

## PALACES AND PROSPEKTS

JUNE 09, 2006

COVER STORY, HERALD-SUN TRAVEL SECTION

A city of palaces, cathedrals, columns and canals, St Petersburg offers a gentle introduction to Russian style blended with a contemporary connection to Europe.

The best way to see St Petersburg is on foot and there is no shortage of eager young locals to proudly disclose the charms and character of the city and its history. The better walking tours include a taste of the underground art scene in pre-Glasnost USSR, following a trail of punk bands, Beatles fans and unauthorized art exhibitions through the pallid staircases and courtyards of urban apartments. The domestic architecture and everyday street life of the modern city present a fascinating insight into the cultural changes the city has undergone.

Artists and cafes now grace the streets and promenades that line the network of canals. The charm of these waterways is enhanced by the three hundred or more bridges which cross them, all of which are unique works of artistic expression in their own right; it is for this reason that St Petersburg is called 'The Venice of the North'. The pier at Anichkov Bridge is a good place for negotiating a boat tour to explore the Neva River and canals.

The Italian Bridge is possibly my favourite, decorated at either end with ornate street lamps and overlooking the 17th century styled Church of Spilled Blood; so named because the Tsar Alexander II was assassinated on that very site, two years before the church began construction. The view along the canal is often accompanied by the busking of a piano accordion player and women selling flowers.

Behind the cathedral a street market operates for locals and tourists. Expect a little more than just Matryoshka dolls and jewellery boxes, this is an ideal place to shop for high quality paintings and drawings by local artists. Stall-holders also compete to sell the most intricate and detailed Christmas-ornaments, regardless of the time of year, and you can find everything from tiny angels that hang from branches to gnome sized Saint Nicholas' carved from wood and painted by hand.

One of the best guides to sight-seeing in St Petersburg can be found on selected bottles of St Petersburg Vodka – the glass etched with a 360

degree view of the city's architecture. Bridges, monuments, cathedrals and domes are silhouetted against the sky. Standing on the edge of the Palace Square along Nevsky Prospekt gives a similar view, including the golden dome of St Isaacs Cathedral, the Winter Palace and the Alexander Column.

You may wish to upgrade from a vodka bottle to a Lonely Planet guide if you want to find all of the great 19th century buildings that St Petersburg has to offer. The Hermitage Museum alone is in fact a collection of buildings, not just one, and you should allow at least two days in full to explore the entire public collection. The main building of the museum is the Winter Palace which overlooks the River Neva to one side and the Palace Square to the other.

The Summer Palace, also called the Peterhof, is an imperial estate situated 30km west of the city. The scale of the grounds and gardens is immense and an avenue of water leads from the shoreline, meeting the Gulf of Finland, up to the cascading fountains at the steps to the Grand Palace. Once inside the building you can tour in an orderly procession through room after room of lavish interiors and decorations, meticulously restored after great devastation during World War II.

Parading through the opulent treasures of Russian royalty is likely to give you an appetite for some premium dining, and this is one category in which St Petersburg sets itself apart from other Russian cities. Streets such as Nevsky Prospekt and Admiralteysky Prospekt offer culinary experiences that elegantly complement their historical facades. A fine example is Paris, one block back from the Mariners Monument on Bolshaya Moroskaya Ulitsa, where patrons dine amongst converted wine cellars and order from a five star menu. The creme-brulee alone is worth a trip to St Petersburg – velvety smooth and tinted with lemon-zest and vanilla.

The romantic nature of St Petersburg reaches its peak in the last week of June when the White Nights banish darkness from the city. Midnight strolls along the river bank are imbued with the soft colours of a sunset that never falls. The phenomenon has given rise to countless acts of literary indulgence, theatrical themes and operatic festivals.

Summer in such a northern city is enjoyed with fervour, in contrast to the harsh conditions of winter when the River Neva freezes like steel and the nights are anything but white. In true St Petersburg style this simply means an opportunity to hold different kinds of festivals; the backdrop of darkness allows the fireworks the chance to light up the sky and bring down a shower of colour upon the domes and spires of a great city.

