Where will you be celebrating on New Year's Eve? Ring in the New Year in Russia's capital city, then journey off the beaten track for some alpine fun and a steamy banya in Pskov before heading north to beautiful St Petersburg.

HIGHLIGHTS AND INCLUSIONS

Trip Highlights
- Moscow - UNESCO-listed Red Square, Kremlin and Lenin's Mausoleum, St Basil's Cathedral and Gorky Sculpture Park
- Pskov & Pechory - riverside kremlin, cathedral and 14th century monastery in these towns near the Estonian border
- St Petersburg - UNESCO-listed city area including: Nevsky Prospekt, Museum and University districts, Peter and Paul Fortress, Church on Spilled Blood, The Bronze Horseman and Admiralty End
- St Petersburg's palaces - the Hermitage Museum at the Winter Palace and St Catherine's Palace

What's Included
- 8 breakfasts, 3 lunches and 2 dinners (including a Welcome Dinner on day 1)
- 1 overnight train from Moscow - Pskov in a 4-berth cabin including bed linen
- 7 nights 3 star hotels
- Escorted by an English speaking Russian tour guide
- Specialist Russian guides at local sights
- Guided sightseeing - Moscow and St Petersburg
- Airport arrival transfer on day 1
- All relevant transfers and transportation on tour
- Moscow Metro travel card - 6 journeys
- Russian banya (sauna) experience
- Winter pursuits - ice skating, cross-country skiing in Pskov

What's Not Included
- Entrance Fees: USD$40-50pp, paid in local currency
- International flights and visa
- Laundry, drinks and items of a personal nature
- Tip for your tour guide. We recommend you allow USD$3 - 5 per day, per traveller. Tipping your guide is an entirely personal gesture

DETAILED ITINERARY

Day 1: Moscow
29 December 2018. Welcome to your New Year’s holiday in Russia! Upon arrival you will be met at the airport and transferred to your hotel for check-in. This evening at 7pm you’ll be treated to dinner with the rest of your group at the hotel, followed by an informative welcome meeting. Remainder of the evening at leisure - your tour guide can recommend some local bars for you to try out. 

Overnight - Moscow (D)

Day 2: City Tour & Ice Skating

Home to the mighty Kremlin, legendary Red Square and iconic St Basils Cathedral, Moscow is not only the capital of Russia, but also the political and cultural heart of the country. As well as boasting some of the country’s most recognisable landmarks, Moscow is also home to internationally acclaimed museums and art galleries, respectable retail havens in the form of malls, markets and boutique-style shops.

First thing this morning we will hop on the Moscow Metro and make our way to legendary Red Square. As the historical, political and social heart of Moscow, this famous square is home to some of the city’s most recognisable landmarks. Within the Red
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Square will find the iconic domes of St Basil’s Cathedral, the imposing red brick walls of the Kremlin and the glitzy Neo-Russian facade of the GUM shopping mall.

Also in Red Square, housed within a red and black marble building, is Lenin’s Mausoleum. If open, we can enter the mausoleum free of charge and pay our respects to the grandfather of Communism whose embalmed body has lain in state here since his death. Later in the day, we can take a journey on the Stalinist-era Metro, to view some of the gold gilded frescoes that adorn many of the stations or go ice skating with your tour leader in Gorky Park.

During our stay in Moscow there will be the chance to join one of our optional evening excursions, such as a traditional Cossack Show or a Moscow by night coach tour. All optional excursions are subject to availability; booked and payable locally. Overnight - Moscow (B)

Day 3: New Year’s Eve

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Later we will embark on a day of alpine fun*. Go ice-skating on a frozen lake, or perhaps try your hand at cross-country skiing - a more horizontal approach to the downhill ski. In the afternoon we will defrost in a local banya - the Russian equivalent of a sauna (remember to pack your swimwear). After steaming up in the banya, the brave among you can run outside to cool down with a roll in the snow! Later we will indulge in a home cooked lunch with a vodka or two. Relax at the hotel in the evening and tuck into a warm dinner.

*Please note: If the weather is inclement, we may need to alter our itinerary. Overnight - Pskov and Pechory (B, L, D)

Day 6: Pechory Monastery

Pskov - St Petersburg. Today, a tour of Pskov takes in the riverside kremlin, cathedral and other sights. Later a short drive will bring us to the beautiful 14th century Pechory Monastery, where we will explore the peaceful grounds and if monastic law permits, head underground for a tour of the burial caves of this fascinating and still-working cloister. This afternoon we will travel by road to St Petersburg arriving in the late evening. Overnight - St Petersburg (B, L)

Day 7: The Hermitage

St Petersburg is known as the city of tsars. Founded by Peter the Great in 1703, St Petersburg is designed around an intrinsic network of canals and rivers built in lavish and grandiose style. Also referred to as ‘the cradle of revolution’, in the 20th century St Petersburg underwent three name changes, three revolutions and a whopping 900 day siege.

In the morning a driving tour will provide an introduction to St Petersburg. We will make our way along the famed Nevsky Prospekt,
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past the museum and university districts and a few photo stops will be made along the way to see sights such as The Bronze Horseman and the magnificent St Isaac's Cathedral.

Later, we will enjoy a guided tour of the Hermitage Museum in the beautiful Winter Palace, which houses one of the biggest and best art collections on earth. The rest of the day is free for you to further explore. Most of the city sights are dotted along and just off the main thoroughfare - Nevsky Prospekt. It’s an easy city to find your bearings and get around.

St Petersburg has a spirited restaurant, bar and jazz club scene, plus some of Russia’s best beers.

During our time in St Petersburg there will be the chance to join one of our optional evening excursions, such as a traditional Cossacks performance or a night at the Russian Ballet. All optional excursions are subject to availability, booked and payable locally.

*Note: During winter months the tour of Peter and Paul Fortress may fall on day 6 due to logistical reasons. Overnight - St Petersburg (B)

Day 8 : St Pete’s Sightseeing

We start today’s touring with a visit to Peter & Paul Fortress which was built on the orders of Peter the Great and was at one time at political prison. Within the compound is Peter & Paul Cathedral, which houses the tombs of many of Russia’s monarchs, including the Romanovs. Then we’ll head out of the city to explore Catherine Palace at Tsarskoe Selo in winter (or Pavlovsk Palace if Catherine Palace is closed). At Catherine Palace its the exterior and the interiors of this lavishly decorated building that really catch the eye - and the spectacular Amber room is a real highlight!

After stopping for a hearty traditional lunch at a local restaurant, we’ll continue on for a guided tour of the exquisite interior of The Church on Spilled Blood. Overnight - St Petersburg (B, L)

Day 9 : Last day in St Pete’s

06 January 2019. St Petersurg. Our tour comes to an end after breakfast and hotel check-out at 12 noon. (B)

HOTELS

Highlighted below are some of the hotels which we frequently use on this tour, though we reserve the right to substitute these hotels to ones of a similar standard. Please refer to your Tour Voucher for your confirmed arrival hotel and further arrival information.

Izmailovo Gamma Delta

Formerly part of the Olympic Village at the 1980 Moscow Olympics, Divided into two wings, Gamma and Delta - the Izmailovo Gamma Delta is part of one of the biggest hotels in the world. The rooms are comfortable and with modern amenities and there is also a number of excellent restaurants plus a gym and swimming pool.

On arrival at the hotel guests are often welcomed with chocolate and still bottled mineral water. Well located with good access to transport links.

Dvor Podznoeva

Set in two buildings, the Dvor Podznoeva is a comfortable modern hotel perfect for exploring Pskov. Rooms are spacious and well equipped. The hotel boasts a number of good restaurants including a beer house style one with lots of excellent local specialities. The hotel also offers guest Wi-Fi. Well located just a short walk form the best parts of Pskov.

Asteria Hotel

Set on the banks of Fontanka River, Asteria Hotel enjoys a prime location in the city centre just a few minutes walk from St Petersburg’s famous Nevsky Prospekt. This 3-star hotel features a restaurant and bar, plus free WiFi throughout the property.

Victory Day - 9 May

On 9 May every year Russia celebrates Victory Day, which commemorates the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany in World War II. On this special day the streets fill up with revelers to witness the country’s biggest military parade. Please be aware that if you are travelling during or around this time certain sites may be closed due to parade preparation.

Optional Excursions

We offer a range of optional evening excursions which are bookable locally. The optional excursions that are offered change each weekend dependent upon what is on in St Petersburg and Moscow at the time and the group size. Some of the excursions only operate a specific times of year.

At the welcome meeting on day 1 your tour leader will give you a list of the optional excursions that are available during your tour and the cost of them in Roubles. Please note that the price of the optional excursions is dependent upon the number of people who choose to book and if the excursion is escorted by the guide and includes transportation. Below are some of our most popular optional excursions that can be booked and paid for locally in Roubles (cash) on the morning of day 2.

• Watch a wonderful Russian ballet in St Petersburg. We offer performances in the
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Mariinsky/Mikhailovsky Theatre or the Royal Hermitage Theatre depending on availability. Prices vary from USD$100-200

- Located across 42 islands, Saint-Petersburg is a perfect place to explore by water and enjoy the stunning architecture that this city boasts. Have a wonderful journey by boat along the rivers and canals and feel the atmosphere of the biggest Northern port of Russia. Offered 15 May - 15 Sept From USD $25

- If you’re keen to enjoy some traditional Russian entertainment, head to a Cossack Show for a night of traditional song and dance. Offered in St Petersburg. From USD$60

- Visit the Russian Vodka Museum in St Petersburg - the first museum in the world dedicated exclusively to Vodka. Try a few top quality brands and learn about the distilling process. You’ll hopefully experience how the right type of Vodka, drunk in the right way, can be very pleasurable. From USD$25

- Experience Moscow by night on a coach tour taking in city sights that are hard to reach during the daytime, with a knowledgeable local guide and vodka! (minimum of 6 people are required for this trip to run). From USD$40

- Watch the world-class national dance show 'Kostroma' in Moscow, which offers an aesthetic journey into Russia’s deep history, with a varied mix of national dances and contemporary ballet pieces. From USD$50

Entrance Fees Not Included

Moscow and St Petersburg entrance fees are not included in the cost of our Russia group tours*, these need to be paid to your tour leader on day 2 in local currency - Rubles. You will find the cost of entrance fees noted under ‘What’s Not Included’ on page 1 of this document.

Please note that entrance fee amounts do change and thus upon your arrival to Russia your leader will give an exact total and breakdown. Please note that we do not include a guided tour of the interior of St Basil’s Cathedral, should you wish to go inside please budget approx USD$8.

*Please note that on our Helsinki to St Petes and St Petes & the Baltics visa free Russia tours, entrance to The Hermitage and Peter & Paul Fortress in St Petersburg, is included.

Tipping

As in many countries tipping is becoming the norm in Russia. In better restaurants it is suggested that you tip 10% of the bill if you were pleased with the food/service.

If you would like to express your appreciation to your tour guide, we’ve made suggestion as to the appropriate amount on page 1 (under the heading ‘Exclusions’) of these Trip Notes. Tipping is an entirely personal gesture.

Visas

Most travellers require a visa to visit Russia. In order to obtain your visa a Russia Letter of Invitation is required (endorsed by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs) which we can procure for any passengers for a fee of GBP£25/USD$59.

As of 30 March 2017, South African passport holders will be granted visa free entry to Russia for a duration of up to 90 days when travelling without the intention of living, working or studying in Russia.

If you’re a resident of the UK and would like someone to handle your visa application for you then we recommend CIBTvisas. Please visit http://www.cibtvisas.co.uk/onthego to start your visa application with them.

If you reside overseas or are departing the UK more than 3 months prior to arrival in Russia, we can provide you with the necessary invitation letter for entry into Russia in order for you to procure the visa independently from a Russian Embassy/consulate in your region. Please note independent applications are your own responsibility.

Further information is available online at onthegotours.com/Russia/Visas. It is your responsibility to ensure you procure your visa in a timely fashion. We recommend you apply for your visa at least 1 month before departure.

Arrival Transfer

An arrival transfer is included for all those arriving on day 1 or those arriving earlier who have booked pre tour accommodation through On The Go. Our transfer representatives wait 90 minutes from the time your flight has landed and they will be holding a visible On The Go sign. If you are delayed please contact our Moscow or St Petersburg office (as detailed on your tour voucher) to advise that you have been delayed for whatever reason. If your luggage has been misplaced, head to ‘Information’ or your airline’s desk prior to exiting Customs to find out how you may lodge a ‘lost luggage’ report.

PLEASE NOTE: Arrival transfers are not included for Helsinki to St Petes’ and St Petes’ and the Baltics visa free Russia tours.

Overnight Trains

Many of our group tours include a comfortable overnight train journey. Russian trains are solid, utilitarian and reliable. All our passengers are reserved in 4-berth closed cabins with freshly laundered bed linen provided. Though not air conditioned, trains are indeed heated during the winter season. We recommend stocking up on some snacks and drinks before you board the train.

We book train tickets 65 days in advance of travel, and once they have been purchased they are non-refundable and non-changeable. Should you wish to upgrade to a 2 berth cabin you will need inform us 65 days prior to departure, otherwise you will have to pay a cancellation fee on top of the upgrade price.

If you book your tour less than 65 days before departure then it is unlikely you will be in the same carriage as the others in the group as their tickets will have already been purchased.

If you prefer not to travel by overnight train, our Back in the USSR and White Russian tours travel by high speed train from Moscow to St Petersburg.

Fitness

There may be a lot of walking involved on your tour, particularly in Moscow where we explore most of the sites on foot, therefore please be aware that a reasonable level of fitness is required.

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This information has been compiled with care and good faith. They give an accurate illustration of the proposed arrangements for this holiday. Circumstances beyond our control such as changes in local conditions, inclement weather or other reasons could force us to make changes to this itinerary. Any costs shown are subject to change, though are an accurate reflection of costs at time of setting. Please also note that visa requirements are subject to change and are the responsibility of the traveller and not that of On The Go Tours.
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Health Requirements
It is recommended that you be vaccinated for Diphtheria, Polio and Tetanus. Food and waterborne diseases are more common than in the UK, so Typhoid and Hepatitis A are recommended. If visiting Yekaterinburg and undertaking outdoor activities between May and August, a vaccination for tick-born Encephalitis may be recommended. This information is only intended as a guide and recommendations can change so please consult with your local healthcare provider.

Drink bottled water only, pack some anti-diarrhoea medication, mosquito repellent and sun cream if visiting in summer.

Currency
While the Russian Rouble is no longer a closed currency, it can sometimes be difficult to buy in advance or to exchange upon your return. As such we recommend exchanging Pound Sterling, US Dollars and other major currencies in Russia, plus you may receive a better exchange rate in destination. To avoid issues, exchange only clean, unmarked bank notes. Bureau de Change and ATM machines exist in Moscow and St Petersburg (to a lesser extent in the provinces). Changing traveller’s cheques is a real hassle. Credit cards are readily accepted.

Climate
Russia is a destination that offers year-round appeal. Certainly summer is appealing for many travellers. Dvoid of snow-covered landscapes, Russia positively blooms in spring and summer. The snow melts to reveal beautifully coloured flowers and manicured lawns at many of Russia’s most famous palaces, parks and gardens and previously spindly birch trees heaving with green foliage. Russia is pleasantly warm in summer. In July and August temperatures have been known to rival the Mediterranean. During mid-summer in the northern city of St Petersburg there is no real darkness and this wonderful phenomenon is known as ‘the white nights’.

Autumn (September - October) is brief but also a good time to travel to Russia, when there are less crowds and the country is swathed in golden autumnal hues. From November through to February winter sets in and the country is usually blanketed in crisp white snow. Despite the freezing temperatures, this is a magical time to visit if you like snow - think fluffy hats, warm coats, picturesque snowy landscapes and a very high chance of experiencing a white Christmas!

Time
Russia (European Russia west of the Urals) is 3 hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT). From the last Sunday in March to the last Sunday in October, summertime is in force in the UK and time reverts to 4 hours ahead of GMT.

Voltage
Standard voltage in Russia is 220V, 50Hz AC. Sockets require a Continental or European plug with two round pins. Remember to pack a travel adaptor.

Hotels
In Russia On The Go use 3 star accommodation as classified by the Russian Ministry of Tourism. However, please be aware that the 3 star standards throughout Russia vary greatly and cannot be compared to hotels of a similar standard in Western Europe or, and in particular, the United States. Russia suffers from a severe shortage of quality 3 star hotels. Tourism is relatively new to the land, resulting in demand for hotels far outweighing the supply. With demand being high, hoteliers have unified with massive price increases, yet continue to paint a rose coloured picture as to what constitutes ‘3 star’ hotel.

On The Go in Russia have taken great lengths to locate the best quality hotels at realistic prices in each of the cities we travel to. All the hotels we provide are clean, comfortable and functional, as well as being within close proximity to public transport, amenities and local sights.

What to Pack
- A frameless backpack or small suitcase on wheels is recommended for your tour. Complimentary portage is not offered at hotels or train stations. Often we need to walk some distance from where we’re dropped off/picked up at train station
- Smaller day bag for your camera and i-Pod etc
- Summer - Russia can get very hot during the summer months of July/August. Pack lightweight cottons and warmer clothes for the evening
- Winter - Russia is bitterly cold from October through to March. Pack a scarf, quality gloves, hat, thermal leggings and longer length coat. You’ll also need a warm pair of boots/shoes with a good grip
- Personal first aid kit (see ‘Health precautions’)
- Sunglasses and an umbrella
- Swim wear and a towel (for the banya/sauna)
- Mosquito repellent & sunscreen (if visiting in summer)
- Money belt and a universal adapter
- Fiat pack toilet paper and anti-bacterial wipes
- Spare camera batteries, especially if you possess a digital camera which requires specialist high-power batteries
- Two spare passport photos/passport photocopy in case of loss/theft
- Your luggage should not exceed 20kg (44pounds). Pack as light as possible to leave room for the souvenirs!

Food & Drink
Food
Russia produces a very diverse culinary repertoire. Beyond Moscow, St Petersburg and other big cities, the choice is far more limited. Which is why we include meals on in provincial Russia on our group tours.

Caviar, smoked sausage, pickles, field mushrooms, cheese and soured cream are the basis of zakuski (hors d’oeuvres or appetisers) - a popular dish. Also try savoury piroshki (a stuffed pastry) and blini (savoury stuffed pancakes). The Russians excel at hearty meat and vegetable-based soups. The tsaar of all soups is Borsch and Solyanka is also good.

Well-loved classic mains include - beef Stroganoff (invented in Russia, as was chicken Kiev), pelmeny (Siberian-style dumplings) and spicy Georgian cuisine such as shashlyk.
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Russian rye bread is flavoursome and most often eaten without butter. Fish varieties include - omul (similar to salmon and from Lake Baikal) and sturgeon - often poached and served with a sauce or mushrooms. Russians also excel at the art of ice-cream making. St Petersburg is particularly renowned for its ices.

**Drink**

Russians consume an average 12 litres of pure alcohol a year, which is three times the average for the rest of the developed world and also testament to how good the vodka really is! Vodka is one of Russia's most famous exports. Supermarket & liquor store prices range from USD$3.00 for a half litre up to USD $20.00 for connoisseur brands.

Russian beer (pivo) is also inexpensive and very good. The market leader is Baltika who produce 9 excellent brews, appropriately labelled 1 through 9 and sold on tap and in bottles.

Drink only bottled water in Russia. It is inexpensive and available everywhere. Locally, the water is considered drinkable, but it contains undesirable levels of heavy metals and Giardia, an annoying little stomach bug. If you do pick up Giardia, it can be treated with antibiotics.

**Moscow Metro**

The Russian Metro is the easiest and quickest way to get around and your tour (if incorporating time in Moscow) will include a Moscow Metro travelcard (for 6 journeys/rides). A Stalinist gift to the people of Moscow, this is one Stalinist project Muscovites are proud of. Graffiti-free stations offer an air of elegance with granite and marble-clad surrounds. Many of the stations boast chandeliers, huge mosaic freezes depict the power of good Soviet workers banding together to help the state and strikingly elaborate sculptures cast in bronze offer a study of people from an age where collectivism was at the forefront of the Communism dream. Art Nouveau style lamps illuminate the long escalator arches.

Riding the Moscow Metro is a sightseeing excursion in itself. Meanwhile, although St Petersurg has an equally fine Metro transportation system, as the city is more walker-friendly you'll be able to get to most inner-city sights often without the need to board the Metro.

**SPECIAL NOTE:** Mind your purses and bags aboard the Metro. Pickpockets are as prevalent here as elsewhere.

**Trading Hours**

As a rule shops are open from 9.30am to 7pm or later and generally closed on Sunday. Banks are usually open weekdays from 9am to 5pm in Moscow and St Petersburg, with a break for lunch. Restaurants, cafes and bars trade until late. In Moscow and St Petersburg, many grocers trade 24/7.

**Shopping**

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia has embraced the free market. Souvenirs are authentic, inexpensive and usually well-made. The trademark souvenir is the brightly decorated wooden Matryoshka doll - a set of dolls within dolls. Enamelled wooden boxes known as palekh are also popular. Perhaps the most curious hangover of Communist times is the quantity of surplus Red Army and military souvenirs. The ubiquitous 'fluffy brown hat', so common an image of Russia, is also a must-buy. The Russians themselves wear similar hats but theirs are often made of real mink, ermine or fox fur. A great place to shop for reasonably priced souvenirs is the Izmailovsky Market in Moscow, which is conveniently located, just a short walk from our hotel.

**A Russian Banya**

If your tour visits Novgorod or Pskov there's the opportunity to sample an invigorating Russian banya (sauna) with veniki (birch twigs). In the public baths of ancient Rome - Romans employed strigule, a curved, scraping instrument to remove dirt and stimulate their skin. The Turks use a kese - best described as a rough cloth - massaging mitt. For their banya - Russians use bundles of very thin birch twigs, with and without leaves. These bundles are known as 'veniki' in Russian. Why birch twigs? Birch relieves pain in the muscles and joints and lifts the mood of the banya user. Once prepared and in the sauna, the twigs (which need to be softened in a bowl of water for around 10 minutes) are employed in a sort of light massaging ‘thrashing’ motion across the body. It's best to get someone else to do this. Although it sounds painful on bare skin - it isn't and it's something you should try! The massage with the veniki stimulates blood circulation and the overall experience will leave you feeling clean, exhilarated and fresh! In winter, it's fun to get all hot and sweaty and then run outside and roll around in the snow. Give it a whirl, if you dare!