

# Let's get ready to ramble



THE SEA is in the blood of Baltic cities. Each has a history of formidable maritime battles, mighty navies or medieval trade empires.

They are graced by canals and lined with palaces, as I was to discover on a Fred.Olsen cruise on board mid-size ship Braemar.

We visited Warnemunde and Rostock in former East Germany, Turku and Helsinki in Finland, Copenhagen, and St Petersburg, the undisputed jewel in the Baltic crown.

This was, though, a voyage with a twist. The average passenger gains around half a stone on a cruise but Fred.Olsen has the solution. It has teamed up with Ramblers Worldwide Holidays, which markets walking trips.

As a result, on some itineraries you can stride off on guided walks that help keep the pounds at bay. So at our first stop, Warnemunde, rather than heading for the excursion buses I was one of 30 ramblers who boarded the double-decker train to historic Rostock, with leaders Alec and Gwen.

After a stroll into town we met our guide Johannes for a two-hour walk through market squares and quaint cobbled streets, past the houses of wealthy medieval merchants to St Mary's Church.

This houses the world's oldest working astronomical clock and calendarium which dates back to 1400. It displays the time, Zodiac month, date, phase of the moon, time of sunrise and even how to calculate Easter.

However this two-hour potter wasn't what ramblers would call a walk. Back at Warnemunde we set off along the coast, leaving the promenade to join a sandy path through the forest.

The next two stops were both in Finland where, for me, the highlight was Helsinki's Ice Hotel. It's in an aircraft hangar of a building but inside you enter the twilight world of the Arctic winter. There are rides on husky sleighs, ice

## Healthy cruising? ANNA SELBY takes it all in her stride on a voyage of the magnificent Baltic Cities

hockey rinks, tobogganing down icy slopes and Father Christmas's log cabin, all made of ice. The hotel rooms are igloos with ice beds (you sleep in double-thick sleeping bags) but since we weren't staying I made do with a shot of cranberry vodka at the ice bar – in an ice glass of course.

After a day at sea enjoying quizzes (the ramblers turned out to be highly competitive), foxtrot lessons and just relaxing on the elegant Braemar with its brass fittings, polished wood and sumptuous fabrics, we arrived in St Petersburg.

Often called the Venice of the North this stunning city is built on numerous islands on the



REFRESHING: Helsinki's Ice Hotel

River Neva, criss-crossed by bridges and canals and lined with 18th-century palaces. We moored in the very heart of the city, two blocks from the State Hermitage Museum, on the English Embankment.

Here I discovered another ramblers' benefit. In Russia most passengers are restricted to the ship's visa and can only go on specific organised excursions. As ramblers we all had our own visas so we were free to ramble.

With three full days we visited Peterhof, Peter the Great's Russian Baroque palace on the Gulf of Finland, famed for its cascades of fountains that rival Versailles.

Back in the city we went to

St Isaac's Cathedral and The Hermitage, one of the world's greatest art galleries. We sauntered down the main street, Nevsky Prospekt, and visited the extraordinary Church of the Spilt Blood, built in the unmistakable Russian style, a kind of baroque, gilded gingerbread.

We also visited Catherine's Palace in Pushkin, built for the Empress Elizabeth during her reign. Painted blue and white, covered in gilt with massive golden gates, inside it's a riot of white Carrera marble, gilded carvings, priceless porcelain and crystal chandeliers.

At Copenhagen we moored minutes from the Little Mermaid statue and walked from one end of the city to the other, through the Botanical Gardens and down pedestrianised streets filled with superb Danish design.

After busy St Petersburg, Copenhagen felt laid-back, with its tranquil parks set around royal palaces and pastel-coloured former merchants' houses and warehouses, many now cafés spilling out on to the streets.

On our last day at sea the ramblers indulged in high tea with freshly baked scones and lashings of cream – so much for good intentions.

However all that walking paid off. At least the scales didn't deliver quite such a shock as they might have done when I got home.

### THE KNOWLEDGE

Ramblers Worldwide Holidays (01707 331133/www.ramblers.holidays.co.uk) offers 12 to 14-night Cruise & Walk Holidays with Fred.Olsen Cruise Lines (01473 742424/www.fredolsencruises.com) from £1,799pp (two sharing), full board. Departures from Dover, various dates in 2012.

HISTORIC: St Petersburg is known as the Venice of the North thanks to its canals, while Copenhagen, right, has a relaxed café-society atmosphere. Both are on the itinerary on the Braemar's Cruise & Walk Baltic adventure



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