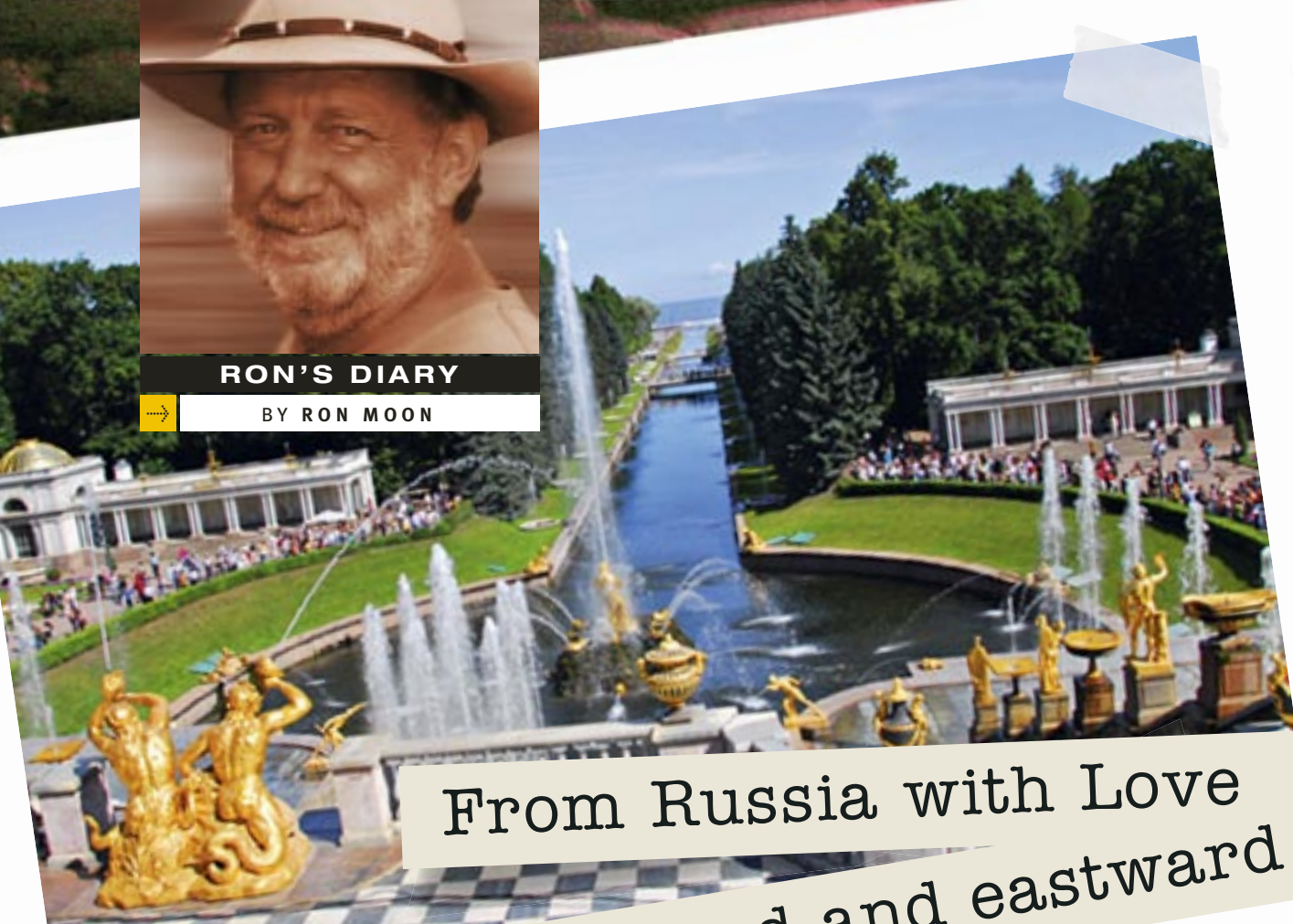




RON'S DIARY

BY RON MOON



From Russia with Love North Cape, Finland and eastward

G'day All,
Just a couple of weeks ago we were at Nord Kapp, the most northerly point of Europe. North Cape, as we tend to spell it, has 11 weeks of perpetual daylight during summer and a similar spell in complete darkness during mid winter.

It actually lies on the island of Mageroya and, as we got closer to our destination, we lost all the fir trees and most of the silver birch, leaving low scrubby, heath-covered tundra stretching from sea shore to the low mountain tops that surrounded us. Patches of snow flanked the hills and valleys while fog shrouded our view for much of the way.

When we actually got to Nord Kapp, we could hardly see more than 50 metres in front of us and the 300m-high cliffs that make up the promontory of North Cape and plunge into the cold Bering Sea couldn't be fully appreciated. Still, we had brought a small container of seawater with us all the way from Cape Agulhus in southern Africa, so with a little fanfare in the cold and mist and a flourish of mitten-covered hands we threw

the water over the cliff, consoling ourselves that maybe a drop made it to the ocean, unseen, a thousand feet below.

While an English sea captain had discovered and named the spot in the early 17th Century, an Italian priest is credited as being the first tourist, visiting back in the 1690s. Many others followed, from kings and queens to the guy on a penny farthing we met a few days previously!

Back at our camp (promoted as the most northerly campsite in the world) on the outskirts of Skarsvag, a fishing village that, yep, you've got it, is the most northerly... we endured our coldest afternoon and night during our trip. With the temperature hovering around zero the warmth and sun of the outback seemed a long way away.

Next day we turned south and headed for the Finland border. Yep, Finland. We travelled through what we all reckoned was a pretty boring country (especially compared to Norway) to get to Russia. Home of Santa Claus, Nokia phones, a few zillion fir trees, numerous rivers and by someone's good count, 186,000 lakes. Needless to say you don't get that much fresh water without rain...

Then it was on to Russia. We were awaiting our first border crossing



The warmth and sun of the outback seemed a long way away



From top: meeting Santa; fog shrouds the way to North Cape; Red Square tourists; village just north of Moscow; the Effie exits yet another tunnel; the magnificent Summer Palace; camped among the fir trees in Finland

into this vast country with a great deal of trepidation. Talk to most Norwegians and Finns and you'd feel the same way.

Maybe it's because they live right beside a very powerful neighbour; maybe it's because Russia's long been seen as an invader or maybe the memories of WWII haven't lost their sting after 60 years. Whatever the case, there doesn't seem much love lost between them!

Anyway, our crossing of the border took just two and a half hours; mostly trying to fill in the customs forms written only in the Russian Cyrillic alphabet.

St Petersburg, with its five million people, is a bustling magnificent city that really owes its existence and delightful persona to Peter the Great. His dream began when he beat the Swedes in 1701 reclaiming this part of Russia and where he first built the Peter and Paul Fortress.

In 1712 he made the growing town his capital, while Catherine the Great made it into a lively cosmopolitan city during the first



'new' Russia hasn't reached yet, and maybe never will.

In many of the rural towns people still gather their daily water from a scattering of wells and old women sell their excess vegetables from wayside stalls. And, once you get away from the capital and the motorways the roads are more reminiscent of rural Africa than a world superpower.

quarter of the 19th Century. It remained the capital until the 1917 Russian Revolution and a few years later was renamed Leningrad.

In 1991, the people of the city voted for the old name for the place to be used and today it hosts a few million visitors - that will turn to a flood when the Russian government realises there's more money to be made from tourists' spending than slugging them unrealistic amounts for visas and fees.

The Hermitage, formerly Catherine the Great's Winter Palace and now a huge art museum, has more old masters than you can poke a stick at.

Then we headed to Moscow through the backblocks where the wealth of the

Moscow, on the other hand, has embraced unbridled capitalism and is still racing full tilt into an extravagant spending spree fuelled by petro dollars, minerals and raw materials controlled by the rich and powerful.

Scratch the surface a little, though, and you find a poorer Russia even in this gargantuan city of 15 million; beggars on the streets, drunks in the gutters, rubbish overflowing... and lifts that don't work. Yep, we found one as we headed to our sixth floor apartment and spent an uncomfortable hour waiting for the Emergency Services to arrive and rescue us.

Welcome to Moscow!

Regards,
Ron And Viv



From top: fountains and gilded figures at the Summer Palace; catch dries amid the trawlers; the throne room at The Hermitage

