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Educated Travelers: Alumni join professors as CBB travel program takes off

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Educated Travelers



Alumni join professors as CBB travel program takes off

Paul Wescott '53 was a senior history major at Colby when Soviet dictator Josef Stalin died. When Wescott heard the news he had one question: "What happens next?"

Wescott recalls the answer given by his Russian studies professor, Harold Raymond: "I have no idea."

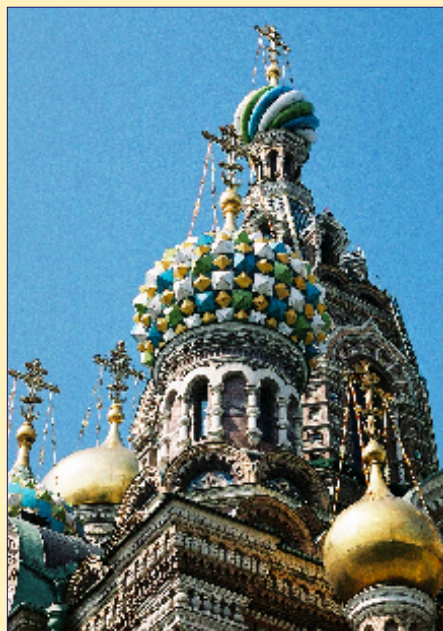
That immense unknown, so emblematic of Russian history, has intrigued Wescott ever since.

Fifty years later—after the Cold War, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the introduction of democracy and capitalism—Wescott and his wife, Peggy, are onboard the *Novikov Priboy*, a 425-foot passenger ship, cruising from Moscow to St. Petersburg. They have come on this two-week river cruise along the canals, rivers and lakes of Russia to witness a country in transition. And maybe to discover what comes next for Russia as it emerges in the 21st century.

"It's been such an important part of history in my life and is undergoing a sea change," says Wescott on deck as we pass the small dachas (country houses) that appear unexpectedly in the trees on the banks along the upper Volga River. "I wanted to see it."

He's not alone.

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY ALICIA NEMICCOLO MACLEAY '97



From left, Paul '53 and Peggy Wescott, Joan Brenner (Bates '49) and other trip participants check out the sights of Moscow with tour guide Julia; the Cathedral of the Resurrection (Our Savior-on-the-Spilt-Blood) in St. Petersburg; Sheila McCarthy (center) talks with Susan (Schaeff) '63 and

Among the 200 passengers listed on the *Novikov Priboy's* captain's log are 26 Colby, Bates and Bowdoin (CBB) travelers—alumni and two professors from the colleges, along with their companions, all venturing on a “Journey of the Czars.” For two weeks in July we explore Russia by river, including St. Petersburg in full 300th-anniversary splendor. We view countless icons, walk through elegant palaces, see the tombs of czars and along the 1,300-kilometer journey share every meal, bus ride and photo op.

Few on the trip have met any of their fellow travelers before arriving in Moscow. And only a small number of us have taken a Russian studies course, which is fine because the trip essentially is one. All CBB alumni trips have an educational focus—in this case Russia's history and culture. In addition to the appeal of sightseeing in Russia, people have been drawn by the promise of lectures by CBB professors, the opportunity to travel comfortably by boat and what everyone hopes will be interesting and pleasant companions. As a group our only connection is having attended one of the three colleges or being affiliated with someone who has. Some might find that a tenuous bond, but it holds—and grows stronger.

“You grant that and you start to talk to people as if you know them in a way and it makes for more of an intimacy,” says Jim Foritano '65.

Except for me, the CBB alumni range in

class years from 1943 to 1965. All have vivid recollections of the Cold War. The opportunity to travel to what was America's arch-enemy is a major draw.

Surprisingly, while the CBB participants are an extremely well-traveled bunch (their accounts of previous trips include Italy, Egypt, Japan, South America, among others), few are regular group travelers. “This is our first group tour after shunning them our entire life,” says Bob Ferrell (Bowdoin '62) at dinner with wife Mimi the first night. “I wouldn't have come on a tour if it didn't include discussions of the history, literature and music.”

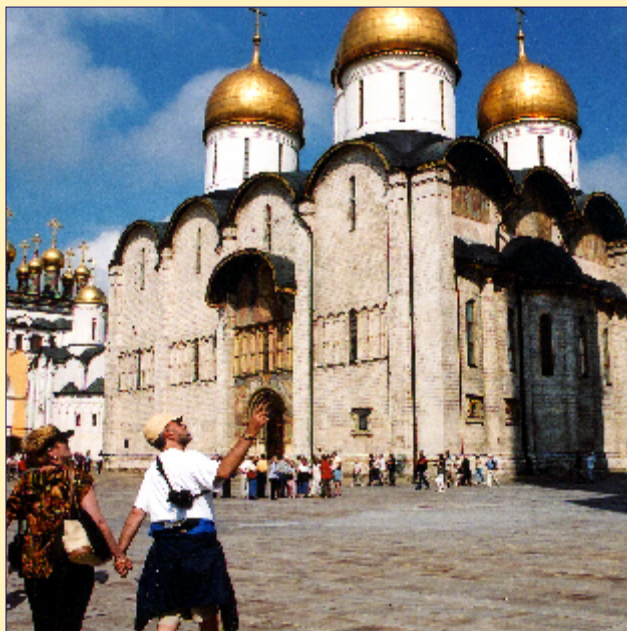
Since the spring of 2001, Colby, Bates and Bowdoin have collaborated to offer alumni trips to such destinations as Tuscany, Normandy and Costa Rica—always with a professor or two along. While the colleges supply the appropriate faculty and offer the trips to alumni, a specialty tour operator runs each trip, organizing all airfare, lodging, meals and sightseeing logistics, including local tour guides in each city. Even as international travel has declined drastically in the last two years, affiliated group travel is gaining in popularity, with everyone from the local bank to bar associations offering programs. While actual numbers on the competitive travel industry are scarce, Scott Kluesner, vice president of sales at Intrav, which operates our Russia trip, says his company has seen continued growth

in alumni travel over the last few years. “In fact our forecast for 2004 is even greater than ever before,” he says.

Our faculty members are Sheila McCarthy, associate professor of Russian literature and language at Colby and director of the Colby in St. Petersburg study abroad program, and Tony Antolini (Bowdoin '63), director of the Bowdoin chorus and an expert on Russian music. McCarthy and Antolini are on hand to answer questions (“Are the arts supported?” “What's your favorite Chekhov short story?”), offer lectures (“The Literary Myth of St. Petersburg,” “Russian Music to 1800”) and provide language assistance (“How do I say, ‘good-morning/how are you/thank you?’”—dobrye utra/kak dila/spasiba). Ultimately each professor is a fellow traveler—who just happens to know a heck of a lot about Russia.

“There are lots of tours you can take that tell you stuff and do the tour-guide thing,” says John Ridlon (Bowdoin '63). “But these are recognized authorities in their field and they bring a unique perspective.”

In a meeting on the *Priboy* our first night in Moscow, Antolini says he and McCarthy are now on their “home turf.” To be more exact, Russian music is Antolini's specialty. Growing up in New York City he visited Russian churches to hear their choirs. “I was so stunned by the singing. I couldn't wait to get started,” he says. Antolini immediately



Paul Pineo '63 on the deck of the Novikov Priboy; Maddie Littman and Jim Foritano '65 view the Cathedral of the Dormition inside Moscow's Kremlin; Mel and Barbara (Brent) Biedermann '43 relax on deck.

signed up for Russian upon arriving at Bowdoin as an undergraduate, first visited the Soviet Union in 1962 ("they were just opening the country to students") and has since led two musical tours to Russia.

McCarthy has been to Russia nearly 20 times since her first visit in 1965 as a student. That first trip also included a cruise on the Volga, although McCarthy traveled on a steamer with roosters, hens and goats riding along and fruits and vegetables piled high on the decks. Chatting with the farmers on their way to market remains one of McCarthy's fondest memories of Russia. Over the last four decades McCarthy has led various groups, from college students to seasoned museum patrons, on summer tours as a guide and interpreter. She and Antolini want to show us the real Russia. To "fight the communist menace, evil empire stereotype," as McCarthy says, and go beyond just being ushered from spot to spot.

Between the two of them we're in experienced hands.

Our first day in Moscow, a Sunday, Antolini offers a side trip to a Russian Orthodox Church service. This is not on our official tour schedule, which appears nightly on the bunk of each traveler. "It was wonderful because Tony knows so much of the liturgy and so much of the music and that's really one of the things that interests me," says Ridlon after returning from the service, which

included a hand bell performance. "It was just wonderful to have that kind of access."

People often don't know what to expect from Moscow, perhaps a gray dour place," says Marina, a tour guide during our three days in Moscow. "When they come they're pleasantly surprised."

"I second that," says Chan Coddington, husband of Jane (Whipple) '55, on our bus.

Many arrive in Moscow half expecting to see heavyset babushkas and poverty around every corner. But downtown Moscow feels prosperous and cosmopolitan. Stylish young women stroll by in fashionable clothes, Western brands adorn storefronts (and a glut of billboards), and Land Rover and Mercedes dealerships offer the latest models, adding to the overflow of cars speeding through the city's streets. (Drivers appear to be still learning the skill.)

"We wanted to see how much it had changed," says Barbara (Brent) Biedermann '43, who visited Moscow and St. Petersburg in 1972 with husband Mel. Then, "everything you wanted to see was restricted. You couldn't go in the Kremlin," she says. As if to emphasize her point, we are waiting in line with other tourists to enter the Kremlin, Moscow's ancient fortress at the heart of the city. Around us mill the ubiquitous souvenir hawkers, with their packs of post cards, T-shirts and fake military pins. "We didn't expect that

Russia would have made this much progress. I am amazed," Biedermann says.

Near such iconic sites as St. Basil's Cathedral, with its brilliant, multicolored onion domes, and Manege Square outside the red brick walls of the Kremlin, there is an underground shopping mall with a trendy Internet café. The Metro, renowned for its magnificent mosaics and sculptures (and escalators that rank among the fastest in the world), is immaculate—not a gum wrapper in sight. And the enormous Cathedral of Christ the Savior (the original blown up in 1931 per Stalin's order, an outdoor swimming pool later appearing on site) was completely reconstructed in the '90s and opened for daily services in 2000.

Okay, I do see packs of stray dogs roaming the city, and we are continually warned about pocket-picking Gypsies (a prophecy that proves true for one Bates couple in St. Petersburg). Still, Moscow appears to be moving forward while reclaiming and retaining the best of its cultural past.

On our way toward Red Square to view Vladimir Lenin in his tomb, a small group of us briskly follows Julia, another Moscow tour guide. We turn a corner and suddenly there is the hammer and sickle flag, being waved proudly on the steps outside the State History Museum. Pro-Communist songs blare from a bullhorn while a group of 20 or so Communist supporters, both young and old,

stand stoically in quiet political protest.

We stop to stare, take photos, wonder about this vestige of Communism, while Julia marches on, seemingly oblivious. I'm torn between seeing this demonstration as the remnant of a misguided, backward ideology or as true political freedom in action. Either way I feel naïve for not having expected it. Lenin and Stalin may be dead inside Red Square, but apparently for some their ideals are not.

"There are lots of mixed feelings about Stalin," says McCarthy later over lunch. "He brought them through the war, kept things together." For some it is nostalgic, she explains, the way some Americans might idealize the "good old days," when they were children and Mom was waiting at home with milk and cookies. But in reality, as our onboard Russian lecturer makes clear, the time was marked by mass executions and a police terror state—and millions of lives lost, including tens of thousands to the construction of the Moscow Canal, the very waterway that begins our cruise north.

For five days we travel north along the Volga, Svir and Neva rivers, crossing the Ladoga and Onega lakes on our way to St. Petersburg. Along the way we navigate 17 locks, the first of which draws nearly everyone out on deck to watch as the *Priboy* drops eight meters. "Just seeing the Stalinist engineering projects, the enormous scale of them, the big Communist seals on hydroelectric plants," says Paul Wescott. "This is stuff you read about."

The pace is relaxed, but there is always something to do: learn the Cyrillic alphabet during Russian language lessons, listen to a folk music concert, watch a film on the Romanovs, play the wooden spoons in an all-ship talent show. Or simply watch the changing scenery. Thick forests, green plains, small towns, busy public beaches and occasional barges—all these pass while we watch from deck.

"There's something very conducive to relaxing and opening up on a trip like this," says Jim Foritano. "It's the boat. It's the rhythm and it's the fact of us all being in a very enigmatic country. We're all open to the adventure and that has been a great experience."

We stop in several towns and cities during the voyage—Uglich, Yaroslavl (where we are invited back for its millennium celebration in 2010), Svir Sstroy. We see brightly painted churches and bustling city markets, hear concerts of native music. And at every dock we are met by a local band playing Ameri-

can standards—"Stars and Stripes," "Hello Dolly"—while vendors sell matryoshka dolls, chess sets and lacquered boxes.

The highlight is Kizhi Island, a remote UNESCO World Heritage Site, home to an outdoor museum of wooden churches and structures. On this small island we see the Transfiguration Cathedral—30,000 wooden shingles adorn its 22 cupolas and shimmer in the midday sun. The guides tell us to keep on the paths because of the poisonous vipers. I never see a snake, but the warning keeps our group together.

Every day Antolini and McCarthy offer lectures onboard the ship. One day it is McCarthy's "The Literary Myth of St. Petersburg." "I find it fascinating. I'll go home and read some Gogol," says Jane Coddington. Another afternoon Antolini plays us music from concerts we have heard in churches along the way, explaining the evolution of Russian music. "We've certainly had our share of the cultural development," says Bob Ferrell.

The atmosphere is informal (the lectures are held in the Sky Bar) but informative.

Antolini and McCarthy even team-teach

a lecture on 19th- and 20th-century literature and music. McCarthy says she likes the opportunity to meet and work with a fellow Russian professor. There is talk of collaborating on a Russian studies course back at home. "I don't get to teach like that at Bowdoin," says Antolini. "It turned out better than I could have hoped."

Lectures like "From Lenin to Putin," offered by Irina Nikolashina, a professor from Moscow State University and the *Novikov Priboy*'s official onboard lecturer, draw Paul Wescott. While Wescott and the rest of us could simply have read a history book (and most have read many), Nikolashina offers human context. It is one thing to read about the economic crisis caused by Yeltsin's 1998 devaluation of the ruble. It is another to have Nikolashina tell you that the result was that overnight her mother's life savings of 5,000 rubles, given to a then-pregnant Irina for her child, became five. "I bought a bottle of vegetable oil, put it in the cupboard. It is all that is left of my mother's life savings," she says.

Or to hear her recount bicycling down to the 1991 uprising outside Moscow's White

On Stalin, Bathing and Bears: Snapshots from Russia

Friday, July 11, 2003

Delta Flight 30, on tarmac, JFK



*Alicia Nemiccolo
MacLeay '97*

"Uh oh," says the woman next to me as we wait for our flight to take off for Moscow. She points to a newspaper headline—"Bomb in Moscow Kills 1." It is less than a week since Chechen separatists killed more than a dozen people at a rock concert outside the city, but it's curiosity rather than fear that

I feel. ("The Chechens aren't interested in tourists," Sheila McCarthy explained to me last week. "They want to get into the heart of Moscow.") Once back home I find myself reading any article that mentions Chechnya, not just the headlines, looking for answers.

Saturday, July 12, 2003

Cabin 109, *Novikov Priboy*, Moscow

Checking out my cabin I look in the bathroom to discover...

a drain in the floor? Turns out the bathroom doubles as the shower. Extend the sink faucet upwards, hang it on the wall and voilà! "At the end of the cruise all of you are going to say, 'Damn I'm going to miss that shower,'" says Teddy, our Dutch cruise director, during orientation. She's right. The efficiency of showering and brushing your teeth at the same time is oddly appealing.



Sunday, July 13, 2003

Lunch at the Kempinski Hotel, Moscow

"I can only think of Stalin as a very benevolent leader. He was called 'little father.'" This unexpected statement comes from fellow cruise-ship passenger Judy Traub of Long Island. It is more surprising

House. Before leaving home Nikolashina asked a friend in Canada to come get her child if she wasn't heard from in a month. Eventually the tanks turned away and the old Russian flag was flown. "That was a tremendously emotional moment," she says.

"I'm most fascinated by the fact that she can be free and open," says Paul Pineo '63.

These personal accounts aren't just enlightening for the trip's participants. "Astounding," says Antolini of Nikolashina's talk. "It's irreplaceable to have a person who's an eyewitness to an historical event. She wasn't just watching it on TV. She was there."

Group tours can conjure up images of tourists following their guides like sheep, herded from site to site, buffered from the actual country they're visiting. But McCarthy offers us unique opportunities for local exposure—a Q&A with Tim Wiswell '01, who works in the investment banking industry in Moscow and tells us about efforts to gain foreign investors; a discussion conducted at 90 mph with a taxi-cab driver on St. Petersburg politics and the city's recent \$500-million restoration project

("They spent an enormous amount of money, but there was nothing in it for us," says the driver); a tour of the St. Petersburg Classical Gymnasium school, which houses the Colby in St. Petersburg program, where students study and teach Russian high school students. "I think I would have really missed something had these professors not been here," says Everett Brenner (Bates '47).

The tour offers its own benefits. In St. Petersburg we enter the Hermitage museum, home to more than 2.7-million pieces of artwork, hours before its regular opening. The museum, usually teeming with visitors, is virtually empty save for our group and a few art students attempting to reproduce the works of masters. We tour Catherine's Palace, a sprawling masterpiece, after the regular visitors have been sent home. We have a private ballet performance of pieces from "Swan Lake," "The Nutcracker" and "Giselle" in Catherine the Great's Hermitage Theater. It's hard not to see the advantages. Being able to view up close a Rembrandt or the restored Amber Room, rather than the back of someone's head, is (as the MasterCard ad

say) priceless. And it's not just the professors and guides who have given us new insights. The interests of the alumni are broad. In our group alone we have an art docent ready to explain the early techniques of van Gogh and Gauguin, a ballet dancer who can critique a ballerina's graceful footwork, and several sailors. "We all profited from the specialized knowledge of each member of the group," says McCarthy, reflecting on the trip.

After 1,300 kilometers, two celebrated cities and countless facts, lectures and observations, our journey ends in St. Petersburg, Peter the Great's personal vision of Russia's future, a future that merged Western affluence with distinctive Russian drive and ingenuity. For our CBB group the question of what is next for Russia remains unanswered, but the trip has opened our eyes to its possibilities.

"I've been pleased and excited with the sense of wonder I've had about the place," says Bob Ferrell. "I feel like I've just put my toes in the water."

For information about the CBB alumni travel program and upcoming trips, see the inside back cover of this magazine.

when you learn that at the age of 5, under Stalin's rule, Traub was deported from her native Poland to a Siberian labor camp.

In 1939 the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact split Poland. The town Traub's family lived in fell to the Soviets, the rest of her relations to the Germans. When her father requested a move to the German side to reunite the family, it was seen as an act of disloyalty.

Three weeks later Traub and her family heard a knock on the door one night. The family was sent to an outpost 2,000 kilometers from the Trans-Siberian railroad's last stop. "At the time it seemed like the worst, but that's how we survived," Traub said. When they returned home to Poland a few years later, one of their relations but one uncle had perished under Hitler.

Sunday, July 20, 2003 *Novikov Priboy, Svir River*

Tonight was our Surprise Entertainment. My Russian language group sang "Kalinka" and "Moscow Nights"—in Russian—on deck accompanied by our onboard musicians (an accordionist and fiddler). For our show-stopping encore we played wooden spoons. Later in the program a Russian girl from the gift shop came out in a sequined cocktail dress and sang "Chattanooga Choo Choo," and for the finale, Arty, one of our Russian interpreters, belted out a Celine Dion number. Now that's cross-cultural entertainment.

Tuesday, July 22, 2003 **St. Petersburg**

Walking on the sidewalk this afternoon I passed ice



cream vendors, souvenir stalls and then a muzzled brown bear, attached by a leash to a boy. For a few rubles passersby could—and did—sit with the bear for a photo.

Continuing on I saw a few Gypsy families, mothers with young children, sitting in doorways, asking for money. Our Russian guides warn us to hang tight to our belongings. Later I am shocked to learn that at this same moment Joan (Bates '49) and Ev Brenner (Bates '47) were swarmed by an entire family, their bags opened, a set of eyeglasses taken. The Brenners were ultimately rescued by the sudden appearance of policemen who drag the family away.

Wednesday, July 23, 2003 **On bus in St. Petersburg**

"Freedom and democracy are for the intellectuals; it's better to have sausage on the table." Olga, our tour guide in St. Petersburg, relates this Russian sentiment to explain the difficulty of the transition for the older generation, the ones who lost their savings, saw pensions shrink with the downfall of Communism and don't even bother to vote. Olga, though, who supplements her paltry teacher's income as a guide, does not agree with them. "Freedom is a great psychological change," she says to explain the economic instability and rising crime rate around her. But "freedom is such a great value in itself that people should be willing to pay anything for it," she tells our busload of Americans. "It was stressful, to put it mildly, to live under the Soviet regime."