


# Tsar Spangled Banner

Ekaterinburg was once a key focal point for the Red October revolution and the fall of the last Russian Tsar. Now, as its economy begins to boom, a new breed of rich oligarchs is emerging. **Mike MacEacheran** witnesses a silent revolution from the heart of the Urals.

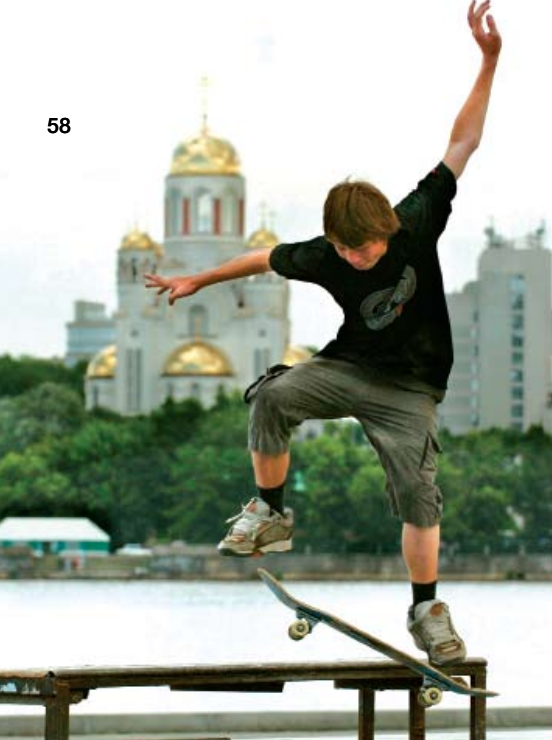




**I**F ANTON CHEKHOV, RUSSIA'S greatest ever playwright, had been born in Ekaterinburg today, rather than on the peripheries of the Russian motherland near the Black Sea, he would no doubt have been a very different man. Rather than looking to heart attack-inducing Russian pies and eye-watering potato drinks for his inspiration, he would instead dine on a mixture of sushi and Japanese haute cuisine whilst drinking fine English tea. Surprising, seductive, yet distinctly Soviet, Ekaterinburg is not the Russian city most visitors expect. Behind the now defunct iron curtain, it is a city opening up to new opportunities and new investments; a microcosm of the modern face of post-Soviet Russia. Forget the KGB spies, Olympic gymnasts and *Doctor Zhivago* DVDs – the capital of the

Urals is a modern, thriving metropolis where women dress as though ready for a Milanese catwalk and businessmen sign and shake million rouble deals before finishing their breakfast cappuccinos.

Ekaterinburg has a population of some 1.5 million people and reared the first ever president of the Russian federation, Boris Yeltsin. The Cyrillic letters etched on the street signs look like upside-down Alphabet spaghetti and the metro map may as well be a physics equation complicated enough to baffle Albert



Old and new meet in Ekaterinburg. The church in the background was erected on the spot where the Bolsheviks executed the Russian Tsar Nicholas II.

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Modern apartment blocks are rapidly replacing the old Soviet-era ones in Ekaterinburg.



Ekaterinburg's tourism industry is growing rapidly, partly fuelled by its history with the Romanov family.

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Einstein. "Ekaterinburg," the guide book tells me, is famous for "myths of lizard-queens and giant ground cats guarding caves full of lustrous treasure". Perhaps Tolstoy's *War and Peace* would be better.

Founded by the will of Peter I, first in the line of the Romanov Tsarist dynasty and better known as Peter the Great, Ekaterinburg has only recently managed to peer beyond its communist bloc walls. After the fall of the iron curtain in 1991, the city was officially opened for foreign visitors for the first time. Out went the military secrecy and in its place came investment, American multiplexes and homegrown Starbucks-

style coffee chains. But only very recently has it made itself heard above the economic fanfares from the Kremlin. Looking up at the statues on Istorichesky Skver (Historical Square), one is reminded of famous Russian generals such as Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great and Ivan the Great. Now KFC's Colonel Sanders takes a place in the city.

"During the last 15 years Ekaterinburg has changed a lot from the typical grey industrial Soviet city that people are used to seeing, to a modern, fast developing megalopolis with a unique geographical position on the border of Europe and Asia," explains local historian Konstantin

Brylyakov, from the Ekaterinburg Guide Centre. "The structure of the city's economy has changed. Now it's not only heavy industries, but new businesses such as trade, logistic and transport services, finance and different consumer services. Tourism is also growing quickly, especially business travel and Trans Siberian transit trips."

**HOW TIMES** change. In 1991 the city had less than 10 dilapidated hotels. Today, however, almost 80 brand new or reconstructed hotels are open, welcoming more than 500,000 visitors annually. According to the Ekaterinburg Guide Centre, the total financial revenue from the hospitality industry is estimated at US\$100 million per year. The skyline is awash with cranes constructing a mini-Manhattan.

Ignoring the Moscovite economic juggernaut, which though heavily affected by last year's financial recession is still home to more billionaires than any other city on Earth, Ekaterinburg has become a silent reformer; the perfect example of capitalist Russian restructuring. Once a bastion of mining and the precious stones market, it now has a noticeably young population – home to more than 100,000 students and 16 state-owned universities, thriving bars, restaurants and night clubs.

“Ekaterinburg is ‘the city with big shoulders’, like Chicago is in the USA,” said Brylyakov. “People who live here have a strong character – they are used to working hard to reach their goals. They are very creative, have initiative and are ambitious. They like their native city and prefer it to Moscow.”

Like Chicago, any lawlessness or corruption has been run out of town and the city now walks to a different beat. Investigating its flourishing weekend arts market on Lenina street, my steps are punctuated by hip hop, R’N’B and Russian folk-rock.

**BEYOND THE** Uspensky shopping mall and sashimi stalls, it becomes clear that Ekaterinburg doesn’t keep its heart and mind solely on the present. Although it may only be the fifth largest city in Russia, it is undoubtedly the most important in recent history. Against the backdrop of Ekaterinburg, Tsar Nicholas II and his family were assassinated by Bolshevik militia, an episode that changed the course of Russia forever.

In 1918, on the night of 16 July, the country was on the cusp of revolution. The Lenin-led Red Army was rebelling against Nicholas’ autocracy, the Romanov family and his supporters, the anti-Bolshevik white army. Kept under house arrest in Ekaterinburg, however, the Tsar’s family was unexpectedly executed in the basement of Ipatiev house in a brutal uprising. It was macabre, violent, and brought to an end nearly 300 years of rule from the Romanov dynasty. Although there still remains a lack of hard evidence, historians believe that the order came directly from Vladimir Lenin himself. It was all the momentum the civil war needed to ignite.

A short 16-kilometre trip out of the city one can find Ganina Yama, the location of the once secret Romanov family grave. There is funereal silence there and even the birds seem to have respect for the dead. Looking down on the graves from what has become Russia’s most notorious episode, it



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India’s Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (L), Brazil’s President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva (C) and Russia’s President Dmitry Medvedev met for a BRIC summit in Ekaterinburg last year.



Heavy industry, such as aluminium smelting, were once the mainstay of Ekaterinburg’s economy. That has changed with increasing diversification.

is hard not to be caught up by the forces of history. “It is always emotional coming here,” my guide Anastasia whispers me to me. “This is where modern Russia was born.”

For Russian visitors the Ganina Yama has become an emotional pilgrimage. They travel from afar to pay their respects to the last in the line of Russia’s canonised Tsars. “For many Russians of my generation and younger people, the murder of the Tsar family is the main symbol of the Russian Revolution and the civil war,” Anastasia explains, punctuating the silence. “It is a symbol of Russian tragedy.” Despite the sadness

it is an immensely beautiful place: seven churches made from wood in the best tradition of Russian architecture – known as the Monastery of the Holy Martyrs and built in honour of the Russian saints – are camouflaged in the forest and the sun effortlessly gleams through the trees.

Tied emotionally and historically to Ekaterinburg, the Romanov memorial is a clear sign that modern Russia is still united to its past tragedies as much as its modern triumphs. Another of Chekov’s comrades, the romantic poet Fyodor Tyutchev, once said, “You can’t understand Russia with reason. You can only believe in her”. ■