St. Petersburg: Russiaâ€™s Gem by Sean Burke

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St. Petersburg serves as a microcosm for Russia in general. Feeling both European and alien, St. Petersburg has been imperial capital, Communist Leningrad, and modern day home to the superrich. Unlike Moscow, which has emerged gradually and sprawled out over the course of centuries, St. Petersburg has existed for only three hundred years. The city was founded by Peter the Great in 1703, and much effort was put into giving Russia a modern capital city. The grand architecture and impressive museums, combined with the relatively short flight time from Western Europe all mean that St. Petersburg is an accessible and attractive holiday destination.

If you are visiting St. Petersburg, then heading to the Palace Square is an absolute must. The square, which forms the centre of the Winter Palace has been the scene of huge numbers of important events throughout Russian history, such as the famous Bolshevik storming of the Winter Palace in 1917. The Palace Square is an attraction in its own right, and its broad spaces show the grandeur of the Russian monarchy under the Tsars. The neoclassical faÃ§ade of the Palace was built on top of the original Baroque design, although the Baroque style of architecture can be seen throughout many of the neighbouring streets.

The Hermitage Museum is another must-see for your trip. Located partially in the Winter Palace, the Hermitage is one of the largest art galleries in the world, and was opened to the public in the mid-nineteenth century. The museum houses paintings by Rembrant, Van Gogh and Gaugin, as well as a painting that has been attributed to Leonardo da Vinci. The shop in the museum sells replicas of many of the more famous pieces of artwork, and so you can take your favourite paintings home with you. The size of the Hermitage is so great that it is worth setting aside a whole day to see it all, or splitting into two trips.

The entire city centre of St. Petersburg is a UNESCO World Heritage site, and travelling throughout the city on foot is a beautiful way to explore the riverside buildings and the large dramatic roads. Most hotel St. Petersburg will be happy to give you tips on where to travel. Alternatively, simply start walking and enjoy getting lost in this magical city. Side streets are home to locally owned bars and restaurants, and this is where you can find the real spirit of the city.

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