



# A Grand Walk In the city of Peter the Great

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It was the last week of March and I was visiting St. Petersburg for the first time. I had looked forward to seeing its rivers and canals capped in ice, its gardens and trees dusted with frosted crystals and its gilded domes glinting beneath melting bonnets of snow, looking much like giant scoops of ice-cream. I had imagined the mist rising from the waters, veiling the city in mystery, melancholy, and magic. What I got was six days of glorious sunshine and lapis blue skies woven with

fleecy white clouds. The magic was still there, even if the colors and textures were not those of my imaginings.

The city of St. Petersburg - named after the saint, not the Tsar - was founded by Peter the Great in 1703, the result of his single-minded vision to create a magnificent new capital for the Russian empire. Determined to pull the Empire out of its medieval period and into a modern era, complete with new reforms, new architecture and novel western ideas, Peter traveled

to Europe, the first Tsar to do so. Upon his return, he set about realizing his dream of a new imperial capital, one that would reflect European culture and civilization.

Peter's city was built on water, a daring feat, to be sure. Constructed on marshy ground and spread across no less than nineteen islands, St. Petersburg is situated on the very edge of Russia. To the northeast is Lake Ladoga, to the west the Gulf of Finland. The icy waters of the River Neva divide the city in half. The

city has been called the "Venice of the North," the "Babylon of the Snows," and most commonly "A Window on the West."

The windows from which I gazed at St. Petersburg for the first time were those of the Grand Hotel Europe, a vantage point that seemed appropriate, given the European flavor of this Russian metropolis. Located in the heart of the city on the corner of Nevsky Prospekt and Mikhailovskaya Ulitsa, Grand Hotel Europe has continued to serve



as the premier hotel of St. Petersburg, offering incomparable hospitality since its grand opening in 1875. There were periods when its hospitality was of a different nature – in 1919 as an orphanage and in 1941-42, during the siege of Leningrad, it served as a hospital. Refurbished over the years to provide guests with the best in comfort, service and cuisine, the hotel was last renovated in 1991. The hotel has an impressive collection of art: ancient marble sculptures, bas-reliefs

and busts as well as 20<sup>th</sup> century metal sculptures and paintings, all of which are protected by the St. Petersburg Cultural Heritage.

The history of the building that is now the Grand Hotel Europe really began in 1816, when architect Carlo Rossi was commissioned to construct a palace for the younger brother of Tsar Alexander I, the Grand Duke Mikhail Pavlovich. Rossi created an architectural complex for St. Petersburg, bringing together the new palace and the nearby streets into one composition with the palace as its centerpiece. The Grand Hotel Europe and the Philharmonic Hall, whose façades were designed later by Rossi, flank Mikhailovskaya Ulitsa, the grand boulevard designed to provide an unparalleled view of the palace and Arts Square and two centuries later, it continues to awe visitors with one of the most beautiful vistas in St. Petersburg.

So why not begin our exploration of the city by exploring the neighboring streets? A “grand” walk around the block. Across the street is the Great Hall of the St. Petersburg Philharmonia where Tchaikovsky’s *Pathétique* premiered in 1893. Also known as the Shostakovich Hall, it has been offering concerts of classical music by the world’s greatest composers since it was first built in 1834. On this bright March morning, a doorman opens the hotel’s door as we exit and then turn left, drawn down the grand boulevard to the lovely Neo-Classical Arts Square with its bronze statue of Pushkin centered in the garden. The Square is dominated by the beautiful lemon curd-yellow Mikhailovsky Palace. The palace was purchased by the state in 1895 to serve as the

first museum of national art, named by Emperor Nicholas II for his father, Emperor Alexander III. The Russian Museum, as it is now known, showcases one of the largest and most impressive collection of Russian art in the world, displaying paintings, sculptures, objects of folk and applied arts - over 400,000 works of art in all - spanning eight centuries, from 13<sup>th</sup> century icons to 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-garde canvases. While I explore the treasures of the Museum, my husband enjoys reading in the sun-filled garden, on a bench not far from the statue of Pushkin, considered Russia’s greatest poet and the founder of modern Russian literature.

Another neighborhood treasure is the historic Mussorgsky Opera and Ballet Theater, originally named the Imperial Mikailovsky Theater. It was built in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, becoming the third Imperial stage of St. Petersburg, used primarily as a concert hall. With its reconstruction in 1859, the inside dimensions were made adequate for large-scale opera and ballet performances. Then, with the October revolution, the theater’s destiny was altered; it became the second opera house of Petrograd and subsequently changed names several times in the 1920’s. In 1926 it was named the Leningrad Academic Maly Opera Theater, or Malegot,



“Maly” meaning small, just as the word “Bolshoi” means grand or big. In 1989 it was determined that there was nothing “small” about the theater or its artistic ideas, so it was given its current name. Overshadowed by the bigger, more renowned Mariinsky Theater, the Mussorgsky Opera and Ballet Theater offers exquisite performances of ballet nonetheless. A pleasant evening stroll from the Grand Hotel Europe brings us to the theater’s doors. This evening we watch a performance of *La Syphilde*, a short ballet of two acts. A long wait interrupts its two acts, but when the curtain is raised, the stage has been transformed into a fairyland and we are mesmerized by the most stunningly beautiful and delicate scenery. We feel transported, along with the ballerinas as they “float” through their fairy dances, as if pulled by magic, through enchanted woodlands.

The early evening hour enables us to experience more enchantment before





retiring. We return to our hotel for dinner. There are several restaurants to choose from, but dining at the L'Europe, which opened in 1905, is an event that will long be remembered. The original and still brilliant stain glass window of this Art Nouveau dining room is exquisite and serves as a backdrop for the pianist and harpist who play softly as we dine by candlelight. Just as European and Russian traditions were merged to create the city itself, Chef Dominique Ferchaud has fused the best of European and Russian culinary traditions, with an emphasis on French cuisine, and the result is world-class. Anton, our Maitre d', guides us through the menu, recommending that we try two Russian specialties, the Borscht and the Beef Stroganoff, two very good choices. Indulging ourselves, we sample other delicacies and cleanse our palettes, midway through the meal, with a peach mango sorbet made with a splash of Don Perignon champagne. Even before the dessert finale, a lime crème brûlée, I am won over. But Anton, tops off the experience by presenting me with a long stem rose. What lady can resist such attention?

I go to sleep with visions of St. Petersburg dancing in my head. What a city! It's as if a great big treasure chest

has been washed up on the banks of the Neva, inviting us to explore its contents, to lift up its brilliant gems and gilded trinkets to the dazzling light, to feel their textures and weigh their worth in our greedy little hands. We are encouraged to hold them in our hands and our mind's eye if only for a fleeting moment so that when it is time to leave, we can take them as memories with us. In the morning, we will explore more of its bountiful booty.

And we need not travel far. We are within walking distance of the magnificent Church of the Resurrection. More commonly known as the Church on Spilled Blood, the church was built on the site where Czar Alexander II was assassinated in 1881. Built as a memorial to this tragic event, its style is reminiscent of St. Basil's Cathedral in Moscow, an architectural design regarded as particularly Russian in character. The funds for its construction were provided almost entirely by the Imperial family and thousands of private donors. I can't think of a more beautiful tribute to Alexander II, a beloved emperor remembered for his many reforms, especially the freeing of the Russian serfs.

It took 24 years to complete the construction, not surprising, when one considers the detail of its ornamentation, both inside and out. Bright enamels cover the domes, colored tiles adorn the roof and mosaics decorate much of the exterior. Not only a holy shrine, the Church on Spilled Blood is a museum of such artistic and cultural wealth, that one could spend hours appreciating its bejeweled interior. Only chance saved this church from destruction during the Siege of Leningrad



when a missile fell, without detonating, on one of the domes. The church was closed in the 1930s. After 30 years of skillful restoration, the Church reopened to the public in 1997. Inside, 308 mosaics, covering an area of more than six thousand square meters, depict Old and New Testament scenes. I feel dizzy as I crane my neck to take in their dazzling splendor.

Outside, this Orthodox monument with its gilded onion domes and riot of candy-like colors and textures are reflected in the waters of the tree-lined Griboedov Canal. Below the watery surface, a glint of gold shimmers here, a brilliant turquoise there, like precious gems tossed into the still water to tempt and tantalize all those who walk along the peaceful canal.

Peter's dream to build his city on water was daring and original. The city's architecture was well

planned and extraordinarily beautiful. I wonder. Did he envision a finished city, mirrored on the shimmering waters, yielding twice the visual pleasures for its citizens? And for those of us fortunate enough to visit St. Petersburg today.



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