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From Russia With Love

Freshly polished, newly proud, St. Petersburg retakes center stage

"Hey,

dance with us!" a young man yells to me over the music's pulsing beat. He's draped in a crimson elf vest ten sizes too big for his slim frame, but seems oblivious to his silly appearance. Gripping my elbow, he steers me to a circle of arm-waving revelers in this cozy place called Purga Club I, stuffed into a cellar in the imperial Russian city of St. Petersburg. Three couples in equally daft costumes—Santa hats and fuzzy bunny ears—are grooving to a DJ mix on the dance floor. ¶ I fall into this whirlwind of whimsy with an embarrassed smile, feeling out of place in jeans and hiking boots. Spotlights swirl. Red and green bulbs wink merrily on plastic Christmas trees. But it's not Christmas. More like early summer, the season of the White Nights, when the sun barely sets this far north (St. Petersburg is near the latitude of Anchorage). This is the time when city residents shrug off endless months of winter gloom and party all night long, explaining the bacchanalian atmosphere. Except that in this lighthearted club on St. Petersburg's Fontanka River they joyfully celebrate New Year's Eve every night of the year.

Tea, pastries, and window-filling views at Café Singer (above) make for a classic St. Petersburg experience. Calm and wide, the Neva River (left) lends itself to day cruises, passing such sights as the 19th-century Stock Exchange and red Rostral Columns. Preceding pages: The Church of the Resurrection of Christ, completed in 1907, was modeled on Moscow's St. Basil's Cathedral.

"Desiat, deviat, vosem, sem…," shout partygoers. I know just enough Russian to join in the countdown. "Ten, nine, eight, seven…" When the clock strikes midnight, clouds of confetti burst out from the ceiling. Champagne corks pop. "To the new friends!" enthuses my newest friend, Sergey Kudryashoff, as he clinks glasses with Irina Nabok, a brunette whose rabbit ears flop winsomely across her eyes. Kudryashoff, 25, is a Web designer, and Nabok, 20, a drama student. They invite me to their table, eager to share with a visitor their passion for their hometown.

"It's a mystical place," Kudryashoff begins.

"A magical city, like no other place in Russia," Nabok says dreamily. She flashes a brilliant smile at Kudryashoff and adds: "Especially now, during White Nights. It becomes the city of love."

A 20-something waitress in a slinky polka-dot dress takes our order and adds her two cents. "St. Petersburg is the most European city in Russia," she says over the blare of the music. Her name is Nadya, and from her fluent English it's clear to me that she is a well-educated waitress.

I find myself warming to this half-shouted conversation over the jaunty strains of a Brazilian *lambada.* But I'm distracted when a vaguely familiar face suddenly crowds the video screen just over Nadya's shoulder. It's a black-and-white image of Leonid Brezhnev, leader of the Soviet Union from 1964 to 1982, delivering an address to a nation that no longer exists. "An old New Year's speech to the people," explains Nadya, laughing. "Part of our nightly celebration." The music is way too loud for any of us to hear Brezhnev's words, not that anyone would listen. The dour days of the Soviets have been banished, reduced to grist for light-hearted mockery on a nightclub's plasma screen.

IT'S A FAR CRY FROM THE LAST TIME I was here. Then, in the mid-1990s, St. Petersburg was still shrugging off seven decades of neglect as Soviet Leningrad. Everything was cloaked in gray, as though the entire city had been mothballed. Gangsters were feasting on the carcass of the defunct U.S.S.R.; fear had imposed a de facto curfew on the streets after dark. The visit left me wondering whether Russia would ever get its act together or if it would remain, as a Russian philosopher friend of mine asserted, "a dark mirror to the West."

Gold-limned biblical scenes fill the cupola interior of St. Isaac's Cathedral (above), one of St. Petersburg's most decorated churches. The city appears to scroll out from the cathedral's roofline (below), punctuated by such landmarks as tree-lined St. Isaac's Square.

Crowded boats churn past us, peals of laughter rippling off them like trumpet calls to merriment. Everywhere, it seems, the scent of freshness is in the air.

A dozen years of growing prosperity have brought renewed vigor to this onetime capital of the tsars. Renovations that were begun in advance of the city's 300th anniversary in 2003 continue, with major restoration projects in full swing. Western hoteliers are lining up to stake their claim, with new W and Four Seasons hotels the latest outposts of opulence just a stone's throw from the palatial Hermitage Museum. Cruise ships from Helsinki and Stockholm bring tourists to docks in and around the city.

After a tumultuous century of revolution and Cold War, has St. Petersburg returned to the world stage? Is the city, once famed across Europe for its palaces and artworks, again ready for prime time? If a feeling of safety is any indicator, the signs are good: It's well past 3 a.m. by the time I step out into the streets, and they're still very much alive with the shouts of carousers.

Nadya's words return to me the next morning as I hike across the Neva River along the Trinity Bridge and take in the view: baroque and rococo palaces in pastel blues and greens, stretching along the embankment as far as the eye can see, with the gold dome of St. Isaac's Cathedral rising beyond them in gilded magnificence.

Bisected by the Neva and laced with scores of smaller rivers and canals fronted by an endless parade of architectural gems, St. Petersburg really does have the look and feel of an enchanted city. It was its access to the Baltic Sea and, some say, the seemingly supernatural quality of the White Nights—when the northern sun barely sets and the midnight sky deepens to a Maxfield Parrish blue—that led Tsar Peter the Great to found a new capital for the Russian empire on marshlands here at the start of the 18th century. He named his creation for his patron saint, Peter. The city was to be Russia's "window to Europe"—and to the Baltic Sea, all the better to project the empire's might.

In the course of the next two centuries, the seat of power moved from St. Petersburg to Moscow and back again, as the monarchy passed from one generation to the next. All the while a succession of master builders, most notably from Italy and France, transformed the remote backwater into a unique blend of Russia and Western Europe, an imperial metropolis of palaces, boulevards, plazas, and canals of such grandeur that even today, residents claim it has a life and soul of its own.

That conviction has given rise to a movement of preservationists called Living City. Its followers are alarmed by what might be seen as the downside to all the new investment—the intrusion of sleek new hotels and buffed-granite arcades into the heart of St. Petersburg, which has been designated a World Heritage site by UNESCO.

I'm headed out to meet with Petr Zabirokhin, one of Living City's organizers. I dodge through thickets of pedestrians as I make my way east along Nevsky Prospekt, St. Petersburg's main thoroughfare, past Palace Square, fronted by the Hermitage Museum, and Uprising (Vosstaniya) Square—two unbroken miles of world-class architecture. I bypass Kazan Cathedral, a limestone colossus that was modeled on St. Peter's Basilica in Rome and houses the crypt of Field Marshal Mikhail Kutuzov, the commander who stood up to Napoleon's army at the Battle of Borodino in 1812. I skirt the Beloselsky-Belozersky Palace, a pink fortress girded by a phalanx of neoclassical male statues. Great Gostiny Dvor, a shopping center that was designed in the mid-1700s—making it one of the world's oldest such centers—sprawls the entire length of another block.

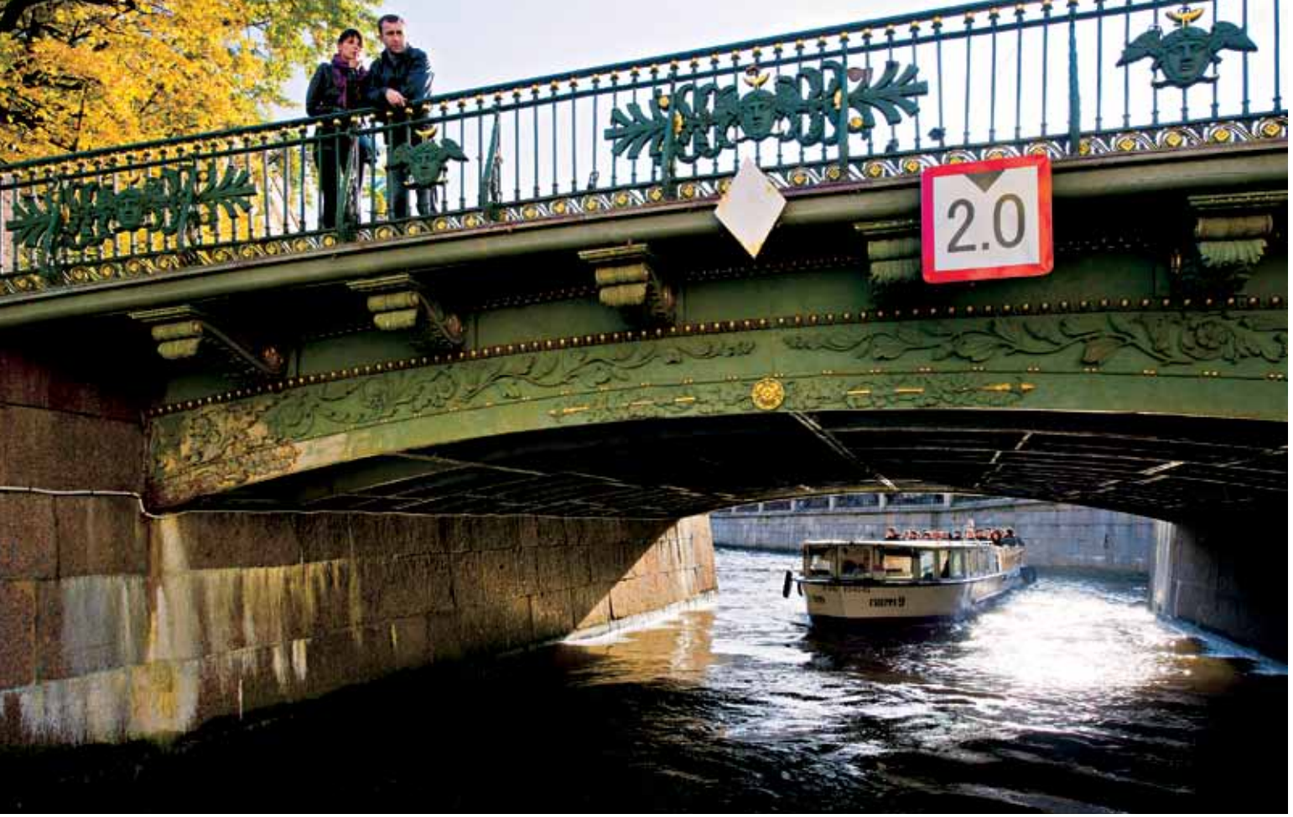
Zabirokhin is waiting for me in a coffee shop just off Nevsky. He is tall, slender, mid-30s, with blue eyes and a luxuriant blond mane, which seems to add several inches to his considerable height when he stands to greet me. A structural engineer for an international firm, he doesn't strike me as a rabble-rouser. Nonetheless, he was arrested in 2011 while trying to block deliveries to the construction site of a new department store. "Demolition and construction," he says to me in his deliberate, school-taught English, "are the twin threats that are facing our city." Even the historical buildings that lack landmark status are precious, he says, worthy of protection. "What distinguishes St. Petersburg is its historical unity. If a new building doesn't reflect this special quality, it damages the soul of the city."

It is always New Year's Eve at playful Purga Club I, complete with sparklers, festive headgear, and a midnight countdown.

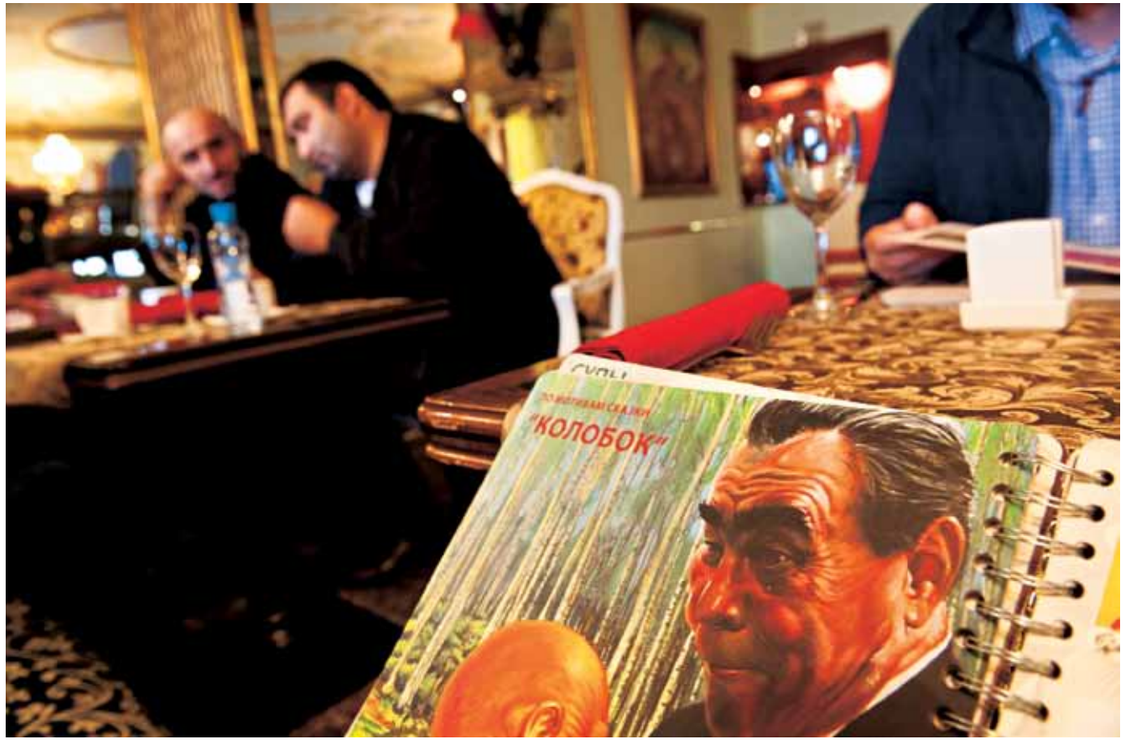
He wants to show me another location his group is fighting to save from the wrecking ball. We step out into the hot July morning and cross the Fontanka River, tour boats shooting from beneath our bridge like torpedoes. Zabirokhin pulls up at an unassuming brick affair wedged into a block overlooking the water. It seems an unlikely candidate for the stirring of passions. "This is a prime example of avant-garde constructivism from the 1920s," he states, apparently sensing my doubt. A plaque drilled to the wall says the building housed the electricity station that powered the city's trams during the infamous "900-day siege" of Leningrad by the Nazis in World War II. Now investors want to raze the structure for a hotel. "The damage to St. Petersburg today," Zabirokhin laments, "can be compared to what the Nazis did during the blockade." I think he's kidding, but he's not. "More buildings on Nevsky Prospekt have been demolished in the past eight years than were destroyed by the Nazis."

I'm finding it almost impossible to grasp, after a few days of strolling its boulevards and its bridges guarded by bronze horses and winged

From Louis XIV's playbook: The opulent Peterhof complex of palaces and gardens, on the outskirts of St. Petersburg, was begun by Peter the Great to emulate Versailles.



More than 200 bridges stitch together this city of rivers and canals, including the Little Stable Bridge (above), on the Moika River. Soviet times are spoofed at the Russky Kitsch Restaurant (below), where Cold War stalwarts like red-faced Leonid Brezhnev live on.



The St. Petersburg I'm seeing is all about the coexistence of light and shadow, imperial rule and revolution, haute couture and savage invasion.

lions, that this city endured one of the longest, most brutal sieges in history. Hundreds of thousands of civilians died of starvation and disease along these streets and canals. At least another half million defenders were killed. To pay tribute to this heroic resistance, I head over to Fontanka Street the following day for a visit to the State Memorial Museum of the Defense and Siege of Leningrad. Its second floor is packed with artifacts from those two and a half years of hell: Soviet banners, propaganda posters, captured German weapons. There are graphs charting the mind-numbing quantity of air raids, firebombings, artillery barrages. A diorama depicts a typical Leningrad living room from the era: woodstove, heavy brocade curtains, a samovar on a small wooden table, a portrait of Stalin on the wall. Your imagination is left to fill in the suffering its occupants must have endured.

A caretaker off to one side is keeping a vigilant eye. She is a stout woman in a long flannel skirt, her white hair pulled back severely into a bun. It occurs to me that she might be old enough to have lived through some of this history herself. She regards me warily as I approach, but the iciness melts almost instantly. "People don't usually ask me," says Galina Sergenevna Bodrova, 73, who was only two years old when Hitler's forces drew their noose around the city in the fall of 1941. Nearly her entire family died in the first six months of the siege. "My grandparents, my parents, brothers and sisters," she says. "Only two sisters and I survived." On a sunny morning in 1942, blockade-runners took Bodrova and a younger sister through German lines to safety. Bodrova went on to marry and have a son. She has a cell phone too, shattering my image of the gruff babushka. She gives me her number and urges me to call whenever I like.

I'm beginning to sense that these small, facade-cracking encounters are a big part of what makes 21st-century St. Petersburg such a compelling place to visit.

"Do you need some help?" The question comes from the back of the bus in crisp British English. I've figured out how to navigate the buses and trams that cruise Nevsky Prospekt, but on my way to meet a friend, I'm uncertain which is the right stop to get off at. Seeing my confusion, a young woman with flaxen hair bounds up the aisle to my side. "We are learning to be more helpful to visitors," she says, smiling. Irina Federova, 23, shows me which stop to take and offers to walk me to my destination. "I'm on summer holiday; I don't need to be anywhere."

A student at St. Petersburg State University, she's majoring in something called "Japanese management." In years past it was nearly impossible to find someone on the street here who could speak anything besides Russian. But a new generation of St. Petersburg men and women eager to be part of a larger world is emerging.

Federova asks what I've seen of her city. I tell her about climbing up to the lookout beneath the dome of St. Isaac's Cathedral and traipsing through the spectacularly ornate halls of the Hermitage, fighting crowds to catch fleeting glimpses of the Rembrandts, Gauguins, van Goghs, and Renoirs. "Have you been to the Russian Museum yet?" she asks. "You must go!" Its collection of works by Russian artists is much larger than that in the Hermitage, she pronounces, all the better for experiencing the true heart of Russia.

She is waiting for me the next morning at the entrance to the yellow-stone Mikhailovsky Palace, which houses the museum. There are no lines, and thus, once we scale the grand staircase to the upper galleries, no need for us to crane our necks to behold medieval icons and monumental canvases. We pause to examine the intricate brushstrokes in "The Last Day of Pompeii," a 19th-century masterpiece by St. Petersburg–born artist Karl Briullov that depicts an apocalyptic scene of lava overwhelming the ancient Roman town. "As you can see," Federova says with the authority of an experienced tour guide, "this shows that something old is dying, but something new is already appearing."

Her words resonate as we sit in the Literary Café, surrounded by portraits of the great Russian writers Pushkin, Dostoyevsky, and

Models donning fashions by local designer Stas Lopatkin check out photos of themselves during St. Petersburg's Fashion Week.

Gogol, and dine on *draniki*—potato pancakes smeared with sour cream and red caviar. Our table has a view of the Moika River, where crowded boats churn past, peals of laughter rippling off them like trumpet calls to merriment. Everywhere, it seems, the scent of freshness is in the air.

Even where you might least expect it: the primly manicured gardens of the gargantuan Catherine Palace in the St. Petersburg suburb known as Tsarskoye Selo. This "summer" palace, commissioned by Catherine I, the wife of Peter the Great, emerged as the center of Russian autocracy in the mid-1700s when her daughter, Empress Elizabeth Petrovna, and, later, Catherine the Great, resided here and assembled works of unparalleled lavishness and staggering beauty. I take the 45-minute bus ride south from the city, lured by intriguing news that a fashion show featuring St. Petersburg's top designers is to be held on the grounds of the royal estate.

Festivities are in full swing by the time I arrive. Beneath the onion domes of the palace's church, ethereal nymphs in gauzy gowns prance across lawns, their hair piled high in gravity-defying

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beehives. Loudspeakers pump out an odd mix of music that shifts between baroque violin sonatas and bass-heavy European techno. I wander over to the pondside Hermitage Pavilion, a minor palace in its own right, where models dressed in taffeta stride onto the veranda to enthusiastic applause.

"The high spirit and imperial atmosphere of St. Petersburg are what inspire me," says 38-year-old designer Stas Lopatkin during a break. His hair is spiked with gel, his eyes hidden behind a pair of stylish sunglasses rimmed with mother-of-pearl. He stands arms akimbo, looking calm in a whirlwind of chaos as makeup artists tend to his bevy of models. A touch of eye shadow here, a blast of hair spray there. The winter months will find Lopatkin working elsewhere in Europe, he tells me, but summer always brings him back to St. Petersburg, the source of his creative energy. "It's the transparency of air and water here," he says, pausing to search for the right words. "The colors, the light…"

The St. Petersburg I've seen is all about the coexistence of light and shadow, imperial rule and revolution, haute couture and savage invasion. For every aristocratic palace here there is an Uprising Square, for every lavish Tsarskoye Selo estate a Soviet-style Finland Station—the St. Petersburg rail terminal where Vladimir Lenin arrived from exile in 1917, unleashing the storm that led to the triumph of the Marxist Bolsheviks.

Perhaps no artist captured the dark side of St. Petersburg—and the dreary characters who peopled its fetid slums—more convincingly than the 19th-century master Fyodor Dostoyevsky, who lived in the city as an adolescent and, intermittently, an adult. I join a procession to the Dostoyevsky Memorial Museum, an annual event that commemorates the writer's tenure in St. Petersburg. A crowd ten deep gathers around a stage outside the museum—a four-story tenement building in the historic district where the writer lived his final years. Beneath a banner proclaiming, "Art is as basic a necessity to humans as the need to eat or drink," onlookers hoot and cheer as characters from the pages of *Crime and Punishment* and *The Idiot* strut the stage, pantomiming acts of lewdness, thievery, inebriation. I spot the obsessive police inspector, the drunken philosopher, the prostituted daughter, and, of course, an ax-wielding Raskolnikov. Natives claim that Dostoyevsky's characters are so graphically drawn

INTERNATIONAL MAPPING

Russian naval cadets leap from the base of one of St. Petersburg's two Rostral Columns. The columns served as navigation aids in the 1800s, when the city was home to Russia's Imperial Navy, and feature statues representing Russian rivers (here, the Volkhov).

that even now you can recognize personages from the pages of his novels walking the streets of St. Petersburg. "You see it in the faces of the people," says Alla Shapiro, a student of Russian literature who teaches English at a private academy here. "Dostoyevsky's characters are alive. These are real people."

For all of its newfound openness and budding cosmopolitanism, St. Petersburg retains an atavistic edge that remains distinctly and uniquely Russian. As I follow the street away from the Dostoyevsky tribute, I pick up on the rousing strains of an all-male chorus. When I turn the corner, I run into an entire company of Russian Army recruits in baggy uniforms belting out a song while they march. It's a stirring partisan anthem, stridently nationalist, carrying a strong scent of Mother Russia and a whiff of the wild Siberian steppe. The sight of a foreigner with a video camera spurs the soldiers to even higher decibels, as if to say: "Make no mistake! You are in Russia!" As the detachment approaches, passersby along the street burst into hearty applause.

On my final night in St. Petersburg, two friends, Tatyana and Nikolai, invite me to join them for a cruise on the Neva. We stroll along the embankment to our boat, passing the white-columned Admiralty, the old headquarters of the Russian Navy. Couples walk by arm in arm, stopping to watch clowns juggle flaming batons. Vendors hawk balloons, cotton candy, popcorn.

The sun has dipped below the horizon, spreading a band of deep crimson light and casting the skyline on the far bank into mysterious silhouette. Our vessel lurches into the current and heads upstream, past the vast Hermitage. Somewhere in the distance, an accordion intones the syrupy notes of a Russian ballad. Waiters strut past, their trays laden with ice buckets and fifths of vodka. Other boats slide by us in the semidarkness, the lilt of saxophones and tinkling glasses rising on the wind.

Nikolai and Tatyana snuggle. I return their smiles. Then, as we approach the Palace Bridge, the span's illuminated drawbridge arms slowly rise, as if inviting us to enter the gates of a magical kingdom. But I've known for some time that, in fact, I'm already there.

Scott Wallace, *author of* The Unconquered: In Search of the Amazon's Last Uncontacted Tribes, *is based in Washington, D.C. The wife-and-husband photo team of* **Sisse Brimberg** *and* **Cotton Coulson** *last collaborated on "Paris: The Longest Sunday" (July-August 2010).*