



4-8 July, 1999 XVI Seroptimist International Convention,
Helsinki, Finland

St Petersburg - Helsinki - Hamina

by *Meryl Caldwell-Smith, Goulburn Club, New South Wales Region, SISWP*
and *Mary Cassell, Cook Inlet club, North Western Region, SIA*

Kate sends her love AND apologies. Her computer has lost dial tone so she has not been able to send reports for nearly a week. She hopes to have everything to rights by the weekend, soon after she returns home.

Great excitement on Kouvala railway station yesterday evening as Mary and I poured ourselves off the St Petersburg-Helsinki 'Sibelius' train with the help of Kate and Judy Dreis THEN massive hugs exchanged with Anu and the guard trying to get Kate and Judy to re-board the train and shut the door!! As the train drew away (ever so quietly) all our St Petersburg travel group waved through their windows. A royal send-off.

And a royal welcome to Anu's after a three quarter hour drive through lovely rural lands and forests. The beautiful dogs looked a bit overwhelmed at so many more strangers entering their domain. We haven't patted them yet, they have been in their own yard and need time. Anu has enlisted the help of young Nina, a fourteen year old, who lives with the mother of the two young dogs many kilometres away. She will take charge of the four-leggeds whilst we gallivant. Today on a boat belonging to Jussi's family we see Hamina from the sea. BTW Jussi is a darling - and OH! so handsome. Have you seen their up-dated home page with some of the photos Anu took at the Cyber-friends breakfast?

StPetersburg! And exciting exhilarating, exhausting three days. The heat continued throughout. The train from Helsinki left at 6.30 am I think it was a four hour journey but with long stops of half an hour or so at the border and again for the money exchange trolley to come though and a hours time change, time was added and it seemed forever. The worst part, of course, was sitting in the closed train in hot sunshine with no air-conditioning never mind - once there it was go, go, go, palaces and more palaces. Passing impressive and naturally very important buildings all the time. Photo stops were very well organised (and naturally we tried to take photos as we move too.). The history of St Petersburg became a blur to me - particularly as our delightful guide, Natasha, repeatedly gave us the complicated and unknown names of the famous architects responsible for every one!!

St Petersburg is built on marshy land - c.1703 - on more than 600 islands, with more bridges than days in the year. There are many trees in the wide streets and long stretches of park land. The grounds surrounding the palaces were mostly beautifully landscaped. The heat continued and was most oppressive when inside the airless palaces - great bunches of tourists with 7 cruise ships moored on the Neva River.

When we were concluding yesterday afternoon, Natasha asked us what we liked best - she may have been a little disappointed with my reply because I did not say The Winter Palace but opted

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for the Peterhof - why? Because it was not as big a palace to go through as the others and it had such wonderful gardens (like Versailles). I marvelled at the famous paintings, beautiful sculptures, Gobelin tapestries, etc. etc, gilt was over dominant.

I leave this for Mary to read, add to and tell you more. And yes, there was not enough time to sleep and we ate too much (again)!

This is Meryl, signing off - over to you Mary.

Hi! to all!!! I don't know what to add right now - it has all been so overwhelming and we are all tired (and too HOT!) It will be lovely to get out on the water! As Meryl said, we all had a Royal Welcome and the last sight that I had of Kate was her sneaking the train door slightly open and taking a picture of us on the platform! Chris and Jussi were awaiting our arrival, also Anu's mother who had prepared a wonderful Finnish meal for us! Today, we meet Jussi's parents.

Later, we will meet Anu's grandmother, who is quite excited about it! Tomorrow, there will be a gathering of Hamina Soroptimists for us!

I enjoyed attending the board meeting almost even more than the meeting itself. I have written an article about it and it should appear on the Internet soon. I guess that I was getting tired by the time that the Convention itself started and I was busy looking for members of Friendship Link clubs, also several Grant of Friendship recipients from previous years, also Chatliners! I did something quite different for me - I brought a Puffin backpack with me and carried it around as a purse, under my arm. Hardly anyone could resist saying "Hello!", so I met many people, again and again!

I will close now as everyone is ready to leave. Talk to you later!

Cyberhugs, Mary.