

ST PETERSBURG.

Ian Belcher writes about a St. Petersburg Winter City break in the Sunday Times.

WINTER IN St Petersburg is about hot white nights and freezing white days, when iney — virgin snow and glinting ice — highlights the palaces, canals and cathedrals like exquisite make-up. It's the time to wrap up like a Teletubby — leave the furs and stilettos to the locals — and yomp into its colonnaded, marbled, stuccoed heart.

However frequently you stop for a slug of vodka, however, the cold can get brutal, so this time I've decided to work up a sweat. After a couple of nights in town, I'm off to sample St Petersburg's newest winter sport, kite-skiing — whose name requires little explanation. It is wind-assisted skiing or boarding, and it sounds complicated, extreme and, frankly, more than a little bit terrifying.

In the city: no town looks as chic in the snow as St Petersburg. I've spent whole days wandering streets washed by invigorating subzero light, the painted facades — the green Hermitage Museum, the pinky-orange Mikhailovsky Castle — stark against the white backcloth. My favourite winter stroll is beside the city's frozen artery, the lumpy, lethal River Neva. Some locals — the "walruses" — smash the crust and plunge in, before sunbathing against the warm, black granite of the Peter and Paul Fortress. I prefer just to stare. The Thames is never this awesome.

I also go to St Petersburg for a party. The city is rediscovering its love of a winter knees-up, and stripping off (almost all of) your layers to head indoors is half the fun. At the Magrib nightclub (Nevsky Prospekt; 00 7 812-275 1255), New Russia flaunts itself: I've watched women check in their furs at the door and take their chiselled cheekbones and endless legs onto the dancefloor.

You can eat superb Uzbek food, including vodka-minted salmon, at the super-kitsch Karavan (Voznesensky Prospekt; 310 5678), or burrow into the cosy, sofa-strewn basement at The Idiot (Moika Embankment; 315 1675) for blini, caviar and Siberian mushrooms. And you can gorge on a cornucopian cultural banquet without worrying about the summer queues. Stride from the foreign masterpieces at the Hermitage (www.hermitagemuseum.org) to the monumental iconography at the Russian Museum (www.rusmuseum.ru), before snoozing through La Sylphide at the Mussorgsky Opera Theatre (www.mussorgsky.narod.ru).

Alternatively, stand among headscarved babushkas in Kazan Cathedral, or make for suburban Petrodvorets and perspire at the Shuvalovka banya (Sankt-Peterburgskoe, 450 6451), where Nina has a welder's forearms and a lethal sprig of birch. Sweat, spirituality and savage history: St Petersburg offers a singular winter break.

In the snow: a touch to the left, down a tad, and I'm off across the vast ice sheet, a man utterly out of control.

This is kite-skiing — and, incontrovertibly, I haven't a clue how to do it.

Olga and Kirill Vonogovi teach three-hour classes off Vasilevsky Island (£60; 00 7 921 328 9951, www.surfstation.ru), a 15-minute taxi hop from the city, where the sky and the frozen Gulf of

Finland fuse into a hundred shades of grey. Unless you have prior experience on the piste, you're unlikely to get up on skis in the first session, but you will, nonetheless, enjoy some exhilarating kite-flying.

Control is easily learnt — until the kite canopy hits 45 degrees, the power zone, when it feels like flooring a Lamborghini's accelerator.

Lean back or you'll fly face forwards and be dragged towards the surrounding forest — or Sweden. "Feel the wind," Olga explained. "It will listen to you." Not today it didn't.

It's apparently easier on skis, when you dig the edge in. I'll take her word for it.

Tour operators: Ian Belcher travelled as a guest of Baltic Holidays (0845 070 5711, www.balticholidays.com), which has three nights at the four-star Hotel Angleterre for £565pp, including flights. The company can arrange kite-skiing.