

St. Petersburg was the Russian royal capital for 200 years, established by Czar Peter the Great, then where Empress Catherine ruled the land. The city's name was changed to Leningrad after the Russian Revolution of 1917.

During World War II, the brave citizens held out against surrounding German armies for two years, refusing to surrender although thousands died of starvation. Russian forces finally freed Leningrad in 1945. After the Communist government was tossed out 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 sense of humor made an interesting trip a delight. She pointed out a former Soviet naval base near the dock. With a mock warning, she told us that if we Americans had been this close before 1990, we would have been shot as spies.

Most other Russians we encountered in our travels around the city were much more reserved, and rarely spoke to us. An exception was a group of oompah band musicians dressed in Russian Army uniforms. When they saw us get off our bus, they immediately struck up, "Yankee Doodle."

St. Petersburg is a very large city, with a population of 4.5 million, about the size of Chicago. Known as the Venice of the North, it's classically beautiful, with many churches, museums and other historical sites. At the center is The Hermitage, the largest art museum in the world.

Our time there was the highlight of our visit. The Hermitage is one of the most famous art repositories in the world. The magnificent building is part of the extensive Winter Palace compound, and contains some of the world's greatest works of art.

One of the more interesting areas of the museum we saw is Empress Catherine the Great's large, ornate bedroom. To we American travelers, it looked like a posh penthouse suite in Las Vegas. Considering Catherine's racy reputation, as revealed to us by our Russian guide, all that was missing from the sexy display was the mirror in the ceiling.

Catherine founded the museum in 1764 when she imperiously purchased 200 Flemish and Dutch paintings from Germany. Today, there are almost three million items, including paintings, sculptures, architecture and other collections.

We really enjoyed our visit to St. Petersburg in Russia. It certainly has earned its reputation as the beautiful Venice of the North.