

Introduction to Russia

Your experience of Russia will depend very much on where you choose to go. While our Itineraries chapter can help you sort through the multiple options, the following should also provide a clearer idea of how best to spend your time. In short, those interested primarily in Russia's cultural and architectural highlights, and those whose need for creature comforts is high, should stick to European Russia, which is all of the country west of the Ural Mountains. If you don't mind occasionally roughing it and are in search of Russia's great outdoors, train your eye on the vast spaces of Siberia and the Far East. Even if you restrict your travels to European Russia, bear in mind that this area is still bigger than any European country, with terrain stretching from the frozen tundra that borders the Arctic Ocean to the peaks of the Caucasus, Europe's highest mountains, 3000km south.

Between these extremes lie Russia's two greatest cities and biggest tourist draws: Moscow and St Petersburg. Here tsars reigned and the world's greatest communist state was born, Russia's unique architecture developed and the Russian Orthodox Church flourished. Here too, modern Russia is most evident – as any traveller can experience in flashy, contemporary hotels, shops and restaurants or while sampling the pumping nightlife. Still, within a few hundred kilometres of either of these cities are dozens of appealing towns and villages where you can witness the timeless beauty of Russia's gentle landscape and agrarian culture: check out the highlights of both the Golden Ring and Western European Russia chapters for some ideas of where to go.

You don't need to head all the way to Siberia to find wilderness. North of St Petersburg in northern European Russia lie huge tracts of largely unexplored forest, lakes, marshes and tundra, ideal for outdoor pursuits. Among the more touristed sites are Kizhi Island, with its extraordinary assemblage of old wooden architecture; the venerable churches and monasteries of Vologda; and, especially popular with Russians, Father Frost's charming home town of Veliky Ustyug.

East from Moscow, then south, flows the Volga River. One of Russia's historic highways, the Volga links many cities of both ancient and modern importance – among them Yaroslavl (a key city in the famous Golden Ring), Nizhny Novgorod, Kazan, Volgograd and Astrakhan – along its course to the Caspian Sea. Numerous ethnic minorities, whose religious beliefs range from Islam to Buddhism to animism, live in or near to the Volga Basin. They are reminders of European Russia's proximity to Asia and its long history of invasion, migration and cultural exchange.

Forming a low barrier between European Russia and Siberia, the Ural Mountains stretch from Kazakhstan in the south to the Arctic Kara Sea in the north. Apart from opportunities to hike and undertake some gentle river rafting, here you'll find major cities, such as historic Yekaterinburg, and Russia's main downhill ski centre at Magnitogorsk.

The other great European Russian waterway, the Don River, flows south from near Moscow to the Sea of Azov, an offshoot of the Black Sea, near Rostov-on-Don, which is known as the gateway to the Northern Caucasus. South of here, along the Black Sea and centred around Sochi, is a coastal riviera to which Russians flock for summer holidays, while heading east is the Kuban Steppe, part of the great rolling grasslands (now largely given over to agriculture) that continue through to Mongolia. The

Caucasus Mountains, a range of spectacular beauty and home to an incredible jigsaw of ethnic groups, rise on Russia's southern fringe. Many of these people were not conquered by Russia until the 19th century; today, some are tragically mired in bloody conflicts with each other or with Russia, putting parts of this region firmly off limits to tourism.

The images traditionally associated with Siberia and the Russian Far East – prison camps, snowbound exile, frozen wastelands – are also less than welcoming. So it's a great surprise to many Westerners to discover that Siberian summers can be a blistering 35°C, that there are beachside rave parties in Novosibirsk, great new restaurants in most of the cities, and that icy cold March is actually the best time to visit as frozen lakes and rivers turn into motorable roads.

Certainly the region has a tragic history. Used by the tsars and then by the Soviet regime to dispose of 'undesirable elements', it took in first criminals, then political dissenters, the suspiciously wealthy, the religious, the stubborn citizens of troublesome nationalities and eventually virtually anyone for no reason at all. The writer Maxim Gorky gave voice to the national dread of Siberia when he described the region as 'a land of chains and ice'.

At the same time though, Russians have also long viewed this vast slab of land as a place of adventure, discovery and immense riches. This was where brave explorers and rapacious plunderers pushed forward the boundaries of the Russian Empire. Of the early exiles, many chose to stay on after their sentences had ended, seduced by the wide open spaces and, strangely enough, the sense of freedom.

The population of this great land is only three times that of metropolitan Moscow, with most of it huddled along the railways in the south, so with a handful of exceptions don't come here in search of manmade wonders. Instead be prepared to discover the serenity of Lake Baikal, the pristine geometry of the Altai Mountains, the fiery volcanic landscapes of Kamchatka, and the lush semitropical forests of the Sikhote-Alin Nature Reserve on the Pacific coast.

Travellers today still write, not of trips in Siberia, but of odysseys, hypnotised by unending views of taiga (Siberian forest) from the cocoon of a Trans-Siberian Railway carriage. By magnifying the difficulties for literary effect, such semifactual travelogues have helped to scare tourists into taking the 'rush through' approach. And travel agents are all too happy to oblige by perpetuating the 'tour only' myth. However, it's reasonably straightforward to hop across the region, taking one overnight train at a time, using the railway as a hotel, and spending the long summer days exploring.

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