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GETTING THERE

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AMAZING:
Frederick II

Spanish until unification with Italy.

For my mission, I headed north to Palermo, passing Agrigento on the way, a city dating from 580BC with its breathtaking Valley of the Temples.

Within Palermo's magnificent cathedral I found the tomb of the greatest Sicilian, King Roger II – and next to him, in a gigantic casket, lay the Wonder of the World himself.

Frederick II was the most extraordinary monarch in Christendom – a Christian emperor who spoke Arabic and travelled with a harem. He scandalised the world by wondering if Mohammed and Jesus were frauds and seduced his wife's lady-in-waiting on her wedding night. Frederick also conducted scientific experiments, fought the Popes and won Jerusalem on a crusade. He may have died in 1250, but on my visit this year there were fresh flowers by his grave.

Visiting the site was a satisfying end to a wonderful holiday. We had hoped to find a hotel that suited us all – where the weather was hot and the food delicious. At the Verdura, we found the ideal family resort – beautiful, immaculately run, yet relaxing and fun-loving, adored by children and adults.

As we packed up, I wondered if our friends from the plane had been as successful in their search for Brando, Pacino and De Niro.

a wonderful, cultured town

As a first-time visitor to the city, it's the scale of things that really strikes you. The buildings are big – very, very big – while the squares are majestic and also on a grand scale. The Palace Square, for example, with its Alexander Column centrepiece, is jaw-droppingly enormous. And Nevsky Prospekt, the city's main shopping drag – although it has all manner of interesting buildings – is a get-your-walking-shoes-on 4.5km in length.

Theatre, opera and ballet are all big business in St Petersburg, a city that can claim a host of literary and musical giants as its own. Dostoyevsky, Tchaikovsky, Borodin, Nabokov and Pushkin were all natives, while the dance fraternity can boast Rudolf Nureyev, Anna Pavlova and Mikhail Baryshnikov.

When I visited there were renovations going on at the Mariinsky Theatre (formerly known as the Kirov) so we took ourselves along to the Mussorgsky instead for a performance of Borodin's best-

known opera, Prince Igor. It was a magical experience – the music itself, the people-watching, and the cheap-but-delicious Russian champagne served during the interval in one of those faded-grandeur, mirrored salons in the upper reaches of the opera house. It was also fascinating for the retail stalls. Yes, stalls – selling all manner of jewellery and artefacts, thrown up in the foyer of the opera house just before the performance. Bizarre.

We travelled to St Petersburg under our own steam, booking flights and hotel directly and spending a night in Helsinki on our way. But if you fancy going as part of a group, you can do that too, with a number of options available. The Travel Department, for example, have a few Russian tours on their schedule for next month.

Whatever way you visit St Petersburg, enjoy. It's a beautiful, vibrant, historic city. And a night at the opera – in the footsteps of Anna Karenina – could be just the icing on the cake...

By Yvonne Gordon

The story of Che Guevara's involvement in the Cuban Revolution has been well documented, and even now there is huge interest in the story of the doctor-turned-revolutionary whose image became a worldwide icon.

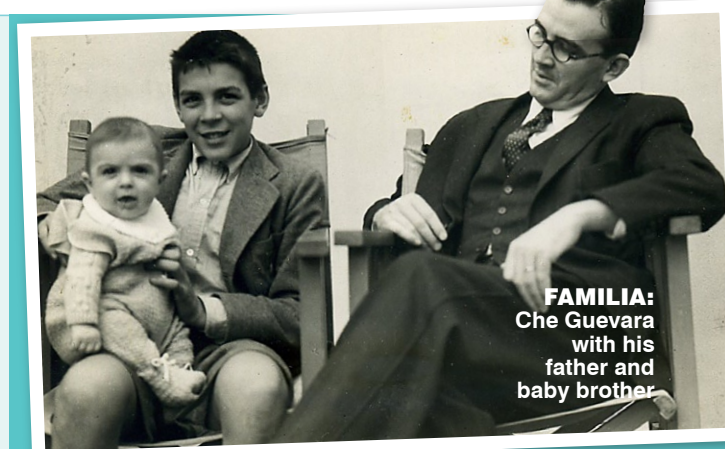
I met his brother, Juan Martín Guevara de la Serna, in Cuba recently, to hear about the new tourist trail which has been developed in Argentina, mapping the places that were significant in Che's life.

Ernesto Guevara was born in Rosario, Argentina, in 1928, and visitors can now see his birthplace as part of the Caminos Del Che trail.

The trail then goes on to Misiones to visit Che's first home (now a museum), where he lived from 1928 to 1929. It also visits the Ernesto Che Guevara House-museum at Alta Gracia in Córdoba province, where he lived for 11 years with his family. The final stop is La Pastera in San Martín de los Andes – where there is another museum dedicated to him.

The Caminos del Che was set up by Juan Martín, who explains that, although some of the stops on the trail are thousands of kilometres apart, there are plans to offer integrated packages in future – and to connect it with other countries in Latin America visited by Che.

The 69-year-old says he gets a surprised reaction when people find out he's Che's brother – that he exists and that he's normal. That's the reason he came up with the



FAMILIA:
Che Guevara
with his
father and
baby brother

On Che's trail through Clare and Argentina

idea of the trail – he wants people to understand that his brother was also a normal person.

'In Cuba, he's a perfect guy,' he says. 'I am someone who can say that it's not like that. I give another view... to make people understand that he was a normal person, who then was transformed into the least normal person and that anyone can do that.'

Juan Martín is proud of his Irish heritage – their father was Ernesto Guevara Lynch and his grandmother, Ana Lynch, was a descendant of emigrants who went to the US from Galway. Indeed, Ernesto once said that the 'blood of Irish rebels' flowed in Che's

veins. And Che actually came to Ireland in 1961, a visit that will be celebrated by a Latin-American festival this month.

The second Che Do Bheatha festival, which takes place in Kilkee, Co. Clare, from September 28 to 30, will also focus on the huge Irish influence on many Latin American countries, and will include music, poetry, dance, film and workshops (see www.kilkeefestival.com for details). Che's daughter Aleida Guevara, a human rights advocate, will be guest of honour.

● For more information on Los Caminos del Che, visit www.loscaminosdelche.gov.ar, www.altagracia.gov.ar or www.lapastera.org.ar.

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