

# INTRODUCING ST PETERSBURG



*The candy stripes of Chesme Church (p146)*

It seemed like a lark. When Peter the Great built this city on a swamp, his subjects humoured the Emperor. When he declared it the new capital, they were less amused.

But history has shown that the forward-thinking, Westward-looking tsar was inspired. Gradually, St Petersburg evolved from a swampy backwater into a modern European city, Russia's 'window to the West'. Unlike Moscow's red bricks and onion domes, St Petersburg's network of canals and baroque and neoclassical architecture give the city a European flavour, no doubt because it was built by Italian architects. Even the residents of St Petersburg fancy themselves 'European' and somehow slightly more sophisticated than their more easterly compatriots.

St Petersburg has always been a city of ideas. Petersburgers incited the Russian Revolution, ushering in 70 years of communist rule. And it was St Petersburg that encouraged democracy when the tide began to change.

Nowadays, this city's citizens are breaking down the barriers of generations past and exploring new ideas, investigating the possibilities of consumerism, creativity and career. It's not only Rastrelli's architecture and Tchaikovsky's operas that entice visitors, but also beatnik bands, edgy art galleries, underground clubs and delectable dining. St Pete's bohemian side gives a glimpse into the 21st century; and (to borrow a communist slogan) the future is bright!

St Petersburg is legendary for its White Nights: those long summer days when the sun barely dips below the horizon. Revels start in May, when the city finally succumbs to spring and the parks are filled with flowering trees. But even when the skies are grey and the ground is covered in snow, the rich culture of St Petersburg dazzles and delights.

## ST PETERSBURG LIFE

Despite the city's history of radicalism, residents of St Petersburg eschew innovation when it comes to changing the face of their beloved Piter.

Controversy surrounds the city's spurt of development. Residents are galvanised by the construction of a modern Mariinsky Theatre. Plans to build a super-tall skyscraper have provoked massive protests. Even the refurbishment of a long-deserted island on the edge of the centre is raising eyebrows. 'That old Petersburg, with its empty squares...full of picturesque ruins, it's being torn down,' complained one activist. 'Everything will spin and shine according to European standards.'

This lament captures the concern of many residents – not only that their cherished city will lose its aesthetic appeal, but also that hidden places will be uncovered, that everything old will be new again.

Nobody can deny that St Petersburg looks spectacular. Hundreds of theatres, palaces and historic buildings have been overhauled. Luxury hotels, shopping malls and entertainment complexes are bringing the city into the 21st century. Residents undoubtedly appreciate this investment into their hometown. But there is a fear that amid all the upgrades, something special – something uniquely St Petersburg – will be lost.

The city's counterculture has deep roots, as deep as the basement galleries hanging avant-garde paintings, as deep as the bomb shelters housing hip music clubs. The same anti-establishment strain that fuelled revolutions and inspired artistic movements today is expressed as conservatism: a reticence to accept the flashy consumerism and nonstop newness that pervades Russian culture. Or maybe, that *is* radicalism.



*Stepping out to enjoy St Petersburg's ballet and opera scene*

# THE AUTHOR

## Mara Vorhees



Mara's first visit to St Petersburg (then Leningrad) was in 1988, when she ditched her tour group for friendly black marketeers and thereafter dedicated herself to ending the Cold War.

She has returned to Russia many times, spending the first half of the 1990s learning Russian and the second half working on a foreign aid project in the Urals. She reappeared in St Petersburg to celebrate the city's tercentenary, where her favourite feature was the 'Ice Khaus', a frozen-solid ice-sculpture exhibit and vodka bar that was built on the Neva.

Mara has written extensively about Russia, her stories appearing in the *Boston Globe*, *LA Times* and *Executive Travel*. She is also the author of Lonely Planet's *Moscow City Guide* and co-author of *Russia & Belarus* and *Trans-Siberian Railway*. When she's not roaming around Russia, Mara lives in Somerville, Massachusetts with her husband and her cat.

### MARA'S TOP ST PETERSBURG DAY

My top day in St Petersburg starts with a steaming cappuccino and a croissant from Baltic Bread (p169). Around the corner is Maltevisky Market (p154), where I stock my kitchen with pink salmon, fresh produce and aromatic spices. After that I amble over to Tauride Gardens (p85) to watch the children

playing and lovers embracing amidst the spring blooms. Shopping and strolling has worked up my appetite, so I stop for a bowl of soup at the cosy subterranean Sunduk (p168).

I spend the afternoon at Pushkinskaya 10 (p91), a complex of galleries and studios, including the often wacky but always interesting Museum of Non-Conformist Art. Then I make my way through the crowds on Nevsky pr, stopping to browse at the charming art market in front of St Catherine Church and at the behemoth bookstore Dom Knigi (p151).

For the evening, I head to The Other Side (p184) to feast on eclectic eats and to hear live music from some tropical place. As the evening wears on, I duck around the corner to St Petersburg's hidden inner-city summer beach bar, Dunes (p180), where I dance away the rest of the night under the twilight sky.

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# GETTING STARTED

So you are planning a trip to St Petersburg? You are in for a treat. Russia's 'second capital' is the number-one attraction for many visitors.

St Petersburg is a far easier place to visit than it was a decade ago. Thanks to the proliferation of privately owned 'mini-hotels' and Western-operated luxury hotels, there is no shortage of excellent places to stay at all price levels. You'll probably want to make reservations – if only because many places are hard to find – but you will have no difficulty booking a place to your liking.

Upon arrival, you may not think that things are geared to tourists: signs are not in English and transport from the airport is tricky. But let it be known that this is like Disneyworld compared to the 'olden days'. Appreciate the advances that have been made and accept the rest as part of the adventure.

One word of warning: the single most annoying thing you will have to do is take care of your visa. Apply early and apply often (see p249).

## WHEN TO GO

Everybody wants to visit St Petersburg during White Nights (late June), when the sun never sets and the city celebrates all night long. It is indeed spectacular (see the boxed text, below). The downside, of course, is that because everyone wants to visit during White Nights, the crowds are bigger and prices are higher.

One way to avoid the pitfalls of the peak season is to come in May, when the days are already long and languorous. Temperatures may not be as warm, but the sky stays light late into the evening, and the summer crowds have not yet arrived. The city gets spruced up for the May holidays (p244) and for City Day (p18), both celebratory times in St Petersburg. However, many services, offices and museums have limited hours during the first half of May, due to the run of public holidays.

Early autumn is a standout season, when the city's parks are filled with colourful leaves and the cultural calendar recommences after the summer holidays. Winter is surprisingly

festive, as St Petersburg has a long tradition of brightening up the dark nights with cultural events, winter festivals and other celebrations. The deepest, darkest part of winter is undeniably cold but, if you are prepared, it can be an adventure. Furs and vodka keep people warm, and snow-covered landscapes are picturesque. Sledders and skiers are in seventh heaven.

No matter when you come, it's bound to rain a bit (unless it snows), so pack an umbrella. St Petersburg gets as much as 65cm of precipitation a year.

## FESTIVALS

June is the most celebratory month in St Petersburg. All of the institutions want to get in on the influx of tourists as the weather warms up, so the city's cultural calendar is packed. The last 10 days, especially, are marked by general merrymaking and staying out late (or early, depending on how you look at it). White Nights (see the boxed text, below) spills over into July. As temperatures rise, more

## WHITE NIGHTS

The sun has barely set over the Gulf of Finland when the eastern sky begins to grow light again. Indeed, St Petersburg's northern latitude means that around the summer solstice – when the days are longest – the night sky takes on a silvery hue, but the darkness never comes.

If the Russians ever needed an excuse to stay out all night and celebrate, this is it. At the end of June and the beginning of July, St Petersburg is open around the clock.

Graduates drink to their successes on the banks of the Neva; lovers stroll along the quiet canals; crowds congregate to watch the raising and lowering of the drawbridges. The cultural calendar during this period is packed, as the Stars of White Nights Festival compiles a program of opera, ballet and symphony that represents the best of Russian music and dance. At all hours of the night, the city streets are filled with revellers singing, dancing and drinking in the twilight.

# top picks

## FESTIVALS

- Stars of White Nights Festival (p18)
- International Festival of Contemporary Art (p18)
- Early Music Festival (p19)
- Victory Day (p18)
- Sergei Kuryokhin International Festival (p18)
- Easter (Paskha) (right)
- Arts Square Winter Festival (p19)

and more visitors descend on the city and the cultural calendar is extended into the summer. During August, many Russians retreat to their *dachas* (country cottages) to escape summer in the city, and the cultural calendar is quiet. Though residents make themselves scarce, tourists abound.

## January

### ORTHODOX CHRISTMAS

Russia celebrates Orthodox Christmas (Rozhdestvo) on 6 January. Similar to the Epiphany in the Christian calendar, it commemorates the baptism of Jesus. Exclusively a religious holiday, it is not widely celebrated, although services are held at churches and cathedrals around the city. Many offices and services are closed for the first week of January.

## February

### MARIINSKY BALLET FESTIVAL

[www.mariinsky.ru](http://www.mariinsky.ru)

The city's principal dance theatre hosts a week-long international festival, usually in mid- to late February, where the talents of the cream of Russian ballet dancers and many international stars are showcased.

### DEFENDER OF THE MOTHERLAND DAY

Celebrated on 23 February, this unofficial holiday traditionally honours veterans and soldiers. It has become a sort of counterpart to International Women's Day and is now better known as 'Men's Day', although the extent of the celebration is limited.

## MASLENITSA

Akin to Mardi Gras, this fête celebrates the end of winter and kicks off Orthodox Lent. 'Maslenitsa' comes from the Russian word for butter, which is a key ingredient in the festive treat, bliny. Besides bingeing on Russian pancakes, the week-long festival also features horse-drawn sledges, storytelling clowns and beer-drinking bears. It culminates in the burning of a scarecrow to welcome spring. Exact dates depend on the dates of Orthodox Easter, but it is usually in February or early March.

Look for a special program at the Mariinsky Theatre (p188), bonfires and other festivities at Yelagin Island (p120) and bliny on the menus at restaurants around town.

## March

### MONOCLE INTERNATIONAL MONO-PERFORMANCE FESTIVAL

[www.baltichouse.spb.ru](http://www.baltichouse.spb.ru)

This biannual festival usually takes place in March, hosted by the theatre Baltic House (see p191) during odd-numbered years. With both international and local participants, the event focuses on 'one-man shows', especially from northern and Eastern Europe.

### INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Russia's favourite holiday – 8 March – was founded to honour the women's movement. These days, men buy champagne, flowers and chocolates for their better halves – and for all the women in their lives.

## April

### EASTER

The main holiday of the Orthodox Church's year is Easter (Paskha). The date varies, but it is often a different date from its Western counterpart, usually in April or early May. Forthcoming dates are 19 April 2009, 4 April 2010, 24 April 2011, 15 April 2012 and 5 May 2013.

Forty days of fasting, known as Veliky Post, lead up to the religious holiday. Easter Day kicks off with celebratory midnight services, after which people eat special dome-shaped cakes known as *kulichy* and curd-cakes called *paskha*, and may exchange painted wooden Easter eggs. Many banks, offices and museums are closed on Easter Monday.

## A TOAST TO THE LADIES

Ask any Russian woman to name her favourite holiday, and she is sure to say International Women's Day, celebrated on 8 March. Some cynics say it is the one day of the year when Russian men are nice to their mates.

International Women's Day has been recognised in various countries since the late 19th century, but in Russia the festive day has revolutionary roots. On 8 March 1917 textile workers in St Petersburg protested against the food shortages, which were directly related to Russia's involvement in WWI. The women's strike 'for bread and peace' merged with riots that were spreading throughout the city. The uprising – which would become known as the February Revolution – forced the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II. Later, the celebrated Soviet feminist and communist Alexandra Kollontai convinced Lenin to make 8 March an official holiday.

These days most Russians have forgotten about the political implications of the day. But nobody misses the opportunity to drink champagne and toast the ladies.

## SERGEI KURYOKHIN INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL

SKIF; [www.kuryokhin.ru](http://www.kuryokhin.ru)

A three-day avant-garde festival in late April brings together an impressive array of international figures for alternative modern music and performance. The festival pays tribute to the eclectic Russian musician Sergei Kuryokhin, a key figure from the Leningrad rock and jazz underground who died in 1996.

## May VICTORY DAY

Celebrating the end of WWII, 9 May is a day of national and international importance. It holds a special spot on the calendar in St Petersburg, where residents remember the breaking of the Nazi blockade. Crowds assemble at Piskaryovskoe Cemetery (p121) to commemorate the victims. A victory parade along Nevsky culminates in fireworks over the Neva in the evening.

## CITY DAY

Mass celebrations and merrymaking are held throughout the city centre on 27 May, the city's official birthday, known as *den goroda* (city day). Brass bands, folk-dancing and mass drunkenness are the salient features of this perennial favourite, which marks the day when Peter the Great made a cross on Zayachy Island and announced 'Here will be a city'.

## June MESSAGE TO MAN

[www.message-to-man.spb.ru](http://www.message-to-man.spb.ru)

A well-respected festival of short, animated and documentary films, Poslaniye k Cheloveku is held annually in mid-June

in the neighbouring Dom Kino and Rodina cinemas.

## FESTIVAL OF FESTIVALS

[www.filmfest.ru](http://www.filmfest.ru)

St Petersburg's annual international film festival is held during the White Nights in late June. Co-sponsored by Lenfilm and hosted at cinemas around the city, the festival is a non-competitive showcase of the best Russian and world cinema.

## STARS OF WHITE NIGHTS FESTIVAL

[www.mariinsky.ru](http://www.mariinsky.ru)

From late May until mid-July, this annual festival is a venue for world premieres, international stars and special tributes to the city's opera and ballet doyens. Performances are held around the city, especially at the Mariinsky Theatre (p188), the Hermitage Theatre (p188) and the Rimsky-Korsakov Conservatory (p189). Four weeks of festivities culminate in a fabulous ball at Tsarskoe Selo (p219), which draws the event to a close.

## INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL OF CONTEMPORARY ART

[www.p10.nonmuseum.ru](http://www.p10.nonmuseum.ru)

While this event takes place at venues around the city, the big bash is at Pushkinskaya 10 (p91), as 30 June is the 'birthday' of this artistic institution. Exhibitions, performances, art auctions and general celebrations fill the once-abandoned apartment block.

## July

### KLEZFEST

☎ 713 3889; [www.klezfest.ru](http://www.klezfest.ru)

This music festival celebrates Klezmer music, the Jewish folk music from 18th- and

19th-century Eastern Europe. Hundreds of musicians from Russia, Europe and the USA come to perform in venues around St Petersburg. The city also hosts seminars and other cultural events for musicians and music-lovers.

## September & October

### EARLY MUSIC FESTIVAL

[www.earlymusic.ru](http://www.earlymusic.ru)

This ground-breaking musical festival aims to revive forgotten masterpieces from the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and the baroque era. The festival always features the production of a baroque opera, as well as performances by the Catherine the Great Orchestra. Musicians come from around the world to perform at various venues from mid-September until early October. See p190 for an interview with the co-director of Early Music Russia.

### DEFILE ON THE NEVA

Defile na Neve; [www.defilenave.ru](http://www.defilenave.ru)

One of the most important fashion events in St Petersburg is held in mid-October at the boutique Defile (p151). There is a week of fashion shows, parties and symposia which allows up-and-coming and established designers to showcase their latest lines. A second fashion show takes place in April.

### ST PETERSBURG OPEN

[www.spbopen.ru](http://www.spbopen.ru)

Since 1995, St Petersburg has hosted this men's tennis tournament at the end of October. The event has been attracting players from around the world to compete at SCC Peterburgsky Stadium (p200). This is where Marat Safin first attracted attention when he took the trophy in consecutive years.

## November

### DAY OF RECONCILIATION & ACCORD

The former October Revolution day – 7 November – is still an official holiday, although it is hardly acknowledged. It still is, however, a big day for flag-waving and protesting by old-school Communist Party members, especially in front of Gostiny Dvor (p75) and pl Ostrovskogo (p75). Makes for a great photo-op.

## December

### ARTS SQUARE WINTER FESTIVAL

[www.artsquarewinterfest.ru](http://www.artsquarewinterfest.ru)

Maestro Yury Temirknaov presides over this musical highlight, which takes place every year at the Shostakovich Philharmonia (p199) on pl Iskusstv (Arts Sq; p74). For 10 days at the end of December and the beginning of January, artists stage both classical and contemporary works, including symphonic music and opera, as well as less traditional musical forms, jazz and puppet theatre.

### NEW YEAR

Petersburgers see in the New Year (Novy God) by trading gifts, drinking champagne and listening to the Kremlin chimes on the radio or TV. Although Novy God has not reached the degree of commercialism of Christmas in the West, it is a gift-giving holiday. Dedya Moroz (Grandfather Frost) and Snezhinka (Snow Girl) dole out treats to deserving youngsters.

## COSTS & MONEY

Experts estimate that the average monthly salary in St Petersburg is about R15,000. Considering that the average for Russia as a whole is about R10,700 per month, it seems that Petersburgers are doing pretty well for themselves.

Unfortunately, these numbers do not convey how far these roubles go, which is not very far. St Petersburg is the second most expensive city in Russia and the twelfth most expensive city in the world, according to a 2007 report by Mercer Human Resource Consulting. The

### HOW MUCH?

Litre of petrol: R18-22

Litre of bottled water: R15-30

Bottle of Baltika beer: R40

Souvenir T-shirt: R500

Bliny: R60

Admission to the Hermitage: R350

Business lunch: R200

Cappuccino: R60

Public toilet: R10

Matryoshka (nesting doll): R500

# top picks

## PASSING AS A RUSSIAN IN ST PETERSBURG *JM\_Dreaming*

**At a restaurant** Embrace the culture and order a bottle of vodka. The look of sheer horror and infinite respect on the faces of fellow travellers – priceless! Especially when your bottle comes accompanied only by shot glasses and ‘black’ Russian rye.

**At the shopping centre** Pay cash. If you *must* pay by credit card, allow extra time. Think 30 minutes, three different counters and five perplexed sales assistants.

**At the supermarket** Take the shopping basket. Not worth blowing your cover by trying to explain to the hardened *grom-baba* (literal translation – thunder woman) that you only came for one item.

**At the ballet** Consider ‘foreigner’ versus ‘Russian’ prices for Mariinsky Theatre. Camouflage by dressing up like a local (no jeans; theatre is taken seriously). Stern babushkas are tough to trick, but not impossible. When the third bell rings, slip in with the crowds.

**At the Hermitage** Don’t bother! Babushkas holding rubber batons are all-knowing. Concede you are a ‘foreigner’, pay X-times the ‘Russian’ price, leave your jacket at the cloakroom and immerse yourself in the atmosphere of one of the world’s richest art collections.

**BLUELIST<sup>1</sup> (blu list) v.**  
to recommend a travel experience.

What’s your recommendation? [www.lonelyplanet.com/bluelist](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/bluelist)

ranking puts St Petersburg ahead of such famously pricey places as Paris, Singapore and New York.

Travellers will not find too many bargains in St Petersburg, although it is possible to live frugally by taking public transport, self-catering and sleeping in hostels. Anyone who is coming from Moscow will be pleasantly surprised to learn that St Petersburg is significantly cheaper than the capital, which ranked number one in the world on Mercer’s list.

Expect to pay at least R600 per head for a meal in a nice restaurant. Many offer business lunch specials, which usually include three courses, for as little as R200. This is an excellent way to sample some restaurants where you would otherwise pay much higher prices. If you self-cater or dine exclusively at budget places you can probably get by on R400 for meals.

Lodging prices are also high, although the proliferation of privately owned ‘mini-hotels’ means that there is no shortage of excellent midrange accommodation options. The going rate for a bed in a hostel is about R600, but you will pay anywhere from R2200 for a private room, and from R3200 if you want private facilities. The good news is that most midrange options are nicely renovated and efficiently run, offering good service and even a touch of style. Prices for luxury hotels start at €150 and go all the way up.

Although dual pricing for hotels and transport no longer exists, as a foreigner in Russia you’ll still often find yourself paying more than a local for museums and theatre tickets. The mark-up for foreigners is extreme – often as much as 10 times the price that Russians pay (although you may be able to avoid it if you have a student identification). Take heart that the extra money you shell out is desperately needed to protect the very works of art and artefacts you’ve come to see.

## INTERNET RESOURCES

There is no shortage of information about St Petersburg on the web. See also the respective chapters for more suggestions.

**[www.bcam.spb.ru](http://www.bcam.spb.ru)** Peter Sobolev’s excellent Wandering Camera includes some 400 albums and thousands of photos of the city.

**[www.encspb.ru](http://www.encspb.ru)** The Encyclopaedia of St Petersburg is encyclopaedic in its coverage of art, architecture, geography, society, economy and more.

**[www.eng.gov.spb.ru](http://www.eng.gov.spb.ru)** Official portal of the St Petersburg city government.

**[www.hermitagemuseum.org](http://www.hermitagemuseum.org)** Take an on-line tour of the fabulous art collection before you visit in person.

**[www.nevsky-prospekt.com](http://www.nevsky-prospekt.com)** This walk down Main Street St Pete includes architectural descriptions, history and other fun facts, as well as plenty of photos.

**[www.other.spb.ru](http://www.other.spb.ru)** Most visitors to St Petersburg miss ‘the other side’ of the city, but you won’t want to after reading this strange and hilarious account. Alas, it may already be too late.

**[www.petersburgcity.com](http://www.petersburgcity.com)** The official English-language portal offers local news and events, contemporary culture and city life, as well as the standard tourist fare.

**[www.saint-petersburg.com](http://www.saint-petersburg.com)** One of the best places to start your research. The site includes a virtual city tour, online hotel booking and descriptions of tourist sights.

**[www.sptimes.ru](http://www.sptimes.ru)** Website of the local English-language newspaper, the *St Petersburg Times*.

## ADVANCE PLANNING

If you are the organised type, you’ll want to take care of a few things before you arrive in St Petersburg:

- Apply for your visa! This is an absolute must for absolutely everybody. You can do it at the last minute, but it may cost you your first-born child. See p249 for details.
- Reserve a place to stay, especially if you are coming during the busy summer months. See p202.
- Book a taxi from the airport. Most hotels, mini-hotels, hostels and hire services will make these arrangements for you for a reasonable rate. Otherwise, you can book a taxi from a private company for about R500. You will pay approximately three times more if you jump in an unreserved cab upon arrival at the airport, so it’s worth the price of the international phone call. See p238.
- Order your tickets to visit the Hermitage (p131; [www.hermitagemuseum.org](http://www.hermitagemuseum.org)). You can buy them at the museum on the day you visit, but buying in advance over the internet allows you to skip the queue.
- Check the schedule at the Mariinsky Theatre (p188; [www.mariinsky.ru](http://www.mariinsky.ru)) and order your tickets ahead of time to ensure great seats and avoid language difficulties.

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