

ST. PETERSBURG,



Explore a treasure trove for history buffs

by Greg Rienzi

If St. Petersburg listened to its billing, the northwestern Russian city might just suffer a calamitous identity crisis. The city, formerly known as Petrograd (1914-1924) and Leningrad (1924-1991), has been dubbed, among other names, the Venice of the North, the city of 300 bridges, the city of palaces, the outdoor museum of Neoclassicism (for those so inclined) and the fortress city.

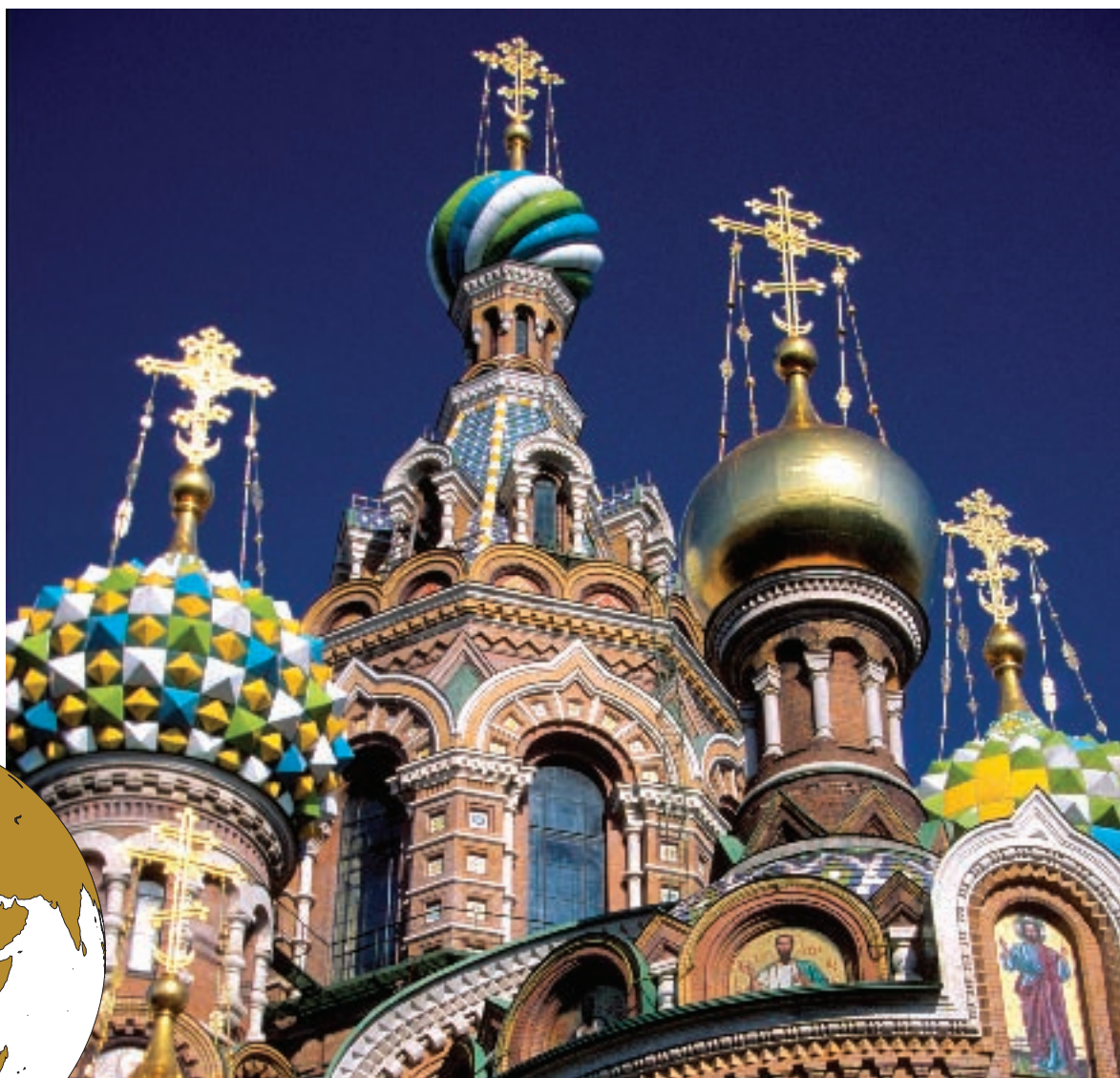
It owes the latter moniker to the city's oldest building, the Peter and Paul Fortress, built in 1703 by Peter the Great, the city's creator who wished it to be his "window on Europe." The northernmost major city in the world, St. Petersburg is located on the delta of the Neva River and eastern tip of the Baltic Sea.



RUSSIA



No trip to the city would be complete without a visit to the Russian Museum and the Hermitage, Russia's answer to the Louvre.



St. Petersburg's Church of Our Saviour on the Spilled Blood is one of the city's most famous icons. The Alexander Column (right), in the center of Palace Square, is 155 feet 8 inches tall and weighs 600 tons. It was erected in under two hours without the use of modern cranes.

Today, the former capital is Russia's second largest city (population 4.7 million) and is considered the country's cultural heart. No wonder, as it boasts not just the nation's, but some of the world's greatest museums and art venues.

No trip to the city would be complete without a visit to the Russian Museum and the Hermitage, Russia's answer to the Louvre. Founded in 1764 by Empress Catherine II (later Catherine the Great) as a museum for the royal court, the Hermitage is home to, among other items, a nearly unmatched gold collection and thousands of sculptures, antiquities, drawings and paintings, including the works of such masters as da Vinci, Raphael, Rembrandt and Monet.

The city's most striking features are its green spaces (it has more than 200 parks and gardens), vast open courtyards, long and straight boulevards and its canals, hence both the Venice and bridge associations. It's actually built over 90 waterways and 42 islands, connected by more than 300 bridges. Katya Chilingiri, a photographer born and raised in St. Petersburg

who now lives in the United States, said that perhaps the best, and most romantic, way to take in the city is by boat tour. "But stick to the small canals," she warns, unless you bring along some Dramamine.

Chilingiri says that the city illuminates at night unlike any other. It's hard not to be transfixed, she says, by the lights on the bridges or those that cascade down the facades of the city's many palaces, museums, churches and other architectural gems, built predominantly in the 18th and 19th centuries by Russia's elite.

One of the most popular attractions for sightseers is the Church of Our Saviour on the Spilled Blood, the multicolored, onion-domed church built on the spot where Emperor Alexander II was assassinated in 1881.

Visitors to the city might notice an almost split personality caused by the juxtaposition of St. Petersburg's Russian heritage and European leanings. Echoes of this can be found in the architecture, which, depending on the alley you turn down,

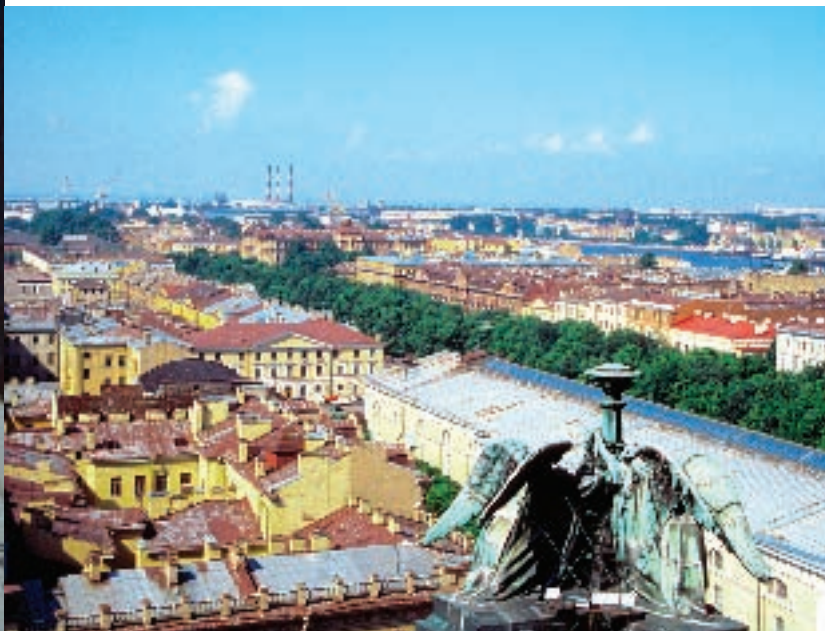


When to go: May to July during the "White Nights." The city stays up around the clock thanks to the twilight during these months. To avoid crowds, early fall is good. For those who can brave winter's chilling temperatures (average of 18 degrees Fahrenheit, minus 8 degrees Celsius), the city in December and January becomes a fairytale setting with frozen-over canals, glittering palaces, snow-blanketed parks and a town literally aglow.

What to do: When you're done with the museums and palaces (be sure to check out the Winter Palace, Peterhof, and Yusupov's Palace), head to Nevsky Prospect, St. Petersburg's lively main street and a prime place for shopping, entertainment and night life. Speaking of night life, a popular spot is Purga, where it's New Year's every night and it's never the same twice. When you're ready to eat, a good destination is Brodyachaya Sobaka, translated "Stray Dog," a literary landmark that features a large selection of Russian and European cuisine. Can't spend enough money? Go to Gostiny Dvor, the huge (165,000-square-foot) department store, one of the world's first.

Where to stay: The Corinthia Nevskij Palace Hotel (downtown) and the Grand Hotel Europe, a world-class luxury hotel in the center of the city. Even if you don't stay there, stop by its gorgeously appointed Lobby Bar, known by locals and tourists as the best place in town for a nightcap.

The people: Using a little Russian can go a long way with the city's residents, who are generally open and hospitable. But don't be put off by the lack of smiles, city native Katya Chilingiri says. "People might take this as a sign that people there aren't friendly or don't want to talk to you, but there is just no tradition to say 'hi,' smile and ask how you are, like there is in other countries. It's not unfriendliness, it's a sign of a serious people."



St. Petersburg's brightly colored buildings are a sharp contrast to most other Russian cities.

can make you think you're in Vienna, Venice or Moscow. What you won't find are many Lenin statues anymore, most of which came down in the 1990s. Yet symbols of the city's industrial and Soviet past can still be found everywhere.

History buffs will find plenty to discover in St. Petersburg, whether it's Decembrist Square, named after the armed revolt held there on December 14, 1825, or the city's many statues and monuments, the most instantly recognizable of which is the equestrian statue of Peter the Great. Those with a keen historical eye might catch the small blue signs, decorated by flowers, on the side of buildings that honor the nearly 1 million who died during the 29-month siege of the city by the German army during World War II.

The city is also the birthplace of many famous Russians,

including Anton Chekhov, Aleksandr Pushkin, Piotr Tchaikovsky, Fyodor Dostoyevsky and, of more recent vintage, Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Blair A. Ruble, director of the Kennan Institute (covering Russia and surrounding states) in Washington, D.C., says that St. Petersburg has earned its reputation as one of the great cities of Europe and the world. Ruble says that those who visit might be surprised to find an active and eclectic music scene (jazz, classical, rock, etc.) and a certain magical energy in the air. "The city feels like it should be haunted," he says.

Ruble recommends trips to the Russian Museum and the Mariinsky Opera and Ballet Theater. Whatever you do, he adds, try to get from point A to point B by foot.

"It's one of the greatest cities to walk in," he says. "Whenever I go, I can just spend a whole day walking up and down the canals." ■

What's in a Name?

The city of St. Petersburg has a storied history and a series of different names.

1703 City of St. Petersburg founded.

1712 Decree issued ordering people to move to St. Petersburg from across Russia.

1724 Peter the Great moves state institutions to St. Petersburg and it becomes official capital of Russia.

1812 Large memorials are erected to mark victory over Napoleon.

1824 City seriously damaged in floods.

1914 Beginning of World War I, St. Petersburg's name changed to the more Russian-sounding Petrograd.

1924 Death of Lenin. Petrograd renamed Leningrad in his honor.

1965 Leningrad named City of Valor.

1991 Attempted coup against Mikhail Gorbachev hastens end of U.S.S.R. Leningrad is renamed St. Petersburg after referendum.



Travel Tips From a Local

St. Petersburg is dense with history, says Jeff Jones. You can't escape it, nor would you want to.

Jones, who is general manager of Dixon Russia and moved to the city with his family in April 2006 to help develop a Russian market for the company, says he still gets excited as he roams through Kolomna (Dostoyevsky's neighborhood and the setting for *Crime and Punishment*) and Palace Square, the city's main square that is dominated by the famous Alexander Column, a 155-foot-tall monument to the Russian military victory over Napoleon's France, and the sprawling Winter Palace, home to the Hermitage.

In the winter, be sure to wear gloves and a hat on these strolls, he says, as it's predictably bitter. The city's rivers and canals freeze this time of year and the temperature, even on an unseasonably warm day in January, will only creep up to the high 30s. Beyond the cold conditions, the lack of daylight also will take some time adjusting to.

"It's dark and gloomy [during the winter], but there is a unique charm to it," he says.

In contrast, the city's mood transforms completely during the summer's "White Nights," when everything and everybody moves outside. Visitors who come between late May to early July can expect an abundance of parades and festivals, he says. Nevsky Prospect, the city's main thoroughfare, in particular radiates a party atmosphere and thousands descend upon the area daily to eat and drink on restaurant patios.

Cruising the Neva River and the city's canals during White Nights is a must, Jones says. So, too, is marveling at the dozens of palaces the city has to offer, many of which have retained their original grandeur and are open to the public.

Jones cautions that St. Petersburg is not all palaces, museums and theaters, however. Fishing is great in the warmer months, he says, and the local soccer team, FC Zenit, provides great entertainment and has a rabid following. To get a sense of the citizens' attachment, the team's nickname is "bomzhi" (bums or hobos), referring to the fans' willingness to travel long distances for away matches and sleep in railway stations if need be.

Summer also draws both locals and visitors to the shore. Jones said there are a bevy of small, worthwhile towns to visit along the Gulf of Finland. He suggests Repino (45 minutes from downtown), named after the great Russian realist painter. It has a sandy beach and several outdoor cafes offering freshly grilled shashlik (Russian shish kebob) and cold Baltika beer, the local favorite.

Closer to the city's center is Krestovsky Island, located only about 15 minutes away by car. The popular island sports several quality oceanfront restaurants and bars, even one (Russia Rybalka) that allows you to catch your own fish, which is grilled on site. Jones's favorite island destination is a German beer restaurant called Karl and Frederick.

"It has lots of outdoor seating, good home-cooked meals and they brew their own beer," he says. It's family friendly, too, complete with petting zoo.

