Travelling Light

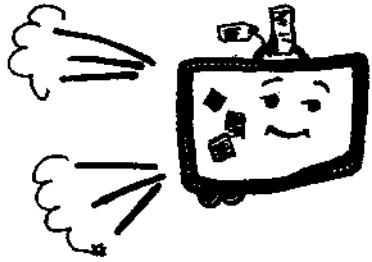
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SARAH WEBB

INTRODUCTION



Everyone loves to travel, whether literally or metaphorically, and this collection is for every traveller – from the most dedicated armchair traveller to the most intrepid jungle explorer. And there's certainly something for everyone in this book – from Martina Devlin's hilarious search for the perfect amber necklace in St Petersburg, to Marian Keyes's moving Ethiopian Journey, and Julie Parsons's unforgettable voyage from New Zealand to Ireland. In fact, it's the ideal travel companion.

I get ideas for new books every week and most are forgotten about by the following week. But some ideas take hold and refuse to let go, like this book. What started life as a collection of short stories with a travel theme, after some thought and reconsideration, became the collection of real-life travel adventures you now hold in your hands. But what never changed was the *raison d'être* behind this book – the children's ward of the Kisiizi Hospital in Uganda.

Kisiizi Hospital is situated in the Kigezi Hills in southwest

Uganda. The hospital is still relatively isolated and patients travel from a large area to receive treatment. The hospital deals with the whole spectrum of medical, surgical and obstetric problems, and for many patients Kisiizi is their only hope.

Among its many community outreach programmes is a support scheme for thousands of AIDS orphans, providing material as well as medical aid.

The hospital has strong links with St Paul's Church in Glenageary, where my family and I are active members. Currently, a civil engineer from the parish and friend of the family, David Barrett, is supervising the completion of the new children's ward.

That is why I decided to put together this book – to help children in Uganda to get a better start in life. And by buying this book, you have also helped to change the world in a small way. If you would like to find out more about the hospital and its work, turn to the back of the book or check out www.kisiizi.supanet.com

MARTINA DEVLIN

AMBER ALERT



I'll let you in on a secret: the chief reason I wanted to go to St Petersburg was to buy an amber necklace. Obviously, I knew better than to admit this to anyone, aware that it left me looking suspiciously shallow. I shop therefore I am.

So when pressed for a reason why St Petersburg was this year's holiday destination, I crossed my fingers behind my back and claimed I was going to visit the Hermitage's art collection, or I longed to see the city that inspired Dostoevsky, or I'd heard the architecture was breathtaking in its magnificence.

I knew Russia was the place to buy amber because I'd been to Moscow the previous year and spotted it in all its siren splendour. Unfortunately, I'd already frittered all my cash on twenty-three babushka dolls and a fake fur coat, soon to inspire a priest in my home town to remark that the Devlins were getting above themselves. That was a triumphant day – we waited far too long for people to start getting above themselves in Ireland.

But back to Moscow, where I fingered amber rings the size of a Central European statelet, and debated trading my jeans to finance the purchase of one. Regretfully I realised this idea was a non-starter. Every Russian I laid eyes on was wearing a pair of Levis already, so they were unlikely to swap a year's salary for my tatty old pair. All that glasnost and perestroika had much to answer for. I left the baubles behind me, but I didn't forget them.

For a year and a half I fantasised about opulent chokers from the Baltic, which could be bought for a pittance. I holidayed in California and Madrid, both fine destinations but, frankly, challenged on the amber front. Russia remained at the top of my wish list, because I knew beyond a shadow of doubt that an amber necklace would transform my life – I'd be more rounded, sensitive, caring, fulfilled.

The problem was finding a reason to go there which didn't include admitting the real one. I hinted about Russia from time to time to my young man but he was unenthusiastic, claiming that nobody spoke English and the street signs were in the Cyrillic alphabet, so we'd get hopelessly lost. Then, curiously, he'd suggest, as an alternative, a trip to China where nobody spoke English and the street signs were in Mandarin.

One day I heard that St Petersburg was celebrating its tricentenary and the hotels were offering special deals, and I treated it as a sign. Peter the Great was intervening personally to expand my jewellery collection.

Special deals from five-star hotels overrule all uncertainties about whether you actually want to visit the country in question, so tickets were booked and my companion bought a new Swiss army knife for the trip. Any excuse. He also purchased a Russian dictionary because of his conviction that even the St Petersburgers who could speak English would decline to do so as soon as they saw him. 'We have to memorise the Cyrillic lettering for the name of the street our hotel is on – it's our only hope,' he insisted, pointing to a geometric squiggle that included two back-to-front Ns. I left him to it.

In addition, he acquired a guidebook and every so often, in the weeks preceding our trip, he'd bombard me with details about how many staircases there were in the Hermitage art gallery – 117, don't say I never share esoteric data – or the distance between the Winter and Summer Palaces, or how many bridges cross the River Neva. He seemed to have formed the impression that I yearned to admire Catherine the Great's art collection, and allow the Kirov Ballet, performing on home turf, to nourish my soul, and I hesitated to admit how superficial I really was. I could always nip out and buy the perfect necklace while he was still savouring his breakfast coffee on the first morning, I reasoned. Then we had the rest of the week to be culture-vultures and he'd never guess how trite I really am.

We landed in St Petersburg late on a Sunday night, and after pounding into the bathroom to purloin the tiny sewing kit – a particular weakness of mine when staying in hotels – and sucking our teeth over the criminal cost of everything in the minibar, we retired to bed.

Incidentally I regard myself as a seasoned traveller, but was taken aback to discover that in the Nevskij Palace Hotel's minibar, nestling alongside one of those quarter bottles of red wine you wind up drinking despite the fact they cost the equivalent of a three-day-old Lada, there were two packets of condoms. And one of the packets was open. The carton describing itself as 'American Quality' had been rifled, while the Russian quality alternative had been left intact. Probably wisely.

Inevitably their discovery set me wondering about who'd occupied the room before us and why they'd opened a three-pack of condoms but only used one. Economising? Shortage of time? Change of heart? In no time at all I had a bodice-ripping scenario steaming through my imagination, involving a Russian sailor in one of those irresistible striped shirts they wear, throwing caution to the winds and urging, 'No, Svetlana, let us not use contraception – let us use this one

night we have together to make a baby.' I could have speculated endlessly if the day's travelling hadn't caught up with me and I hadn't fallen asleep.

Zombie-like the next morning, en route from the hotel bedroom to the breakfast buffet, the edge of my gaze brushed against something glittering inside a glass case. It was a collection of amber necklaces. My body craved caffeine but I was in the grip of a power beyond my control. I paused to admire them.

'We can come back and look at the amber after breakfast,' negotiated my young man, alerted, even at that early stage, to a certain fanaticism in my bearing.

I was about to agree when three Russian ladies bore down on us with the determination of women on commission. Before you could say toast and marmalade, or in this case caviar and sour cream – Russian breakfasts are in another league, and not one you can adjust to in the space of a week – they had kidnapped me. Well, propelled me at high speed, anyway. I found myself inside their shop with amber dripping from my neck, wrists, ears and fingers. You have never seen a creature so comprehensively festooned.

The quest for the perfect amber necklace was under way.

The saleswomen didn't speak much English, but nobody needs words to express rapture when a customer is wearing the most expensive string of jewellery on the premises. There was a torrent of language that sounded like 'take this preposterous woman outside and feed her to the street-cleaning machine' – Russian is an accusatory-sounding tongue – but which appeared to convey unqualified admiration.

'What do you think?' I asked my companion.

He claimed the pieces of jewellery were all equally gorgeous, and asked would I ever hand over my credit card so he could have a peaceful cup of coffee and another read of the guidebook.

Now, here's a lesson that men have wholly failed to grasp

about women, no matter how often it's drummed into them. When we're debating a purchase, no two items are exactly as desirable as each other – one is always marginally superior. The quandary lies in resolving which it is. So if he'd pantomimed indecision before pinpointing one of the necklaces as infinitesimally preferable, I'd probably have gone along with it. But every woman knows she's being humoured when her partner says, 'Yes, that's lovely, and so is that', in-between sneaking furtive peeks at his watch and whimpering about wanting food.

Naturally I left empty-handed, although with promises to return for a further preening session, and we adjourned for breakfast. This was spent in a delicious haze of pondering which necklace to buy. I still hadn't made a final decision after a glass of the Russian champagne served with our eggs. It was sweet and warm, but I polished it off anyway. I don't have many rules in life, but never turn down free champagne has to be one of the fundamentals.

Still irresolute about whether to plump for the traditional amber rope or the milk-and-garnet-coloured amber mélange, I consented to be organised into a plan for the day. On the agenda was an acclimatisation stroll, followed by a visit to the Church of the Spilled Blood. This turned out to be a joyous carnival of multicoloured onion domes, despite the dour name. And predictably, blood has been spilled there – royal blood, in fact – by a group of nineteenth-century anti-monarchists called the People's Will.

We pottered off along Nevsky Prospekt, the main road that runs through the centre of St Petersburg, with me covertly memorising amber-shop locations and my young man searching in vain for a plaque mentioned in his guidebook. 'Citizens! At times of artillery bombardment this side of the street is most dangerous!' Craning for the stencilled warning, camera in hand, he made a discovery that threatened to destabilise the holiday. All the street signs were in incomprehensible Cyrillic lettering, as he'd predicted they

would be, but with a perfectly intelligible translation underneath. So all that brainpower expended on memorising back-to-front Ns was redundant. There was weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth, assuaged only by coffee and cake in the Gostiny Dvor department store, which had a balcony for watching street life.

There is no power on earth that could make me sit and watch St Petersburgers go about their daily business when one floor below me lies a series of in-store jewellery shops. The building was awash with amber. So with the companion settled at a table, a huge chocolate confection in front of him, I bolted downstairs to study the form.

Russian department stores were a revelation. They trundle endlessly along for what feels like miles, housing hundreds of small concessions, each one the same as the previous one. So while there were numerous jewellery stalls, all their wares were identical. Furthermore, inspecting them is time-consuming, because the Russian system requires job creation. It is one assistant's responsibility to remove the necklace from behind a glass case for a customer to view it, another models it and a third rings up the purchase. They take these roles seriously. At the first stall where I lingered, the girl whose job was to model the amber wouldn't allow me to try it on. 'It looks better on me than on you, you bourgeois foreigner,' she pouted – I may not be able to understand Russian but I can read body language. Of course, I sulked and wouldn't buy anything from her, transferring my acquisitive streak to another stall.

It was here that, in a rare burst of insight, I acknowledged my pursuit of a piece of jewellery was going to overshadow the holiday, even though it was my clandestine reason for being there. So I flung vacillation to the winds and chose a necklace. Simple as that. I felt quite proud of myself for being so decisive.

When I tried to pay, however, the shop wouldn't accept euro. Now, every other shop, restaurant and hotel in the city

was happy, indeed eager, to relieve visitors of their foreign currency, but Gostiny Dvor was a state-run store and roubles it had to be. No decadent euro, comrade. I left the trinkets behind, secure in the knowledge that there were dozens of identical necklaces in stock and I could pick up one any time, provided I paid a visit to a money exchange. Then I doubled back to collect the man with the guidebook and cake crumbs on his chin, to see something of St Petersburg.

We looked at bridges, we walked across bridges, we had our photographs taken beside bridges. We favoured the wooden bridge suspended by cables emerging from the mouths of gold-winged griffins. Then we went home for dinner.

One of the most gratifying aspects of a holiday is sauntering past restaurants, delaying to inspect menus and toss around possibilities of where to eat that night. But we had our evening meal in the hotel's rooftop restaurant, basically because the *maître d'* sank to her knees and pleaded with us to come in as we passed by en route to the leisure centre. (Not to use it, mind you, just to check that it really existed. We've done this ever since Madrid, when the hotel claimed to have a leisure complex, but we discovered a gaping hole where the facilities would one day be located, perhaps in three years' time.)

One other table in the restaurant was occupied, containing two business people and a supremely bored interpreter. But it was swarming with staff and they were desperate for diversion. We had no choice but to supply it. Naturally we were put right beside the other diners, despite a yawning chasm of tables around the room, so we eavesdropped on their conversation. It was all terribly formal – 'It's a pleasure for me doing business with you'; 'On the contrary, my friend, it's a pleasure for me doing business with you' – and it was a relief when they paid the bill and removed all that mutual pleasure from our vicinity.

Meanwhile, our waitress looked at us with incredulity

when we ordered Russian champagne – 'But we also stock Moët et Chandon,' she protested – and for the remainder of the evening a knot of staff gathered to gaze in wonder at us. The tourists who were voluntarily drinking shampanskoe. It's not bad once you get used to it, we felt like reassuring them. But we didn't; we just bore their scrutiny meekly.

The following day we headed for the Hermitage, five linked palaces containing a collection that amounts to a history of Western art. Rembrandt, Titian, Rubens, Picasso, the Impressionists and the post-Impressionists are all featured in a series of awe-inspiring marble rooms. I promised myself I'd immerse myself in art and avoid amber for one day.

Initially we couldn't find the entrance, because an army of workmen was swarming all over the buildings, preparing for Russian Federation President Vladimir Putin's visit later that week. We stopped a couple walking away from it, who looked like tourists, to enquire how to gain access. They were French and engrossed in a savage and expletive-ridden argument, which, with any other nationality, would signify irrevocable sundering of all future ties and immediate division of the saucepan collection. But they were probably just debating where to go for lunch. They paused in their diatribe to pronounce the museum closed, with an air of absolute certainty. Then they said, 'Have a nice day', and resumed lacerating one another.

We resigned ourselves to missing all those Renaissance masterpieces and ambled over to the side of the building to watch the workmen instead – where we found the entrance. And a babushka collecting admission fees according to the usual system of one scary price for tourists, another less scary charge for Russians. Actually it only sounded frightening in roubles; once you converted it, you didn't mind.

The Hermitage was sumptuous, magnificent and lavishly ornate – within minutes it was clear to us why the peasants had revolted and the tsars had been deposed. These rulers literally had diamonds on the soles of their shoes, to

plagiarise Paul Simon. But credit where credit is due, they had impeccable taste in art. After the revolution, the state confiscated aristocrats' collections, boosting the displays still further, so we wandered contentedly for the rest of the day.

Except I found an amber shop. Truly. In the souvenir section, where I thought to buy a couple of postcards, I stumbled across a glass case with a selection of amber necklaces in it. An Italian woman was handling several, while her husband infuriatingly muttered bellissima at each one she pointed to – even Italian men are clueless. I manoeuvred myself into the tiny gap beside her flailing arms and pored over the merchandise, and was relieved to discover that I preferred the necklace in the department store. Imagine if I just kept finding more and more fabulous amber chokers, it would reach sensory overload.

'You were a long time buying postcards,' remarked my young man, when I retrieved him from the café, where he was ploughing through his second Danish pastry.

'Massive queues,' I fibbed. 'Sure you know how bureaucratic the Russians are.'

We trundled home, picking our way with care along the lunar landscape footpaths. Compo culture is obviously unknown in Russia.

Since drinking in culture is thirsty work, we stopped off in the hotel bar for some refreshment.

Later, as we paced beneath lime trees in the Summer Garden, feeling like a couple who'd stepped from the pages of a Tolstoy novel – in fact, I positively mourned the lack of a parasol – my companion shared snippets from his guidebook. He had supplemented it by the purchase of a map, but I wouldn't let him read out street names, even if he spoke in a smoky Russian accent with K sounds at the end of words, like darlink.

Nearby, Russian pairs walked arm in arm, most of the women carrying bouquets of red roses presented to them by

their escorts, some even with red heart balloons attached. Russian men are romantic, despite their predilection for long leather coats, shaven skulls and a general demeanour that implies 'one crossways look from you, pal, and you'll find my flick knife buried in your ribs'.

The last day rolled around. I'd put by enough money to purchase the amber necklace from Gostiny Dvor that I'd spied on the first morning, and I determined to buy it. I had been methodical about evaluating every other necklace I'd chanced upon during the week, but none had measured up. So I left my companion eating at a café, and went off to conduct the transaction.

But – talk about a malign twist of fate – I was robbed within feet of the stall. Possibly by a romantic man who yearned to buy his girlfriend roses and a scarlet heart balloon. At least I hope that's what he spent my money on. If I discover he bought a long leather coat and had his head shaved with it I'll be extremely aggrieved.

Robbed. Just as I was about to buy my amber necklace. Destiny was toying with me, I thought, in an explosion of Russian fatalism. I staggered back in a state of hyperventilating sorrow to interrupt my young man's cake-eating, relaying the sorry tale of how I was now rouble-less and amber necklace-less. My holiday was utterly spoiled. He laid aside his half-munched custard slice, went straight to a money exchange, swapped his emergency stash of euro for the price of the necklace and bought it then and there. The business was completed in a matter of minutes.

Then he swept me off to the Mariinsky Theatre, with me sparkling in amber and him wearing his last clean T-shirt. I'm not even sure which ballet it was, because there was nobody to translate it for us, but it was brimming with energy and ego, it even featured a mechanical elephant, and we loved it. We'd have loved it even more if it had lasted two hours instead of three, but Russians prefer to get their money's worth from a night at the ballet.

We strolled home afterwards through the White Night of a long summer's evening, smiling at the prostitutes, smiling at the boarded-up shop fronts, smiling at the bridges and statues and the potholes in the pavement. Smiling at St Petersburg.