



Great rush to Russia

A little more than 20 years after perestroika, Russia is becoming a hot destination for travellers, with many new and interesting products entering the marketplace, writes KRIS MADDEN.

EMIRATES TO ST PETERSBURG

Emirates has released special economy class airfares for Perth travellers to celebrate the launch of its new European destination, St Petersburg. Prices start from \$1,600 return, including all airport charges and taxes and are valid for travel between 31 October and 31 January 2012. In 2011, Emirates has increased its European network to 28 destinations, with new services operating to Geneva (1 June), Copenhagen (1 August), and St Petersburg (1 November). Conditions apply. www.emirates.com/au

RUSSIAN RIVER CRUISING

Viking River Cruises has dramatically upgraded its Russian fleet to meet demand for the 2012 season.

Viking Rurik (formerly Peterhof), Viking Helgi (formerly Surkov), Viking Truvor (formerly Kirov), and Viking Ingvar (formerly Pakhomov) are some of the best river cruise ships in Russia, providing deluxe

staterooms and public areas comparable to those found on the finest European ships.

In the Ukraine, Viking Lomonosov sails on the Dnieper River between Odessa and Kiev.

The renovated Viking Rurik features full, private verandas in all 98 staterooms which have been refurbished in Viking's signature Scandinavian décor. The ship is named after Rurik, the Viking warrior who founded and ruled the area known as Rus – now Russia. Its sister ships – Helgi, Ingvar and Truvor – are named for Rurik's descendants, the original Russian explorers.

Viking River Cruises' 13-day 'Waterways of the Czars' voyage travels from St. Petersburg to Moscow, visiting the important landmarks of these two great cities as well as ancient villages such as Yaroslavl, Uglich and Mandrogy. Highlights include Moscow's Kremlin and Red Square; St. Petersburg's Pushkin, Peter and Paul Fortress and the Hermitage — as well as discovering the history and culture of Russia's heartland. Prices start at \$4,499 per person twin share. Viking's

all-inclusive pricing covers accommodation, all on-board meals, daily guided shore excursions, shipboard gratuities, and port charges. www.vikingrivercruises.com.au

RUSSIAN GATEWAYS

Gateway Travel has launched a number of tours ranging from three to seven nights in its 2012 Russian program, which all take in the majesty of Russia's major cities: Moscow, St. Petersburg and Novgorod the Great. All tours offer budget three-star and luxury five-star hotel options.

Prices for the eight-day 'Classic Moscow to St. Petersburg' tour start from \$2336 per person twin share staying in three-star hotels. There is also a five-day 'Moscow Short Break' option priced from \$1262 per person. Packages include bed and breakfast accommodation, sightseeing tours with English-speaking guides, transfers by comfortable bus, sightseeing tours, meals, train tickets and entrance fees. Tours are available year round and some are operated in reverse. www.russian-gateway.com.au

RUSSIAN CITY WONDERS

Trafalgar's eight-day 'Wonders of St Petersburg and Moscow' tour is priced from \$2150 per person twin share and includes the highlights of the major cities such as the Winter Palace and Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg; and a high-speed train trip to Moscow to see Red Square and St. Basil's Cathedral. The itinerary allows for plenty of free time to explore the cities with its 'hop on – hop off' feature; as well as 'insider highlights' – surprise experiences unique to each itinerary; and a 'Be My Guest' local dining experience in St Petersburg. www.trafalgar.com

Images (clockwise from top): Russian dolls; St Basil's Cathedral, Moscow; Russian caviar galore; Viking River Cruises' Rurik.





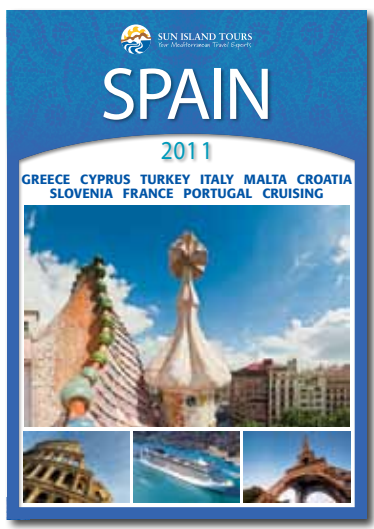
Sagrada Familia
Barcelona



*"Perhaps it is the sangria
As well...or the moon
Spinning a spell,
But I remember Barcelona
And the Plaza Catalunya...
The sound of church bells...
An old man, sitting on a corner
Playing Spanish guitar,
In melodies
Of running water
And dark eyes
Twinkling with stars..."*
by E. W. Richardson



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Touring Italy's great cities

SANDY GUY shares her experiences from a recent Globus tour of Italy with her 12-year-old son.

ALTHOUGH THE DOORS to the Vatican Museums open at 10 am, there's already a long line of people waiting outside by eight. We don't wait for a moment after disembarking from our luxury tour bus, and sashay through the entrance to view the Vatican's treasures minus the crowds.

Led by local guide Antonio, an expert on Roman history and art, our group wanders through the grand gallery of maps, which is empty. The breathtaking Sistine Chapel is empty too: we have the immense privilege of viewing Michelangelo's masterpiece in the solitude of the quiet chapel.

The Vatican Museums are one of the highlights of an eight-day Globus tour of Italy's great cities – Rome, Florence and Venice, with side

trips to Pisa and Verona – that my son Dion, 12, and I embark on from the Eternal City, with around 30 co-travellers and British-born guide, Anna, who has lived in Italy for 30 years.

Later in the day Dion and I munch pizza in one of Rome's sunny squares as scores of scooters whoosh past. We stroll to the Parthenon, climb the Spanish Steps, and flip a coin into the Trevi Fountain.

That's what I enjoy about this tour: while guided sightseeing each morning is included in the tour price, there's the choice of taking optional tours in the afternoon at an additional cost. This suits Dion and I perfectly: we're new to coach tours, and while we enjoy seeing the sights with the

friendly tour group, we can combine this with exploring Rome at our own pace.

The following morning we board the coach – like a luxe lounge room on wheels – for the Colosseum, built in AD 80, where Antonio delivers a fascinating commentary on this ancient stadium, where gladiators clashed and prisoners fought off lions. Dion is spellbound by the place, as he is by the Roman Forum, Temple of Julius Caesar, Arch of Septimius Severus, and Palatine Hill.

Checking out of our inner-city hotel the next day – something that requires us to barely lift a finger; bags are collected from our room and delivered to the next hotel like magic – the coach heads north to Pisa.

Busy autostrades link Italy's major cities. But we take the scenic route, following the Aurelian Way and Tyrrhenian coast. As the mesmerising landscape rolls by, Anna, a font of information on Italy, delivers a fascinating commentary on everything from the country's history, geography, regions, wines and cuisine to politics.

After a stop in Pisa to snap the celebrated tower, our lounge-on-wheels heads to Florence, capital of Tuscany and cradle of the Renaissance.

Joined by another local guide – Globus uses resident guides in Rome, Florence and Venice – we visit the city's ancient sights, including the circa 1296 Duomo cathedral; Academy of Fine Arts to pay our respects to Michelangelo's famous statue of David; splendid Piazza Della Signoria and Ponte Vecchio, and incredible Uffizi Gallery, which houses the world's largest collection of Italian and Florentine art.

Accommodation in Florence is at the Hilton Metropole, a curious choice by Globus – it's miles from the city and a bit disappointing.



Marooned at the Hilton with nary a trattoria in sight, we join the tour group to dine at I Tre Pini Restaurant in the village of Pozzolatico, situated in the Florentine hills, where we feast on antipasto, pasta with fresh artichokes and roast beef, all the while being serenaded by a local baritone with classical Italian opera.

Winding through the Appenine Mountains we pass spectacular mountainous countryside on the way to Verona. Verona is like a mini-Rome, with an ancient amphitheatre, fine piazzas and churches, and Casa di Julietta – where legend has it Juliet called for Romeo from a tiny balcony jutting from the wall.

From Verona we head to Venice, checking into the (thankfully) charming Hotel Carlton on the Grand Canal, near Santa Lucia railway station.

Venice is made up of 117 small islands linked together by a network of canals and more than 400 bridges including the famous Ponte de Rialto, which we pass on the 40-minute vaporetto (water bus) ride to the city's epicentre, San Marco Square.

Led by a local guide, we learn all about the elaborately decorated halls of the Doge's Palace, built in the 9th century, and the soaring splendour of Basilica di San Marco.

Later, after wandering, dazzled by the city's beauty, through labyrinthine streets, Dion and I take a pit-stop at Café Florian on San Marco Square, which opened in 1720. We're seated beside people fabulously clad in 17th century costumes. It's a week before Carnival, but the city already has an aura of festival magic.



There's a feeling of carnival in the air as the tour group boards gondolas for an evening cruise along the canals, which twist past the architectural magnificence that is Venice. Blessed with a lack of cars and scooters, the city is wonderfully silent. That is until a gondolier breaks into song, belting out Italian classics like O Sole Mio, on what is another magic moment on a memorable journey.

Images courtesy Sandy Guy and Globus.

Globus' eight-day Italy's Great Cities tour has regular departures throughout 2012. The tour is priced from \$1,809 per person twin-share including all accommodation, breakfasts, and two three-course dinners. Transport is by deluxe motorcoach, with an average group size of 38 passengers. www.globus.com.au

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Swiss precision and perfection

For a country where sun seekers have to make do with a scattering of lakeside beaches, Switzerland more than makes up for it with jaw-dropping scenery. JOHN NEWTON takes in some of the stunning sights.

AS PERFECT summer days go, they don't come much better than in land-locked Switzerland - with its lakes and rivers, mountains and valleys, glaciers and forests.

The captivating Swiss Riviera - boasting its Mediterranean climate along Lake Geneva (or Lac Lemman as it's known in French-speaking Switzerland) - offers a matchless array of entertainment, events, recreation, sports facilities and gastronomic delights.

While Vevey has often played second fiddle in the popularity stakes to nearby Montreux, this quaint little town has a charm all of its own.

A few years ago, Vevey did an about-turn and overshadowed its more glamorous

neighbour with one of the great Bacchanalian summer events of the century - the Fete des Vignerons, or Winegrowers' Festival.

Organised by the 400-year-old-plus Confrerie des Vignerons (Brotherhood of Winegrowers), the event - staged only 11 times since its origins in 1783 because of the complex production and cost - attracted visitors from all over the world to the town's Grand' Place - the second biggest marketplace in Europe after Lisbon.

A museum dedicated to the festival is open daily in Vevey. The idyllic town even has its own wine train to the vineyards of the Lavaux - as different as they are lustrous - in the canton of Vaud.

From Vevey, it takes just 20 minutes for the wine train to reach Chexbres, where you can take a nice and easy stroll through the picturesque World Heritage-listed terraced vineyards which slope down to the shoreline of Lake Geneva. There's a choice of 26 wine-tasting stops.

A region to delight the eye, as well as the palate, it has attracted many celebrities - including Charlie Chaplin, who lived at the Manoir de Ban, a large property in Corsier, north of Vevey, for almost a quarter of a century before his death in 1977. A bronze statue - 'The Tramp' - created by the English sculptor John Doubleday, was erected by the lakeside in Vevey in 1982 as a local tribute to Chaplin, whose daughter Geraldine (of Dr Zhivago fame) and son Michael still live close to the town.

This year, another Chaplin tribute has been unveiled near Vevey - a 20 million Swiss franc investment on renovated low-cost rental apartments featuring frescos of Chaplin on the outside of the buildings.

Not far from the lakeside Chaplin statue, locals and visitors alike can sunbathe on a man-made beach on the marketplace, while those who want to get even closer to the lake can jostle for chairs built into rocks near the water's edge.



Swiss people travel more kilometres by train than their counterparts anywhere else in the world. On average, each person travels about 2103 kilometres a year - that's 127 kilometres a year more than those in Japan, the nearest rival.

Just a short steam boat or train ride along the lakeside, Lausanne has been dubbed the Olympic capital even though it has never held either a summer or winter Olympic Games.

The city's Olympic Museum is one of Switzerland's national treasures and houses the most prestigious collection of Olympic objects in the world - from sports equipment, torches, medals, mascots, stamps and coins and pins to official outfits and ceremony costumes and a rare collection of statuettes, vases and jewels which bear witness to the splendour of the ancient games.

Also on display in the 'temple of sports' is one of Cathy Freeman's shoes which she wore to blitz the field and win gold at the 2000 Sydney Olympics.

No visit to Lausanne would be complete without stepping into the 13th century cathedral built on the hill of the old city overlooking Lake Geneva. It's the biggest gothic monument in Switzerland and was constructed over 80 years, but never finished (it's missing a tower). The cathedral's Italian-designed, US-built organ has 6600 pipes and when installed it took 12 months to tune it.

In Switzerland, you are never more than 20 kilometres away from a lake or a river. The country has 1484 lakes, 1 national park, 16 natural parks and five UNESCO World Heritage sites.



Like Vevey, Lausanne also has been home to celebrities, including Coco Chanel who lived near the city for 30 years. Her real name was Gabrielle – not Coco.

When they're not on the water or scrambling for a spot to sunbathe, the locals head up to the mountains, glaciers and forests around the Joux Valley, where only the sound of cow bells can be heard. Even if there's no snow on the peaks, young and old, couples, families or groups can take a stroll, cycle, roller skate or go hiking along the many alpine trails. The less energetic will be captivated by the lakeside villages, tranquil countryside, medieval castles, and ancient market towns and villages (don't miss Switzerland's oldest monastery founded in Romainmotier in AD 450), while indulging in some mouth-watering Swiss fondue.

The Joux Valley is a stronghold of precision Swiss watch-making. A former watch

factory at Le Sentier, the Espace Horloger, has an exhibition on the history of watch-making and a fascinating collection of watches dating from the 16th century.

Throughout the year – and particularly in the summertime - the Lake Geneva region sways to the rhythm of major festivals and out-of-the ordinary events that are of international interest – the stand-out being the famous Montreux Jazz Festival which lures more than 220,000 spectators to the sumptuous Stravinsky Auditorium or in the Miles Davis Hall.

But wherever you go in this breathtaking region you can be assured of perfect days in a country as near perfect as you will find. www.switzerland.com

Images (clockwise from left): Switzerland's stunning landscapes; Vallee De Joux; Lausanne Cathedral; Museum of Charlie Chaplin

Switzerland.
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Ladies week.

MySwitzerland.com

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