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The cities and the guardians of the night

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ABSTRACT

“The Cat: it possesses beauty without vanity, strength without insolence, courage without ferocity, all the virtues of man without his vices” (Lord Byron). This paper is a photographic summary of trips to three cities that we consider among the most representative of the harmonious relationship between humans and cats: Istanbul, Kotor, and Saint Petersburg. The photos show some of the beauty of these cities: architecture, avenues, museums, squares, parks, the natural beauty of the surroundings, and, of course, its community's cats.

Keywords: Tourism, Cat, Istanbul, Kotor, Saint Petersburg

INTRODUCTION

An ancient legend says that the Cat's origins are linked to Noah's Ark, when Noah, desperate for the number of Rats that proliferated and devoured all the provisions, begged God to help him. The Cat then, for the salvation of all species, would have been created from the breath of a Lion [1].

The first representatives of the feline family must have appeared around ten million years ago, long before the appearance of man on Earth [2]. The first social contact between men and wild cats was probably in cave times, with some prehistoric remains evidencing the fact [3]. However, the true encounter between cats and man began around five thousand years ago, in ancient Egypt, in the times of the pharaohs, where these felines were worshiped as deities. The Egyptian goddess Bastet, a symbol of maternal love, tenderness, and fertility, was portrayed with the body of a woman and the head of a cat [4-8]. It was believed that the beautiful goddess had the power to fertilize the earth and men, cure illnesses, and guide the souls of the dead. Bastet was also associated with the power of the Sun and defended Ra from the attacks of Apep, the Serpent against whom the supreme god fought every night when he passed through the realm of darkness [1].

Amongst all the sacred animals that were mummified and buried in vast quantities by the ancient Egyptians during the last centuries of their long history, cats held a special place and were accorded special respect. They were regarded as special and mysterious animals, almost divine, beloved and feared at the same time [9, 10]. Cats were the most beloved animals in ancient Egypt. A famous painting from the time depicts Pharaoh Akhnaton's mother feeding a cat at a banquet [11]. They were considered the guardians of the night, the dead, and the mysteries of life and death. These guardians of the other world, when they died, were mummified and their owners shaved their eyebrows as a sign of mourning. Anyone who killed or simply injured a Cat was sentenced to death. If a house caught fire, the Cats were the first to be saved. In Ptolemy's time, a member of the Embassy of Rome accidentally killed a Cat and was only saved from death by the intervention of the Pharaoh [1].

It was forbidden for the Cat to leave Egypt, but some of these felines must have been taken to Europe on Phoenician commercial vessels, around a thousand years before the Christian Era. The Romans, when they invaded Egypt, adopted the cult of the goddess Bastet, and in Rome, Cats also began to be perpetuated in statues, paintings, and mosaics, as they represented the greatest symbol of freedom for the Romans. During this period, the Cat was

associated with several deities, such as Diana, the goddess of fertility, and the sensual Venus, often represented as a Cat. With the expansion of the Roman Empire, cats were introduced throughout Europe, and for a long time, they were accepted by men as domestic animals, due to their ability to hunt mice. In classical Greece, the Cat was already associated with femininity and love, all attributes of Aphrodite, the goddess Venus of the Romans. In Babylon, there was no cult of felines, but a legend says that the Cat was born from a Lion's sneeze, which coincides with an ancient Hebrew legend [1].

At Buddha's death, while all the other animals gathered to mourn, the Cat kept his eyes dry as he calmly devoured a Mouse, showing a total lack of respect for the solemn event. Despite the legend, the Cat is one of the animals most revered by Buddhists, due to its self-control and tendency to meditation. In Hinduism, the goddess Shosti, who presides over births, is represented riding a Cat. The Cat was also much loved in the Islamic religion, where several tales associate it with the prophet Muhammad, who would have been saved from death by a Cat, who killed a Serpent as it attacked him [1]. The Cat's relationship with Islam would be one of the causes that led the Catholic Church to relate the Cat to Satan. The Gnostics, who attributed equal importance to Jesus, Buddha, and Zoroaster, were already accused by the Church of worshiping the devil in the figure of a black Cat [12, 13].

In China, Cat figurines were used to drive out evil spirits, and there were two types of Cats, good and bad, which were easily differentiated because the bad ones had two tails. In Japan, when a Cat died, it was buried in its owner's temple, and a similar Cat, painted or carved, was offered at its altar, to guarantee the owner peace of mind and good luck during his life. In Cambodia, there is a ritual where a Cat is taken to every village so that there is no lack of rain, and the rice harvest is good. In Thailand, it was believed that the souls of highly evolved people migrated to the body of a Cat, before ascending to the heavens [1].

In Celtic culture, the goddess Cerridwen is related to the cult of the Cat. In Finland, there was a belief in a sled pulled by Cats, which carried the souls of the dead. The pagan temples of the Nordic countries were all decorated with images of Cats, and in the Norse legends, Freya, goddess of love and healing, there was a carriage that was pulled by two gray Cats, which represented the qualities of the goddess: fertility and ferocity [14-17]. In America, before the invasion of Europeans, some relatives of Cats, such as the Jaguar and the Puma, were also venerated with associations with the gods. Before the extermination of these American people, heretics in the view of the Catholic Church, the Jaguar was a symbol of great strength and wisdom, and it was believed that dead healers were transformed into this beautiful animal [1].

The Cat's independent behavior, agility, and beauty are attributes that have awakened a connection with mystery and magic in the popular imagination. Even in cultures where they were worshiped as deities, they did not escape torture and death, due to their supposed supernatural powers. For centuries, they were walled up alive, to guarantee the solidity of houses, churches, and castles, and buried on their thresholds for good luck. They were buried under the plantations, to guarantee an abundant harvest. They were buried at the crossroads of the roads, crucified and enclosed in sacks alongside adulterous women, thrown from the top of the walls, burned at the stake, and poisoned [1].

In the 11th century, cats would play a crucial role in human history, helping Europeans get rid of rats that transmit bubonic plague. The two main characters of the Middle Ages were not Charlemagne and Kublai Khan, but the flea *Xenopsylla cheopis* and the Cat [18]. The constant climate changes in North Asia forced the Mongols to travel great distances, and with them, they brought rats carrying the dreaded black plague flea. Silk merchants and ports in

Mediterranean Europe were then contaminated. The epidemic, within a few years, reached all European countries, decimating almost a third of the European population. France was one of the countries hardest hit by the Black Death, with its population reduced from 17 to 8 million inhabitants [1]. The Black Death (Polish: Czarna śmierć), a major bubonic plague pandemic, is believed to have spread to Poland in 1351. Poland has been minimally affected by the disease compared to other regions of Europe [19].

Faced with this epidemic, the wisest sought the help of the Cats, the only ones capable of fighting the Rats. There was then, throughout Europe, a great effort to breed cats, and the role of these felines was once again indispensable for the survival of humanity (they had already, four thousand years before, contributed to the development of Egyptian civilization). Even so, the Church considered the Cats guilty of the spread of the plague and so many deaths, ordering their destruction at the stake. A true crusade was then waged against Cats and their worshipers. In the year 1232, Pope Gregory IX founded the Holy Inquisition, which acted for six centuries. This Pope stated in the bull *Vox in Roma* that the diabolical Black Cat, "the color of evil and shame", had fallen from the clouds to the misfortune of men. To end the Celts' resistance to Catholicism, the Catholic Church preached that Druid priests were witches. As the Druids lived isolated and surrounded by many Cats, the Church associated Cats with darkness, due to their nocturnal habits, and said that they had a part with the devil, especially the black ones. Thousands of people were forced to confess, under torture, that they had worshiped the devil in the form of a black cat and were then sentenced to death [1].

The same persecution was carried out in the 15th century, against the Germanic peoples of the Rhine valley, worshipers of the goddess Freya, a pagan deity, according to the Church, which considered her cult an act of heresy, associating it with the worship of evil spirits. Images of the goddess were destroyed, and women who had cats were tortured and burned alive. The Cats, who were protected by the goddess Freya, were accused of being demonic, captured, hanged, and thrown into the fires of the Holy Inquisition. In the centuries in which the Inquisition operated in Europe and America, a person who was seen with a Cat, especially a black one, was subject to being denounced as a witch and suffering torture and death, without any right to defense. Once accused of witchcraft, a person could be held responsible for any natural misfortune, such as crop failure, accidents, illnesses, and deaths. In the medieval imagination, the black cat became another mystical figure, the result of ignorance, associated with the cult of the devil. In 1484, Pope Innocent VIII promulgated a bull against sorcerers, accusing thousands of people of heresy, a good number of whom were guilty just for owning a Cat. At this same time, Leonardo da Vinci would write: "The day will come when a crime against an animal will be considered a crime against humanity." Leonardo loved Cats and considered "the smallest of cats" a masterpiece [1].

Across Europe, All Saints' Day was celebrated by throwing bags full of live cats into the bonfire. In Metz, France, every year, for four centuries, in the cult of Saint Vitus, 13 cats would be burned alive, trapped in a cage. In Ypres, France, hundreds of cats were thrown from the top of a bell tower during a religious festival. For centuries, thousands of cats would be sacrificed in rituals during Easter. These practices, encouraged by the Church, ended up extending to any type of religious celebration, such as the night of Saint John and other Saints, which ended up almost decimating the population of cats in the 15th century, which consequently contributed to the multiplication of rats, which carried the bubonic plague. At the coronation of Queen Elizabeth I, hundreds of Cats were imprisoned and taken in a procession, representing the devil under the control of the Church, and at the end of the procession, they were all burned alive. In

Elizabethan England, it was common for cats to be placed in leather bags and used as targets for archers. In this and other ways, man unloaded all his complexes and cruelties onto animals [1].

Taking great care not to be burned alive as a heretic, the Genoese navigator Cristoforo Colombo took the precaution of boarding dozens of cats on his three caravels, Santa Maria, Pinta and Niña, which, over 35 days of transatlantic travel, they fought real battles against the Rats, protecting the food supplies and allowing the crew members to disembark alive on the unknown shores, on October 12, 1492. Even in these times of so much hatred, Cats were loved in some countries, such as Russia, where they were common in convents and monasteries. Over time, the Church also became more tolerant of the Cat's presence, and the persecution of felines decreased. Cardinal Richelieu had many cats, including a black Angora called Lucifer. In the 18th century, laws on witchcraft were abolished. During this period, Isaac Newton, for the greater comfort of his Cats, invented the door, which allowed Cats to enter and leave the house as they pleased. In the 19th century, the first anti-cruelty laws were passed in England, and the first organizations in defense of cats and other animals were founded. Finally, the Cats would receive special care [1].

Mendel not only studied peas but also cats. The father of genetics was impressed by the high diversity resulting from crossings and by certain permanence that suggested to him the hypothesis of two factors, one recessive and the other dominant. Even today, Cats continue to make their contribution to science and the survival of the human species. In 1961, thousands of Cats were transported by plane to Borneo, to put an end to a large invasion of Rats in the rice fields, and with the expected success, they prevented thousands of people on that island from dying of hunger. Lord Byron proclaimed the superiority of the Cat over man: "It possesses beauty without vanity, strength without insolence, courage without ferocity, all the virtues of man without his vices." They were also praised and loved by Victor Hugo, Charles Baudelaire, Mark Twain, Pablo Neruda, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Charles Bukowski, Julio Cortázar, Yuri Knorozov, Chopin, Liszt, Monet, Renoir, and other important figures in our history, people of talent and sensitivity [1].

Domestic cats are part of the Felidae family, which is divided into genres, such as *Felis*, of the Cats; *Panthera*, of the Lion, Tiger, Leopard, and Jaguar; *Leopardus*, of the Ocelot and Oncilla; *Lynx*, from the Lynxes; *Puma*, of the Cougar; and *Acinonyx*, of the Cheetah. The 41 extant Felidae species exhibit the most diversity in fur patterns of all terrestrial carnivores [20]. Cats have retractile claws, slender muscular bodies, and strong flexible forelimbs. Their teeth and facial muscles allow for a powerful bite. They are all obligate carnivores, and most are solitary predators ambushing or stalking their prey. Wild cats occur in Africa, Europe, Asia, and the Americas. Some wild cat species are adapted to forest and savanna habitats, some to arid environments, and a few also to wetlands and mountainous terrain. Their activity patterns range from nocturnal and crepuscular to diurnal, depending on their preferred prey species [21].

The Cat, despite being domesticated, still has characteristics in common with its wild relatives, such as hunting techniques. Graceful, sociable, hygienic, intelligent, and independent, they spend around 50% of their lives in light sleep, 15% in deep sleep, and most of the remaining 35% hunting, dating, playing, and mainly cleaning themselves. Unfortunately, even today, Cats continue to be persecuted by people who believe they are representatives of a superior race. There are conditions for a harmonious life between Cats and humans. Countless facts from our history prove that these felines have always been on our side, even if just to get a simple cuddle.

On trips to different countries in America, Africa, Asia, and Europe, we observed the presence of cats and how they are treated by the local population. In particular, we paid particular attention to these felines in countries in Eastern Europe and Asia. For example, the love for cats in Poland is so intense that recently the community cat Gacek, living in a small house on Kaszubska Street, in the city of Szczecin, became an international tourist attraction, appearing in documentaries and videos on the internet. However, among so many cities where we saw cats roam around calmly, unmolested, we chose three cities that we consider to be among the most representative of the harmonious relationship between humans and cats: Istanbul, Kotor, and Saint Petersburg. The photos presented in this report were taken by Fabio Rossano Dario and Cristina De Vincenzo, using a cell phone and digital photo camera.

Istanbul, Türkiye

Istanbul, formerly known as Constantinople, is the largest city in Türkiye, serving as the country's economic, cultural, and historic hub. The city straddles the Bosphorus Strait, lying in both Europe and Asia and has a population of over 15 million residents, comprising 19% of the population of Türkiye. Istanbul is the most populous European. The city was founded as Byzantium in the 7th century BC by Greek settlers from Megara [22]. In 330 AD, the Roman emperor Constantine the Great made it his imperial capital, renaming it first as New Rome and then as Constantinople after himself. In 1930, the city's name was officially changed to Istanbul [23].

The city served as an imperial capital for almost 1600 years: during the Roman/Byzantine (330-1204), Latin (1204-1261), late Byzantine (1261-1453), and Ottoman (1453-1922) empires. The city grew in size and influence, eventually becoming a beacon of the Silk Road and one of the most important cities in history. The city played a key role in the advancement of Christianity during Roman/Byzantine times, hosting four of the first seven ecumenical councils before its transformation to an Islamic stronghold following the Fall of Constantinople in 1453 CE, especially after becoming the seat of the Ottoman Caliphate in 1517. In 1923, after the Turkish War of Independence, Ankara replaced the city as the capital of the newly formed Republic of Türkiye. Istanbul was named the European Capital of Culture in 2018 and is among the eight most visited cities in the world. The historic center of Istanbul is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

On 29 May 1453, after an eight-week siege, Sultan Mehmed II "the Conqueror" captured Constantinople and declared it the new capital of the Ottoman Empire. Following the conquest of Constantinople, Mehmed II immediately set out to revitalize the city. Cognizant that revitalization would fail without the repopulation of the city, Mehmed II welcomed everyone, showing extraordinary openness and willingness to incorporate outsiders that came to define Ottoman political culture. He also invited people from all over Europe to his capital, creating a cosmopolitan society. Revitalizing Istanbul also required a massive program of restorations, of everything from roads to aqueducts. Mehmed II transformed Istanbul's urban landscape with the wholesale redevelopment of the city center. There was a huge new palace to rival, a new covered market, porticoes, pavilions, walkways, as well as more than a dozen new mosques. Mehmed II turned the ramshackle old town into something that looked like an imperial capital [24] (**Photos 1-14**).

The presence of street cats in Istanbul (Turkish: sokak kedisi, "street cat") is noted to be very prevalent, with estimates ranging from a hundred thousand to over a million stray cats.

The street cats in the city have gained widespread media and public attention and are considered to be symbol of the city. Many Turkish citizens view street cats as communally owned pets rather than traditional strays, and the country has a blanket no-kill, no-capture policy. So, we thought we'd share just some of the many, many cat photos that we took while in Istanbul (**Photos 15-34**).

The wide prevalence of cats in Istanbul is probably linked with Ottoman times. The majority of Istanbul's houses were made of wood, which gave shelter and enabled the proliferation of the mice and rats. In this situation, the presence of cats in the city was essential to control unwanted rodents. The presence of cats in Istanbul and throughout Türkiye is directly correlated to Islam, the most prevalent faith in the country. Before 2021, Turkish law defined animals (strays and pets) as "commodities". This classification was criticized by animal rights activists. According to the proposition that was accepted in 2021, pets and stray animals were given "living being" status, which allows from six months up to four years jail sentences for crimes against animals. The law also mandates the sterilization of all stray animals in Türkiye.

Generally, every street in Istanbul has cats that are familiar to locals. In these streets, tiny "cat houses" have been prepared for stray cats. Neighborhood residents place food and water containers in front of their houses to feed stray cats. The Municipality of Istanbul has placed vending machines for cat food in many parts of the city. Citizens passing by put coins into these machines, ensuring that cats are fed. Stray cats can be seen in many places in Istanbul, whether in university classrooms, on the ferry, in mosques, in restaurants and bars, on the bus seat, or the subway, with no one bothering them. Admired for their cleanliness, the domestic cat is considered "the quintessential pet" by Muslims [25]. Muhammad ibn al-Uthaymin, a 20th-century Saudi Arabian Sunni imam, preached: "If there are too many cats and they are a nuisance, and if the operation will not harm them, then there is nothing wrong with it because this is better than killing them after they have been created. But if the cats are ordinary cats and are not causing a nuisance, perhaps it is better to leave them alone to reproduce" [26].

Muezza was Muhammad's favorite cat. Muhammad awoke one day to the sounds of the adhan (the call given to announce that it is time for the ritual Prayer). The Prophet encountered her during Uhud's campaign while she was nursing her young, and because of this, Muhammad altered the course of the soldiers marching to the battlefield. Upon returning from combat, he decided to adopt her. Preparing to attend prayer, he began to dress himself; however, he soon discovered his cat Muezza sleeping on the sleeve of his prayer robe. Rather than wake her, he used a pair of scissors to cut the sleeve off, leaving the cat undisturbed. He then smiled and gently stroked his beloved cat three times, giving all cats the ability to land squarely on their feet.

Kotor, Montenegro

Kotor is a coastal town in Montenegro, a small Balkan country that was part of the former Yugoslavia. It is located in a secluded part of the Bay of Kotor, one of the most indented parts of the Adriatic Sea, and it has a population of around 13 thousand. The old Mediterranean port of Kotor is surrounded by fortifications built during the Venetian period. Some have called it the southernmost fjord in Europe, but it is a ria, a submerged river canyon. Together with the nearly overhanging limestone cliffs of Orjen and Lovćen, Kotor and its surrounding area form an impressive landscape. Kotor is part of the World Heritage Site dubbed the Natural and

Culture-Historical Region of Kotor. The fortified city of Kotor was also included in UNESCO's World Heritage Site list as part of Venetian Works of Defense between the 16th and 17th centuries [27]. Kotor is one of the most popular tourist destinations in Montenegro due to its well-preserved medieval architecture [28]. In 2019, it welcomed over 250,000 tourists [29].

The medieval city of Kotor is wedged in rugged mountains, facing the Adriatic Sea and surrounded by centuries-old stone walls. When you enter the city, you can see the beautiful Baroque-style clock tower from 1602 and the main Venetian square full of cafes. The city is breathtaking. Looking up, you can see the rugged limestone cliffs of Mount Lovcen (**Photos 35-57**). Walking through the labyrinth formed by narrow medieval streets, full of museums, shops, bars, and restaurants, you can see cats everywhere, hundreds of these felines, always very calm and well-fed, sitting on the steps of an old church, sleeping in a comfortable basket at the entrance of a store, in a garden or a shady place along the wall (**Photos 58-70**).

Montenegrins believe that cats are a sign of good luck, and many old people in Kotor will tell you they have always loved cats. For many years, almost all doors in homes and businesses have cat flaps especially for the cats so these guests can always come and go - theories for how this obsession with cats developed are up for discussion. After surviving wars, sieges, and earthquakes, some believe cats have helped to save the town over the years. Others say the "lucky charms" were brought to Kotor by sailors, who docked their feline-filled ships in the Bay of Kotor during a revolt by the Austro-Hungarian navy in 1918 known as the "Cattaro mutiny".

Because the ships would bring in cats from all over the world, the feline population of Kotor is as diverse as it is extensive. This is just part of legend, but historically the cats appeared here when the sailors were coming back home, and they had the cats on their ships. This for centuries. Because Kotor is a town between the sea and mountains, there were also lots of mice and rats and snakes, and it was necessary to have cats in the town to protect it. So, cats have become a symbol of good luck for Montenegro. Another interesting fact is that Kotor was built by the Venetian Republic and the symbol of the Venetian Republic is a lion, so the cats have always been respected [30].

Kotor Kitties is a partnership of all-volunteer charities committed to reducing the suffering of Montenegro's community animals. The natural charm and grace of these cats fascinate people all over the world! But when overpopulation goes beyond what a community can properly care for, the charm is lost in the suffering. Montenegro simply has too many community cats to care for. Kotor Kitties unites the concern of tourists, the skill of local veterinarians, and the compassion of local people to provide a humane solution for the community cats: Montenegro's first sterilization program of High Quality-High Volume Spaying and Neutering. The program includes Montenegro's first Trap-Neuter-Return project for cats. In 2022 were introduced vaccines into parts of the program, working towards the goal of a full Trap-Neuter-Vaccinate-Return program [31]. It is essential to keep the population of street cats at a level where they can live in good health with enough food and medical resources to survive because an unchecked cat population is more susceptible to disease and food resources can be scarce.

A public initiative that celebrate its feline population is Kotor's town square, which has been nicknamed the 'Square of Cats' for the large community of cats that reside there. There's even a museum dedicated to them, the Cats Museum Kotor. Inside this museum, there's a plethora of feline-themed artifacts, a real testament to the Montenegrin respect towards its animals. Cats are so ubiquitous to Kotor that they have taken on a symbolic meaning, and if

you're a cat lover, then a visit to this purry haven is a must. The residents of Kotor treat stray cats with lots of love, and that's why we consider the city of Kotor, in Montenegro, to be the main cat paradise in the world. While there is of course so much to see in this wonderful country the street cats and kitties in Kotor's cafes are certainly a draw for many of the visitors.

Saint Petersburg, Russia

Saint Petersburg, formerly known as Petrograd (1914–1924) and later Leningrad (1924–1991), is the second-largest city in Russia after Moscow. It is situated on the Neva River, at the head of the Gulf of Finland on the Baltic Sea. The city has approximately 5 million inhabitants, and it is the fourth-most populous city in Europe. The city was founded by Tsar Peter the Great on 27 May 1703.

In Russia, Saint Petersburg is historically and culturally associated with the birth of the Russian Empire and Russia's entry into modern history as a European great power. It served as a capital of the Tsardom of Russia, and the subsequent Russian Empire, from 1713 to 1918 (being replaced by Moscow for a short period between 1728 and 1730). After the October Revolution in 1917, the Bolsheviks moved their government to Moscow. The city was renamed Leningrad after Lenin died in 1924. In 1991, following the dissolution of the USSR, the city's original appellation was restored [32].

The city is considered by many tourism websites to be the most beautiful city in the world, and one of the cities richest in culture. Saint Petersburg is inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage list as an area with 36 historical architectural complexes and around 4,000 outstanding individual monuments of architecture, history, and culture. The city has 235 museums, 2,000 libraries, more than 80 theatres, 100 concert organizations, 45 galleries and exhibition halls, 62 cinemas, and 80 other cultural establishments (**Photos 71-88**). Every year the city hosts around 100 festivals and various competitions of art and culture, including more than 50 international ones. Saint Petersburg receives over 15 million tourists every year. It is home to the Hermitage, the biggest art museum in the world, and the Lakhta Center, the tallest skyscraper in Europe, with 462.5 meters.

During World War II, German forces besieged Leningrad. The siege lasted 872 days, or almost two and a half years, from 8 September 1941 to 27 January 1944. The Siege of Leningrad proved one of the longest, most destructive, and most lethal sieges of a major city in modern history. More than one million civilians were killed, mainly from starvation. Leningrad was rebuilt over the post-war decades. The Leningrad Metro underground rapid transit system, designed before the war, opened in 1955 with its first eight stations decorated with marble and bronze. From the 1960s to the 1980s many new residential boroughs were built on the outskirts, with functionalist apartment blocks [33].

The historic architecture of Saint Petersburg's city center, mostly Baroque and Neoclassical buildings of the 18th and 19th centuries, is largely preserved. Since 1991 the Historic Centre of Saint Petersburg and Related Groups of Monuments in Saint Petersburg and Leningrad Oblast have been listed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site. The ensemble of Peter and Paul Fortress with the Peter and Paul Cathedral takes a dominant position on Zayachy Island along the right bank of the Neva River. The Saint Petersburg Mosque, the largest mosque in Europe when opened in 1913, is on the right bank nearby.

The Spit of Vasilevsky Island, which splits the river into two largest armlets, the Bolshaya Neva and Malaya Neva, is connected to the northern bank (Petrogradsky Island) via

the Exchange Bridge and occupied by the Old Saint Petersburg Stock Exchange and Rostral Columns. The southern coast of Vasilyevsky Island along the Bolshaya Neva features some of the city's oldest buildings, dating from the 18th century, including the Kunstkamera, Twelve Collegia, Menshikov Palace, and the Imperial Academy of Arts. It hosts one of two campuses of Saint Petersburg State University. On the southern, left bank of the Neva, connected to the spit of Vasilyevsky Island via the Palace Bridge, lie the Admiralty building, the vast Hermitage Museum complex stretching along the Palace Embankment, which includes the Baroque Winter Palace, the former official residence of Russian emperors, as well as the neoclassical Marble Palace. The Winter Palace faces Palace Square, the city's main square with the Alexander Column.

Saint Petersburg has been breathing culture for centuries in all forms of art: music, dance, painting, literature, theater, sculpture, cinema, photography, etc. Saint Petersburg has a longstanding and world-famous tradition in literature. Dostoyevsky, author of masterpieces of literature, such as *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, called it "The most abstract and intentional city in the world". Most of his novels are set in this beautiful city. Dostoyevsky's tomb is located in the Tikhvin Cemetery, where are also the tombs of classical Russian composers Mily Balakirev, Aleksandr Borodin, César Cui, Mikhail Glinka, Modest Mussorgsky, Anton Rubinstein, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Piotr Ilitch Tchaikovsky. Traditions of the Russian classical school have been passed down from generation to generation among outstanding educators. The art of famous and prominent Saint Petersburg dancers like Rudolf Nureyev, Natalia Makarova, and Mikhail Baryshnikov was, and is, admired throughout the world. Contemporary Petersburg ballet is made up not only of traditional Russian classical schools but also ballets by those like Boris Eifman, who expanded the scope of strict classical Russian ballet to almost unimaginable limits.

Cats have been loved in Russia for centuries. These felines can be seen walking calmly through the streets of Saint Petersburg or taking a nap somewhere in the city, in squares, gardens, cemeteries, on window eaves, in store windows, in "Cat Cafes", where anyone can have a drink. Calmly have a coffee in the best possible company: feline (**Photos 89-96**). The Hermitage Cats are a group of cats residing in the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg, Russia.

The museum has a press secretary dedicated to the cats, and three people act as caretakers. The cats live in the museum's basement, and they also appear on the embankment and the square during the summer. In previous eras, they roamed throughout the museum galleries. The cats were present in the museum, originally a palace, since the 18th century. In 1745, Elizabeth of Russia ordered cats to be placed in the palace to control the mice. These cats originated from Kazan; a city known for having cats good at catching mice. The cats remained in St. Petersburg except during World War II when the existing cat population was killed. A new group of cats replaced the previous cats since the rat population had increased [34]. In 2011, the museum began a "Catfest", a celebration of its cat population. "Catfest" has included cat painting contests and scavenger hunts for children. Beginning in 2015, because of the number of visiting tourists, a website was set up by the museum for people who may be interested in adopting a cat.

To the early Slavs, cats were powerful animals in the fight against evil spirits. They were believed to be attached to Weles, the god of the lowlands, underworld. That attachment added to their independent spirit and power against the spirits, and it was a major reason cats were admired by the early Slavs. Russians are feline-friendly. No country in the world has a higher

rate of cat ownership. Nearly 60 percent of Russians have at least one cat. And some cat lovers put up strays in makeshift shelters in their homes. But it seems no one country rivals Russia when it comes to cat-love.

Perhaps the affection is a historical remnant, left behind by ousted royals. It is said that the pets of the children of Nicholas II, Russia's last emperor, were allowed to sharpen their claws on imperial tapestries.

The cities we chose represent those we visited and noticed the large presence of cats. However, many other cities also offer special treatment for cats, where there are many cat lovers, such as the well-known Tokyo, Aoshima, Rome, Turin, Budapest, Zelenogradsk, Kaliningrad, Amsterdam, among others. These cats, walking through parks and city streets, arouse the sensitivity of tourists and many tourists have planned their trips with cats as one of the attractions, as is our case.

Gacek is a male domestic cat with tuxedo fur, which over the years 2020–2023 became a prominent tourist attraction in the city of Szczecin, Poland. The feline maintained a five star rating on Google Maps. Gacek was most often found resting in a wooden booth built specially for him on Kaszubska Street, in downtown Szczecin. The cat attracted the attention of tourists, including foreigners.

Some people visited Szczecin specifically to meet Gacek. In September 2023, it was announced that Gacek found a new permanent home and lost weight after following a diet. Gacek also initiated an online fundraising campaign named "Gacek buys food for the homeless" to raise funds to feed homeless animals.

CONCLUSIONS

After days of touring Istanbul, Kotor, and Saint Petersburg, photographing urbanized landscapes of these beautiful cities, their houses, buildings, churches, theaters, mosques, bridges, aqueducts, streets, avenues, monuments, museums, parks, rivers, canals, observed that in many of these places, I was almost always accompanied by a feline.

The trip to Saint Petersburg was in May 2017, to Kotor in October 2019, and the trip to Istanbul in October 2023. When we finished the last trip, where we were surprised by the great number of cats in the beautiful Turkish city, we decided to write this paper, showing a little of the beauty of these three cities and trying to discover why cats live in complete freedom in these cities. But, why so many cats?

In the history of civilization, the closest animal to humans has always been the cat, present in almost all cultures, such as special and mysterious, worshiped as deities, guardians of the night, the dead, and the mysteries of life and death, perpetuated in statues, paintings and mosaics, symbol of freedom, associated with femininity and love. The only ones capable of fighting the rats, the cats were essential for the survival of humans in these cities. Countless facts from our history prove that these felines have always been on our side, even if just to get a simple cuddle.

We also noticed many aspects special about the culture of the Turkish and Slavic peoples, which is reflected in the harmonious relationship between cats and humans in these countries visited. Our trip to Istanbul, Kotor, and Saint Petersburg could not be complete without considering the cats, and they will always be in our memory when we remember these cities.

We dedicate this paper to our cats Nina, Mel, and Nhenhéu (**Photos 97-100**).

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Photo 1. Istanbul is primarily known for its Byzantine and Ottoman architecture. Despite its development as a Turkish city since 1923, it contains many ancient, Roman, Byzantine, Christian, Muslim, and Jewish monuments.



Photo 2. Originally a church, later a mosque, the Hagia Sophia, in Istanbul, Türkiye, was the largest cathedral in the world for nearly a thousand years.



Photo 3. Istanbul was named the European Capital of Culture in 2018 and is among the eight most visited cities in the world. The historic center of Istanbul is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.



Photo 4. The large Fatih Mosque is an Ottoman mosque in the Fatih district of Istanbul.



Photo 5. The mosque is the House of prayer in Islam, one of the key elements of the religion. There are over 3,000 mosques in Istanbul of all sizes. Some of them are recent but there are many old ones built during the Ottoman period. For instance, the biggest mosque in the city is Süleymaniye Mosque from the 16th century, and the most important one is Sultan Ahmet Mosque (known as Blue Mosque) from the 17th century.



Photo 6. The Blue Mosque (Sultanahmet Camii) is the most important religious temple in Istanbul. It was constructed between 1609 and 1617 during the rule of Ahmed I and remains a functioning mosque today.



Photo 7. The Yeni Valide Mosque (Yeni Valide Camii) is an 18th-century Ottoman mosque in the Üsküdar district of Istanbul.



Photo 8. Wander aimlessly in Istanbul, and anywhere in this wonderful city, you will make an incredible discovery.



Photo 9. Topkapi Palace, dating back to 1465, is the oldest seat of government surviving in Istanbul—detail of the Baghdad Pavilion.



Photo 10. Tomb of Mehmed II Fatih, the Conqueror.



Photo 11. Iznik tiles are a type of Turkish ceramic tile that has been used in architectural applications for private residences since the late 15th century.



Photo 12. Istanbul is located in north-western Türkiye and straddles the Bosphorus Strait, which provides the only passage from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean via the Sea of Marmara.



Photo 13. The estates and mansions along the Bosphorus reflect the city's longevity. Ottoman-era palaces are perched next to contemporary mansions.



Photo 14. Rumelihisarı or Boğazkesen Fortress (literally 'strait-cutter fortress') is a medieval Ottoman fortress located in Istanbul, on a series of hills on the European banks of the Bosphorus.



Photo 15. Throughout Türkiye, you will have the pleasant company of a cat.



Photo 16. The presence of street cats in Istanbul is noted to be very prevalent, with estimates ranging from a hundred thousand to over a million stray cats.



Photo 17. Stray cats can be seen in many places in Istanbul, whether in university classrooms, in restaurants and bars, on the bus seat, and in mosques, with no one bothering them.



Photo 18. In Islamic tradition, cats are admired for their cleanliness. They are considered to be ritually clean and are thus allowed to enter homes and even mosques.



Photo 19. The presence of cats in Istanbul and throughout Türkiye is directly correlated to Islam, the most prevalent faith in the country.



Photo 20. Admired for their cleanliness, the domestic cat is considered "the quintessential pet" by Muslims.



Photo 21. Many Turkish citizens view street cats as communally owned pets rather than traditional strays.



Photo 22. Everywhere you walk in Istanbul, you will find cats.



Photo 23. Looking through history books about Islam, many mention the Prophet's love of felines and while variations on the foregoing stories exist, the overarching affection for cats has been consistent.



Photo 24. Generally, every street in Istanbul has cats that are familiar to locals.



Photo 25. Cats are known to enjoy a very comfortable life in Istanbul.



Photo 26. There is a belief among some Muslims that cats seek out people who are praying.



Photo 27. But why cats? “Because in the history of civilization, the closest animal to humans has always been the cat”.



Photo 28. Friendly street cat in Istanbul.



Photo 29. Istanbul is known for the beautiful relationship between the city and its cats.



Photo 30. Istanbul has a long history of caring for its feline citizens that goes way back to the city's origin in the Ottoman Empire, so it makes sense that the cats are so well cared for.



Photo 31. Cats' prevalence in Istanbul is connected back to Ottoman times.



Photo 32. While the cats are not adopted formally, in Istanbul, they are taken care of by no one and everyone, a giant community network of cat caring.



Photo 33. Cats will always be in my memory when I remember Istanbul.



Photo 34. Stray cats can be seen in many places in Istanbul, whether in university classrooms, on the ferry, in mosques, in restaurants and bars, on the bus seat, or the subway, with no one bothering them.



Photo 35. Kotor is a coastal town in Montenegro, a small Balkan country that was part of the former Yugoslavia.



Photo 36. Kotor is located in a secluded part of the Bay of Kotor, one of the most indented parts of the Adriatic Sea.



Photo 37. Some call the Bay of Kotor the southernmost fjord in Europe, but it is a ria, a submerged river canyon.



Photo 38. Together with the nearly overhanging limestone cliffs of Orjen and Lovćen, Kotor and its surrounding area form an impressive landscape.



Photo 39. Upon entering the cobbled old town of Kotor, it is hard not to notice prowling cats on every corner.



Photo 40. When you enter Kotor, you can see the beautiful Baroque-style clock tower from 1602.



Photo 41. Kotor is one of the most popular tourist destinations in Montenegro due to its well-preserved medieval architecture.



Photo 42. The historic town of Kotor hosts hundreds of stray cats, that are looked after and adored by locals and visitors alike.



Photo 43. Kotor, in Montenegro, is one of the best-kept medieval towns on the Adriatic coast.



Photo 44. The buildings in Kotor are full of character and authentically preserved.



Photo 45. The influence of Venice is everywhere in Kotor, very visible in architecture.



Photo 46. The fortified city of Kotor is included in UNESCO's World Heritage Site list as part of Venetian Works of Defense between the 16th and 17th centuries.



Photo 47. The old Mediterranean port of Kotor is surrounded by fortifications built during the Venetian period.

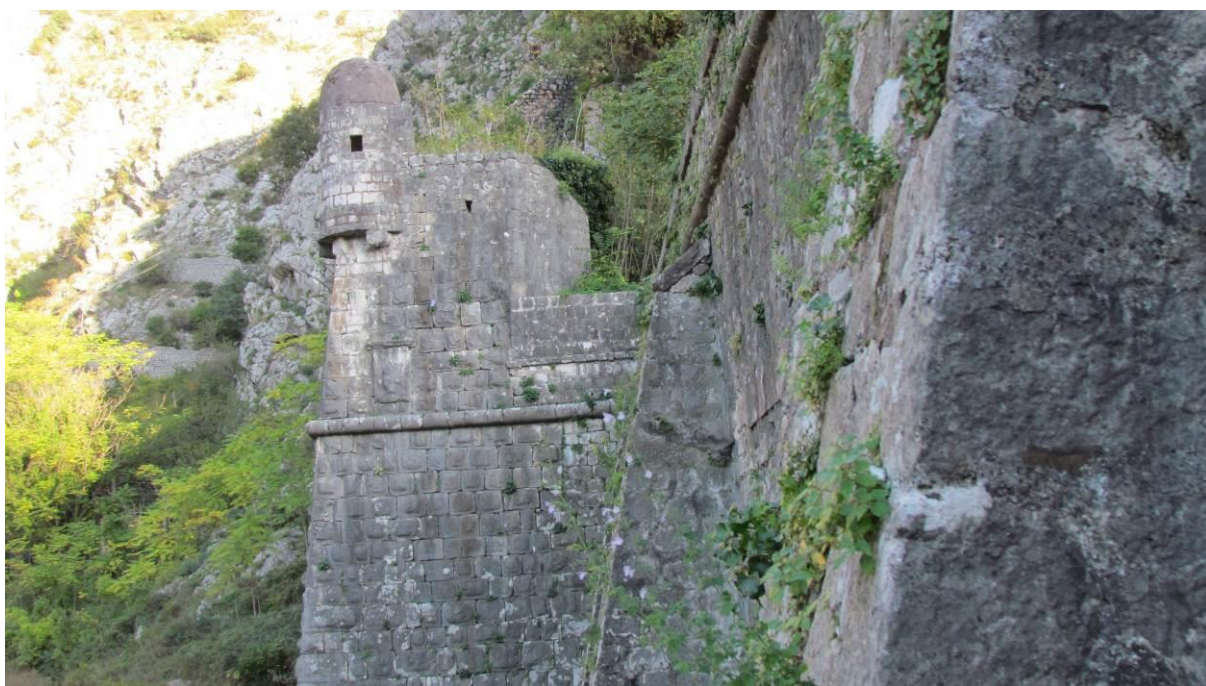


Photo 48. The medieval city of Kotor is wedged in rugged mountains, facing the Adriatic Sea and surrounded by centuries-old stone walls.



Photo 49. Kotor has an ancient fascination with cats.



Photo 50. Cats Museum Kotor hosts cats.



Photo 51. Inside the Cats Museum Kotor, there's a plethora of feline-themed artifacts...



Photo 52. ... like thousands of cards with drawings from around the world and photos of famous personalities in the company of their cats:



Photo 53. Actresses Audrey Hepburn and Elizabeth Taylor loved cats.



Photo 54. Detail of actresses Ingrid Bergman and Sophia Loren with their kittens.

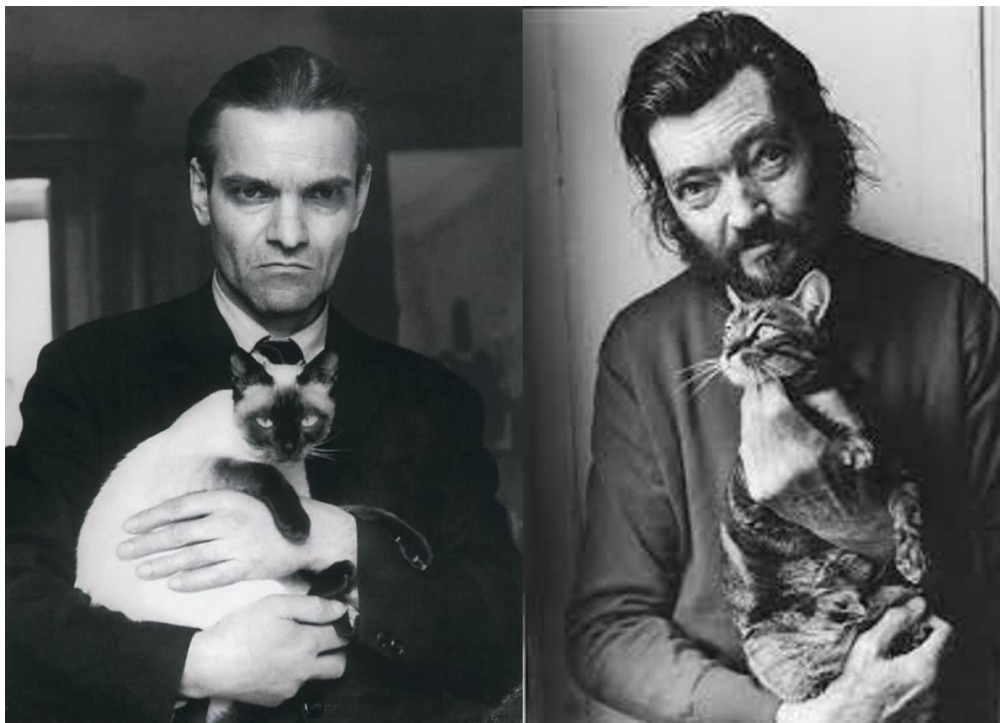


Photo 55. The scientist Yuri Knorozov and the writer Julio Cortázar also loved cats.

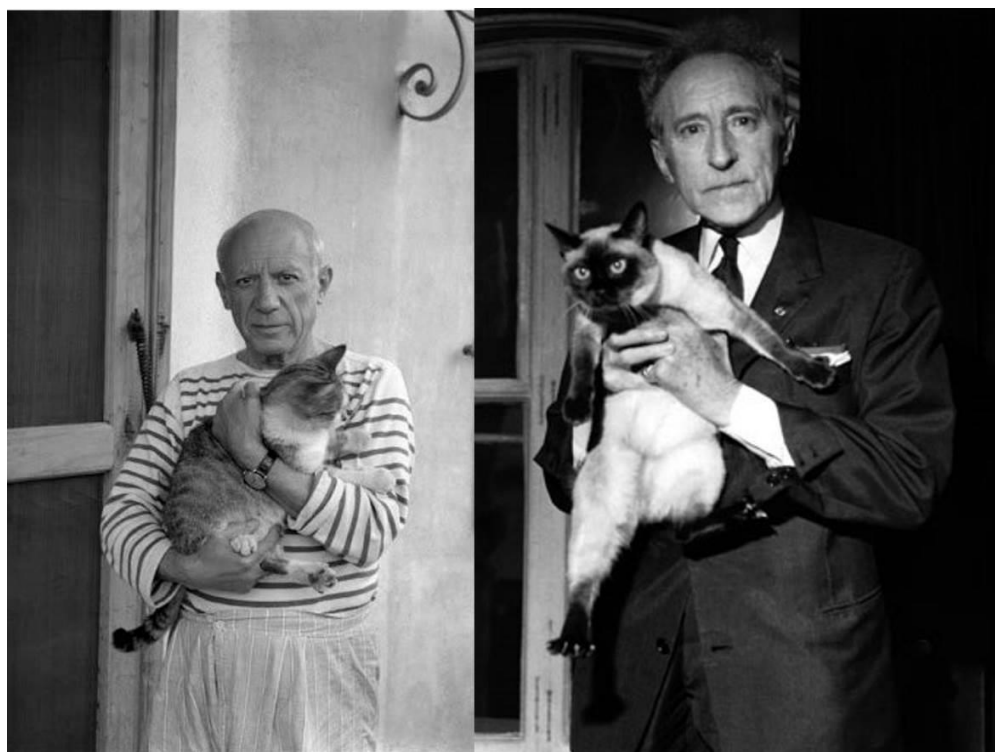


Photo 56. Pablo Picasso and Jean Cocteau were in love with cats.



Photo 57. Advertising poster created by Théophile Steinlen for the Chat Noir cabaret in Paris and book cover *The Master and Margarita* by Bulgakov.



Photo 58. We consider the city of Kotor, in Montenegro, to be the main cat paradise in the world.



Photo 59. There are most confident cats approaching tourists of tourists, purring for affection.



Photo 60. The cats have lived in Kotor for centuries and protect the town from the rats and mice.



Photo 61. Montenegrins believe that cats are a sign of good luck.



Photo 62. The residents of Kotor treat stray cats with lots of love.



Photo 63. Cat in Kotor yawning after a nap.



Photo 64. Walking through the labyrinth formed by narrow medieval streets, full of museums, shops, bars, and restaurants, you can see cats everywhere.



Photo 65. Cat registered under a wall of a house in Kotor.

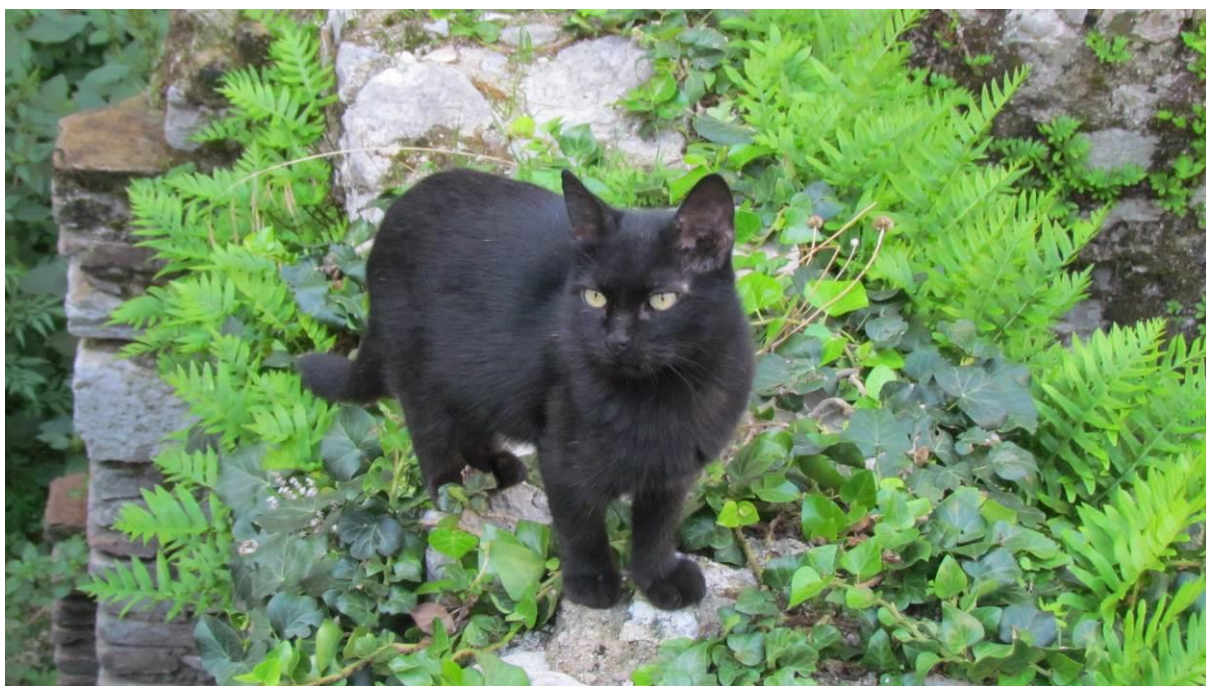


Photo 66. Cat walking under a wall of a house in Kotor.



Photo 67. This lazy kitty along the Kotor City Walls is just one of the many cats of Montenegro.



Photo 68. While there is of course so much to see in this wonderful country the street cats and kitties in Kotor's cafes are certainly a draw for many of the visitors.



Photo 69. A well-deserved rest after a peaceful day in Kotor, Montenegro.

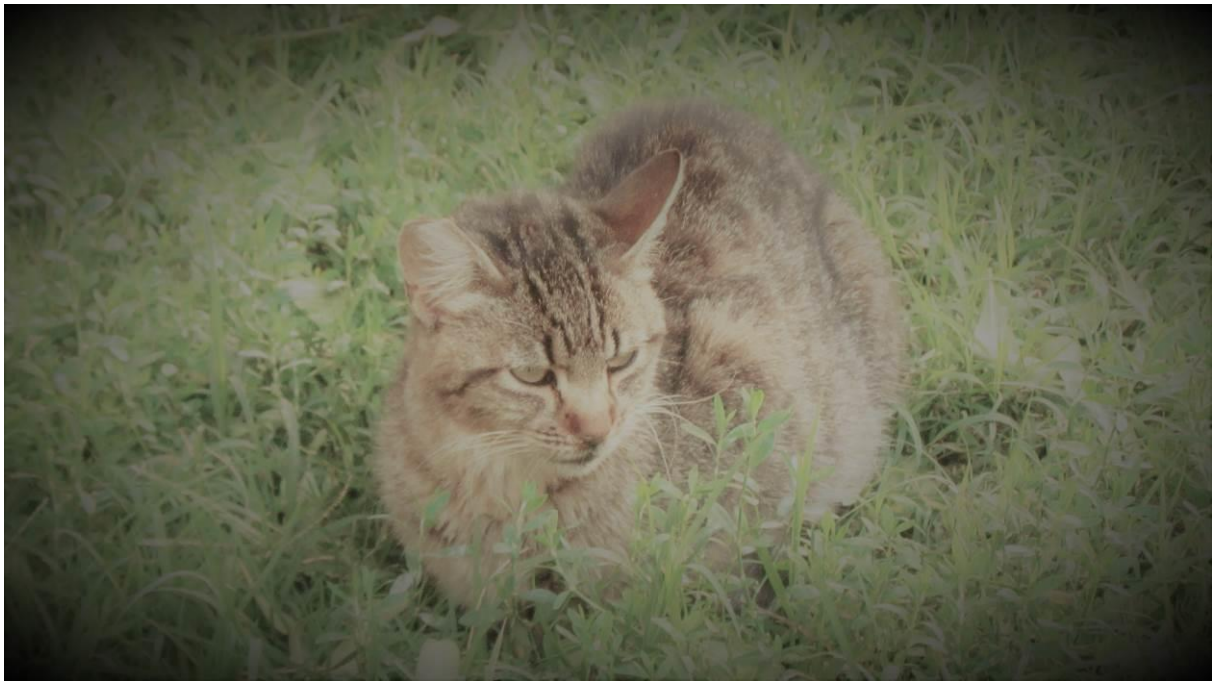


Photo 70. Montenegro has lots of cats. While there is of course so much to see in this wonderful country the street cats and cafe kitties are certainly a draw for many of the visitors.

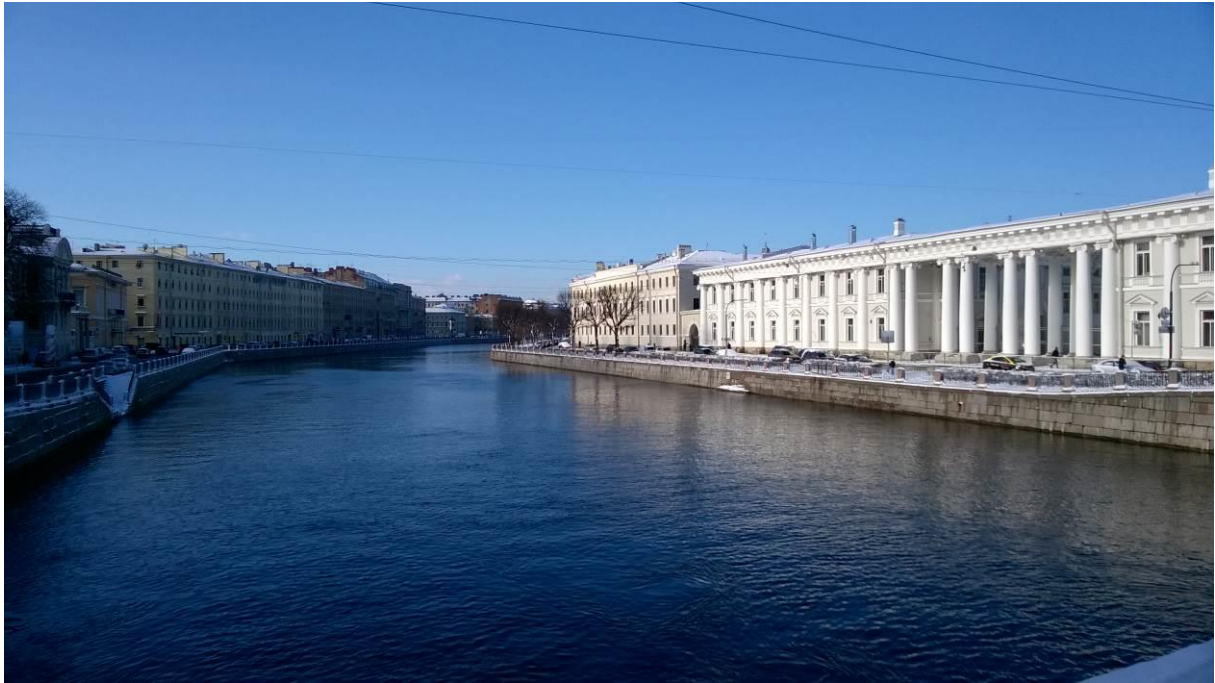


Photo 71. Saint Petersburg, the city of canals, is situated on the Neva River, at the head of the Gulf of Finland on the Baltic Sea.



Photo 72. Nevsky Prospekt, on the left bank of the Neva, is the main avenue in Saint Petersburg.



Photo 73. Saint Petersburg is considered by many tourism websites to be the most beautiful city in the world and is inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage.



Photo 74. Saint Petersburg has a range of architectural styles like neoclassical, neogothic, baroque, art nouveau, and soviet architecture.



Photo 75. Saint Petersburg has 103 universities, 235 museums, 130 parks, and gardens.

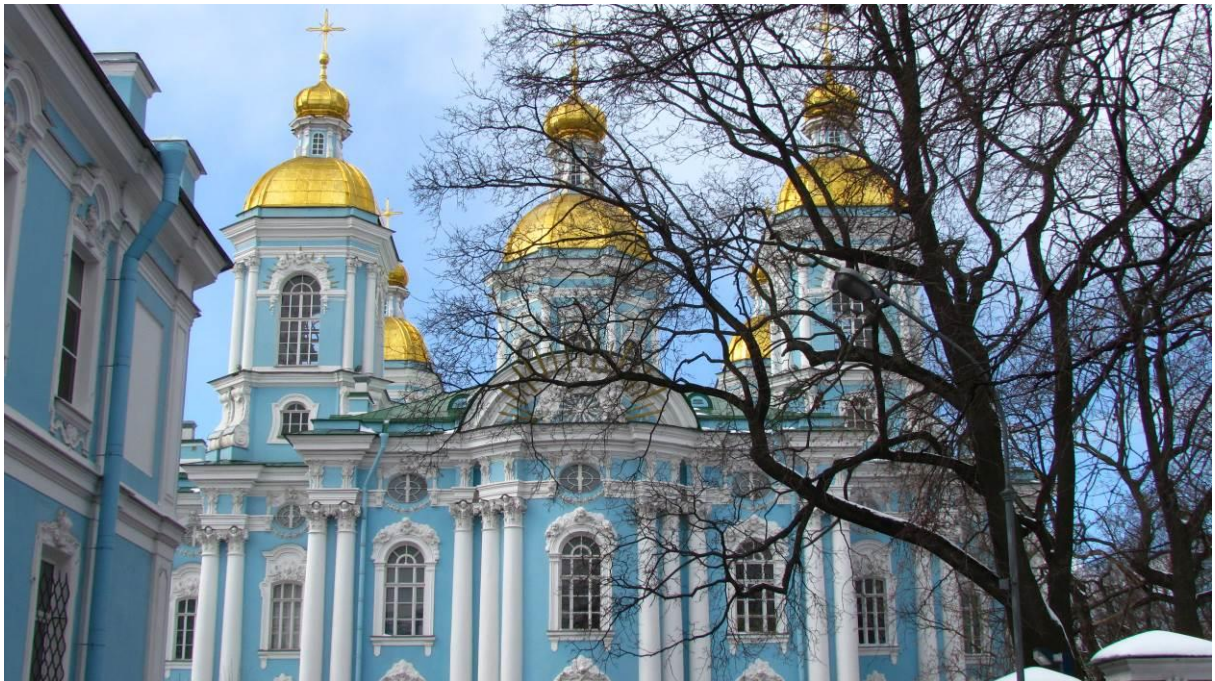


Photo 76. The Resurrection of the Christ the Savior (Smolny) Cathedral of the Novodevichiy convent is a unique example of Russian religious baroque.



Photo 77. The first architects tasked with building the city correctly assessed the value of urban development along the Neva. The river became the main architectural axis of the new Russian capital.

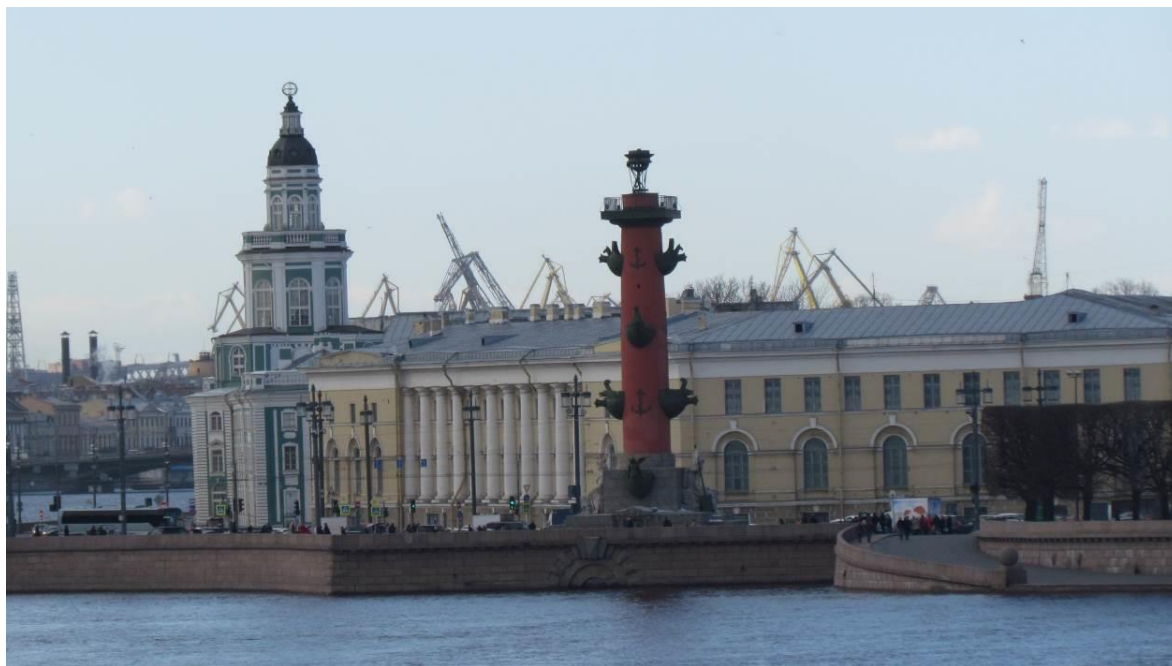


Photo 78. Almost all of the major attractions of Saint Petersburg are either placed directly beside the water or can be easily seen from a boat. But the main attraction is, of course, the Neva itself, creating a unique atmosphere in the Venice of the North, a town between sky and water.



Photo 79. Detail of the Hermitage, in Saint Petersburg, the biggest art museum in the world.



Photo 80. Detail of the Hermitage in Saint Petersburg, seen from the Neva River.



Photo 81. The Armorial Hall of the Winter Palace, Saint Petersburg, is a vast chamber originally designed for official ceremonies.

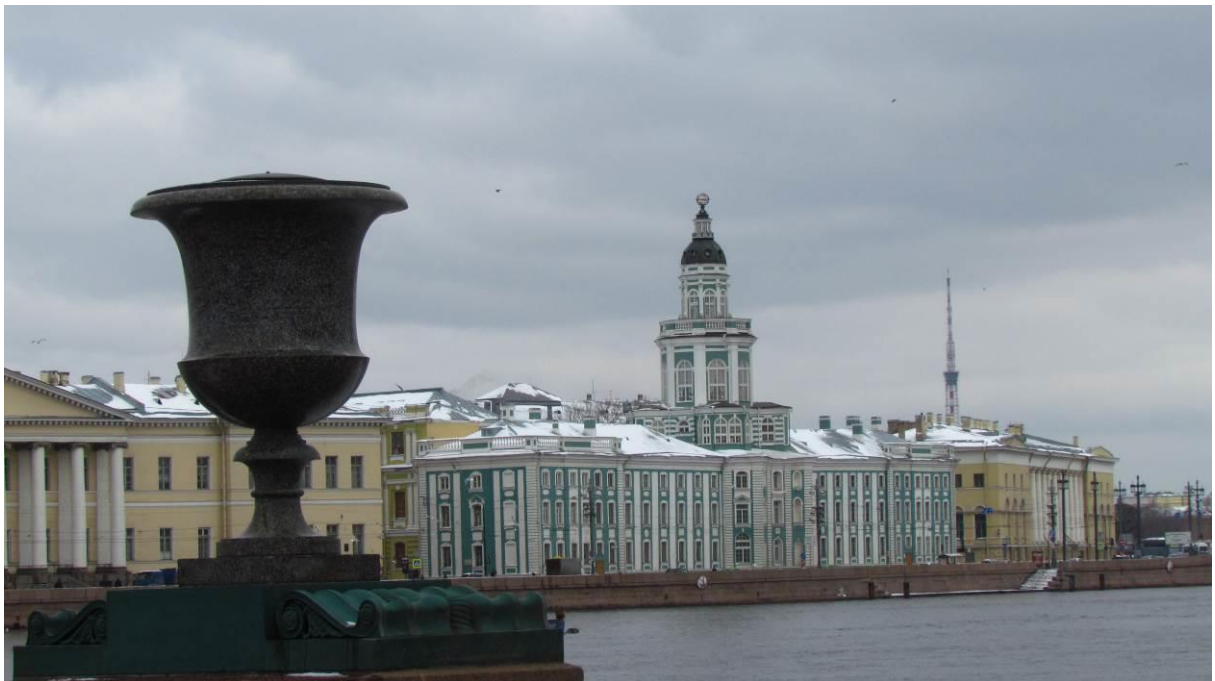


Photo 82. The historic architecture of Saint Petersburg's city center, mostly Baroque and Neoclassical buildings of the 18th and 19th centuries, is largely preserved.



Photo 83. The Neva is the main waterway of Saint Petersburg, and the town is situated along its banks and across the islands of its broad delta.



Photo 84. Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (the Kunstkamera), in Saint Petersburg.



Photo 85. The Zoological Museum of the Zoological Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences, in Saint Petersburg, is one of the largest nature history museums in the world.

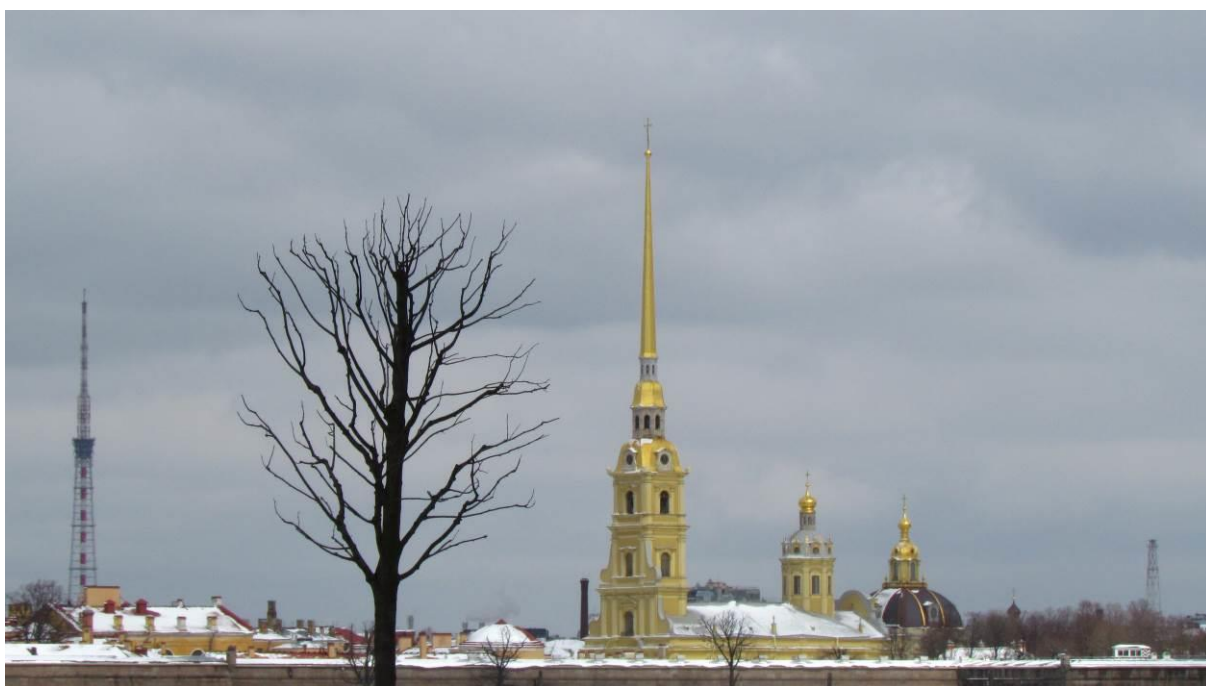


Photo 86. The ensemble of Peter and Paul Fortress with the Peter and Paul Cathedral takes a dominant position on Zayachy Island along the right bank of the Neva River.



Photo 87. The Peter and Paul Fortress is the original citadel of Saint Petersburg, Russia, founded by Peter the Great in 1703. Between the first half of the 1700s and early 1920s, it served as a prison for political criminals. It has been a museum since 1924.



Photo 88. The Peter and Paul Fortress, in Saint Petersburg, was built to Domenico Trezzini's designs from 1706 to 1740 as a star fortress.



Photo 89. Cat from Tikhvin Cemetery, in Saint Petersburg, where the tombs of Dostoyevsky and Piotr Ilitch Tchaikovsky are.



Photo 90. Cats have been loved in Russia for centuries. These felines can be seen walking calmly through the streets of Saint Petersburg or taking a nap somewhere in the city.



Photo 91. Russians are feline-friendly. No country in the world has a higher rate of cat ownership. Nearly 60 percent of Russians have at least one cat.



Photo 92. Friendly street cat in Saint Petersburg, Russia.



Photo 93. In the Russian language, *koshka* is the general translation for cat, but it can also mean female cat. *Kot* is a male cat. *Kotyata* is a kitten, and *Kotyonok* is a kitten.



Photo 94. Saint Petersburg is a magical place, in part thanks to its feline denizens.



Photo 95. Unlike in Western countries, cats have been considered good luck in Russia for centuries.

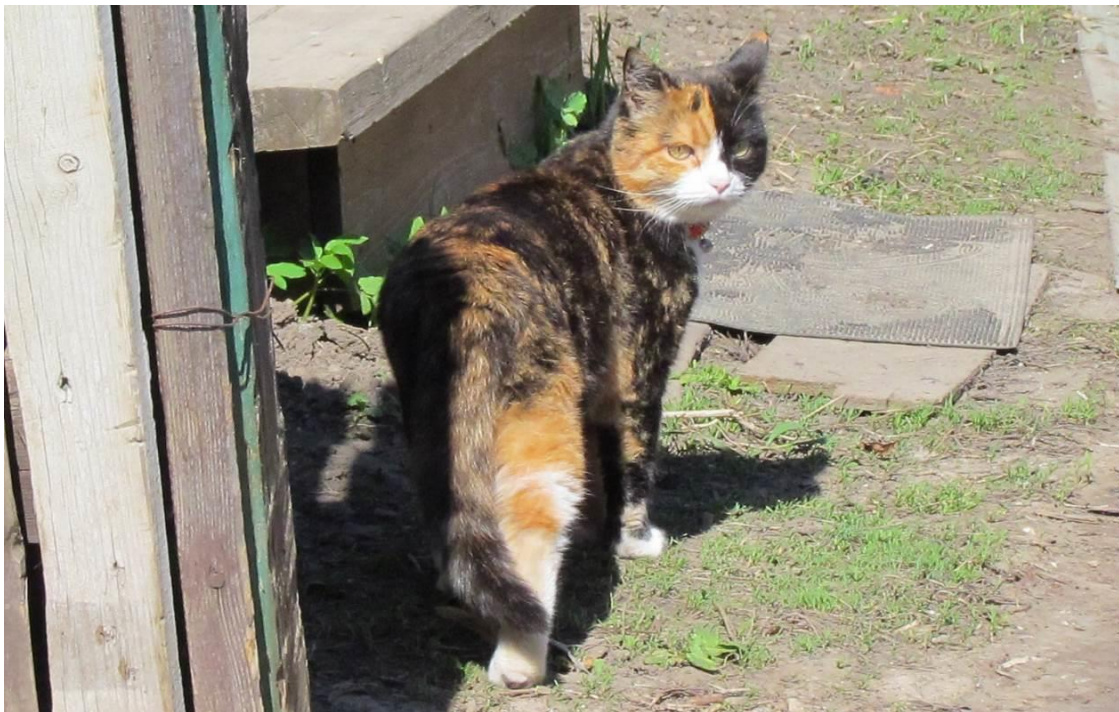


Photo 96. Owning a cat, and especially letting one into a new house before the humans move in, is said to bring good fortune. Cats in Orthodox Christianity are the only animals that are allowed to enter the temples.



Photo 97. Discovering places and photographing, are two of my passions.



Photo 98. Nina showed up at my mother's house, in a small town in the interior of Brazil, adopted the house as its new home, and is an important companion for an old person who lives alone.



Photo 99. Mel, despite its sullen face in the photo, is very friendly, affectionate, and a great companion to my mother-in-law.



Photo 100. Sasha or Nhenhéu, as it is affectionately called, is the cat who has lived since it was born in our house on the coast of Brazil, on a beautiful beach in the city of Ubatuba.