



A senior reader's personal experience: The metropolis was the Russian royal capital for 200 years, established by Czar Peter the Great. It later was where Empress Catherine the Great ruled the nation.

The city's name was changed to Leningrad after the Russian Revolution of 1917. Surrounded by German troops for more than two years during World War 2, the city heroically defeated the Nazis. After the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1990, the city's name reverted back to St. Petersburg.

We went ashore from our cruise ship and joined an excursion group led by a young Russian schoolteacher. She spoke excellent English, and her wry sense of humor made our excursion a delight. As she pointed to a former Soviet naval base, she told us that if we Americans had been this close before 1990, we'd have been arrested as spies.

Most other Russians we encountered were more reserved, and rarely spoke to us. An exception was a street band of musicians dressed in old Red Army uniforms. When they saw us, they immediately struck up, "Yankee Doodle", and after we gave them tips, happily posed with us.

St. Petersburg, with a population of 4.5 million, is about the size of Chicago. Known as the Venice of the North, it is classically beautiful, with many churches, museums and other historical

sites. At the center is The Hermitage, one of the largest art museums in the world.

It was the highlight of our visit. The magnificent building is part of the Winter Palace compound, and contains over 2.7 million exhibits including some of history's most famous works of art.

We visited Empress Catherine's large, ornate bedroom, resembling a posh penthouse suite in Las Vegas. Considering Catherine's racy reputation, all that was missing was the mirror in the ceiling.

Catherine founded the museum in 1764 when she purchased 200 Flemish and Dutch paintings from Germany. hermitagemuseum.org