

4 – ZAGORSK

Tuesday, 19 June

The town of Zagorsk, which is situated some forty-six miles north-east of Moscow, contains the largest monastery in Russia. One of the main centres of the Russian Orthodox Church, it was founded as far back as 1337 by the learned statesman-prelate, Sergei Radonezh, who became known as Saint Cyril of Radonezh. The monastery was named the Trinity-Sergius Monastery after him, and the town was called Sergeivsky Posad (The Seat of Sergius) in his honour until 1919, when it was renamed in the memory of a leading member of the Bolshevik Party, V. M. Zagorsky.

Early in his life, the great icon painter Andrei Rublyov entered the monastery and came under the influence of his Superior, Saint Cyril. He returned in 1422 in order to redecorate and paint the iconostasis of the most important church in the monastery, the Trinity Cathedral, which had been destroyed by fire but was rebuilt in the following year. The plan of this little cathedral followed the general outline of the ancient Vladimir-Suzdalian style, although its sloping roof was a Novgorodian feature. It was rebuilt once again during the sixteenth century.

The monastery, which is surrounded by stout fortress-like walls, had provided protection for the people of Moscow, especially in 1608–10 when a Polish-Lithuanian army had attacked the city. In 1689, when there had been a false alarm about an attack on the capital, the future Emperor, Peter the Great, had fled from Moscow and had stopped in Zagorsk to hide.

Today we would be visiting this famous monastery. In the morning it was cool but sunny; Walter and I got up shortly before eight o'clock. Outside on the landing, a *dezhurnaya* talked animatedly to somebody on the telephone. Downstairs, in the lobby, we saw an enormously large woman sitting on a seat, clutching her stomach. Breathing heavily and grunting, she slowly stood up and waddled over to one of the lifts in order to relieve one of her colleagues.

At 8.30 we clambered aboard a coach but had to wait a full half hour for a scatterbrained young American man – the same one who had delayed our flight from Gatwick. He had come down from his room about five minutes late and, as he had not found the coach right outside the main entrance, he assumed that he had missed it and had returned to his room. One of his female companions had insisted on trying to find him; it had taken her nearly half an hour to travel up to his room, fetch him, then return to the ground floor in the slow-moving lift. Most of the people in the coach were rather annoyed by this delay, for we had paid £10 for the trip and now were wasting time.

At last we set off through the city, this time heading north-eastwards for Zagorsk. When we drove through the northern suburbs, we passed the tall television tower at Ostankino and then saw the entrance to the Exhibition of Economic Achievements, with its tall monument outside. We could have availed of a trip to this place on the previous morning, but Walter and I had decided that we were not really interested.

We now passed through the Babushkin district, an area of high-rise jerry-built apartment blocks and factories, and eventually came to the Moscow Circular Motorway, which we passed under. This marked the boundary of the capital.



On the road to Zagorsk

Now out of the city, we drove through green and pleasant countryside, where we found ourselves once again surrounded by forest, large undulating meadows, and painted wooden houses. As the small and colourful villages looked quite charming in the morning sunshine, Walter and I took out our cameras and snapped some shots of them. Close to one of the villages I noticed a narrow road leading to a clearing in the forest, which was closed off to the general public by a mechanical gate and a sentry in a box. I guessed that this could have been the entrance to a private dacha belonging to some influential person; we had learned that Brezhnev's dacha was situated in a village somewhere south of Moscow.

We also passed several pretty little churches; one of them, which had been built on a low hill, was painted yellow and white, and it was surrounded by a cluster of painted wooden houses. Later we whizzed past a larger ecclesiastical establishment, probably a monastery, on our left. We were surprised to discover that signposts in this region had the names of places printed both in Cyrillic and Roman lettering, probably because the roads were open to foreign tourists. The 'Stop' notices were also in English, though we had also seen them in Russian ('Стоп') in the streets of Moscow.

Driving along wide modern roads, we now approached Zagorsk. Pointing to our right, our guide indicated the way to Abramtsevo, where there was a fine country estate. The writers Gogol and Sergei Aksakov had once lived there; the house and land had been bought in the 1870s by the Muscovite merchant prince Savva Mamontov, who had been a great patron of the arts. He had invited many artists to his country home and had set up workshops for them there. Among the many painters who had visited the place were Repin, Vasnetsov, Levitan, Vrubel, Serov and Polenov. The house had once been described as a 'nest of Moscow artists'.

On arriving at the modern – though rather dilapidated – town of Zagorsk, we stopped at a restaurant in order to make arrangements for a meal later. In the large dining room, noisy pop music was being played over loudspeakers. In contrast to the spick-and-span entrance and dining area, the toilets were horribly dirty and smelly.

Fifteen minutes later we returned to the coach and were driven off. Swinging to the left, we climbed up a hill along a winding narrow road that had attractive wooden

houses on both sides. We noticed some tidy gardens and also washing hung on lines or in open windows. Suddenly the impressive citadel of Zagorsk appeared above us, perched on top of the hill. Blue and gold domes of churches rose above the tall stone walls which, like the walls of the Kremlin in Moscow, had watch towers at various points. At the entrance to the citadel we stopped in a large square and parked beside some other tourist coaches. Before we got out of the coach, our young guide told us to be careful about photographing the monks and pilgrims, who did not like cameras being pointed at them. She advised us either to ask permission, or else to pretend that we were photographing something else. She then told us to wander around for fifteen minutes, then return to the square.



The citadel of Zagorsk

We entered the citadel through the archway under the imposing stone Krasnaya Tower. Crowned with a gold cupola, this had been built and subsequently rebuilt between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries. Once we had passed under the archway, we were in the monastic complex. Straight ahead was the large white stone Cathedral of the Assumption. Its central and tallest tower was topped with a gleaming gold cupola; its four subsidiary towers were topped with blue cupolas adorned with gold stars. The cathedral looked most impressive in the sunlight.



The Cathedral of the Assumption, Zagorsk, and two Orthodox priests on the steps

As we wandered around, admiring the fine architecture, several Orthodox priests and monks crossed our path, ambling around the place in their flowing black garments and cylindrical hats. All of them were bearded and had long hair. They waved away tourists who were pointing cameras in their direction, sometimes remonstrating with them. Although I kept well out of their way, I did manage to include some of them in the photographs that I took of the magnificent buildings all around me.

Also walking and hobbling about the place were old peasant women and men in dark clothing; many of them looked weary and haggard, and several of them looked as though they were in a bad way, both physically and financially. In the distance, here and there, a few soldiers kept their eyes on things in general. Although one could sense a deeply religious atmosphere about the place, one could also detect a hint of control by the authorities. Walter and I rambled about, taking photographs of the fine buildings from the shade of the trees, which gave a distinctive rural feeling to the place. It was clear to us that we had now strayed into the real Holy Russia of old.



The Refectory, Zagorsk

On our left was the long and elaborately decorated Refectory that had been built at the end of the seventeenth century. We ambled along its covered walkway, admiring the multi-coloured decorations on the stonework, until we found a tiny toy-like chapel at the end. This was the Saint Mica Chapel, which dated from the eighteenth century. Like the Cathedral of the Assumption, this too was closed to the public.



Trinity Cathedral, Zagorsk

We then made our way to the rather plain but attractive Trinity Cathedral, which was the earliest building within the monastery. This had one main tower made in the Byzantine style, which had a gold cupola, and one smaller onion-shaped Russian cupola placed on top of a secondary tower. As the door was open, we decided to go inside. Beside the entrance, in a small booth, sat an elderly priest with a long bushy grey beard and feeble eyes, who sold scented wax candles for a few small coins.

Inside the cathedral, we were swallowed up by the darkness. The noise and bustle outside now disappeared and was replaced by the sound of a choir singing a mournful yet beautiful hymn. As our eyes adjusted to the darkness, we began to discern ancient icons, undoubtedly painted by Rublyov, hanging on the walls and affixed to the iconostasis. On the right hand side we saw the choir of women; on the left we could see women shuffling about, buying candles from the elderly priest and reverently placing them in the holders in front of the sacred icons. As we had noticed previously, the singers sang in a spontaneous manner, starting and leaving off whenever it suited them.

To the right of the tall iconostasis was a small sarcophagus decorated in silver, which either contained the body or the relics of some saintly person. Beside it, an old priest sang, prayed, and crossed himself three times every so often. Nearby, an elderly woman lowered herself to the floor with difficulty, then kissed and knocked her head against it three times. Almost in a trance, she then rose to a kneeling position, crossed herself three times and, having done this, finally clambered to her feet unsteadily, but with great determination.

Walter and I stayed for a little while, enchanted by everything around us and listening to the choir. By now we had lost track of time, and cared little about it. However, we eventually wandered back out into the sunshine and, quite by accident, came across our guide, who by now was rounding us up for a visit to a little museum nearby.

We now entered a cool, old-world stone building, the walls of which were whitewashed inside. We donned large museum slippers, the purpose of which was to protect the parquet flooring, which creaked noisily when we walked on it. Climbing up a narrow staircase, we entered rooms containing icons that dated from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries. One set had been painted by a famous artist named Simon Ushakov in 1673. The panels on which the early icons had been painted were held together with wooden nails, whereas metal nails had been used for the later ones.

The rest of the museum was full of old folk utensils, materials and costumes. The costumes were elaborate and colourful, the materials impressive, and the utensils quaint and interesting. Most of the latter were made of wood; on display were colourful bowls, spoons, scoops and ladles. We also saw decorative sections of spinning wheels, which were displayed in long rows, and also various parts of old houses and their roofs. I quite enjoyed looking at these exhibits, for they were far more interesting than the icons.

When we had finished our tour of the museum, we were told that we would return to the restaurant for lunch, for it was fast approaching 1.30 p.m. As I remembered that 'metro and shopping' were to be included in this tour, I was disappointed by the thoughts that I had paid £10 to ramble around this wonderful place for just fifteen minutes, our time having been cut short by the stupid American fellow and the young lady who had asked the guide to wait for him. However, when I heard rumours that we might return to the monastery after lunch, I cheered up.

Back in the restaurant we had a very appetising meal; in fact, the food was better than what we had been eating in our hotel. We began with the usual selection of bite-size starters, then were given some delicious soup. For the main course, the plump and expressionless waitress brought in a trayful of tall round bowls. Inside them was a hot and rather tasty concoction of rice, meat and peas. After we had finished this, we were served with pancakes, ice cream, and finally, coffee.

During the meal I chatted with three English ladies who were in our group. They told me why we would be returning to the monastery. There had been a mix-up this morning: our guide had asked us to return to the square outside the citadel after the allotted fifteen minutes given to us to see around inside, and the three ladies had returned as requested. However, as the guide had found most of us inside, she had brought us directly into the museum without having checked outside. The three ladies had waited in vain for a considerable time and therefore had missed seeing inside the museum. When they eventually caught up with the guide, they had complained and had demanded that they be taken back again so that they would get their money's worth.

We therefore returned to the monastery shortly after three o'clock and were asked to be at the coach by 3.45 p.m. I wandered into the quiet citadel, while Walter went shopping in the nearby Beriozka official tourist shop, a branch of which we had found in our hotel. By now the afternoon sun was shining brightly on the colourful buildings and it was pleasantly warm. I walked around at a relaxed pace, taking photographs. The priests had disappeared by now, but old women, their heads covered in black or white scarves, ambled around or sat on steps in the sun, chatting among themselves. An old man, ragged and bearded, sat on a step near the Trinity Cathedral, gazing mournfully around and nibbling a chunk of bread.



The Cathedral of the Assumption, the Well Chapel, and the well, Zagorsk

The most colourful and decorative little building was the so-called Well Chapel, which had been built at the end of the seventeenth century. Situated behind the large Uspensky Cathedral (which had been built in 1559–84), the chapel's yellow, red, blue and white decorations gleamed in the sunshine. In front of it was the equally decorative well.

Behind the Cathedral of the Assumption were some more beautiful buildings, including the Hospital Chambers, outside of which was a row of cannons, and the tall white tent-roofed Church of Saints Zosima and Savvati, which dated from the

seventeenth century. Its plain and rather austere exterior, with simple stucco-work and typical Russian *kokoshnik* gables, was offset by the shining gold cupola and Orthodox cross at the top. However, it seemed to be closed. Beside it was a fine baroque building, which may have been a chapel, and which was finely decorated with blue and white stonework. Between these two buildings was a square tower; the lower part was green and white. Behind could be seen a tall and elegant mid eighteenth-century bell tower with a clock; the tower was blue and white, and had a gold decorative top.

Along the eastern side of the complex was a long yellow building, the late seventeenth-century Tsar Chambers, which looked rather derelict. In front of it was an overgrown garden. A locked iron gate led to a pathway, which in turn led to the entrance of the building. It was a great pity to see this fine building in such poor condition; I wondered if it would be restored at some time in the future.



The Gate Church of Saint John the Baptist, Zagorsk

Satisfied, I now began to wander back to the entrance, passing by small groups of elderly women who were chatting and laughing among themselves. I walked under the trees and stopped to admire the impressive red and white Gate Church of Saint John the Baptist, which dated from the end of the seventeenth century. How delightful it had been to wander around by myself in such a beautiful place!

Near the entrance, a crippled old man hobbled about and begged for money, holding out his hand to anyone who passed by. Outside the walls, I discovered that I still had a few minutes to spare, and so hurried down the hill to a little white church topped by a large green and gold dome. Surrounded by lawns and trees, it looked quite beautiful. This was the Church of the Holy Ghost, built in the fifteenth century.

I then walked back to the coach, where I found Walter. He had bought a packet of beautiful postcards of Zagorsk in the Beriozka shop; I noticed that the price was '1.60'. Walter advised me to dash out and buy a packet of them, as we were still missing several people. I jumped out, ran into the shop, quickly found the cards, brought them to the girl at the cash desk, and produced 1.60 roubles. I was quite taken aback by the arrogant treatment that I suddenly received: several women shouted at me in Russian all at the same time, while another snatched the packet from my hand and flung it back on the pile, glaring at me. I eventually got the message; the girl at the cash register fingered some coins and snapped 'Breetish money' at me.

I stormed out angrily but returned a moment later brandishing a couple of pound notes in front of the women's noses. I snatched another packet of cards, flung them at

the girl and paid her. When she gave me the change, I spat a sarcastic ‘Спасибо’ (*‘spasiba’* ‘thank you’) at her, and she responded with an equally acerbic ‘Не за что’ (*‘nyé za shto’* ‘don’t mention it’).

I then ran back to the coach and off we drove down the winding road and onwards to Moscow. After a while, the journey became tedious and I began to doze.

During dinner back at the hotel, Walter and I chatted to a young English couple in our group whom we had also spoken to earlier at the restaurant in Zagorsk. They told us that they had gone on their own to Zagorsk by train. They reckoned that the whole trip had cost them about three roubles (about £2.50)! They had the advantage of having visited the country before and both of them had a good working knowledge of the language. They told us that there had been a vicious row between two old ladies on the train, which they described as ‘great fun’. At Zagorsk, an old lady had struck their camera with her heavy walking stick because they had dared to take a photograph of her.

This couple proved to be quite interesting and were good company. During their previous stay they had seen most of the standard sights, and had now come to experience the place in more detail and observe the people. It turned out that some others in the group had been here before and that they could speak the language quite fluently. It appeared that the rules and regulations about who could visit the country had eased quite a lot over the past few years; Intourist was obviously glad to get hold of any tourists who were willing to come, and to benefit from their money. We had been told by our guides not to change any more than £5 into roubles. This was their way of encouraging us to pay for official excursions, stay together, and to shop in official stores. By now Walter and I had decided to go on as few optional tours as possible, and to find our own way to places for a fraction of the official cost.

In the evening I went out for a walk and Walter stayed put. By now it had turned quite cool outside and a sharp wind blew against me.

I walked briskly up to the Kremlin, which was by now closed. This time I skirted the southern wall, ambling along by the river Moskva. The gold cupolas shone forth against a dark grey sky and water in the river looked grey in colour. I then turned back and crossed the bridge, where I saw a policeman talking to some lads beside a car; they were playing with a toy plastic gun with the word ‘Speedgun’ printed on it in large letters.

Next I went down the Bolshaya Polyanka Street, having crossed a smaller tributary of the Moskva river, and began to look for the Tretyakov Gallery, which I very much wanted to visit. After a short distance, the street narrowed and became rather quaint, but there was no sign of the gallery. I realized that I had to go down a side street, but I was not sure which one. When I came to highly decorated but dilapidated church, I decided to go no farther and turned back. As I walked, I glimpsed through windows and saw the shabby interiors of various apartments. A dusty and locked old building across the street had the word ‘Bar’, in English, painted on the windows. I had noticed that the word was also used in Russian: ‘Бар’. I tried one of the side streets, but to no avail. A cheerless lad asked me for something in Russian, but I could not understand him. He then stopped somebody else, who reluctantly gave him a cigarette and a light.

Tired by now and feeling rather cold, I now retraced my steps and walked back along Prospekt Kalinina where, at one point, I saw an elderly man dressed in shabby clothes placing a box of rolled-up posters on the ground. Scratching his head, he looked in despair at some billboards that already had posters stuck on them. They

were advertisements for concerts and films. Shortly afterwards I noticed messages, formed by coloured lights, scrolling across the top of a nearby building. Once again, they seemed to be advertising various events, such as concerts and films. At the top of another building could be seen a flashing and animated advertisement for Aeroflot.

Here and there, cars had been parked, and policemen were chatting to their drivers and passengers a few feet away. As there seemed to be no signs of pens and notebooks, they seemed to be friendly conversations.

Back in our hotel bedroom, I found Walter stretched out on his bed, watching a football match; it was between Italy and Russia, and was being played in Italy. Walter told me that there had been an interruption during play for a news flash about the talks between Brezhnev and Carter.

I eventually climbed into bed at 12.30. It had been a very interesting day.