

Sabrina Hogan - St Petersburg, September 2015

My trip to St Petersburg was a truly thrilling experience. Studying Russian, and never having been to the country before, I was tremendously excited, but also apprehensive about what to expect. St Petersburg, I found, is somewhat of a hybrid city. It was built by Peter the Great who had absorbed Western practices and in particular, architectural styles on his travels around Europe in the eighteenth century. He wanted to impress whoever visited the city, to show off the majesty of the Russian Empire. This is a city, in a sense, built for tourists.

During my stay, I, along with my fellow Cambridge students attended a three week language course at the Benedict School. Every day we had lessons on various topics- cinema, grammar, media culture and a conversation class. Of these, I most enjoyed the cinema class, in which we watched an iconic film set in the Soviet era, and were able to discuss it in class. The teachers were very keen to help us and provided us with thorough material and ample opportunity to practise. The grammar class was also particularly well taught, and consolidated areas which we had covered only briefly the previous academic year. It was an experience of 'full immersion'- that is- constantly speaking Russian in class, outside with the locals we encountered, and, when we were really feeling it, between ourselves. At the end of the third week we participated in a quiz about the city of St Petersburg and it was satisfying to be able to talk about this wonderful place in Russian. My confidence in speaking the language grew immensely thanks to these lessons.

As our classes commenced in the afternoon, we always had the mornings free to explore the city. One of my favourite places that we visited was the Kazan Cathedral. The Orthodox Church icon tradition, that is, the decoration and religious veneration of icons in the churches struck me in particular. The other place to which I went back time and again during my stay was the bookshop 'Dom Knigi'- House of Books. We were all drawn in by the possibility of purchasing the great texts of Russian Literature, as well as Harry Potter in Russian. Other particular cultural highlights were the opportunities to see the Russian ballet in the Marinsky Theatre and a musical adaptation of *The Master and Margherita*.

We were pleased to find that food was very reasonably priced. Our regular haunt became 'stolovaya's- canteen-like restaurants where many locals, and in particular, business men and women went to eat. This was important for us because it meant we were constantly using our language skills to order, and had the buzz of Russian conversation around us.

Strangely enough, after three weeks there and despite obvious cultural differences, I felt settled in St Petersburg. The beauty of the city and its charming European feel were teeming with life. I would like to thank Pembroke College for helping to fund my trip. I am very grateful to have had such a stimulating experience, which has helped affirm my desire to study Russian.