

Thoughts On Modern Tourism: A Traveller in St. Petersburg

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NEVER BEFORE IN HISTORY have so many people moved from place to place for short periods of time, and for no more compelling reason than the pursuit of pleasure, relaxation, or new experience. Year after year tens of millions of people in North America, Europe, and Japan remove themselves from their regular locations. They visit other countries or less familiar parts of their own country in the hope of finding gratifications which elude them in the normal course of their lives.

While rapid mass transportation and the growth of discretionary incomes have been the preconditions of mass tourism, rising expectations and new human desires have been no less important. The part travel plays in efforts to make modern life more meaningful has been given little attention by social historians or sociologists. There is little information as to what travel accomplishes for the participants as distinct from the income it generates for the countries on the tourist circuit. Such neglect is likely to be a result of the belief that the motives for travel are self-evident. I believe that the motives for travel are more varied and not necessarily self-evident. A better

understanding of these motives may allow us to discern characteristics of our times and the society we live in that are less closely linked to the pursuit of pleasure than to the pursuit of meaning.

Focusing on mass tourism does not imply that the migrations of impoverished or persecuted people prompted by dire need or fear no longer exist. Millions in impoverished and oppressed parts of the world know about a better life in the West and seek to reach it. The motives of these migrants and would-be migrants hold little mystery.

My recent trip to Russia stimulated reflections about the costs, contradictions, gratifications, and frustrations that travel yields. Has the quality of travel experience changed since it became transformed from an aristocratic-patrician pastime into a mass pursuit, an adjunct of mass culture? How do diverse motives for travel—ranging from the simple wish to escape the routines of daily life to the grandiose quest for self-realization—coexist? How has travel, and especially the foreign variety, become a barometer of social standing, a new way of displaying wealth, taste, education, and refinement?

Much of contemporary travel may be seen as a metaphor for the incompatibility of human desires, of the limited attainment of high expectations and the

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problem of unintended outcomes in personal lives. Many travellers going abroad have in common the usually unarticulated belief that there is something in other lands that one's own fails to provide; that going abroad (or to some remote or exotic part of one's own country) will lead to new experiences and insights, which cannot otherwise be obtained.

Admittedly, many travellers are not afflicted with such longings and curiosities; they are the people for whom travel has become what Daniel Boorstin has called a "pseudoevent." They seek for the familiar and comfortable abroad, or in the less familiar parts of their own country; they are eager to encounter replicas of the familiar, packaged and manageable doses of the foreign and the exotic that will justify the bother and the expense of travel. Characteristically they seek to combine and to reconcile what cannot realistically be expected to be merged. As Boorstin wrote in *The Image* (1964).

We expect our two-week vacation to be romantic, exotic, cheap and effortless. We expect a faraway atmosphere if we go to a nearby place; and we expect everything to be relaxing, sanitary and Americanized if we go to a faraway place.... Never have people been more the masters of their environment. Yet never has a people felt more deceived and disappointed. For never has a people expected so much more than the world could offer.... Formerly travel required long planning, large expense, and great investments of time. It involved risks to health, or even to life. The traveler was active. Now he became passive. Instead of an athletic exercise, travel became a spectator sport.

In short, travellers have become tourists. The difference between the two, in Boorstin's opinion, is that the traveller is actively in pursuit of new experience and adventure, whereas the tourist is a passive pleasure-seeker who goes "sightseeing." Sightseeing itself has be-

come increasingly standardized, dictated by guidebooks, tour guides, or snippets of the mass media. There are "must" sights the tourist is obligated to see, like the Eiffel Tower, the Tower of London, St. Peter's Basilica, or the Parthenon. It is not for the tourist to decide and to discover what is worth seeing unless he belongs to another (much smaller) group, the sophisticates who pride themselves in refusing to visit the prescribed itineraries and sites of mass tourism and who make their own discoveries in anonymous villages and other places "off the beaten track."

While Boorstin correctly identifies the links between mass culture and mass travel, the high expectations shaping travel do have another aspect and origin. For an increasing portion of American (and European) travellers the aim of travel is nothing less than a temporary escape from modernity, a flight into the past or imaginary past and its presumed authenticity. That is why so many modern travellers attempt to find "unspoiled" villages, small towns, or islands, and also why advertisements of the travel industry promise places without other tourists: places of "magic" where life goes on "in time-honored traditional ways," and where the distractions and taints of modernity—urban crowding, impersonality, timetables, and technology—have yet to penetrate or to become a massive presence. What is so appealing about old villages and small towns, their architecture and artifacts? Why do Americans, often mesmerized by whatever is new, feel awe and respect when confronted with the physical evidence of the old and the enduring?

The remnants of traditional settlements and their ways of life enchant us because we believe that they are, or used to be, free of the familiar problems and difficulties of modern urban and suburban life: crime, family instability, competitive status-seeking, social isolation,

the superficiality of human bonds, technological homogenization, planned obsolescence, anomie, and meaninglessness. We harbor the unspoken belief that the old ways were in some indefinable way more authentic and superior to those modern life has created.

The admiration of traditional ways of life, their physical settings and unspoiled nature, are often connected. We tend to imagine that there used to be a more harmonious relationship between nature and human beings in traditional societies and communities than is the case in the modern world. (The eagerness of American Indian tribes to build huge casinos on their reservations is an illustration of the dubious nature of such beliefs.)

Travel and modernity are further linked in less evident, more symbolic ways. Travel to new places is the most obvious attempt to acquire new experience; those motivated by exploratory or adventurous urges (as distinct from others who keep going to the same resort in search of tried comforts) rarely revisit the same place. If so, each trip ends in permanent separation from the place visited, an experience resembling fleeting personal contacts and interactions which are part of modern life. The modern traveller relates to places as he relates to people; encounters are brief, lacking in depth and continuity. Why return to any particular place when there is so much to see?

In a different kind of tribute to modernity, many contemporary tourists gravitate to cruise ships and huge resorts, or "resort villages," where most decisions and arrangements are made for them; where they find themselves in physical and social settings that often indeed replicate (or improve upon) the comforts of the familiar; and where everything is predictable and a frantic regimen of organized activities awaits them. In such places the focus of recreation is food and

drink, physical comfort, and the suspension of the work-related and home-centered routines. Such recreational travel may include the promise of romance or the short-lived camaraderie of like-minded vacationers who rejoice in a shared, temporary freedom from responsibilities and immersion in pleasures denied in familiar settings.

Modern travel also lends itself to status-seeking, even though it has ceased to be the prerogative of the rich. It is easy to incorporate status-seeking into travel. The most obvious way is by spending huge amounts of money on luxurious accommodations and forms of transportation. For the status-seeker it is also important to visit "in" places, both fashionable and exclusive. For millions of Americans, going abroad for a vacation has become in itself a reassuring status symbol reflecting both a gratifying standard of living and a measure of cultural sophistication. It is the ultimate paradox that modernity, which has made mass travel possible, has also created the conditions many travellers seek to escape.

My recent trip to Russia combined research, sightseeing, and family reunion. It was my first visit to Russia (or the former Soviet Union), although I have written extensively on Soviet affairs and taught a course on Soviet society for almost thirty years. My failure to take the obligatory trip, or trips, has several explanations. For many years I felt insecure to undertake such a visit as a former Hungarian refugee of 1956 vintage. Later on I felt that I ought to spend a substantial amount of time in Soviet Russia, which I was reluctant to do, having considered the former Soviet Union both an unfriendly and an uncomfortable place for an extended visit.

Several circumstances combined to make me embark on my recent trip. I was, needless to say, not getting younger; there was no more Soviet system to inspire (somewhat irrational) apprehensions; a

Russian graduate student in history who was my part-time research assistant, a native of St. Petersburg, was going to be an all-purpose tour guide. His father, a sociologist, was going to find some people to interview for my next project, an examination of the responses of intellectuals in the West and East to the collapse of Soviet communism and about their current thinking about Marxism. And since I had a book in press on the collapse of Soviet communism, I was eager to discuss the consequences of the collapse with some of the eyewitnesses.

I also have a cousin in St. Petersburg whom I was anxious to meet. Her father, my uncle, perished in the purges in 1937. This uncle, Sandor Hollander, by training a military engineer, served in the Austro-Hungarian army and was taken prisoner in Russia during World War I. He stayed, married a Russian woman, became a communist, fought with the Bolsheviks in the civil war, subsequently came to occupy positions of importance in the political-economic hierarchy, and worked on some of the major construction projects of the first Five Year Plan, including the Moscow subway, the Kharkhov tractor factory, and the Baku-Grozni oil pipeline. In 1937 he was dispatched to participate in the Spanish Civil War, but in the early morning of the day of his departure, he was arrested. Eight months later he was executed as a spy. As I learned during my visit, he knew both Trotsky and Bukharin, a fact which undoubtedly increased his vulnerability.

I was in a somewhat better position to learn about facts of life in Russia than the

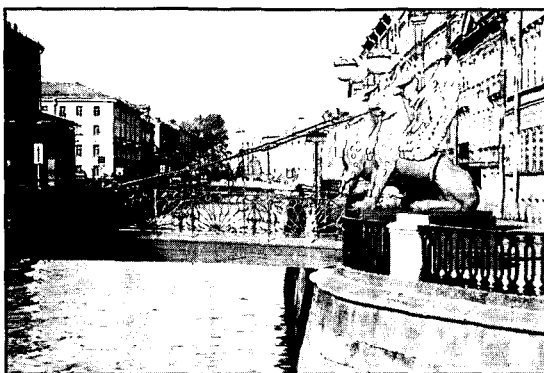
typical short-term visitor. Through my assistant I made connections with a small cross-section of the Russian intelligentsia. He himself is a serious, bright, and very well-educated young man, a graduate of Herzen University of St. Petersburg, and currently a graduate student in history in this country. My other source of information was my Russian cousin and her daughter, a young woman who

now lives in Hungary (married to a Hungarian) and who, by happy coincidence, was visiting her mother when I was there. My Russian cousin teaches in an institute that trains adult education teachers. Her daughter, although a resident of Hun-

gary for over a decade, considers herself Russian, and her children (born in Hungary) are bilingual.

There were also the people I interviewed who included academics, a former military intelligence officer, the head of a major library, a highly placed engineer, and a former head of a domestic airline, as well as the grandfather of my interpreter, who in addition to being a head of an institute of neurology used to preside over a workplace party-committee.

I used to be an unembarrassed critic of the Soviet system, but as far as post-communist Russia is concerned I have no axe to grind, and I have been inclined to the benefit of doubt. I sympathized with the effort, insofar as it has been undertaken, to build a pluralistic society with a free-market economy. I was also pleasantly surprised that the collapse of the Soviet system took place with little violence and bloodshed, that the well-earned frustrations of the masses did not lead, for example, to the kind of looting



A Canal in Saint Petersburg

and destruction that occurs from time to time in this country as a now customary expression of the discontent of ethnic minorities in major urban areas. On the other hand, I certainly did not expect to see the power and influence organized and unorganized criminals would yield, and the emergence of new anti-democratic forces, some of them old-Party loyalists and functionaries.

I did expect bleak material conditions and these expectations were largely met. The total neglect of maintenance of material objects and installations was especially striking. Whatever could rust was rusting, paint was invariably peeling or flaking, floor covers were curled up, walls cracked, sundry objects coming apart. Screws would be missing or loose on whatever was once screwed together; things were literally falling apart, having been poorly made or finished. Buses, trains, cars, elevators seemed to be on the verge of breakdown. In a toilet of the National Library, used only by the staff, scraps of newspaper were provided instead of toilet paper—a usage that brought back memories of public toilets in Hungary during the 1940s and 1950s. To be sure, all this reflects not merely neglect but scarcities as well. To keep things in a good state of repair costs money. Toilet paper, in particular, costs more than newspaper; it is an extra expenditure.

The decay of physical objects in Russia is not a matter of “planned obsolescence,” as it is allegedly in capitalist countries. Russian obsolescence has been entirely unplanned, the cumulative result of a (prior) government policy of stinting on consumer goods, private needs, maintenance, and of a traditionally poor work ethic, conveyed by the old joke, “They pretend to pay us and we pretend to work.”

The three homes (apartments) of Russian professional families I visited reinforced these impressions; in each there

was a dismaying lack of space, and rooms were especially small. Furniture was of poor quality, thin, feeble, rickety, badly crafted, and of poor materials.

Establishments of private commerce provide spectacular physical evidence of the difference between the Soviet era and the emerging capitalism, or between the public and the private. One may see the ground floor of a building housing a private shop or office nicely restored and repainted, whereas the upper floors remain spectacularly decrepit. A small supermarket near my hotel was not only stocked with an impressive selection of imported and Russian goods, but also accepted my Visa card and had a scanner for entering the price of each item. The private travel agency where I booked a boat trip on Lake Ladoga was also thoroughly up-to-date, well furnished, complete with smiling employees and with computers, though the large number of papers relating to the trip were filled out by hand. A final example of these contrasts were two luxury hotels I visited to change money, mail postcards, and have ice cream. As I learned upon my return, the postcards bore Finnish stamps and were mailed in Finland, reflecting the skepticism of the hotel management about the Russian mail service.

The exception to these generalizations are important public buildings and especially those of tourist interest, which are in good condition or being repaired. They include many churches, monasteries, and the various palaces of the czars and famous aristocrats. The restoration of these buildings began under Stalin after World War II, motivated undoubtedly by nationalistic considerations since they are reminders of the past power and splendor of Russia.

Despite the financial crisis already in high gear during my visit, there was no discernible crisis atmosphere: people seemed to enjoy the small pleasures of life on the streets, eating ice cream, drink-

ing sodas; children playing, the young rollerblading, couples necking in public, shops thronged. Such surface normalcy can of course be notoriously misleading, and in fact used to be a staple of past accounts of the happy lives of Soviet citizens even under Stalin.

Impressions of public safety are a further example of the difficulty the visitor has in penetrating beneath the surface. I never felt unsafe on the streets, subways, or buses; nobody seemed suspicious or threatening; nobody tried to pick my pockets, cheat me out of money, or sell me things I did not need. Due to the "white nights," streets were crowded at 11 P.M. and after. The existence of a Russian mafia was only vaguely suggested by occasional glimpses of bulky young men riding in, or standing by, expensive foreign cars, and groups of them hanging around an expensive restaurant in which customers had to go through metal detectors before being seated. At the same time, during my visit I read articles about unsolved assassinations of politicians and journalists, and was warned of pickpockets.

Parking regulations were virtually non-existent, and I saw no meters, parking lots, or garages. In the case of moving violations, the offender is fined on the spot (as happened to the driver of a taxi I rode in); the traffic police apparently give no tickets.

Prices were strangely dissimilar, almost as if there was a two-tier price system. My university-affiliated hotel cost only \$30 dollars per night, but it had certain limitations. In this hotel, after considerable waiting, I could get break-

fast for exactly 90 cents, which consisted of two pieces of bread with butter and a cup of tea. The most serious problem was the lack of screen or mosquito netting on the windows. I did not expect St. Petersburg to be infested with mosquitoes, but it was. Many apartments have mosquito nets on the window. Given the hot and humid weather during my visit, I had to choose between mosquitoes or semi-suffocation without mosquitoes, if I closed the windows.

The luxury hotels, built by Finnish contractors, are islands of solid comfort and cleanliness. Prices began at \$300 per day for a single room. Ice cream in these hotels cost \$12-\$14, soft drinks \$3-4 per small bottle. On the other hand, a taxi to the airport (about a one-hour's ride with many traffic lights, since there is no expressway) cost \$8; a subway ride, 25 cents, and surface transportation was 20 cents per ride. Meals in the new restaurants were

expensive, main courses costing \$20 or more, totally beyond the reach of the vast majority. My interpreter told me that members of his family, or anyone he knows, never went out to eat except perhaps for fast food.

In the museums, as well as on trains and boats, there were two sets of prices, one for foreigners and one for the natives. These differences could be substantial: in the Hermitage Museum, for example, admission cost about \$10 for foreigners and \$3 for citizens.

The boat trip to Valaam island in Lake Ladoga, famous for its natural beauty and its numerous monasteries and chapels, was another reminder of the new contrasts. Many of the passengers were



The Church of the Resurrection in Saint Petersburg

on board to participate in a workshop on private pension funds. On the other hand, and reminiscent of Soviet times, before docking in St. Petersburg passengers were informed by the public address system that they had to collect and hand over all used bed linen and towels in exchange for a receipt allowing them to disembark.

The most remarkable contrast between pervasive decrepitude, neglect, and poor maintenance was provided by the appearance of young women on the streets. I cannot recall when and in what city, European or North American, have I seen so many attractive, well-groomed, well-dressed young women as in St. Petersburg. My Russian contacts informed me that Russian women have not embraced the version of puritanical Western feminism that disapproves of women dressing well, if that means dressing in sexy, (male) attention-getting ways. I was told that Russian women, although most of them work, consider finding a husband a project central to their lives. They do not consider it humiliating to dress in ways that please men, even as their stylishness may also be interpreted as a reaction against the drabness associated with the Soviet era, a way of wishing to be "Western."

There are other, more substantive indications of pro-Western ways and preferences and especially on the part of the intelligentsia. It was refreshing for an American academic normally surrounded by "celebrations of multiculturalism," which generally translates into disdain for Western culture and ideas, to be among people who are unabashedly "Eurocentric." In the public library of St. Petersburg, among the ten largest collections in the world, I was reverently shown the entire library of Voltaire, as well as rare book collections and manuscripts. Librarians on pitiful salaries remain dedicated to these relics of Western culture. Indeed, I counted 41

museums in my St. Petersburg guidebook.

St. Petersburg and its great public buildings and palaces are also manifestations of imperial political will and grandeur. The city itself was built on swampy land because of its western-most location and proximity to the sea. It is a planned city, full of massive public buildings, canals, and statues honoring not only czars, generals, and statesmen, but also writers and artists. The city as a whole is a monument to the Western orientation in Russian history shared by the czars, the nobility, and much of the intelligentsia. The admiration for Western culture is seen in the design of the old buildings (many actually designed by foreigners), in the collections in the museums, in the thorough and serious information museum and palace guides provide, in the curricula of universities and the aspirations of the educated. As in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, I had the distinct feeling that the former communist countries may yet become the most eager guardians of a Western culture now devalued by many Western academic intellectuals. Of course, this is not to say that there is no ambivalence towards the West, especially towards the United States.

An impression that emerged from my interviews was similar to that yielded by the biographical and autobiographical sources I consulted.¹ The informants who held various official positions readily admitted that they used to harbor serious doubts about the system for years or even decades while simultaneously performing their various official duties. To what extent this admission indicated a retroactive modification of earlier beliefs and attitudes in light of new realities is hard to know. As to views of what was wrong with the old system, responses were fairly uniform and predictable: it was an inefficient, bureaucratic, over-centralized system; it discouraged individual initiative and innovation; it subor-

minated the individual to the collective—and it was mendacious. No one disputed that *glasnost* was the most direct cause of the unraveling of the system by allowing widespread popular frustrations and discontent to find expression and coherence. Unlike many American social scientists, none of these people felt the slightest reluctance to refer to the Soviet system as “totalitarian.”

Another common denominator of these conversations was the reported impact of Khrushchev’s 20th-Congress speech in 1956. My interviewees believed that it was the beginning of the end, a crucial point of departure in the loss of legitimacy that culminated in the late 1980s. Several people I spoke to also felt that the pace of change, particularly in the economic realm, has been too fast and conducive to widespread insecurity and inequality. The latter is symbolized, among other things, by the speeding luxury vehicles (mostly Mercedes, BMW, and Volvo), contrasting with most automobiles that are old, rusted, and dilapidated Soviet models.

The former functionaries and members of the party-intelligentsia I spoke to criticized the old system yet also regretted its demise. Clearly there was little unambiguous rejoicing. Life used to be more predictable and secure, more risk-free. The government spent more on education, medical care, cultural institutions; prices were controlled, everybody worked.

By coincidence, during my visit James Billington, the Librarian of Congress and historian of Russia, was also visiting. His observations echoed the views of my informants. He noted: “...we have not understood the extent and depth of either the material transformation or the spiritual demoralization of the Russian people since the fall of communism...., I

found an alarming degree of fatalistic expectation that Russia is heading in an authoritarian direction.”²

A more apolitical lesson of this trip belongs to the sociology of travel. I call it sightseeing fatigue. An individual who has done a fair amount of traveling and obligatory sightseeing sooner or later reaches a point when physical discomforts and the presence of other sightseers begin to weigh more heavily than the aesthetic or spiritual appeals of great architecture and objects of art. There is something demoralizing about mass tourism and of being immersed in crowds and sharing, willy-nilly, the obligation to see what one is supposed to see according to experts in art, architecture, history, and travel literature. The dilemma is insoluble because in many instances what one is supposed to see is actually worth seeing. But, like the beauties of nature, they cannot retain their attractions intact when masses of humans swarm over them.

I will conclude with an experience of a more personal nature. I did not register with the St. Petersburg police upon arrival because I had no idea that this was still required. I learned about this requirement when checking out of the hotel on the day of my departure, when the receptionist, examining my passport, observed with consternation that I had failed to register. I expected that this failure would be apparent to the border guards at the airport and might lead to some unpleasantness—a fine, delay, missing my flight. I felt, as in the old days, at the mercy of the authorities. But, as it turned out, the official at the passport controls paid no attention to the missing registration, and I was neither fined nor detained. Thrills of political menace are no longer part of visiting Russia.

1. This information was collected for my forthcoming book on the fall of communism in Russia. 2. See

International New York Tribune, June 18, 1998.