

Visiting the “Palaces of the People” in the St. Petersburg Metro

By Judi Cohen



Avtovo Station

“...they’re a place to
preserve Russian art
and history
where it can be
displayed
to the public.
~ Unknown

With just two days in St. Petersburg on the Viking Homelands Cruise with Viking Cruises, I had some tough choices about what to see. I could have easily spent weeks exploring the city’s rich Soviet history, fine art and architecture, music, opera, and ballet. Ultimately, I chose to take one full day for a “behind closed doors” tour of the Hermitage Museums and a second full day to explore the St. Petersburg Metro.

The Metro system in St. Petersburg turned out to be one of the highlights of my cruise, and it is a hidden treasure of the city that might not immediately come to mind for a traveler. But it really is a sight to behold. In fact, our guide described each station as a unique “theme park” about the culture and history of Russia.

The Metro is one of the deepest systems in the world with some of the longest escalators extending to a whopping 130 meters deep into the earth.

With the purchase of a single 45-ruble token (around \$0.69 USD and #0.90 CAD), I entered one subterranean world after another. The Metro was first contemplated in the 1940s when the city was still called Leningrad; however, it was not until the 1950s when the Leningradsky Metropolitan was

constructed and eventually opened on November 15, 1955.

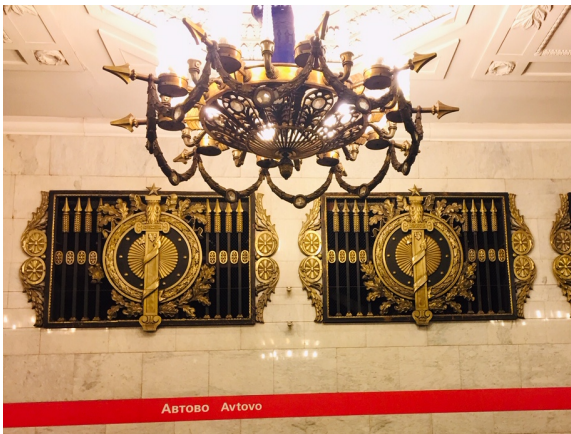
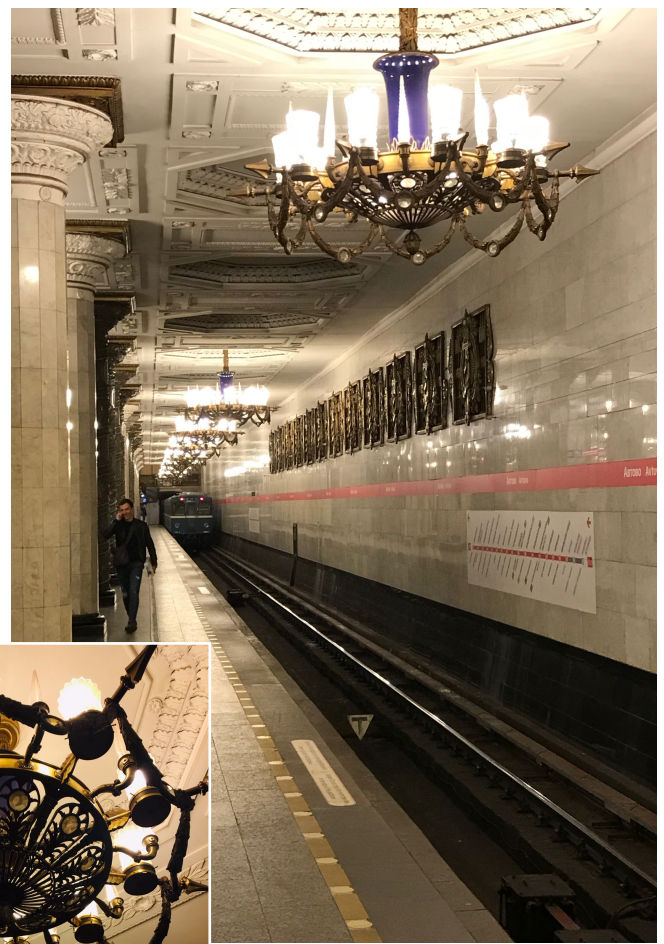
These “Palaces of the People,” as the Soviets called them, were designed to be unique subterranean palaces providing a permanent public display of Russian history and art.

Kirovskiy-Vyborgskaya Red Line

With 69 stations on five lines to traverse, I saw as much as I could in the time I had for that single metro ticket. Highlights included riding on the oldest line, the Kirovskiy-Vyborgskaya Red Line and ascending, by far, the longest escalator I’d ever been on.

There are seven stations on the M1 Kirovskiy-Vyborgskaya Red Line, and each was more jaw-dropping than the next. Whereas our subway systems in North America are purely functional, with the odd splash of public art, in St. Petersburg, each was a masterpiece of art, architecture, and storytelling about Russia.

The system was intuitive and relatively easy to navigate. Signage was in Russian and English, and a system map was available. I entered at Avtovo Station on the Red Line and stopped at the



The ornate pillars and chandeliers of Avtovo Station

Kirovskiy Zavod, Devyatkino, Narvaskaya, and the Technologicheskii Institut Stations.

The headways (time between trains) were very close on the Red Line, and the station dwell times (length of time the train stops in each station) were very short—only 30 seconds at each stop. If we missed a train, the next one was arriving within just a minute or two. The guide warned me that once the train doors began to close, they would not stop even if something got caught in them. Not surprisingly, nobody rushed to jump on a train while the doors were closing like I've so often seen in Toronto, New York, and so many other cities.

We traveled downtown on the Red Line to where it connects to the newer, more basic, 1960s-era Blue Line, and we transferred for a short ride to exit the Metro at the Nevskiy Prospekt Station on Sadovaya Street. This station is along the Neva River and is one of the deepest stations in the system with a long escalator that extended from the platform to the street. The escalators moved very quickly, so we held the hand rails tightly and stood on the right side to let the fast-moving passengers run by us on the left. Our exit was the Griboyedova channel quay where we walked along the colorful and crowded streets for

hours.

These are a few of the stations on the Kirovskiy-Vyborgskaya Line that I found most interesting:

Avtovo (Abtovo) Station

Avtovo was my favorite station by far. We entered the system through an above-ground neoclassical yellow-colored pavilion. Its bold majestic columns reminded me of the Pantheon in Greece. The station entrance stood in sharp contrast to the surrounding stark grey apartment blocks, construction, and traffic chaos.

Unlike most other stations, Avtovo is a shallow-level station (just 12 meters deep), and it was a short walk to the platform. The platform resembled an art gallery more than a subway station with its jaw-dropping highly polished and pristine white marble floors and walls. Columns lined the platform, and sparkling patterned glass covered 16 of them. Ornate chandeliers, a patterned ceiling, and distinctive wall plaques all along the brightly lit platform led us to a magnificent colorful mosaic on the end wall. It commemorates the Leningrad Blockade of 1941-1944 and features a woman holding a child.



Mosaic at Avtovo Station
(L); Detail of pillars (R)



Kirovsky Zavod Station

Quite different from Avtovo Station, Kirovsky Zavod Station looks and feels more sparse, but its history tells quite a different kind of story: Kirovsky Zavod was designed as a tribute to workers in the large local metal and machinery factory of the same name. The large rectangular columns displaying Soviet icons, along with the bold light fixtures contributed to this station's having a distinctively Soviet appearance. There was even a well-lit bust of Vladimir Lenin displayed at the end of the platform.

Narvskaya Station

I found the neo-classical Narvskaya Station very interesting with its arched ceiling and the flat-light fixtures that followed the arch. Our guide informed us that when the construction of the station started, it was named Ploshchad Stachek. However, before it opened in 1953, the name changed to Stalinskaya, in honor of Joseph Stalin. After Stalin died, the station was renamed to Narvskaya after the nearby Narva

Triumphal Gate built to celebrate the Russian victory over Napoleon.

The walls were finished in elegant white marble with inlaid bronze inserts with a hammer and sickle design. There was also a rust-colored strip running the entire length of the platform with a soviet star and leaf motif. The floors were dark tiles in the center with a patterned design in the passages leading to the trains. I was fascinated by the column corner sculpture groupings that showed ordinary soviet citizens in various work and living situations.

When I have the opportunity to return to St. Petersburg, I plan to explore more of the Metro system and stop in the dozens of neighborhoods I missed on this quick stop.

Where else can you feel the pulse of the city and see so much art, architecture and Soviet history for only 45 rubles than in these "Palaces of the People"?





Clockwise from top left and right: Platforms of Narvskaya Station; Ticket office at Avtovo Station; Bronze capitals on pillars at Kirovsky Zavod Station; Sculpture in Narvskaya Station; Sculpture of Red soldiers in Narvskaya Station; Sculpture of school children in Narvskaya Station; Sculpture of seamen in Narvskaya Station; Bust of Lenin in Narvskaya Station

