

# on the trail of the ROMANOVs



**Jo Hoban has always been fascinated by the Romanovs, Russia's imperial family. Here, she shares her memories of a journey through the land they once ruled.**

**T**ales of the Romanovs, including mysterious monks, epic romances and fairytale palaces, have captivated me since childhood. During the 300 years of Romanov rule, Russia evolved from a series of warring principalities into a mighty European state. From Peter the Great to Nicholas and Alexander, the Romanov tsars left an enduring mark upon the country which lasts to this day despite years of Soviet rule. Indeed the elegant, colourful vistas of St Petersburg and the beautiful cathedrals of the Kremlin in Moscow have remained unchanged, offering a unique insight for travellers seeking a glimpse into the imperial past of a country that I have come to love.

## St Petersburg

Founded by Peter the Great in 1703 as a 'window on the West', St Petersburg's vast and varied history is inextricably intertwined with that of

the Romanov dynasty. For this reason it is my favourite of all Russian cities, its vast array of beautiful parks and palaces offering a glimpse into the lives of the Romanovs.

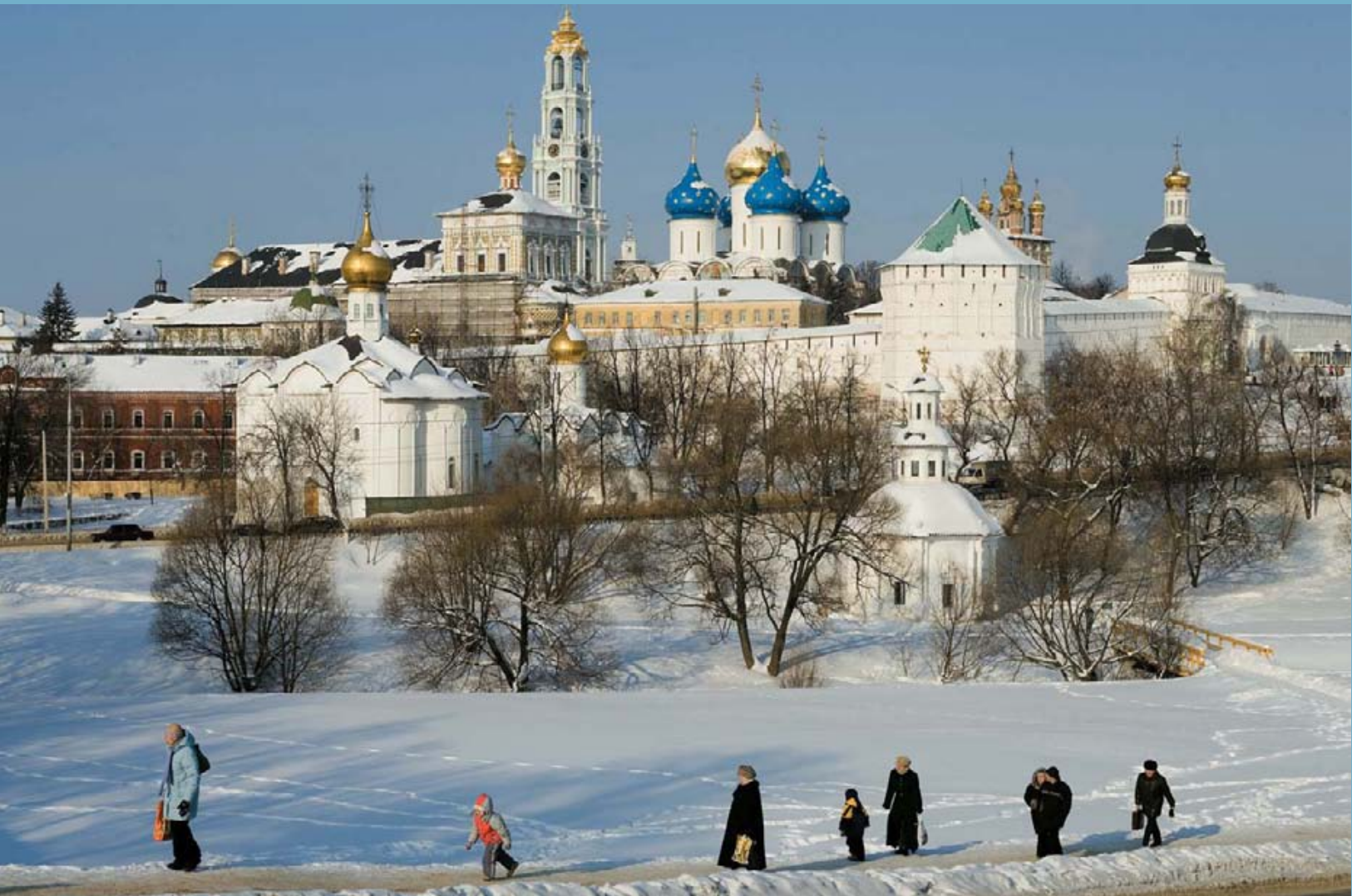
## The Yusupov Palace

Once home to one of the city's wealthiest families, the Yusupov Palace is an example of the baroque architecture typical of the city, but it also holds a special significance as the place in which one of Russian history's most infamous figures met his untimely end. On the night of December 16th 1916 the mysterious Grigory Rasputin, a shadowy monk famed for his hypnotic supernatural powers, was murdered in the basement of the palace by a group of the city's noble elite, jealous of his close relationship with the royal family. The cellar where the dreadful deed took place is now part of an exhibition which retells the story of that fateful night and transports visitors back to a

time when murder and intrigue were as commonplace as vodka and caviar!

## The Hermitage

It is easy to forget that the palace housing one of the world's largest and most important collections of European art was once home to just one family. Today, visitors to the Hermitage (also known as the Winter Palace) are not only treated to a collection which boasts masterpieces by the likes of Cezanne, Renoir and Degas but are also offered a glimpse into the beloved home of the last Romanov tsars. Strolling up magnificent marble staircases into sumptuous state rooms on my first visit to the Winter Palace, I found it difficult to believe that such an array of treasures could have been owned by just one family. Indeed the horde is so large that some of it had to be stored in vaults elsewhere in the city, which have recently been opened to visitors.



Sergiev Posad, Moscow

### Peter and Paul Fortress

Situated on a small island in the Neva Delta, the Peter and Paul Fortress is the city's oldest building, founded in 1703 by Peter the Great. In 1998 it became the focus of worldwide media coverage following the discovery of the remains of murdered Tsar Nicholas II and his family. They were finally laid to rest in the Peter and Paul Cathedral after centuries of secrecy surrounding their execution and burial in Ekaterinburg. Along with the tombs of all of Russia's great pre-revolutionary rulers from Peter the Great onwards, the Romanov Chapel is visited by millions every year who come to pay their respects to a family who in recent years have become a symbol to many in Russia of the suffering endured by millions under decades of Soviet rule.

### Moscow

As a city that has long been associated with the might of Soviet domination, the imperial heritage of Moscow is often overlooked. Yet even a short visit to the city uncovers a wealth of sights linked with Russia's imperial heritage.

#### The Kremlin

Since time immemorial the rulers of Russia have been crowned in the beautiful Assumption Cathedral that stands in the grounds of the Kremlin. Whilst decades of Soviet rule have certainly left their mark, what is most remarkable about the Kremlin is that it retains an aura of early Tsarist Russia. For example, a visit to the armoury reveals countless treasures from the priceless Fabergé eggs to royal carriages given as gifts to the tsars from the British royal family!

### The Novodevichy Convent

A cluster of sparkling onion domes set behind high turreted walls on the banks of the Moscow River, the Novodevichy Convent is one of my favourite buildings in Moscow, its fairytale exterior hiding a gruesome but fascinating history. Founded in 1524, the convent became a prison for a succession of meddling royal wives and princesses who were confined within its walls, often for life. Surviving the Soviet prohibition of religion as the place in which many of the Communist party's most famous leaders were finally laid to rest, most notably Khrushchev, the convent today acts as a welcome place of quiet reflection for many Muscovites seeking refuge from the city's hustle and bustle. ▶



Siberian woman, Ekaterinburg

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Traditional 'Sani' sledge



Catherine Palace, Tsarskoe Selo, St Petersburg



Pilgrims at Ganina Yama, Ekaterinburg

## Ekaterinburg

Following the February and October 1918 revolutions the family of Nicholas II - the last members of the dynasty - were transported along the famous Trans-Siberian route, first to Tobolsk and then to Ekaterinburg where they were imprisoned in a small merchant's house in the heart of the city. Several months later on the night of the 17th July 1918, fearful that the family would be a rallying point for anti-revolutionary forces, they were executed by the Bolsheviks. Following in their footsteps my journey took me first to the city's magnificent Church of the Blood, which stands on the site of the execution. Dominating the city skyline, the church is fascinating not just for its historical link to the last days of the Romanovs but also for its sumptuous interior which symbolises the death and spiritual rebirth of the family following their canonisation by the Russian Orthodox Church.

## Ganina Yama

After the execution of the family they were buried in an old iron mine shaft deep in the forests of Ganina Yama, their bodies moved several times by the Bolsheviks who were afraid that they would be discovered. Today an Orthodox monastery consisting of seven wooden churches (one dedicated to each of those who died) stands on the site, which in recent years has become a place of pilgrimage for many Russians. In fact the depth of emotion displayed by these pilgrims is truly remarkable, with young and old alike visibly moved by their visit to the monastery grounds. What I found most touching however were the dozens of family photographs which cover the walls of the monastery compound, bringing to life the once idyllic existence of this ill-fated family that has entranced me for so long.

## Jo Hoban

Russia Specialist

## FACT FILE

St Petersburg, Moscow and Ekaterinburg can be combined in a ten-day trip, starting from £2,400 per person, including accommodation, flights, a taste of the Trans-Siberian railway and privately guided excursions. Alternatively, just Moscow and St Petersburg can be combined in an eight-day trip, starting at £1,800 per person. For more details please contact Jo, Zoe or Victoria on 01993 838 230.





## Trans-Siberian Taster

The famous Trans-Siberian railway, the longest continuous railroad in the world, runs from Moscow to Vladivostok or Beijing and passes through Ekaterinburg. For those who would just like a taster of this epic journey, a trip from Moscow to Ekaterinburg allows you to sample 24 hours of the seven-day journey, which will give you an idea of the vastness of Russia and allow you to experience life on board. Please call Jo, Zoe or Victoria on 01993 838 230 for more information.

## The Three Capitals: Russia and Ukraine escorted small group tour

We are running a 13-day small group tour to Kiev, Moscow and St Petersburg in September 2008. As well as the three historic capitals, time is also spent in the Golden Ring. Please call Victoria on 01993 838 231 for more details and to request a detailed tour dossier.