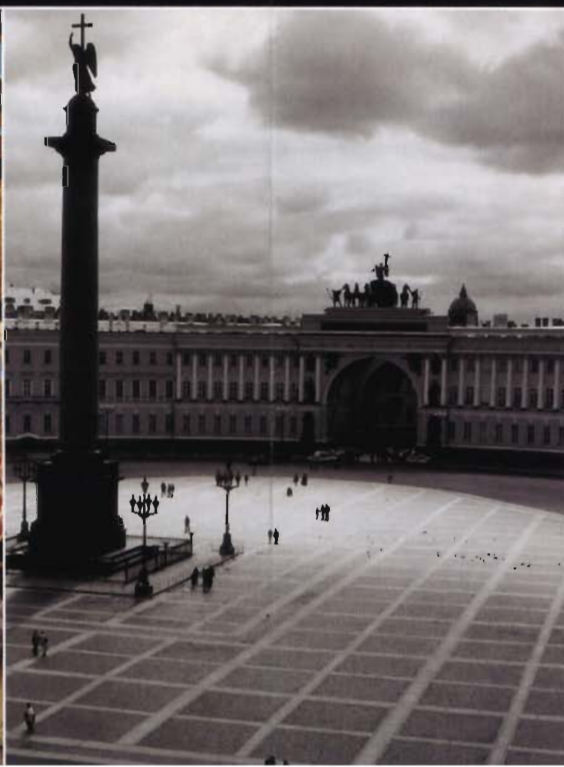




City by the sea

FAMED FOR ITS WHITE DAYS AND NIGHTS, ST PETERSBURG IS THE PERFECT PLACE TO TASTE
THE CHAMPAGNE-AND-CAVIAR LIFESTYLE



St Petersburg is the ultimate city of light. The celebrated White Days of bright snow and the White Nights, when summer's daylight lasts until dawn, are unforgettable. The elegant buildings, mostly designed by Italian architects in the eighteenth century, are marvels of washed pastel, pink, yellow and pistachio green, and each season has a colour of its own. Autumn finds the city suffused in gold. In October, when we visit, a dazzling sun shines from a deep blue sky, reflecting from the domes and spires, shimmering on the many rivers and waterways.

At Peterhof, the palace started by Peter the Great in 1714 to rival Versailles, the famous fountains shoot water high in the air, sparkling

were guests, George Bernard Shaw dined with Maxim Gorky and Shostakovich played for Prokofiev, visitors now flock to the hotel for its style and atmosphere. The L'Europe restaurant, with its Art Nouveau stained-glass ceiling, serves memorable food. The breakfast here must not be missed. You can choose from 22 different teas and fill your glass from a samovar. Thick toast dripping with buckwheat honey, dried fruits from Uzbekistan and pine nuts from Siberia, plus a harpist playing in the background, make this an experience to be savoured.

It is almost impossible to choose one highlight of St Petersburg. We went to the Grand Peterhof Palace on the last day before the fountains were turned off for winter. Clouds of balloons were released into the sky; bands played and marched

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like tiny diamonds. The sun shines brightly on the golden statues and flickers through the trees in the park. Russian ladies gather the falling leaves and make them into fluffy hats like psychedelic Peter Pans.

Four days in this most romantic of cities is only enough for a first taste, but they are days full of discovery. St Petersburg was built on 42 little islands at the edge of the Baltic to provide a much-needed gateway to the sea for Peter, and to become a 'Venice of the North'. But this is its own city, with a beauty and culture of its own. Walking through the Hermitage museum, gazing at the opulence of the rooms and the extraordinary paintings, you cannot but be intrigued about the personalities who built these palaces and who were such forceful rulers of Russia.

We stay in the Grand Hotel Europe on Nevsky Prospekt. Refurbished by the Orient-Express group, it's wonderfully grand. The first five-star hotel in Eastern Europe, it was built in the 1830s by the architect Carlo Rossi and has been an important part of Russian social life and history ever since. Where once upon a time Tchaikovsky and Strauss

in full costume. Monplaisir, a small palace in the Peterhof's grounds (and Peter's favourite) has lovely views out over of the Gulf of Finland. The tiny Mariinsky Theatre is a must. Formerly known as the Kirov and now restored, it has wonderful ballet and opera.

Within the walls of the Fortress of Peter and Paul, the Cathedral, the city's tallest building, is an enduring landmark with its simple spire rising like a fine gold needle into the sky. Inside, the tombs of Peter the Great and the Romanovs make touching history.

Nevsky Prospekt, the long main street, is now full of cars rather than sledges, but is still romantic in the evening light. The shop windows are packed with furs, delicious food, colourful dolls and painted wooden toys – wonderful presents to bring home.

On our last night, nothing else would do but a farewell extravaganza in the Caviar Bar of the hotel – exquisite Russian caviar washed down with vodka as smooth as velvet, as we drank a toast to our next visit. ■ *Sandy Boler*
1 *Abercrombie & Kent offers 3 nights b&b at Grand Hotel Europe from £889pp, including flights and transfers. Call: 0845-070 0612; www.abercrombiekent.co.uk*



From top L'Europe restaurant. Peterhof Palace from the Great Cascade. The tiled floor of the Hermitage museum. The Cathedral of the Resurrection



Opposite, clockwise from top The spire of the Fortress of Peter and Paul rises above the Neva. The Grand Hotel Europe. The Main Square. Nick-nacks at a market stall

