

St. Petersburg's fresh new face

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CHRISTOPHER MUTHER/GLOBE STAFF

A popular T-shirt in town elevates St. Petersburg to a world city.

By **Christopher Muther** GLOBE STAFF OCTOBER 25, 2014

ST. PETERSBURG — I assumed that the T-shirt prominently displayed in the art gallery window was intended to be ironic and cheeky. It read “Paris, London, Tokyo, St. Pete.” Isn’t that adorable? The folks in this sleepy city of 250,000 are pretending that they have a seat at the grown-ups’ table. If St. Petersburg were a toddler, I’d tousle its hair and give it an encouraging smile.

But back at my hotel later that night, I spotted an article on the Condé Nast Traveler website that listed St. Petersburg as the fourth-most underrated city in America. So perhaps the T-shirt wasn't blatantly lying.

The Condé Nast Traveler nod is the latest in a string of big ol' bear hugs that posh travel tastemakers have heaped on St. Petersburg this year. The city on the state's west coast has the element of surprise in its favor. Who would guess that the largest collection of Salvador Dalí art outside of Europe is housed here in a museum that looks like it has glass bubbles bursting out of it? Or that St. Petersburg has an arts district with an ever-growing corridor of more than two dozen graffiti-influenced murals, art galleries, and a burgeoning bar and restaurant scene, plus new microbreweries.

“Miami has a rival for the finer things,” gushed the London newspaper The Independent earlier this year.

The Independent needs to dial back the hyperbole and simmer down for a moment. Miami doesn't have a rival quite yet. But St. Petersburg is an interesting case study in what happens when a city finds itself with an arty new identity and a critical mass of cool kids moving in.



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Photos: St. Pete's mix of youth, cool, art

Posh travel tastemakers have heaped big ol' bear hugs on St. Petersburg this year.

“I’m meeting about five new people a month who are moving here,” said Mickie Nepinsky, my adorably hip bartender at my favorite St. Petersburg watering hole, The Bends. “It’s just blowing my mind every day. It’s beautiful too. Old auto repair shops are turning into eateries. There are amazing murals everywhere.”

And just as Nepinsky finished her sentence, a suave chap with a glossy, pomaded coif chimed in. “I’m moving here next month.”

I decided to sample the extensive St. Petersburg cultural buffet — no early bird specials, please — beginning with the expansive Saturday morning farmers’ market which brings together all demographics.



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Bartender Mickie Nepinsky livens up the atmosphere at The Bends.

The market, the largest in the state, runs from October to May and is a dizzying maze of vendors selling produce, locally made soap, honey, and

pickeled everything. Chefs cooked crepes, knishes, and food for any and all unusual cravings. There's music at all the market's corners, artists selling their creations, and gobs of people. The morning I visited, it was hotter than Ryan Gosling in a pepper patch. I sought post-market air conditioning in the stunning Dalí Museum .

The \$36 million museum is St. Pete's can't-miss draw . Even if you're not a big fan of surrealism, the Dalí's architecture is worth your time. The free-form geodesic glass bubble on the building, known as the Enigma, is made of more than a thousand triangular pieces of glass. It also offers a beautiful view of Tampa Bay. Walk up the helical stairwell to see some of Dalí's surrealist masterpieces. If you don't understand what you're looking at, mumble some vague references to Dalí's wife, father, and Catholicism, and you'll sound like an expert.

Surely Dalí would have appreciated the inventive graffiti murals splashed across the buildings in the Central Arts District more than the city's Museum of Fine Arts, which is thin on both masters and avant-garde work, save for its current Jamie Wyeth exhibition.



The Saturday farmer's market is a mix of more than foodstuffs.

After an afternoon of fine art and blissful air conditioning, I strolled to the galleries and stores. It was Second Saturday, a night when galleries and shops stay open late-ish and serve wine. It's free wine, but once you get tipsy, you start buying art. By the time the trunk of your rental car is filled with objets d'art, you've more than paid for all the wine.

Most of the galleries are recent arrivals. My neophilia propelled me from one to the next with stops at some dusty record stores and a massive mid-century antiques shop called Furnish Me Vintage. At a store called Plain Jane, I spoke with an excited owner who said the city has changed dramatically since her arrival just a few years ago, and, she added, is becoming increasingly younger. Ah ha! I knew something was missing. After a full day of exploring, I hadn't spotted any motorized scooters or walkers. The city's green benches were not filled with bald heads and blue rinses. Apparently God's waiting room had been relocated.

"I read somewhere that 50 percent of the population of St. Petersburg is now under 40 years old. And there is also a well-established sophisticated professional population," said artist Duncan McClellan. (The city's median age is, in fact, under 40.)

As it gets hipper, you can sense an increase in civic self-esteem. Think of St. Petersburg as Molly Webber in the 1972 "Brady Bunch" episode "My Fair Opponent." That's the one when Marcia gives the mousey, drab Molly Webber a makeover. Molly takes off her glasses, learns to walk with a book on her head (a staple of all "Brady Bunch" makeovers), slips on a crocheted vest, and suddenly she's the hottest thing at Westdale High since lime Jell-O.



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The Morean Arts Center’s gallery, store, and workshops all feature local artists.

The Central Arts District and Warehouse District feels like an adolescent version of Miami’s Wynwood neighborhood. Wynwood, once a bleak and abandoned shell of a place, is now my favorite district in Miami. The

Warehouse Arts District has a long way to go to reach par with Wynwood, but the seeds have been planted, and the seedlings are growing quickly.

After gallery hopping, I was ready for tacos from the Taco Bus, a food truck and restaurant all in one (and quite tasty). And because I never know when to stop eating, I walked a couple more blocks to the British-themed Queens Head Restaurant and Eurobar for a second course consisting of cauliflower cheddar croquettes and crispy chickpeas. I may also have had a bite of sticky toffee pudding.

On the prowl for a nightcap, I found that a block of Central Avenue in downtown is the epicenter of the city's night life scene. There are a few places I would recommend here, such as Ruby's Elixir, and a very chic craft cocktail bar called Mandarin Hide, but I mostly wanted to get away from the yelling bros and the women who were so intoxicated they were tripping over plastic cups in their wobbly heels. Lift your feet, ladies, it helps you avoid objects on the sidewalk! Not everybody was a pie-eyed rascal, but when I saw police breaking up a fight, I knew this wasn't quite my scene.

What I did enjoy was the bar and restaurant in the lobby of my hotel, the Hollander. People were taking their drinks on the veranda or watching the entertainment in the lobby. I didn't appreciate that I could still hear the music when I went back to my room for the night, but I liked that the Hollander was an independently-owned boutique hotel.



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Taco Bus, a food truck and restaurant all in one (and quite tasty).

A logical second day in St. Petersburg would include an extended visit to the beach, and I did eventually get there in time to see the sunset. The beaches here are consistently rated as some of the best in the country.

But I started Sunday morning in another part of St. Petersburg that fascinated me, a stretch called Beach Drive. Anchored by the posh Vinoy Renaissance Resort & Golf Club, Beach Drive looks like a California commercial district that's been airlifted and dropped near the water. This is intended as a compliment. It's pristine and very popular. I ate brunch at a French restaurant called Cassis American Brasserie and sat outside for a healthy dose of people watching. In the evening, restaurant crowds spill out onto the sidewalk. Going to a Holocaust museum may not be the first activity on your beach vacation to-do list, but it is worth taking time out to go to the Florida Holocaust Museum. It's thorough, heartbreaking, and surprisingly timely in

the way that it relates the Holocaust to current human rights conflicts around the world.

I needed a bit of sunshine after the intensity of the museum, and found myself at the Morean Arts Center. I was drawn to an outdoor mural reading “You are my sunshine.” It’s a clever spot that combines a store full of locally made art, a gallery of locally made art, and workshops taught by local artists. I think you get the picture: There’s a lot of art going on in St. Petersburg.

I left with a laundry list of galleries and restaurants that I’d yet to visit. I also left with a nagging fear: If St. Petersburg continues this hip transformation, where will I go when I’m ready for a seat in God’s sunny waiting room?

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