

# LETTER FROM THE EDITOR



Old St. Petersburg remains a beautiful stage set but to the Russians it is not what Rome is to the Italians or Paris to the French. The decisions are made in the Kremlin. The city of Peter remains a museum, open from 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM.  
—Joseph Wechsberg

I travel a fair amount for business, lecturing and consulting. My primary role is as an educator, but often it is mostly for M&M (miles and money). Nevertheless, I am quite selective in where I travel, which is ironic since I rarely see where I am and often wake up not knowing what time zone I am in. My standard trip is to leave one day, arrive the next, speak the next, and then fly home the following. To put it into perspective, I arrive in Tokyo or Australia on a Friday for dinner, and am home on Sunday for lunch. My most recent journey was quite an exception. I have just returned from St. Petersburg, Russia. The trip got off to a rather aggravating start: my flight was delayed for an hour because of weather. We then pulled away from the gate, only to return to it moments later. A woman on board was considered to have a high-risk pregnancy and had been instructed by her doctor not to get on a plane. Contractions set in and the paramedics were called. The next task was then to locate her checked baggage. Thus, because of a second hour delay, I missed two connections and had to take an extra flight. But, I kept reminding myself, M&M, M&M.

Nevertheless, once I arrived at my destination, I was amazed at how very splendid it was. The hotel was extraordinary and, all through the trip, the people were as cordial and friendly as possible. The lectures went well. However, I am not sure that anyone had any idea what I was talking about. Not that they aren't intelligent and interested in learning, but, when I was listening to the simultaneous translation from Russian to English, it made absolutely no sense to me, so I can only imagine what they were hearing.

The 4 outside speakers were presenting at two separate meetings that had a free day between them, and we were treated to a tour of this magnificent city on the intervening day. Through St. Petersburg runs the Neva River with its numerous canals and 76 bridges, such that residents refer to their city as the "Venice of the North." The river is lined with enormous palaces, mostly private residences. The churches are spectacular; one of those that I went in, the Church of the Savior on Spilled Blood, had its walls covered in brilliant mosaics. Many of the historic buildings, including this church, were remembered as sites where someone had been assassinated, leading to the succession of another czar or emperor the second, third, fourth, or whatever.

The highlight of the tour was an all-too-brief visit to the Hermitage museum. It is said that if you spend 1 minute viewing each object within the Hermitage, you will be there 11 years. We saw rooms full of beautiful Russian art and then viewed classics from Michelangelo, Rembrandt, and others. I was sorry to have missed the Impressionists, but we were on the clock. Next was a boat ride weaving through the canals, which allowed us to see the beauty of the city from a different perspective. There is a later boat ride that I am too old and tired to go on, which leaves at around midnight and returns at 2:30 AM. At around 1 AM, the bridges on the river open up for the only time each day, and scores of boats pass under them.

My most pleasant surprise was the food. Although I haven't a clue about most of what I put into my mouth, it was quite tasty. I even enjoyed the borscht, which wasn't my mother's watery beet soup. I did manage to avoid the sliced lard, however, as did everyone else at the table. It took until the second night to finally indulge in the national drink—vodka. There are hundreds of varieties, some with herbs, others tasting like decent grappa. The little glasses are continuously replaced until you are comfortably numb.

The last night we went to an excellent, traditional Russian restaurant with the original name of "Restaurant." After dinner, I took a walk with a colleague whom I hadn't connected with for many years until this trip, when we had ample opportunity to renew our acquaintance. My goal was to find a store that sold matryoshka (look it up) for my granddaughter, which we did. The city was quite alive, full of attractive young people out having a good time. My image of Russia as teeming with babushkas and old men with beards was clearly ancient history.

I asked one of the people who had invited me to Russia how much it had changed in the last two decades since the USSR was disassembled, when Leningrad became St. Petersburg once again. I was surprised that, as far as the government went, the answer was—not much. The country was run out of Moscow as a Presidential Republic, still under the control of one man.

But, for a place not to miss for a visit, I highly recommend St. Petersburg (and eagerly look forward to returning next year). It may not be representative of the country as a whole, but neither is Hollywood.

Dasvidaniya comrades, until next month...

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Bruce D. Cheson". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Bruce D. Cheson, MD