
Armchair Traveler Visits Saint Petersburg, the Cultural Capital of Russia

OSHER 323-001

Dates: Thursdays: January 14 – February 18

Time: 1:30 – 3:00 pm

Location: Online via Zoom

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Course Description:

Saint Petersburg is Russia's second largest city, its cultural heart, and my hometown. For almost two thirds of its 300-year-long history, Saint Petersburg served as Russia's capital. From the reforms of Peter the Great to the Decembrist revolt of 1825, and again from the Bolshevik Revolution to the 900-day-long siege during World War II, the most important dramas of Russia's history played out on the city's stage. Saint Petersburg has also served as a gateway to and from Europe: Italian architects, Dutch shipbuilders, French restaurateurs, German artisans all contributed to the image of the city, depicted by Russian literary greats such as Pushkin and Dostoyevsky. Splendid architectural gems like the Winter Palace, the Peter-and-Paul Fortress, and the Church of the Savior-on-Blood make Saint Petersburg a veritable open-air museum. Indoor museums such as the Hermitage and the Russian Museum boast some of the world's best collections of Western and Russian art, respectively. The city's numerous rivers and canals with their gorgeous bridges earned it the nickname of "Venice of the North"—but Venice lacks Saint Petersburg's "White nights" when the sun barely sets, turning bridges, statues, and wrought-iron latticework into magical silhouettes. Yet the city's physical geography presents a challenge too: built on a marshy, flood-prone delta of the Neva River, Saint Petersburg is a marvel of urban engineering. Its location at 60°N makes it the world's largest northern city: its population is greater than that of Helsinki, Stockholm, Oslo, Copenhagen, Reykjavik, and Anchorage combined—by a margin of nearly two million people! Join me for an exploration of this magnificent city and its historical significance.

Course Overview:

- Week 1:** Brief geographical overview. Founding of the city by Peter the Great: building a city to reform a country. The Peter-and-Paul Fortress. The beginnings of St. Petersburg as Russia's capital. St. Petersburg as a "window into Europe". Petrine Baroque architecture.
- Week 2:** The "Age of the Four Empresses" (1725-1796). The Great Fire of 1737 and the new urban development plan. Elizabethan Baroque architecture. The Hermitage Museum: then and now.
- Week 3:** The turn of the 19th century: Paul I and Alexander I. Napoleonic wars and St. Petersburg. Neo-classical and Empire architecture. The Kazan Cathedral: Russia as "the Third Rome". St. Petersburg in the poetry of Alexander Pushkin.
- Week 4:** The "Golden Age" of St. Petersburg, through revolts and revolutions: from the Decembrist revolt of 1825 to the revolutions of early 20th century. St. Isaak's Cathedral and Savior-on-Spilt-Blood Cathedral. How politics define architecture. St. Petersburg in the works of Tolstoy, Gogol and Dostoevsky.
- Week 5:** The "Silver Age" (turn of the 20th century). St. Petersburg leads Russia into the capitalist industrial age. New architectural styles, esp. Art Nouveau. St. Petersburg as a world capital city. The role of St. Petersburg in the three Russian revolutions.
- Week 6:** Tragic developments in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods: post-revolutionary depopulation, the Siege of Leningrad during World War II and the post-war reconstruction. Urban engineering: the metro, the Dam, newest bridges, the only skyscraper in the city. St. Petersburg in the 21st century.