

## **Two Capitals and A River In Between (St. Petersburg and Moscow)**

(What better way to be introduced to Russia than to visit its two capitals with a river in between?)

### **Saint Petersburg (Санкт-Петербург)**

Founded in 1703 by Peter the Great, St. Petersburg was Russia's capital from 1712-1918. It is situated on the banks of the Gulf of Finland and in the delta of the River Neva, where 65 rivers and canals, and 42 islands help give St. Petersburg the nickname "Venice of the North". With five million inhabitants, it is Russia's second largest city.

St. Petersburg offers much to see and do within the city limits. For example: Nevsky Prospect, St. Isaac's Cathedral, Kazan's Assembly Church, the Admiralty Building, the 1782 equestrian monument of the "Bronze Horseman" of Peter the Great (built by Empress Katarina II), the cruiser Aurora, and the bridges of the River Neva (they are raised every night to allow the passage of ships to the Baltic Sea).

To begin your tour in St. Petersburg, you can start with the Russian Czars' residence: the 1,000+ room Winter Palace, at Palace Square. The Hermitage, one of the world's greatest museums is located within the Winter Palace. The Hermitage with its 365 rooms boasts 3 million artifacts and an art collection that ranges from Greek to Modern, featuring such famous artists as Da Vinci, Van Gogh, Gauguin and Monet.

You should also not miss Peter the Great's Cottage, a wooden building, purportedly built in three days, where he resided while he supervised the construction of St Petersburg. This provides a sharp contrast to the Winter Palace and a glimpse of how complex this man was.

Then visit the Peter and Paul Fortress, located in the historic part of St. Petersburg, one of the city's main highlights. The fortress, founded in 1703 to protect the Neva lands from the Swedes, was the first building of the new city. In the Cathedral of Saint Peter and Paul is the burial vault of the Romanovs.

Venture beyond the bridges and canals to visit the village of Puskin, the former summer retreat of the Russian Royalty. Here, see the impressive Catherine's Palace, the gardens of Petrodvorets and the Summer Palace of Peter the Great (built to rival Versailles in France with its magnificent gardens, fountains powered by gravity and its grand statues).

St Petersburg is a home to more than 50 theaters. The oldest is the Hermitage Theatre, a private palatial theater of Catherine the Great, where the complex stage machinery built in the 18th century is still in use. Another worth visiting is the Alexandrine Theatre, built in 1828-1832 by Carlo Rossi, named after the wife of Nicholas I. Also, the Ciniselli Circus, one of the oldest circus buildings in the world.

In the evening, attend the exciting folkloric show of the Cossacks, or ballet at the famous Mariinsky Theatre (formerly known as the Kirov Theatre of Opera and Ballet). There is also the Opera House at St. Petersburg Conservatory, founded in 1861 by Anton Rubinstein, whose alumni include Tchaikovsky, Prokofiev, and Shostakovich.

Several film festivals are held here annually; for example, the International Film Festival of St. Petersburg. On this note, as a preparation for your trip to Russia, it may be useful to see some of the

films mentioned below to have a feel for St. Petersburg. You can start with the 1997 production of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, which starred Sophie Marceau and Sean Bean, and *Noi vivi*, based on the novel, *We The Living*, by Ayn Rand. *Onegin* (1999), featuring Ralph Fiennes, Liv Tyler and Lena Heady, and based on the Pushkin poem, showcased many tourist attractions of St. Petersburg. The *Russian Ark* was filmed entirely in Hermitage. Then, there are two versions of the story of Anastasia - the 1956 film starring Ingrid Bergman or the 1997 cartoon. Other movies include *GoldenEye* (1995), *Midnight in St. Petersburg* (UK, 1996), and *Two Brothers and A Bride* (2002), originally titled *A Foreign Affair*, starring David Arquette.

## **Moscow (Москва)**

While St. Petersburg is Russia's imperial crown, Moscow is its familial heart. Moscow, the present capital is located where the trade rivers Moskva and Yauza meet on the central Russian plateau. Artisans settled here (on the site of present-day Kremlin) long before the first references to Moscow appear in the *Chronicles* of 1147. It became Russia's capital in 1327 (under Ivan I), replacing Tver, but it was not until 1480, after Ivan III broke Moscow free of Tartar control that it became prominent. In 1712, Peter the Great moved the seat of government to St. Petersburg. Moscow became the capital again in 1918.

Moscow is a city in which one comes face to face with all that is the finest and all that is the most frustrating in Russia. More than anywhere else in the country, it is in Moscow where the Soviet past collides with the capitalist future. The gregarious geniality of its people is as evident as the extreme tensions of a city coming to terms with the confusions of rapid social change.

Lenin's Mausoleum remains intact, but today it faces the newly chic and expansive facade of the world-famous Main Universal Store or **GUM** (ГУМ, pronounced "goom"). Its full name is Главный Универсальный Магазин, Glavnyi Universalnyi Magazin, Glavnyi Universalnyi Magazin. This department store is Bloomingdale, Saks, Bergdorf's, Harrods, and everyone else, combined.

For most visitors, Red Square is associated with images of stone-faced Soviet leaders at the review stand atop Lenin's Mausoleum, in the bitter cold, as the Russian military rumbled past. While the Square no longer witnesses the imposing parades of *May Day*, it remains a genuinely impressive space. Bordered by the stark severity of the mausoleum, the **GUM** department store, and the exuberant colors of St. Basil's Cathedral with its elegant onion domes, Red Square deserves the time it takes to explore.

The Kremlin, which simply means "fortified town" is Russia's mythic refuge of a self-contained city with palaces, armories, and churches. The Kremlin dates back to 1147 and the very beginning of Moscow. The original towered walls were completed in 1157, ten years after Moscow's founding, and by the late 14th century, became the seat of the Russian Orthodox Church. This change brought with it the construction of some of The Kremlin's most impressive structures, including the Cathedral of the Assumption, where Ivan III defiantly tore up the charter binding Moscow to Mongol rule.

Over the centuries, almost every ruler added their own, monumental touches to the ensemble, leaving us with the dazzling citadel we see today. Within The Kremlin are beautiful cathedrals that store invaluable treasures including state regalia and ancient icons. The Kremlin's best known temple is the

Uspensky Cathedral that features one of the largest collections of Russian icons in the world. Other highlights of The Kremlin include the famous Tsar Bell and Tsar Cannon.

Moscow's architecture and performing arts culture are world-renowned. Moscow is well known for the Cathedral of Christ the Savior and the Seven Sisters. The Patriarch of Moscow, whose residence is the Danilov Monastery, serves as the head of the Russian Orthodox Church. Visit the New Maiden (Novodevichy) Convent, famous not only for its outstanding architecture but for being the place of imprisonment for disgraced women from noble families in the past.

In Moscow, a visit to the Bolshoi Theatre and a ballet performance is a must. This theatre has seen productions of Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake (premiered at the theatre on Saturday, March 4, 1877), Sleeping Beauty and The Nutcracker; Adam's Giselle; Prokofiev's Romeo and Juliet; and Khachaturian's Spartacus.

### **“Dobro Pozhalovats”! (Welcome Aboard!) (Cruising the “River in Between”)**

River cruises around Russian cities is a unique opportunity to get acquainted with the cultural and natural heritage of this country. In addition to the plenty of churches and monasteries that you will see on the way, you will also get a chance to enjoy the magnificent Russian lands, forests and lakes.

The river cruise along the River Neva, a 1140 mile journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow, is a voyage that crosses time - this cruise is a must, to see how one city affects the other. You will travel through Lake Ladoga, Svir River, Lake Onega, the Volga-Baltic canal, the White Lake, Vitrega, Kavdga, Seksna, the Volga Rivers and finally the Moscow Volga Canal before entering into Moscow. You will be following the steps of Russia's ancient travelers, from Varagians to Greeks.

The journey along the 119-mile Svir River which connects Lake Ladoga with Lake Onega, is a captivating voyage: enjoy a Shashlik barbeque picnic; partake a traditional Russian meal; visit the Vodka Museum in Mondraga or Upper Mandrogi; wander along the picturesque meadows; and visit exhibitions of local textile goods and earthenware.

Visit Valaam and the Savior's Transfiguration Cathedral, built by Nester. This is an imposing gem of Russian architecture with 22 shining domes, erected without a single nail or piece of metal.

Visit the fairytale island of Kizhi on Lake Onega, an open-air architectural museum containing examples from various regions of Russia. It boasts more than 80 masterpieces of Russian wooden architecture. Here, enjoy an authentic Piroshki tea party - enjoy Russian pies and learn about local tea traditions. Visit typical Russian villages: Goritza or Goritsy.

The ancient Nunnery of the Resurrection will be especially interesting for anyone with a real zest for Russian history. An excursion to the Kirilo-Belozersky Monastery is a great opportunity to get acquainted with a former center of Orthodox Christian culture and one of the greatest centers of iconography. The monastery, founded by the monk and chronicler, Reverend Kirill, in 1397, has the largest monastic library in Russia. It is included in the List of Cultural Heritage of Russia's Nations.

Visit the 11th century port of Yaroslavl, often called “Florence of the Russian North”, on the Volga River. It was founded by Prince Yaroslavl the Wise and, today, it is famous for many noteworthy monuments of its colorful past. Take an inspiring excursion to the magnificent 13th-century Spassky Monastery ensemble, a group of majestic 17th century cathedrals. Here, you may feel the spirit of the true ancient Russia.

Visit Spaso-Preobrazhenskiy Monastery, Church of Ilja Prophet (St Elija, the Prophet). In the central square you can enjoy its famous fresco paintings, and listen to a choir singing Russian hymns.

Visit Uglich, one of the most ancient towns of Russia and believed to have been founded in 937, when the envoy of Princess Olga built a fortress on the bank of the Volga River. Despite the sound of its name (to an English speaker), it is actually one of Russia's most loved towns. It is best viewed from the river. Sightseeing here will include the Kremlin and the Palace of Tsarevitch Dmitri, the town's oldest building. Worth visiting is the 16th century Church of St Demetrius of the Blood which was built on the spot where the tsarevich (prince) Dmitry Ivanovich, the youngest son of Ivan the Terrible, met his death.

(You can also do the cruise in the opposite direction, starting in Moscow and ending in St Petersburg)