

Russia

# MEET ST

*Story by Kathleen Murphy*



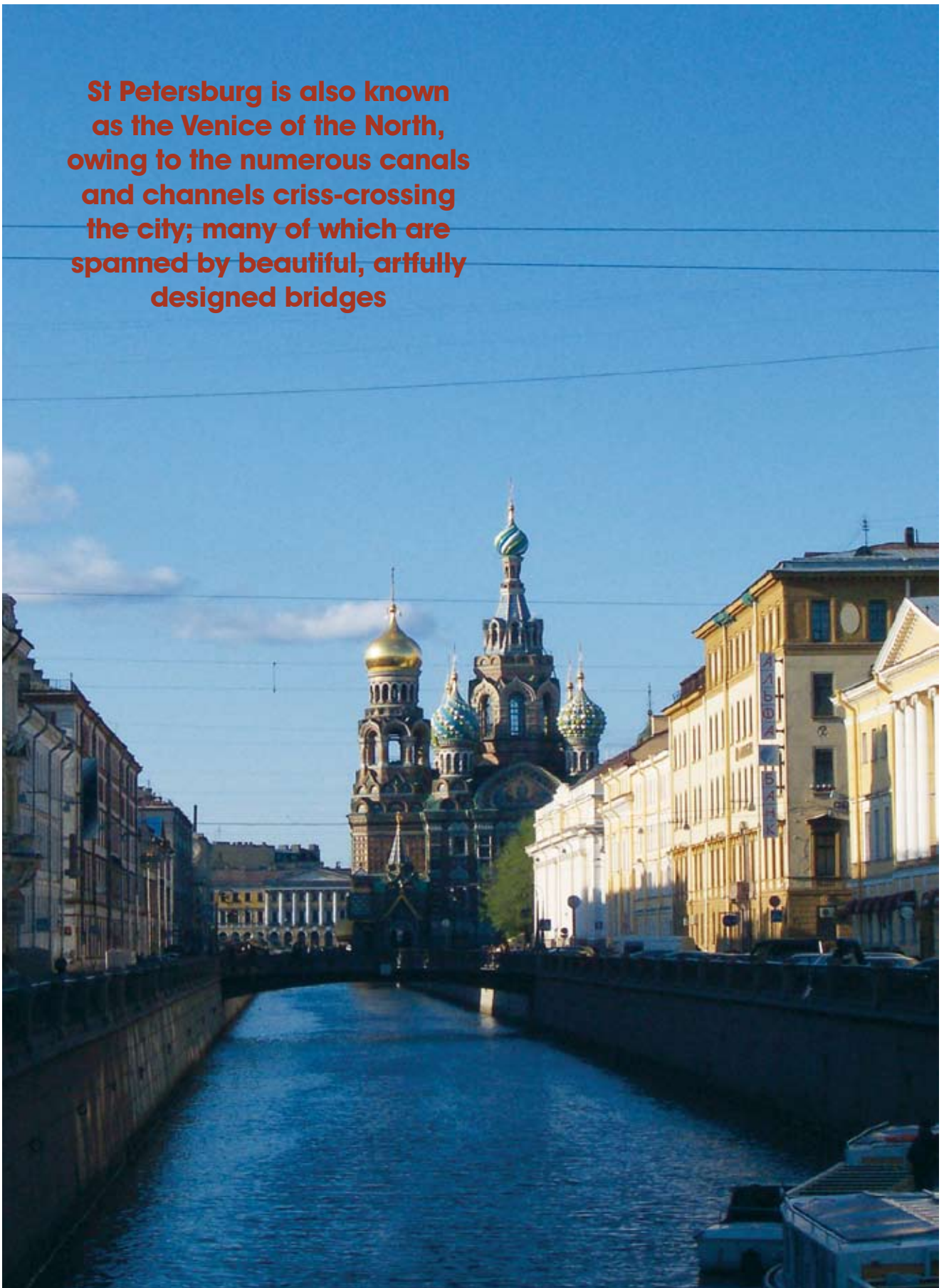
Long known as the cultural centre of Eastern Europe, St Petersburg is a place of curious juxtapositions.

**Kathleen Murphy** travels to the largest country on earth to experience everything its gallery-lined streets have to offer.

# PETE



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h Mother Russia! What a heroic land. And a diverse one at that. “A riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma”, as Winston Churchill so famously said. Geographically speaking, Russia is the largest country on earth, spanning two continents and 11 timezones. It houses over a quarter of the world’s gas reserves, contains vast tracts of uninhabitable land and a number of inland seas.



The country’s most famous exports include gymnasts, skaters, dancers, scientists, spies, guns and caviar. It is the largest, and arguably most significant, neighbour of the European Union, with recent years seeing a rapid increase in its political and economical power. A quarter of the world’s scientific literature is published first in Russian. It is also the only country where buying a bottle of vodka is cheaper than buying the same of water. In short, Russia is an undeniably interesting place.

While Moscow is the official capital of Russia and may consequently be your first port of call, St Petersburg should not be overlooked. The second-largest city in Russia, St Petersburg is at times referred to as the ‘Northern Capital’ and considered perhaps the most Western city in Eastern Europe. It is arguably as important a centre as the nation’s actual capital and irrefutably beautiful at that. In short, a good starting point for a Russian odyssey.

## Arriving

Arriving into Pulkovo-2, St Petersburg’s international airport, on a grey and snowy afternoon is an interesting introduction to Russia and its imperial capital. Unsmiling customs officials, lines snaking through the form-fit processing area, concrete as far as the eye can see – all things conspiring to make me question the cultural melting-pot I’m told the city is. This sterile first-pass, however, belies the intricate beauty of a diverse and sprawling metropolis. Once out of the arrivals hall and safely ensconced in a swiftly driven taxi, shielding me from the -20°C outside, I am able to begin appreciating better the mixture of styles and people that populate this intriguing city.

## St Petersburg Unveiled

Founded by Peter the Great in 1703, St Petersburg can be most correctly described as a collection of islands, being built, as it is, on a swamp. But even swamps – hitherto regarded as spongy, wet, unusable land – can afford a romantic air, St Petersburg is also known as the Venice of the North, owing to the numerous canals and channels criss-crossing the city; many of which are spanned by beautiful, artfully designed bridges.

## Cultural Capital

‘Peter’, as it known to locals, is commonly perceived as the ‘cultural capital’ and the most European of Russia’s two largest cities – the other being, of course, Moscow. Russia itself is a country with a rich, and passionate, cultural, literary and artistic history, and ‘St Pete’ (another of its colloquial titles) is often seen as the heart of this creative melee. Indeed, the local population are – at times contentiously – considered to be more intelligent, polite and cultured than their Moscow counterparts.

While it remains an undeniably Russian city, St Pete has a strongly romantic quality. Its expansive, tree-lined boulevards, palaces, churches, historic monuments and impressive architecture



are everywhere; interspersed with statues of Lenin, contemporary political banners and transitory street kiosks selling Soviet paraphernalia and, quite often, ice-cream, despite the snow. You can wander happily along Nevsky Prospekt - the 4.5km long, main street of the city - taking in colonnades and architraves of grand facades on crumbling buildings, stopping

to browse and thaw out in cafes, bistros, boutiques, bootleg CD stores, and foreign franchises.

## Must See Sights

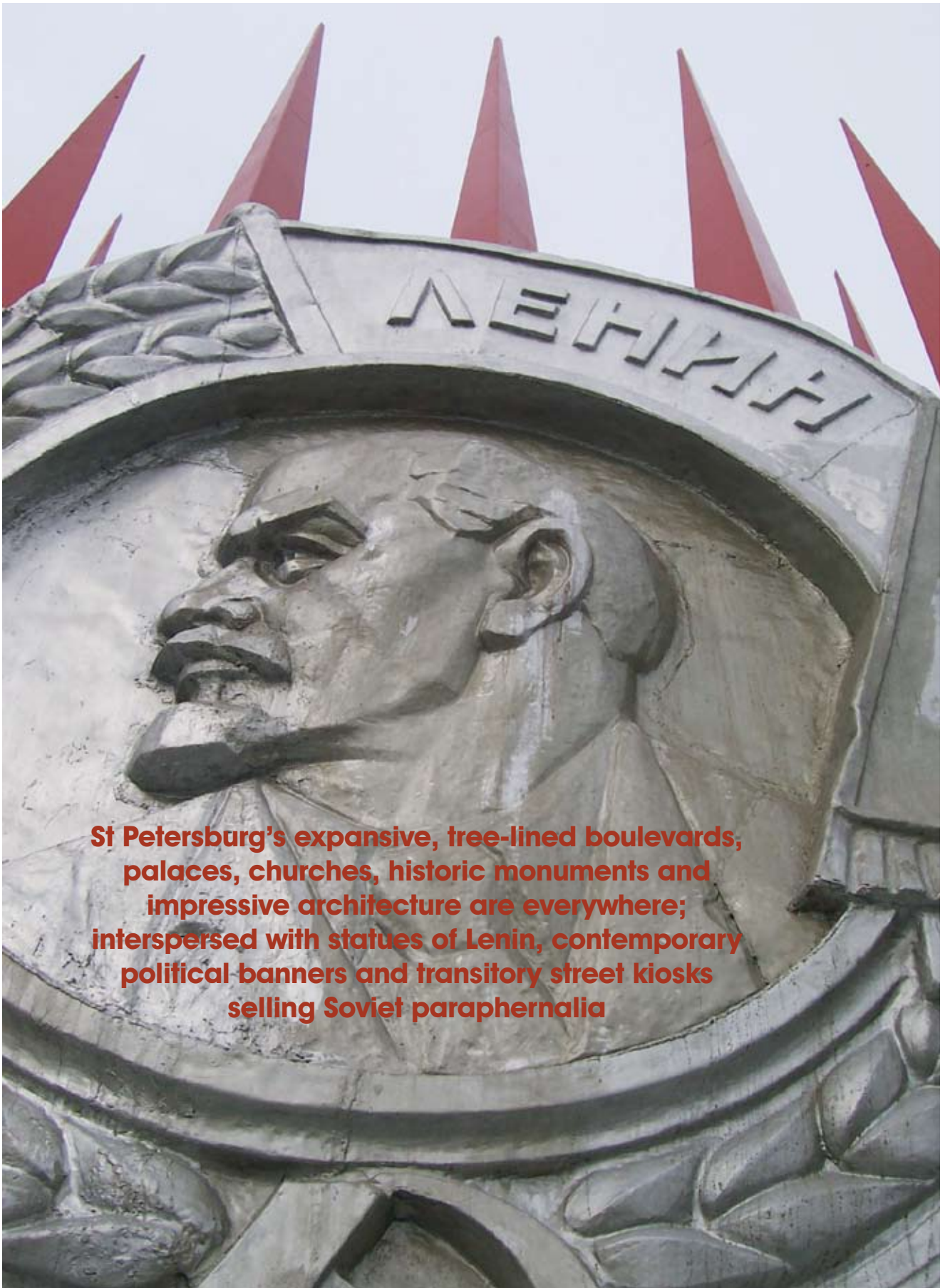
St Petersburg contains well over 200 museums, 45 significant galleries and more than 80 theatres, so take your pick. Orchestras, small classical concerts and numerous local theatres attract audiences all year round. For a relatively small price, you can see a magnificent ballet or opera at the renowned Mariinsky - the theatre where now-famous masterpieces by composers like Tchaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakov premiered. The theatre itself is iconic, a lavish and ornately worked complex, offering an impressive and varied bill. Tickets can be purchased from a remote box office on Nevsky Prospekt (where tickets for a number of other classical events are on sale) or direct from the theatre itself. If classic isn't your

caper, St Pete also has at least one circus in residence at any one time.

## The Hermitage

Palaces, museums and galleries are plentiful in St Petersburg and the most famous of these is The Hermitage, the former Winter Palace of the Russian tsars, spread along the embankment of the Neva. The now historic collection was instigated by Catherine the Great in the mid-18th century and has grown to span six buildings, totalling around three million exhibit items (not all on display at once, mind). It is absolutely beautiful and is also absolutely massive in size so have a reasonable night's sleep and protein for breakfast in order to have the stamina to do it justice, at least in part. There are also a number of exquisite churches, including the Church on Spilled Blood and St Isaac's Cathedral - the latter having a rickety spiral staircase up to a rooftop that affords one of the best views across the city.





**St Petersburg's expansive, tree-lined boulevards, palaces, churches, historic monuments and impressive architecture are everywhere; interspersed with statues of Lenin, contemporary political banners and transitory street kiosks selling Soviet paraphernalia**



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### The Metro

When above-ground sites have filled their quota, it's easy to side-step into one of the pedestrian underpasses and hop onto the Metro, en route to the next destination. The Russian metro system, in general, is efficient, full and always running. In St Petersburg, because of the city's geography, the metro stations are the deepest in the world, and a ride down the escalator can feel like the beginnings of a journey into the centre of the earth. Most escalators are guarded at the bottom by a *babushka* (a late-middle-aged to elderly woman); I suppose watching out for all types of mischievousness, but quite often fast asleep on the job. The stations themselves, both here and in Moscow, are incredible – truly impressive structures. Most are themed, based on different designs, architecture, artists, Soviet-era slogans and murals. However, photography is forbidden, so stick to looking and admiring – and if you must take some snaps, well, don't say I didn't warn you.

### Getting Around

Actually navigating your way around the city, and indeed the country, can be

challenging. There are physical obstacles, such as in winter when, across town, part of the footpath, often a major thoroughfare, is cordoned off in large irregular rectangles - preventing unsuspecting citizens having a small mountain of snow land on top of them during regular clearing of heavily snow-laden rooves and gutters.

### The Language Barrier

There is also the significant hurdle of language. For those unacquainted with it, the Russian language can be tricky to communicate and impossible to decipher. In major cities such as St Petersburg and Moscow it is relatively easy to find your way around with no Russian speaking, an idea of the alphabet (for the Metro, mainly) and plenty of charades practice. However, once you venture out of the major centres, particularly South and East into Siberia, at least basic language skills and/or the ability to comfortably recognise Cyrillic is a distinct bonus. Russian remains the *lingua franca* throughout the Federation and simply acquainting yourself with several conversational phrases – those with the least syllables are probably easiest – will make a huge difference.





# WHERE TO STAY

If you haven't already arranged it through your travel agent, most accommodation will be able to help with travel invitations and visa registration.



Street of Nevsky Prospekt

## B & B's

Taking a room in private accommodation, B&B Russian-style, is a good option for central, local, quality and reasonably priced accommodation. Options abound, many of which can be found in the historical heart of St Petersburg, just minutes from Nevsky Prospekt - including the recently renovated **Swisstar Bed and Breakfast**: from 50 euro a night (1,800 rubles), rooms are simple, central and well appointed. Swisstar is located at 93 Fontanka Naberezhnaya, 1st Floor. Ph: +7 [812] 929-2793.

**Nevsky Prospekt B&B**: from 55 euro (2000 rubles), is an excellent location right on Nevsky Prospekt, with spacious rooms and quaint furnishings. Nevsky Prospekt B&B is located at 11 Nevsky Prospekt. Ph: +7 [812] 325 9398.

**The Art Hotel**: from 63 euro (2,350 rubles), has a number of comfortable rooms, where breakfast is served to you each morning, and again is only a short walk from Nevsky Prospekt and a number of museums and galleries. Art Hotel is located at 27-29 Mokhovaya Str. Ph: +7 [812] 740 7585.

## Hotels

If you prefer to travel, and lodge, in style, book a room at the renowned **Grand Hotel Europe**. Frequented by the rich and famous, this sumptuous hotel spans several heritage buildings along Nevsky Prospekt, offering a variety of suites and rooms in the heart of the cultural and shopping precinct of the city. Rooms start at around 320 euro (12,000 rubles). *Grand Hotel Europe is located at Cnr Nevsky Prospekt and Mikhailovskaja Ulitsa 1/7 ph: +7 [812] 329 6000.*



**Casa Leto** is a small, boutique hotel offering a unique and individual service. Just a short walk from Nevsky Prospekt, St Isaac's and The Hermitage, Casa Leto has five rooms, each named for the famous Italian architects of St Petersburg. Depending on the room and time of year, prices can vary greatly, but start from 155 euro (5,750 roubles), including breakfast. *Casa Leto is located at 34 Bolshaya Morskaya. Ph: +7 [812] 600 1096.*

If you want serious plush, **The Hotel Astoria St Petersburg** is a luxury spoil. A sumptuously outfitted, five-star affair, sitting directly opposite St Isaac's Cathedral. Rooms start from 330 euro (12,250 rubles). *The Hotel Astoria is on St Isaac's Square, 39 Bolshaya Morskaya. Ph: +7 [812] 494 5757.*



## Russian Cuisine

Any culture may lay claim to its rich culinary traditions and Russia is no different - here, though, the importance is not gustatory alone, but deeply personal. Famous dishes such as caviar, bliny (pancakes) and borscht (beetroot soup)

are well known, and toasted, far and wide, but many Russian staples such as pelmeni (dumplings), schi (cabbage soup), heavily sauced salads, potatoes wherever possible and as many types of meat as you can imagine, frequent menus and private tables daily. Heavy, savoury flavours dominate the

palate and fortify the eater for the day, or night, that lies ahead. For those in-between times, sweet berry jams, black teas and delicate cakes are regular, and delicious, morning or afternoon morsels - tiding the happy devourer over until the next infusion of heavy, fulfilling tastiness.

# WHERE TO EAT



Ice-cream stall



Door of Idiot Cafe



## Street Stalls

If you're game, street food can be a fun way to refuel - a convenient one too, with stalls found on nearly every corner and always outside metro stations - a kapusta/kartoshka (cabbage/potato) roll or a steaming, cheesy, bliny (pancake) followed by sticky ice-cream (preferably when the temperature is below 0) is, if not to be regularly recommended by your nutritionist, lip-smacking and unlikely to set you back more than 50 rubles (under 2 euro).

## Cafes

If you prefer your food made to order, however, numerous cafes, bars and restaurants abound throughout the city, you need only take your pick. Bistros can be found on most main streets (bistro actually being the Russian word for 'quick' - the original inventors of fast food!). One of the most famous places to visit in St Petersburg, particularly amongst visitors, expats and artists, is **Idiot Cafe**; named for the Dostoevsky book 'The Idiot', this cosy little cafe and bar is warm and welcoming, with a varied menu (available in English) serving Russian and vegetarian food - with a shot of vodka included alongside every meal. *Idiot Cafe is located at 82 Naberezhnaya Reki Moiki, open 11am - 1am. Ph: +7 [812]315 1675*


## Restaurants

For high-end Russian fare, the **Caviar Bar & Restaurant** in the Grand Hotel Europe provides a selection of the best quality caviar served with a range of top-end vodkas, served ice-cold. Set in the opulent surrounds of the hotel, the restaurant is famed for its high quality, and is a neighbour to L'Europe Restaurant, specialising in French and European cuisine, named 'Best Restaurant in St Petersburg' in 2007.



Delicious Caviar

## Great Expectations

Attempting to describe St Petersburg in a nutshell is lunacy. It is just too vast, and diverse, with a culture so rich that it cannot be encapsulated in one person's description. To best do it justice, pack your bag with your travelling best and hop a flight to St Petersburg or jump onboard the Trans-Siberian if you're game. Discover for yourself what the country, its cities and people have to offer. Invariably you will find both an element of the most common clichés, alongside aspects you couldn't previously have imagined. Regardless, you will not be disappointed. 

## Quirky Facts

- The guides at St Petersburg's Hermitage Museum undergo rigorous preparation before being granted their illustrious position – a year of training, in conjunction with considerable self-tutelage is commonly undertaken; outfitting them with sufficient knowledge to pass through the abundant array of rooms and buildings exhibiting works from a collection of just over three million pieces (although, only one fifth is displayed at any one time).
- One of the most convenient methods of getting from one place to another in St Petersburg, when public transport can't be found and your legs aren't obliging, is hailing a car. By this, I mean an ordinary, everyday car. Driven by a local who is going your way. In short: hitchhiking. A reasonable level of Russian is required to be able to do this, but it's an otherwise remarkably easy and cheap way of getting from A to B in a variety of circumstances.

## Nightlife



Toward Fish Fabrique

If you want to scope the local nightlife, the dance and live-music scene is thriving. St Petersburg boasts a number of underground clubs – literally. I'm talking about ex-bomb shelters. One of the most well known, and indeed best, of these is **Griboedov**, not far off Nevsky Prospekt on the bank of the Griboedov Canal. This club was the first of its kind in St Petersburg and has a legendary 44-year lease on the premises. Since its inception in 2000, Griboedov has developed a cult following, famous for cheap drinks and some of the best local DJs. Security can be tough, so be prepared for a serious patting-down at the front door, but once inside, relax and enjoy. Another of the city's coolest music venues is **Fish Fabrique** (Fishka, to locals), a highly unconventional club that is undoubtedly St Pete's most intimate live music venue. It sits in the alternative art centre, Pushkinskaya 10, and is liveliest after the stroke of midnight.



Crowd at Fish Fabrique



Game at Fish Fabrique