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3 Petersburg Hotels Fit for a Tsar

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The Grand Hotel Europe on Nevsky Prospekt, which offers the Faberge suite, pictured, opened its doors in 1875. **Roberto Bonardi**

ST. PETERSBURG — St. Petersburg is getting more and more modern these days. You can make it from Moscow to the northern capital in a few hours on a shiny, high-speed Sapsan express train. If you're attending this week's economic forum, and your deal-making potential is high enough, you might wind up strolling the decks of an oligarch's super-yacht.

But despite the increase of conveniences and improvements the city has seen in recent years, chances are that once you start strolling its streets you'll feel the absorbed history in the cobblestones seeping through the soles of your shoes and up your legs.

While plenty of hotels are housed in sumptuous historic buildings in the center of town, there are only three that you could have checked into in 1914.

Book into one of these, and you can steep yourself in all the tsarist splendor, revolutionary drama and wartime austerity you can handle.

Grand Hotel Europe on Nevsky Prospekt is where you come to live like an Imperial Russian aristocrat. This local institution, historic landmark and venue for national events won the world's best Luxury Hotel in the 2009 World Travel Awards. Nicholas II and Rasputin both dined here before the Revolution, and a century on it still boasts all the luxury a tsar — or a nefarious peasant mystic — could wish for.

Opened in 1875 on the site of an even older hotel, the Grand Hotel Europe claims to be the oldest hostelry in the northern capital. And the history is quite simply oozing out of the walls and onto Ploshchad Khudozhnikov behind the hotel, where the National Museum and Mikhailovsky Theater are located.

The original buildings were built in 1824 and 1825, and a hotel has been operating on the site since 1830. The properties were united behind a single facade in the 1830s by Italian architect Carlo Rossi — who is responsible for some of the city's most iconic buildings, including the grandeur of the Mikhailovsky Palace, the Alexandrinsky Theater and the vast General Staff building that faces the Winter Palace across Palace Square.

In 1872 a joint stock company was formed to create a luxury hotel, and after the renovation the Grand Hotel d'Europe opened in 1875 — as one of the world's great luxury hotels. It quickly became a favorite haunt of social and cultural luminaries including Tchaikovsky, Turgenev and ballerina Anna Pavlova, as well as the creme de la creme of imperial society.

Even after the flow of aristocratic clientele dried up following the 1917 Revolution, it remained the chosen spot for visiting glamour — dancer and socialite Isadora Duncan being just one of the 1920s celebrities to sign the registration book.

That was followed by a period as a more modest stint as a people's hotel during the Soviet Union — with most of the larger suites being subdivided into smaller individual residences. The Grand Hotel also served as an orphanage during World War I and was converted into a hospital during the 900-day Siege of Leningrad in World War II.

Following a complete overhaul between 1989 and 1991, the hotel again found its niche as the preferred home in St. Petersburg for royalty, glitterati and a surprising number of sportsmen. It is currently under the management of Orient Express Hotels, Trains and Cruises.

The Restaurant Europe, Lobby Bar, Caviar Bar and Billiard Room are fitted out in turn-of-the-century Russian Art Noveau style by Swedish-Russian architect Fyodor Lidvall. The hotel boasts a lovely private speedboat, its own boxes at the Mariinsky and Mikhailovsky Theaters and a chocolate factory on the premises.

After wallowing in the comforts of the Grand Hotel, you can moving toward the slightly quieter St. Isaac's Square and enjoy the equally historic Astoria and Angleterre — sister hotels both owned by the Rocce Forte hotel group, and no less frequented by high society and visiting rock stars.

The Astoria, the only surviving pre-revolutionary hotel with five-star status other than the Grand Europe, is the more opulent of the two.

Groundbreaking on the Astoria took place in 1911, and it was intended to be a cutting edge

modern facility for the city.

But history was not kind. It opened in 1914 — the year World War I started — and was almost immediately pressed into service as a hospital.

The opulent tsarist era it was built to serve came to a grinding halt three years later. But the hotel managed to regain its executive status and had achieved such fame by the 1940s that Hitler is said to have chosen the Astoria as the locale for his planned victory dinner after the capture of Leningrad.

The city never fell, and Hitler never got his banquet — although he had apparently even had menus printed. Leningrad endured the horrific 900-day siege, during which the hotel was once again pressed into service, this time as housing for refugees.

Like the Grand Hotel Europe, the Astoria underwent a vast reconstruction just before the fall of the Soviet Union.

In 1997 the Rocco Forte group acquired the hotel from the city government and invested some $7 million making her fit for her original purpose of providing luxurious accommodation for the world's super-rich.

Today the 242-room hotel is a self-described "authentic Russian experience steeped in comfort and elegance" that competes with the Grand Hotel Europe and the Corinthian on Nevsky Prospekt for the attention of celebrities and statesmen. Its foyer and the pavement nearby are regularly crowded by blacked-out limousines and thick-necked men in sunglasses managing lines of autograph hounds.

Former guests have included George H.W. Bush, The Rolling Stones and Sir Cliff Richard. Roger Waters of Pink Floyd caused a similar fuss in April. No obvious Nazis are reported to have visited the restaurant in recent years.

But while the Astoria and Grand Europe compete for the super-rich and garishly famous, the Angleterre offers more understated elegance and effortless style.

The four-star Angleterre is several decades older than the Astoria. But its manager, Mirco Zannini, who has also run the Astoria, calls it "younger in spirit," — in other words, it has the comfort of its five-star sister with none of the pretension.

The story starts in the 1840s, when a hotel called the Napoleon, where Leo Tolstoy was once a guest, was built on the site.

The founder of the current establishment is Teresa Schmidt, who opened the hotel here in 1876 and gave it its moniker because she, despite her Germanic name, is alleged to have been an Englishwoman. The facility also briefly housed a British diplomatic mission in 1924.

By 1917 it had already been through several names — the Schmidt-England, the England and then the Angleterre. In 1919 it became the more ideologically appropriate "Internationale," reverted to the Angleterre in 1925 and then became the Leningrad after World War II.

The poet Sergei Yesinin — who at one time was the husband of Isadora Duncan — wrote his

last poem here before hanging himself from the heating pipes in one of its rooms in 1925. Today the management says the place has undergone so much renovation over the years that no one knows in which room he died.

A much-loved St. Petersburg landmark, the hotel had fallen into disrepair by the end of the 1980s and was narrowly saved from demolition by a popular campaign that eventually saw the place shut for complete renovation.

Rocco Forte took over in 1996 and had soon re-established the venue as a place of slightly more understated luxury than its five-star sister next door.

The result is a welcoming atmosphere that is less intimidating but every bit as pleasant. Its indoor terrace — a long gallery lined with trees and tables — fronts a fine Italian restaurant and a pleasant bar that boasts live pianists and mixes a very fiery Bloody Mary.

Unlike the 19th-century pretensions of either next door's Astoria or the Grand Europe, where one can imagine oneself as a latter day Count Vronsky, the Angleterre is a place to indulge in a 20th-century brand of glamour. Take a packet of cigarettes and a sharp suit, wreathe yourself in smoke, order scotch or a cocktail instead of champagne and watch guests pass in black and white.

Other Options

There are other hostelries that can't claim the same age as the institutions mentioned above but do a fine job of recreating the St. Petersburg of the past.

The Corinthian, formerly the Nevsky Palace, dates from 1993 in its present incarnation but occupies a neo-classical mansion built by August Lange in 1861 and the former home of the Samoilov family — a grand St. Petersburg acting dynasty — that overlooks Stremyannaya Ulitsa. The main building housed the Hotel Hermes from 1920 to 1957 and the Baltiiskaya Hotel from 1958 to 1989. The hotel includes a museum about the Samoilovs.

Today it is part of the Malta-based Corinthia Hotels chain. One of the great five-star hotels in the city, it competes with the Grand Hotel Europe and the Astoria for luxury and A-list celebrities.

The 89-room Taleon Imperial Hotel at 15 Nevsky Prospekt is a modern hotel that trades on its lovingly restored historically accurate interiors. Opened in an 18th-century mansion and boasting enough polished marble, gold leaf and chandeliers to make Catherine the Great feel at home, its web site claims that "no hotel in the world" can offer the same kind of historic beauty. Come here for the "War and Peace" experience, in a film-set kind of way.

The Antique Hotel Rakhmaninov on Kazanskaya Ulitsa, just behind the Kazan Cathedral off Nevsky Prospekt, recreates the Silver Age of Russian letters in an apartment where the composer lived in his youth. Described by one source as "half hotel, half museum," the current management preserves Rakhmaninov's own room, offers a historically themed upper floor and an artistically themed downstairs. Rather than focusing on the exploits of tsars and revolutionaries, the Rakhmaninov positions itself as part of St. Petersburg's cultural history — and the prices are correspondingly more affordable for starving artists.

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