

The Best of Moscow & St. Petersburg

Russia breathes superlatives: the world's biggest country; its largest supplier of natural gas and second-largest oil producer; and home of the planet's longest railroads, busiest subway system (Moscow's), and one of its deepest, biggest, and oldest lakes (Baikal, in Siberia). It even boasts balmy beach resorts (on the Black Sea), though the Kremlin and the snowcapped cupolas of its cathedrals seem truer reflections of this northern nation's might and mysticism.

What the country lacks in climatic warmth, Russians make up for with their bottomless generosity and jovial hospitality. Survivors of despots from Ivan the Terrible to Stalin, Russians place high value on keeping their home worlds safe from the perils of without and stocking the larders with homemade jams, pickles, and desserts. The past decade has been rough on Russians, but it's sharpened their adaptation skills. Today's Russian university graduates know more languages, more about financial markets, and more about text messaging than many of their Western counterparts.

There is much for travelers to experience in Russia's two most popular cities. The rigorous traditions of the Bolshoi Theater coexist with some of Europe's most cutting-edge DJs. Hip restaurants fashion mouthwatering delicacies that put a twist on traditional Russian meat pies and cabbage soup. The Hermitage Museum is a fortress of fine art from around the world; and just down the street, the Russian Museum overflows with works by local artists from throughout the centuries. Explore Russia's contributions to the exploration of the universe by taking a "ride" in a space shuttle in Gorky Park or wandering the Cosmonautics Museum, a tribute to the tireless scientists and engineers who sent the first man—and woman—into space.

Russia's tourism infrastructure, alas, is still catching up with the rest of the changes, but Moscow and St. Petersburg are well on their way. Take along some pluck and flexibility and have a look at the best Russia has to offer.

1 Most Memorable Russian Experiences

- **View Red Square at Night** (Moscow): The crimson-and-ivy-colored domes of St. Basil's Cathedral rise in a dizzying welcome to this most majestic of Russian plazas. The red stars on the Kremlin towers twinkle above one side of the square, making the medieval fortress seem festive instead of forbidding. Lenin's Mausoleum in nighttime shadow is appropriately eerie. Stand on the rise in the center of the square and feel a part of Russia's expanse.
- **Experience White Nights in St. Petersburg:** Two weeks of festivities in late June celebrate the longest day of the year, when the northern sun never dips below the horizon. The

Russia





Russia's enormous size (6,592,846 square miles or 17,075,400 square kilometers, covering 11 different time zones) makes it difficult to map; in this drawing, North follows the meridians (lines of longitude) that converge near the top center of the map.

White Nights are more than just a party; they're a buoyant, carefree attitude of summer-ness liberated after the city's long hibernation. Watch at midnight as residents picnic with their kids or play soccer in the court-yards. Then take a nighttime boat ride through the canals as the sunset melts into a languorous sunrise, and you'll never want to go south again.

- **Steam Your Stress Away at the Banya:** Thaw your eyelashes in January or escape snow flurries in May in the traditional Russian bath house, something between a sauna and a Turkish hammam. The pristine Sandunovsky Baths in Moscow are a special treat, with Greek sculptures and marble baths. Watch expert banya-goers beat themselves with birch branches, plunge into icy pools, exfoliate with coffee grounds, and sip beer while waiting for the next steam. **Sandunovsky Baths (Sandunovskiy Bani)** are at 14 Neglinnaya, Moscow (© 095/925-4631). See p. 141.

- **Watch the Drawbridges Open Along the Neva River** (St. Petersburg): An unforgettable outing during White Nights, or anytime, involves perching yourself on the quay very early at 2am to watch the city's bridges unfold in careful rhythm to allow shipping traffic through the busy Neva. Just be careful not to get caught on the wrong side of the river from your hotel.

- **Take the Trans-Siberian Railroad:** This winding link between Europe and Asia offers a sense of Russia's scale. Seven days from Moscow to Beijing, or from Moscow to Vladivostok on the Pacific Coast, the journey provides plenty of time for reflection and making acquaintances. Lake Baikal and the Altai Mountains are stunning interruptions in the masses of pine and birch forests.

- **Picnic at Kolomenskoye** (Moscow):

This architectural reserve boasts the breathtaking 16th-century Church of the Assumption and the wooden house where Peter the Great sought refuge before assuming the throne. The surrounding lawns and groves beckon visitors to stretch out with caviar or cucumber sandwiches and a thermos of strong Russian tea. The hilly paths wind through apple orchards. Historic folk festivals are staged here throughout the year.

- **Pay Your Respects at Novodevichy Cemetery and Convent** (Moscow):

The intricately original graves of the Russian eminences buried here—writers Anton Chekhov and Nikolai Gogol, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev and Stalin's suicidal wife among them—are allegories more than headstones. The tranquil grounds of the convent above witnessed bloody palace intrigues, and many a powerful woman in Russian history was exiled there. Today its restored cathedrals and adjacent pond exude a quiet serenity.

- **Sip Baltika Beer at Patriarch's Ponds** (Moscow):

This prestigious neighborhood inspired writer Mikhail Bulgakov. It's still a prime spot in which to sink onto a bench with a bottle of local beer (Baltika is a popular choice) or other beverage and watch Moscow spin by. Whimsical statues of characters from Ivan Krylov's fables will entertain kids, and the pond is a skating rink in winter.

- **Take Tea at a Luxury Hotel:** A cup of steaming tea from an antique samovar is a treat for anyone, and even those on tight budgets should find something affordable at top-end hotels. To accompany the tea, try jam-filled *bliny* (thin Russian pancakes), fruit- or meat-filled *pirozhki* (pies), or caviar on toast. (For more

information, see the listings for Moscow's Le Royal Meridien National or Metropol hotels (chapter 5) or St. Petersburg's Grand Hotel Europe (chapter 13).

- **Sample Wild Mushrooms:** Mushroom-picking in the countryside is a national pastime, and homemade mushroom dishes are heavenly though not without risks. Restaurant-approved mushrooms are nearly as good and much safer: succulent cepes in soup; chanterelles sprinkled

on pork chops; or *zhulien*, any wild mushroom baked with cheese and sour cream.

- **Enjoy a Night Out at the Bolshoi Theater** (Moscow): Locals bemoan falling standards and rising prices at Russia's premier ballet and opera house, but the performers remain top class. Even seats on the fourth-level balcony offer views of the opulent 18th-century interior. The Mariinsky (formerly The Kirov) is St. Petersburg's no less impressive version.

2 Best Luxury Hotels

- **Baltschug Kempinski** (Moscow; ☎ 800/426-3135; www.kempinski-moscow.com): The hotel's views of St. Basil's Cathedral, Red Square, and the Kremlin are so breathtaking that TV networks set up here for their stand-ups. The brunch is fit for a czar, and the understated elegance of the rooms complements the facade's pastel ornamentation. See p. 91.
- **Le Royal Meridien National** (Moscow; ☎ 095/258-7000; www.national.ru): The National (a Royal Meridien hotel) has hosted legions of foreign and Russian dignitaries, including Vladimir Lenin before he moved into the Kremlin across the street. Now Russia's capitalist multimillionaires make it their home away from home. See p. 82.
- **Metropol** (Moscow; ☎ 095/927-6040; www.metropol-moscow.ru): The intricate Art Nouveau mosaic circling its crown is just one reason to delight in Moscow's century-old

Metropol. The chandeliers eclipse all else. The Bolshoi Theater lies across the square. See p. 82.

- **Grand Hotel Europe** (St. Petersburg; ☎ 812/329-6000; www.grandhotel-europe.com): This baroque confection in central St. Petersburg charmed Tchaikovsky and Bill Clinton, among other dignitaries. The winter garden stays lush even during St. Petersburg's dimmest months. The harpist and the plush furniture of the mezzanine café provide respite from a day of touring. See p. 211.
- **Corinthia Nevsky Palace** (St. Petersburg; ☎ 812/380-2001; www.corinthia.ru): Bursting with amenities too rare in Russia's second city, this thoroughly modern hotel is housed in a 19th-century landmark on central Nevsky Prospekt. Its heated garage, aromatherapy sessions, and sunbathing terrace compete with its in-house theatrical museum for customer raves. See p. 210.

3 Best Affordable Accommodations

- **Pulford Apartments** (St. Petersburg; ☎ 812/325-6277; www.pulford.com): A British company rents out these furnished, renovated flats with views of St. Petersburg's greatest monuments. A

range of room sizes and services is available, including cleaning and airport transfers. Moscow apartments are also available. See p. 207.

- **Sovietsky Hotel** (Moscow; ☎ 095/960-2000; www.sovietsky.ru): The soaring ceilings and cornice work of this behemoth in northern Moscow infuse it with grandeur. The service is no longer as Soviet as its name. Downstairs, the renowned Yar restaurant serves up elegant Russian fare. See p. 93.
- **G&R Hostels** (Moscow; ☎ 095/378-0001; www.hostels.ru): Several floors of a drab Soviet hotel have been transformed into clean, comfortable accommodations. Services include cars with drivers and visa invitations (see “Entry Requirements,” in chapter 2). While the location is not central, it’s right next to a metro station. See p. 95.

4 Best Dining Experiences

- **Best Aristocratic Atmosphere:** Plunge into the refined opulence of 19th-century Russia at **Cafe Pushkin** (Moscow; 26a Tverskoi Bulvar.; ☎ 095/229-5590), as you spear a bite of suckling pig or sip fine tea from a silver samovar. Though it only opened in 2000, the three-story restaurant’s careful design and immediate popularity have made it seem an old landmark. See p. 105.
- **Best Comfort Food:** One of the most reliable, reasonable Russian menus in Moscow is at the basement restaurant/bar **Uncle Vanya** (Moscow; 16 Pyatnitskaya; ☎ 095/951-0586). Literary and musical memorabilia line the walls, and the place mats teach you the Russian alphabet. Favorites are their dumplings (*pelmeni* or *vareniki*) with meat, potato, or berry fillings; and the buckwheat kasha. See p. 113.
- **Best Fusion:** Leading restaurateur Anton Novikov has capitalized on Russia’s growing obsession with Asian cuisine without surrendering to it, at **Vanil** (Moscow; 1 Ostozhenka; ☎ 095/202-3341). The menu is relentlessly fresh; a recent option was a soup of duck livers and oysters. The soaring ceilings and massive chandeliers seem built to the scale of the staggering Christ the Savior Cathedral across the street. See p. 114.
- **Best Fresh Fish:** The spare stone arches of St. Petersburg’s **Staraya Tamozhnya** (St. Petersburg; Old Customs House; 1 Tamozhenny Pereulok; ☎ 812/327-8980) evoke the building’s history as an 18th-century Customs House, but its elegant lines and French chef keep things thoroughly modern. The unobtrusive salad bar offers marinated Russian specialties. The fish is so fresh you can forget any fears and indulge. See p. 232.
- **Best Georgian Fare:** The generous cuisine of Georgia, in the herb- and sheep-covered Caucasus Mountains, is best sampled at **Genatsvale** (Moscow; 12/1 Ostozhenka; ☎ 095/202-0445). Exposed wood and lace curtains provide the perfect home-style setting for cheese-filled *khachapuri* loaves or lamb marinated in pomegranate juice. Georgia’s southern climes also produce spicy vegetable dishes sorely lacking in Russian cuisine. The same family runs **Mama Zoya** and another Genatsvale locale. See p. 115.
- **Best Literary Dive:** Just a small streetlight above the entrance marks the bohemian basement cafe **Idiot** (St. Petersburg; 82 Moika Canal; ☎ 812/315-1675), named after a Fyodor Dostoyevsky novel. Mulled wine warms visitors in the winter

months; lightly fermented *kvas* cools you in July. Pick a book in English from the café's eclectic library to peruse while you sip. See p. 230.

- **Best Kitschy Theme Dining:** Three elaborate and pricy Moscow restaurants plumb the stereotypes and cuisines of Russia's neighbors. **Shinok** (Moscow; 2 Ulitsa 1905 Goda; ☎ 095/255-0888), a Ukrainian farm with a chicken coop, is hidden on one of the city's hippest streets. Aromatic borscht is served here 24 hours. **Prisoner of the Caucasus** (Moscow; Kavkazkaya Plennitsa; 36 Prospekt

Mira; ☎ 095/280-5111) offers grilled lamb and garlicky eggplant. Waiters are decked out as mountain warriors. **White Sun of the Desert** (Moscow; Beloye Solntse Pustyni; 29/14 Neglinnaya St.; ☎ 095/209-7525) offers central Asian cuisine like lamb pilaf and spicy dumplings. See pp. 116, 115, and 111, respectively.

- **Best Quickie Meal: Yolki-Palki** is a Russian chain with basic sit-down service in a country kitchen setting. It's also kid-friendly, a rarity on Russia's otherwise up-to-date dining scene. See p. 108.

5 Best Views

- **Lookout Point at Sparrow Hills** (Moscow): With the Stalin Gothic skyscraper of Moscow State University at your back, the capital spreads out beneath you in its enormity. Watch newlyweds pose and embrace at the lookout, leaving empty champagne bottles on the ledge.
- **Resurrection Gate Entrance to Red Square** (Moscow): Get ready to gasp when the cacophonous onion domes of St. Basil's Cathedral greet you at this cobblestone hilltop square. Resurrection Gate, itself resurrected in the 1990s, forms a perfect frame.
- **Strelka** (St. Petersburg): If you stand on this spit of land on Vasilevsky

Island, you'll get a panorama of nearly every major landmark and monument in St. Petersburg, while the Neva River laps at your feet. It's also a window onto the classical conformity of the city's architecture.

- **The Sail Up to the Petrodvorets Palace** (Peterhof): The dense forests along the Baltic shore suddenly part and the gilded palace emerges, atop cascading fountains and sculpted gardens. Any boat from St. Petersburg to the imperial summer residence offers this vista. Hydrofoils leave from the Winter Palace/Hermitage in the warmer months.

6 Best Architecture

- **The Kremlin** (Moscow): This red brick fortress encloses a complex of 15th-century cathedrals that serve as Russia's best-preserved window onto that era, with their gold domes and pointed arches. Surrounding them are palaces where Russia's President Vladimir Putin and his predecessors have reigned, from the flowered columns of the Grand Kremlin Palace

to the classical triangular Senate Building. See p. 119.

- **Palace Square** (St. Petersburg): The Russian baroque Winter Palace looks across this square—the stage for the Russian Revolution—toward the Alexander Column (celebrating the victory over Napoleon) and the curved facade of the General Staff building. Though its parts were

erected at different times, Palace Square demonstrates the ensemble architecture that gives this planned city its consistency. See p. 238.

- **Stalin Gothic Skyscrapers** (Moscow): These seven towers raised in the 1940s to 1950s soar above the capital, looking grandiose from afar and eerie up close. Two of the towers house private apartments, two house government buildings, two are hotels, and one is Moscow State University. See p. 66.
- **Kolomenskoye museum reserve** (Moscow): The towering tented spires

of the 16th-century Church of the Ascension share this reserve with the quirky wooden house in which Peter the Great once stayed, among other architectural treasures. See p. 137.

- **Moscow's Metro Stations** (Moscow): The spotless marble and granite floors of the subway are as remarkable as the intricate artwork and regal columns that adorn the stations. Favorites include the bronze statues at Ploshchad Revolutsii, the aviation mosaics at Mayakovskaya, and any stop on the opulent Circle Line.

7 Best Museums

- **State Hermitage Museum** (St. Petersburg; 1 Palace Sq.; ☎ 812/110-9079): The museum holds one of the world's best and biggest collections of fine art, from Egyptian carvings to Rembrandt to Impressionist masterpieces. A controversial hall holds so-called trophy art seized from the Germans after World War II. The museum is located in the Winter Palace, stormed in 1917 by revolutionaries arresting Czar Nicholas II's government. See p. 234.
- **Armory Museum** (Moscow; Kremlin; ☎ 095/302-3776): Fabergé eggs, coronation robes, royal carriages, and jewels have filled what was once the czarist weapons storehouse. The Armory, the Kremlin's main museum, also holds an impressive collection of armor and weaponry. Admission is limited to four sessions per day. See p. 122.
- **Tretyakov Gallery** (Moscow; 10 Lavrushinsky Pereulok; ☎ 095/230-7788): The largest collection of Russian art, this museum is treasured by locals but underappreciated by visitors. Chagall and Kandinsky share space with penetrating medieval

icons. Vrubel's *Style Moderne* and Levitan's smoky landscapes are pleasant discoveries. See p. 131.

- **Peter and Paul Fortress** (St. Petersburg; Hare's Island or Zaichy Ostrov): This island fort holds the cathedral where the remains of Russia's last royal family are interred, as well as a former mint and several small galleries. It was here that Peter the Great started his project to build this northern capital. See p. 240.
- **Museum of Cosmonautics** (Moscow; Prospekt Mira 111; ☎ 095/283-7914): Housed beneath a sculpture of a rocket shooting off into the cosmos, this museum traces the formidable industry that put the Soviets head-to-head with the United States in the Space Race. Exhibits include moon rocks and the evolution of spacesuits. See p. 131.
- **Literary Museums:** Moscow and St. Petersburg have wonderful small museums devoted to Pushkin, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Bulgakov, Gorky, and scores of other Russian writers, though signage is often in Russian only. See p. 137.

8 Best Gifts to Bring Home

- **Linens:** Delicately embroidered tablecloths, pillowcases, and women's or children's traditional tunics made from local linen are great buys.
- **Lacquer Boxes:** Different schools produce different styles of boxes, usually in black wood decorated with images from Russian folk tales.
- **Vodka:** Russky Standart and Flagman are two top-quality choices unavailable outside Russia.
- **Nesting Dolls:** *Matryoshka* dolls can be tacky or tasteful, and kids love them. Adults like the political ones portraying Russian or U.S. leaders stacked inside each other.
- **Stones from Siberia:** Malachite, charoite, and radonite are set into jewelry hard to find anywhere else in the world.

9 Best Oddball Attractions

- **Lenin's Mausoleum** (Moscow): The red-and-black granite mausoleum on Red Square is no longer the pilgrimage site it once was, and its future is in question—which is all the more reason to go see Vladimir Lenin's embalmed body now. A visit allows you access to the graves of all the other Soviet leaders (except Khrushchev) along the Kremlin wall. See p. 126.
- **Art MUSEON** (Moscow, behind the Central House of Artists; 10 Krymsky Val): A collection of Lenin heads and other Soviet monuments toppled in the early 1990s lay abandoned in Gorky Park until the pieces were unofficially resurrected and lined up in a garden behind Moscow's modern art museum. The place is a fitting commentary on Russia's political tumult of the last 15 years. See p. 130.
- **Kunstkamera** (St. Petersburg; 3 Universitetskaya Naberezhnaya; ☎ 812/328-1412): Peter the Great's museum of 18th-century scientific curiosities is not for viewing after lunch. Among exhibits of the foremost technical developments of his day, the museum boasts pickled animals and human heads. See p. 244.
- **Buryan space shuttle in Gorky Park** (Moscow): The amusement section in Gorky Park is fun for kids but feels generic—until you bump into the Buryan. This space shuttle abandoned during the Soviet Union's waning years has been turned into a ride along the Moscow River, with gyrating chairs meant to make your stomach lurch as in a real rocket blastoff. The effect is mediocre, but the up-close view of the shuttle is worthwhile. See p. 134.