

Welcome to St Petersburg

Built on a swamp, the imperial capital is today a dazzling metropolis whose sheer grandeur never fails to amaze.

City of the Tsars

Built from nothing by westward-looking Peter the Great, St Petersburg was to be from its inception a display of imperial Russia's growing status in the world. Fine-tuned by Peter's successors, who employed a host of Italian architects to add fabulous palaces and cathedrals to the city's layout, St Petersburg grew to be the Romanovs' showcase capital and Russia's first great, modern city. You can walk through the incredible gilded results today, just as the tsars would have done. Despite all that history has thrown at it, St Petersburg still feels every bit an imperial capital, a city largely frozen in time.

Venice of the North

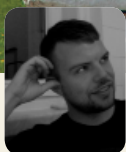
Whether you're crossing one of the 342 bridges in the city, cruising the elegant canals or watching the bridges over the mighty Neva River rise at night to allow the ships to pass through, you're never far from water in St Petersburg, which has earned the city unsurprising comparisons to Venice. The similarities don't stop there, though: wander the historic centre to see the canals lined by Italianate mansions and broken up by vast plazas adorned with baroque and neoclassical palaces.

Artistic Powerhouse

St Petersburg is an almost unrivalled treasure trove of art and culture. You can spend days in the Hermitage, seeing everything from Egyptian mummies to Picassos, while the Russian Museum, spread over four sumptuous palaces, is perhaps the best collection of Russian art in the world. Add to this world-class ballet and opera at the Mariinsky Theatre, classical concerts at the Shostakovich Philharmonia and a slew of big-name music festivals over summer, and you won't be stuck for cultural nourishment. If contemporary art is more your thing, there's also the fantastic new Erarta Museum, showcasing the best in modern Russian art, and a buzzing gallery scene.

White Nights

The city's White Nights are legendary: those long summer days when the sun barely dips below the horizon. Revelry begins in May, when spring finally comes to the city and parks are filled with flowering trees, and peaks in mid-June, when the sky doesn't get dark, festivals pack out concert halls and the entire city seems to be partying over the brief but glorious summer. But don't worry – even when the skies are grey and the ground covered in snow, St Petersburg's rich culture still dazzles and delights.



Why I Love St Petersburg

By Tom Masters, Author

There is something about St Petersburg that gets under your skin. Despite preferring Moscow when I first came to Russia 15 years ago, St Petersburg lingered; its colours and incredible light stayed with me; its history haunted me. When I came to live in Russia in 2000, I didn't hesitate for a moment to choose St Petersburg as the city to settle in. Today what excites me about the city is the growing underground art and music scene, the hedonistic atmosphere and the sense that great things are once again happening here. The city is emerging from Moscow's shadow and there's never been such a good time to visit.

For more about our authors, see p272.