

Imperial Estates near St. Petersburg

No visit to St. Petersburg is complete without a trip to at least one of the world-famous Imperial palaces in the city's suburbs. A showcase for the wealth and tastes of the Emperors of Russia from Peter the Great onwards, these extraordinary estates boast sumptuous palaces, extensive landscape gardens, and a treasury of art and history. It is debatable which estate takes preeminence - Tsarskoe Selo or Peterhof - but all of them have unique attractions and charms, so it is well worth trying to fit as many as you can into your trip.



Peterhof (Petrodvorets)

The pleasure ground of Peter the Great, this beautiful estate on the shore of the Gulf of Finland is probably most famous for its spectacular fountains, though there's much more to see besides.

One of St. Petersburg's most famous and popular visitor attractions, the palace and park at Peterhof (also known as Petrodvorets) are often referred to as "the Russian Versailles", although many visitors conclude that the comparison does a disservice to the grandeur and scope of this majestic estate.

Versailles was, however, the inspiration for Peter the Great's desire to build an imperial palace in the suburbs of his new city and, after an aborted attempt at Strelna, Peterhof - which means "Peter's Court" - became the site for the Tsar's Monplaisir Palace, and then of the original Grand Palace. The estate was equally popular with Peter's granddaughter, Empress Elizabeth, who ordered the expansion of the Grand Palace and greatly extended the park and the famous system of fountains, including the truly spectacular Grand Cascade.

Improvements to the park continued throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. Catherine the Great, after leaving her own mark on the park, moved the court to Pushkin, but Peterhof once again became the official Imperial Residence in the reign of Nicholas I, who ordered the building of the modest Cottage Palace in 1826.

Like almost all St. Petersburg's suburban estates, Peterhof was ravaged by German troops during

the Second World War. It was, however, one of the first to be resurrected and, thanks to the work of military engineers and over 1,000 volunteers, most of the estate's major structures had been fully restored by 1947. The name was also de-Germanicized after the war, becoming Petrodvorets, the name under which the surrounding town is still known. The palace and park are once again known as Peterhof.



Tsarskoye Selo (Pushkin)

Synonymous with the luxury and excess of the Russian Emperors, Tsarskoe Selo boasts two remarkable palaces and a veritable wealth of other historical sights.

If any proof is needed for the extravagance of Russia's Imperial rulers, then it can be found in the fact that, in less than two centuries, the Romanov Tsars established not one but two suburban estates - at Tsarskoe Selo and Peterhof. What is more, at Tsarskoe Selo, the 18th century saw the construction of two vast and truly exceptional palaces, both surrounded by extensive landscaped gardens with diverse and fascinating decorative architecture.

Built for Empress Elizabeth by Bartolomeo Rastrelli, the architect of St. Petersburg's Winter Palace, the Catherine Palace is undoubtedly Tsarskoe Selo's top attraction, particularly renowned for the extraordinary Amber Room. Less well known, and currently much more dilapidated, the Alexander Palace is nonetheless a neoclassical masterpiece, and has a particularly poignant connection with the family of the last Tsar, Nicholas II.

The town of Pushkin, which surrounds the Tsarskoe Selo estates, is St. Petersburg's most charming suburb. Renamed in Soviet times to honour Russia's greatest poet, the town has numerous sights connected to Alexander Sergeevich, including a museum in the former Imperial Lycee, where he was

schooled.



Oranienbaum (Lomonosov)

The only suburban palace to have withstood the Nazi invasion, Oranienbaum boasts a charming park and a truly magnificent baroque palace.

Still commonly known by its post-war name of Lomonosov, the estate at Oranienbaum is the oldest of the Imperial Palaces around St. Petersburg, and also the only one not captured by Nazi forces during the Great Patriotic War. Founded by Prince Menshikov, Peter the Great's closest adviser, the Grand Palace is one of the most opulent examples of Petrine architecture to have survived to the present, although until very recently the palace itself has been greatly neglected. After Menshikov's death, Oranienbaum passed to the state, and was used as a hospice until, in 1743, it was presented by Empress Elizabeth to her nephew, the future Peter III. Peter made Oranienbaum his official summer residence and transformed one corner of the park, ordering the construction of a "Joke" Castle and a small citadel manned by his Holstein guards. This peculiar ensemble, called Petershtadt, was mostly demolished during Pavel's reign. Antonio Rinaldi, the Italian-born architect who also designed the Grand Palace at Gatchina and the Marble Palace in St. Petersburg, was commissioned by Peter in 1758 to build a modest stone palace next to the fortress, and this has survived.

After Peter was deposed, Rinaldi was commissioned by Catherine the Great to build the Chinese Palace, in the Upper Park, as her official country residence. However, Catherine spent little time at Oranienbaum, which she had grown to hate during her marriage to Peter, and by the end of the 18th century the estate had been turned into a Naval Cadet College. The palace became an Imperial residence again in the reign of Alexander I, and retained that status until the Revolution, when it

was immediately opened as a museum. Although never captured by the Germans, Oranienbaum was bombarded during the war and, while the Grand Menshikov Palace survived intact, its restoration was given much lower priority than the more famous estates at Peterhof and Tsarskoe Selo. Today, the small but elegant park has been almost completely restored, while the full restoration of the palaces has finally gained momentum over the last decade.

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