



The people's palaces

IN THE 1930S, STALIN EMBARKED ON A MISSION TO ERADICATE OPULENCE IN RUSSIA AND IN ITS PLACE, FLAUNTED SOVIET SPLENDOR BENEATH THE STREETS OF MOSCOW AND ST PETERSBURG. TODAY, EXPLORING THESE GLORIOUSLY GLITTERING TUNNELS IS THE PERFECT WAY TO EXPERIENCE RUSSIAN HISTORY AND CONTEMPORARY URBAN LIFE

WORDS & IMAGES | JESSICA GLIDDEN

IMAGE | Getty/Editorial

Somewhere between St Petersburg and Moscow, a train rolls to a pause. A group of hunched old women in headscarves approach the carriage, clutching baskets of blueberries, strawberries, dried, rust-coloured herrings and clusters of neon orange mushrooms – a scene that wouldn't be out of place in a Gauguin painting. Passengers disembark to make their purchases, re-boarding with cups brimming with blueberries. The train pulls away with a grumble, as quaint *dachas* [country houses] flit away in the big woolly wilderness that takes up much of Russia's endless rural country.

Immortalised in the image of a solitary engine plunging across the great Russian steppe in David Lean's sprawling cinematic masterpiece *Doctor Zhivago*, Russian train travel has a distinct power to evoke romance. Mass transit has a unique meaning in this country. Over the course of Russia's tumultuous history, train travel became a symbol of the people. It was, during the communist times, a symbol of a system that was meant to take care of everyone. So followed the metros, first laid by Stalin. He tore down palaces and cathedrals, seen as symbols of elite extravagance, removing their most ornate fixtures and placing them in the new home of egalitarian transport: the metro station. These quickly earned the name: "the people's palaces".

The metros of Moscow and St Petersburg encapsulate in their walls fragments of Russian life. They saw their people through eras of turmoil, serving as shelters during World War II. Now they have become the frontlines for a war of memories: between Russia's Tsarist and communist pasts.

Rolling into Moscow's Leningradsky Station (which was supposed have been renamed Nikolayevsky last month – a subject of much controversy in the debate over communist versus Tsarist namings) on the Aurora Express midday service, one of Stalin's imposing Seven Sisters apartment buildings slides into view over a tangle of wires and ⇒



of the Moscow metro is Komsomolskaya Station. The place could make the Hermitage blush: yellow ceilings knit with white flower motifs arch over the platform interior with extravagant chandeliers dangling like jewels, where multicoloured glass mosaics depict the most famous scenes in Russian history.

Wondering at the origins of all this grandeur leads to the musty back corner of Sportivnaya Station, where the transport system's outdated museum nestles. If you don't speak Russian, it's somewhat incomprehensible, but you can still marvel at photographs of the metro's developments and models of old metro trains. Old photographs of Mayakovskaya Station, whose steel archways made it very high-tech in 1935, depict it packed with communist leaders for a celebration of the 24th anniversary of the October Revolution, then packed with hospital beds during World War Two.

Sportivnaya Station, named during the 1980 summer Olympics, deposits its passengers upon the Novodevichy Convent and its surrounding gardens and ponds. The 14th Century convent is a work of spiralling beauty, with golden onion domes crowning red and white buildings. It was the site of much royal intrigue and imprisoned a queen or two in its past. Nowadays, it feels serene. The choir gives occasional performances in the abbey basement, for a bit of added atmosphere.

Across the pond is Pirosmeni, one of Moscow's first private restaurants during



bushy trees. The unreal spikes of this gothic building pierce the sky with a red star, evoking the intimidating splendour of Stalin's times. On the train platform, a blast of jolly, jingoistic-sounding Russian music explodes at full volume as people pour out onto the platform in a human sea of florescent clothing.

There seems to be a rule of life in Russia – women below 30 are drop-dead gorgeous, uniformly wearing heels, dresses and an obligatory scowl. Older women seem to be overweight, equipped with even more ominous scowls, and are quick to shove any offender out of the way. My Moscow guide, Liya, attributes this to deprivation and hardship under communism and the comparable affluence, and corresponding diet, privileged to young women today. In fact, Russia is no longer about vodka and caviar – champagne and sushi are now *de rigueur*.

Moscow is a monolith. There's no holding back here – by night its streets are paved with

young nightlife-seekers, by day they are teeming with office workers. Moscow has a 15 million plus population and on any given day, some 10 million of them ride down the metro's rolling escalators.

Ploshchad Revolyutsii Station is the stop for the famous Kremlin, an immense government area strewn with golden cathedrals, and the even more famous Red Square. But like the psychedelic candy-colours of St Basils (which is, apparently, dedicated to a prophet who wandered the city naked, stealing from the rich to giving to the poor), the metro is extravagant. It has its communist-designed stations, to be sure, but they aren't sober. Take Ploshchad Revolyutsii's muscular bronze sculptures, who pose on the edge of each pillar – the most famous among them being Miss Metro, an athletic, short-haired Frisbee-throwing beauty queen of the communist era.

Despite Ploshchad Revolyutsii's Frisbee player's claim, the undisputed beauty queen

PREVIOUS PAGE: The grand platform at Komsomolskaya Station
LEFT: A train pulls into the platform at Komsomolskaya Station; a stained glass detail at Novoslobodskaya Station
RIGHT: A stunning mosaic at Novoslobodskaya Station; the gravestone of a famous musician at Novodevichy Cemetery

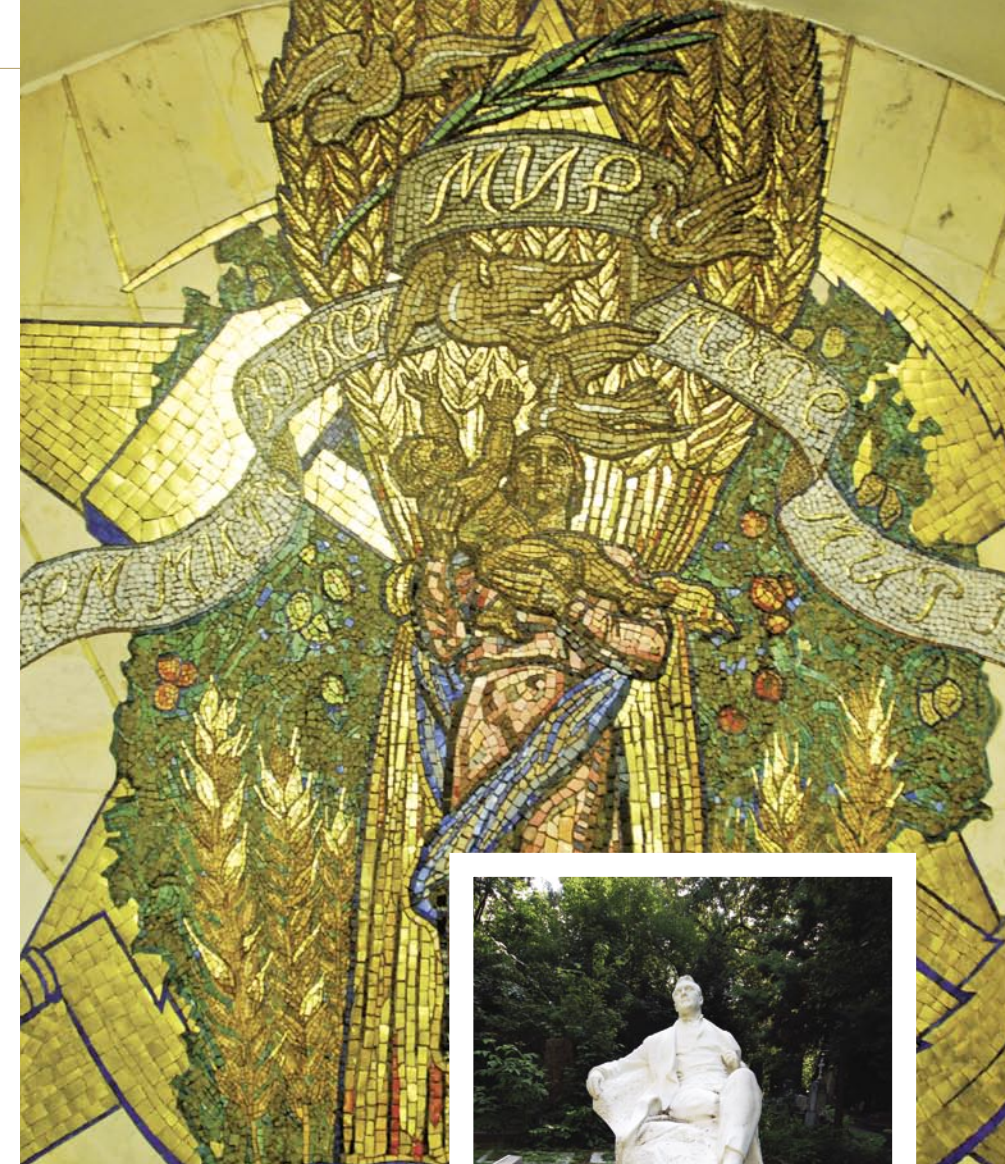
perestroika (privatisation). This sweet Georgian eatery is named after the famous Georgian painter and has been host to famous faces from Bill Clinton to Richard Gere. The charming building, wrapped in green vines, serves the vibrant cuisine of the former Soviet republic, complete with the indulgent cheese bread *imeretian khachapuri*, and the heavenly spiced beef soup, *khalia*.

Nearby, the Novodevichy Cemetery is the most famous burial ground in the city, where most of Russia's great leaders and artists lie, including Boris Yeltsin and Nikita Khrushchev – and writer Mikhail Bulgakov. Mayakovskaya Station, itself named after a constructivist author, is near to the former apartment of Bulgakov, the creator of the early 19th Century novel *The Master and Margarita*, an imagining of the devil's visit to Moscow. The novel opens at the Patriarch Ponds, down the street from the beautiful Art Nouveau house where the author lived. Soak up the bohemian life on the park's edge, where the Volkonsky Keyser café offers the freshest baked goods in the city.

Planned during communist rule, the metro was meant to celebrate the glory of industry, resulting in a system that strangely mixes Tsarist aesthetic and communist principle

It was intended that St Petersburg's metro would open in 1935, a time when many European cities were constructing such systems, but the tunnels had only just been dug when the bombs of World War Two began to fall. The city would have to wait until 1955 to get its metro.

The beauty of St Petersburg is not lost on the metro, although it has a different feel from the airy, canal-lined streets above. Planned during communist rule, the metro was meant to celebrate the glory of industry, resulting in a system that strangely mixes Tsarist aesthetic and communist principle. Examples pepper



the original line, Line 1, such as Kirovsky Zavod Station, which hails the four great products of the Soviet Union – oil, gas, energy and metal works – pictured on coats of arms, bizarrely framed with laurels and torches.

The metro lines were built in order of their founding; Line 1 is the original while Line 5 is the newest, built only this year. When it was constructed, it was designed with similar materials to the old stations; marble, brass and mosaic. The entirely new Zvenigorodskaya Station features arched roofs, spear motif archways and a shiny new mosaic depicting Peter the Great's army in a gesture towards

rewriting Russian history to favour Tsarist times. As part of this effort, any images of Stalin have since been covered, but Lenin still rules the platforms, scowling as a bust at the end of Kirovsky Zavod Station.

Like in Moscow, St Petersburg's metro honours its artists. Two metro stations are named after the city's most famous authors – Alexander Pushkin and Fyodor Dostoevsky. Pushkin's statue sits on the Pushkinskaya Station platform, surrounded by a mural depicting Catherine the Great's summer house where he used to compose poetry. The station is named in his honour due to its =>

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proximity to the Vitebsky Station, which connects to the palace in Pushkin town.

Dostoyevsky's final residence stands near the awesome yellow onion domes of Vladimirskaya Church. The author lived in flats across the city and his most adamant devotees can visit his former residence amongst the winding canals of Sennaya – it is even possible to stand in front of the flat where the old woman was supposedly murdered in *Crime and Punishment*. Dostoyevsky's apartment, which is quite drab but perfectly restored, is fiercely guarded by stern old women – not unlike the metro itself.

Avtovo Station, based in an out-of-the-way corner of the network, is by far St Petersburg

metro's greatest palace. It is dedicated to the battle for Leningrad (St Petersburg's name during communist times); around the corner from the station entrance, a tank commemorates the spot where the Nazis were turned back. The rotund entranceway features a grandiose dome and Roman columns. But the columns along the platform are the true artworks – carved in glass, they glint off the lights of the approaching trains. The ceiling resembles the interior of a baroque mansion, but sadly this ornamentation has been falling on passengers, and half of the station remains in scaffolding. Even more sadly, rather than restore the 60-year-old glass, it is being replaced with marble.

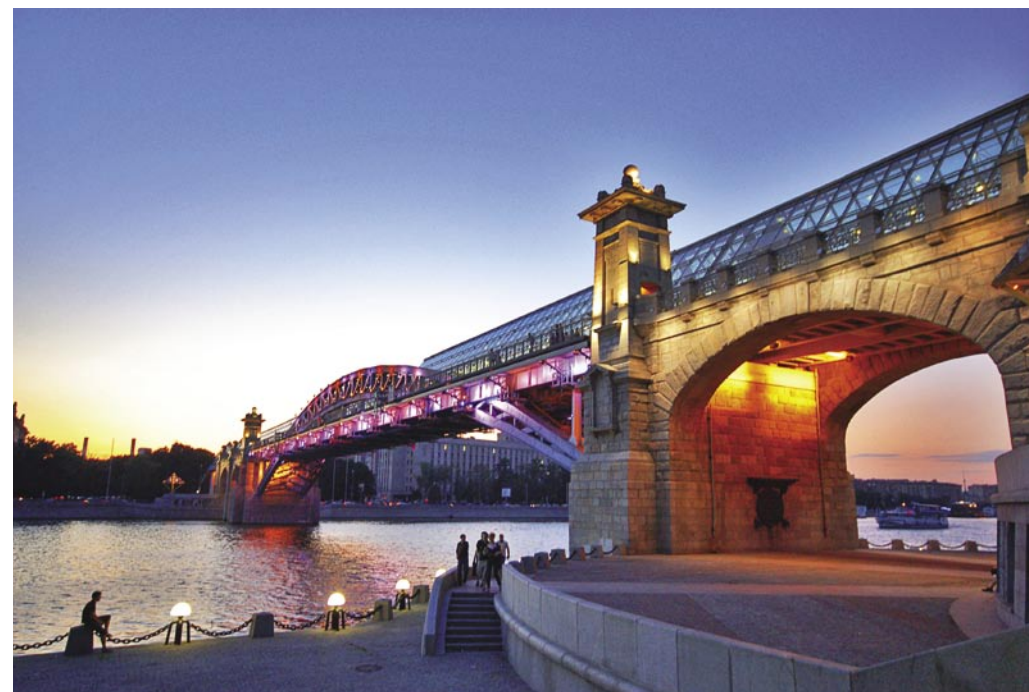
Glass mosaic, a favourite Russian art form, features heavily in St Petersburg's metro; a prime example being Baltiyskaya Station's elaborate illustration of the contributions of the Baltic states to the 1917 communist revolution. Heavy chandeliers swing over approaching trains in almost every station – but none are more extravagant than those at Avtovo, replete with spikes (purportedly to scare of invading Nazis) and ruby glass lanterns.

These ominous ornaments befit the atmosphere, as the St Petersburg metro is incredibly deep and dark. Line 1's escalators are still mostly wooden, and plunge down a very narrow chasm; in the deepest station, Chernyshevskaya, by more than 50 metres. Their depth is to dodge under the city's many rivers, as well as to burrow beneath the swampland that Peter the Great annoyingly chose to build his city on.

Disembarking at Park Kultury Station in Moscow at sunset (which in the summer is at a heady 11pm) elicits a showground of visual delights. Literally – across the bridge is Gorky Park's amusement park, flags flapping in the wind. On the other side of the street lies the New Tretyakov Museum of Modern Art and its immense sculpture garden, the Muzeon Park of Arts, which holds old communist sculptures that once decorated the city. It is dominated by a brand new, towering sculpture of Peter the Great, who gave Moscow the ultimate insult when he preferred building a new city in a swamp to staying in Moscow.

With their fairytale wedding cake palaces, Russia's sister cities often invoke a dreamlike reverie. In the evening along the banks of the Moscow River, what seems to be an impromptu episode of ballroom dancing is taking place. Hundreds of couples dreamily sway in the evening breeze, slender women in waving dresses plunging into backwards bends in their partners' arms. It's all part of a dream swathed in gold below ground – governments have risen and fallen, but the true beauty of these cities remains with the people. ☺

LEFT: St Basil's Cathedral in Moscow by night, with the statue to Minin and Pozharsk in the foreground
BELOW: Moscow's Krymsky bridge at dusk; Kievskaya metro station



EXPERIENCE MOSCOW & ST PETERSBURG

FOR EATING: GINZA PROJECT

Based in St Petersburg and quickly expanding internationally, the Ginza Project is a group of chic, funky themed restaurants. They offer every cuisine under the sun but for local fare try Mari Vanna, a nostalgic Soviet-themed eatery, complete with the paraphernalia one would expect from a communist household. In sharp contrast, there's Tsar, housed in an old aristocratic home. Outfitted in antiques, including a century-old piano, the restaurant is strewn with characteristic Ginza detail, including antique picture books, portraits of former Tsars and giant candlesticks. The food is equally lovely – try the breakfast of tart cherry porridge and potato dumplings. WWW.GINZAPROJECT.RU

FOR TRAINOPHILES: MUSEUM OF RAILWAY TECHNOLOGY

If riding the metro in circles doesn't satiate public transport obsessions, Baltiyskaya Station in St Petersburg has the answer. It is located next to the Museum of Railway Technology – not to be confused with the Railway Transport Museum in Sennaya, which is the oldest train museum in the world and features enough toy train models to send model train fanatics into spasms. The museum features antique locomotives, many brazened with a red hammer and sickle. There are engines of every type, and even an intercontinental ballistic missile thrown in for good measure.

FOR VIEWS: RIVER CRUISE

Tired of riding the trains? Boats are one of the best ways to view Russia's cities, especially in St Petersburg where the city's historical buildings and low, ornate bridges make the place look like a second Venice. Moscow's waterways also offer a chance to see some of its greatest monuments.

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