



Moscow Metro Station



Lenin and Stalin look-alikes



The Hermitage, St Petersburg



Wedding at Red Square, Moscow

# FOR ST PETE'S SAKE

**Rishad Saam** knocks back Russian vodka shots in St Petersburg and finds Lenin look-alikes feasting on Big Macs in the ex-Communist Russian capital, Moscow

Something wasn't adding up. Catherine the Great's coronation dress in the armoury museum at the Kremlin in Moscow had me gaping in surprise like other tourists around me. The garment's waist was minuscule enough to make even an anorexic ramp model feel wide. Yet a few days ago, I had seen a portrait of the very same Catherine on a horse in the Hermitage at St Petersburg and there her cylindrical build definitely screamed Mrs Jaya Sawant. The handsome white horse also looked burdened.

After becoming queen at 32 in 1762, the good life had taken Catherine the Great from hour glass to 'open the double doors so that the queen can pass'.

In St Petersburg, there's ample proof that Catherine had lived large. In fact, the wealth in the Hermitage, Catherine's private museum where she hoarded all her art and jewellery, could easily equal the GDP of a small country - twice over!

## Vodka and Weddings

I had arrived in St Petersburg aboard a Globus coach on a road trip from Warsaw to Moscow to find the gilded city preening under a lovely summer day.

That first day my coach co-travellers and I went for a canal cruise. St Pete's was often referred to the Venice of the east thanks to its canals. We floated past the Church of the Spilled Blood and the Peter and Paul Fortress.

Most of my co-travellers, taken in by the festivity of the moment brought about by tambourine tapping, fair and lovely dancing girls, knocked back vodka shots like there was no tomorrow. So at disembarkation, there was much swaying even though the boat had already docked. Many could see eight gangplanks instead of the one. They, of course, crawled into their beds and called it a night. Massive hangovers were waiting to be delivered the next morning.

But my five friends and I were buzzing with energy and started off on a leisurely walk around St Petersburg. Summer is a joyful time and

there were many marriages taking place. Newlyweds gleefully ran on the streets fuelled by romance and champagne followed by tittering best men and bridesmaids. This mirthful entourage would usually be followed by a much harrowed photographer desperately trying to get that perfect shot to freeze all this gaiety for posterity.

All the city's architectural marvels were lit up. At the Victory Square behind the Hermitage, the revelry of the White Nights (as this time of the year is called) showed no signs of abating even at 2.30 am. Musicians played and fireworks went off.

On Nevsky Prospect, the city's popular for-km-long thoroughfare, cafes spilled out onto the pavement. Laughter, music and the tinkling of glasses floated out of each. We felt fortunate to be part of this revelry during the best time of the year in this pretty city of the Tsars.

## Big Macs near the Kremlin

Taking the train to Moscow was a good idea. The five-hour journey in the plush first class cabin of the Aurora Train gave me much needed blank time between sightseeing in St Pete's and the Russian capital.

Moscow's most popular tourist site is the Kremlin - once the nerve

centre of Communism. Tourists wander where Stalin once ranted. The State Armory with its collection of period garments, carriages, weapons and jewellery is open to tourists but the guards are fussy about letting cameras in. They let compacts through, but my big SLR was barred.

Five hundred meters from the Kremlin is the popular Red Square. I did a double take as I saw Lenin headed towards the huge McDonalds right opposite the Kremlin. My first thought was that he had risen from his mausoleum close by and was storming to this most blatant sign of capitalism to deliver some stern 'commie' ideology.

It was actually a look-alike going to get a Big Mac. Local look-alikes dress up



involved a lot of miming and gesturing because our Russian vocabulary consisted of three words - 'Da', 'Nyet' and 'Spaci-ba' - 'Yes', 'No' and 'Thank-you' respectively. But minuscule vocabulary notwithstanding, we managed to get to the Novodevichiy Cemetery. Composer Sergey Prokofiev is buried here and it felt good to pay my respects to the man whose fantastic musical work, *Peter and the Wolf*, thrilled me as a child.

Red Square is a crowded *mela* during the tourist season. There are souvenir, ice-cream and hot-dog stalls, performers and visitors from the world over. At the Kremlin end, the daily changing of the guard with its high kicking and synchronised marching is a throw-back to the old USSR.

But there is more to Moscow. We used the underground, whose stations with chandeliers and sculptures are an attraction by themselves, extensively to get to other less known but interesting sights in Moscow. Asking for directions

## Moscow by Metro

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## Noisy Last Supper

My last meal in Moscow was in a packed and boisterous sausage and beer joint that we found close to our hotel. The juke box's waiting list rivalled that of the Tata Nano. The waitresses were frantic like headless chickens and the double doors to the kitchen constantly clapped. All this because the food was superb. Our stocking-sized sausages arrived perfectly cooked and the beer arrived in tankards equalling small bathroom buckets in volume.

That groaningly delicious meal in that chaotic restaurant, after which we had to be almost helped out of our chairs because we were so stuffed, was a fitting conclusion to my summer holiday in Russia.

## Info Panel

- A confirmation from a registered hotel or travel agent is required to apply for a Russian visa.
- A coach tour is an easy and convenient way to see St Petersburg and Moscow. Try Globus ([www.globusjourneys.in](http://www.globusjourneys.in)) for their tours of the two cities.
- A good place to stay in heart of all the action in St Petersburg is Hotel Ambassador ([www.ambassador-hotel.ru](http://www.ambassador-hotel.ru)) and they will also arrange a tour for you.
- For a cruise combined with an indulgent meal and a special evening in St Petersburg eat at the New Island Restaurant, a floating restaurant on a luxury cruise ship.
- Skillful pickpockets operate in large numbers, especially near the Aurora Warship, so look after your belongings.



Saint Basil's Cathedral on Red Square, Moscow