



Magical White Nights

Christina Ching discovers that the sun never sets and the Russian city of St Petersburg never sleeps in the summer

IT WAS 4am in St Petersburg and the sky was as bright as at 4pm in Singapore. Chill-out music wafted in through the open window of my hotel room in Rubinstein Street, a trendy boulevard of restaurants and bars.

Sitting on the broad window sill, I observed the hustle and bustle below. Twilight revellers were not short of options as everything remained open — whether it was jazz, sushi or shisha they were seeking.

Equally enigmatic was the view above. It was the middle of June and the cultural capital of Russia was bathed in eternal light.

Called the "White Nights", this peculiar phenomenon is caused by St Petersburg's northerly geographical location. The sun does not dip below the horizon enough for the sky to turn dark.

While the revelling starts in late May, the nights are whitest and brightest from mid-June to early July.

Here are eight White Nights experiences you should not miss:

1 Explore the city on foot

Get your camera ready for a walking tour of the historic heart of St Petersburg, a Unesco World Heritage Site that is an architectural gem of Baroque, neoclassical and Russian-Byzantine styles.

Czar Peter the Great made the city the Russian Empire's capital in 1712, a position it held until 1918.

He transformed it from a dismal swampland, laying out canals and building palaces, parks and cathedrals modelled after what he saw in Europe.

After his death, the imperial family continued to erect buildings to outdo previous ones. Today, you can admire these splendid landmarks — including the baroque-style Winter Palace that houses the renowned State Hermitage Museum and the clas-



The Church of the Saviour on Spilled Blood stands out with its mediaeval Russian architecture. PHOTO: CHRISTINA CHING

sic Russian Orthodox Church of the Saviour on Spilled Blood — in their restored glory.

Climb the 300-step spiral stairway of St Isaac's Cathedral to its colonnade and be rewarded with a magnificent 360-degree view of the city. During the White Nights, the colonnade is open till 4am.

2 Cruise along the Neva River and canals

St Petersburg is built on water and interlaced with a labyrinth of rivers and canals. On a balmy day, cruise the Neva River, which runs through the city, and the many canals. The city's architecture and hundreds of bridges are best admired from the water.

3 Stroll in the Summer Garden

There are more than 200 parks and gardens in St Petersburg, the oldest and most romantic of which is the Summer Garden. I felt like I was in a bygone era as I strolled along its shady avenues decorated with fountains and marble statues.

Founded in 1704 by Peter the Great, it was once the playground of the nobility, who would hold balls here. It is also home to the city's first summer palace, a humble two-storey stone house that is now a branch of the Russian Museum showcasing the original interiors and personal items of Peter and his wife Catherine.

4 Chill out in a café

The cafés along Nevsky Prospekt, the city's main avenue, are a good place to recover if you have stayed up all night. My favourite chill-out spot was Café Singer, hidden within a bookshop on the second level of the Singer Building, from where I got a magnificent view of the 19th-century Kazan Cathedral.

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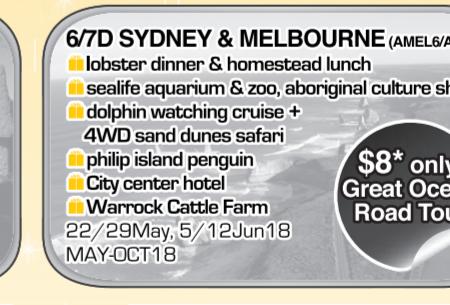


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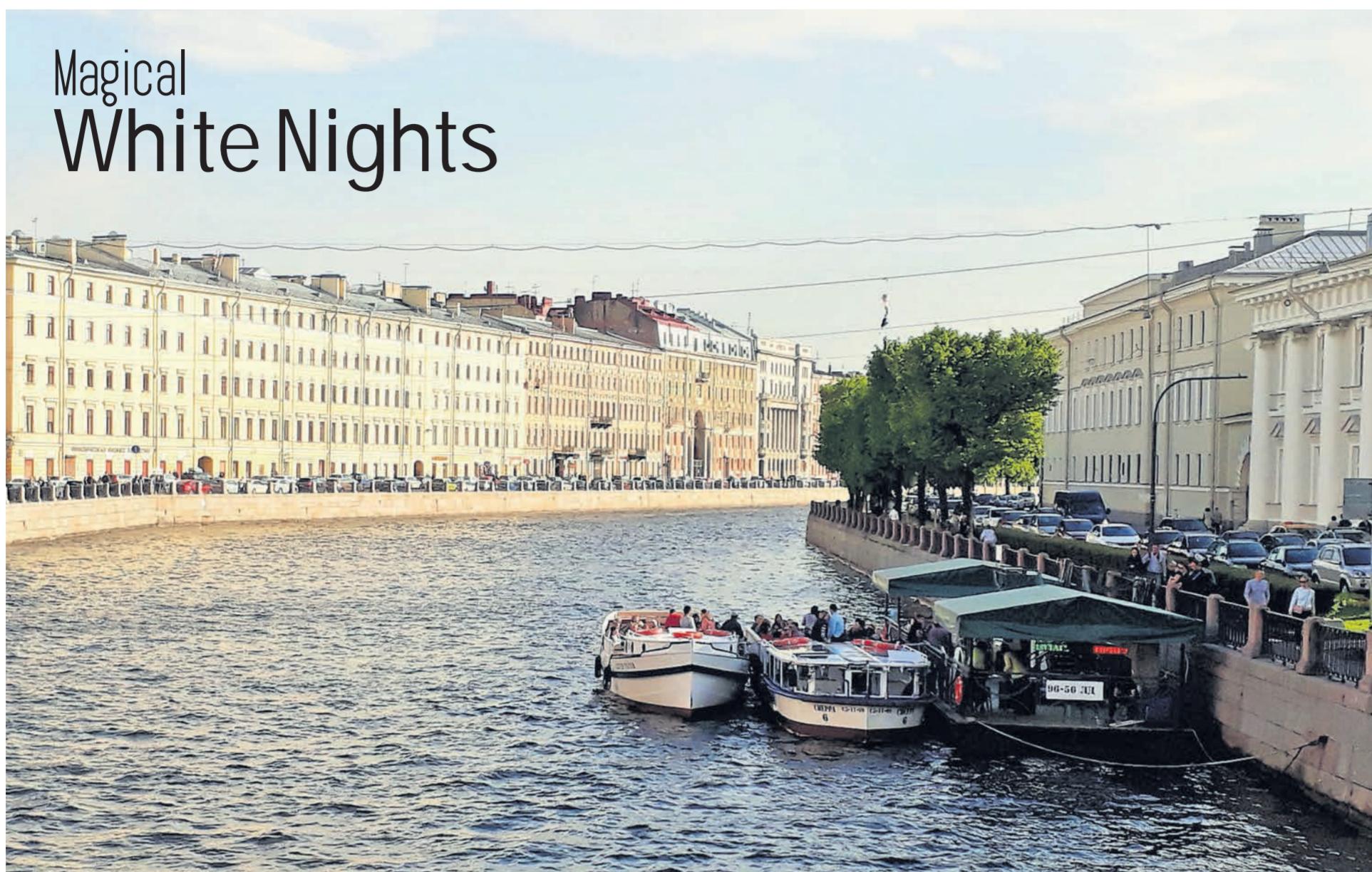
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Magical White Nights



A cruise along St Petersburg's canals gives you the best views of the city.

PHOTOS: CHRISTINA CHING

Getting there

I flew from Singapore to St Petersburg on Finnair, transiting in Helsinki.

Traveller's tips

Singaporeans require a tourist visa to enter Russia. Give a minimum of two weeks to a month for processing. You can get your tourist visa done hassle-free with agencies such as Global Singapore.

The Russian rouble is not widely available at money changers in Singapore. Change US dollars or euros for roubles after you get to the city. The central Gostiny Dvor, the city's oldest shopping centre along Nevsky Prospekt, has a money changer. Exchange rates are more favourable than in Singapore.

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5 Visit the summer palace of the czars
The 200ha Peterhof Palace, a series of palaces and gardens that is now

a Unesco World Heritage site, was once the summer palace of the Russian monarchs. It was built in the 18th century to emulate France's Versailles.

The imposing Grand Palace is worth a visit if you can brave the summer hordes, but the crown jewel of the estate is the Grand Cascade and its 64 fountains. The central statue in the pool depicts Samson tearing open the jaws of a lion, celebrating Russia's victory over Sweden in the Northern War in 1709. If all the gilded opulence — and the crowds — makes you dizzy, seek solace in the beauti-



View from the Colonnade of St Isaac's Cathedral

fully landscaped gardens. The site is a 45-minute journey by hydrofoil from the pier opposite the Hermitage Museum.

6 See The Stars of the White Nights

From end-May to mid-July every year, there are daily operas, ballets and classical concerts at the historic Mariinsky Theatre (www.mariinsky-theatre.com), one of Russia's top arts venues. Book tickets early as these performances, featuring renowned Russian and international stars, sell out quickly.

7 Watch the Neva bridges open

Don't miss this tradition of the White Nights. After lam, I made a beeline for the banks of the Neva River to watch the illuminated bridges draw apart to let barges and other large vessels pass. Others chose to view the spectacle from party boats.

8 Stay up all night

Stroll along the riverbank at lam, munch on pizza at 3am, and have a cocktail al fresco at 5am — along with the rest of the city that never sleeps.

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8D Go Go Kore!

- (All in \$988 for December Holidays)
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- Jeonju Tower & Sky Tours

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fr\$988

Japan

8D Go Go Hokkaido!

- Free Flow of Hokkaido Crab
- 3 Nights Onsen Hotel Experience
- World No. 3 Hakodate Night View (Cable Car)
- Seafood Market & Bear Ranch
- Furano Tomita Farm & Sounkyo
- Ishiya White Chocolate Museum & Tanukikoji Shopping Street

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- Tokyo City Tour Free and Easy
- Upgrade Meal: Free Flow of Crab
- UNESCO Takayama Shirakawa-go Village
- Nara Todaiji & Deer Park
- Kyoto Kiyomizu Temple & D.I.Y. Sushi

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Bonus : FREE half day city tour

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