

Tour showed Russia a country of contradictions

By **CAROL R. EMMENS** and **PAUL CHAPMAN**

Special to the Star and Wave

(Editor's note: Emmens, a frequent contributor to the Cape May Star and Wave, and Chapman spent three weeks touring Russia.)

Windows were boarded up; factories were decaying; along stretches of the highways, there were tall fences to hide them. "For Rent" signs hung lopsidedly. No, we were not visiting a town in the Rust Belt. We were visiting Moscow and St. Petersburg on a Viking River tour of Russia.

In contrast, on the roads we saw new, well-maintained cars from manufacturers such as Ford, Mercedes, BMW and Toyota. The Russian cars, or Ladas, were generally on the shoulders or blocking traffic. The Ladas, say the Russians, have heated bumpers so you can warm your hands as you push them. The traffic jams were worse than those caused by Bridgegate or the Garden State Parkway.

In St. Petersburg, often described as the Venice of the North, many of the canals are being filled to expand the roads. The beauty of the city is in danger of disappearing.

Along the highways, mile after mile, we saw dismal gray Soviet-era apartment buildings that were dirty and in disrepair. We asked one of our guides what it's like inside those buildings, and she replied, "About the same as the outside."

But in the malls were companies such as Mark and Spencer, McDonald's, Tommy Hilfiger and Starbucks.

In Russia, we saw the results of a global economy. Our tour guides warned us about where to buy goods as most of the tourist items are made in China.

Combined with global trade, sanctions, the collapse of the Soviet Union and capitalism, Russia is a country that has been in deep economic recession for many years. But those at the top thrived. Moscow has more billionaires than any other city in the world.

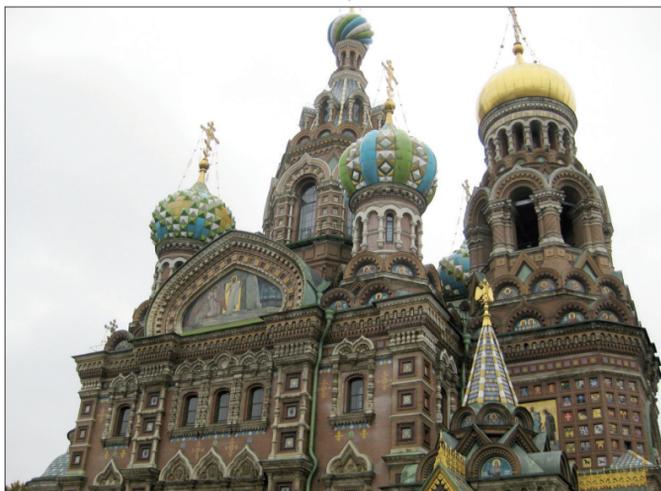
The cities were filled with contradictions. Modern ultra-sleek buildings filled the business districts and hotels such as the Four Seasons were elegant and expensive. Huge construction cranes marked the skyline.

Tourism was alive and well. Despite warnings to distrust the taxi drivers and the police, there was no real opportunity to go out on our own; we were too far from the center of the cities.

We spent our days visiting museums and our evenings at a ballet and concerts. On board the ship, we ate Russian specialties such as caviar and beets as well as all types of meat, fish and vegetables; we listened to Russian music and singers and we attended the talks given by the tour guides.

The ballet and the music lived up to their reputations. The concert we heard was by students and our expectations were low. But what a joy it was to see their unabashed enthusiasm as they played their instruments, especially those who played the balalaika, a Russian instrument featured in the movie "Doctor Zhivago."

The six buildings of the State



Carol Emmens/Special to the STAR AND WAVE

One of the many restored orthodox churches in St. Petersburg, Russia.

Hermitage Museum, founded by Catherine the Great, are filled with art works such as Rembrandts, Egyptian antiquities, jewelry and rooms in which the surface of the walls, the window frames and the moldings — practically everything — was gilded in gold.

It was difficult to see the art works and it was difficult to walk around as there were busloads of Chinese tourists streaming into the museum throughout the day.

The historic Red Square was not grand like the Lincoln Memorial and in the center of it is Gum's, Russia's large, high-end department store just across from Vladimir Lenin's tomb. At the far end is a Russian Orthodox Church.

Throughout the cities, the iconic turrets of the churches dotted the skyline. We saw scores of churches that have been restored or are in the process of restoration. They have incredible gold embellishments and icons. But it is difficult to judge how many go to church; many of the churches were essentially inactive and more like a museum.

What was far more interesting to us than the historic sites and museums was the visit to a Russian home in a village near the Volga River. The home was small and 14 of us were crowded around a table in the dining room. We were treated to a tasting of "moonshine." We were told to eat salty crackers and olives with the "moonshine" to prevent getting drunk.

so today.

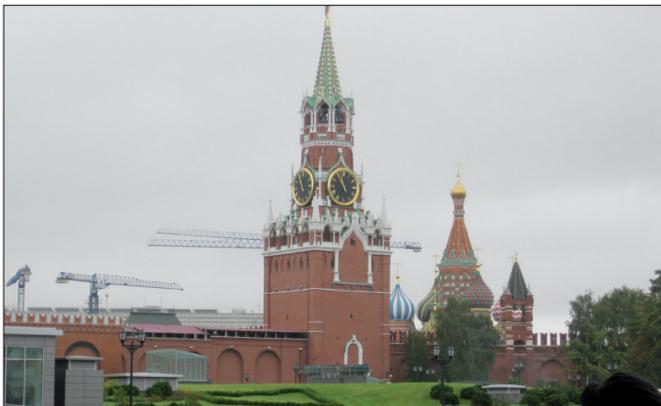
Yet Putin genuinely appears to be popular. As one of our guides told us, the average wage of a Russian citizen is eight times what it was when Putin took power. Under the Russian constitution, Putin cannot run consecutively for office more than twice so his "friends" run and then he runs again. It's thought that this ploy will continue for years and it is joked that Putin, a former KGB officer, is actually a pawn of the wealthy.

The tour guides amused us — unexpectedly — by telling us jokes about Russian history. They asked, "Do you know why the U.S. beat us to the moon?" They answered, "We weren't sure our astronauts would return home."

They talked more freely about the Soviet years and the Soviet leadership than we expected. Joseph Stalin was described as the "worst dictator who ever lived," responsible for the deaths of 19 million Russians during the purges and the forced collectivization of the land during the 1930s.

On a train from Russia to Helsinki, Finland, we asked a young woman we met in the dining car, "What are students taught today about Stalin?" We were surprised by her answer. She said "The good and the bad." She noted that her grandmother cried and cried on the day that Stalin died for he had saved her when Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) was under siege by the Germans during World War II. She added, "And my grandmother was not the only one who cried."

The trip to Russia was interesting and well worth the cost and the long, tedious flights, but as we crossed into Finland, we silently cheered.



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Construction cranes dot the skyline in Moscow, which is undergoing a building boom.



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The State Hermitage Museum, founded by Catherine the Great.

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TIDES : December 2016

DATE	HIGH		LOW	
	A.M.	P.M.	A.M.	P.M.
14	7:44	8:13	1:06	2:00
15	8:35	9:06	1:58	2:53
16	9:25	10:00	2:51	3:45
17	10:17	10:55	3:44	4:38
18	11:09	11:52	4:40	5:31
19		12:03	5:37	6:25
20	12:50	12:59	6:37	7:19
21	1:50	1:57	7:39	8:12

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