

Alexander's

PRACTICAL GUIDE TO SAINT PETERSBURG

Helpful Travel Guide.
For your first trip to
Saint Petersburg, Russia

BY ALEXANDER HART

"Russia is very cold, so if you want to make friends with ordinary Russians you will need to "Break the Ice" first.

After this, once warmed to you, they will become your friends for life and quite likely invite you into their lives and homes. " - Alexander



SAINT PETERSBURG

→ Cultural Capital



Saint Petersburg is considered the Cultural Capital of Russia. With over 120 performing arts theaters across the city, many are sponsored by the State.

Museums play an impressive part in the cultural life of her citizens. There are 65 to choose from. Children are encouraged from a young age to appreciate Russian and foreign cultures from all across the world. A strong sense of Russian identity is nurtured and encouraged.



→ Population



The population in the year 2018 for Saint Petersburg is estimated to be 5.28 Million. It is the second most populous city in Russia after Moscow at 12.19 million

This city is considered to be the most "European" city in Russia. So in many respects it is the most cosmopolitan and culturally diverse city, embracing trends and being at the forefront of the arts and design. Her citizens reflect this in fashion, attitude and general vibe.

→ White Nights



One of the most exceptional natural phenomena is the Saint Petersburg's "White Nights" during Summer from about June 11 to July 2

I experienced my first White Nights this year 2018 and it blew my mind that at about 22:00 it was still Light outside. Plays havoc with ones sleep patterns as day break starts again at 3:00 am the next morning. There is a White Nights festival and fun things to do during this time. Bizarre and fun.

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QUICK INTRO

Saint Petersburg was founded by **Peter the Great** in 1703. Named after **Saint Peter the Apostle**.

In May 27, 1703 It became capital of the Russian Empire for more than two hundred years (1712–1728, 1732–1918)

He was an interesting dynamic character and as Tsar, by force of will and determination had this beautiful city of stone literally rise above the swampy mud on which it was built. It is often said that the city was built on the bones of the numerous Serfs and workers who died building her up with granite and mortar, working 20 hour days during Summer, and during frigidly cold Winter months.

Saint Petersburg is a monument to Peter the Great (1672-1725) and the Romanov dynasty, with numerous reminders of his glory and life through palaces, statues, place names, stories and legends.

It is a relatively young city by European standards, a lot younger than Moscow which turned 871 earlier this year (2018). My wife and I went to the birthday weekend in Moscow and it was a fantastic vibrant experience, dancers, ballerinas, classical and contemporary musicians and acts.

Within 30 years which is a very short space of time, the inner city had largely being built. The most impressive building of the Petrine (Peter's) era was the Menshikov Palace. Menshikov was a close confidante of the Tsar and later disgraced after his Peter's death.

The main purpose for building a city here on the Neva with direct water/river access to the Gulf of Finland was to finally have a link to the Baltic and Europe via the sea. At that time Russia was fighting off the Swedes.



HANDY TRAVEL TIPS

➔ BUY A SIM CARD



The key to getting on line is so that you can use your helpful travel apps from your phone without Wifi. Data is super cheap in Russia

Mobile shops require your passport to buy a sim card. Megafon, Beeline MTS are some of the providers. Ask a local where to find a shop as there are many across the city. It is really helpful to be connected and reception is strong throughout the city. I found my reception does dip inside some old stone buildings .

➔ DRAW SOME HARD CASH



I recommend drawing cash on arrival , use the main Russian bank ATMs Sberbank, its the green one. Find at the airport. Instructions are in English.

The most cash you can draw per transaction is 5000 Rubles , which means not every shop is willing to break your 5000 into smaller notes, here metro stations are helpful , or high cash shops. It's very useful having cash on you for Bus/Metro Fares/Tokens , and food, wares on the street. Your Master or Visa Card will work too. I always Google Currency conversion rates before I buy something.

➔ Screenshots.



SAINT PETERSBURG IN ENGLISH

I always take screen shots in case I am not in a wifi zone or haven't bought a sim. This Ebook/ PDF will be useful as you don't need to be online to view the info.

Screenshots of info on your phone is very handy when traveling , especially remembering Bus Numbers and Metro routes and stops. Offline maps are helpful when navigating to for instance the start of our tours. Also advisable to take a screenshot of your Uber Ride ,driver name plates and car make.

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GET THESE FREE APPS ON YOUR PHONE



Here are 3 essential apps to have on your phone when travelling to Saint Petersburg. (Or anywhere)

First off, get Google Maps which is most useful for getting bus numbers and metro stops under the "directions" function/button. This little trick I learnt while travelling in neighboring Georgia recently, and also useful for navigating to new parts of town. If you have an iPhone the native map app I find more useful when typing in place names in Russian "English"



Google translate is super helpful when trying to communicate with regular Russians. Most can speak English but it is typical to have a voice note automated voice conversation when discussing more complicated needs or topics.



Uber does operate in Saint Petersburg, It is useful when you need get to obscure places and don't want to use public transport. It is handy if you've had a few drinks and can't be bothered to face the metro in most cases. Also useful for when public transport is unavailable after 24:00. If you can't get Uber you can download Yandex Taxi as an alternative.



GETTING AROUND

↪ Bus / Tram



Buses or Trams will get you close to where you need to go and operate until 24:00 at Night. Use Google Maps to find bus numbers. You can pay cash on the bus or tram

Loading your Metro Card may save you in the long run but it is quite possible to use cash for the duration of your stay. This form of Transport is super cheap . 40 Rubles per ride in the Machutka (Smaller Bus) 40 Rubles for the electric buses, the same for Trams . You'll find old trams running along side super modern trams.

↪ Metro



The Metro carries around 2,5 Million commuters everyday. Rush hours do apply and often you'll have to stand . There is a culture of giving up your seat for woman or the elderly .

Metro stations are clearly marketed with an M . Ask a local and the closest station is not too far from where ever you find yourself in Saint Petersburg . 45 Rubles



PUBLIC TRANSPORT FROM AIRPORT

It is quite possible to take public transport to and from the airport. Although this option is cheaper you must bear in mind that you will be having to lug your luggage around, to and from Metro Stations etc and it stops at 24:00.

Best option : if you're traveling fairly light and want to save money.

To and from the airport, Pulokovo LED (Formerly Leningrad) Saint Petersburg International Airport, take bus number 39 or 39E or MiniVan K39 to the nearest Moskovskaya metro station.

Costs 40 Rubles plus 40 rubles for your luggage (I know its weird to pay for luggage, and is only applicable on this route)

You will find the bus stop directly outside the airport departures exit on the ground floor. If you're in doubt about which bus to take you can ask someone at the airport.

Before your trip just grab a screenshot from Google Maps under "directions" its will give you an easy to follow route with bus numbers. Peace of Mind is having a picture of what to do and which buses to take.

Using an Uber /Yandex is possible too, there is free wifi at LED so it will involve a bit of trust getting to where you want to go without changing your route mid trip. This is really the only option after 24:00 when there is no public transport available.

↪ Uber /Yandex



Using Uber / or Yandex is probably the most convenient way to get around the city if you don't want to public transport. Useful after 24:00 when public transport is unavailable.

I recommend using Uber /Yandex over Taxis initially because you as a newbie to the city won't know what a reasonable fare is for distances and routes. A friend of mine made the mistake of being over charged for a trip from LED (airport) because he was haggled into a ride without knowing the fare upfront.

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3 BEST THINGS TO DO

➔ Isaac Cathedral Colonade view



The Cathedral took 40 years to build (1858) and stands 105 meters high. It was built on a base of 2500 tree trunks driven into the mud. It cost 1 Million gold rubles.

Its beautiful golden dome was blackened during WWII because it is so prominent a feature on the city skyline. 60 people died "spray painting" the dome gold as the technique of the day used mercury as a way of liquefying the gold, of course the vapour poisoned workers. A macabre snippet.

➔ Peter and Paul Fortress



Designed as a star shaped Fortress and built over 34 years. (1706). It was a famous prison and the most inglorious prisoner was Peter's own son Alexey (treason)

It was seen a place of horrible torture and bad treatment of political prisoners by the Bolsheviks (Before the Revolution 1917) and by them afterwards. Its most prominent feature is the Cathedral Spire which stands 123 meters tall with a gilded Angel and Cross at its pinnacle,

➔ Faberge Museum



Fascinating Private Museum housing repatriated cultural gems of Russia. the most famous being 9 Imperial Easter Eggs. (\$100 Million worth)

The museum also includes 4,000 works of decorative applied and fine arts, including gold and silver items, paintings, porcelain and bronze., but of course the eggs designed by Peter Carl Faberge are the main attraction. It is still a tradition today to give hand painted eggs to family and friends on Easter Sunday, Eastern Orthodox Tradition.

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TOP 3 THINGS TO DO

ISAAC CATHEDRAL COLONNADE - PETER AND PAUL FORTRESS - FABERGE MUSEUM

Apart from the wonderful museums listed on the next page these are my recommendations on "3 Must Do things" when in Saint Petersburg.

I personally like getting a strategic view of the city, which is quite flat, built on a swampy marsh, from above the buildings, that is why I recommend getting yourself to **Isaac Cathedral** and taking a walk around the Colonnade. You can do this without going inside. The commentary is unfortunately in Russian but you can purchase an English Audio Guide.

I also proposed to my wife on the Colonnade so it has a personal romantic connection for me.

Secondly the **Peter and Paul Fortress** and of course the **Faberge Museum**.

I would also recommend taking a guided walk on one of our tours or by yourself around the inner the city. You will have to include Nevsky Prospect (Avenue) which is considered the main street of the city and its most "vibey" known for its shops, cafes and historical sites.

At street level this a fantastic city to explore mostly because you can have close access to sites within the Historical Precinct, all within walking distance from each other.



3 BEST MUSEUMS

➔ The Hermitage



Visiting the Hermitage is the most important thing to do on your visit here. This world famous art museum is much loved by locals and travelers alike.

Also known as the Winter Palace, its museum complex comprising 6 buildings hosts fascinating collections comprising Egyptian antiquities, Classical antiquities, Prehistoric art, Jewelry and decorative art, Italian and Spanish fine art, Russian art, German, Swiss, British and French fine art. *Totally Worth it!*

➔ Catherine Palace



Named after Catherine I and not Catherine the Great II, a common mistake, is the beautiful palace, just outside of SPB in a small village called Pushkin.

The Palace houses the famous reconstructed Amber room, the original they say was stolen by the Germans during WWII. (Still a mystery). This is a tourist favourite and rightly so, beautiful and Grand. Lovely walk through the gardens.

➔ Peterhof



I personally love Peterhof, accessible by hydrofoil taxi and by public transport, it is a beautiful complex of different museums and an impressive garden.

The most impressive feature of Peterhof are the Fountains which are produced by gravity and not mechanical pumps. This was the first museum I saw in Russia (mid winter its free) and I immediately was overwhelmed by its splendour and grandeur. The gardens are immaculate and definitely a Russian National treasure.

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TOP MUSEUMS

HERMITAGE / WINTER PALACE- CATHERINE PALACE - PETERHOF

These 3 Museums are the most popular and in my estimation the museums you simply have to visit on your trip to Saint Petersburg.

Firstly the **Hermitage** often called the **Winter Palace** which is actually one of the buildings making up the museum complex. I personally recommended finding the Golden Peacock Clock, and work of art and mechanical marvel. I will also add the Summer Gardens as an additional thing to do while here. (Peter's First **Summer Palace**, a smaller more humble building)

Russians are very proud of the Hermitage and rightly so, it houses an astonishing collection of Art Works from all over the world and are simply "priceless" in value. Both the young the old visit this museum and others and its is typical of ordinary Russians to tell you what they enjoy best at the Hermitage. Its a cultural appreciation thing, it's celebrated here to be seen as culturally aware.

The **Catherine Palace** is on every worthwhile tour itinerary because it's another National Gem. Usually requested on day tours. One of my personal favourites even with so many awesome Palaces to choose from.

Peterhof is also fantastic, and I highly recommend making the effort to get there to see the famous fountains and Gardens. When I first visited it was mid winter and my fiance and I walked on the iced over Finnish Gulf beach, quite a thrill.



WHAT TO EAT

→ Borsh



Think Beetroot stew? It is a meat dish and personally a favorite of mine. Its a real treat when you've come in from the cold. I also like cold beetroot soup.

There are few varieties of Borsh with homemade recipes passed from generation to generation. I surprised myself by actually loving this soup.

→ Fish pie



Okay this one was weird to me at first, the Fish pie, I've never had fish pie and was curious to try it out . Its definitely a unique taste ..

→ Caviar



The main types of caviar are Beluga, Sterlet, Kaluga hybrid, American osetra, Ossetra, Siberian sturgeon and Sevruga.

The rarest and costliest is from beluga sturgeon that swim in the Caspian Sea, which is bordered by Iran, Kazakhstan, Russia, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan.

→ Pelmeni /Dumplings



Pelmeni are dumplings of Russian cuisine which consist of a filling wrapped in thin, unleavened dough.

Dumplings are big in Russia, a relatively quick meal to prepare but simply boiling in water, like pastry wrapping different kinds of Ingredients., meats etc The great mystery is trying to work out where the dumpling originates from, some say the Urals, others Siberia. even the Ukraine.

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YOU HAVE TO TRY THESE DISHES

Soup When my wife was "selling" the idea of living in Russia to me she very excitedly told me that she was proud to make me some "Russian Soup" I was totally unimpressed as I didn't think much of soup until I arrived here. This is now a family joke of course, as I've really become fond of soup while living here, it is typical to have soup over three or 4 days and there a long list of types of soup, including cabbage soup.

A strange thing about soup here is that it is normally served with a dollop of sour cream either on the side or in the soup.

Fish Pie It is common to order pie made in trays and cut into squares as a party food. (Chicken, Fish, and Desert Pie made from Cranberry)

Pelmeni also known as **dumplings** are a Russian favourite. My mother-in-law loves them even knows exactly how many would fill me up for a lunch time snack.

Caviar is also popular and most Russians would be familiar with it having their own private connections. Get the environmentally friendly variety when buying. The rarest and costliest is from beluga sturgeon that swim in the Caspian Sea, which is bordered by Iran, Kazakhstan, Russia, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan.



WHAT TO DRINK

➔ Mors



Mors (Russian: морс) is a non-carbonated Russian fruit drink prepared from berries. Lovely refreshment in Summer.

This Russian style homemade juice is usually made lingonberry and cranberry (although sometimes blueberries, strawberries or raspberries). It's made by boiling berries with sugar or just mixing pure juice with sweetened water.

➔ Berry and Herb Tea



There are a variety of Teas made from Herbs and Berries find in Russia. I remember having delicious berry a tea on top of Mount Elbrus, mid winter.

Berries and herbs for tea making include Lingonberries, Smorodina (currant) leaves, Tavolga or Labaznik (Filipéndula), Zveroboy (Hypericum), Ivan Chai (Chamérion angustifólium)

➔ Kvass



Kvass is a traditional Slavic and Baltic beverage commonly made from rye bread. It has very low alcohol 0.5% , and a popular everyday drink.

Its called a black bread drink and is healthier than fizzy drinks thankfully. Normally home brewed you can find popular brands in the shops.

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FAVOURITE RUSSIAN DRINKS

The first Drink you think when it comes is of course Vodka, although vodka actually originates from Poland. There are many vodkas to choose from obviously but I speak more about that on my Blog.

You drink Vodka neat here and by the shot glass and normally eat a salty fish snack directly afterwards. Mixing your vodka is unheard of, but younger generation Russians are not offended if you do take a mix.

Other Russian Drinks

Mors - Traditional Homemade Fruit Juice

Herbal Teas - Homemade from Herbs found in Russia.

Kvass - Think very low alcohol beer

Birch juice - Made from Birch Tree sap

Fermented milk products - Kefir and Baked Milk



LIKE A LOCAL

➔ Good Luck Coin Toss



Chizhik-pyzhik coin tossing is a fun thing to do here near the Summer Gardens . You toss a coin and try and get it to land on the ledge below for luck.

The tiny statue is of a Siskin, a song bird, students from an old university nearby wore green and yellow uniforms, which made them look like this songbird. There is also a Rabbit at Hare Island and a Cat, tiny soldier guards, all good luck charms across the city . Its typical to find locals and tourists trying their luck at each site .

➔ Soviet era Arcade Games



This is also a fun place to hang out. I went there with my friend and we hang out and played games like cool kids . Definitely a fun thing to do.

The Museum of Soviet Arcade Machines in St. Petersburg offers 40 or so original video arcade games from the 1970's and 80's period which are presented in a Soviet-style arcade of the period.

➔ Street Buskers



It's typical to find buskers and muso's playing up and down Nevksy Prospect all year round . They are popular and some rely solely on busking for income.

Russians love music and celebrate music culture, Buskers can be found all over, sometimes on the metro, or outside metro stations, playing popular songs and Russian favourites from all genres, including which is peculiar a Russian style "Rap"

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FUN THINGS TO DO LIKE A LOCAL

There are many fun things to do as locals do. Russians will stand in queues going to their favourite museums, theaters and parks. A people who really celebrate their Culture and of course enjoy entertainment beyond watching TV. (I find many Russians reading books on the metro instead of looking into their phones)

My Russian friends say

" I like treating myself to different burger joints across the city on the weekend"

"I play in an indoor Soccer league" says the other.

" I go play board games at a few different restros for fun, its a quite a new trend"

" I like hanging out at New Holland during Summer " definitely a local secret.

" We go to our Dacha (small patch of land where families cultivate , tomatoes, potatoes , berries etc during Summer)

" We also enjoy the Banya (Sauna) during winter"

" I enjoy hanging out with friends and hanging out at restaurants and even their homes "



WHERE TO STAY

→ Accommodation



Saint Petersburg has world class Hotels, right down to hostels and Airbnb obviously depending on your budget.. Accommodation is surprisingly cheap.

→ Locality



You're wanting be near the center of town., Nevsky Prospekt When choosing your accommodation on line always take a look at Google Maps to see where you will be.

Why it's best to be near the center of the city, is because most of the interesting places to walk to and visit are located here.,

→ Safety



Saint Petersburg is extremely safe there is always a policeman or policewoman close by or least a security guard. It's a highly surveilled city.

Obviously you need to keep an eye on your belongings but its not common to be pick pocketed. Every time you enter the metro system your bag will be scanned this happens to everybody so don't be offended.

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MORE PRACTICAL ADVICE

When booking accommodation try find a place close to the city center, near **Nevsky Prospekt** not only it is practical but will be easy to navigate around using public transport. Use google maps if you're unsure.

If you're arriving by air, you'll arrive at LED, and by train from **Moscow** or **Finland** all connect you to the Metro system. It is handy to know which is the closest metro station to where you're going .

Some Useful Russian words to learn

Hello - Zdravstvujtye

Thank you - Spasiba

You're Welcome - Pozhaluysta

Excuse me - Izvinite menya

Google Translate is your friend



SAINT PETERSBURG TRIVIA

→ Peter's Eagle



During the construction of Peter and Paul Fortress, an Eagle appeared in the sky and landed on Peter the Great's hand, a sign of God's favour or legend?

Some speculate that the eagle was in fact a trained eagle/falcon left behind by the sudden departure of the Swedes. Eagles are not endemic to this region, making the legend all the more tantalising.

→ The house made of ice.



The empress of Russia Anna Ioannovna had an Ice "palace" constructed for a wedding celebration of her favourite court jesters.

She forced them to spend their wedding night inside, as a curiosity. The jester and his wife in order to save their lives (and his bride's) bribed a guard to sell him his coat, and thus survived the night. A cruel thing to do even in 1740. The ice palace stayed up until May of that year.

→ Green Potatoes



Peter the Great introduced potatoes to Russia (and pineapples) only eaten by nobles. Catherine the Great wanted everybody to eat potatoes.

Legend has it that when guards left the potato fields at night, peasants would steal the potato "fruit" or berry, and not the "potato underground. They would poison themselves. They couldn't read instruction manuals which would've explained this. Needless to say, Peasants did not embrace the cultivation of potatoes for sometime afterwards.

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FUN FACTS

The city has **90 waterways** and canals with an aggregate length of 300 km. There are about 101 islands and furthermore 170 kilometers extended coastline.

The lowest temperature recorded in Saint Petersburg on 17th February 1740 was **minus 43** degrees Celsius.

Everyday at **12:00 a shot is fired** from a cannon at the Naryshkin Bastion at Peter and Paul Fortress. This custom was introduced under Peter the Great, in that time it was fired from the Monarch Bastion and signified the beginning or ending of a work shift, or reported the risk of a flood. The tradition of the noon day gun appeared in 1865.

The **Alexander Column** in the center of Palace Square was setup in 1834, designed by Auguste de Montferrand in memory of Alexander 1's victory over Napoleon. The marble column rests on a pediment thanks to its own weight, of 600 tons. Locals thought it might fall at any moment, and only Monteferrand would be seen walking his dog nearby, safe in the knowledge of his own calculations and handiwork.

Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837) is a much loved Russian poet, his memory lives on in statues and a small village and metro station dedicated to him. The first writer to write in Russian for the common man, exiled for his views and became a legend. He died from his wounds after fighting a duel, accusing his wife's supposed lover of an affair with her. Eugene Onegin is one of his famous works, a novel written in verse.

There are many tales and legends and we cover some of them on our walking tours.



REFERENCE LINKS

➔ Links

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<https://howround.com/first-foray-st-petersburgs-theatre-scene>

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ABOUT ALEXANDER

Alexander is an expat living in Saint Petersburg, Russia, originally from Cape Town South Africa. He is a professional tour guide who loves showing his guests around this beautiful and culturally rich city. This ebook is written as a practical guide to help you navigate the first few days of being here and for you to get an idea of what to expect upon your arrival.

"I've kept the information concise and to the point. As a storyteller I do tend to get carried away in the moment so it has been a great effort keeping my story simple and to provide useful insights.

Saint Petersburg is a truly remarkable city and it has been a fascinating voyage of discovery getting to know her secrets and hidden treasures. "

