

# The Golden Ring, Russia 2019

Yuri of the long arm, golden domes, blue domes, frescos, icons, beating with oak leaves in a wood fired banya ( Russian bath house), singing the Volga boat song on the Volga, battling with cruise crowds and tourists in the Hermitage, are all snippets from a wonderful trip to the Golden Ring of Russia and St Petersburg. The Golden Ring is a group of medieval towns and cities that form a ring to the northeast of Moscow. These towns played a significant role in early Russian history and in the formation of the Russian Orthodox Church. The towns are full of Russian architecture from the Middle Ages including kremlins (walled fortresses), monasteries, cathedrals and churches. The cities are associated with Russian princes and knights, early Tsars such as Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great, the Mongol invasions and many other historical figures and events. They are all in the beautiful Russian countryside, full of forests, fields, rivers and lakes.

.....and, of course, there are potters.

After a day of sight-seeing in Moscow we set off for Suzdal. The whole village is kept as a slice of history with numerous churches and wooden private houses in charming countryside. Many local tourists were being driven around in horse drawn carriages. We visited a monastery and were treated to some lovely singing and bell ringing. In the local museum were examples of huge, tiled stoves, decorated tiles and ancient pots. We then proceeded to learn all about Yuri of the long arm ( 10<sup>th</sup> century) who had much to do with Suzdal when it was capital of Russia.

Down a winding country lane, we met our first potter. She made ocarinas in animal forms, mainly horses. They were exceptionally beautiful, raku fired with a reduced copper glaze which was bright gold. Some just reduced to black. She fired them first to 1000 in a large electric kiln then a second firing in a small front opening electric kiln to 800c.



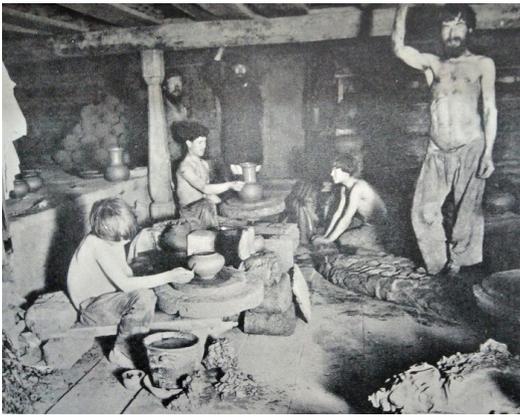


She took them out while hot and reduced them in sawdust, all inside her house. She said that the gold did not fade. I bought a small black horse which is enchanting, especially after being told that the mane of a horse represents a stairway to heaven.

The second potter made earthenware domestic pots. He demonstrated throwing but was embarrassed when told that several of us were potters. He was obviously used to demonstrating to ordinary holiday makers. Some of his pots had a transparent glaze, some un-glazed, others dark brown and black - fired with milk to 300c. We told him that we had seen that technique in Siberia. He was surprised. I bought another pot.



In Kostroma we visited the Ipatyev Monastery and the nearby Museum of Wooden Architecture. Here we found a potter making traditional pots on a 100-year-old wooden wheel. They were mainly cooking and drinking wares, again fired with milk to give them some waterproofness. He also was impressed that we knew that. I added another pot to my growing collection.



Later, we visited a craft shop which also had a working pottery and gave classes. We were made very welcome with tea and biscuits and shown around. I was intrigued by old photographs showing traditional potters from the area. We bought some pots from the young students.

In Sergiev we visited the Unesco-protected Trinity Lavra Monastery of St.Sergius. Our guide showed us around the complex which included famous frescoes by Andrey Rublev in the Troisky Cathedral, built in 1422, and hundreds of tourists taking selfies. We escaped through lovely grounds to a small workshop making the famous Matryoshka dolls.



Here also was a pottery. We were made extremely welcome and shown around by the Monk potter, Gerasim, who ran it. The pottery was extremely well equipped with several people working there. Some of the wares were thrown and some were slip caste. We once again recognized the brown milk fired pots while others were brightly glazed. Several purchases were made as we were served tea. The Monk made beautiful teapots and was very keen to visit the UK for further training. We promised to keep in touch, which we do.



A high-speed train took us to St Petersburg where we visited the sights, including The Peterhof, The Hermitage and watched Giselle at the Mariinsky Theatre. Our young guide was superb in recounting the history of the places but also told us of her parent's experience of life there, which was just as interesting. She also managed to whisk us through the selfie taking cruise crowds in the Hermitage to see the important works of art and downstairs to see the objects from the excavation sites from Central Asia, especially the Altay region, which we had come especially to see as we had visited Scythian burial sites in Siberia the previous year. Golden objects, wooden objects, ceramics and the oldest carpet in the world. A fantastic collection.



On our last day we visited the house and workshop of a local sculptor and ceramist, Nikolay and his wife Svetlana Karakhanov. They lived in an old house which they were renovating in a rather rundown area. They ran ceramic and painting workshops and were delighted to meet us. The garden was full of extraordinary sculptures and a few kilns. Inside was a gallery upstairs with paintings. After a look around we were invited to take tea and have a chat about their life and how they came to be there.



Our finale was a canal cruise at sunset as the lights came up. Magical, with Vodka of course to keep us warm.

A fitting end to another stupendous trip organised by Christine-Ann Richards and Gulnora Khurramova.

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