

## VOYAGE



# Travel Trunks

Russian star of the north - the neverending light of St. Petersburg

Picture Michael Caine in his spy persona, Harry Palmer, meeting with some underworld figure on a bridge over a canal, negotiating the whereabouts of some high priced plutonium. Now, flip forward to a point in the flick where he comes to a spectacular art gallery, where the bad guys are all rounded up and good triumphs over evil.

From the first scene of the forgettable “Midnight in St. Petersburg” til its last, the one undeniable thing about the movie is that the sole Oscar winning performance was delivered by none other than the city itself. The same words keep rolling around in your head...”Wow...spectacular!”

And, yes... in real life it is all of that and so much

more.

St. Petersburg, Russia is one of those magical kingdoms where a whole lot-o-history has gone into the décor. About the best way to describe it is that the city is one big gallery, with myriad exhibits. The Hermitage art museum alone, is home to over 2 million pieces of art.

First, though... a history primer.

St. Petersburg was founded 300 years ago by Emperor, Peter the Great. Wrestling the Neva River away from the pesky Swedes, Peter set about to turn a then weak and underdeveloped country into a military power, anchored by a European styled oasis, fit for a king.

Starting the process and since refined by rulers such as Catherine the Great, Peter established a progressive society and laid the groundwork for a cultural explosion that has carried St. Petersburg through to this day.

Built on swampy marshlands at the east end of the Baltic Sea, a skipping stone from Finland, St. Petersburg is billed as the “Venice of the North”, and north it is indeed! It is the largest city (4 million people) in the northern world, having about the same latitude as Anchorage, Alaska. Countless canals and bridges criss-cross this city of endless summer nights, turning the waterways into “blue” carpet runways that introduce the masses to an incredible number of historic and cultural landmarks. The aforementioned Hermitage rivals the Louvre for its sheer size and collection. I once strolled the 100 meter long hallways for three hours and never once ran into the friends I had entered the building with. With 1057 rooms, this shouldn't be all that surprising. Like filet mignon every day for a year, every mouthful of masterpiece drops the jaw ever lower. Across the Neva River, the spectacular Peter and Paul Fortress stands guard. The first structure in St. Petersburg, it was built as a garri-



son to protect the city and is the star of every Russian postcard company.

With its distinctive Russian style, such icons as the Church of Our Savior on Spilled Blood (built on the site of one of the many Emperor assassinations), the ever-gilded St. Isaac's Cathedral or any number of impressive palaces and theatres make the city a haven for shutterbugs and history junkies. The architecture alone is enough to appease the most cynical of travellers. Another can't-miss venue is Peterhof, the Imperial estate of Peter the Great, which is compared to Versailles in its lavish design. Built between 1714 and 1725, it is comprised of lush gardens and parks, teeming with 150 fountains and presided over by a battalion of statues. The building itself is modeled after Peter's magnificent Winter Palace with interiors that are truly staggering and the site, just a few clicks from downtown St. Petersburg, lies right on the shore of the Gulf of Finland.

Location, location, location. Perhaps, Peter was on to something here.

It was not always honey and roses for the city, however. It's tough, resilient people have endured many tragic battles over the years, including a gory 3 year siege during the World War II, where over 700,000 people starved or froze to death denying entry to the Nazis. A rather poignant example of their commitment to cultural preservation was the decision to sacrifice lives rather than burn books and art for heat. Add to this the 1917 October Revolution, where Vladimir Illych Lenin stormed the Emperor's palace and introduced Russia to the world of Communism for the next 72 years, plus the city's name change to Leningrad and Petrograd... and you can see a community of people ever fighting to defend their own identity.

Today's St. Petersburg is a thriving city landscape with a burgeoning hotel and restaurant community. The distinguished standbys like the Astoria and the Grand Hotel Europe will always offer an elegant stay in ultra historic digs, proximal to absolutely everything one might want to see. There are also a number of fantastic little downtown boutique hotels like the Casa Leto that offer personalized service in a charmingly unobtrusive setting.





From a culinary perspective, the cuisine has come a long way from the days of cabbage soup. Besides the classic eateries that serve the finest of Russian caviar and vodka, Beef Stroganoff and borscht, there has been an explosion of “worldfood” landing on city shores, from Indonesian and Indian to Latino and Asian. If one really wants the so-called comforts of home, one can always up one’s grease count with a bucket of the Colonel’s chicken, washed down by a golden arches shake... but this picture somehow doesn’t fit the crime scene.

It’s very easy (and recommended) to go on a guided tour, especially for some of the definitive city sites. It’s also a great idea to poke around town at your own pace, exploring little nooks and crannies on streets other than the main drag, Nevsky Prospekt. The dynamic number of bridges and waterways will certainly lead you in many different directions and the hometown of President Vladimir Putin is more than willing to show you more than a few secrets!

A very intriguing travel prospect for your Russian odyssey might be to consider a Volga River cruise. The intension here would be to bypass Aeroflot and see the true Russian countryside, meandering on an elegant river bateau toward the southward destination

of Moscow. Though Moscow itself regained its status from St. Petersburg as the capital of Russia during the turbulent WW1, this option certainly makes for acute separation anxiety as Peter’s city disappears down river...

Landing at Pulkovo Airport, one isn’t likely to see a seedy looking Michael Caine lurking in the shadows. More likely, one will come across the kitschy smirk of today’s celluloid spy, Tom Cruise on a movie billboard. Western “enlightenment” has such a way of taking root these days.

It’s hard to say if the hardline Russian culturistas really approve of this onslaught of western ascendancy, but if history had a say in it, old Peter himself would probably be looking in on the place, applauding his city’s embracement of yet another foreign influence. St. Petersburg typifies sheer beauty and tenacity and these traits will keep it a cool place to visit for a very long time.

*Ron Taylor has traveled to over 30 countries, owns his own communications company, Taylor Creative (TaylorCreative.ca) and contributes regularly to Calgary Living. For more information on St. Petersburg go to <http://stpetersburg-guide.com/>*