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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

5 Ways to Celebrate the Holidays in St. Petersburg

Make use of visa-free travel this season.

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Peter Kovalev / TASS

On Dec. 22 Grandfather Frost makes his first stop on the holiday train in St. Petersburg, where he lights the enormous tree on Palace Square that is both the symbol and the heart of the holiday season. On New Year's Eve, the square is filled with music, special events, a light show on the buildings. This is the place to celebrate the holidays with locals and visitors.

Dvortsovaya Ploshchad. Metro Admiralteiskaya.

Next to the Naryshkin Tower of the Peter and Paul Fortress the city holds its fantastic ice sculpture show every winter. In temperatures always kept below zero, dozens of sculptors from Russia and around the world carve fantastic creations out of crystal-clear ice. They sparkle in the daylight and are lit up every color of the rainbow at night. Not to be missed — but remember to dress warmly.

Peter and Paul Fortress. Zaichy Ostrov. Metro Gorkovskaya. www.spbmuseum.ru

On several squares all over the city you can find holiday fairs big and small. The main one this year will be held on Malaya Sadovaya and Manege Square, which will be filled with wooden stands selling everything you could possible want to celebrate the season, from gingerbread to wild boar sausage; hand-knit woolen scarves, mittens and socks; tree decorations; traditional toys; and gifts and souvenirs from all over the country and the world. Take a ride on a reindeer-driven carriage or sip on sbiten, a traditional hot winter drink. And bring plenty of cash.

Manage Square, Malaya Sadovaya. Metro Sadovaya.

On Dec. 21 just after 6 p.m. the northern capital stops for the most colorful race in Europe, if not the world. Thousands of Grandfather Frosts, Grandmother Frosts, and Baby Frosts, from age seven to 90, dress up in red costumes, don beards and hats, and run a race in the heart of the city. Anyone can join in — just register ahead of time — and get a costume and hat. Long beards purchased separately. Robe optional. Terrific fun whether you run or cheer on your favorite Christmas elf.

Dvortsovaya Ploshchad. Metro Admiralteiskaya. www.dedmoroz.run

One of the best ways to celebrate the holidays in St. Petersburg is to leave the city for the day. The Gatchina Palace holds a spectacular holiday festival from New Year's Day until Orthodox Christmas. Every day there are concerts, dancing, games for kids, troika rides, classes and parties. You can learn how to tell your fortune for the new year the way young people did in past centuries (wax, water, rings), send you kids on a quest while you sip something warming, or take in a concert performed by some of the city's best musicians.

1 Krasnoarmeisky Prospekt, Gatchina. By car via Kievskoye Shosse; by commuter train from Baltiisky Station; by #431 bus from Metro Moskovskaya. gatchinapalace.ru

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