital of Central Asia. It has large and beautiful parks and boulevards. The new Madrassa has a center of manuscripts, mostly Korans, including one on deerskin from the 8th Century.

I then flew Uzbekistan Airlines from Tashkent to Moscow. A totally full-service airline, no charge to check a suitcase, a meal that was huge - breakfast plus lunch - plus new planes, music headsets, pleasant staff. At the Moscow airport every immigration and customs officer was a blue eyed platinum blond female. (This might be the time to mention that people of “color” were noticeably absent during the entire six weeks and seven countries of travel.) A very efficient aero express train takes you to the subway and the subway itself is a major attraction in Moscow. It goes everywhere for \$1, has monumental décor and art in every station and carries more



passengers per day than NYC plus London combined, second only to Tokyo.

It makes the Paris metro look quaint. There is even a Paris Metro replica at the Kievskaya station near the Dorogomilovsky market, which was stocked with every high-end food product imaginable.

Moscow is expensive, but in the GUM mall – three 3-story covered passages, light and airy, built in the late 1800’s and chock full of all global name brand shops – is a self-service eatery with very good food at more reasonable prices. I ate dinner there twice, including a glass of wine, for about \$13.

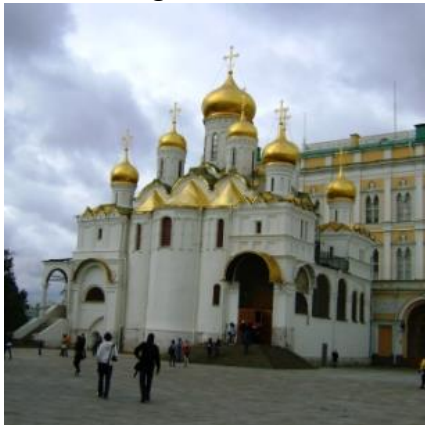


Moscow is clean and easy to get around.

Visiting the New Tretyakov Gallery helped put in perspective the vast upheavals in the country during the 20th Century. But it is clear that Communism is being replaced by three C’s: Consumerism, Capitalism and Christianity.



The Kremlin is quite a complex, and, unexpectedly for me, the cathedrals are among the highlights, but unfortunately no photography inside. The Armory (a separate ticket that fills up fast for the timed slots) was well worth it and computer stations in every room gave more information on every display than you could possibly want to know. The amount of gold and jewels was astonishing and I particularly enjoyed the Sevres dessert china “Olympus” illustrating the good and bad traits of the Greek Gods. And, the Faberge Eggs with a “surprise” inside, such as a working train.



Back to the New Tretyakov. It is near the French Embassy. 2010 has been the year France/Russia – France features a country every year and organizes cultural events from the featured country throughout France.

On the grounds of the New Tretyakov is a very large canvas covered arcade with stalls displaying the works of many current artists, and the artists are there, selling their work.



On Red Square I happened along the culmination of the 4400 km “Paris to Moscow Bike Ride for Peace”. Six people did the whole trip on bike and a “hippie” girl was playing a tube of cardboard like a flute.



St Basil's on Red Square is complex and beautiful but I found it somewhat disappointing inside.



Something I observed in many of the cities were false facades (like the scrims in a stage theatre) replicating the exterior appearance while restoration work was going on behind – nice touch and I'm sure not cheap!



I opted to lunch at the Café Pushkin instead of buying a Bolshoi Ballet ticket. All was excellent but highlights were the Pistachio Crème Brulee with cherries and the ladies' room!



My final Moscow day ranged from the beautifully restored Upper Monastery of Saint Peter, to a chicken pesto mozzarella sandwich at Starbuck's to a Ricard aperitif at the lobby bar in the historic Hotel Metropol opposite the Bolshoi Theater (which, unfortunately was closed for renovations).



A tip is to check in for your flight at the Petrovsky Metro Station before taking the aero train, and my airline, Rossiya Russia to St Petersburg, bought the aero train ticket! Another tip: I discovered that the hotels where breakfast is included in the rate will pack a take away box breakfast if you are leaving before the buffet opens – just ask ahead and you will get a very generous box. Another signal of cultural priorities, every hotel room had a shoe shine brush and shine towelette.

St Petersburg was of course about The Hermitage. The highlights for me were simply the opulence of room after room of the building itself, the Impressionist collection (Art Institute of Chicago plus Musee d’Orsay +++) and the visiting Picasso Museum collection of Paris which is touring the world while the museum undergoes a 2-year-long rehab. I had never done the Picasso properly before and taken the time with an audio-guide to fully appreciate him. I of course also enjoyed the paintings of Morocco by Delacroix, Bonnet and Matisse.

At St Catherine’s I saw a wedding, and the part where the attendants hold crowns above the bride and groom’s heads which I remembered from Moldova. The couple select as their attendants a married couple whom they admire and want to emulate in their marriage.

The 300- year history of St Petersburg makes the entire history of the USA seem calm. On August 31st there was a demonstration by the “31st Group” who are demanding the right of free assembly as provided in the 31st article of the Russian Constitution. During WWII the Nazi’s blockaded St Petersburg from 1941 -1944 and accounts range from 1-3 million people who died of starvation.



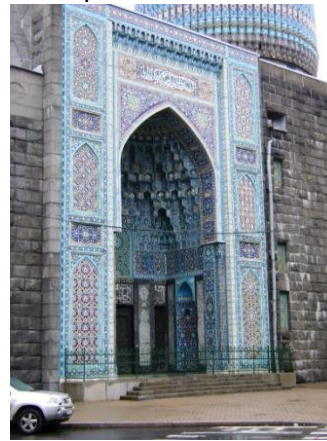
I ate dinner twice at a Spanish restaurant near my hotel and twice traditional food in the hotel café. Lunches were traditional at the Pushkin Café and a Russian bistro near the Cathedral on the Spilled Blood commissioned by the son of Alexander II in 1881 on the site of his father’s assassination. The entire interior walls are mosaics – incredible!



I took the hydrofoil to Peterhof Palace which has mostly been restored since WWII. No photos allowed inside and The Rough Guide of St Petersburg (borrowed from the hotel) had such complete descriptions I didn't need the audio guide.



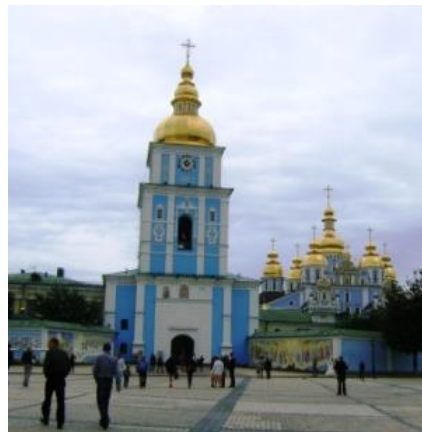
Although the architecture of St Pete is beautiful, because it is more European it was less of a novelty to me than for many of my friends who visit and rave about it. However, I enjoyed visiting the Sobornaya Mosque, one of Europe's largest which can hold 5000 people. It was constructed in 1913 and was used as a warehouse during the Communist era. The cupola is copied from the Mausoleum of Tamarlane in Samarkand. Restoration is in process.



People were very friendly and helpful in both Moscow and St Pete. Every time I had my map out someone stopped to offer help, even in the Metro when it took me a little longer to figure out what stop I needed due to the Cyrillic writing. Many of the helpers spoke English, and not just the young ones but middle-aged people also.

My next stop was Kiev, Ukraine, a beautiful city – more beautiful than Paris because there is lots of color in the architecture. It is very walk-able and has huge parks – almost forests – right in the

city, some with great views over the Dnipro River. Lots of brides being photographed at all the important monuments, as was the custom in Moldova. Here in a park and then at St Michael's.



St Sophia is beautiful and many of the murals date from the 11th Century. It seemed as if each street was more beautiful



than the prior one! A wide variety of dining options – every possible cuisine in the city that was the capital of the original Russia, known historically as Kievan Rus (what is today Russia + Belarus + Ukraine). By the way, Americans don't need a visa to visit Ukraine. Since my friend couldn't come and

travel south to Crimea with me as was the plan I opted to head west to Lviv in Western Ukraine and Krakow across the border in Poland. A good choice and very festive as Poland/Ukraine were celebrating being named joint venues for the 2012 FIFA Euro Cup. Right outside my hotel in Lviv is a statue of Polish poet Adam Michiewicz, with a golden eternal flame on top like the one



in Paris.

There is an informal street market is next to the site of the Grand Synagogue which was blown up by the Nazis as was the "Temple" Synagogue near the more formal market area.



The used book market seemed appropriate next to the statue of the monk Federov who introduced printing in the 16th Century. The main square, Place Roynak has mostly buildings 3 windows wide as these were tax free.



While eating out, I noticed a preferred drink among women as well as men is a cognac with a pot of tea. The "Palace"

in Lviv was originally the home of a Greek merchant, then bought by the family that became Polish King Jan III from 1674-1697 when Ukraine, Poland and Lithuania were one country. The famine in 1932-33 due to Soviet Agriculture collectivization is considered genocide and there is a memorial in Kiev. During WWII Ukraine was caught between Soviet Russia, Nazi Germany and Independence (which they had enjoyed briefly in 1917-1919) and 6-8 million Ukrainians died, 2 ½ million of them Jews.



I took the train from Lviv to Krakow. The guidebook warned that there could be extreme delays at the border crossing due to cigarette smuggling into the EU plus changing the undercarriage of the cars (different gauge of tracks) which was a labor-intensive process of about 1 hour. Checking the undercarriage of my sleeper car with mirrors the border guards found 50 cartons of cigarettes – processing this paperwork also took about an hour. But I had a good book and a huge breakfast provided by the hotel.



Krakow is beautiful with a great deal of history. The town is flat except for Wawel Hill where the castle is, and has good transport – golf cart taxis inside the walls, trolleys outside. I stayed in the Jewish quarter, Kazimierz, which seemed appropriate as it was Rosh Hoshana. On my first walk I encountered a large photo display of Pope John Paul II’s visit in 1979, of crowds in white praying for him after an assassination attempt in 1981, and then the riots caused by Soviet police killing a priest in August, 1984, with the quote “the beginning of the end of Communism in Poland”. Pope JP II lived in Krakow from 1958 – 1967 and performed his first holy mass there in 1946.





Krakow also has a large central plaza known as Market square.

On Wawel Hill above the Vistula River is the Castle that was the residence of the Kings of Poland from 1050 onwards. It is beautifully restored and furnished and has one of the largest tapestry collections in the world. The marble stair was unlike anything I have ever seen, as the handrails were part of the cutout shape of the marble balustrade.

The gold dome of the cathedral was completely blackened by the pollution from the Soviet Nowa Huta heavy industrial district but now has been restored. I spent Sunday visiting a number of synagogues and Jewish museums which helped me remember the various holy elements of Judaism.



I also happened upon the celebration of the 600th anniversary of the victory at the battle of Grunwald against the Teutonic Knights with speeches, a parade in period costumes and re-unveiling of the commemorative statue from 1910 (why? I don't know).



All of the food was excellent, from Szara Kazimierz (veal stew in mushroom sauce with roasted potatoes), the most varied hotel breakfast yet, cheesecake at Noworolski on Market Square (he was originally from Lviv), pierogis they called Russian but are the type my Polish mother in law used to make filled with cottage cheese, potato and onion and served with blackened grilled onions. My final dinner was delicious duck breast "Krakow" style. My hotel-provided breakfast box fed me the entire next day as I flew via Prague back to Kiev and from there onwards to Riga, Latvia, yet another city of beautiful architecture.

Riga is a great long weekend destination. You can walk all of the old town in the morning and enjoy the Art Nouveau architecture and Centrum in the afternoon.



The Central Marche is several former dirigible hangars moved to the site in the 1920's with Art Deco facades added on each end. The market is huge with dried fish one of the most frequent offerings.



I attended the noon organ concert at Dome Cathedral – it was the world's largest organ when it was installed in 1884 and is still one of the largest in Europe. The Cloisters surrounding the Cathedral contain many fascinating artifacts.



I got some great restaurant ideas – Le Crabe and La Boheme – from the Air Baltic in-flight magazine. And you can eat heartily and cheaply at Le Kafejnica chains found all over town.

When seeking out the Art Nouveau buildings I got very lucky because the only remaining synagogue, built in 1905 and beautifully restored at #6 Peitavas Iela, was open for a private photo shoot (interiors should become available on www.synagogues360.org). Before WWII there were 80,000 Jews in Latvia, half in Riga with 7 synagogues. This synagogue was saved from burning because the nearby Lutheran minister convinced the Nazis that the entire surrounding warehouse district would also go up in smoke. He bricked over the Ark so the Torah was perfectly preserved. There are about 200 families now in the congregation and they have "sister"



congregations in Montreal and Elizabeth, New Jersey. There is also a beautiful Nativity of Christ Orthodox Cathedral – but, as usual, no photography inside and no postcards.

It is easy (and recommended) to arrange day trips into the Latvian countryside. Around Riga are the usual Soviet type apartment blocks, but then the rural areas begin. According to my guide, since its entry into the EU, many farmers are paid not to farm and most Latvian factories were previously destroyed, but the ports and fishing are still an important part of the economy. Latvia used to feed itself plus export 40% of its agriculture output but now imports 60% of its food. I visited the Sigulda and Tureida fortresses in various states of restoration plus the town of Cesis with its wooden structures, the town most



similar to rural pre-war Latvia. There is marvelous hiking in Gauja National Park and it has been an outing destination for urban Latvians since the early 1900's. I really liked the statue outside the cathedral in Cesis. Created in 2005 it is called "Over the Centuries" and symbolizes victory over medieval darkness and it is said you can see into the future by rubbing the old man's lantern.

Next stop, Prague, and as you will probably guess, I strongly recommend Riga, Krakow and/or Kiev instead. Simply because of the hoards of tourists. The three-day Metro pass came in handy and except for the Cathedral, the Castle was disappointing. The Loreto Church, however, was one of the loveliest of the whole trip with bucolic countryside paintings providing a calm oasis and a 100% contrast to the pink and gold



baroque



of St Nicholas. I stumbled upon Bethlehem Meeting Hall of Jan Hus, who Martin Luther said



inspired his reformist ideas. All the churches are having concerts almost every night but I opted instead for a dinner cruise which I always like to do when in a city with a river.



I took an excellent guided walking tour of the old Jewish quarter on Sunday. The old cemetery (where the graves are stacked as many as 10 deep), Pinkus Synagogue (the very moving holocaust memorial) and the tower clock in Hebrew (which tells time counterclockwise) were highlights along with the Spanish Synagogue, so-called because of its Moorish architecture, not because it

was of a Sephardic (Spanish Jews) congregation. It was good to see so many people interested in this important period of history (we must never forget that Hitler was elected, he did not seize his power). As I only had a two-day weekend before going on to the final week of the trip in Bulgaria, I did not get a chance to visit any of the sights outside of Central Prague.



Another destination high on my list of recommendations is rural Bulgaria. With a car (and driver) there are magnificent, varied, mountains, caves, rivers, forests and traditional villages to visit.



Along the roads people have built water fountains for travelers (human and animal) often as a memorial to a loved one.



Americans do not need a visa.

The first night was in the cobblestoned village of Koprivishtitsa in an immaculate, beautiful guest house. Weekends and summer there are many tourists but we had the village to



ourselves. While walking in the evening we encountered a farmer returning from his fields, his horse Margarita hauling the wagon and he driving standing up like a charioteer! The village was the site of the April uprising against the Ottoman Turks in 1876.



A national dish is shepherd's salad whose ingredients vary but we ordered it as a starter for every meal as it was fresh, healthy and quick.



We found that in traditional homes, the salon was surrounded by pongs, Moroccan style, and dining was sitting on the floor at a round table.

We then drove to Plovdiv via Thracian tombs and one of the major rose oil producing areas of the world. One acre of roses produces about ½ litre of oil – worth 4000 Euros!

Plovdiv has excellent Roman ruins and a walkable old city with modern conveniences.



We arrived to the evening call to prayer from the mosque, with church bells sounding at the same time. The next day was a bank holiday, one of the days of independence, so we were treated to traditional music and dancing on the main square.



En route to our next stop we visited a monument to those who died for independence (from the Turks, not Soviets) with Soviet-style architecture. The theme was repeated on the municipal

building of our next stop – the spa town of Devin. The art says “two epochs, one ideal – freedom”, i.e. from Turks and Nazis – and was built during Soviet times. After a day of spa pampering off



we went to (mostly) Muslim villages of the Rhodopes. The typical mosque(s) in each village had a minaret style known as Ottoman Turk (Bulgaria was part of the Ottoman Empire for 400 years).

This area was closed to travel during Soviet time because we are as close as 50 km to the border with Greece. A communist-era sign on a building advises: “Throwing garbage, eating sunflower seeds and spitting on the ground show lack of good culture”!

The sound of chain saws and the aroma of freshly split wood and wood smoke will always remind me of Bulgaria – everyone was busy laying in their firewood supply for the winter heating season, which has already begun. Tobacco leaves were being harvested and threaded on string to dry under plastic or any protective overhang at almost every house.

Farm produce was available along the roadside and cows and horses seemingly wandered freely in town.



Most of the women in the villages were still wearing traditional pantalons and headscarves.





This region produces a lot of slate and we spent the night in a guest house high on the hill of a 19th C village of slate roofs – Kovachevitsa.

Next we visited a quiet monastery in Roehzen, an area of sandstone hills and formations that



continued to Melnik, a charming town noted for its wines (it even has its own grape variety) but with lots of tourists – weekenders from Sofia among others. From here to Sofia almost every house had a grape arbor over its porch, ready to harvest. And, en route, another famous Monastery, Rila, with beautiful murals.



In Sofia we saw the changing of the guard at the office of the President which is in the same building as the Sheraton hotel and surrounding 2nd C Roman bath ruins!



The Aleksandur Nevski Memorial Church was massive but not particularly beautiful on the inside.

By contrast, the Sofia Synagogue, which completed restoration in 2009, 100 years after its first service, is stunning and ironically has a Moorish exterior. The synagogue is across the street from the Banya Bashi Mosque built in 1576 - no photography inside, and you must be properly covered to visit.



Bulgarians seem to be very proud of the harmonious relations among their many religions.

A final piece of whimsy in Sofia is the colorful apartment building designed like a snail!



Thanks for hanging in with this very long travelogue. I hope it has inspired some ideas for you for the future.

Marilee