

WONDERFULL ART: ST PETERSBURG

Few are disappointed by St Petersburg, built on a grand scale in the 18th century when Peter the Great ordered his nobles to decamp from Moscow to create a new city. In a severe case of keeping up with the Jonesys, palace after palace was erected, each trying to outdo the last. Admittedly, the city's grandeur is fading slightly now that the palaces are decaying, but it still packs a punch. Tributaries of the Neva flow through the city, criss-crossed with canals intersected with pretty footbridges. Amsterdam rather than Soviet Bloc is the image, appropriately enough because it recalls Peter the Great's vision to create "a window on the west".



The best way to get the full-on hit of St Petersburg's might is to walk through Rossi's triumphal arch into the cobbles of Palace Square where you'll be confronted by the Alexander Column, and the Hermitage with the wide expanse of the Neva behind. After that, you're lost because some visitors to St Petersburg do nothing except wander around the Hermitage admiring a fraction of its 2.8 million exhibits (so many that only around a tenth can be shown at any one time). These include early Picassos, rooms full of Matisse, Botticelli, Rembrandts and Gauguins, maps and tea sets commissioned by Catherine the Great. The palace itself, inside and out, is enough to impress - even the floors, ceilings and intricate incidental furniture invite a triple-take. Afterwards, head to Nevsky Prospekt, the city's main shopping street.

Drink: The hippest hangout is Decadence (12 Admiralteiskaia Naberezhnaia, tel: 00 7 812 312 3944).

Eat: Steer clear of anywhere not pricing in roubles, or you'll pay over the odds. Restaurant (tel: 00 7 812 327 8979) serves traditional Russian dishes and flavoured vodkas.

Sleep: Hotel Astoria (00 7 812 313 5757) is Rocco Forte's sleek refurbishment of a grand hotel. Book online for special internet rate of \$210 per night, plus taxes of around 25%.

Getting there: British Airways (0845 7733377) from £254, plus taxes of approximately £46.

SHOPPING: REYKJAVIK

Reykjavik was once inextricably linked with Bjork, and is now in danger of becoming the newest spot on the stag night circuit. Clubs pump out a mix of home-grown and international club anthems; if you haven't heard of Gus Gus, Sigur Ros, Emilian Torriani or rap band Quarashi, you'll hear them in Reykjavik's clubs and return home weighed down with new CDs.

The plane lands in a landscape of bizarre volcanic formations hissing with steam, and frontier-style Reykjavik looks almost transitory. Winters are bitterly cold; luckily, the steam has a purpose as most of the city's heat comes from geothermal energy (hot water occasionally smells of sulphur).

Shopping-wise, try the quaint downtown main street of Laugavegur for boutiques and speciality stores (locally smoked salmon and hand-knitted sweaters, scarves, hats). For more unusual buys, head to Skólavörustigur, a street just off Laugavegur, where you'll find Icelandic jewellery and local labels. Check out GuSt Reykjavik Design (21a Skolavordustigur) for fashion cool - and warm. Also worth a browse is the Kolaporti flea market on the harbour front.

Drink: Kaffibarinn (tel: 00 354 551 1588) serves the city's best cocktails and is part-owned by Damon Albarn. Expect to queue.

Eat: Brasserie-style food at Thorvaldsun (00 354 551 3509), on Austurstraeti.

Sleep: Hotel Borg (00 354 551 1440) is a good choice, because you can kick off or end the evening in its Shadow Bar. Single rooms from \$115, B&B. 101 Hotel (tel: 00 354 580 0101) is just open and promises sculptures, murals and contemporary Icelandic art - a bit like overnighting in an art gallery. Doubles from 20,600 isk (approximately £150) per night, room only.

Getting there: Icelandair (020-7874 1000) from £186 return.



We hope you enjoy your travels watch out for more short and sweet.