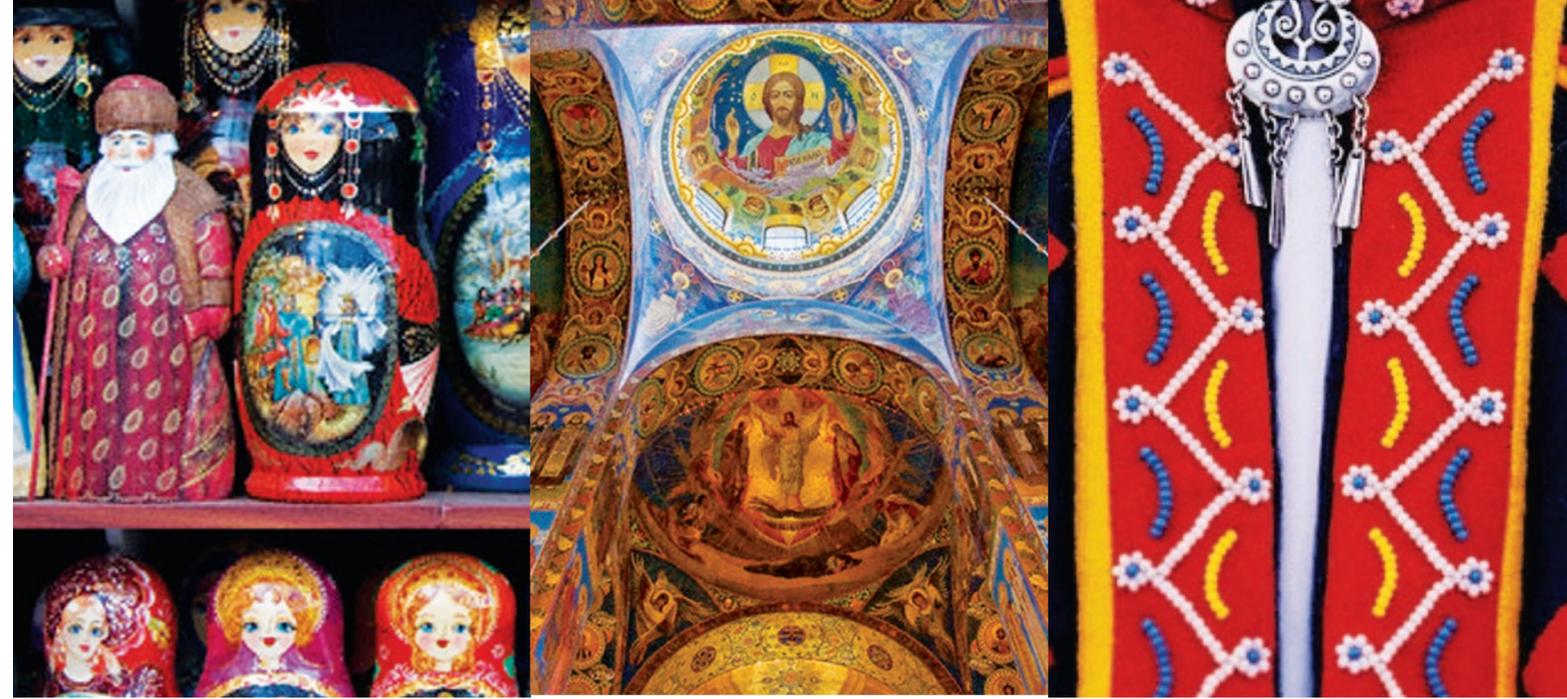




# Venice

of the north

As our sleek black BMW enters St. Petersburg's city center on a cold Russian morning, the landscape passing outside the window brought to mind the words of William Faulkner: "The past isn't dead. It isn't even past." Cruising down Nevsky Prospect as nearly every visitor to St. Petersburg has before, sets the scene for the city at large. Planned by Peter the Great himself, the wide avenues and bridges that crisscross the network of islands that make up the city are straight and deliberate, with plenty of space for the grand palaces and monuments that have shaped and represent the events that shaped this historic city. The main street in St. Petersburg is marked by the Admiralty building with its tall gold spire on the north end and the Nevsky Monastery to the south, with the Kazan Cathedral, the Dom Knigi bookstore (an Art Deco confection that formerly housed the Singer sewing machine company), the Russian National Library, monuments to Catherine the Great, and the Anichkov Bridge with its four famed equestrian statues in between. It's also the



central street for shopping and restaurants with the Gostiny Dvor, the city's largest department store, on one side of the street, across from the Grand Palace luxury complex. However, St. Petersburg isn't a shopping city, its high prices and limited selection means that most wealthy Russians do their shopping on vacations in the rest of Europe or America.

That taste of history was enough to get us excited as we pulled up in front of the block-long Grand Hotel Europe, the oldest and grandest of the hotels in this very old, grand city. The first five-star hotel in the country, the historic building dates from 1824 including the preserved neo-classical facade and original Art Nouveau interiors designed by the Italian architect Carlo Rossi, an architectural legend in St. Petersburg. While the dramatic entrance hall was striking enough, we were headed for the Historic Floor and the 10 recently renovated historic suites, which after an extensive restoration, led by French designer Michel Jouannet, who is renowned for his work at Hotel Cipriani in Venice, reflect the rich history of both the hotel and St. Petersburg. The 1,044 square foot suites were named and inspired by famous Russians who left their marks on the hotel, either directly, as in the Pavarotti Suite, complete with grand piano, where the tenor stayed during his final tour in 2004, and the Dostoevsky Suite, named for the author who was a frequent guest (it's a corner suite, because he preferred big windows to watch the crowds outside), or indirectly, as in the sparkling jewel-toned Faberge Suite, and the Romanov Suite, grand in purple and gold, where we had the honor to lay our heads. Though the hotel's interior, from the palatial L'Europe restaurant to the top-floor ballroom, is big enough and exciting enough to explore for a week, the view outside was too good to keep us inside for long.

Within walking distance of the Winter Palace Square is the Hermitage Museum, the Moussorgsky Opera and Ballet Theatre; the hotel being the perfect place to set out from for a day of sightseeing. We began by exploring the theaters and museums of Arts Square and the main Russian Museum; look for the life-size Pushkin statue that marks the

center of the square. The house where he lived here has also been turned into a museum – it housed the city's other favorite son, Tchaikovsky, for a short while as well. We next ventured down Kanal Griboedova to the Cathedral of the Spilt Blood, a classical-style Russian orthodox construction in the style of St. Basil's in Moscow, and then into St. Isaac's Cathedral, the fourth-largest domed cathedral in the world and an architectural marvel. A caveat: visiting St. Petersburg is not for the faint of heart or the weak of stomach. As a royal capital for generations, the history here is alive and kicking, with every stone and every stream symbolizing something.

The breadth of this truth hit home as we crossed the bridge onto Peter and Paul Fortress, one of the 42 islands that make up the city called "Venice of the North." Established by Peter the Great, the complex has served as a military base, as well as a prison for high-ranking political prisoners. There is no Russian history without military history, and this is one place that many central players passed through at one time or another, all of them at least once as we soon found out. The central cathedral, one of the tallest structures in Russia, is the burial place of all the tsars from Peter the Great to Alexander III, as well as the final resting place of the Romanovs and the family of the last last



tsar Nicholas II, who were reinterred into their own memorial room. After fighting our way out of the scrum, we went for a walk into the gardens, stopping to touch the spindly fingers of the statue of Peter the Great, created from his death mask and said to be his most accurate depiction, for good luck, overlooking the Gate of Death, which the arch prisoners walked under before boarding a boat that took them to the Gulf of Finland, where they were killed and dumped. Luckily, there is a coping mechanism in place for the weight of all this history, and its name is vodka.

Pectopah is the one word you need to know if you're hungry in St. Petersburg. It's pronounced "restoran," like "restaurant" with a twist, and is displayed prominently on almost every eating establishment in St. Petersburg. The cuisine available varies from Moroccan to European to Japanese (sushi is the latest craze with the younger set) but for traditional Russian fare, there are a few experiences a cut above the rest. Stroganovsky Dvor is a combination of traditional food, new trends and some concepts that haven't quite become trends yet, such as inter-table telephoning. Don't be confused when you walk into the courtyard of the Stroganov Palace, past the entrance to the Chocolate Museum, that large, heated tent filled with statuary that looks like something out of your last bar mitzvah is, in fact, the café; the location is also a hotspot at night. If the word "Stroganov" is ringing some bells, you're correct: they're the ones who gave Russia and then the world beef Stroganoff. However, for that dish we recommend you try the Caviar Bar at the Grand Hotel Europe: they're in possession of the family's own recipe, a closely guarded gift from the youngest generation, who are frequent guests at the hotel. The Caviar Bar is also, naturally, in possession of huge quantities of top-notch caviar, and if you're a fan, make sure to try the sturgeon from whence they came as the delicious fish is not available in the United States. They've also recently begun training a vodka sommelier, to help pair their extensive list of vodkas with your various courses, a delightful conceit that nevertheless failed to distract us from the caviar to be consumed. To complete our own vodka education, we lunched at the Russian Vodka Room No. 1, which is also home to the Vodka Museum, tracing the history of the drink in the country. We attempted a trio of shots, and discovered two things the hard way: honey vodka is often also flavored with hot peppers, in case you're looking for something sweetened, and that curl of white substance on black bread is not some kind of smoked whitefish, it's lard. That said, the excellent blinis and hot borscht more than assuaged our terrified stomachs, and we more than walked off the heavy stuff seeing at the Western-style nightclubs. The Royal Beach is one club that has adapted the best and worst of American nightlife. Creating a distinctly Russian twist, tanks of baby alligators and bikini-clad gogo dancers made a lively addition to the scene. For a nightcap, nearly everyone in the city has taken ad-

vantage of the Lobby Bar in the Grand Hotel Europe – the beautifully preserved Art Nouveau-style space is open 24 hours, and the signature cocktails are as good as any breakfast.

Where better to relax the next morning than on the waterfront? In this nautical city, a boat tour is an important point of view, and there are all kinds of boats available for rental, from the very high-end to private catered group tours to open boats similar to the *bateau-mouches* of Paris. We saw views of the bridges that were inspiringly beautiful, as well as the less-exposed and less polished sides of the buildings that really emphasizes the strife this city has seen. There are also some local oddities as the ruins of a massive shipbuilding factory can be found on a tiny man-made island. On a clear day, you can take a hydrofoil clear across the Gulf of Finland, and one popular destination is Peterhof, one of the summer palaces. Over 350 fountains on the grounds take advantage of a naturally-occurring quirk in the river system here: a mountain spring keeps them fed and spouting without a single pump or machine, as it has for hundreds of years. The beautifully restored rooms include personal effects of some of the country's past leaders, and furnishings that will make you wish you'd chosen interior design as your profession.

We finished up the night at the Alexandrinsky Theater for a performance of *Swan Lake*, but you won't lack for cultural options here. The Russians are, collectively, a nation of balletomanes and opera buffs, and there are multiple performances taking place every night, including the Kirov Ballet at the Mariinsky Theater, arguably the biggest and best in the country. And truly, it was a thrill to see a Tchaikovsky ballet performed and then to file out into the Arts Square in the shadow of centuries of artists. They take their high culture seriously here, and it shows.

Any previous visitor to St. Petersburg is probably wondering why we haven't mentioned the Hermitage. Beautiful, challenging, unmissable and inescapable, no visit to the city is complete without it. As any reasonably worldly-minded person has probably heard before, the warning goes that you can't see the Louvre or the Hermitage in one day. And well, you can't. Don't try. There are several special exhibitions going at any one time, although they're not always well-advertised, and it's best to just pick one or two sections of interest so you have time to enjoy the art and the interiors themselves. It's a combination of grand baroque and spooky decay that just about sums up the indefinable nature of modern Russia.

Engaging a tour guide is an excellent way to make sure you know what you're looking at. There are a few extraordinary galleries, particularly the halls of portraits, which are of great historical as well as artistic value, such as the Military Gallery, with more than 300 portraits painted from life of every officer that served in the Napoleonic Wars (blank spaces are left for officers who died overseas or before their portraits could be painted), and the White Dining Room, where the Bolsheviks

captured the leaders of the government, which stands as it did that day, the clock permanently set to 2:10, when they were overthrown.

We took a stroll through a special exhibit of French Impressionists (fitting, we thought, since the Hermitage is in constant and vicious battle with the Louvre for the largest overall collection of works) and were unpleasantly surprised by the conditions in some parts of the palace. The paintings sat under hazy lighting on cracked walls, next to windows open to the humidity and ocean air. The upstairs galleries where the more permanent collection is housed are in more standard condition, and some of the works are super-protected, you can tell the paintings that have been slashed, attacked with acid and otherwise damaged over the years as they are the ones to be found under glass with a motion-detector alarm. We suggest you not pay the 15 rubles to be allowed to take pictures inside, though hundreds of your fellow visitors will; the experience of being inside surrounded by centuries of history and the arts is something you'll never be able to capture in the frame anyway. ■

#### Getting there

There are connections to St. Petersburg's Pulkovo II International Airport (airport code LED) from most major European cities; we took the opportunity to try out Lufthansa's new business class, complete with priority check-in, a dedicated boarding aisle (through a separate door on the plane), flat seats, plentiful entertainment and meals prepared through their new Star Chefs program. We found the business class lounges to be the biggest enhancement for our trip as they were stocked and operational for tired travelers even in the wee hours of the morning. Entry visas to visit Russia are required.