

St Petersburg

As elegant as Prague and as enchanting as Budapest but with just a smattering of the tourists due to Russia's intransigent visa regime, St Petersburg really will be the next big thing once visa-free travel arrives, although with that looking to be at least a decade away, you still have St Petersburg pretty much to yourself by the standards of other tourist-filled cities in the Baltics.

Long before Eastern Europe became known for its incredible cities, St Petersburg was the most important city in the entire region, capital of one of the world's most powerful empires and centre of countless movements in all fields of art. Since being founded by Peter the Great in 1703, St Petersburg has grown to be Europe's fourth largest city and easily one of its most culturally significant. A 'window on Europe', the city of Dostoyevsky and Shostakovich and the cradle of the Russian Revolution – a trip to St Petersburg makes a fantastic excursion from Scandinavia into a very different world.

FAST FACTS

- **Population** 5 million
- **Currency** Russian rouble (R); €1 = R34; US\$1 = R27; UK£1 = R50; SA1 = R20; CA\$1 = R24; NZ\$1 = R20.19; ¥100 = R23.6
- **Official Language** Russian
- **Telephone Codes** Russia country code ☎ 7; St Petersburg ☎ 812
- **Visa** required by all and can be a real headache – begin preparing well in advance of your trip!



ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

St Petersburg is spread out across many islands, some real and some created through the construction of canals. The central street is Nevsky prospekt (pr), which extends for some 4km from the Alexandr Nevsky Monastery to the Hermitage. The vast Neva River empties into the Gulf of Finland, filtered through a number of islands. Most significant of these are Vasilyevsky and Petrogradsky Islands.

Currency exchange offices are available throughout the city. ATMs are inside every metro station, in hotels and department stores, in main post offices and along major streets. **American Express** (☎ 326 4500; Malaya Morskaya ul 23; ☎ 9am–5pm Mon–Fri) only offers travel services; travellers cheques can be exchanged at most Russian banks (with commission, of course).

There's a mediocre (English-speaking) **tourist office** outside the Winter Palace in a kiosk on Palace Sq.

Nevsky pr boasts two large, excellent internet cafés – **Café Max** (☎ 273 6655; Nevsky pr 90/92; per hr R60; ☎ 24hr; ☎ Mayakovskaya) and **Quo Vadis** (☎ 333 0708; Nevsky pr 76; per hr R60; ☎ 9am–11pm; ☎ Mayakovskaya), which is entered on Liteiny pr.

In an emergency call ☎ 01 for fire, ☎ 02 for the police and ☎ 03 for an ambulance. The operator will speak Russian only.

SIGHTS The Historic Heart

Unquestionably your first stop should be **Dvortsovaya Ploshchad** (Palace Sq), where the baroque **Winter Palace** (Zimny dvorets) appears like a mirage under the archway at the start of ul Bolshaya Morskaya. The palace was commissioned from Bartolomeo Rastrelli in 1754 by Empress Elizabeth, and some of its 1057 rooms now house part of the astonishing **Hermitage** (☎ 571 3465; www.hermitage.ru; adult/student & child R350/free; ☎ 10.30am–6pm Tue–Sat, 10.30am–5pm Sun; ☎ Nevsky Pr), which is one of the world's great art museums. Enter through the courtyard from Palace Sq. To avoid queues in the summer months, you can book tickets online very easily. Entrance is free for all individuals on the first Thursday of every month. The collection is vast and can be overwhelming for a first-time visitor. Ask for an English

map at the information desk in the ticket hall. If your time is limited you should look out for the following highlights: the Jordan Staircase (directly ahead of you when you enter); room 100 (Ancient Egypt), rooms 178–97 (the State rooms for the apartments of the last imperial family); room 204 (the Pavilion Hall); rooms 228–38 (Italian Art, 16th to 18th centuries); room 271 (the Imperial family's cathedral); and concentrate most of your time on the fabulous 3rd floor, particularly rooms 333–50 for late 19th-century and early-20th-century European art, including a huge array of works by Matisse, Picasso, Monet, Van Gogh, Cézanne, Gauguin, Pissaro, Rodin and Kandinsky. There are several cafés and shops within the museum, so you can easily spend a whole day there. Disabled access is now very good – call ☎ 110 9079 if you require any assistance.

Opposite the Winter Palace across the square is the fabulous **General Staff Building** and in the middle of the square, the 47.5m **Alexander Column** commemorates the 1812 victory over Napoleon.

To the west across the road is the gilded spire of the **Admiralty**, former headquarters of the Russian navy. West of the Admiralty is **Ploshchad Dekabristov** (Decembrists' Sq), named after the Decembrists' Uprising of 14 December 1825.

Falconet's famous statue of Peter the Great, the **Bronze Horseman**, stands at the end of the square towards the river. Behind looms the splendid golden dome of **St Isaac's Cathedral** (Isaakiyevsky Sobor; ☎ 315 9732; Isaakiyevskaya pl; admission to cathedral adults/students R300/170, to colonnade adults/students R150/100; ☎ 10am–7pm Thu–Tue; ☎ Sadovaya/Nevsky pr), built between 1818 and 1858. At this price think twice before going into the cathedral itself unless you like the ornate baroque style. The colonnade is far better value for money giving superb views over the city.

Nevsky Prospekt

The inner part of vast Nevsky pr runs from the Admiralty to Moskovsky Vokzal (Moscow Station) and is St Petersburg's main shopping thoroughfare. The most impressive sight along it is the great colonnaded arms of the **Kazan Cathedral** (Kazansky Sobor; Kazanskaya pl 2; admission free; ☎ 9am–6pm), built between 1801 and 1811.

CENTRAL ST PETERSBURG

INFORMATION

- American Express.....1 C3
- Café Max.....2 F3
- Quo Vadis.....3 D3
- Tourist Office.....4 C3

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

- Admiralty.....5 C3
- Alexander Column.....6 C3
- Alexander Nevsky Monastery.....7 H5
- Bronze Horseman.....8 C3
- Church on the Spilled Blood.....9 D3
- Dostoevsky Museum.....10 F4
- General Staff Building.....11 C3
- Hermitage.....(see 21)
- Kazan Cathedral.....12 D3
- Naryshkin Bastion.....13 D2
- Palace Square.....14 C3
- Peter & Paul Fortress.....15 D1
- Ploshchad Iskusstv (Arts Sq.).....16 D3
- Russian Museum.....17 D3
- St Isaac's Cathedral.....18 C3
- St Peter & St Paul Cathedral.....19 C1
- Smolny Cathedral.....20 H2
- Winter Palace.....21 C3
- Yusupov Palace.....22 B4

SLEEPING

- Five Corners Hotel.....23 E4
- Herzen University Hostel.....24 D3
- Nevsky Inn.....25 C3
- Nord Hostel.....26 D3
- Rachmaninoff Art Hotel.....27 D3

EATING

- Fasol.....28 C3
- Oliva.....29 C3
- Talkhino.....30 D3
- Sukawati.....31 D3
- Sirovsky Most.....32 E4
- Vostochny Ugolok.....33 D4

DRINKING

- Dacha.....34 D3
- Novus.....35 D3
- Tsynik.....36 C4

NEVA RIVER

SMOLNY

BEZMYANNY

KAZANSKY

SPASSKY

FONANKA

NEVA RIVER

0 0.5 miles 1 km

At the end of Nevsky pr is the working **Alexander Nevsky Monastery** (Lavra Alexandra Nevskogo; ☎ 274 0409; adult/student R60/40; ☪ dawn-dusk, to 8pm in summer; M pl Alexandra Nevskogo), where you'll find the **Tikhvin Cemetery** (admission R60/40; ☪ 11am-dusk Fri-Wed), last resting place of some of Russia's most famous artistic figures, including Tchaikovsky and Dostoyevsky.

Between Nevsky & the Neva

A block north of Nevsky Prospekt metro is the lovely **Ploshchad Iskusstv** (Arts Sq), with a monument to Pushkin at its centre. The yellow Mikhailovsky Palace, now the **Russian Museum** (Russky Muzei; ☎ 315 1636; Konyushennaya pl; adult/student R300/170; ☪ 10am-8pm Thu-Tue; M Gostiny Dvor), housing one of the country's finest collections of Russian art, makes up the far side of the square. Behind it are the pleasant **Mikhailovsky Gardens**.

The polychromatic domes of the **Church on the Spilled Blood** (Khram Spas na Krovi; ☎ 315 1636; Konyushennaya pl; adult/student R300/170; ☪ 10am-8pm Thu-Tue; M Gostiny Dvor) are close by. Also known as the Church of the Resurrection of Christ, it was built from 1887 to 1907 on the spot where Alexander II was assassinated in 1881. The interior is incredible and somewhat overwhelming – having been restored since Soviet times when the church was used as a potato warehouse.

The lovely **Summer Garden** (Letny Sad; ☪ 9am-10pm May-Oct, 10am-6pm Oct-mid-Apr, closed mid-Apr to end Apr) is situated between the open space of Mars Field (Marsovo Pole) and the Fontanka River. Laid out for Peter the Great with fountains and pavilions in a geometrical plan, it's a great place to relax.

The best thing about the unmistakable Rastrelli-designed **Smolny Cathedral** (Smolny Sobor; ☎ 278 5596; pl Rastrelli; admission R150; ☪ 11am-5pm Fri-Wed), 3km east of the Summer Garden, is the sweeping view from atop one of its 63m-high belfries.

South & West of Nevsky Prospekt

A short walk down the Moyka River is the fascinating **Yusupov Palace** (Yusupovsky Dvoretz; ☎ 314 9883; nab reki Moyki 94; adult/student R300/250; ☪ 11am-5pm). Notorious as the scene of Rasputin's grisly murder in 1916, the palace has some of the most magnificent interiors in the city.

Across the meandering Canal Griboedova and the Fontanka River, east of the palace,

is Sennaya pl, the heart of Dostoevskyville. The author lived in several flats around here, and many of the locations turn up in *Crime and Punishment*. To find out more head to the small, interesting **Dostoevsky Museum** (Muzei Dostoevskogo; ☎ 571 4031; www.md.spb.ru; Kuznechny per 5/2; adult/student R100/50, audio tour in English R100; ☪ 11am-6pm Tue-Sun) in the house where the writer died in 1881 which includes many original pieces of furniture and possessions of the great man as well as a good exhibit about his life.

Petrograd Side

Petrograd Side refers to the cluster of delta islands between the Malaya Neva and Bolshaya Nevka channels. The principal attraction here is the **Peter & Paul Fortress** (Petropavlovskaya Krepost; ☎ 230 0340; admission to grounds free, admission to all buildings adult/student R120/60; ☪ 10am-5pm Thu-Mon, 10am-4pm Tue; M Gorkovskaya). Founded in 1703 as the military fortress for the new city, its main use up to 1917 was as a political prison: famous residents include Peter's own son Alexei, as well as Dostoevsky, Gorky and Trotsky. At noon every day a cannon is fired from the **Naryshkin Bastion**, scaring the daylighters out of tourists. It's fun to walk along the battlements. Most spectacular of all is the **St Peter & St Paul Cathedral**, with its landmark needle-thin spire and magnificent baroque interior. Here all Russia's tsars since Peter the Great have been buried. The latest addition was Nicholas II and his family, finally buried here by Yeltsin in 1998.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

City Day is on 27 May and celebrates the founding of the city with mass festivities. The **White Nights** (around the summer solstice in late June) are truly unique. The city comes alive and parties all night as the sun only barely sinks below the horizon, leaving the sky a magical grey-white throughout the night.

SLEEPING

As St Petersburg has a very definite 'high season', room prices are at a premium between May and September. Outside this period, room prices decrease by between 10% and 30% on those quoted below.

Nord Hostel (☎ 517 0342; www.nordhostel.com; Bolshaya Morskaya ul 10; dm/d 825/2250; ☪; M Nevsky Pr) Run by friendly Russian staff along the lines

of a traditional travellers hostel the Nord is a real winner, with by far the best location of any of the city's hostels next to the Hermitage and huge, beautiful dorm rooms (one has its own piano) and a few doubles as well. Book ahead – this is our hostel of choice.

Herzen University Hotel (☎ 314 7472; fax 315 5716; Kazanskaya ul 6; s/d/tr R1950/2600/2800; M Nevsky Pr) This well-run Russian hostel with a brilliant location is used to foreigners, although it's very much a university hall of residence and so don't expect your usual hostel vibe, it's mainly popular with groups but its clean and simple rooms (nearly all with ensuite facilities) are a great deal.

Nevsky Inn (☎ 924 9805; www.nevskyinn.ru; Kirpichny per 2, flat 19; s/d R2250/2750; M Nevsky Pr) Run by a joint British-Russian management, the Nevsky is one of the best places to stay in the city. Rooms are clean and comfortable and there's a modern kitchen that guests can use, perfectly combining comfort and economy. Highly recommended.

Five Corners Hotel (☎ 380 8181; www.5ugol.ru; Zagorodny pr 13; s/d/ste R4900/5600/6650; ☪ ☪; M Dostoyevskaya) This place is very stylish indeed. Its suites are some of the coolest in the city and overlook a trendy hub of streets a short walk from Nevsky pr. Staff are polite and efficient and recent expansion to 35 rooms suggests it's deservedly popular. There's free wi-fi throughout.

Rachmaninoff Art Hotel (☎ 327 7466; www.kazansky5.com; Kazanskaya ul 5, 3rd fl; s/d R4000/4850; ☪ ☪; M Nevsky Pr) Perfectly located and beautifully designed, the Rachmaninoff attracts an in-the-know crowd of arty types staying in the city. Stuffed full of antiques, the understated rooms nonetheless enjoy a thoroughly modern, boutique feel. There's free wi-fi throughout.

EATING

Keep your eyes open for *blini* (Russian pancake) kiosks throughout the city. Their delicious *blinis* are superb value (R20 to R30) and a great snack. Street food is sold around metro stations.

Troitsky Most Kamennooostrovsky pr (☎ 232 6693; Kamennooostrovsky pr 9/2; mains R100-200; M Gorkovskaya); Zagorodny pr (☎ 115 1998; Zagorodny pr 38; M Vladimirskaaya) Superb vegetarian chain with multiple locations across the city. The mushroom lasagne is legendary and the salads delicious.

Fasol (☎ 571 9695; ul Gorokhovaya 17; mains R150; M Sennaya pl) Delightful respite from the norms of the Russian eating experience, Fasol combines friendly and efficient service with good food at low prices. It's a cool place to come any time of day, although it's particularly busy in the evening. There's an English menu.

Oliva (☎ 314 6563; Bolshaya Morskaya ul 31; mains R160-300; ☪ 10am-midnight; M Nevsky Pr) An authentic Greek addition to the St Petersburg scene, though there is nothing taverna-like about this cavernous place, subtly painted and decorated in an array of Greek styles. The menu is traditional and food is both excellent value and extremely good.

Salkhino (☎ 232 7891; Kronversky pr 25; mains R300-500; M Gorkovskaya) This is our favourite Georgian in town, serving up delicious Georgian fare and a great selection of wines.

Sukawati (☎ 312 0504; Kazanskaya ul 8; mains R250-350; M Nevsky Pr) Sleek Indonesian-Japanese fusion place set back behind the Kazan Cathedral. The nasi goreng is delicious, and the whole menu far more imaginative than most Asian restaurants in town.

Vostochny Ugolok (☎ 713 5747; ul Gorokhovaya 52; mains R250-500; ☪ 24hrs; M Pushkinskaya/Sennaya pl) A taste of the Caucasus in St Petersburg, the 'Eastern Nook' serves up brilliant trans-Caucasian dishes from Georgian *pkhali* to Azeri *shashlyk*, all in a warm atmosphere of southern hospitality.

DRINKING

Novus (☎ 569 3818; Bolshaya Morskaya ul 8; ☪ 6pm-6am; M Nevsky Pr) The current favourite for young expats and travellers, Novus is named after a highly eccentric Latvian hybrid of backgammon and pool. Packed every night, this is a great place to meet a young and beautiful international crowd. Enter through the takeaway downstairs.

Dacha (Dumskaya ul 9; ☪ 6pm-6am; M Nevsky Pr) The bar sensation of 2005, when everyone in the city flocked here, indie bar Dacha now looks like an old timer, but still features on many people's list for a night out. The R100 cover charge includes two beers.

Tsynik (☎ 312 9526; per Antonenko 4; ☪ 1pm-3am, until 7am Fri & Sat; M Sadovaya) Just as raucous and popular is the grungy cool of Tsynik. Famous for its rowdy crowd and *grenki* (fried garlic black bread), this is the place to be seen misbehaving.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Daily express buses run from Turku and Helsinki to Vyborg and St Petersburg (Russian visa required) along highway E18, via the Finnish towns of Porvoo, Kotka and Hamina. Check current timetables and book tickets at the bus station or a travel agency; from Helsinki to St Petersburg there are three daily buses (€55.60, 9½ hours). The train is a more romantic and comfortable way to reach Russia. Note that St Petersburg is Pietari in Finnish, and Vyborg is Viipuri.

There are three daily trains from Helsinki to Russia, travelling via the Finnish stations of Lahti, Kouvola and Vainikkala. You must have a valid Russian visa but border formalities have been fast-tracked so that passport checks are now carried out on board the moving train.

The Russian *Tolstoi* sleeper departs Helsinki daily at 5.42pm, arriving in Moscow at 8.30am the next day (one way in 2nd/1st class €85.80/128.20) via Vyborg (€47/75) and St Petersburg (€58.40/90); it departs from Moscow daily at 10.50pm. Both 1st- and 2nd-class fares include a sleeper berth. The *Sibelius* and *Repin* have daily services between Helsinki and St Petersburg (5½ hours) via Vyborg (3¾ hours). The *Sibelius* (a Finnish train) departs from Helsinki at 7.42am (2nd-/1st-class seats €51.40/81.90, six hours). The Russian *Repin* departs at 3.42pm and has 2nd-class seats (€51.40) or 1st-class sleeping berths (€91). From St Petersburg, departures are at 4.28pm (*Sibelius*) and 7.28am (*Repin*).

Buy Russian rail tickets in Helsinki at the special ticket counter in the central station. Check timetables at www.vr.fi.

GETTING AROUND

The metro (flat fare 12R) is best for covering the large distances across the city. The four lines cross over in the city centre and go out to the suburbs. The most confusing aspect of the system is that all labelling is in Cyrillic. Listen out for the announcements of the station names, or ask locals who will usually go out of their way to help. A further confusion is that two stations sharing an exit will have different names. For example, Nevsky Pr and Gostiny Dvor are in the same place, but as they are on different lines, they have different names.

Around the centre, *marshrutka* minibuses are a very quick alternative to the slow trolleybuses. Costs vary on each route, but the average fare is R18, and is displayed prominently inside each van. To stop a *marshrutka*, simply hold out your hand and it will stop. Jump in, sit down, pass cash to the driver (a human chain operates if you are not seated nearby) and then call out '*ostanovityes pozhalusta!*' when you want to get out and the driver will pull over.

If you'd rather take a cab, holding your arm out will cause unofficial taxis to stop very quickly. The standard rate for a short distance (1km to 2km) is R50 and then R100 after that, although as a foreigner, expect to have the price raised – always agree on a price before getting into the car. For an official cab, call ☎ 068.

© Lonely Planet Publications. To make it easier for you to use, access to this chapter is not digitally restricted. In return, we think it's fair to ask you to use it for personal, non-commercial purposes only. In other words, please don't upload this chapter to a peer-to-peer site, mass email it to everyone you know, or resell it. See the terms and conditions on our site for a longer way of saying the above - 'Do the right thing with our content.'