

Helsinki to Leningrad

Train links two cultures in northeastern Europe

Leningrad Tour by Train by Holiday Tours of America, is available from travel agencies. It is for four days/three nights, includes transportation, first-class accommodation, and Finnish tourleader; \$215-235 per person in double room; \$55 single supplement. Also available is a Leningrad & Moscow Tour by Train, or Moscow only.

Your travel agent will help you arrange a visa. Fill out the application form and return it with copy of your passport and three identical photos at least three weeks before your trip.

By Cynthia Luska
special writer

Helsinki, Finland. This morning my father and I had time for a quick bite at Market Square by the harbor, my favorite place in Helsinki. I ate fresh strawberries while watching the seagulls hover over the fishing boats displaying their catches of the morning.

Now it is time to leave the brightly colored flower stands and red rooftops of Helsinki behind, because we will take the Leningrad Express east into an unfamiliar world.

The train will take us 27 miles on an eight-hour journey. We will stay two days in Leningrad and return by train. Besides being a convenient and inexpensive side trip from Finland, the train lets you gradually move from west to east, highlighting the differences between cultures and giving you a sense of traveling through time.

Depending on your expectations, the train ride can be filled with espionage and fantasy or it can serve as a classic introduction to the ways of Soviet Russia.

THE TRAIN. The first thing I notice about the train is the hammer and sickle emblem on each car. We are greeted by our Finnish tourleader Helga (she speaks Finnish, English and Russian) who gives us our compartment assignments.

Six people are in each compartment which consists of two roomy padded benches facing each other, two fold-out sleeping benches above, a little table by the window and an overhead luggage rack.

The railway we will travel on was built when Finland was under Russian rule in the early 1800s. It connected the newly appointed capital of Finland, Helsinki, with what was then St. Petersburg (now Leningrad). We will travel down the Karelian Isthmus, lost by Finland to Russia in the last of the 42 wars the countries have fought against each other.

At noon we begin to roll out of the station and Helga tells us that we must declare all money, jewelry and other valuables for comparison when we leave the Soviet Union. She also gives us a two-page guide on train protocol. Among other things, it tells us that the toilets will be closed for two hours at the Russian border.

As we ponder the significance of this and help each other fill out the customs declarations forms, we become quickly acquainted. There are many personalities and regions represented in this 45-person American tour group.

We hear one of the Texans admit loudly, "I ain't been doin' nothing but complainin' since I left San Antonio." In our compartment is a rather cryptic professor from San Francisco who will feed our fantasies of espionage and danger with labor camp tales.

OUTSIDE. THE endless Finnish fir trees rush by. They look proud against the cool blue sky. Here and there we slow down or stop at idyllic little stations with neat yellow buildings and big shady trees.

The scenery does not hold our attention, however. There is tension in the air and we find ourselves exchanging quips about Peter Lorre, Sydney Greenstreet, trenchcoats and guns.

We laugh nervously at "ghost stories" about spies and labor camps and softly over the rhythmic clicking of the wheels. Now and then someone looks around the corner into the aisleway. My glance follows, but the passengers are only armed with pop and beer. Our tour leader will bring us boxed picnic lunches at 2, but we decide to explore the dining car.

After making our way through the swaying aisles and what seems like 50 doors, we find people seated at black formica tables, drinking and laughing. Here you can order coffee, beer and pop (\$1-\$1.75), champagne (\$9 a bottle), and caviar (\$3.25) to eat there or take to your compartment.

I ask for pop and am surprised to get a bottle with a familiar blue and white logo... Russian Pepsi-Cola.

Back in the compartment, my new 'friends' tell me to sample the Russian beer. I make a face. It is watery and tastes like vinegar. Helga brings us our picnic lunch which is quite good but hard to balance on your knees. There is chicken and salad and some people stash away the bread and jam for later.

At 3 p.m. it is time for Finnish customs and passport control. A polite Finn collects our passports, then we are free to get a snack at the Finnish station of Vainikkala.

BACK ON the train, we are soon approaching the Russian border town of Vyborg. A storm has been building up and the sky is darkening. Our attention is diverted from the window to the Russian border guards in uniforms and high black boots approaching down the aisleway.

"Get up please," one tells us. Two guards come to each compartment and look under benches, flip through magazines and books, spot-check luggage, check under floors, ceilings, raise and lower window blinds. We are lined up in the aisle outside our compartment.

They motion us back into the compartment. Our visas were given to us a few minutes ago and a passenger in our compartment accidentally received another man's photo on his visa. We are all sitting rigidly, eyes averted.

The guard looks at the visa, the man, the woman, and the man's photo. He again, talks to his comrade in Russian and shuts the door to our compartment. We wait. No one tries to open it. "I wonder if we are being bugged," someone says. There is a long silence. "Will someone crack and make a break for it to the woods?" someone else adds, laughing.

Thirty minutes pass, then we are allowed off the train to exchange our

money into rubles. By now there are great cracks of thunder, and lightning streaks fill the sky. I lose sight of my group and wander downstairs where I get my first glimpse of ordinary Russians, in flower print dresses or grey pants, standing in long lines. They stare right back at me, along with two soldiers. Back upstairs I see a prominent sign that says "Money Exchange."

NOW THE rain is coming down in great torrents. I follow the herds of running people back to our train. The man with the mixed-up photo has been pulled aside and questioned by the guards. "I bluffed them," he says later, smiling, until the guard finally threw up his hands in exasperation and yelled, "Go!"

Now we are heading into Russia. The forests are darkened by the clouds, the houses are in need of paint. There is a Russian woman tending to her cows and groups of faded buildings with tin roofs.

A matronly Russian woman appears at our doorway and asks us if we want tea. Looking down the aisle, I see a fire in a grey metal furnace in the corner of the car. In the furnace is a samovar. The woman fills our glasses with hot tea.

She comes back again with biscuits and sugar cubes. The tea is good and soothing. Back and forth she goes, four or six glasses in hand... into the next compartment, the next and the next.

Just as with the slow-moving hotel waitresses and the scores of men chopping down grass with sickles that we will come to see, the work methods in Russia seem purposely left at a 19th-century pace probably to keep every one busy and working.

As evening approaches, so does Leningrad, and the tin roof houses give way to apartment buildings with laundry hanging on the balconies. The station is quiet. We are guided from our track to the bus. As we drive through streets we see potholes, soldiers and



Street musicians entertain at a square in Helsinki, Finland. The city is the starting point for a train trip to Leningrad in the Soviet Union.

empty storefronts on the way to our hotel on the Gulf of Finland.

LENINGRAD, USSR. The next two days bring us to many sights, including the great Hermitage Museum housed in the former Winter Palace of the czars, and the gold-gilded St. Isaac's Cathedral which now functions as The Museum of Christian Mythology.

Passing by many bridges and rivers we learn why Leningrad is called "The Venice of the North." Our guide, Katya, a broad-faced, smooth-skinned Russian girl, translates the omnipresent red-lettered signs for me, such as "Glory to Lenin and the People of the Soviet Socialist Republic" and "We Shall Fulfill the Five-Year Plan."

She proudly points to a factory billboard. "It is a great honor for a worker to get his picture here," she beams, "a great honor."

From among the choice of tickets to the circus, folklore dance, ballet, opera or theatre, we sample an energetic, soul-stirring folklore performance and the famed Russian circus.

The tour pace is hectic and I leave wishing that I had set aside an afternoon to explore on my own as a few

people in my group did.

Return. On the train ride back, many people celebrate with champagne and caviar, full of tales about the boisterously singing Romanians, the Russians offering to buy clothes or anything Western and the excitable people who seem to yell every answer to you in a steady stream of Russian.



Cynthia Luska at a park in Leningrad.

Soviet tours available

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Ypsilanti honors past at Heritage Festival

Ypsilanti holds its fifth annual Heritage Festival Friday, Saturday and Sunday.

The festival, set along the shores of the Huron River in Ypsilanti's old Depot Town, will recreate in clothing, crafts and exhibits the days of Michigan's beginning. Ypsilanti was the second incorporated village in Michigan and is noted for its 19th century architecture.

The Living History Encampment recreates life as it was in the 17th and 18th centuries in America. The group will settle in Riverside Park and launch artillery demonstrations and reenact battles. The organizations involved specialize in the authentic period of clothing, weaponry and culture of the early frontiersmen.

ENTERTAINMENT WILL be provided by the Ypsilanti Players on the stage at Riverside Park. Musical entertainment will include a jazz competition, a ragtime band, a gospel jubilee, a

regimental band.

A Heritage parade will begin 11 a.m. Saturday. Bands, floats, clowns and performers from the Franzen Brothers Circus will join the march.

The circus will perform twice daily featuring acrobats, trapeze artists and trained animals.

A juried arts and crafts fair features several Michigan and regional artists. A quilt show, a tour of historic houses and an antique show are also scheduled.

Activities for children and adults include a frog leaping contest, softball tournament, a soap box car race, a 6.32 mile run and a marbles contest.

A costume contest will be held to judge the authenticity of period clothing. Visitors are invited to join in the spirit of the event and dress in period clothing.

Local clubs and vendors are providing a variety of foods including a chicken barbecue, a pancake breakfast and an ice cream social.