

EXCURSIONS

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As soon as you leave St Petersburg the fast-paced city fades from view, while the slowed-down, old-fashioned countryside unfolds around you. The subtly changing landscape is crossed by winding rivers and dotted with peasant villages – the classic provincial Russia immortalised by artists and writers over the centuries.

Before Russia was a cohesive nation, it was a collection of principalities – city-states that competed, traded and (sometimes) cooperated with each other. Ancient Rus – as this period is known – developed in the provincial towns around St Petersburg. The whitewashed walls of once-fortified cities still stand, in some cases. The golden spires and onion domes of the monasteries of these cities still mark the horizon, evoking medieval Rus. Bells ring out from towering belfries; robed holy men scurry through church doors; historic tales recall mysterious, magical times.

The St Petersburg elite has long escaped the heat and hustle of city life by retreating to the surrounding regions. Old aristocrats – including the imperial family – used provincial Russia as a venue for grand palaces, extensive gardens and extravagant art collections. Many of these retreats now house museums to inspire and amaze the rest of us.

IMPERIAL PALACES

In the wilderness of the sparsely inhabited Baltic Coast, Russia's aristocracy – and particularly the imperial family – outdid each other trying to create the ultimate summer palace. Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries the ruling class built fantastic façades, opulent interiors and glorious gardens, so that they might enjoy lavish lifestyles even when away from the capital. **Peterhof** (p216) boasts the most amazing grounds, with its world-famous cascades; while the interior of the **Catherine Palace** (p220) at Tsarskoe Selo is unparalleled, especially with its over-the-top amber room. **Konstantinovsky Palace** (p219) – only recently renovated and reopened by President Putin – is the latest addition to this list of palatial properties.

Other lesser-known estates – built by various Russian rulers over the years – are still enormously impressive and generally less crowded. In 1743 **Oranienbaum** (p223) became the summer residence of the future emperor Peter III. Its main buildings received a complete overhaul in 2007, so it is in fine form today. Later in the century, emperors Paul I and Alexander III spent their summers at **Gatchina** (p223), enjoying the setting amidst beautiful parkland and a lovely lake. Dating from the early 19th century, the estate at **Pavlovsk** (p221) was another favourite destination of Paul I. It is surrounded by 600 hectares of shady, wooded grounds. All of these imperial palaces are an easy day trip from the city, easily accessible by train, bus or boat.

MEDIEVAL RUS

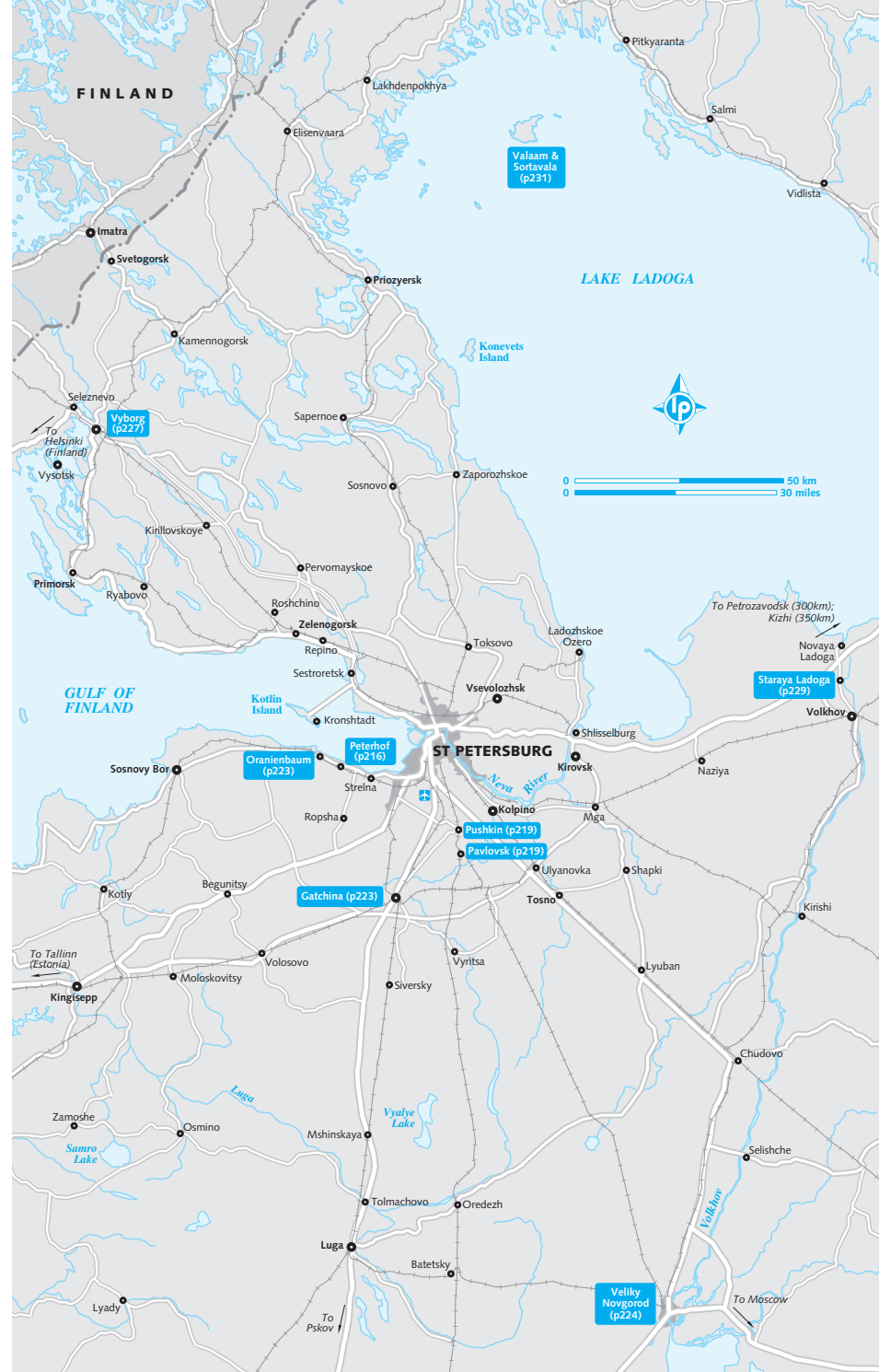
Russia's earliest history was characterised by principalities, who competed and traded with each other, jostling for power and resources. **Veliky Novgorod** (p224) was one of the earliest and most influential cultural and religious centres. These days it still retains a magical, mystical air of history, which is reflected in the domes of its myriad churches and the arcs of its ancient trading arcades. You can see Novgorod in a day, although there are enough sights and activities to keep a traveller busy for two or more.

Dating back even further, **Staraya Ladoga** (p229) is generally considered to be Russia's oldest town. Its quaint streets contain a fascinating fortress, ruined churches and precious architectural relics from Russia's birth as a nation. Again, it's close enough for a day trip if you get an early start.

PROVINCIAL RUSSIA

For the 'real Russia', look no further than the country's pleasant provincial towns. Life here is decidedly languorous, and you'll see how the vast majority of the Russian population lives – a far cry from their cosmopolitan St Petersburg cousins.

The Finnish-Russian border town of **Vyborg** (p227) has a mixed history, having been passed between Russia and Finland constantly throughout its history. It's a run-down but charming town with cobblestone streets, a rich architectural heritage and a fascinating 13th-century Swedish fortress. While it's not



typically Russian, due to its strong Scandinavian influence, it has plenty to offer for an enjoyable day trip.

If you have a few days to spare, the region of Karelia is a unique destination, filled with birch forests, inland lakes and historic architecture. Karelia is tucked between Europe's two biggest lakes, Lake Ladoga and Lake Onega. The former is the site of the age-old town of [Staraya Ladoga \(p229\)](#), as well as the stunning [Valaam Monastery \(p231\)](#); while the latter contains an island called [Kizhi \(p231\)](#), home to a fantastic architectural museum. Kizhi is accessible from [Petrozavodsk \(p230\)](#), the economic and cultural capital of Karelia.

PETERHOF ПЕТЕРГОФ

This most stunning of the tsarist palaces around St Petersburg was first built by Peter the Great; it is also known as Petrodvorets (Peter's Palace). Over the years his successors continued to build and expand – pretty much constantly – to create the astounding ensemble seen today. Comparisons to Versailles abound and it's easy to see why: the sheer scale of the main palace and its incredible garden were heavily influenced by Louis

XIV's own summer residence. That said, the centrepiece at Peterhof, the Grand Cascade, is all Peter's own work.

Peterhof (☎ 420 0073; www.peterhof.ru in Russian) is the most popular day trip from St Petersburg for visitors. If you intend to go inside the palace, expect to wait, especially if you visit on a weekend. Nonetheless, it's worth jostling with the crowds to marvel at the amazing network of waterways and flowing fountains that adorn the gardens. And the trip from St Petersburg by hydrofoil makes this an easy and immensely enjoyable day trip.

The vast palace and grounds you see today are a far cry from the original cabin Peter the Great had built here to oversee construction of his naval base at Kronshadt. He liked the place so much that he built a villa, Monplaisir, and then a whole series of palaces across the estate. All are set within a spectacular ensemble of gravity-powered fountains that are now the site's main attraction.

After WWII, Peterhof was largely left in ruins. Hitler had intended to throw a party here when his plans to occupy the Astoria Hotel were thwarted. He drew up pompous invitations, which obviously incensed his Soviet foes. Stalin's response was to pre-empt

MAKE A WISH

Cast your kopek into any one of 150 fountains that adorn the grounds at Peterhof. Besides the Grand Cascade and Samson Fountain, here are some of our favourites.

Adam & Eve These two – prominently placed on either side of Water Ave – are the only outdoor sculptures remaining from the Petrine era.

Chess Mountain Flanked by a staircase, this black-and-white tiled chute is adorned with colourful dragons spitting water instead of fire.

Favoritka the Dog Often overlooked, this sweet fountain features four bronze ducks, swimming in circles, as they are chased by a silly-looking bulldog, seemingly shooting them with water.

Little Oak These gangly oak trees are rigged to spray when somebody approaches.

Rimsky Fountains Like two massive marble glasses bubbling over with champagne, these two beauties spray water 10m into the air, then into the pools below.

Sun Perched on a rotating axis, a disk radiates streams of water, creating the effect of sunrays.

Umbrella This circular bench looks like a pleasant shady spot. But anyone who sits down for a rest will discover that the umbrella drops a sheet of water from its edge, so you'll be shaded but soured.

Water Alley Most of the time, this looks like a regular shady path through the Lower Gardens. But at designated times, when hidden fountains are turned on, the walkway (and anybody walking there) gets wet!

any such celebration by bombing the estate himself, in the winter of 1941–1942. So it is ironic but true that most of the damage at Peterhof occurred at the hands of the Soviets. What you see today is largely a reconstruction; in fact, the main palace was completely gutted, as only a few of its walls were left standing.

Inexplicably, many museums within the estate have different closing days, although all the buildings are open from Friday to Sunday (and, with the exception of the Grand Palace, most buildings are open only on weekends between October and April). In any case, it's time-consuming and expensive to see all of the attractions from the inside, as they each charge separate hefty admission fees. You are better off focusing on a few museums, but spending the bulk of your time enjoying the grounds. All tours and posted information are in Russian, so it's worth investing in an information booklet, available at the kiosks near the entrances. Almost all of the buildings require an extra ticket to take photographs or videos.

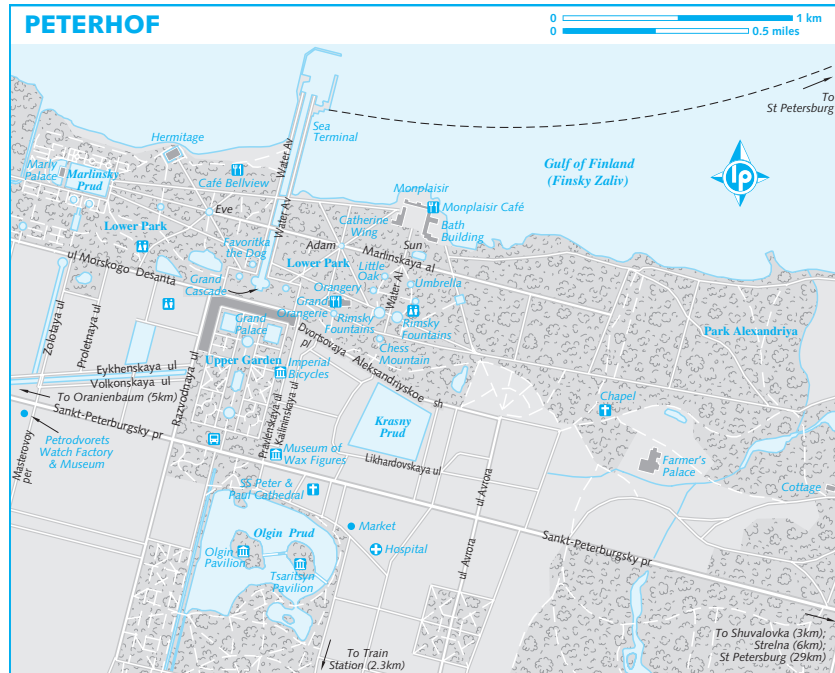
Whether you arrive by water or by land, you will have to purchase a ticket to enter the **Lower Park** (Nizhny Park; adult/student R300/150; ☎ 9am–7pm, fountains play 11am–5pm Mon–Fri, 11am–7pm Sat & Sun May–Sep), which is where you can wander to discover all the fabulous fountains. See the boxed text, [above](#), for some suggestions.

Crisscrossed by bridges and bedecked by smaller sprays, **Water Avenue** is a canal leading

from the ferry dock to the palace. It culminates in the magnificent **Grand Cascade**, a symphony of over 140 fountains engineered in part by Peter himself. The central statue of Samson tearing open a lion's jaws celebrates – as so many things in St Petersburg do – Peter's victory over the Swedes at Poltava. Shooting up 62m, it was unveiled by Rastrelli for the 25th anniversary of the battle in 1735.

Providing an amazing backdrop to the Grand Cascade, the **Grand Palace** (Bolshoy Dvorets; ☎ 450 6527; adult/student R500/250; ☎ 10am–6pm Tue–Sun, closed last Tue of month) is an imposing edifice, although with 30-something rooms, it is not nearly as large as your typical tsarist palace. It is open to foreign tourists only at specific times during the day, so you are advised to come here immediately upon arrival if you are interested in going inside. Tickets are sold near the lobby where you pick up your *tapochki* (slippers to wear over your shoes to avoid damaging the wooden floors).

While Peter's palace was relatively modest, Rastrelli grossly enlarged the building for Empress Elizabeth. Later, Catherine the Great toned things down a little with a redecoration, although that's not really apparent from the glittering halls and art-filled galleries that are here today. All of the paintings, furniture and chandeliers are original, as everything was removed from the premises before the Germans arrived. The **Chesme Hall** is full of huge paintings of Russia's destruction of the Turkish fleet at Çesme in 1770. Other highlights include the



East and West Chinese Cabinets, Picture Hall and Peter's study.

The more humble, sea-facing villa **Monplaisir** (☎ 450 6129; adult/student R300/150; 🕒 10.30am-5pm Tue & Thu-Sun May-Sep, Sat & Sun Oct-Apr) was always his favourite retreat. Snug and elegant, the wood-panelled cottage also provided the proximity to the sea that he craved.

To the west of Monplaisir is an annex called the **Catherine Building** (Ekaterinsky korpus; ☎ 450 6129; adult/student R300/150; 🕒 10.30am-5pm Tue-Sun May-Sep, Sat & Sun Oct-Apr), which was built by Rastrelli between 1747 and 1755. Its name derives from the fact that Catherine the Great was living here – rather conveniently – when her husband Peter III was overthrown. The interior contains the bedroom and study of Alexander I, as well as the huge Yellow Hall. On the right side is the magnificent **Bath Building** (Banni korpus; ☎ 450 6129; adult/student R300/150; 🕒 10.30am-4pm Thu-Tue May-Sep, Sat & Sun Oct-Apr), built by Quarenghi in 1800.

Along the shore to the west, the 1725 **Hermitage** (☎ 450 5325; adult/student R110/60; 🕒 10.30am-5pm Wed-Mon, Sat & Sun Oct-Apr) is a two-storey pink-and-white box featuring the ultimate in private dining: special elevators hoist a fully-laid table into the imperial presence on the 2nd floor, thereby eliminating any hindrance by serv-

ants. The elevators are circular and directly in front of each diner, whose plate would be lowered, replenished and replaced. Further west is yet another palace, **Marly** (☎ 450 7729; adult/student R130/65; 🕒 10.30am-5pm Tue-Sun), which was inspired by a French hunting lodge.

To the east of the Grand Palace, an old **Orangery** houses a restaurant. Outside, the Triton fountain shows off an 8m jet of water.

Even on summer weekends, the rambling, overgrown **Park Alexandriya** (admission free) is peaceful and practically empty. Built for Tsar Nicholas I (and named for his tsarina), these grounds offer a sweet retreat from the crowds. Originally named for Alexander Nevsky, the gothic **chapel** (☎ 450 6901; adult/student R110/60; 🕒 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) was completed in 1834 as the private chapel of Nicholas I. Nearby is the **cottage** (☎ 450 6953; admission R150; 🕒 10.30am-4pm Tue-Sun May-Sep, Sat & Sun Oct-Apr) that was built around the same time as his summer residence. Also part of this same ensemble, the **Farmer's Palace** is still undergoing renovations and is not open to the public.

In front of the Grand Palace, the **Upper Garden** is more manicured (and much drier), occupying the grounds between the palace and the town. A few small museums line the road out to town, including an exhibition on **Imperial Bicycles** (Imperatorskie Velosipedi; Pravlenskaya ul 11; adult/student R110/60; 🕒 10.30am-6pm) and a **Museum of Wax Figures** (Pravlenskaya ul 12; 🕒 11am-7pm).

In case you have not had enough, there is more to see in the centre of the town of Peterhof. In the midst of Kolonistsky Park, two islands sit side by side in the middle of a pond known as Olgin Prud (Olga's pond). The two islands house the **Tsaritsyn & Olgin Pavilions** (adult/student R450/250; 🕒 10.30am-5pm). Nicholas I had these elaborate pavilions built for his wife (Alexandra Fedorovna) and daughter (Olga Nikolaevna) respectively. Only recently restored and reopened, they boast unique Mediterranean architectural styles reminiscent of Pompeii.

One bus stop west of the main palace entrance is the **Petrodvorets watch factory & museum** (☎ 420 50003; Sankt-Peterburgsky pr 60; admission €5; 🕒 boutique 10am-5pm Mon-Fri) with a little boutique selling very cool watches.

Eating

Café Bellevue (meals R100-300; 🕒 10am-6pm) A complex of restaurants overlooks the Gulf of Finland, just west of the boat dock, with several

DETOUR: STRELNA СТРЕЛЬНА

The small village of Strelna, about 6km east of Peterhof, is the site of another palace dreamed up by Peter I. Although construction began in the 18th century, current President Vladimir Putin deserves credit for completing this project.

Peter's original plan was to construct a small palace surrounded by water, for use as a summer home. He commissioned Jean Baptiste LeBlond to build the palace and park, but the famed French architect died before he made much progress on the project. Work came to a standstill when Peter turned his attention to Peterhof, as that site was better suited for his fountain fantasy. Years later, at the request of Empress Elizabeth, her favourite architect Rastrelli attempted to expand and elaborate on the existing palace at Strelna. But he too was distracted – this time by construction at Tsarskoe Selo – and never really finished. In 1797 Emperor Paul I presented this half-built palace to his son, Grand Duke Constantine Pavlovich. Construction of the Konstantinovsky Palace was finally completed several years later.

The estate fell into disrepair during the Soviet period, occupied by a children's camp and a secondary school. It was devastated by German occupation during WWII, and then left to languish for more than half a century.

In the lead-up to the tercentennial in 2003, President Putin decreed that the property would be rebuilt and converted to a presidential palace – in other words, the 'Palace of Putin'. Using LeBlond's original design, the **park** (admission R100) was landscaped with canals, bridges and fountains, as well as Peter's intended island chateau. Studded with sculpture, it makes a lovely place for a stroll or picnic.

Konstantinovsky Palace (☎ 438 5360; www.konstantinpalace.ru in Russian; Berezovaya al 3; adult/student R280/170; 🕒 10am-5pm Thu-Tue) has also been fully restored. Excursions visit the fabulous 'parade rooms', including the Blue Room and the over-the-top ornate Marble Room, as well as the ceremonial guestrooms of the president and the first lady. Most impressively, visitors can take a peak into the wine cellar. Apparently, as far back as 1755 these premises were used to house the emperor's collection of Hungarian wine, when the Winter Palace was under construction. These days the *vinniy pogreb* contains a collection of more than 13,000 bottles from all over the world.

Also known as the Congress Palace, it is often used for official functions, hosting heads of state and other important delegations. For this reason, it's worth calling in advance to confirm that the grounds and palace will be open when you wish to visit. If you'd like to sleep like a tsar, consider staying at the Baltic Star Hotel, see the boxed text, p206.

different cafés, plenty of seating and (bonus) public toilets. Café Bellevue offers the widest selection of dishes at lunchtime.

Grand Orangerie (☎ 450 6106; set menus R450-700; 🕒 10am-6pm) If you want somebody to serve you lunch, you'll have to queue for a spot at this pleasant restaurant overlooking the pond.

Monplaisir Café (snacks R100-300; 🕒 10am-6pm) For a quick sandwich or snack, head to this pleasant café next to Peter's favourite retreat. A few outdoor tables catch the breeze off the Gulf.

PUSHKIN & PAVLOVSK ПУШКИН И ПАВЛОВСК

The sumptuous palaces and sprawling parks at Pushkin and Pavlovsk are entrenched in Russian history and immortalised in literature: few places in Russia are more strongly associated with the country's history and culture. These two neighbouring complexes can be combined in a day's visit. If you are not in the mood to rush, however, there is plenty at either site to keep you entertained for an entire day.

The original estate at Tsarskoe Selo (Tsar's Village) was a gift from Peter I to his wife

Catherine in 1710, and from around 1725 she started to spend more time here. It was under Empresses Elizabeth and Catherine the Great that the place began to take shape, as both the palace at Tsarskoe Selo and the estate of Pavlovsk were built, expanded and aggrandised.

The centrepiece is the vast 1752 to 1756 baroque **Catherine Palace** (Yekaterininsky Dvoretz), designed by Rastrelli. It gradually became the favourite country estate of the royal family. In 1837 Russia's first railway line was built between St Petersburg and Tsarskoe Selo to shuttle the imperial family back and forth.

The town changed its name from Tsarskoe Selo to Pushkin in 1937 on the centenary of the poet's death. Pushkin studied here in the Lycée established by Alexander I. In the 1990s the name of the palace and grounds changed back to Tsarskoe Selo, although the town is technically still Pushkin. In reality, these two names are used nearly interchangeably.

Pavlovsk's park of woodland, rivers, lakes, statues and temples is one of the most exquisite in Russia, while its Great Palace is a classical contrast to the florid baroque Catherine Palace.

TRANSPORT: PETERHOF

Distance from St Petersburg 29km

Direction West

Travel Time About 45 minutes

Boat From May to September, a fine option is the *Meteor* hydrofoil (R350 one-way, 30 minutes) from the jetty in front of St Petersburg's Hermitage, which goes every 20 to 30 minutes from 9.30am to at least 7pm. Be aware that queues for the boat back to St Petersburg can get very long later in the day, so don't leave it too late to return.

Bus From Avtovo metro station you can take bus 424, or bus 103 from Leninsky Pr metro station. The trip takes about half an hour.

Train *Elektrichky* (suburban trains) leave St Petersburg's Baltic Station (Baltiyskiy vokzal) every 15 to 30 minutes throughout the day. You need to get off at the Novy Petrodvorets (not Stary Petrodvorets). From here you can either walk to the palace grounds (about 20 minutes) or take *marshrutka* 350, 351, 351A, 352, 353, 354 or 356, getting off at the fifth stop.

Catherine Palace

Most of the exterior and 20-odd rooms of the **Catherine Palace** (☎ 465 2024; www.tzar.ru; Sadovaya ul 7, Tsarskoe Selo; adult/student R520/250, private tour R7000; 🕒 10am-5pm Wed-Mon, open for individuals noon-2pm & 4-5pm, closed last Mon of month) have been beautifully restored. As you tour the palace you can compare them to the photographs showing the devastation by the Germans. While the palace opens for individuals only at noon, it is usually necessary to queue up well in advance. All visitors are ushered into groups led by a tour guide; arrangements can be made for tours in English.

As at the Winter Palace, Catherine the Great had many of Rastrelli's interiors remodelled in classical style. Visits normally start with the **State Staircase**, an 1860 addition. South of here,

two rooms by Rastrelli are open to tours: the **Gentlemen-in-Waiting's Dining Room** and the huge, frescoed **Great Hall**, all light and glitter from its mirrors and gilded woodcarvings. North of the State Staircase, you will pass through the **State Dining Room**, the **Crimson and Green Pilaster Rooms** and the **Picture Gallery**. The **reception room of Alexander I** holds portraits of his esteemed predecessors.

The highlight is Rastrelli's amazing **Amber Room**, completely covered with gilded woodcarvings, mirrors, agate and jasper mosaics. The exquisitely engraved amber panels were gifts from the King of Prussia to Peter the Great in 1716. But these treasures were plundered by the Nazis and went missing in Kaliningrad in 1945, becoming one of the art world's great mysteries. In 2004 the strange hoax was revealed – the Amber Room was

destroyed in a fire in Kaliningrad while under Red Army occupation. Those responsible for the loss were so terrified of Stalin's reaction that an elaborate myth was created of its disappearance – one that Soviet art historians spent years trying to solve. In 2004 President Putin and German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder presided over the opening of a new Amber Room, restored largely with German funds. While this spectacular centrepiece is open to visitors, photography is forbidden.

Most of the north end is Charles Cameron's early classical work, including the perfectly proportioned **Green Dining Room** and the **Pink Room** with its inlaid wood floor.

Once you finish your tour, you can head to the southern **Zubov Wing** (Zubovsky korpus; adult/student R200/100; 🕒 10am-5pm Thu-Tue), which houses special exhibitions.

Tsarskoe Selo Parks

Around the Catherine Palace extends the lovely **Catherine Park** (Yekaterininsky Park; adult/student R160/80; 🕒 9am-6pm). The main entrance is on Sadovaya ul, next to the palace chapel. The **Cameron Gallery** (adult/student R200/100; 🕒 10am-5pm Thu-Tue) has rotating exhibitions. Between the gallery and the palace, notice the south-pointing ramp that Cameron added for the ageing empress to walk down into the park.

The park's outer section focuses on the **Great Pond**. In summer you can take a ferry (adult/child R300/150; 🕒 noon-6pm May-Sep) to the little island to visit the **Chesme Column**. Beside the pond, the blue baroque **Grotto Pavilion** (adult/student R50/25; 🕒 10am-5pm Fri-Wed) houses temporary exhibitions in summer. A walk around the Great Pond will reveal other buildings that the royals built over the years, including the Turkish Bath, the Chinese Pavilion and a Concert Hall isolated on an island.

Alexander Palace & Park

A short distance north of the Catherine Palace, the classical **Alexander Palace** (☎ 466 6071; www.alexanderpalace.org; Dvortsovaya ul 2; adult/student R300/150; 🕒 10am-5pm Wed-Mon, closed last Wed of month) was built by Quarenghi between 1792 and 1796. It was built and named for the future Alexander I, but Nicholas II was its main tenant. Many tourists skip this spot, which has yet to be completely renovated, which means it is the least crowded and most intriguing of the palaces. The overgrown and empty **Alexander Park** (admission free) surrounds the palace.

TRANSPORT: PUSHKIN & PAVLOVSK

Distance from St Petersburg 25km (Pushkin) and 29km (Pavlovsk)

Direction South

Travel Time 45 minutes to one hour

Bus A large number of *marshrutky* (R25, 30 minutes) leave from outside Moskovskaya metro station in St Petersburg to Pushkin (aka Tsarskoe Selo). Take bus 286, 299 or 342. *Marshrutky* K299 and K545 connect Pushkin and Pavlovsk (R15, 10 minutes).

Train Suburban trains run from Vitebsk Station (Vitebsky vokzal) in St Petersburg, but they're infrequent except for weekends. For Tsarskoe Selo get off at Detskoe Selo Station (zone 3 ticket, 30 minutes) and for Pavlovsk (zone 4, 40 minutes) at Pavlovsk Station.

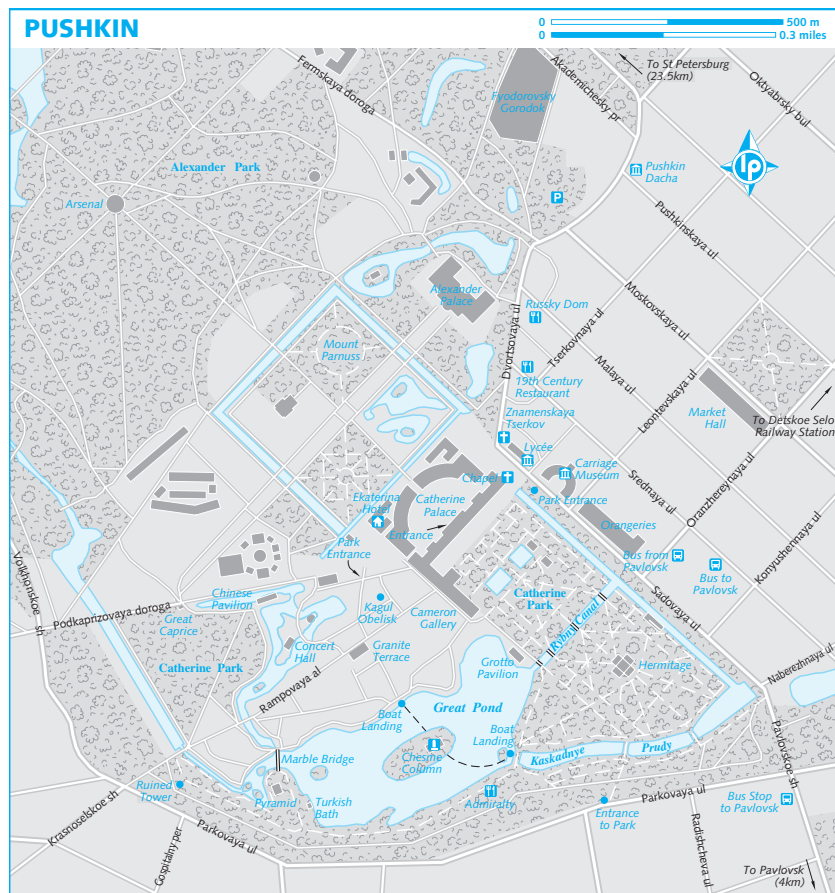
Pavlovsk Great Palace & Park

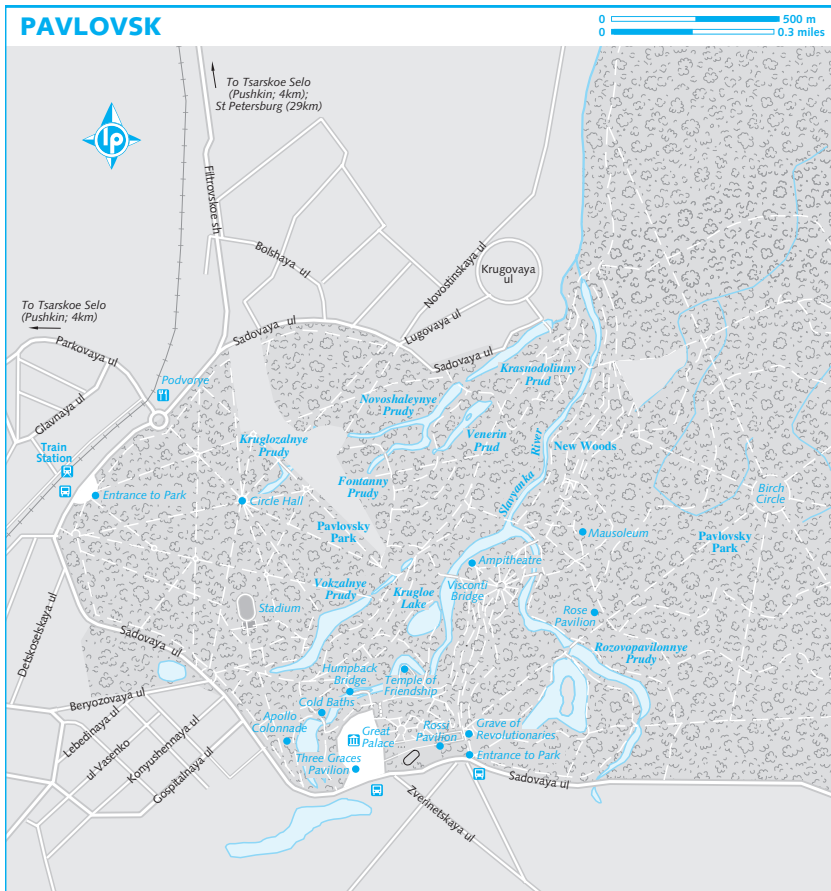
Between 1781 and 1786, on orders from Catherine the Great, architect Charles Cameron designed the **Great Palace** (☎ 452 2156; www.pavlovskart.spb.ru; ul Revolutsii, Pavlovsk; adult/student R370/180; 🕒 10am-6pm Sat-Thu, closed first Fri of month) in Pavlovsk. The palace was designated for Catherine's son Paul, and it was his second wife, Maria Fyodorovna, who orchestrated the design of the interiors. It served as a royal residence until 1917. Ironically, the original palace was burnt down two weeks after liberation in WWII by a careless Soviet soldier's cigarette which set off German mines (the Soviets blamed the Germans). As at Tsarskoe Selo, its restoration is remarkable.

The finest rooms are on the middle floor of the central block. Cameron designed the round **Italian Hall** beneath the dome and the **Grecian Hall** to its west, though the lovely green fluted columns were added by his assistant Vincenzo Brenna. Flanking these are two private suites designed mainly by Brenna – Paul's along the north side of the block and Maria Fyodorovna's on the south. The **Hall of War** of the insane, military-obsessed Paul contrasts with Maria's **Hall of Peace**, decorated with musical instruments and flowers.

On the middle floor of the south block are Paul's **Throne Room** and the Hall of the Maltese Knights of St John, of whom he was the Grand Master.

If you decide to skip the palace, you may wish to wander around the serene **park grounds**





(adult/student R100/80; ☎ 10am-6pm) and see what you come across – or, do the same by **bicycle** (☎ 347 7743; per half-day R400; ☎ 11am-8pm). Filled with rivers and ponds, tree-lined avenues, classical statues and hidden temples, it's a delightful place to get lost.

Sleeping

Ekaterina Hotel (Map p220; ☎ 446 8042; www.hotel.ekaterina.ru; Sadovaya ul 5, Tsarskoe Selo; r €120; 🚻) Located inside the old servants' block at Catherine's Palace, this small, midrange hotel offers great views on the building's gilded façade. Rooms are modern and reasonably spacious. Best of all, perhaps, it is probably your best chance of being first in the queue to enter the palace. Room prices include continental breakfast.

Eating

The palaces at Tsarskoe Selo and Pavlovsk both have pretty mediocre and overpriced self-service cafeterias.

19th Century Restaurant (XIX Vek; Map p220; ☎ 465 2685; Srednaya ul 2, Pushkin; meals R400-600) Three different dining rooms each have an interesting interior décor, including the fairytale-like Lyceum Hall.

Admiralty (Admiral'teystvo; Map p220; ☎ 465 3549; Catherine Park; meals R600-800; ☎ noon-11pm) Housed in the old brick Admiralty building overlooking the Great Pond in Catherine Park, this atmospheric restaurant serves traditional and tasty Russian food. The towerlike building does not have a lot of room, so reservations are recommended.

Podvorye (☎ 465 1399; Map p222; Filtrovskoye sh 16, Pavlovsk; meals R800-1200; ☎ noon-11pm) This tradi-

tional Russian log cabin is a short walk north-east of Pavlovsk station. Podvorye dishes up huge portions of delicious Russian food with a side-order of live Russian music and dancing. Apparently, President Putin is a regular here.

Rusky Dom (Russian House; Map p220; ☎ 466 8888; Malaya ul 3, Pushkin; meals R800-1200; ☎ noon-midnight) Smartly decorated in a contemporary style with a lovely terrace, this popular spot serves lots of standard dishes including shashlyk, cooked on wood-fired braziers outside.

GATCHINA ГАТЧИНА

Originally owned by Peter's sister Natalya, the palace estate at **Gatchina** (☎ 81371-134-92; admission R350; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun, closed first Tue of month) is less refurbished, more overgrown, less touristy and more romantic than any of the other palaces. After Natalya died, the palace changed hands several times until Catherine bought it and gave it to her lover Grigory Orlov (a little gift for helping her get rid of her husband Peter III). The palace was later passed to Catherine's son Paul I, who spent most of his time drilling his troops on the parade ground here.

Although still impressive, today Gatchina is but a shadow of its former self. Shaped in a graceful curve around a central turret, the palace looks fine from the front, but is falling to pieces around the back. Inside, few of the rooms have been restored (work only began in 1985); the most interesting feature is a tunnel running from the palace to the ornamental lake.

The best reason to come to Gatchina is to wander around the leafy park, with its many winding paths through birch groves and across bridges to islands in the lake. Look out for the **Birch House** (Beriozoy Dom), with a

façade made of birch logs, and the ruined **Eagle Pavilion** (Pavilion Orla).

In the nearby town there are a couple of interesting churches. At the end of the main shopping street, the baroque **Pavlovsky Sobor** (ul Gubernaya) has a grandly restored interior with a soaring central dome. A short walk west is the **Pokrovsky Sobor**, a red-brick building with bright blue domes. There are not too many places to eat; you are better off packing a picnic.

ORANIENBAUM ОРАНИЕНБАУМ

Anyone interested in Prince Menshikov – best friend of Peter the Great – will be fascinated by this testament to his growing vanity and general hubris. While Peter was building Monplaisir at Peterhof, Menshikov began his own palace at **Oranienbaum** (Orange Tree), 12km further down the coast. Peter was unfazed by the fact that his subordinate's palace in St Petersburg (Menshikov Palace, p110) was grander than his own; and likewise Menshikov outdid his master in creating this fabulous place. While not particularly opulent compared to the palaces that Elizabeth and Catherine the Great favoured, by Petrine standards Oranienbaum was off the scale. This grand enterprise would eventually bankrupt Menshikov.

Following Peter's death and Menshikov's exile, the estate served briefly as a hospital and then passed to Tsar Peter III. Of course, Peter III didn't much like ruling Russia, so he spent a lot of time here before he was dispatched in a coup led by his wife, Catherine the Great.

Spared Nazi occupation, after WWII Oranienbaum was renamed for the scientist-poet Mikhail Lomonosov. Now known as Oranienbaum again, it doubles as a museum and **public park** (adult/child R40/20; ☎ 11am-6pm Wed-Mon), with boat hire and fairground rides alongside the remaining buildings.

Menshikov's **Grand Palace** (☎ 423 1627; adult/student R380/190; ☎ 11am-5pm May-Oct) impresses the most with its size, though many of its rooms are still under renovation. The palace is accessible only by guided tour, which takes place every hour on the quarter-hour. Admission to the palace also includes the recently renovated **Japanese Pavilion**.

Beyond the pond, the **Palace of Peter II** (adult/student R280/140; ☎ 10am-5pm Wed-Mon May-Oct) – also called Peterstadt – is a boxy toy palace, with

TRANSPORT: GATCHINA

Distance from St Petersburg 45km

Direction Southwest

Travel Time One hour

Bus From Moskovskaya metro station bus 431 (R40, one hour) runs often. In Gatchina it stops on pr 25 Oktyabrya: the park is immediately west.

Train Any suburban train bound for Kalishe or Oranienbaum from Baltic Station (Baltiyskiy vokzal) stops at Gatchina.

TRANSPORT: ORANIENBAUM

Distance from St Petersburg 41km

Direction West

Travel Time 45 minutes to one hour

Bus *Marshrutky* to Oranienbaum depart from **(M)** Avtovo.

Train The suburban train from St Petersburg's Baltic Station to Petrodvorets continues to Oranienbaum. Get off at Oranienbaum-I (not II) Station, an hour from St Petersburg. From the station it's a short walk south, then west at the Archangel Michael Cathedral (Sobor Arkhangel'a Mikhaila) along Dvortsovy pr until you reach the palace entrance.

rich interiors. Approach it through the monumental **Gate of Honour**, all that remains of a small-scale fortress where he amused himself drilling his soldiers.

Worth a peek also is Catherine's over-the-top **Chinese Palace**, designed by Antonio Rinaldi. It was closed for renovation at the time of research, so it's bound to be looking fabulous in the near future. Rococo on the inside and baroque on the outside, the private retreat features painted ceilings and fine inlaid-wood floors and walls.

Perhaps Oranienbaum's best feature is the several kilometres of quiet paths through pine woods and sombre gardens, with relatively small crowds; again it's a lovely place for a picnic. Otherwise, you can head across the street to **Okhota** (☎ 422 0659; Dvortsovy pr 65a; meals R600-1000; ☎ noon-midnight). If the name didn't give it away (*okhota* means 'hunt'), you'll get the message from the herd of stuffed animals hanging from the walls and ceilings: game is the order of the day.

VELIKY NOVGOROD ВЕЛИКИЙ НОВГОРОД

The name means 'new town' but Novgorod was here by the 9th century, and for 600 years this little town was Russia's most pioneering artistic and political centre.

In a sense, Russian history began here. This was the first permanent settlement of the Varangian Norsemen, who established the embryonic Russian state. By the 12th century the principality – known as 'Lord Novgorod the

Great' – was the largest in medieval Rus. It was unique for its quasi-democratic form of governance, by which princes were hired and fired by a citizens' assembly. And, most enduringly, its strong, spare style of church architecture, icon painting and down-to-earth *byliny* (epic songs) were to become distinct cultural forms that would influence Russian art, architecture and music for centuries to come.

When other principalities were ravished by the Mongol Tatars, these warriors got bogged down in the marshes surrounding Novgorod, so the city was spared. Indeed, Novgorod suffered most at the hands of other Russians. Ivan III of Moscow attacked and annexed it in 1477; and Ivan the Terrible razed the city and slaughtered 60,000 people in a savage pogrom. When St Petersburg was founded, Novgorod slipped into obscurity as a trading centre.

Although the city was methodically trashed by the Nazis, it was a top priority for rebuilding by the Soviets – a sign of its historical importance. Today, some amazing architecture remains from the early days. Spires and steeples mark the skyline of this little city (population 240,000).

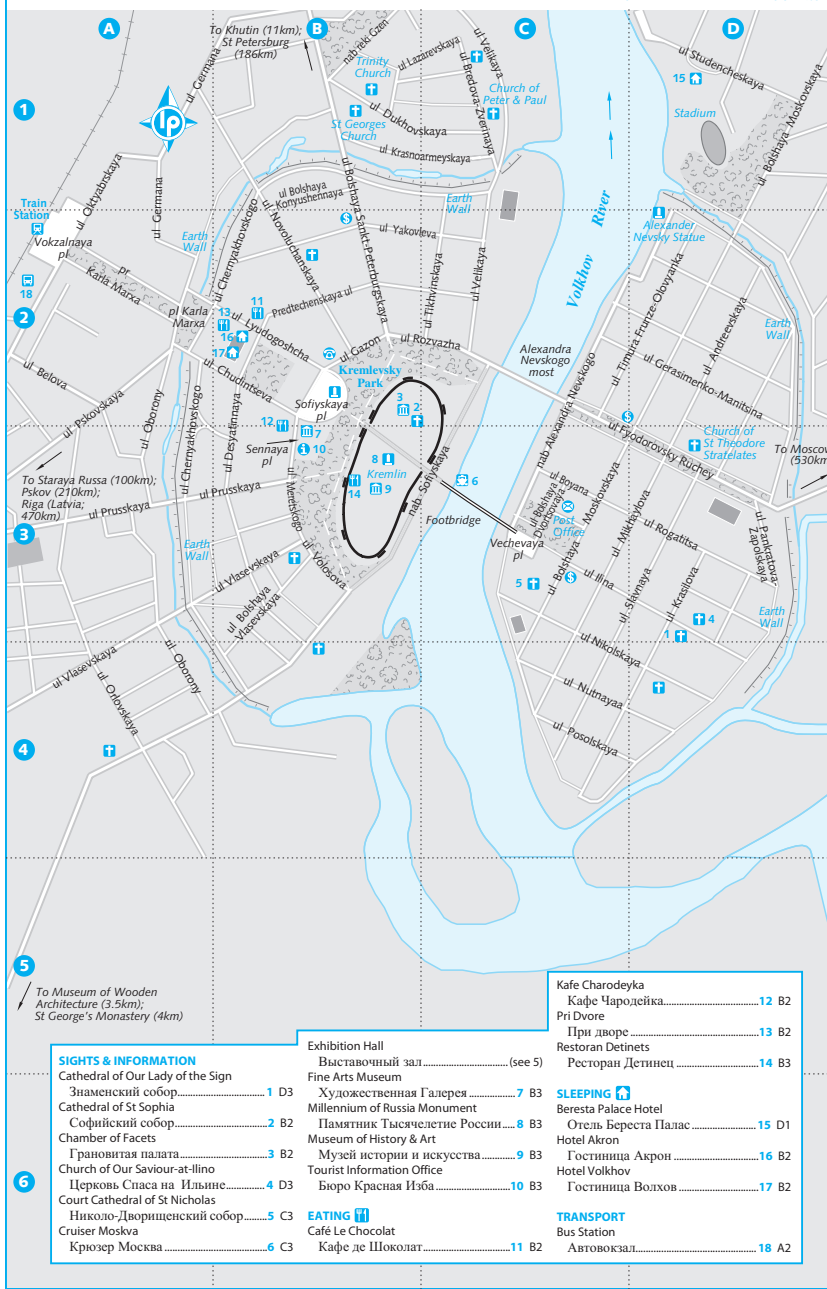
The ancient kremlin, the proliferation of churches and the still thriving artistic centre make Novgorod a fascinating place for medieval history buffs, art-lovers and anyone who wishes to relive the Russia of yesteryear.

Novgorod Kremlin

Part park, part museum, part archive, the **kremlin** (☎ 8162-773 608; www.novgorodmuseum.ru; admission free; ☎ 6am-midnight) was referenced in chronicles as early as 1044. From here, Alexander Nevsky and his troops marched off to battle the Swedes; here the *vech* (Peoples' Assembly) met to elect the local leaders; and here stood the sacred St Sophia Cathedral. It was, in short, the heart and soul of ancient Novgorod. The kremlin walls standing today date from the 15th century. You can climb the highest of its nine towers, **Kokuy Tower** (☎ 11am-7pm Apr-Sep), for a panorama of the Volkhov River and the town beyond.

Finished in 1052, the handsome Byzantine **Cathedral of St Sophia** (Sofiysky Sobor; ☎ 8am-8pm) is one of the oldest buildings in Russia, built under the rule of Prince Vladimir of Kyiv. The simple, fortresslike exterior was designed to withstand attack or fire, especially since flames had taken out an earlier wooden church on the site. The

VELIKY NOVGOROD



TRANSPORT: VELIKY NOVGOROD

Distance from St Petersburg 186km

Direction Southeast

Travel Time Three to four hours

Bus From St Petersburg's Avtovozkal No 2 you can take buses to Novgorod (R250, 3½ hours, 14 daily), arriving at Novgorod's bus station, which is right next to the train station.

Train There is currently one evening train daily from St Petersburg's Moscow Station (Moskovsky vokzal) to Novgorod (R326, 3¼ hours, 5.15pm), returning to St Petersburg in the morning (8.05am). In effect, this means staying at least one – if not two – nights in Novgorod. Alternatively, you can take the bus in one direction or the other.

onion domes were probably added during the 14th century – even so, they are perhaps the earliest example of this most typically Russian architectural detail. The west doors, dating from the 12th century, have tiny cast-bronze biblical scenes and even portraits of the artists.

The interior is much more ornate, with fabulous frescoes from the 11th and 12th centuries. Of the icons, the most noteworthy is the miraculous *Znamenie Bozhey Materi* (Sign of the Mother of God), which saved the city from destruction when it came under attack in 1170. It is a working church, with services usually taking place at 10am and 6pm daily.

A picturesque whitewashed belfry is nearby. Although such a belltower has stood on this spot since the 15th century, it was destroyed and rebuilt several times: the structure that is here today is from the 17th century. The belfry normally has an exhibition about the 'Ancient Bells of Veliky Novgorod'. Appropriately, its original cast-iron bells are on display nearby.

The buildings that are scattered around the kremlin grounds occasionally open up for exhibitions. The gothic **Chamber of Facets**, built in 1433, has a collection of icons and other lavish church booty. The **Museum of History & Art** is said to be one of the best research museums of its kind, with a huge collection of early icons, birch-bark manuscripts, early wooden sculpture and applied art. Both museums were closed for renovation at the time of research.

The unique **Millennium of Russia Monument** was unveiled in 1862, on the 1000th anniversary of the founding of the city (marked by the ar-

rival of Varangian Prince Rurik). The female figures at the top represent Mother Russia and the Orthodox Church. Around the middle, clockwise from the south, are Rurik, Prince Vladimir of Kyiv (who introduced Christianity), tsars Mikhail Romanov, Peter the Great and Ivan III, and Dmitry Donskoy trampling a Mongol Tatar. In the bottom band on the east side are nobles and rulers, including Catherine the Great with an armload of laurels for all her lovers; Alexander Nevsky and other military heroes are on the north side, while literary and artistic figures are on the west side.

From the dock below the kremlin, you can catch the **Cruiser Moskva** (☎ 8162-156 207; adult/student R200/100; ⌚ 12.30pm & 2pm May-Sep) for a one-hour float down the Volkhov River. On a good day, the surrounding marshes are lovely, with churches rising up majestically from the countryside.

The cool halls of Novgorod's the **Fine Arts Museum** (☎ 8162-73763; Sofiyskaya pl; adult/student R90/50; ⌚ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) showcase paintings by 18th- and 19th-century Russian artists, including Andropov, Bryullov and Ivanov. Novgorod artists are featured on the 3rd floor. The museum is just outside the kremlin gates and across the square.

Yaroslav's Court

Across a footbridge from the kremlin is old Novgorod's market, marked by the remnants of a 17th-century **trading arcade** facing the river. Beyond that's the market gatehouse, an array of churches sponsored by 13th- to 16th-century merchant guilds and a 'road palace', built in the 18th century as a rest stop for Catherine the Great. This area is known as Yaroslav's Court (Yaroslavovo dvorishche), as legend has it that this was the site of Prince Yaroslav's elaborate 11th-century palace.

The Kyiv-style **Court Cathedral of St Nicholas** (Nikolo-Dvorishchensky Sobor; 1136) is all that remains of the early palace complex of the Novgorod princes. The cathedral itself is closed, but an **exhibition hall** (☎ 8162-233 465; adult/student R60/30; ⌚ 10am-4.30pm Wed-Sun) in the former trading court gate, across from the cathedral entrance, holds church artefacts and temporary exhibitions of local interest.

On the outside, the 14th-century **Church of Our Saviour-at-Ilino** (Tserkov Spasa-na-Ilino; ul Ilina; adult/student R60/30; ⌚ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) has graffiti-like ornaments and lopsided gables, which are almost playful. Inside are some of the few surviving frescoes by legendary Byzantine painter

Theophanes the Greek. Recent restoration has exposed as much of the frescoes as possible, though they are still faint. A small exhibition upstairs includes reproductions with explanations in Russian. Note Theophanes' signature use of white war-paint-style markings around the eyes and noses of his figures, and their soul-penetrating expressions. The church itself, east of Yaroslav's Court, is a prime example of Novgorod style (in contrast to the more complex 17th-century Moscow-style **Cathedral of Our Lady of the Sign** across the street).

St George's Monastery & Museum of Wooden Architecture

Set amid peaceful marshlands just outside of town, these two sights are worlds away from the city, making for a splendid outing if you are in Novgorod for more than a day. About 4km south of town along the Volkhov River, the 12th-century **St George's Monastery** (Yuriev Monastyr; ⌚ 10am-8pm) still functions as a working Orthodox monastery. It features the heavily reconstructed Cathedral of St George and a clutch of 19th-century add-ons. Services are held in the Church of the Exaltation of the Cross (1761), which is attached to the monks' dorms. The monastery grounds are worth a visit, but what really warrants the trip out here is the windswept river setting, with gorgeous views out across the marshes.

Between Novgorod and the monastery is the beautiful **Vitoslavtsy Museum of Wooden Architecture** (adult/student R80/40; ⌚ 10am-5pm), an open-air museum of peasant houses and beautiful intricate wooden churches from around the region. Take bus 7 from Novgorod to either place.

Information

Tourist Information Office (☎ 8162-773 074; www.visitnovgorod.ru; Sennaya pl 5; ⌚ 10am-6pm) This little tourist information post is possibly unique in Russia for its helpful, English-speaking staff, assistance with hotel reservations and booking tours and plentiful free information.

Sleeping

A day trip to Novgorod is very rushed, so we recommend that you stay overnight at one of the following hotels.

Beresta Palace Hotel (☎ 8162-186 910; www.fcnovgorod.ru; Studencheskaya ul 2; s/d R3000/3500; 📶 📺 📺) The town's best hotel is on the east bank of the Volkhov, fully equipped with over 200 rooms, a fitness centre and a restaurant.

Hotel Volkhov (☎ 8162-335 505; www.novtour.ru; Predtechenskaya ul 24; s/d from R1500/2100) Next door to the Akron, the Volkhov is a large business hotel that is part of the NovTourInvest Hotel Group. Rooms are fine, though the place does not have much character.

Hotel Akron (☎ 8162-736 918; topol@mail.natm.ru; Predtechenskaya ul 24; s/d R1100/1620) This friendly hotel has received a complete overhaul, leaving the simple rooms in good shape with very modern bathrooms.

Eating

You'll eat decently in Novgorod, where a large number of traditional restaurants cater to both foreign and Russian tourists.

Kafe Charodeyka (☎ 8162-730 879; ul Volosova-Meretskogo 1/1; meals R300-400) Opposite the kremlin gate, this place has the ultimate a la carte menu, where you choose the ingredients of your meal and the chef cooks it according to your request.

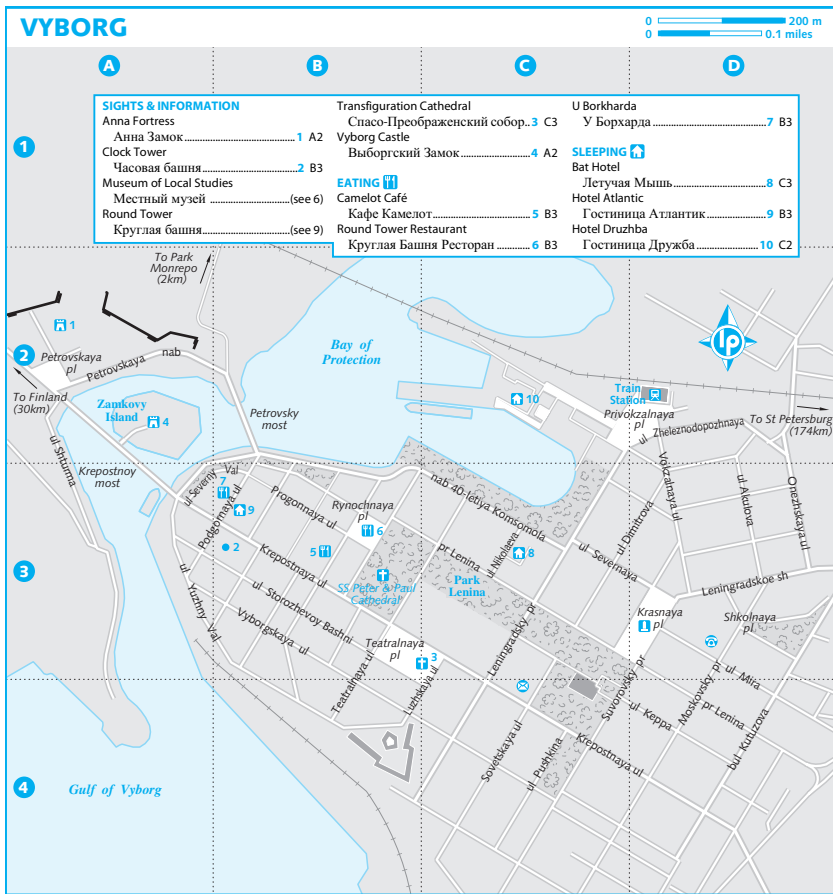
Pri Dvore (☎ 8162-777 086; ul Lyudogoshcha 3; meals R150-200) Cheery little cafeteria with good prepared salads and hot dishes by the kilogram. A more formal sit-down restaurant is next door.

Restoran Detinets (☎ 8162-274 624; meals R400-800) Housed within the kremlin wall, this is an atmospheric and historic place serving Russian dishes. Enter the kremlin from the west bank, turn right and follow the wall beyond the WWII memorial and the first few buildings to the restaurant entrance.

Café Le Chocolat (☎ 8162-739 009; Lyudogoshcha 8; meals R300-600; ⌚ 9am-11pm) Stop by this cute café for breakfast or for your daily fix of caffeine.

VYBORG ВЫБОРГ

Whether you are on your way to Helsinki or you want to get as close as you can to Finland without actually leaving Russia, the old Finnish town of Vyborg (population 81,000) is a fascinating and rewarding destination. Perched on the Finnish border, this ancient place has a melancholic, rather forgotten feel to it (the atmosphere of most Russian provincial towns in fact); but its quietly crumbling old architecture, winding cobblestone streets and magnificent fortress retain the magical atmosphere of a medieval town. Movie buffs may be interested to know that the critically acclaimed film *The Return* (Vozvrashcheniye) was filmed partly on location here in 2003, with the opening scene taking in the fortress as the young protagonists run through the town.



Vyborg (*vi-berk*) is built around the medieval, moated Vyborg Castle, built by the Swedes in 1293 when they first captured Karelia from Novgorod. Since then borders have jumped back and forth around Vyborg, giving the town its curiously mixed heritage and explaining the Finnish influence visible in everything from architecture to attitude.

Peter the Great took Vyborg for Russia in 1710. He had just recently established St Petersburg as his capital and he wanted to secure the region around it. A century later it fell within autonomous Finland and after the revolution it remained part of independent Finland (the Finns call it Viipuri). It changed hands several times during WWII, but finally ended up as Soviet territory, at which point all of the Finns fled west (or

were deported, depending on whose side of the story you hear).

Today Vyborg looks like a Finnish town; and indeed, coach-loads of Finns arrive every weekend – many apparently coming just for the cheap alcohol. But the permanent residents are Russian fishers, timber-haulers and military men, as well as the service sector catering to the growing tourist industry.

The ancient and picturesque **Vyborg Castle** (☎ 81378-21515; admission R30; 🕒 10am-7pm Tue-Sun), built on a rock in Vyborg Bay, is the city's oldest building, though most of it now consists of the 16th-century alterations. Inside, you can climb the tall **tower** (adult/child R70/50) and visit the small **museum of local studies** (adult/child R70/50), as well as a few other small exhibitions.

Across the bridge is the **Anna Fortress** (Aninskaya Krepost), built in the 18th century

TRANSPORT: VYBORG

Distance from St Petersburg 174km

Direction Northwest

Travel Time Around two to three hours

Bus Hourly buses (2½ hours, R120) run between St Petersburg and Vyborg from the bus stop to one side of Finland Station (Finlyandsky vokzal).

Train Suburban trains (three hours) run roughly every hour from Finland Station to Vyborg's train station. It's best to take the express services (R182, two hours, three times a day) or a Helsinki-bound train, all of which stop in Vyborg.

as protection against the Swedes and named after Empress Anna Ivanovna. It is not open to the public. Behind this is the **Park Monrepo Reserve** (☎ 81378-20539), a massive expanse of wooded and lake-dotted parkland. Laid out in a classical style, the wild forested park is packed with curved bridges, arbours and sculptures.

Vyborg is crossed by lovely streets and dotted with centuries-old churches, bell towers and cathedrals, especially along and off Krepostnaya ul. Look also for the many Style Moderne buildings that are in a similar state of disrepair. A short walk from the castle takes you to the crumbling 15th-century **Clock Tower** (Krepostnaya ul 5; admission R30; 🕒 Sat & Sun May-Sep). Climb to the top – if you dare – for fantastic views of the fortress and of the ruins of the nearby **Transfiguration Cathedral** (Spaso-Preobrazhensky Sobor, 1787). It is ruins – literally – but open around the clock if you want to climb around some crumbly walls.

Sleeping

Hotel Druzha (☎ 81378-25744; booking@lens.spb.ru; ul Zheleznodorozhnaya 5; s/d R2400/3000) This old Soviet hotel is convenient to the train station, but otherwise does not have much to offer.

Bat Hotel (Letuchaya Mysh; ☎ 81378-34537; www.bathotel.ru; ul Nikolaeva 3, Vyborg; s R2280-2800, d R2740-3100; 🚗) A very cosy option with newly renovated rooms on two floors and a cute café on the ground floor. Enter from the back.

Hotel Atlantic (☎ 81378-24778; atlantik.vyborg@mail.ru; Podgornaya ul 9; s/d R1100/1500, s/d/tr/q with private bathroom R1500/1700/2000/2600, s/d upgraded from R1750/2000) On a quiet street near the castle, this pleasant place has decent rooms with fresh paint, clean white sheets and brand new bathrooms. The

'upgraded' rooms have been recently renovated and filled with new furniture, which explains the slightly higher prices.

Eating

U Borkharda (☎ 81378-34007; Podgornaya ul 10; meals R200-400) This place evokes old Vyborg in its décor, but the main feature of the menu is its beer list.

Round Tower Restaurant (Kruglaya bashnya; ☎ 81378-31729; Rynoch'naya pl; meals R400-600; 🕒 noon-11pm) On the main square, the old round tower has an excellent, atmospheric restaurant on its top floor.

Camelot Café (Krasnoarmeyskaya ul 14; meals R100-300) Choose between the arcaded interior or the covered outdoor 'summer garden'. Food is filling and affordable.

STARAYA LADOGA СТАРАЯ ЛАДОГА

You'd hardly guess it from the current state of this sleepy village, but Staraya (Old) Ladoga (population 3000) played a crucial role in the very birth of the Russian nation. Today there is little to see along its quiet streets other than an ancient fortress, several crumbling churches and some prettily painted wooden cottages. It's a pleasant place to wander for a few hours, particularly in summer when a swim in the river adds to the charm.

Dating from the 8th century, the town was known as Ladoga until 1704, when Peter the Great founded Novaya (New) Ladoga to the north as a transfer point for the materials arriving to build St Petersburg. Protected as a national reserve, the town's basic structure

TRANSPORT: STARAYA LADOGA

Distance from St Petersburg 125km

Direction East

Travel Time Around three hours

Train Take an *elektrichka* to Volkhov (Volkhovstroy l station) from Moscow Station in St Petersburg (R156, two hours, 8am). There was only one morning train at the time of research, so check the schedule in advance and get an early start. From Volkhov, take bus/minibus 23 (R20, 20 minutes) towards Novaya Ladoga.

RUSSIA'S ANCIENT CAPITAL

Just as the origins of ancient Rus are continually debated, so will Staraya Ladoga's status as 'Russia's first capital'. Nevertheless, its significance remains uncontested, as historians have given 753 AD as the village's birth date.

According to some ancient texts, when the Scandinavian Viking Rurik swept into ancient Russia in 862, along with his relatives Truvor and Sineus, they built a wooden fortress at present-day Staraya Ladoga and made this his base. You can see Rurik in a colourful mosaic on the side of the village school. Locals even claim the tumulus on the banks of the Volkhov River at the northern end of the village is the grave of Oleg, Rurik's successor.

Archaeological expeditions continue to uncover a wealth of information about the town's past. In 1997 a second 9th-century fortress was discovered 2km outside the village. The frescoes in the village's 12th-century churches exhibit Byzantine influences, indicating that the town was a cultural and commercial crossroads.

and street patterns have remained virtually unchanged since the 12th century, give or take a few ugly Soviet blocks.

The highlight is the **fortress** (Staroladozhskaya Krepost; ☎ 9am-6pm Tue-Sun Jun-Aug, 9am-4pm Tue-Sun Sep-May) at the southern end of the village, boasting wonderful views over the winding Volkhov River. The stone **St George's Church** (Tserkov Georgiya; admission R50) is open only during dry weather to protect the delicate 12th-century frescoes that are still visible on its walls. The wooden **Church of Dimitri Solun** is also contained within the partially ruined fortress walls. The main tower of the fortress is the **Historical-Architectural & Archaeological Museum** (☎ 81263-49331; admission R30; ☎ 9am-6pm Tue-Sun Jun-Aug, 9am-4pm Tue-Sun Sep-May) housing a retrospective of the area's history, including a scale model of the fortress in earlier times and items found on archaeological digs. Explanations are in English.

At one time, six monasteries worked in this small region. Now only the **Nikolsky Monastery** (☎ 9am-5pm) remains, 500m south of the fortress.

Atop the hill at the north end of the village, the striking blue, 17th-century **John the Baptist Church** (Ioanna-Predtechki Tserkov; ☎ 9am-6pm) is in much better repair, especially the frescoes and iconostasis inside. On this site was a 13th-century monastery. Nearby, beside the riverbanks, is an ancient burial mound and, beneath the church, caves where glass was once made.

Eating

Staraya Ladoga suffers from a shortage of eating options. The café above the general store on the main drag, Ladya, has decent food with an excellent ambiance.

Night Bird (Nochnaya Ptitsa; Volkhovskiy pr; meals R100-200; ☎ 3pm-3am Mon-Thu & noon-3am Fri-Sun) A nicely decorated pub, about 100m north of the fortress.

PETROZAVODSK ПЕТРОЗАВОДСК

Nestled on the coast of vast Lake Onega, Petrozavodsk ('Peter's Factory') has a history directly linked to that of St Petersburg: it started as an iron foundry and armaments plant in 1703 – the same year as the northern capital. The capital of the autonomous republic of Karelia (the Russian region that borders neighbouring Finland), this is an exceptionally relaxed and pleasant Russian town (population 282,000), with countless green parks and pretty squares flanking its broad, tree-lined avenues.

The pretty crescents of neoclassical buildings on pl Lenina were built in 1775 as headquarters for Petrozavodsk armament plants. One of them houses the **Museum of Local Studies** (☎ 8142-780 240; pl Lenina 1; admission R100; ☎ 10am-5.30pm Tue-Sun), with nicely laid-out displays on the founding of the city and the history of Karelia. The best museum in town, however, is the **Fine Arts Museum** (☎ 8142-773 723; pr Marksa 8; admission R100; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun). It has

TRANSPORT: PETROZAVODSK

Distance from St Petersburg 420km

Direction Northeast

Travel Time Eight hours

Bus It's possible to take one of the daily buses (R200, nine hours) from St Petersburg's Avtovozkal No 2 but it's a hell of a journey.

Train The only enjoyable way to travel to Petrozavodsk is to take the overnight train (R950, eight hours, daily) from Ladoga Station (Ladozhskiy vokzal), which gets you into Petrozavodsk in the early morning. Trains running between St Petersburg and Murmansk also stop in Petrozavodsk.

DETOUR: KIZHI КИЖИ

One of the most stunning sights in European Russia, the island of Kizhi on Lake Onega was once a centre of paganism, but it was invaded by Christianity in the 12th century. Over the centuries churches have come and gone, but the collection of churches you can visit today date from the 14th to 18th centuries and make for a fascinating half-day trip from Petrozavodsk.

The entire island of Kizhi comprises an open-air **museum of history, architecture and ethnography** (☎ in Petrozavodsk 8142-765 764; http://kizhi.karelia.ru; admission R500; ☎ 8am-8pm). The centrepiece is the 1714 fairytale **Transfiguration Cathedral** (Preobrazhensky Sobor), with its chorus of 22 domes, gables and ingenious decorations to keep water off the walls. It is a gem of Russian wooden architecture and not a single nail was used in its construction. Next door is the nine-domed **Church of the Intercession** (Pokrovskaya Tserkov), built in 1764.

The other buildings in the collection were brought from the region around Lake Onega. The 19th-century peasants houses, some more ornate than others, are nicely restored inside. The little **Church of the Resurrection of Lazarus**, from the 14th century, may be the oldest wooden building in Russia. The **Chapel of the Archangel Michael**, with an interesting tent-roofed belfry, has an exhibition on Christianity in Karelia and music students from Petrozavodsk play its bells in summer. There are numerous other houses, barns, windmills and buildings open to exploration.

While Kizhi is open year-round, it is only practical to visit between June and August, when the lake is open to navigation. Hydrofoils (return R1000, 1½ hours) make the trip a few times a day from the Petrozavodsk ferry terminal, allowing plenty of time for visitors on the island, and returning in the afternoon. Call the **ferry terminal** (☎ 8142-775 070) to confirm the schedule, which changes frequently.

In St Petersburg, you can also book two or three-day cruises that bypass Petrozavodsk, but stop at both Kizhi and Valaam. Contact **Solnechniy Parus** (☎ 332 9686; www.solpar.ru in Russian; return from R6700).

collections of 15th- to 17th-century Karelian icons, folk art and other art inspired by the *Kalevala*, Finland's national epic.

While Petrozavodsk is a pleasant place to spend a few hours, most people come here to visit the magnificent collection of old wooden buildings and churches on Kizhi, an island 66km northeast of the city in Lake Onega. See the boxed text, *above*, for details.

Information

Sampo.ru Internet Centre (☎ 8142-733 263; ul Anokhina 20; pr hr R33; ☎ 9am-9pm) Internet access.

Tourist Information Centre (☎ 8142-764 835; www.tickr.ru; ul Kuybisheva 5; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat Jun-Aug, Mon-Fri Sep-May) Provides helpful English-speaking staff and plenty of info.

Sleeping

Hotel Fregat (☎ 8142-764 162, 8142-764 163; pr Marksa 1a; s/d R2400/2650) Located on the lake side of the ferry-terminal building. You will pay a bit more for lake views.

Hotel Severnaya (☎ 8142-762 080; http://severnaya.onego.ru; pr Lenina 21; s/d R1980/2400, ste R3300-4300; ☎) Smack in the centre, this place is not flashy, but it's clean and comfortable.

Hotel Prionezhsky (☎ 8142-765 271; www.nikolaevskie-oteli.ru; ul Fedosovoy 46; s/d from R2900/4000; ☎ ☎)

Petro's classiest hotel, on the lakeside 700m northwest of the ferry terminal, has just a dozen bright, modern rooms.

Eating

As well as the venues listed here, there are also restaurants in the hotels.

Karelskaya Gornitsa (☎ 8142-785 300; ul Engelsa 13; meals R300-500) Claiming to be the first restaurant serving Karelian cuisine, this excellent place offers plenty of fresh fish and game.

Fregat Restaurant (☎ 8142-764 162; pr Marksa 1a; meals R300-400) Attached to a small lakeside hotel, this airy restaurant has high ceilings, big windows and a wide terrace with a wonderful view.

VALAAM & SORTAVALA ВАЛААМ И СОРТАВАЛА

The delightful Valaam Archipelago, which consists of Valaam Island and some 50 smaller ones, sits in northwestern Lake Ladoga. The main attractions here are the 14th-century **Valaam Transfiguration Monastery** (Spaso-Preobrazhensky Valaamsky Monastery; www.valaam.ru; ☎ 81430-38233) and the tree-covered island on which it stands. The island can be reached by boat or hydrofoil between mid-May and mid-October.

TRANSPORT: VALAAM & SORTAVALA

Distance from St Petersburg 240km

Direction Northeast

Travel Time Six to eight hours

Boat During the main tourist season, hydrofoils (45 minutes) and boats (up to three hours) to Valaam leave the dock in Sortavala. Otherwise, overnight cruisers depart from St Petersburg's River Passenger Terminal. Make arrangements through a tour agency such as **Solnechniy Parus** (☎ 332 9686; www.solpar.ru in Russian) for a one-day, two-night trip (return from R3300) to Valaam, or a longer cruise that visits both Valaam and Kizhi (return from R6700).

Train One slow train departs from Ladoga Station (Ladozhsky vokzal) bound for Sortavala (R510, six hours, every second day), continuing on to Petrozavodsk. The timing is very awkward and requires at least one overnight stay in Sortavala.

Most agree that the monastery was founded in the late 14th century as a fortress against Swedish invaders, who managed to destroy it completely in 1611. It was rebuilt and destroyed several times in the next few hundred years. When the Soviet Union took this region from Finland in WWII, many of the monks

and much of the monastery's treasure were moved to Finland. Soviet authorities used the monastery as a home for war invalids.

Monks started returning to Valaam in 1989 and today it has a community of about 200 monks. The buildings are now protected architectural landmarks, but neglect has taken its toll and restoration work is ongoing. The centrepiece is the monastery's Transfiguration Cathedral with its five blue domes.

The usual access point for Valaam is the sleepy town of Sortavala, on the northern shore of Lake Ladoga. Stop by the **Tourist Office** (☎ 81430-24802; sortavala-info@onego.ru; Karelskaya ul 15, Sortavala) for more information.

SLEEPING & EATING

Hotel Zimnyaya (☎ 81430-38248; www.valaam.twell.ru; Tsentralnaya ul 4, Valaam; d R1900-2900) Bare rooms – most of which share bathroom facilities – occupy the 2nd floor of this old building near the monastery. There is a small café on site but it is not open during winter months.

Hotel Piypun Pikha (☎ 81430-23240; Promyshlennaya ul 44, Sortavala) This hotel is in a lovely lakeside location on the east edge of Sortavala and can arrange excursions to Valaam. Also on site are a restaurant and nightclub, which probably represent your best bet for dining and entertainment in town.

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