



Russia | Moscow

“The Legend of the Monument of Peter the Great Russia”

What in the world is more permanent than a monument? No sooner is man born than he falls into a perpetual cycle of change: moving from here to there, name change, then a change of occupation and of opinions, and finally for good measure a sex change. A monument, on the other hand, doesn't change its name, its creator is known, it is eternally anchored on its plinth in the center of a square or a park. But sometimes unforeseen changes also happen to a monument... In 1997, in the center of the Russian capital on the Golden Island, a nearly 100 meter high monument was erected in honor of the 300th anniversary of the Russian Fleet, which is known rather as a monument to the reforming Czar Peter the Great and is the work of Surab Zereteli. Holding a scroll in his hand and with a wafting cape draped over his arm, the first Emperor of the Russian Empire looks on Moscow. Yet Czar Peter never liked Moscow and even moved the capital of the Russian state to his new city of St. Petersburg. Moscow of course then recovered its capital status in 1918, but the Muscovites invented the legend that Surab Zereteli's Peter is in reality not Peter but Columbus. According to the Moscow legend, Zereteli, the founder of the first museum for contemporary art in Russia, intended to give the Americans a statue of Columbus on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of America's discovery. But neither the United States nor Spain, nor yet a Latin American country, wanted the statue. So, according to the legend, the statue was mysteriously given a new head – that, namely, of the Russian czar. This blend of Peter and Columbus, fitted out with a single-masted ship on a pedestal decorated with ram bows, found its place on an artificial island in the center of Moscow. Whether because of the mysterious origin of the monument or the personality of Peter the Great, or because of something else, the monument preyed on the minds of the Muscovites. Some donated money for the demolition of the monument; revolutionary divers put dynamite under Peter's feet; architects proposed shrouding the monument and turning it into a viewing platform; while the most radical group wanted to send it on a long cruise to Latin America But why ship it to Latin America when Russian cities such as Petrozavodsk, Voronezh, Pereslavl-Zalesski and Izhevsk were willing to give Peter a new home? For the time being, Peter doesn't seem to have the slightest inclination to lift anchor. He still stands on the River Moskva, behind him the Kremlin, before him the Muzeon Sculpture Park, where many monuments of the Soviet era have found their last refuge ...