This is true of many other places, including Oslo, Reykjavik, the southern tip of Greenland and Seward in Alaska, but the fame and singularity of the White Nights of St Petersburg owes as much to history as it does to geography.

In no other northern city have the White Nights achieved such poetic and literary resonance. This is partly because St Petersburg is the world’s most northerly city with more than a million inhabitants, but also because in 1848 Fyodor Dostoyevsky wrote a short story about love and loneliness in the then imperial Russian capital. Since 1957 the powerful romanticism of this story has inspired adaptations by film directors of myriad nationalities: Italian (Visconti, 1957); French (Bresson, 1971); Iranian (Roshan, 2003); Indian (Chhalia, 1960, Janadan, 2003 and Nair, 2006); and American (Hackford, 1985 & Gray, 2008).

The famous ‘White Nights’ (Beliye Nochi) of St Petersburg, which occur from 11 June to 2 July, are a unique phenomenon. Because the city is located at 60 degrees North the sun does not dip deep enough below the horizon for the sky to grow dark around the time of the summer solstice.

The Marathon is held in late June, during which time night becomes curiously indistinguishable from day and streetlights become redundant. Potential romantic film sets abound on the embankments of the River Neva, which carves its broad course through the city and feeds the canals that give the St Petersburg the deserved sobriquet of ‘the Venice of the North’.

There is a special atmosphere on the streets of St Petersburg during this time, and it continues later through summer months: lively, friendly, romantic and bustling with people throughout the night as well as the day.

Those who most intently bustle through the city have come to run the marathon, or the associated 10km. Both races start and finish in Palace Square, just a short distance away from the river on the south side of the Winter Palace, the official residence of the Tsars from 1732–1917. It now houses the Hermitage Museum which first opened (within the Palace, when Tsar Nicholas I was in residence) in 1852.

Continued on page 17
PORTUGAL MARATHON

42TH

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NOV 8TH 2015

16K FAMILY RACE
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Six thousand runners packed Palace Square this year, ready for the 09.00 start. They had come from 50 countries. Enough of them finished within the six-hour time limit to make the White Nights Marathon 2014 the biggest ever held in Russia.

They set off westward at the start of one large, winding, figure-of-eight loop. St Petersburg was planned by Peter the Great, and was eventually built under his descendants, in grand imperial style and on such a scale that the marathon distance is contained mostly within what is recognisably the centre of the city.

Runners cut over to the Neva embankment after a kilometre, before crossing Lt Schmidt bridge, the first of ten that you will cross over the Neva and its feeder canals. The historic tour starts soon after that, with the iconic Dvortsov lifting bridge (the one that you see on vintage film of the 1917 revolution) on the right just past 3km. After an out-back section, which involves crossing a bridge over a different branch of the Neva, the Peter and Paul Fortress comes into view at 6km, and it takes 2000m of running before it is behind you.

This was the place which was supposed to be a military base, but became home to governmental departments, a burial ground of the Russian Imperial family, and the site of groundbreaking scientific experiments. But above all it was a forbidding jail in which those incarcerated included the ‘original’ anarchist Pyotr Kropotkin, the Tsarevich Alexei Petrovich, Fyodor Dostoevsky himself, Maxim Gorky, anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, Lenin’s closest confidant Leon Trotsky and the founder of the Yugoslav state, Josip Broz Tito.

You turn north past the Cruiser Aurora, which fired the blank shot that signaled the storming of the Winter Palace and the start of the October Revolution in 1917. You then embark on a 15km lap around the north of the city, which brings you back to the Dvortsov bridge at 22km.

You then begin a grand sweep through the centre and south of the city, first heading westward along the Neva and then doubling back along the embankment of the Fontanka Canal until at 30km you hit St Petersburg’s main thoroughfare, Nevsky Prospekt. Here you turn right over Anichkov Bridge with its four famous ‘Horse tamers’ statues and pass the Moscow railway station before joining the Neva river upstream for a grand 9km-long sweep towards the Winter Palace.

At around 35km you pass behind the Smolny Institute, where the Bolsheviks proclaimed victory in the 1917 October Revolution and which was their headquarters until Moscow became the new capital. It now houses the St Petersburg City administration and was the workplace of Vladimir Putin from 1991–1997. The bend in the river seems endless, but after 40km the familiar Dvortsov bridge comes into view. When you eventually reach it you turn away from the river for the last few hundred metres and re-enter the Palace Square at the end of your journey.

A concert starts up on the stage, and this particular white night is about to begin…

Next year’s race will be held on 28 June 2015.
19TH EDITION
Official record 2:17.27

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