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## Glitzy St Petersburg is Russia's grand dame

TWO elderly Russian ladies wearing full-length mink fur coats carefully sip mugs of hot chocolate, their gnarled fingers heavy under the weight of expensive-looking gold rings. If there is one thing St Petersburg has in spades, it's glamour.



Senate Square Cathedral towers over Helsinki Harbour where vessels depart for St Petersburg

The city's reputation as the "Venice of the North" has long attracted the glitziest of visitors and the five-star Grand Hotel Europe, on the main street Nevsky Prospekt, is where they prefer to stay.

I don't spot Jane Fonda, Bill Clinton or the Queen, who have all stayed here, but the fur-clad grand dames provide more than enough fascination as I warm up with my own steaming hot chocolate.

Visiting this city in winter is almost a rite of passage.

The 300 bridges, 42 islands and 200 onion-domed churches look so much more, well, Russian, under a blanket of snow. It is also the perfect time of year to up the glamour stakes and showcase my own Dr Zhivago-style hat.

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I am in St Petersburg for a short trip but have managed to visit without a visa by travelling on the St Peter Line ferry service from Helsinki.

This voyage allows passengers up to 72 hours, or two nights, in this exotic city without the hassle of dealing with the Russian Consulate.

At 10.30 in the morning I had arrived at St Isaac's Cathedral under cover of darkness, the only sign of life a golden glow spilling onto the snow from the entrance and the soaring chorus of a hymn ringing across the square.

Inside, the smell of incense was overwhelming and flickering candles illuminated the paintings and murals that decorate the ceiling and every wall. Among marble pillars and life-size golden angels and cherubs, locals shuffled around on the flagstone floor, lighting yet more candles and praying, another perfect people-watching opportunity.

While Venice may be criticised for being a ghost town devoid of locals, the same can't be said for St Petersburg, its northern counterpart.

Our minibus tour criss-crossed innumerable bridges taking us past the house where Rasputin was poisoned, the church where Alexander II was assassinated and the apartment (now museum) where Alexander Pushkin, one of Russia's most famous poets, died after a duel in 1837.

St Petersburg has had a bloody past, the Siege of Leningrad in 1941-1944 saw more than a million civilians die, which may explain, in part, the stoicism of its inhabitants.

The Hermitage Museum is a destination in its own right and visiting in the winter is a clever ploy, as you probably won't have to queue.

The Western European art collection is regarded as one of the finest in the world. The paintings on display read like a who's who of the art world, Renoir, Picasso, Gauguin Goya, Degas, and include works taken from Germany in 1945. From here you can take a traditional horse-drawn carriage ride to see the sights.

I am disappointed to be dragged away after only two hours but it is worth it for the slice of upper-class Russian life I experience as we finish up in the Grand Hotel Europe.

Back on board the Princess Maria, my cabin is basic but perfectly adequate for an overnight sailing to Helsinki. There is singing around the piano but if your inner Simon Cowell would rather avoid all that, you can always head to the bar and enjoy a quiet drink in the corner.

After the ship nudges her way back into the harbour, I head out on the tram to explore this stylish enclave. Helsinki was named World Design Capital for 2012 and the Finnish flair for the aesthetically pleasing is clear to see.

While the beautiful architecture has me forever gazing skywards, my favourite haunt is the Hakaniemi Market Hall.

Wooden booths are immaculately turned out and crammed with every conceivable foodstuff from soured herrings and fresh oysters to dark rye bread and fresh reindeer meat, not to mention a fragrant offering of herbs and spices. It is like the Harrods Food Hall, but without all the marble.

I finish my tour in the famous Fazer coffee shop, with a mug of their famous thick hot chocolate to thaw me out.

Sadly there are no exotic Russian women dripping in gold to observe here, but great people watching all the same.

#### THE KNOWLEDGE

Guild Travel (0207 388 4158/[www.guildtravel.com](http://www.guildtravel.com)) offers four nights in Helsinki and St Petersburg from £744pp (two sharing), B&B. Includes return Finnair flights from Heathrow, accommodation and overnight St Peter Line cruise from Helsinki to St Petersburg.

Information: [www.visitfinland.com/uk](http://www.visitfinland.com/uk) and [www.visitrussia.org.uk](http://www.visitrussia.org.uk)

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