

HOLIDAY GEOLOGY

The Amber Room, St Petersburg

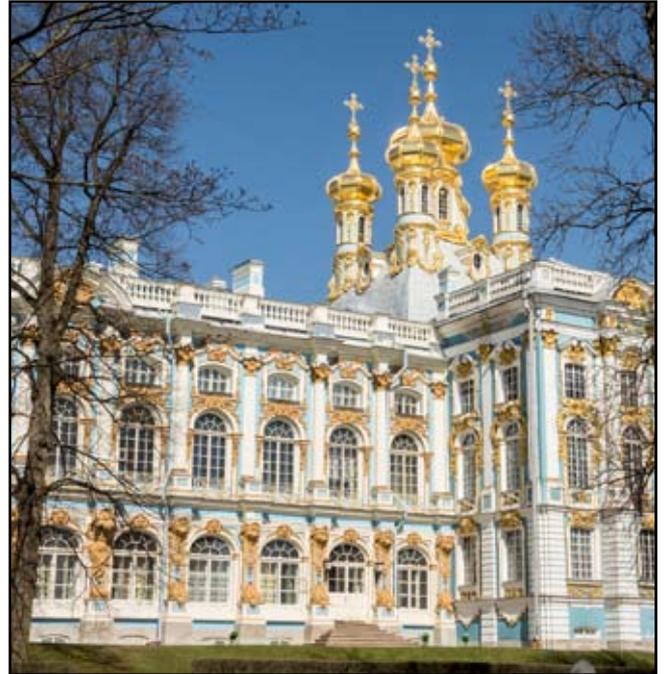
The story of Baltic amber was told by Michael Czajkowski in the *Mercian Geologist* (pages 86-92, in Volume 17, 2009). Whereas few travelling geologists have the opportunity to visit the mines near Kaliningrad, the Amber Room in St. Petersburg is rather more accessible, and is one of the world's most remarkable geological features.

First constructed at the Charlottenberg Palace in Berlin in 1701, the amber panels that form the walls of the Amber Room were given to the Tsar of Russia by the King of Prussia in 1716; after sojourns in various palaces in St. Petersburg, they were incorporated into a room in the Catherine Palace at Tsarskoye Seloe (now often known as Pushkin), 25 km south of the city, in 1755. But the Nazi army looted the palace in 1941, and the amber panels were taken by train to Königsberg (then in Germany, but now known as Kaliningrad). Recorded in the inventory of Königsberg Castle in December 1941, the panels have not been seen since. Later Russian investigations concluded that the amber was lost in the bombing-induced fire at the castle; but nothing has been proven, and its disappearance remains a mystery.

Between 1979 and 2003, a complete replica of the Amber Room has been made in its original position within the restored Catherine Palace. This was a massive undertaking, using amber from the same

source on the Baltic coast of Kaliningrad (now a Russia enclave between Poland and Lithuania). A detailed, black-and-white, photographic record from the 1920s, together with a single, pre-1941, Autochrome colour image on glass, allowed craftsmen to make a copy that is exact in every detail.

Catherine Palace is now firmly on the tourist circuit for a day trip out of St. Petersburg. This does mean that the summer sees an endless stream of visitors on the palace tour, being led, rather too briskly, through



The opulent facade of the magnificent Catherine Palace at Tsarskoye Seloe, with the Amber Room behind three of the tall first-floor windows.



The Amber Room in the Catherine Palace, with its usual crowd of visitors, viewed from one of its doorways.

Part of a wall panel in the Amber Room, with bas-relief ornamentation, all carved in amber, that is surrounded by the mosaic of amber slices; this view is about 120 cm wide.



A magnificent specimen of Baltic green amber that contains well-preserved flies and many other insect fragments; the green colour derives from leaf material caught in the original tree resin; this piece, less than 20 mm long, can be viewed through a magnifying glass in the Amber Museum in the Polish city of Gdansk.



a succession of opulent rooms, including the Amber Room. This is the one room where photographs are not allowed, and the rule is enforced by very Russian, and rather fearsome, lady attendants, but photos can be taken on a long lens (without flash) from outside the room; how close one can be to the doorway depends on the attendant of the day interpreting the rule as no photos *of* or *in* the room.

The Amber Room is well worth the trouble of Russian bureaucracy. It is about 9 by 10 metres, with one wall of windows. The other three walls have 55 square metres of amber mosaic in eight panels that reach from floor to cornice. Frames around the panels, and bas-relief ornamentation within them are beautifully carved in solid amber. Pilasters, doorways and window frames are all made of wood gilded with gold leaf. The total effect is truly spectacular.

The elements of the amber mosaic are mostly 50-100 mm across and randomly shaped, though they are fitted together perfectly. The carved amber is in larger pieces. Colours vary from yellow to red to brown, but there is none of the milky, opaque amber that is generally from older sources. There are almost no inclusions in the Amber Room material, and certainly no recognisable insects, as any mineral with inclusions was better used in jewellery or in museum displays. It is claimed that six tonnes of the best-quality output from the Kaliningrad mines were used to re-construct the Amber Room, though less than half that is now in the room after the raw material was sliced or carved. Amber requires careful upkeep, as it can dry out and crumble over time, but the Amber Room is currently in excellent condition.

Many, or even most, visitors to St. Petersburg call in from cruise ships, and probably stop by Gdansk on the way. In which case, the Amber Museum should not be missed. It is in the old prison tower at the western end of Długa, the splendid pedestrianized main street. Gdansk (once known as Danzig) lies towards the western end of the amber-rich Baltic beaches, and the museum has some magnificent specimens on display, both raw and carved. Some of its insects in amber are spectacular, and they are genuine; most of the insect-bearing material on sale at many Baltic towns is fake, with modern insects encased in plastic. The Gdansk museum also has some green amber, with its colour derived from chlorophyll in leaf material that was caught up in the sticky resin. Baltic amber provides a fascinating aspect of geology.

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