

## St. Petersburg, Russia: A Disney Cruise Line Port of Call Review

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Featured Columnist

For many cruisers heading to Europe, St. Petersburg in Russia is their main reason for taking a Baltic cruise, and with good reason.

It's a stunning destination, and with so much to enjoy, it's not unusual for ships to dock overnight, or in the case of Celebrity, who we sailed with in summer 2016, two nights.

Alas, this summer's sailings on the Disney Magic around the Baltic will present cruisers with some tough choices when they get to St. Petersburg, as it's only berthed there for one solitary day, albeit from early in the morning until late in the evening.

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□St. Petersburg, more than perhaps any other Disney cruise destination, is one place where you do need to book scheduled excursions to get off the ship, because of the strict Russian visa restrictions. Essentially, if you want to get off independently, you'll need to arrange your own visa before leaving home. We booked excursions through a highly rated independent company, and had no problems, although getting off the ship was a bit of a nerve wracking experience as a result!

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□Perhaps the biggest attraction here is the amazing Hermitage, with a number of different tours taking it in. Be warned, everyone wants to get inside, and the lines were horrendous when we arrived, even for pre-booked groups. We walked straight in, because there were only six of us in our group, and our guide managed to push in ahead of all the bigger groups, otherwise I dread to think how long we'd have stood outside waiting to get in.

It's one of the world's most famous museums, and occupies a huge selection of buildings, including the Winter Palace, which was once the official residence of the Royal Imperial family. This was the part I was most fascinated to see, as I love palaces, whereas I can take or leave art. It lived up to my expectations, with truly opulent rooms everywhere you turned, making it worth the while to brave the hoards of tour groups. If you are an art lover, don't expect to have time to take in the items on display here. We stopped to see some of the most famous pieces by Leonardo da Vinci, Canaletto, and Rembrandt, and that was about all we had time for. It did feel like a whistle stop tour, and I don't say that unkindly, as I felt it was comprehensive, but there's just so much to see here, it's impossible not to feel rushed.

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□The other major attraction that many people want to see is Catherine's Palace. It's not exactly near to the cruise terminal, and is about an hour's drive, but it's worth it for what awaits you. It was built for Tsarina Elizabeth, who named it after her mother, Catherine I. Catherine the Great then redesigned the interior during her reign, and wow, what a superb job she did! The highlight for me was the spectacular Great Hall, although it's best known for the Amber Room. I was personally very disappointed to discover it was a recreation, rather than an original. While it took my breath away with all the different colors of amber, I had no idea of its history. Apparently the original amber was taken by the Germans in World War II, and was never seen again.

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□The Peterhof Parks also feature in a number of Disney's shore excursion offerings, and this was our first stop before we saw Catherine's Palace. They were designed by a French architect, and immediately reminded us of Versailles, and just like the French palatial park, fountains are the stars of the show here as well. They begin at 11:00am, and our tour was timed to get us there just as they kicked in. It was beautiful to watch, but like the other major tourist attractions here, it was packed. I guess it's got something to do with the huge number of visitors that flock in on cruise ships, with three or four often in port.

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□Despite all of these big attractions, one of the places I wanted to visit was the Church on Spilled Blood, a spectacular Russian church, with the familiar brightly colored domes. It has a colored past as well, given it got its name after Tsar Alexander II was assassinated here by a suicide bomber. It's beautifully decorated inside, to the point where you almost can't take in all the detail, and definitely well worth seeing.

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□Something else we were able to do during our two days in St. Petersburg (we spent our middle day visiting Moscow, which was a completely unforgettable experience!) was a city cruise sightseeing tour, and Disney have an evening version on offer. It certainly provided a unique perspective, as you see things from below. The city is often referred to as the Venice of the North, and as we travelled around on the canals, we could see why, as they form an extensive network.

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□One of the other excursions takes in the Peter and Paul Fortress, which wasn't really on my radar before our cruise, but I was so glad our tour included it, as the cathedral here is the last burial place for various Russian Emperors and Empresses. Despite its looks from outside (we quickly learnt that you can't judge a building from its exterior in St. Petersburg), it was extremely ornate inside, with most items made of gold!

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□ There is truly so much to see here that two days really wasn't enough. Had it not been for my overwhelming desire to Moscow, which dates back to my childhood, I'm sure we could have made good use of our third day seeing even more sights in St. Petersburg. From what we did see during our short time here, I'm convinced that anyone on this year's Baltic cruises on the Magic can't go wrong with any of the shore excursions they have on offer.

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□ The Magic stops at St. Petersburg on the seven-night Northern Europe cruise from Copenhagen, departing May 28, and June 11, and it's also a port of call on the 10-night Northern European cruise from Copenhagen to Dover, departing June 18.

*About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)*

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