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St. Petersburg's Gay Nightlife Is Alive and Kicking

By Tom Masters

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ST. PETERSBURG — Perhaps what's most surprising amid the homophobic rhetoric and the new law targeting the "promotion" of gay lifestyles is the fact that St. Petersburg's gay scene has never been more visible or felt less threatened than it does today.

Like many aspects of Russian civil society that tentatively grew up in the early 1990s, the gay and lesbian movement characterized itself by keeping its head down, not upsetting the authorities and trying hard to avoid creating trouble, a strategy most unlike that used by other, more provocative European gay rights movements. Many gay people in Russia still consider the mere existence of a gay rights movement a nuisance that will simply serve to turn an intolerant society's attention toward a group of people that the average Russian rarely sees or even thinks about.

While gay rights groups have become far more vocal in recent years, it's still no exaggeration to say that the political side of the gay scene remains small and rarely visible, even as political

protest seems to be returning to St. Petersburg.

Nevertheless, the city's gay scene is surprisingly busy and accessible to all, with four well-established clubs and a smattering of bars and saunas — it differs little from the scene to be found in any other European city. While visibility is increasing, nearly all establishments remain somewhat discreet about their nature, so you can still expect good old-fashioned videophone entries and unsigned venues, which just adds to the sense of adventure.

The biggest and most European-style gay club in town is **Central Station**, at the end of Dumskaya Ulitsa, a multi-floor fun house of Russian estrada, mainstream pop and house, which is busy nightly throughout the week. In the summer months crowds of clubbers mill about outside, rubbing shoulders with the largely straight overspill from nearby bars such as Dacha. Inside, there are two crowded bars, a big dancefloor, a VIP room and a dark room. The club is very much the center of the St. Petersburg gay scene and is mainly popular with gay men, though it does have a girls' night (Female Station, on Thursdays), where guys are still welcome, though they have to pay twice as much to get in. More typically, the menu features dance shows compered by drag queens, club nights with international DJs and karaoke competitions.

Next door, a short distance down Ulitsa Lomonosova, is the self-styled "trash bar" the **Blue Oyster** (Golubaya Ustritsa), its name both a pun on the Russian word for gay (goluboi) and a reference to the notorious leather bar that is the butt of constant jokes in the now rather dated Police Academy movies of the '80s. Inside you'll find few leather daddies though — the bar is actually the favored hang out of a young, slightly more alternative mixed-sex crowd that knocks back the cheap drinks and then throws itself into the sweaty scrum on the dancefloor; the most egregious-cum-suicidal of them also climb over the rails of the balcony above the dance floor and hang off it above the crowd, somehow still managing to smoke and drink, while the bouncers look on unperturbed. The Oyster is also free to get in to at any time (though security is tight and face control is still exercised), which ensures a young and more mixed bunch of people than at Central Station next door.

A St. Petersburg gay scene highlight by any standards is the fantastic, fun and silly **Cabaret** club, now in its umpteenth incarnation and venue, but having been on the go in one largely unchanged form since the late 1990s. Now housed in a new venue just off Ligovsky Prospekt, the focus of any evening at Cabaret is the 2.30 a.m. weekend show. Be prepared for a staggeringly campy, heavily Soviet performing style from ageing drag queens, lots of Alla Pugacheva and plenty of sharp, old-school tranny humor (your Russian will be severely tested). Before and after the lip synching activities, the club plays a mix of Russian and international pop, the bar is crowded and the older and richer clientele enjoy table service around the stage. Cabaret is also popular with and welcoming to curious straight people wanting to enjoy some camp performances, and it's not unusual to see Russian theatrical celebrities rubbing shoulders with the decidedly relaxed and unusually friendly crowd.

The third large gay club in the city is the inventively titled **The Club**, which used to be a straight venue, but has been totally overhauled and is now marketed to the more elitny sections of the gay world. It's a slick place, with table service (though you're not allowed to sit down unless you've reserved ahead), friendly bar staff, Moscow DJs and nightly shows with dancers and drag queens. In the summer it has a great outdoor area in the building's

courtyard where you can enjoy cocktails under the stars and mix with the "in-crowd" tusovka gays in their shiny clothes. As with any such club, you can expect your face to be controlled quite thoroughly, although they mainly seem to be keen to check that people know they're entering a gay club.

Russia's first lesbian club, **Triel**, keeps itself to itself, and its location in the south of the city in a warehouse just by Moskovskiye Vorota helps it do just that. This is a friendly space for lesbians and their friends (there's still a relatively small cross over between gay male and lesbian nightlife in St. Petersburg), but men as guests of girls are welcome at weekends, although the entry prices for them are high (600 rubles). Inside, it's a modern space with a busy dancefloor and parties that go on all night.

Across the way from Triel is another queer hangout, **Malevich**, which refreshingly welcomes everyone on equal terms and with equal entry prices (elsewhere they tend to be stacked in favor of men, just as entry to straight clubs in St. Petersburg is nearly always stacked in favor of women). With a focus on community, LGBT activism and fostering an environment for creative self-realization, this place is very different to other venues on the scene and hosts various groups and classes (including queer tango, film screenings, singing lessons, games nights and concerts). However, on the weekends there's always lots of dancing and drinking and a pleasantly mixed and "non-scene" crowd.

Finally, if you want to get down and dirty, the bar you're looking for is **Bunker**, the kind of place that probably keeps Milonov up at night. Just finding this men-only place is a challenge enough, hidden away as it is in an enormous courtyard on the Fontanka (enter through the archway on Ulitsa Borodinskaya, and it's in the second courtyard on the right). Inside there's a small bar and social area and a maze of dark rooms where guys wander from encounter to encounter. The same management also runs **Fitness Sauna**, a small male sauna just off the Fontanka, which serves the same purpose as Bunker, only you're able to use a small gym as well. Girls don't need to feel left out either — yes, St Petersburg has a private club for lesbian encounters too, although of course it's far classier than the male equivalent, and also far more discreet. But if you ever needed a reason to go to Prospekt Prosveshcheniya, then **Raduzhny Zamok** ("the Rainbow Castle") is it. Looking like the spiritual successor to long-dead 90s gay club Greshniki with its hilarious mock-medieval interior complete with cats in chainmail, this place boasts numerous "thematic parties" (a Russian euphemism for gay), has a sauna, mini-hotel and restaurant on the premises and is a favourite with discreet ladies.

So despite the current legal climate, there's plenty of choice and variety for gay and lesbian life in the northern capital, and for the most part no climate of fear exists for the men and women who lead their lives openly. Travelers shouldn't feel scared of joining in the fun either, most clubs are totally accessible to non-Russian speakers and you'll usually find locals more than happy to meet foreigners. Just don't expect to get to bed before sunrise.

****Tom Masters is the author of the Lonely Planet St. Petersburg and Eastern Europe guides.****

Locations

Central Station

www.centralstation.ru

Ulitsa Lomonosova 1, metro Gostiny Dvor

open 10 p.m.-6 a.m. Sun-Thu,

until 11 a.m. Fri & Sat.

Cabaret

www.cabaretspb.ru

Ulitsa Razyezzhaya 43,

metro Ligovsky Prospekt

open 11 p.m.-6 a.m. Thu, Fri & Sat.

The Club

www.vk.com/the_club_spb

Shcherbakov Pereulok 17,

metro Dostoevskaya

open 11 p.m.-6.30 a.m. Thu, Fri & Sat

Triel

www.vk.com/club1905880

Moskovsky Prospekt 109,

metro Moskovskiye Vorota

Open 8 p.m.-6 a.m.

Malevich

www.malevich-club.ru

Moskovsky Prospekt 109/3,

metro Moskovskiye Vorota

6 p.m.-11 p.m. Wed, until 6 a.m. Thu-Sun

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