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Sleepless in St. Petersburg: Make the Most of White Nights

Tips on how to stay up until dawn in and around the northern capital this summer

By Alastair Gill

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'Scarlet Sails' is the biggest event of the White Nights calendar in St. Petersburg. **PIXABAY**

This week marks midsummer, which means it's the perfect time to head north to Russia's former imperial capital and experience its famed "White Nights." But don't worry if you can't make it yet – this period of luminous twilight lasts until mid-July. Here are some ideas for sleepless nights in and around the city on the Neva.

Scarlet Sails

Who needs a prom when you've got this?

The most spectacular event of St. Petersburg's White Nights is without doubt "Aliye Parusa" (Scarlet Sails). Officially a celebration for school leavers, the event grew into a celebration for the whole city, and attracts huge numbers, often over 2 million. After concerts on Palace Square, spectators cram the embankments for watershows on the Neva River before the bridges go up.

The culmination of the evening is the appearance of a tall ship bearing bright red sails, which moves down the Neva as huge showers of fireworks explode overhead. Russian pop-rock band Mumiy Troll headlines this year's Palace Square program, which kicks off at 20:00. Turn up several hours early if you want to get a good spot by the river to see the light show and fireworks.

Palace Square, central embankments

Metro: Admiralteiskaya, Gorkovskaya

Bike Tour

Cover half the city on two wheels

In 1996 Peter Kozyrev founded Peterswalk, a company providing budget-conscious travelers with innovative walking tours of the northern capital. Over the years he expanded, earning a reputation for original routes that dip into the nooks and crannies of St. Petersburg. One of the hits of the Peterswalk summer program is the White Night Bike Tour, which sets off at 10:30 p.m. every Tuesday and Thursday.

The tour takes in most of the main sights of the city center, including Palace Square, the Admiralty, the Bronze Horseman, the Field of Mars and the Church on Spilled Blood. There is also a stop by Trinity Bridge for participants to watch the bridge being raised. Taking this 3.5-hour bike trip will allow you to see many areas that can't be fitted into a single walking tour. Cruise around the embankments and historical quarters of Vasilevsky Island, watch the bridges over the Neva River open and enjoy the views of the city from a new angle at an unusual hour.

The tour costs 2,000 rubles ($33.50) per person including bike. English-speaking guides are available; ask for Lena.

+7 (812) 943-1229

peterswalk.com

Assembly point: 2 Moshkov Pereulok, inside the courtyard of Taiga Space.

10:30 p.m., Tuesday, Thursday

Metro: Admiralteiskaya, Nevsky Prospekt

Camp Out by Lake Ladoga

White nights in the wilderness

For adventurous souls, spending a weekend out in the forest camping and hiking is an ideal way to get a taste of the ethereal beauty of northern Russia during the White Nights. You don't have to go far from the city before the meadowlands and woods of the Leningrad region become pristine pine forests and lakes as you approach Karelia. The town of Priozersk, 2.5 hours north of St. Petersburg by suburban train, is located within hiking distance of Lake Ladoga, with forest trails running along the shoreline.

There are plenty of good camping spots among the trees. If you don't fancy walking 8-10 kilometers through the forest from the town, take a taxi from the railway station to the river port and walk southeast to the shore. Watching the luminous sky across the infinite horizon of this vast lake from beside a campfire is an unforgettable experience. Don't forget to take a tent, food and water, map, a fully charged cell phone and a power pack – GPS will come in useful for navigation.

If you don't want to go so far, get off at Petryarvi, 1.5 hours north of St. Petersburg, and follow the trails west into beautiful, hilly pine forest, where there are a couple of small lakes – but more mosquitoes than you'll find by Ladoga.

Trains to Priozersk/Petryarvi run frequently from St. Petersburg's Finlyandsky Railway Station.

Metro: Ploshchad Lenina

Roof Music Fest

Summer rhythms above the city

One of the highlights of the White Nights season is the huge variety of cultural events on offer. It may be a relative newcomer, but Roof Music Fest has become one of the most anticipated entries on the city's summer calendar. The festival, which offers indie, jazz and classical concerts, unites a string of different venues with one thing in common – a rooftop terrace.

Upcoming highlights of this year's program include Georgian indie folk band Mgzavrebi on July 17, perennial local favorite and Tom Waits-inspired Billy's Band on July 21, as well as Belarusian pop-rock trio Iowa (best known for their song "Marshrutka@) on Aug. 4. Ex 5'nizza singer Andrey Zaporozhets will also be appearing with his new group Sunsay on July 6.

Various locations

roofmusicgroup.ru

Up on the Roof

Step from building to building

Boat trips and bridge-watching may be seen as the traditional White Nights pastimes, but exploring the roofs of St. Petersburg has been a cult summer activity for as long as anybody can remember. Many rooftops offer incredible views of the city's canals and rivers, and are popular spots for impromptu gatherings or romantic evenings with a bottle of wine. While formerly gaining access to the rooftops was relatively straightforward, in the last 10 years most lofts and staircases have been locked, meaning you need insider knowledge (or luck) these days.

For those who are new to the city or don't have local contacts, Nebanalny Peterburg (Unbanal Petersburg) offers several nocturnal rooftop excursions, including options to watch the raising of the bridges. The company also offers a daytime tour in English, including views of a number of major sights. Bring comfortable shoes.

+7 (812) 509 66 42

unbanalpeter.ru/catalog/ekskursii-po-krysham

Watching the Bridges

Join the throngs by the river

There are some things in this city of stone and water that never go out of fashion, and one of them is watching the raising of the drawbridges across the Neva River.

The most popular spots are along Admiralteiskaya Naberezhnaya and Dvortsovaya Naberezhnya, which offer the best views of the Palace and Trinity bridges going up. There's usually a carnival atmosphere, with bands playing nearby, food and drink stalls and party boats going up and down the river. Download the Most Have app to keep tabs on the opening and closing times, and make sure you don't get stuck on the wrong side of the river or it could be a long night!

razvodka-mostov.ru

Palace Bridge: 1:10 a.m.

Trinity Bridge: 1:20 a.m.

Liteiny Bridge: 1:40 a.m.

Metro: Admiralteiskaya, Gorkovskaya

St. Isaac's Colonnade

Get a bird's-eye view all night long

The debate over whether or not St. Petersburg's largest cathedral should be handed back to the Orthodox Church and reconsecrated looks like it is going to run and run, but in the meantime it's business as usual. The tourists don't mind either way – the view from the cathedral's colonnade is stunning.

Until August 20 this viewpoint is open all night, allowing visitors a chance to catch aerial views of the city's avenues, parks and waterways during the magical twilight that descends in the summer period. Take your camera and a tripod along and capture the bridges rising. Open from 10:30 p.m. to 4:30 a.m.; tickets cost 400 rubles ($6.70).

+7 (812) 314-40-96

eng.cathedral.ru

4 Isaakievskaya Ploshchad

Metro: Admiralteiskaya

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