

A trip to St. Petersburg takes
CASSIDY HAZELBAKER through
the centuries-old beauty and charm of
this historic and culturally rich
Russian city

For centuries, a rich culture of art, literature and music has been at the heart of Russian heritage. Perhaps there is nowhere within the country more emblematic of this than Russia's cultural capital, St. Petersburg. Since its founding in 1703 by Peter the Great, the city has held a special place in the hearts of Russian people. Acquainting oneself with the art, sights and food of this imperial city is a delight for visitors coming from near and far.

After a nonstop Emirates flight from Dubai, I arrived to the recently opened Four Seasons Lion Palace in the heart of the city. My room displayed the opulence and elegance characteristic of all Four Seasons properties, with tasteful furnishings and an enticing marble bathtub. The highlight of my room, however, was the view from the terrace—I found myself level to the dome of the magnificent St. Isaac's Cathedral, brightly illuminated and standing boldly in contrast to the crisp winter night's sky. The heated terrace floor added an extra level of comfort. My stay was sprinkled with such small touches, such as a bookmark thoughtfully left in the novel I was reading.

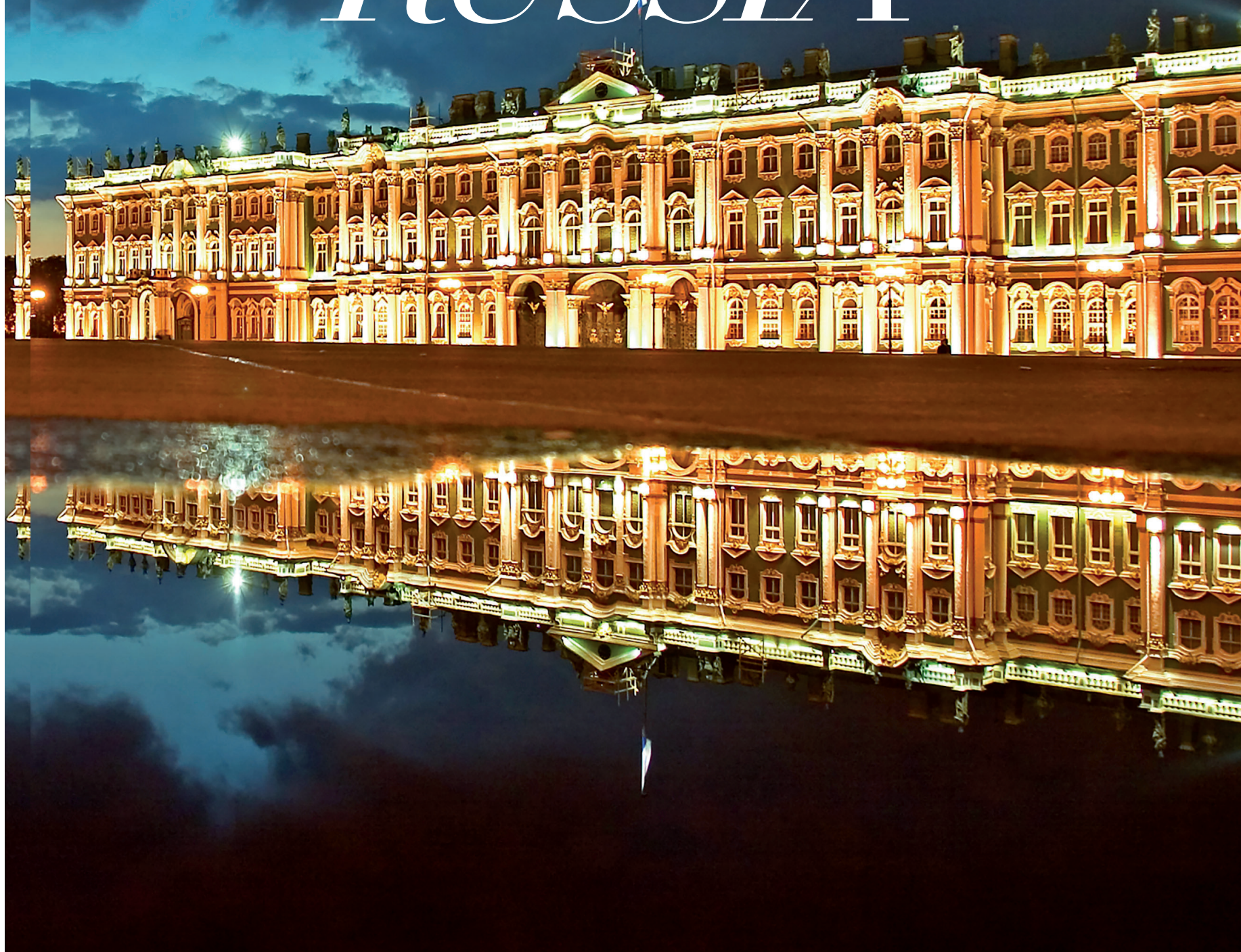
The next day, fortified by a peaceful night's sleep and the luxurious breakfast spread presented by the hotel, I set off for arguably the most well-known landmark of St. Petersburg: the Hermitage. Founded by Catherine the Great in 1764, the sheer size of the Hermitage is almost incomprehensible—it includes six historic buildings located along the Palace Embankment that together house over three million objects. The museum contains everything from prehistoric jewelry to Italian Renaissance painters, with a few token ancient Egyptian mummies in the mix. Particularly striking were two saddle sets presented to King Nicholas I as a diplomatic gift from the Turkish Sultan. Each of the saddle blankets contained over 16,000 diamonds woven into the fabric, with bridles and harnesses encrusted in precious jewels. Another novelty was a golden vanity set owned by Queen Anna Ioannovna, who was well-known for not possessing the beauty typically attributed to a royal. It is said she found herself prettier when she admired herself in the gilded mirror.

I concluded a day spent meandering through the Hermitage with one of Russia's most traditional dinners: beef stroganoff. Legend has it that the dish was created by a French chef who cooked for a Russian general. One day the general received a much larger group of visitors than expected, and the chef, improvising to feed the crowd, thinly sliced the beef filets and prepared them into a creamy mushroom stew. The diners were delighted and beef



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stroganoff was born. Feeling like a tsarina after a gourmet feast, I indulged in a slice of medovik, Russian honey cake.

No visit to St. Petersburg is complete without a visit to the ballet in the renowned Mariinsky Theater. Many of Russia's greatest musicians, including Tchaikovsky and Mussorgsky, have premiered their scores at the historic ballet and opera house, which opened in 1860. Rudolf Nureyev and Anna Pavlova are amongst the many famous feet who have danced upon its stage. The interior of the theatre is everything a great opera house should be and more- several levels of golden gilded rows which lead to extraordinary lavish imperial box seats, a light blue ceiling decorated with cherubs, and a thick velvety blue curtain teasing spectators to reveal the elaborate performance within. The ballet was as captivating as the theatre itself—rows of ballerinas brilliantly executing precise movements that only years of skillful mastery can achieve.

I contemplated the rich heritage of the ballet later while ambling down Nevsky Prospekt, the Champs-Élysées of St. Petersburg. The boulevard's glittering lights were enchanting, and the nighttime illumination of the city's most famous monuments softened a harsh winter's night. The cold climate and turbulent history of the city seemed an unlikely place to foster such a delicate dance, but upon reflection, I realized that perhaps it is only by cultivating

and cherishing such beautiful art, whether the ballet, literature, or paintings, that the city has maintained its heartbeat through it all.

The historical highlight of my trip was a visit to the Fabergé museum, which is the project of Russian billionaire Viktor Vekselberg, who bought back many heritage objects which were lost during the 1917 revolution to share them with the public. Opened in December 2013, the museum is located in the Shuvalov Palace, a building with an eventful history of its own. The palace was badly damaged during World War II's Siege of Leningrad, but after seven years of careful restoration, the building has become the epitome of luxury and its silk-draped walls provide the perfect setting for the wondrous creations of Carl Fabergé.

A French immigrant, Fabergé settled in Russia and opened his atelier in 1842, where his handmade and bespoke table wear, desk clocks and bejeweled decorative items quickly became must-haves for Europe's elite. Displayed within the palace's salons are collections of elaborately-designed silver dining sets, which were displayed by Russia's military officers at dinner parties. A second room exhibited a plethora of decorative objects, from golden monogrammed cigarette cases, a staple accessory for any gentleman of the time, to more fantastical pieces such as a jewel encrusted thermometer or a

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miniature neon-green arm chair, the seat of which opened to reveal a small stock of candy inside.

The focal point of the museum, however, was the collection of eggs which Tsar Alexander III and later Nicolas II commissioned each year as gifts to their wives and mothers. Each egg is completely unique, with a theme carefully chosen for the recipient. Most of the eggs are exquisitely decorated with jewels and precious metals, and some open to display further accessories or charms. Innovative mechanisms such as clocks are incorporated into some of the eggs, which was avant-garde at the time and contribute to the high value of the pieces. Around 50 eggs were produced in total between 1885 and 1917.

Tragically, with the start of the Russian revolution, Fabergé closed his company and left Russia, taking many secrets such as the formulas for his vibrant enamel color palette with him. Though a company of the same name was later founded, it does not possess the knowledge of the master artisan or his team, making the original Fabergé objets d'art even more precious.

Fabergé's eggs, representing revival and eternity, are symbolic of St. Petersburg itself. The city continues to

blossom and thrive, remaining year after year one of Europe's cultural capitals and most sought-after destinations. Just like the eggs, St. Petersburg's resilience and elegance are sure to stand strong for centuries to come. *Whisk off to St. Petersburg with Emirates that offers daily non-stop flights to this rich cultural capital. Book now on www.emirates.com*



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