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Travel archive Travel **St Petersburg: Not an Average Holiday** Directory Back to November 2012

[« Previous Article: VW Golf Cabriolet in Motoring](#)

[Next article: Chase the Sun in St Lucia in Travel »](#)

# St Petersburg: Not an Average Holiday

by Olivia Greenway

Considering that you can now visit Russia without a visa by travelling overnight on the St Peter Line ferry from Helsinki, Olivia Greenway guides us to the best places to visit for a brief stay (you are allowed 72 hours, or two nights in the country!).



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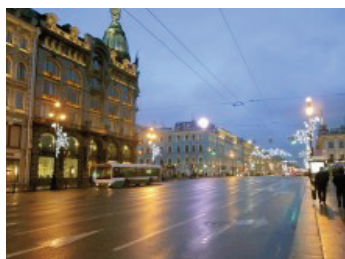


OUTDOOR CLOTHING

Olivia Greenway

The ferry sails in the evening. After an enjoyable supper (buffet style, including wine for €25), a trip to the duty free allows you to buy potent vodka at bargain prices. Prices in the bar are reasonable too for a quick drink before bed. The cabins are basic but clean; let the gentle rocking of the boat send you to a peaceful sleep. When you wake up, you're in Russia. An obligatory drive from the ferry to the town centre (and back again later) costs around €25. You may also like to avail yourself of a guided four-hour city tour.

As soon as you hit the main street of Nevsky Prospekt, it feels foreign and rather exotic, but it's the most European of all the streets. It's winter and although it's 11am in the morning, the streetlights are still on and it's dark. The street names are in the Cyrillic alphabet and reading maps is difficult. The familiar onion domed churches from your fairy tale books are now a reality. Young women are tall and look severe and slightly old-fashioned and many wear full-length fur coats. A group of soldiers, wearing long grey greatcoats, stand



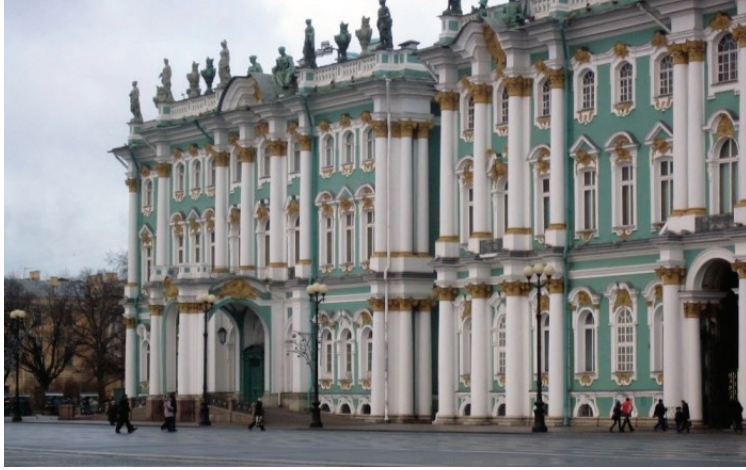
Nevsky Prospekt at 11am

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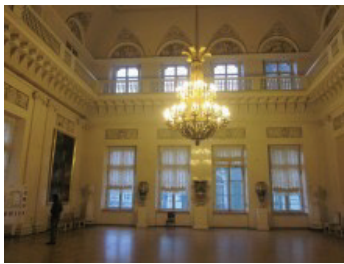
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around in a huddle, stamping their stout black boots on the ground to keep warm. This place has a definite Eastern European feel.

Over 300 bridges criss-cross the canals and river, earning it the moniker “Venice of the North”. There are also 200 churches, the same number of museums and 42 islands. So it’s a large city (population just under 5 million) with a lot to take in on a short visit; you need to select the activities that interest you.



The spectacular Hermitage



The Hermitage is probably worth a trip to St Petersburg on its own. Really a series of interconnecting historic buildings, it is the former Winter Palace of Catherine the Great. It’s quite a performance to get in; there are usually long queues and you have to pay extra to take your camera (no flash allowed). If you can,

organise an official tour (perhaps through your hotel concierge), which will short-circuit all these problems. With over 3 million items in the collection, it can also be a bit overwhelming, so a tour guide will take you to the greats – for example Renoir, Goya, Degas and Picasso - and many more you might have struggled to find on your own. In winter, the queues are shorter and the museum is not so busy; so if you really want to enjoy The Hermitage, take my tip and visit in the winter. The entrance fee is modest.



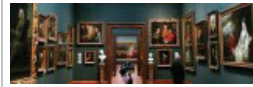
Inside the Hermitage



Captain Scott:  
Undone by an  
Empire?



Seaside Vintage:  
Cockles and Muscles



National Portrait  
Gallery, London



Chase the Sun in St  
Lucia



A Flick Back in Time

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Visiting all the churches is not possible, but if you want to select just two, the Russian Orthodox Cathedral of St Isaacs takes some beating. Its sheer size and the extravagance of the decoration inside - tall white marble pillars rising heavenwards; gilded life-size angels and cherubs, the yellowy reflected light from these and all the flickering candles –is impressive. There will probably be a whiff of incense in the air and if you are lucky, you may hear choral voices. This is a working church and well used by the residents, especially at Christmas and Easter. The grimly title Church of the Saviour of the Spilled Blood is where Alexander 11 was assassinated in 1881 and has the familiar onion domes.



The Church of Saviour of Spilled Blood

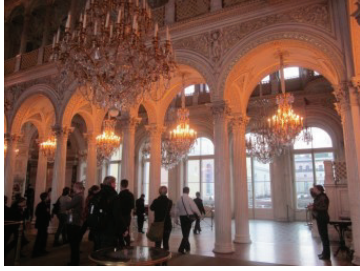
Having a cup of hot chocolate in one of St Petersburg's oldest hotels for a spot of historical nostalgia and people watching is also recommended. The Grand Hotel Europe has been visited by Bill Clinton, Jane Fonda and even HM the Queen. You may not spot a celebrity but should see a few women flaunting exquisite jewellery and expensive furs.



Ice sculpture in the Grand Hotel Europe

The Sokos Finnish hotel chain has three four star hotels in St Petersburg – I had lunch in the one near The Hermitage at Palace Bridge. A buffet style meal with excellent traditional stroganoff may be enjoyed from midday in this cleverly converted former warehouse. However, there are other hotels to suit all budgets, from basic to grandiose.

If you enjoy opera and ballet then no visit would be complete without trying to see a performance at the world class Mariinsky Theatre. Tickets won't be cheap but they will not be as expensive as visiting the opera or ballet in London and you may be able to see a performance that is unique to Russia.



The grand interior of the Hermitage



Iron Horseman at St Isaacs Cathedral

The summer is extremely busy with both domestic and foreign tourists, especially for the White Nights – two weeks in about the middle of June when the sun sets for just a brief period. All sorts of concerts, festivals and parties are held that go on late into the night. Book early to secure accommodation.

A winter visit will see the city almost empty. You just need to wrap up, bring sensible shoes for the icy streets and be cheered by the much lower hotel rates.

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