

# Quietly Take Queer Tours Through Moscow and St. Petersburg

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However impossible it might seem today, even during the Soviet period there were places where queer people could get together on dates. In fact, not long ago — in 2014 — two women got married in St. Petersburg. Some of Russia's most famous writers, poets, artists, dancers, and other cultural figures were part of what is now called the LGBTQ+ community. One of them was Zinaida Gippius. Activists of the LGBTQ+ festival Side by Side have included her house in a queer audio-excursion through St. Petersburg.

## St. Petersburg

In 2021, the Russian Culture Ministry refused to include the country's queer film festival Side by Side in the list of international film festivals. It meant the organizers of the festival could not show queer films, so they started to think about other formats to support the Russian LGBTQ+ community. Someone came up with the idea of audio-excursions.

In the summer of 2023, activists began to work on audioguides through St. Petersburg. "It was important for us that we had different genders among the guides. I negotiated with all the activists directly," Roman Polyakov, one of the organizers, told The Moscow Times. Some of

the activists were in Russia at the time, but others had left the country. Some became guides, others researched historical facts about LGBTQ+ society in the 20th century.

“We wanted to show the lives of queer people, how they met, where they worked, etc. Then, we tied these places to specific points on the map so that we could go through them in an hour and a half,” Roman Polyakov said.

Maria Latsinskaia, a journalist and founder of the Lesbian Lobby media, became one of the guides of audio-excursions through St. Petersburg. She had not been in Russia for a long time and liked the idea of the project. And she agreed because she wanted to increase the visibility of lesbians in general.

“I read some articles about Zinaida Gippius, and it resonated with me, because I was interested in non-heterosexual writers. I wanted to show that queer people were always there,” Latsinskaia told The Moscow Times.

Soon people began to listen to — and walk — queer audio-excursions through St. Petersburg. It was the first city the group did audioguides for since the Side by Side festival began there.

## **Moscow**

People asked for more audio-excursions, so at the end of 2023 activists decided to make one for Moscow. They took the period 1980–2022. Roman Polyakov calls this one of the easiest times for queer people in Russia.

Renat Davletgildev, a journalist and the author of the Telegram channel Gay and Dynamite, became the guide for a tour of Moscow. “After the repeal of the sodomy law in 1992, gay clubs opened, and queer people from all over the world came to Russia. It is important not to forget about those years, and projects like this can help. Personally, this project gave me the strength to live on, the right to continue to identify myself gay, to hold up the flag of LGBTQ+ society and carry it proudly,” he told The Moscow Times.

Renat agreed to be one of the guides through Moscow because there is not much content for queer people in Russia, authorities say they are the main source of Russian problems, and queer people have been removed from everyday life. The audio-excursions are especially important for LGBTQ+ people who have stayed in Russia.

“They need to hear the voices of people like them, people who are not afraid of being themselves. It is important to show that our struggle will last longer than just these years. We have always been here. We are not propaganda from Western countries. We are people. We must shout loudly so that our voices are not drowned out by the explosions of bombs in the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the applause of propagandists,” Renat said.

According to Roman Polyakov, the organizers of the Side by Side festival are thinking about how to continue the audioguides. They are considering covering other historical periods, or describing other routes through Moscow and St. Petersburg. Or perhaps they’ll do guides through other cities, such as Yekaterinburg, or small towns. They don’t know exactly what they’ll do, but they will certainly continue their work.

*Audio-excursions through [St. Petersburg](#) and [Moscow](#) with English subtitles are available on YouTube.*

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