

Siberia Сибирь

From the Ural Mountains to the great Lena River, the sheer size of Siberia is hard to comprehend. Fearfully cold in winter, swelteringly hot in summer and with a history of banishment and cruelty – for Westerners Siberia’s image doesn’t readily suggest a tourist destination. But Russians disagree. Southern Siberia’s beautiful peak-tickled underbelly offers world-class rafting, hiking and mountaineering. Amid endless forests are ramshackle wooden-cottage villages, and certain Siberian cities hide evocative historic cores behind their harsh Soviet exteriors. Of these, Tomsk and Tobolsk are the most memorable. Irkutsk and Ulan-Ude also have a certain charm and offer launching points to visit Siberia’s greatest attraction, Lake Baikal. Visiting all four cities, plus Omsk and Krasnoyarsk, makes sense by breaking a continental crossing into painless overnight hops using the Trans-Siberian Railway. Away from the railway tracks in Tuva, Altai, Buryatiya and Khakassia, local Buddhist and shamanistic beliefs remain closer to those of Mongolia or Tibet. Here local cultures retain their own sports, passions and languages while their fascinating ancient histories are faintly visible in mysterious *kurgany* (burial mounds), standing stones, petroglyphs and *kameny baba* (moustachioed stone idols).

Siberia has friendly inhabitants, rapidly improving restaurants and many new or renovated hotels. Prices are rising but remain much lower than in European Russia. The region remains one of the least toured areas in all of Asia; you’ll really need rudimentary Russian to travel independently as neither museums nor most hotels or restaurants usually have a word of English. However, several cities do have English-speaking tour agencies who can help you out. This is especially helpful for preparing trekking adventures (facilities are minimal *in situ*) and for arranging peak summer-season bookings around Altai and Lake Baikal.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Explore the kremlin and photogenically dishevelled old town of **Tobolsk** (p501), Siberia’s former capital
- Observe the Buryat Buddhist revival at **Ivolginsk** (p594), **Aginskoe** (p601) or the glorious **Tsugol datsan** (p601)
- Discover throat-singing and sumo-style *khuresh* wrestling in the wild **Tuva Republic** (p546)
- Beat the rush to **Olkhon Island** (p578), an ecofriendly getaway for meditational hikes, dog-sled rides and shaman encounters
- Cross the world’s deepest lake...in a taxi! **Lake Baikal** (p563) looks magical when frozen in March
- Trek in the spectacular **Ergaki** (p545), **Sayan** (p581) or **Altai** (p520) Mountains



History

Siberia’s early Altaic people were conceivably progenitors of the Inuit-Arctic cultures and of the Mongol-Turkic groups which expanded in westbound waves with Attila, Chinggis (Genghis) Khaan and Timur (Tamerlane). The name Siberia comes from Sibir, a Turkic khanate and successor-state to the Golden Horde which ruled the region following Timur’s 1395 invasion (see p37). From 1563, Sibir started raiding what were then Russia’s easternmost flanks. A Volga brigand called Yermak Timofeevich was sent to counter-attack. Though he had only 840 Cossack fighters, the prospect of battle seemed better than the tsar’s death sentence which hung over him. With the unfair advantage of firearms, the tiny Cossack force managed to conquer Tyumen in 1580, turning Yermak into a Russian hero. Two years later Yermak occupied Sibir’s capital Isker, near today’s Tobolsk. Russia’s extraordinary eastward expansion had begun.

Initially, small Cossack units would set up an *ostrog* (fortress) at key river junctions. Local tribes would then be compelled to supply Muscovite fur traders, and villages slowly developed. Full-blown colonisation only started during the chaotic Time of Troubles (1598–1613, p39) as Russian peasants fled east in great numbers. Local Altaic peoples were decimated by imported diseases like smallpox. Meanwhile settler numbers were swollen by exiled prisoners. Old Believers then followed after the religious rift of 1653. Other banished troublemakers included the influential Decembrists who’d failed to pull off an 1825 coup (p45).

Siberia’s fur-based economy rapidly diversified, and discoveries of gold, copper and ferric metals further encouraged colonisation. Despite quarrels over the status of Altai that weren’t resolved until 1864, trade with China brought considerable wealth following the treaties of Nerchinsk in 1689 and Kyakhta in 1728. Lucrative tea caravans continued trudging the seemingly endless Siberian post road until put out of business by the Trans-Siberian Railway after 1901 (see p742). The railway instantly changed the fortunes of cities according to whether or not they were on the line. By 1914 it had carried another five million new Russian settlers east.

Russia’s revolutions had reverberations in Siberia. In 1919 Omsk was the centre of Ad-

miral Kolchak’s anti-Bolshevik White Russia, and from 1920 to 1922 eastern Siberia was nominally independent as the pro-Lenin Far Eastern Republic centred on Chita. As the USSR stabilised and Stalin’s infamous Gulags developed, Siberia reverted to its old role as a land of banishment. Nonetheless unforced colonisation continued apace, especially after WWII when much heavy industry was shifted east for strategic security. Patriotic workers and volunteer labourers as well as prisoners undertook grandiose engineering projects, building dams, railways and whole new cities whose glum concrete realities often belied the dream.

Since the USSR’s collapse in 1991, certain settlements built with Soviet disregard for economic logic have withered into gloomy virtual ghost towns. In contrast, discoveries of vast oil and gas deposits in the frozen north have proven Russia’s greatest economic asset. Today petroleum as well as timber and minerals provide the wealth that is visibly transforming the region’s most prosperous cities, notably Tyumen and Krasnoyarsk.

Climate

Siberia. Impossibly cold, right? Well not necessarily. In some years February can dip to -50°C , which is too cold to do anything. However, March is arguably the best time to visit Siberia, with temperatures oscillating between -5°C and -25°C . On windless, sunny days the latter can even feel pleasant; the snow is crisp underfoot and you’ll feel comfy if you’re properly wrapped up in good ski wear and gloves. March is great for

TICK WARNING

The encephalitis threat (see p750) is often underestimated in Siberia. The ticks (*kleshchi*) that spread this nasty disease are alarmingly plentiful from May to July. The threat is worst in the taiga, but extends to well-trodden footpaths such as those along the Circumbaikal Railway, to the Akokan Gulag near Severobaikalsk and in the Stolby Park (Krasnoyarsk). Recently ticks have even been found in city parks and at the Ethnographic Museum (near Novosibirsk’s Akademgorodok). Don’t panic but do cover up and be vigilant.



driving across frozen rivers and even Lake Baikal. There's not really any spring. One day it's suddenly 10°C and the compacted blackened snow on the city pavements melts into slush. All those ski clothes soon feel far too warm and by midsummer temperatures can top a sweaty 35°C. Air is obviously cooler and fresh in the Altai or Sayan Mountains though rain there is always possible. In the brief autumn, colours can be beautiful but the seasonal transition is similarly abrupt, albeit with some false starts.

Getting There & Away TO/FROM RUSSIA

Several Siberian cities have air connections to Germany (from €480 return, p724), the

Caucasus, Central Asia and the Far East. Flying from Ürümqi (western China) to Novosibirsk handily saves getting a Kazakhstan transit visa.

Trains run between Novosibirsk and Almaty (Kazakhstan) daily, between Irkutsk and Ulaan Baatar (Mongolia) nine times weekly and between Chita and Manzhouli (China) three times weekly. For all routes a nearby road border allows hop-across independent travel. Since 2004 an exciting new option is the rough road between Kosh-Agash and Olgi (Mongolia) via Tashanta.

WITHIN RUSSIA

If you book three weeks in advance, super-discount air tickets from Moscow to Irkutsk

or Bratsk can cost under R4000 – that's cheaper than the train. Travel agencies and even sometimes the airlines themselves sell them. Other well-connected airports include Krasnoyarsk, hub for **KrasAir** (www.krasair.ru); Novosibirsk with **Siberia Airlines** (www.s7.ru); and Abakan, a secondary hub for **Vladivostok Airlines** (www.vladavia.ru).

First-time visitors often erroneously imagine that there's only one 'trans-Siberian' train running Moscow–Vladivostok. In fact there are dozens operating along sections of the route. In summer several extra cross-Ural services connect from various Siberian cities to Adler (near Sochi) and Kislovodsk (a Caucasus spa). Beware that certain routes cut through a corner of Kazakhstan, with potentially catastrophic consequences for your visas.

Getting Around

Distances are great but travel is remarkably painless if you break journeys into overnight train hops. An ideal routing is Yekaterinburg–Tobolsk–Omsk–Tomsk–Krasnoyarsk–Irkutsk–Ulan-Ude. For the Altai Mountains and Tuva, use Tomsk–Biysk or Krasnoyarsk–Abakan trains respectively then hop on buses or shared taxis. Handy Kyzyl–Irkutsk flights (Saturday) let you continue east from Tuva without backtracking via Abakan.

TYUMEN & OMSK REGIONS ТЮМЕНСКАЯ И ОМСКАЯ ОБЛАСТИ

The highlight of these regions is the historic and delightfully ramshackle old town of Tobolsk, but en route you could happily spend a day strolling and dining in the vibrant cities of Tyumen or Omsk.

TYUMEN ТЮМЕНЬ

☎ 3452 / pop 507,000 / ☎ Moscow +2hr
Founded in 1586, Tyumen was the first Russian fort in Siberia. These days the city exudes a sense of growing prosperity as the booming capital of a vast, oil-rich *oblast* (region) stretching all the way to the Arctic

Circle. The city has a businesslike drive and youthful bustle, best experienced by strolling through City Park on summer weekend evenings amid the musical fountains. Pleasant and liveable, Tyumen has tree-lined streets and a fair few older buildings amid all the new construction, but if you have limited time you'd be better off seeing Tobolsk instead.

Orientation

From the fine Trinity Monastery to well beyond the bus station the main thoroughfare is ul Respubliki. The train station lies around a kilometre south of ul Respubliki at the end of ul Pervomayskaya.

MAPS

City maps and hard-to-decipher bus-route plans are sold at **Knizhny Magazin** (Poliklinika Bldg, Privokzalnaya ul 28a; ☎ 8.30am–6pm Mon–Sat, 9am–4pm Sun) near the train station and more expensively at **Knizhnaya Stolitza** (ul Respubliki 58; ☎ 10am–7pm).

Information

There are dozens of exchange bureaux and ATMs in the city centre, including at hotels Vostok and Tyumen.

Internet Salon (cnr uls Respubliki & Krasina; Internet per hr R28.80; ☎ 11am–8pm) Through the phone office on ul Krasina. Prepay at room 3.

Main post office (ul Respubliki 56; ☎ 8am–8pm Mon–Sat, 9am–6pm Sun)

Sberbank (ul Melnikayte 82; ☎ 9am–2pm & 3–5pm Tue–Sat) Good dollar and euro rates and 24 hour ATM.

Telephone office (ul Respubliki 51; Internet per min R0.48; ☎ 24hr)

Trikita (ul Melnikayte 100; Internet per hr R30; ☎ 24hr) Slow but handy for Hotel Vostok. By day enter through the Megafon cellar-shop, by night good luck!

Tyumen.ru (www.tyumen.ru, in Russian) Has air and railway timetables plus updated cinema listings.

Web Khauz (ul Respubliki 61; Internet per hr R28; ☎ 11am–8pm) Entry from ul Profsoyuznaya, up two flights of stairs then along a balcony.

Sights

TRINITY MONASTERY

Riverside **Trinity Monastery** (ul Kommunisticheskaya 10) is undoubtedly Tyumen's most appealing architectural complex. Its kremlin-style crenellated outer wall is pierced by a single gate-tower. Behind, black and gold domes top the striking 1727 **Peter & Paul Church**. Its

comprehensively renovated and sensibly priced. Breakfast included.

MIDRANGE

Hotel Neftyanyik (☎ 461687; fax 460021; www.neftyanyik.ru; ul Chelyuskintsev 12; s/tw/d R1200/1400/2040) Now thoroughly renovated, this concrete slab block has the best position for visiting the nicer old-town areas. Double rooms have sitting areas with flouncy sofas. Some single rooms cost only R1100 but are much less stylish.

Hotel Prometey (☎ 250 021; fax 251 423; 5th fl, Sovetskaya ul 61; s/tw/d R1250/1700/1700) Fully renovated bedrooms have pleasant new furniture though the bathrooms don't quite reach the same standard. Beds in the single rooms are a good size but in twins they're barely wide enough for stick-insects.

Hotel Tura (☎ /fax 282 209; ul Melnikayte 103a; s/tw/d R1370/1950/2160) This relatively small, well-kept hotel near the Vostok has pleasant, subdued décor and new shower-booth bathrooms. One breakfast is included per room.

TOP END

Hotel Tyumen (☎ 494 040; www.hoteltyumen.ru/en; ul Ordzhonikidze 46; s/d R3500/4400, ste R6000-7700) Nicknamed 'Quality Hotel', typical international business standards come complete with muzak, ping-pong elevators, a giftshop and great restaurants.

President Hotel (☎ /fax 494 747; ul Respubliki 33; s/d/ste R3200/4000/5500) Reached by a glass elevator through the atrium of the self-proclaimed 'World Trade Centre', the rather overpriced rooms are fully equipped but blandly styleless. Night-time security guards are less than welcoming.

Eating & Drinking

Eateries are dotted along uls Lenina and Respubliki with terrace cafés appearing in summer outside the **Art Palace** (ul Respubliki) cinema-concert complex.

Korolevskaya Trapeza (☎ 451 248; ul Lenina 4; R60 cover after 8pm; biznes lunch R200, meals R250-650; ☎ noon-midnight Mon-Sat) High-vaulted ceilings with Crusader murals and throne chairs give this atmospheric place the feel of a medieval castle. The subtly delicious *svinina po-burgundski* (Burgundy pork) uses prunes to great effect. Enter via a courtyard behind Osminog casino and the Italika pizzeria.

Vienna Café (Hotel Tyumen; meals R400-700; ☎ 6am-3am) With a wide-ranging English-language menu and long opening hours, this smart café-restaurant offers good cakes and tongue-tickling snack meals like Thai rice-noodles (R150) or aubergine in oyster sauce (R160).

Kofeynya (☎ 466 083; ul Semakova 19; espresso R40; ☎ 8am-11pm) Tyumen's top coffee house has an astonishing range of special grinds, delicious cakes and *mate* teas served in curious, wooden bulbs shaped like opium pipes, just as they are in South America.

Pinta Taverna (☎ 250 220; ul Dzerzhinskogo 38; meals R200-400, beers R60-100; ☎ 11am-2am) Waitresses in peasant costumes and a stunted model cow star in this cosy farmyard-styled cellar beneath Vulkan slot-machine casino.

Restaurant Mozart (☎ 455 363; ul Respubliki 34; meals R500-1200, cover R200 after 7pm) Tyumen's top restaurant tries a little too hard to look elegant but its menu (in English) offers extraordinary creations like pistachio-stuffed prawns.

If you're out near Hotel Vostok and in need of a feed, try one of these three options. The low-key *biere* pub **Pivnoy Klub** (☎ 283 669; ul Melnikayte 103; meals R65-140, beers from R40; ☎ 10am-11pm) has heavy wooden seats, displays Gambrian glasses and serves perfectly cooked chicken ragout using wonderfully crunchy fresh vegetables. Next door is the ever-popular Friday fast-food joint. **Telega** (☎ 782 232; ul Melnikayte 100; meals R350-900; ☎ 11am-2am) is a cute, Ukrainian cellar-restaurant with a carefully contrived village feel and unfiltered *weissbier* (white beer, R100) on tap. The semi-stylish café **Zakusochnaya Teatralnaya** (☎ 246 833; ul Respubliki 36/1; meals R80-250, beers from R30; ☎ 10am-10pm) has reasonably priced if less-than-memorable food with amusingly grouchy staff.

Getting There & Away

AIR

There are daily flights to Moscow (R5000 to R6900), three flights weekly to St Petersburg and various international connections, including flights to Baku (R9100, Wednesday), Kyiv (R7470, Tuesday) and Tashkent (R6730, Wednesday). Tickets are sold by **UtAir Aerokassa** (☎ 453 131; ul Pervomayskaya 58a; ☎ 8am-8pm) opposite the train station and by **Transagenstvo** (ul Respubliki 156; ☎ 8am-8pm) which also sells train tickets.

BUS

From the **bus station** (ul Permyakova), 3km east of the centre, seven daily buses to Tobolsk (R260, five hours) travel via Pokrovskoe (R89, 1¼ hours).

TRAIN

Useful overnight rail connections include Omsk (R700, eight hours) and Kazan (R1100, 22 hours, departs 4pm). Three daily trains (4½ hours) serve Tobolsk and a *platskart* (3rd-class) ticket is R180. While the ugly train station undergoes its long-term reconstruction, rail tickets are sold across the square at ul Pervomayskaya 62.

Getting Around

Tyumen's **Roshchino Airport** (☎ 496 450; http://roschino.tyumen4u.com/, in Russian) is 30km west of the centre. Take *marshrutka* 35 (R18 plus R8 per bag, 40 minutes) from outside Transagenstvo which leaves within 20 minutes of the first passenger getting aboard (last 8.40pm).

From the train station bus 25 serves Hotel Vostok and passes near the bus station – hop off at the Neptun/Stroitel stop then walk a block east, crossing the big clover-leaf junction of uls Permyakova and Respubliki. Metered taxis between bus and train stations cost R70, though freelancers ask R150.

Bus 13 from the train station loops around to the Hotel Neftyanyik; switch to frequent buses 30 or 14 in front of the President Hotel for Trinity Monastery. These follow ul Respubliki westbound but return along ul Lenina.

TOBOLSK ТОБОЛЪСК

☎ 34511 / pop 98,000 / ☎ Moscow +2hr

Tobolsk was once Siberia's capital and remains its most memorable city. Highlights are its handsome kremlin and a charmingly decrepit old town. Tobolsk is off the trans-Siberian mainline but direct overnight trains to both Yekaterinburg and Omsk make stopping here a perfectly viable option when crossing Russia.

An early visitor to the city was Yermak Timofeevich, whose band of Cossack mercenaries sacked the nearby Tatar stronghold of Sibir in 1582. Tobolsk's original fort was built five years later. Although locals were predominantly Muslim Tatars, Tobolsk became the seat of Siberia's first bishopric in 1620 as Christianity strove to stamp out

incest, wife-renting and spouse-stealing by sexually frustrated Cossacks.

Tobolsk also became the region's politico-military hub but its strategic importance started to wane in the 1760s, when it was bypassed by the new Great Siberian Trakt (post road). However, until the early 20th century, it remained significant as a centre for both learning and exile. Involuntary guests included Fyodor Dostoevsky en route to exile in Omsk, and deposed Tsar Nicholas II who spent several doomed months here in 1917.

Hospitable Muslim Tatars still form 30% of the city's population, many living in the quaint, if mosquito-blighted, old town. A handy local greeting is *istimissis* (hello); thank you is *rakhmat*.

Orientation

Buses from the inconvenient train station (some 10km north) give visitors a dismal first impression. Concrete drabness reaches a glum centre around the Hotel Slavianskaya, but don't be put off. Tobolsk's glories begin 3km further south around the splendid kremlin. Immediately beyond and below the kremlin, the old town sinks photogenically into the Irtysh's boggy flood plain.

Information

Gazprombank (ul Oktyabrskaya; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-4pm Mon-Thu, 9am-3pm Fri) Changes money.

Post office (Komsomolsky pr, M/R 42; ☎ 8am-6pm) Has an attached telephone office.

Servis Tsentr (Internet per hr R28.80; ☎ 8am-10pm) Behind the telephone office.

Sights

KREMLIN

Within the tower-studded 18th-century walls of the **kremlin** (☎ grounds 8am-8pm) are the intriguing but disused **Trading Arches** (Gostiny Dvor) and the glorious 1686 **St Sofia Cathedral**, whose central dome has recently been gilded. Less eye-catching from the outside, but with splendid arched ceiling murals, is the 1746 **Intercession Cathedral** (Pokrovsky sobor). Between the two is a 1799 **bell tower**, built for the Uglich bell which had famously signalled a revolt against Tsar Boris Godunov. The revolt failed; in a mad fury Godunov ordered the bell publicly flogged, de-tongued and banished to Tobolsk for its treacherous tolling. A tatty copy of the bell is displayed in the

'night-effect' interior but the music can get appallingly loud in the evenings.

Getting There & Away

Tobolsk is a stop on the railway line to Nizhnevartovsk, Purpe and Novy Urengoy. There are useful overnight connections to/from Yekaterinburg (R850, 12 hours) and Omsk (R890, 12 hours), though the latter arrives at 5am northbound. For Tyumen, trains (R167 *platskart*, 4¾ hours) are supplemented by seven daily buses (R260, five hours) via Pokrovskoe (3¾ hours), Raspustin's home village. Eight buses per day to various destinations pass Abalak.

Big ferries run from June to September out of the **river station** (☎ 96617) about 10 times per year to Salekhard on the Arctic Circle (1st/3rd class R2411/740, four to five days) via Khanty Mansysk and Beryozovo; tickets can be in very short supply. From any of those towns you could fly back to Tyumen, and from Salekhard you can cross the river to Labytnangi from where trains run to Moscow and Vorkuta. See Lonely Planet's *Greenland & the Arctic* guide.

Southbound, the ferries run to Omsk (1st/3rd class R1674/612, 79 hours) via Tara (51 hours).

Getting Around

Bus 4 and *marshrutka* 20 link the train station, new town and kremlin. Buses 1, 3 and 10 travel past the kremlin and loop around the old town. Bus 1 passes the mosque.

AROUND TOBOLSK

Abalak Абалак

From Tobolsk, a quiet road skirts the border of the ancient Tatar kingdom of Isker, continuing 25km to Abalak. Here the region's holiest **monastery** was built on the site of a miraculous materialising icon that was last spotted in Australia long after the Soviets had turned the church into a tractor barn. Today, the monastery is working again, with a copy of the icon over the door. There are charming views over the bend in the Irtysh River, with 249 steps leading down to the riverbank. From Tobolsk, buses bound for Yuzhno Begishebskie, Baygara or Zagbazdina stop at the Abalak bus stop (40 minutes), from which it's an obvious 1.5km walk to the monastery.

OMSK OMSK

☎ 3812 / pop 1.145 million / ☎ Moscow +3hr
Spending a day in Omsk, 568km southeast of Tyumen, is the best way of breaking a Tobolsk–Tobolsk or Tyumen–Novosibirsk train ride into two overnights. Vast and sprawling, Omsk's industrial suburbs look off-putting but the gently attractive central core has some fine century-old architecture and is dotted with parks, museums, great restaurants and quirky public sculptures.

Starting life as a 1716 Cossack outpost, Omsk grew rapidly and by 1824 had replaced Tobolsk as the seat of Siberia's governor general. Exiled Dostoevsky nearly died from a flogging while jailed here from 1849 to 1853. During the civil war Omsk was briefly the seat of Admiral Kolchak's government until overrun by the Red Army in 1919.

Orientation

The wide Irtysh River divides the city. On the western bank are the airport and bus station. The historic centre, 4km north of the train station, is on the eastern bank at the confluence of the Irtysh with the much smaller Om River. A bookstall upstairs within the train station sells excellent city maps.

Information

Bank Moskovy (pr Marksa 10; ☎ 10am–1pm & 1.45–4pm Mon–Fri, 10am–3pm Sat) Good euro rates and 24-hour ATM.

Hai Lama! (☎ 287 866; ul Mayakovskogo 15; Internet per MB R3, per hr R25; ☎ 24hr) Outside is a comical, cross-legged birdman sculpture in a tree.

K2 Adventures (☎ /fax 693 075; www.adventuretravel.ru; office 505, ul Neftzavodskaya 14) Uniquely experienced for extreme rafting and mountaineering expeditions on the toughest rivers and peaks of Siberia and Central Asia. Igor speaks English and can meet you in town, saving you a 6km trip (*marshrutka* 335 to bus stop Magistralnaya). **Navigator Internet Kafe** (ul Lenina 14/1; per MB R3, per hr R25–35; beers R30–60; ☎ 9am–10pm) Night shift R90 to R120 plus R2 per MB.

Omni Travel (☎ 500 070; Hotel Mayak; ☎ 10am–5pm Mon–Fri) English-speaking travel agency offering simple city tours.

Omskpromstroybank (ul Lermontova 20; ☎ 10am–2pm & 3–6pm Tue–Fri, 9am–2pm Sat) Good US dollar rates.

Post office (ul Gertsena 1; ☎ 8am–7pm Mon–Sat, 10am–5pm Sun)

Telephone office (ul Gagarina 34; ☎ 24hr) For calls prepay a deposit, dial the number (with 8–10 for international), then when connected press '3'.

KOLCHAK'S GOLD TRAIN

The reverberations of Russia's 1917 revolution are full of scarcely believable tales. Few top the incredible journey of the tsar's national gold reserve. With Communist forces closing in, royalists somehow managed to use barges and special trains to scurry east with over 1300 tons of gold, plus silver, platinum and millions of roubles in banknotes. When the retreat reached Omsk, the hoard fell into the hands of Admiral Kolchak. A former national hero for his Arctic explorations, Kolchak was then a minister in Omsk's anti-Lenin coalition. The captured cash allowed him to launch a coup ousting socialist-moderates. Even more money poured in as 'aid' from vehemently anti-Bolshevik Western powers. Thus, while much of Russia starved, 1918–19 in Omsk was a year of surreal extravagance. It couldn't last. Despite some initial successes, Kolchak's brutality as a general as well as his venality meant the movement soon backfired. The Whites collapsed and retreated to Irkutsk where, after a series of intrigues, Kolchak was summarily executed. His body was dumped in the Angara River at the point where his statue now stands (see p567). To pay Japanese agents for military supplies (which failed to arrive), some of the remaining gold was reportedly shipped east to Chita and never seen again. The counter-revolution disappeared with it.

Sights & Activities

Several witty **statues**, including a brass workman emerging from a manhole, add to the elegant, century-old façades of upper ul Lenina. Grandiose flourishes make the **Drama Theatre** (☎ 244 065; www.omskdrama.ru, in Russian; ul Lenina; ☎ cash desk 10am–7pm) Omsk's most ornate historical building. Decrepit but potentially fabulous, the 1905 **Hotel Oktyabrya Building** (Partizanskaya ul 2) faces the pointy little **Serafimo-Alexievskaya Chapel** which looks like it fell off a kremlin. Across Yubileyny Bridge, the **OGIK Museum** (Omsky Gosudarstvenny Istoriko-Kraevadchesky muzey; ☎ 314 747; ul Lenina 23a; admission R25; ☎ 10am–6:30pm Tue–Sun) has a strong historical and ethnographic collection. The next-door **Art Museum** (Omsky muzey iskusstv; ☎ 313 677; admission R100; ☎ 10am–6pm Tue–Sun) displays a lot of fussy decorative arts but the rectilinear 1862 building is a historical curiosity in itself. It was built as the Siberian governor's mansion and hosted passing tsars: note the original Kalmykian throne with its ebony elephant armrests and 7kg of beaten silver. In 1918–19 the building housed Admiral Kolchak's counter-revolutionary government and was thus the very heart of White Russia.

In the gardens behind the art museum are a **war memorial** and a **Lenin statue**, Vlad apparently preening himself in an invisible mirror. Beside the red-brick **former town duma** (pl Lenina) is the **Liberov Centre** (☎ 301 645; Dumskaya ul 3; admission R6; ☎ 10am–5pm Tue–Sun), with a piano room/gallery and a dozen works by renowned artist Alexei Liberov.

The city has several fine churches, including the 1870 **Krestovozdvizhensky Cath-**

edral (Tarskaya ul 33) and the 1840 neoclassical **St Nicholas Cathedral** (Svyato-Nikolsky sobor; ul Lenina 27a). In a 90-year-old timber house, the **Old Believers' Chapel** (ul Shchetinkina 10) is almost hidden by recent redevelopment.

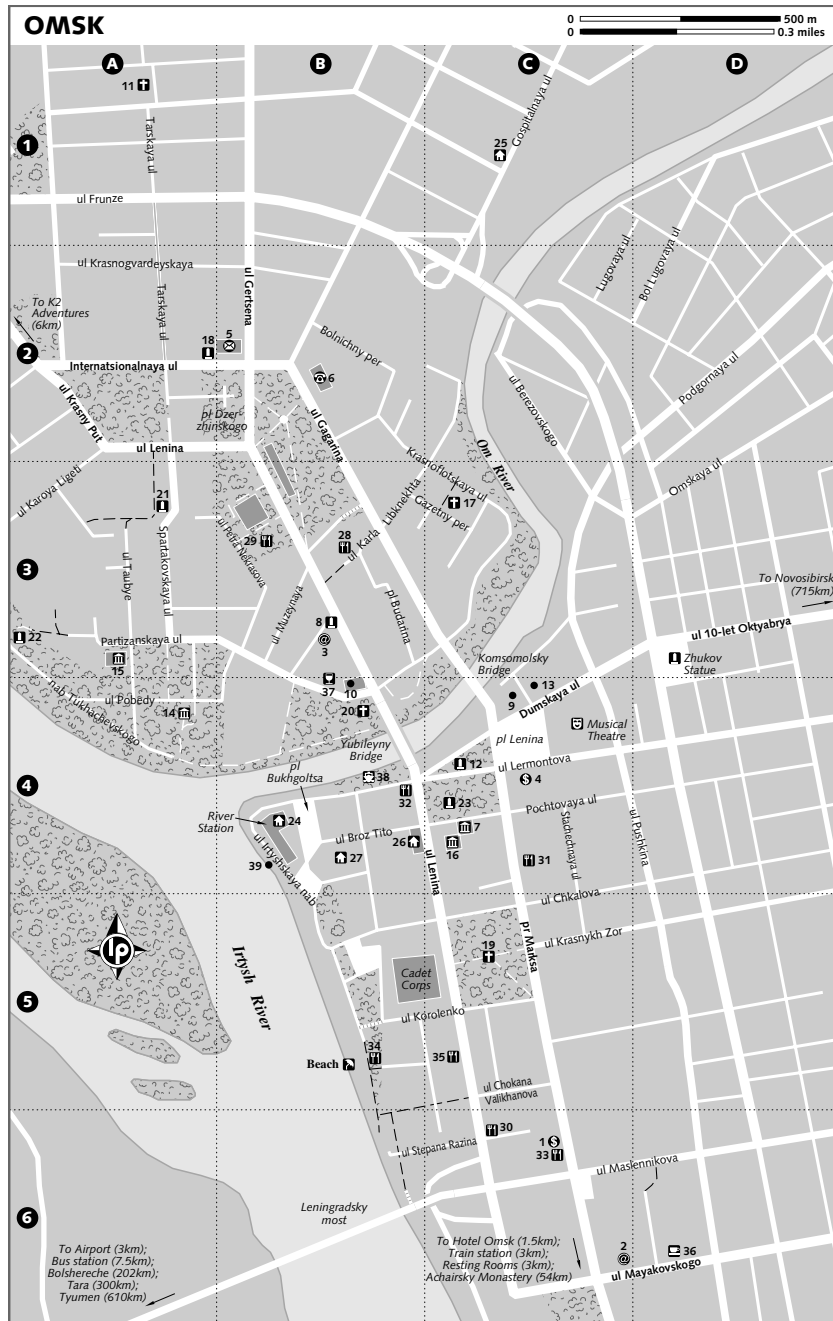
The limited attractions of the **Literature Museum** (☎ 242 965; ul Dostoevskogo 1; admission R40; ☎ 10am–6pm Tue–Sun) include some Dostoevsky doodles from the unhappy time the writer spent here. One block west a century-old brick building houses the newly renovated **Military Museum** (ul Taubye 7; admission R70; ☎ 10am–5pm Tue–Sun), its garden bristling with artillery.

Chunky but isolated and hardly thrilling, the **Tobolsk and Tarskaya Gates** are all that remain of Omsk's second (1791–94) city walls. Across pl Dzerzhinskogo from the latter, the curious **Pozharnaya Kalancha** (ul Internationalnaya) is an unusually photogenic, seven-storey firemen's lookout tower. Brick with white-washed column capitals, it was finished in 1916 and is something of a city icon.

Sleeping BUDGET

Hotel Omskgrahdanstroy (☎ 251 247; Gospitalnaya ul 19; dm/5/tw R210/350/660) Remarkably good value, this little-known hotel is the wrong side of the busy ul Frunze intersection, but still walking distance from the centre via ul Gusarova. Rooms are not sexy but are clean, large and all have private bathrooms – even the dormitories.

Hotel Omsk (☎ 310 721; fax 315 222; ul Irtyshskaya Naberezhnaya 30; dm R350, s R650–1200, tw R1200–1600) Halfway between the train station and centre,



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this big, drab concrete block is somewhat redeemed by its river views. Rooms are mostly unreconstructed Soviet affairs but a dozen have been fairly thoroughly rebuilt and certain others are half-heartedly redecorated. Very rarely full. Take any bus along ul Karla Marksa to the circus then walk five minutes through Pobedy Park to the riverside.

Resting rooms (komnaty otdykha; ☎ 442 347; train station; dm/tw R250/700) Rebuilt, clean and relatively inviting, they're in a separate building – exit the main station, turn left and find the door before the baggage *kassa*. TV costs R30 per hour extra.

Hotel Sibir (☎ 312 571; 2nd fl, ul Lenina 22; s R500-1300, tw R1300-2400) Despite a great central position in a historical building and some rudimentary improvements, the Sibir remains rather dingy and overpriced. Best deals are the cheapest singles which are very simple with a sink but no bathroom. Cheaper doubles have a basic toilet too. 'Better' rooms have new but clashing floral décor and musty old furniture.

MIDRANGE

Hotel Mayak (☎ fax 315 431; www.hotel-mayak.ru; ul Lermontova 2; s/tw R1920/2640) Within the rounded end of the vaguely ship-shaped Art Deco river station, the Mayak has small but stylish rooms with artistic lines and good bathrooms. Half-price for 12-hour stays.

Hotel Turist (☎ 316 419; fax 316 414; www.tourist-omsk.ru; ul Broz Tito 2; economy s/tw R1330/1640, standard s/tw R1680/1940, 1st-class s/d/tw R2100/2120/2350) A fairly appealing address with fine views from upper floors. Good 'first-class' rooms are totally rebuilt but the overpriced 'econ-

omy rooms' were remodelled back in the early 1990s and now look very worn.

Eating & Drinking

Chashka (☎ 252 379; www.hollcup.ru; 3rd fl, Pyat Zvyozd shopping mall; ul Karla Libknekhta; meals R150-450; ☎ 11am-midnight) Delft-style tiles, wooden half-wall panelling and a fireplace give a nominally Dutch décor while the menu (available in English) ranges from Creole pork to Thai beef via a delicious *baklazhany pa-rimski* (cheese-topped aubergine with olives and cream sauce, R127).

Senkevich (☎ 510 981; ul Sezdovskaya 1) Over-looking the river this stylishly contemporary glass-and-steel building incorporates a small sushi bar (R40 to R140 per piece), an airy business-casual Russian café (meals R260 to R600) and an upscale European restaurant (pastas R150 to R300, meals R400 to R1200) specialising in oysters and duck.

Dom Aktyora (☎ 313 254; ul Lenina 45; meals R230-600) A sedately atmospheric rendezvous for actors whose signed photos grace the walls. Thursday nights there's live jazz without cover charge.

Chudesnitsa (☎ 234 979; ul Nekrasova 8; meals R200-450; ☎ 10am-midnight) An unpretentious outdoor terrace marked simply 'Kafe' that's ideal for well-made Georgian cuisine on a sunny summer's evening.

Fresh pastries and croissants are sold at **Proviant** (ul Marksa 10; ☎ 9am-9pm) and from a **bakers' window** (☎ 10am-8pm) in the side of the traditional, upmarket Russian restaurant **Lygovskaya Sloboda** (☎ 311 540; ul Lenina 20; meals R350-1000; ☎ noon-1am). **Il Plato** (☎ 310 315; pr Marksa 5; salad-bar lunches R150-215, dinners to R600;

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Framed cameras, newspaper-clad ceilings old ticking clocks, and a hollowed-out double-bass 'bookshelf' all add to the special atmosphere of the reliably great-value **Restoran Zhurnalist** (☎ 511 313; ul Lenina 34; lunch R90-160, dinner R270-600; ☎ noon-1am). Even the waiting area is disguised as a 1920s tobacconist newsstand. Lunch deals for R110 include five salads and a perfectly filling 'small portion' main course. Try the Radeqa wine (R78 per glass), a fascinating red with strong strawberry notes from Abkhazia, one of the world's least-known (self-declared) countries.

☎ 9am-midnight Mon-Sat, noon-midnight Sun) does R90 set breakfasts with bottomless coffee.

Drinking

Ferma (☎ 247 827; Partizanskaya ul 2; beers R45-60, snacks R80-200) Beneath a splendid old-Omsk building, communist iconography is delightfully mocked in this amusing cellar bar-café where Sly Stallone, Elvis, Michael Jackson and Marilyn Monroe lurk surreptitiously in the Soviet realist paintings.

Coffee Base (☎ 307 578; ul Mayakovskogo 17; coffees R29-100; ☎ 10am-11pm) Pleasant coffee house with sensibly priced espressos. If your palate differentiates 80% from 100% Arabica beans, consider the more expensive 'Elite' blends. Food includes decent mini-bliny, pricey cakes and steaks.

Getting There & Away

Flight destinations include Moscow (R5500, several daily), St Petersburg (R5510, twice weekly) and Irkutsk (R6050, three times weekly) plus international connections to Germany (from US\$440, up to twice weekly) and Tashkent (US\$190, Wednesday). Numerous air-ticket agencies at the river station sell rail tickets (R150 commission).

Useful overnight trains from Omsk serve Tobolsk (No 395, R890, 13¼ hours, 4pm), Tomsk (No 38 or 272, R850, 14 hours), Novosibirsk (No 88, R420 *platskart*, 9½ hours), Yekaterinburg (No 67, 13 hours) via Tyumen (7½ hours) and Zlatoust (No 59, 17 hours) via Chelyabinsk and Miass.

For Tara the **bus station** (pr Komarova 2) is across the Irtysh just beyond the Khristo-

Rozhdestbensky Cathedral with its eye-catching gilded domes.

On a green barge behind the **river station** (pl Bukhgoltsa) is the **Rechflot** (☎ 398 563; ☎ 9am-7pm) ticket office. Also here is the jetty for hydrofoils to Tevriz via Tara and for ferries cruising the Irtysh River to Salekhard (six days, 1st/3rd class R3000/1098) via Tobolsk (R1674/612, two days) roughly three times monthly. Various **pleasure cruises** depart from a separate jetty near Yubileyny Bridge, notably for Achairsky Monastery (R160 return, four times daily mid-May to early October).

Getting Around

From the train station, trolleybus No 4 and *marshrutka* 335 run along pr Marksa to pl Lenina, past the main post office and on for miles up Krasny Put. Bus 60 crosses the Irtysh to the **airport** (☎ 517 570; lnzhernaya ul 1) while trolleybus 7 or the faster *marshrutka* 366 head for the bus station. Allow over half an hour in rush-hour traffic jams.

AROUND OMSK
Achairsky Monastery

This impressive riverside convent is 55km south of Omsk on the Pavlodar highway. The original 1905 buildings were destroyed in the 1930s and the site became a Gulag where, according to local guides, some 200,000 people died or were executed. Since 1992, impressive gilt-topped brick reconstructions include a five-storey belfry and a glittering nine-domed central church. Boat tours from Omsk (4½ hours return) stay long enough for you to stroll across the site to a holy spring that flows out beneath a cute wooden chapel in the woods. Alternatively, Achair-bound *marshrutky* leave roughly hourly (R30) from the 'Lobkova' stop, just two minutes' walk south of Omsk train station.

TARA TAPA

☎ 38171 / pop 26,000 / ☎ Moscow +3hr
Founded in 1594 as a defensive outpost for Tobolsk, Tara recovered from a devastating fire in 1669 to become a major trade centre. It was later eclipsed by Omsk, 300km to its south, becoming a dozy backwater and place of exile for several Decembrists. Soviet planners ringed an obligatory Lenin statue with a few small concrete eyesores on pl Lenina and destroyed five of the city's six great 18th- and 19th-century churches.

However, a gentle charm remains, making Tara a possible hop-off if you're taking the river route between Omsk and Tobolsk.

Within a block of each other are a small **museum** (pl Lenina; ☎ 9am-3pm Sun-Fri), the 1761 **Saviour's Church** (Spasskaya tserkov; ul Kuybysheva), a partly reconstructed **ostrog** (timber fortress) and the **Hotel Irtysh** (☎ 21538; pl Lenina 15; dm/d R140/636). The most attractive **wooden cottages** are in the lower town, down a short, steep bank beside a silver toadstool-shaped memorial, a block northeast of the square. With its little **mosque** this lower town straggles 3km along the river valley to the river station for Salekhard ferries (three monthly) and Omsk hydrofoils (alternate days, R170).

Buses (R166, six hours) and minibuses (R170, four hours) to Omsk each leave at least four times daily. The **bus station** (ul Izbisheva) is hidden away, two blocks north of the little market on ul Lenina (the main road from Omsk). Three blocks south of that market is the *ostrog* where you'd turn left walking to pl Lenina.

AROUND TARA**Bolshereche** Большережье

☎ 38169 / pop 11,000 / ☎ Moscow +3hr
About 100km before Tara, Omsk–Tara buses stop briefly in Bolshereche. Its pleasant outskirts have some old cottages and a renovated church. The central area is mostly unattractive but boasts a locally famous little **zoo** and a trio of small **traders' houses** (Sovetskaya ul) with beautifully carved wooden façades. One of these retains its original interior. The ultrabasic **Hotel Rus** (☎ 21851; ul 50i let VLKSM 7; dm/s/tw R100/290/200) is opposite the market.

NOVOSIBIRSK & TOMSK REGIONS
НОВОСИБИРСКАЯ И ТОМСКАЯ ОБЛАСТИ

Novosibirsk, 530km east of Omsk, is Siberia's biggest city. It's a lively and useful transport hub but you'll thank yourself for choosing Tomsk instead to break your long trans-Siberian journey.

NOVOSIBIRSK НОВОСИБИРСК

☎ 383 / pop 1.5 million / ☎ Moscow +3hr

If you want nightlife, restaurants with Las Vegas-style glitz or a choice of countless Irish pubs, Novosibirsk might be your Siberian dream come true. For anything else, consider skipping the place or departing the same evening on an overnight train. Novosibirsk hotels, already overpriced, have a weird rule preventing most from accepting foreigners unless prebooked through a tour agency.

Despite its size, Novosibirsk has relatively little to see. It grew up in the 1890s around the Ob River bridge built for the trans-Siberian. Named Novo-Nikolaevsk until 1925 for the last tsar, it grew rapidly into Siberia's biggest metropolis, a key industrial and transport centre exploiting coalfields to the east and mineral deposits in the Urals.

Orientation

Despite its daunting scale, the 'capital of Siberia' has a manageably simple centre focused on pl Lenina. The city's main axis, Krasny pr, runs through this square linking most points of interest. Across the river around Metro Studencheskaya, ul Karla Marksa has numerous dining alternatives at marginally more reasonable prices. Bookshop **Dom Knigi** (Krasny pr 51; ☎ 10am-8pm Mon-Sat, to 7pm Sun) has a good range of maps.

Information**INTERNET ACCESS**

Computer Klub Arena (☎ 220 3939; ul 1905 Goda 41; Internet per MB R3, per hr R15; ☎ 8am-9pm) Fun, with submarine-décor, downstairs through an inner courtyard of a school. Night shift R110 from 10pm, booking required.
Internet Tsentr (☎ 291 8841; ul Trudovaya 1; per 30 min R30; ☎ 9am-10pm) Beneath an apartment block; take the first alley off Vokzalnaya magistral when walking from pl Lenina. Night shift R110.

MONEY

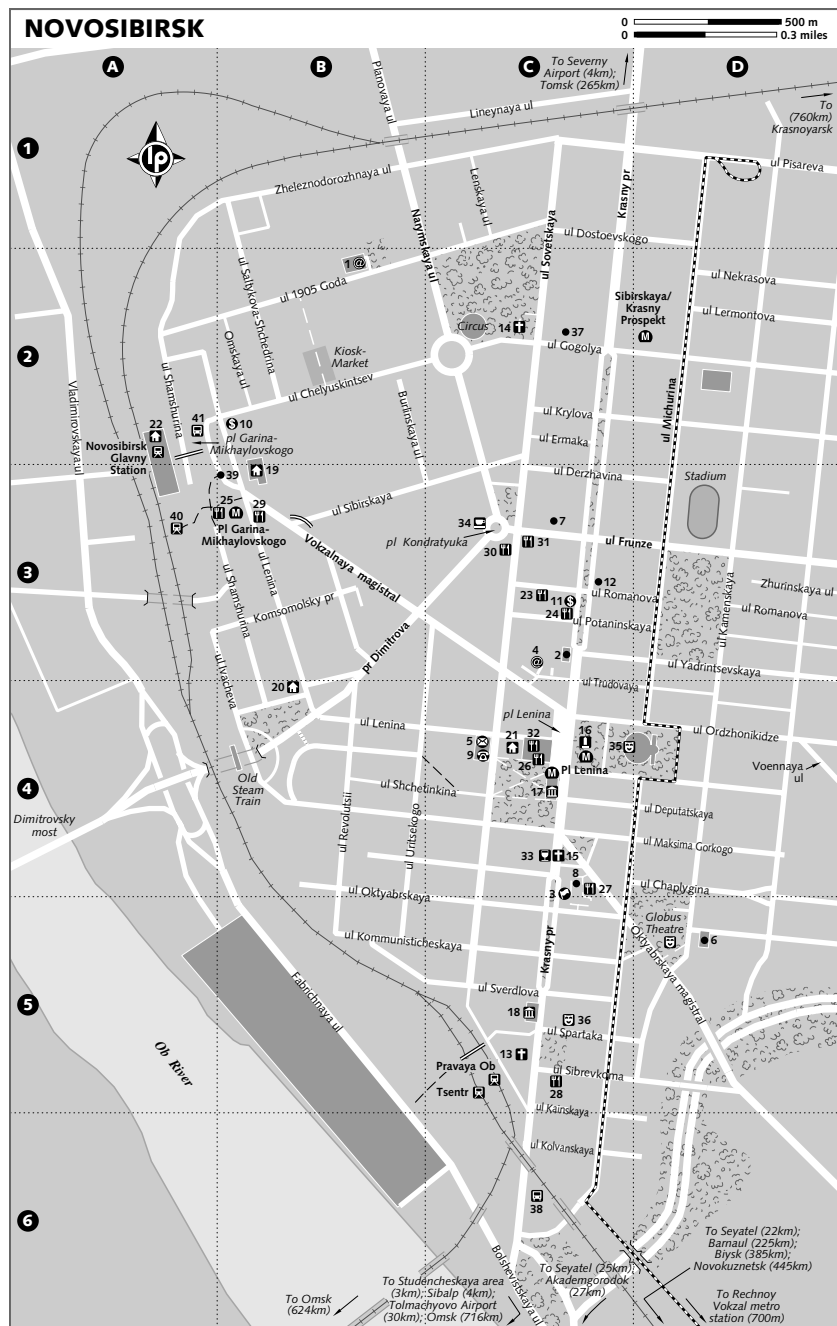
TranskreditBank (ul Lenina 86; ☎ 9.30am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) Handy for train station; 24-hour ATM.
Vneshtorgbank (Krasny pr 35; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) Decent euro rates.

POST

Main post office (ul Lenina 5; ☎ 8am-9pm Mon-Fri, to 7pm Sat & Sun)

TELEPHONE

Telephone office (ul Sovetskaya 33; ☎ 24hr)



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TRAVEL AGENCIES

Novosibirsk's many travel agencies virtually all offer packaged or tailor-made trips to Altai.

Acris (☎ 218 0001; www.acris.ru; 2nd fl, Krasny pr 35; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat) Offers upmarket Yenisey River cruises from Krasnoyarsk to Dudinka and, given plenty of warning, can sort out the awkward permits. Yuri speaks English.

Altair (☎ 212 5115; www.altairtour.ru; office 15, ul Sovetskaya 65) Helpful, with a wide range of tours and English spoken.

Sibalp (☎ 346 3191; http://sibalp.unpo.ru; office 515, pr Karla Marksa 2; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri, longer in summer) Focusing on Altai exploration trips for small-groups and independent foreign travellers, this is a helpful, personal travel service that can also arrange English-speaking homestays and city tours in Novosibirsk. Multilingual staff will meet clients at their hotel.

Sibir Altai (http://sibir.ru, in Russian; office 607a, ul Frunze 5; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Fri, 11am-3pm Sat) Packages Altai trips for local tourists, sold through numerous regional travel agencies. Minimal English. Runs direct weekend buses to Turbaza Katun.

STA-Novosibirsk (☎ 223 9534; www.sibtravel.com/eng; ul Oktyabrskaya 45a; ☎ 7am-1pm & 2-6pm) English- and German-speaking staff can book you into 'closed' hotels at very short notice for just R100 over normal costs. They offer a variety of Altai trips with set departure dates, prices varying according to take-up. The easily missed office is in a courtyard between the Mexico Kafe and German consulate.

Zhemchuzhina Altaya (☎ 219 2198; www.ozera.sib.ru, in Russian; office 306, Dom Bita, Krasny pr 50) Specialist for Lake Teletsko.

Sights

Novosibirsk's pl Lenina is dominated by the huge, silver-domed **Opera & Ballet Theatre** (p513). Bigger than Moscow's Bolshoi, its grand interior alone makes performances one of the city's highlights. In front, wearing a flapping coat, the dashing **Lenin statue** is flanked by waving partisans vainly trying to direct the chaotic traffic.

In an elegant mansion, the **Local Studies Museum** (Kraevedchesky muzey; ☎ 218 1773; Krasny pr 23; admission R150; ☎ 10am-5.30pm Tue-Sun) has Altai shaman coats, cutaway pioneer houses and some splendid religious artefacts. The **State Art Museum** (Khudozhestvenny muzey; ☎ 223 3516; http://gallery.nsc.ru; Krasny pr 5; adult/student R150/80; ☎ 10am-5.20pm Tue-Fri, 11am-5.20pm Sat & Sun) has an extensive collection including icons, Siberian art, Braque-esque works by Nikolai Gritsyuk and numerous distinctive mountainscapes by celebrated spiritual Russian painter Nikolai Rerikh.

CHURCHES

The pretty little **Chapel of St Nicholas** (Chasovnya Svyatitelya Nikolaya; pr Krasny) was said to mark the geographical centre of Russia when built in 1915. Demolished in the 1930s, it was rebuilt in 1993 for Novosibirsk's centenary. The gold-domed 1914 **Cathedral of the Ascension** (Voznesensky sobor; ul Sovetskaya 91) has a wonderful, colourful interior with a soaring central space that's unexpected from its fairly squat exterior appearance. The 1898 **Alexander Nevsky Cathedral** (sobor Alexandra Nevskogo; Krasny pr 1a) is a red-brick Byzantine-style

building with gilded domes and colourful new murals.

Sleeping

Novosibirsk hotels are poor value by Siberian standards. Most, including the riverside Ob and the nicely renovated but inconvenient Vostok, will only accept foreigners when booked through a tour agency (incurring booking fees and commission).

Hotel Sibir (☎ 223 1215; centre@gk-sibir.sibnet.ru; ul Lenina 21; s/d from R2100/2600; 📺 📺) The Sibir considers itself Novosibirsk's international hotel with some English-speaking staff and useful air-ticket and tour bureaux. Only the Hotel Sibir is sure to offer visa registrations, and it will only do so for guests. Excellent king-bedded 'studios' (d R5400) have inviting modern décor and party-sized bathrooms. However, standard rooms lack style or air-conditioning, their parquet floors are worn and some of the furniture is ageing. 'First category' rooms (s/tw R2600/3900) are fully renovated but hardly justify the hefty prices. Rates include breakfast.

Hotel Tsentralnaya (☎ 222 3638; fax 227 660; Lenina 3; s/tw without bathroom R700/1000, s/tw with bathroom R1500/2200) Perfectly central, the no-frills basic rooms with shared, survivable bathrooms are Novosibirsk's best budget option. That's if you're allowed to stay: this seems to depend on having a preregistered visa, on the mood of the receptionist and the wind direction. Sometimes agency bookings are demanded. Lifts are dodgy.

Station Hotel (☎ 229 2376; 2nd fl, Novosibirsk Glavny train station; dm/tw/tr without bathroom R500/1200/1500, s/tw with bathroom R2800/3500). Only for those with onward rail tickets. Half-price for 12-hour stays. It's frequently full.

Hotel Novosibirsk (☎ 220 1120; fax 216 517; Vokzalnaya magistral 1; s/tw from R1100/1700) Opposite Novosibirsk Glavny train station, this glum 23-storey Soviet-era tower has mediocre, overpriced Soviet-era rooms. The cheapest share a toilet and washbasin between pairs of rooms and lack showers altogether. You'll pay over R1800 for a private bathroom. Room rates include a lacklustre breakfast.

Homestays (s R700-1000, tw R1100-1500) can be organised through **Uyut Kvartirnoe Byuro** (☎ 202 009; www.risp.ru/~hotel, in Russian; Novosibirsk Glavny train station) and half-price is charged for stay of 12 hours. For similar rates, tour

agency Sibalp can arrange English-speaking hosts. For marginally less you could take a chance with one of the women loitering outside the train station after 9pm with 'Квартира' (apartment) signs pinned to their jackets.

NOT SLEEPING

No hotel? Budget travellers might consider getting 'locked in' to an Internet Club night shift and typing the night away. Alternatively, for just R280 *platskart* each way you could take an overnight sleeper train to Biysk.

Eating

RESTAURANTS

Choice is almost endless near pl Lenina.

Tbilisi (☎ 222 8181; ul Sovetskaya 65; meals R320-800; 📺 11am-11pm) Despite growing competition, this atmospheric tavern-cavern still offers the most authentic Georgian cuisine in town. Filling, oozingly cheese-filled *khachapuri po-imeretinsk* (Georgian bread stuffed with salty cheese) cost R100.

Mexico Kafe (☎ 210 3420; Oktyabrskaya magistral 49; meals R350-800; 📺 noon-1am) Dangling chillies, Aztec icons and a big charcoal grill add atmosphere while Los Gringos serenade. Great Mexican food.

Ieroglif (☎ 222 5712; Krasny pr 35; meals R250-700; 📺 noon-1am) This hypnotic temple of a restaurant has Chinese, Japanese and Korean offerings.

Aladdin (☎ 222 5233; ul Romanova 28; meals R250-600) Arab-style place with Las Vegas-style entryway and a slightly embarrassed doorman costumed as a harem eunuch. The menu mixes Middle Eastern, Uzbek and Thai. Smoke water pipes from R400.

Prices are relatively reasonable in the very central, Disney-esque 'Siberian village' **Zhili Bili** (ul Lenina 1; meals R130-450; 📺 11am-11pm), with English menus, a salad bar and great stuffed bliny. It's upstairs above fast-food eatery **Grill-Master** (ul Lenina 1; burgers R39-54) through a central wooden door. Within the same building but entered from the rear (park side) is the super-popular **Lanch Kafe** (☎ 270 581; meals R200-350), above which is a great Italian restaurant and a chilled-out, cushion-floored DJ-bar serving sushi.

QUICK EATS

Vilka-Lozhka (ul Frunze 2; meals R70-130; 📺 10am-10pm) Simple yet stylishly modern cafeteria

decorated with primary-coloured cutlery to remarkably dramatic effect.

Stolovaya Parus (ul Sibrecoma 2; meals R35-50, tea R3; 📺 9am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) Fill up for a pitance in this easy-to-miss, old-style Soviet chow-room.

SELF-CATERING

Kaskad (ul Vokzalnaya 2; 📺 7.30am-10pm) Multitimed grocery with a takeaway, pay-by-weight salad bar and a basic sit-down *pelmenaya*.

Supermarket Khoroshy (Vokzalnaya magistral 4; 📺 24hr) Groceries any time.

Drinking

Plethoric Irish pubs and Wild West bars are easy to find. Just stroll down ul Lenina, Krasny pr or Vokzalnaya magistral for a block or two from pl Lenina. Almost all serve decent if pricey food as well as drinks.

People's Bar & Grill (☎ 275 5000; Krasny pr; beers from R48, espresso R39; 📺 noon-2am) Performer barmen, hip clientele and a modern vibe (despite items of Anglo-American retro-fashion) make this a great people-watching venue. Descend the stairway opposite St Nicholas chapel.

Retro-Kafe Dezhavu (☎ 213 2720; www.v-gosti.ru, in Russian; ul Dimitrova 15; coffees R40-110; 📺 9am-1am) This very pink piano-café has love niches for romantic couples and menus are presented as old newspapers. Serves breakfasts till 11am.

Entertainment

Dozens of nightclubs, bowling alleys, concert halls and theatres are fully listed in Russian on www.novosibout.ru.

Opera & Ballet Theatre (☎ 227 1537; www.opera-novosibirsk.ru; Krasny pr 36; admission R35-200; 📺 Oct-Jun) For classical culture don't miss an evening at this gigantic theatre.

Philharmonia (☎ 222 1511; www.philharmonia-nsk; ul Spartaka 11) Concerts here range from classical symphonies to Dixieland jazz. Ticket prices vary widely but are usually between R100 and R150.

Rock City (☎ 227 0108; www.rockcity.ru, in Russian; 3rd fl, Krasny pr 37; typical admission R200) With designer metallic factory-style décor, this is Novosibirsk's top spot for everything from Latin dancing to heavy rock concerts. It's above the Old Irish pub.

Getting There & Away

AIR

There are two airports in Novosibirsk. **Severny** (☎ 228 3788), 6km north of the centre, handles shorter hops including three weekly services to Kyzyl (R4800). However, most major airlines use the much bigger **Tolmachevo** (☎ 216 9230; http://tolmachevoeng.faktura.ru), 30km west of Novosibirsk off the Omsk road. The website gives approximate timetables. Regular international destinations include Ürümqi (R5250, two hours, Tuesday), Beijing, Bangkok, Dubai and Seoul plus several cities in Central Asia (eg Baku R7200). Most weekends there are flights to Hanover (R12,040 return) and/or Frankfurt (R14,600 return). **Siberia Airlines** (toll-free ☎ 8-800 200 0007; www.s7.ru), the biggest regional carrier, is launching online sales and plans links with several international carriers. A comprehensive domestic network includes regular flights to Moscow (R6300, R8600 return), St Petersburg (R7080 booked six days ahead) and Irkutsk (R5490 to R6100, 2¼ hours). The central **Aviakassa** (ul Gogolya 3; 📺 8.30am-8pm) is one of dozens of places to buy air tickets.

BUS

From the **bus station** (Krasny pr 4) around 20 daily buses serve both Barnaul (R190, 4½ hours, last at 7.40pm) and Tomsk (R170, five hours). For roughly double the price, shared taxis shave an hour or more off those times.

TRAIN

The city's huge main train station, **Novosibirsk Glavny** (ul Shamshurina 43), has numerous daily long-distance trains.

For Moscow (48 to 55 hours via Omsk, Tyumen and Yekaterinburg), comfortable train 25 (even days) is easy to book. However, the cheaper 339 (1.30am, odd days) takes one night longer, saving on hotel accommodation as well as the fare. Of a dozen possible trains to Omsk, the handiest overnighter is train 87 (R420 *platskart*, nine hours, daily). For Krasnoyarsk (R541 *platskart*, 12 to 14 hours), train 84 (13¼ hours overnight, even days) is well timed and rarely full.

For Altai, the handy 601 runs overnight to Biysk (R280 *platskart*, 10¼ hours, daily)

via Barnaul (5½ hours). For Khakassia and Tuva you could go to Abakan direct (train 68, 23 hours, daily) or in two overnight hops via Novokuznetsk for which the best option is train 605 (R690, 9½ hours). Trains to Almaty, Kazakhstan (R1500, 32 to 37 hours), run daily at 5pm.

If queues are horrendous at the station's main ticket desks (not normally the case), you can buy them relatively swiftly from the upstairs **service centre** (commission R100; ☎ 4.30am-2am) – no English spoken.

Getting Around

From the train station, take trolleybus 2 to Severyn airport, *marshrutka* 1122 to Tolmashyovo airport or *marshrutka* 1212 for the bus station via pl Lenina. The metro (R8) has a major north-south line running beneath Krasny pr and across the river to Studencheskaya and pl Karla Marksa. For the main train station you'll need metro stop pl Garina-Mikhailovskogo, which is on a second three-stop line that intersects with the major line at Sibirskaya/Krasny pr. Generally *marshrutky* are handier within the centre.

AROUND NOVOSIBIRSK Akademgorodok & Seyatel

Академгородок и Сеятель Akademgorodok suburbs were elite Soviet academic townships full of research institutes. Attached to most Siberian cities, they attracted scientists by offering special perks and relatively spacious apartments in peaceful surroundings. Nearly 30km south of central Novosibirsk, Siberia's biggest Akademgorodok nestles in taiga close to the beaches of the Ob Sea. The idea is interesting, but the reality is frustrating for tourists. Although most institutes have 'museums', most are only for invited academics. A potentially brilliant **open-air**

museum 4km along the Akademgorodok-Klyuchi road contains a superb Yakutian wooden church and partly restored *ostrog* (military stockade) but you can only glimpse them through the high, locked gates. Package tourists get channelled to the **Geological Museum** (☎ 332 837; ul Koptyuga; R150) to endure the tired recitations of Soviet-style slow-motion guides; it's open only by arrangement.

For something vastly more inspiring, jump off *marshrutka* 1015 at Seyatel *elektrichka* station, 2km before Akademgorodok beside an interesting **Railway Locomotive Museum** (☎ 337 9622; admission R50; ☎ 11am-5pm Sat-Thu). Directly east (but hard to find behind an overgrown playground) is the small but spiritually uplifting **Sun Museum** (Музей Солнца; ☎ 339 9126; mobile ☎ 913-943 9835; sun-museum@yandex.ru; 2nd fl, ul Ivanova 11a; adult/child R30/20); call ahead for opening hours. Using carved copies of petroglyphs, religious symbols and popular art, this wonderful place examines sun symbolism across an incredibly diverse range of cultures. For meditative-minded visitors, a highlight is listening to artist-sculptor curator Valery Lipenkov playing the extraordinary *bila* (flat bells) or chanting Tibetan sun mantras. Valery speaks very basic English.

To learn Russian you could enrol in 160-hour, eight-week summer courses at **Novosibirsk State University** (☎ 339 7378; www.nsu.ru) from US\$645 including accommodation. Book well ahead.

Marshrutka 1015 (R28, 30 minutes) from Novosibirsk Glavny train station passes the Railway Museum then loops anticlockwise around Akademgorodok. Returning to central Novosibirsk from Seyatel is easier by hourly *elektrichka* trains (R18) or bus 622 (R8, 40 minutes). Bus 7 links Akademgorodok with Seyatel station (east of the rail tracks).

FOR BETTER OR WORSE

Many visitors to Russia unwittingly offend locals by unconsciously assuming that life is better now than in the 'bad old commy days'. The reverse is often true. Perhaps 80% of older Russians (especially non-English speaking) are nostalgic for Brezhnev. Ah, the good old days. Jobs were easy and assured. Arts flourished within ideological limits. Travel was cheap within the vast Soviet world. Life was reassuringly predictable. Predictability and conformism were stultifying for the Western-championed intellectual elite that we hailed as dissidents. But it was just dandy for average Joe Pibalski.

Even the relative 'winners' in today's new Russia aren't always happy. Smart and multilingual, Sasha is a young professional working for a Western multinational in a booming Siberian city. Financially he's doing very well. Yet over burritos and a second Stella Artois he confesses that he'd happily bring back the KGB. 'Sure there were certain things you couldn't say, but there was no crime whatever, no poverty, no begging, no homelessness. If you could have a world like that, wouldn't you want it?'

Across the square a maudlin half-forgotten Lenin statue with broken fingers seems to nod.

TOMSK TOMCK

☎ 3822 / pop 473,000 / ☎ Moscow +3hr

Just 260km from Novosibirsk, but light years ahead in terms of history, ambience and tourist appeal, Tomsk is one of the most enjoyable cities in Siberia. It combines endless examples of fine wooden mansions, some grand century-old commercial buildings and a dynamic, modern outlook. Tomsk's relatively intact architecture was in part preserved by a ghastly commercial miscalculation. The city fathers refused to have the Trans-Siberian Railway pass through, fearing noise, dirt and disruption. Instead they found economic isolation, and the once important trading centre dwindled. However, it survived as a university city and now has half a dozen major academic establishments – hence the youthful, intellectual atmosphere during term time. In summer the city is relatively quiet.

Orientation & Maps

The bus station and Tomsk 1 (main) train station sit together about 2km southeast of the centre. The main axis is fascinating pr Lenina, an architectural and entertainment smorgasbord dotted with banks, shops and cafés. Accurate bus maps are sold at the news kiosks in the bus and train stations. Excellent city maps are available from **Dom Knigi Bookshop** (pr Komsomolsky 49; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Fri, 11am-6pm Sat & Sun) or online in Russian at <http://karta.tomsk.ru/>. **KnigoMir** (pr Kirova 62 & basement, pr Lenina 5; ☎ 10am-8pm) stocks the Delovoy Tomsk atlas-directory (R120).

Information

Biznes Tsentr (Hotel Tomsk; Internet per hr 100;

☎ 24hr) Very pricey but handy when awaiting a train.

Graft Tur (☎ 526 399; <http://tour.graft.ru/>; ul Gagarina 35; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Fri, 11am-5pm Sat) Helpful travel agency with English-speaking staff.

Internet Salon Plaza (☎ 529 446; ul Kuznetsova 15; Internet per hr R16-28; ☎ 9am-10pm, night shift R60-110) Faster connection costs R3 per MB extra.

Main post office (pr Lenina 95; Internet per hr R20; ☎ 9am-7.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-5pm Sat, 9am-5pm Sun) Cheapest Internet in town.

M@KDEL Internet (☎ 507 808; ul Yakovleva 2; Internet per MB R3, per hr R24; ☎ 8am-10pm) Near a brick water tower; use bus 11 from the train station or bus 8 from pr Lenina.

Netcafé (☎ 281 441; pr Lenina 32; Internet per MB R2.5, per hr R32; ☎ 9am-11pm) Night shift costs R130 plus traffic (11pm to 8am). Annoyingly, you must prepay then top up. Half-hour minimum.

Sberbank (pl Lenina 12; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, to 5pm Sat) Changes travellers cheques for 2% commission. Decent euro cash rates with R10 commission.

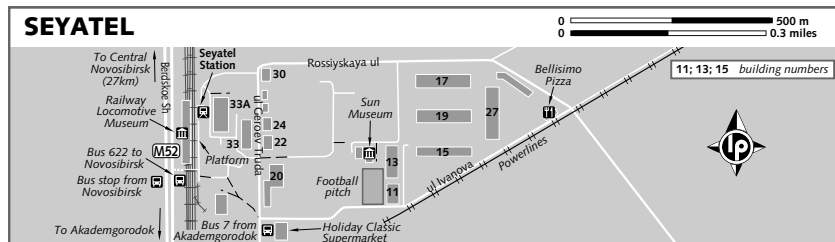
SibakademBank (☎ 527 489; ul Belinskogo 15a; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, to 5pm Sat) Great rates for US dollars.

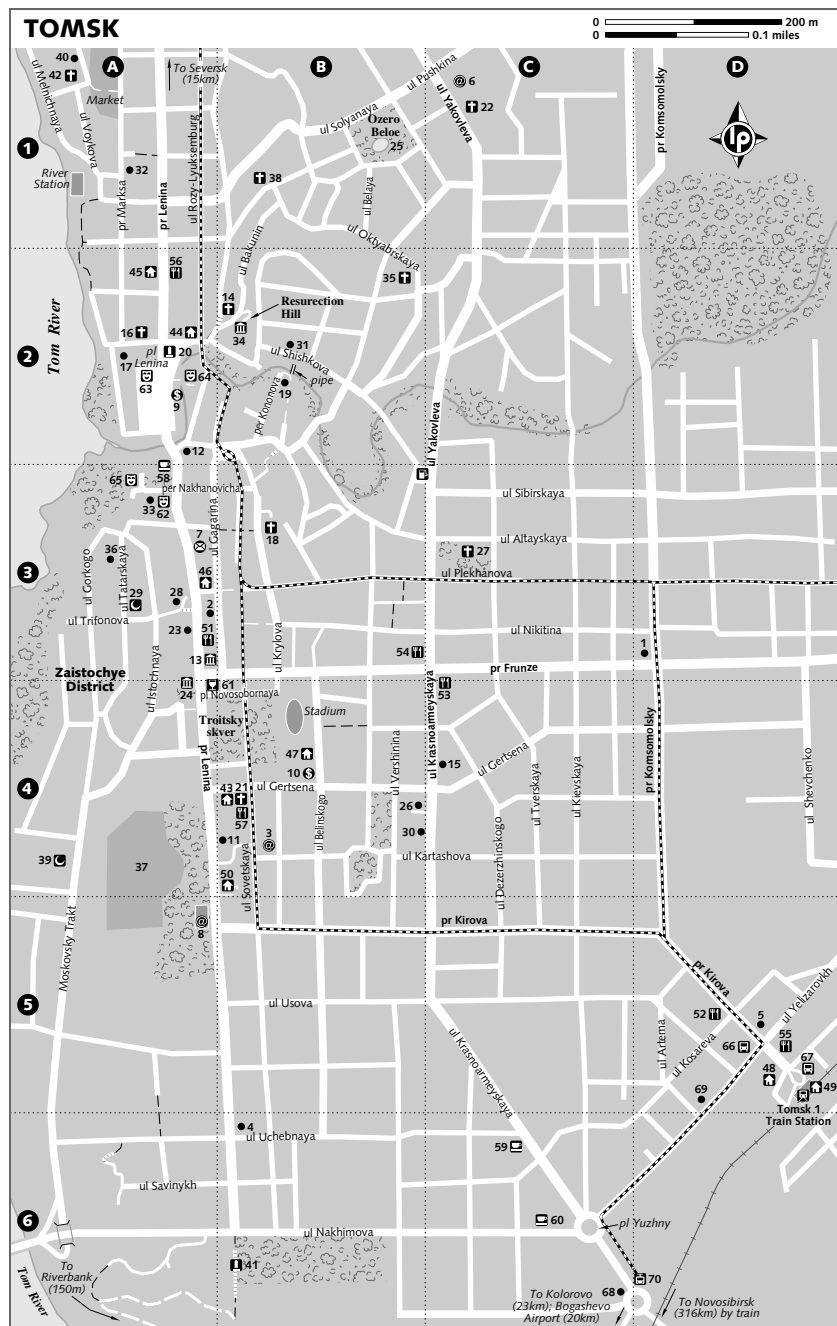
Tomskturist (☎ 528 179; pr Lenina 59; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 11am-4pm Sat) Can arrange individual walking tours of the city, with English-, French- and German-speaking guides. Based in a lovely wooden house opposite the university.

Sights

WOODEN ARCHITECTURE

Tomsk's greatest attraction is its 'wooden-lace' architecture – the carved windows and tracery on old log and timber houses. The





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most notable concentration is along **ul Tatarskaya**, accessed via steps beside the lovely old house at **pr Lenina 56**.

Grand, more showy wooden mansions stand along **ul Krasnoarmeyskaya**, including the spired, bright turquoise **Russian-German House** (1906; **ul Krasnoarmeyskaya 71**), the **Dragon House** (**ul Krasnoarmeyskaya 68**) and the fan-gabled **Peacock House** (**ul Krasnoarmeyskaya 67a**). All are classic landmarks.

Several lesser examples line **per Kononova**, including number 2 where communist mastermind Kirov lodged in 1905. Close by (but hazardous to reach from **per Kononova** across a slippery pipe) is the splendid, recently restored **Shishkov House** (**ul Shishkova 10**). The cottage at **ul Voykova 14** is all the more photogenic for the **Znameniye bozhney materi Church** that rises directly behind it. There's even a wooden-lace school, **Shkola 43** (**pr Karla Marksa 31**).

RESURRECTION HILL

When founded in 1604, Tomsk's original fortress sat atop **Resurrection Hill**. For the city's 400th anniversary, an impressive replica of its 'Golden Gate' was rebuilt in wood complete with domed central tower. Beside it, the well-presented but sparse

Tomsk History Museum (admission R15; ☎ 11am-5pm Tue-Sun) has resprouted its wooden **lookout tower** (R10); try to spot the seven historic churches from the top.

Olde-worlde charm continues up cobbled **ul Bakunina** (named for a 19th-century anarchist) past the Italianate 1833 **Catholic Church** (**ul Bakunina 4**) and on towards the **Voznesenskaya Church** (**ul Oktyabrsky Vzvoz**). This Gothic edifice with five gold-tipped black spires has great potential as a Dracula movie set. A truly massive bell hangs from its new lurid-pink belfry.

About 200m beyond is the **Ozero Beloye pond**, whose surrounding park is popular for beer terraces and rides in horse carts or sleighs according to the season. The cute, **Old Believers' Wooden Church** (Starobryadcheskaya tserkov; **ul Yakovleva**) is worth a look if you've got any energy left, though its surroundings are relatively uninteresting.

PLOSHCHAD LENINA

Central **pl Lenina** isn't really a square so much as a jumbled collection of beautifully restored historic buildings interspersed with banal Soviet concrete lumps. The frustrated **Lenin statue**, now relegated to a traffic circle, points at the ugly concrete of

Tomsk Drama Theatre apparently demanding 'build more like that one'. Fortunately, nobody's listening. The theatre is flanked instead by the splendid 1784 **Epiphany Cathedral**, the former **trading arches** and the elegant 1802 **Magistrat Hotel**. Topped with a golden angel, in a second circle beside Lenin, is the recently rebuilt **Iverskaya Chapel** (☎ 10am-6pm) whose celebrated icon is dubbed 'Tomsk's Spiritual Gateway'. The **1000 Melochey Shop** (pr Lenina; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Sat, to 6pm Sun) has a wonderful 1906 façade featuring griffins and Art Nouveau ironwork flourishes.

PROSPEKT LENINA

Cafés and great architecture continue either way along pr Lenina, most appealingly around per Nakhanovicha where you'll find the thought-provoking **Tomsk Art Gallery** (☎ 514 106; per Nakhanovicha 5; admission R50; ☎ 10am-5:30pm Tue-Sun). Amid the dry 19th-century portraiture, wonder how happy SP Obolensky would have felt having been depicted wild-haired with red, hayfeverish (or alcohol-blurred?) eyes. And why does St Christopher have a horse's head on one of the icons?

Built for gold-mining entrepreneur Ivan Atashev in 1842, the **Atashev Palace** (pr Lenina 75) was once used as a church, hence the incongruous steeple tower and wonderful organ hall where concerts are held. Two rooms host the very modest **Regional Museum** (☎ 514 398; <http://museum.trecom.tomsk.ru/>, in Russian; ☎ 10am-6pm Wed-Sun) with a few Atashev furnishings. Outside, a missile launcher points inexplicably at the building's north roof.

The gloomy 1898 brick building across the road is a haunted former school. Closed following the murder of a pupil, it later became the prison for the cruel NKVD (proto-KGB). The building's eerie dungeon is now a memorable **Oppression Museum** (☎ 516 133; rear entrance, pr Lenina 44; admission R18; ☎ 2-6pm Mon-Fri). Tours are recommended but are only in Russian. Lighten the mood by peeping into the 1908 **pharmacy** (apteka; pr Lenina 54; ☎ 8am-8pm) with its gloriously well-preserved Art Nouveau interior.

The classically colonnaded main buildings of the **university** lie in resplendently leafy grounds, giving Tomsk the soubriquet 'Oxford of Siberia'. Tucked away in unmarked rooms, the university hosts several quietly intriguing museums covering archaeology, geology, zoology and ethnog-

raphy. Pr Lenina finally ends at the powerful mother-and-son **WWII Memorial** (Lagerny Gardens), behind which are taiga views across the meandering Tom River.

RELIGIOUS BUILDINGS

Tomsk has many more fine churches, including the scoop-domed 1844 **Trinity Church** (Troitskaya tserkov; ul Oktyabrskaya), the very active **Kazansky Icon Church** (ul Krylova 12b) of a former monastery, the pretty new **Nevsky Church** (ul Gertsena) and the Byzantine-style brick **Peter & Paul Cathedral** (Petropavlosky sobor; ul Altayskaya 47) from 1911.

The Zaistochoye district was historically the 'Tatar' Muslim quarter. Its unusual, white-washed 19th-century **White Mosque** (Belaya Mechet; Moskovsky Trakt 43) is now fully renovated. The 1904 **Red Mosque** (ul Tatarskaya 4) was sacrilegiously used as a vodka factory in the Soviet era; it's now just a brick shell.

Sleeping

BUDGET

TGU Hotel (☎ 528 386; 5th fl, pr Lenina 49; dm R250, s R500-600, tw R700) Uniquely good-value, clean rooms have kettle, fridge and fully equipped new bathrooms (except in the dorms which share facilities between two triples). In term-time reservations are essential (R100 booking fee) but dropping in might work in midsummer. Enter from the rear, no lift.

Resting rooms (komnaty otdykha; Tomsk 1 train station; dm/tw R200/700) Perfectly clean, new rooms with sparkling shared toilets and shower. No rail-ticket requirement. Curfew 1am to 5am.

Hotel Sputnik (☎ 526 660; www.sputnik.tomskturist.ru/; ul Belinskogo 15; s/d/tw/tr R550/750/900/960) A bland tower with lift and smartened-up Soviet rooms sharing refitted bathrooms.

Hotel Severnaya (☎ 512 324; pr Lenina 86; dm/tw/d R300/900/1300) Don't be fooled by the smart new façade. Most rooms remain ageing Soviet affairs sharing communal squat toilets, though some wallpaper is new and there's a sink in each room. A few doubles (R1300) and twins (R1700) are nicely renovated with full facilities.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Hotel Magistrat (☎ 511 111; fax 511 200; www.magistrathotel.com/; pl Lenina 15; d/tw/ste R2800/3850/4500 ☎ ☎) Behind the palatial 1802 façade, the luxurious rooms are brand new in a comfortable international style though sadly

without historical idiosyncrasies. English is spoken and the restaurant's lavish. Air-conditioning only in suites.

BonApart (☎ 534 650; bon_apart@mail.ru; ul Gertsena 1a; s/tw/d/ste R1550/1850/2400; ☎) In its price range this brand-new, fully fitted private hotel is by far the best. English is spoken, floors have key-card security and the stairs are polished light marble. However, there's no lift and only the suites have air-con.

Hotel Siberia (pr Lenina 91; s/tw/d/ste R1700/1900/2100/2800) This splendidly central old building is now two hotels in one, two reception desks facing-off across the foyer. Choose the **Sibir Forum** (☎ 530 280; www.sibir-forum.tomsk.ru) which operates the appealingly bright, fully renovated 2nd floor and the almost-equivalent 4th floor (rooms discounted R200 for all the stairs). Although prices are the same for the **Hotel Sibir** (☎ /fax 527 225; www.hotelsibir.tomsk.ru) its dingy 3rd-floor corridor is unreconstructed.

HotelTomsk (☎ 524 115; www.tomskhotel.best-service.biz; pr Kirova 65; s/tw R1800/1900) Acceptable but rather overpriced, its smartly upgraded Soviet rooms are now reasonably comfortable though baths are very small. A few R1500 rooms have tattier floors and older bathrooms. R200 discount at weekends.

Eating

There are more choices on and around pr Lenina than you can eat through in a week.

Vechny Zov (☎ 528 167; ul Sovetskaya 47; meals R250-800; ☎ noon-4am) Tomsk's top dining option is a Siberian ranch outside and within it has an antique-filled home feel. A menu in English offers 'Louis Armstrong pork', 'Roman Abramovich cutlet' and a wide variety of imaginative Siberian alternatives. Most nights, talented jazz-violinist Viktor Korolev serenades after 7pm (cover charge).

FoodMaster (pr Lenina 83; meals R100-450; ☎ 11am-1am) Despite the ill-fittingly banal name, this is a wonderful *belle époque* café with painstakingly restored plasterwork tracery on the high ceilings. The menu (in English) ranges from Chinese to Mexican to pseudo-Italian; try a strawberry tagliatelle!

People's Bar & Grill (☎ 443 315; ul Krasnoarmeyskaya 31; beers from R60, meals R250-600; ☎ noon-2am) The hip place to drink cocktails or be seen dining on 'Indiana Jones' or 'Some Like It Hot', whatever that might actually mean. Upstairs **Pizza Rio** (☎ 24hr) offers generous slices for R41.

Allegro (☎ 281 586; pr Lenina 32; meals R45-90; ☎ 9am-midnight) Unusually comfortable and pleasantly appointed for such a cheap, base-metal café. Karaoke threatens after 7pm (R20 per song).

Sibirskoe Bistro (pr Lenina 123 & pr Kirova 66; meals R80-170; ☎ 24hr) Cafeteria chain with lunch-time discounts.

SELF-CATERING

Holiday Supermarket (ul Krasnoarmeyskaya 44; ☎ 24hr) Wide selection, sensible prices

Gastronom (pr Kirova 59; ☎ 24hr) Handy grocery for the train station.

Drinking

Sibirsky Pub (☎ 530 047; www.siberian-pub.ru/, in Russian; ul Novosobornaya 2; mains R100-200, Guinness per pint R140; ☎ noon-3am) Siberia's first British pub was founded over a century ago by a certain Mr Crawley, an Anglo-Egyptian albino who'd got stuck in Tomsk after touring with a circus freak show. Today's pub is no relation. Nonetheless it uses British photo icons from Big Ben to beefeaters and has a menu in English with a filling lunch deal (R144) before 3pm. Bands play live at weekends (cover charge).

Bulanzhe (☎ 516 735; 2nd fl, pr Lenina 80; espresso R40; ☎ 8am-midnight) Tomsk's answer to Starbucks serves great coffee, stuffed bliny (from R30) and superb *chernichniyy pai* (black-currant gâteau, R33 per 100g). Branches at ul Krasnoarmeyskaya 107 and ul Nakhimova 40.

Prado (☎ 512 685; pr Lenina 78; meals R200-600; ☎ 24hr) Amusing coffee-house restaurant within the Aelita Theatre conceived as an Italian piazza.

Entertainment

Tomsk has a vibrant arts scene. **Tomsk-Life** (<http://life.tomsk.ru/>, in Russian) has extensive listings.

Aelita Theatre (☎ 516 131; www.aelita.tsk.ru/; pr Lenina 78) Mixed offerings from rock concerts to Indian dance.

Philharmonia (☎ 515 965; pl Lenina 1) Classical music and great big-band jazz.

Tomsk Drama Theatre (☎ 512 223; pl Lenina 4)

Youth Theatre (TYuZ; ☎ 513 933; per Nakhanovicha 4)

Getting There & Away

Transport options are comprehensively listed in Russian on <http://transport.sibr.ru/>.

Tomsk's **Bogashevo Airport** (☎ 270 084), 22km southeast, has flights to Moscow (R8500) most days on Siberian Airlines, plus some local regional services on **Tomskavia** (☎ 412 466; www.tomskavia.ru, in Russian; ul Yelizarovkh). The choice is much wider from Novosibirsk's Tolmachyovo Airport (p513), to which there are five direct buses a day (R180, five hours) from Tomsk bus station. Shared taxis (R500, 3½ hours) are much faster than buses (R260, 5½ hours, 20 daily) for Novosibirsk. For Kolorovo (R9, 35 minutes) take one of seven daily services towards Yarskoe, and from pl Yuzhny there are roughly hourly *marshrutky*.

From Tomsk I (main) train station there are daily services to Moscow's Yaroslavy station (56½ hours). Train 37 leaves around 10am and is handy for Tyumen (22½ hours). For Omsk, the summer-only train 437 (R850, 15 hours, even days) is more convenient. *Platskartny* carriages run to Barnaul (R442, 14¾ hours) on even days and to Irkutsk (34 hours) via Krasnoyarsk (R420, 14½ hours) daily in summer, even days only in winter.

Getting Around

For the airport take the rare bus 119 from pl Lenina. Other city *marshrutky* are very frequent. Handy route 7 runs from near the train station, along pr Frunze, up pr Lenina, then east again on ul Pushkina. *Marshrutka* 11 shows you the wooden houses along ul Krasnoarmeyskaya, 29 does the same for ul Tatarskaya via pl Yuzhny, while bus 4 goes west from the train station and then runs north the length of pr Lenina.

AROUND TOMSK

Kolorovo Колорово

☎ 3822 / pop 280

Picturesquely set on the bank of the meandering Tom River, Kolorovo was once a flourishing way-station for caravans on the tea route from Mongolia. Founded in 1620 it was originally known as Spasskoe. Today the only sign of former glory is the baroque 1799 **church** (new interior). Nonetheless, Kolorovo's utter tranquillity is very refreshing, there are plenty of typical cottages and it's pleasant to stroll south through the river-view meadows along the deserted Yarskoe road. Buses and *marshrutky* to Tomsk (35 minutes) stop opposite the church beside the village shop.

ALTAI АЛТАЙ

Greater Altai (Altay) straddles corners of Kazakhstan, Mongolia and China, as well as southern Siberia. Within the Russian Federation it's divided administratively between the almost flat Altai Territory and the mountainous Altai Republic. Here steppe, mountains, semideserts and over 7000 lakes culminate in the Unesco-cited 'Golden Mountains' including Mt Belukha (4506m), Siberia's highest peak. Celebrated by artists Rerikh and Choros Gurkin, it's called Shambala or Belovodye by Russian New Age groups who revere the region as a major pole of spiritual energy. From do-nothing relaxation to extreme-adventure sports, the region is one of Siberia's tourism magnets.

Altai Culture

Asiatic ethnic-Altai people constitute around 30% of the Altai Republic's 200,000-strong population, and a vastly lower proportion in the heavily Russianised Altai Territory. Despite strong animist undercurrents, most Altai are nominally Christian and villages aren't visually distinct though some rural Altai homes still incorporate a traditional *ail* (tepee-shaped wooden tent). In the Altai language, hello is *yakhshler*, thank you (very

RAFTING

Fun-splash rafting is possible at short notice at **Turbaza Katun** (p530) or around **Aya Bridge** (p528).

Increasingly popular five-day raft-and-camp trips start at Kür-Kechü, descending the potentially dangerous Ilgumen Rapids (p532). While not for beginners, they're not Altai's toughest challenge either. Prices (ex Barnaul) start from a bargain US\$150 per person but that's likely to mean poor food, no wet suits and mediocre safety standards. You get what you pay for: **Travel Trophy** (☎ 495-502 3145; info@traveltrophy.ru; Moscow) charges US\$490-575 for the same tour but readers have praised its vastly higher standards, good guide-to-guest ratio and 'gourmet' cooking. For tailor-made specialist rafting challenges talk to Altour in Barnaul (p522) or English-speaking K2 Adventures in Omsk (p504).



much) is (*dyan*) *biyan/biyan bolzyn* and beautiful is *charash*. Altai tea is served milky: add a bran-rich flour called *talkan* and it becomes a sort of porridge.

Alcohol has a disastrous effect on Altai people. Gentle smiles can turn to unpredictable violence within a bottle. This makes pure-Altai villages like Ulagan and Balyktuyul somewhat dangerous, especially at night.

Some of the Altai Republic's 5% ethnic Kazakhs are still nomadic herders living in traditional felt yurts, notably around Kosh-Agach. Most Kazakhs are Muslims who are keen on kumis (fermented mare's milk) but don't generally drink vodka, making Kazakh settlements noticeably less hazardous than Altai ones. In the local Kazakh

dialect, *salamat sizbe* means hello, *rakhmat* means thank you and *sarlyk* is a handy term for yak meat.

Planning

Remnant old areas of Biysk and Barnaul are worth a passing look, visit Gorno-Altai for compulsory visa registration then head for the lakes and mountains. Lake Teletskoe is touted as a 'second Baikal' and is arguably even more picturesque. For glimpses of local culture, rugged valleys, varying scenery and plenty of ancient stones it's quite feasible to potter independently down the memorable Chuyky Trakt by bus or chartered Lada. However, to get closer to the snow-crested mountaintops you'll have to hike. Generally

tree-shaded southern end. A few splendid wooden-lace houses include the famous **Imperator** (Rusky Chay; Krasnoarmeysky pr 131; ☎ 6pm-6am), now a nightclub, plus ul Korolenko 96 and ul Polzunova 31 and 48. The bulbous-domed, brick **Pokrovskoe** (ul Nikitina 135-7) is the most appealing of the city's many churches with a fine, gilded interior. For wide river views, climb up to the gigantic Hollywood-style **sign** spelling БАРНАУЛ (Barnaul).

Sleeping

BUDGET

Hotel Altai (☎ 239 247; pr Lenina 24; s/tw/tr without bathroom R350/500/600, s/tw/d with bathroom R700/1100/1500) In an early 1940s building this good budget choice has certain elements of faded grandeur. Off corridors green with potted plants, even the simplest rooms and shared facilities are well maintained. Nearby is a 24-hour ATM and a statue of Lenin posing as a bullfighter.

Hotel Rus (☎ 354 382; 2nd fl, ul Chkalova 57a; s/tw/tr from R400/600/690) Very neat, pleasant new rooms have sink and fridge though beds are slightly saggy. Rooms from R700 have bathrooms. Central yet very quiet, it's above the Traktir Nikolsky restaurant. Cannot register foreigners so two-day stays are a maximum.

Hotel Kolos (☎ 228 605; ul Molodyozhnaya 25; dm/tw/tr without bathroom R160/420/540, s/tw/tr with bathroom R510/860/1230) Perfectly acceptable old Soviet rooms though the shared toilets are highly communal with neither seats nor doors.

The train station has decent **resting rooms** (komnaty otdykh; dm per 12hr in d/q R157/136), with clean, shared hot showers.

MIDRANGE

Hotel Siberia (☎ 624 200; www.siberia-hotel.ru; pr Sotsialisticheskyy 116; s R2200-2500, tw R2745, d R2530-3250) Barnaul's new business hotel is built almost to international standards though the excellent rooms lack air-conditioning.

Hotel Tsentralnaya (☎ 368 443; www.hotelcentral.ru, in Russian; pr Lenina 57; s/tw R700/800, ste up to R2500) Well renovated, perfectly central and virtually all rooms have good bathrooms.

Hotel Obsky Most (☎ 234 004; ul Bavarina 17a; dm R300-400, tw/tr R1000/1200; ☎) Perhaps the world's only hotel with its own museum of road-building machinery, this surprisingly well-appointed new minihotel is oddly placed in a cloverleaf road junction, though the windows are fairly well soundproofed.

All rooms except the cheaper dormitory have modern, private bathrooms.

Hotel Barnaul (☎ 626 222; info@barnaulhotel.com; pl Pobedy 3; s R750-1200, tw R900-1500) This vast 12-storey block has been thoroughly renovated and some suites are magnificent, but look before paying as quality is uneven. Press XOD to operate the lift (elevator).

Eating & Drinking

Dozens of appealing options include several summer terraces along pr Lenina.

Polzunov Restaurant (☎ 625 958; pr Krasnoarmeysky 112; meals R280-650) Old copperware and wooden beams add appeal to this delightful upper-market restaurant. The imaginative menu (in English) includes tasty *pork premyera* with pineapple, walnut and mushroom sauce. Attached is a bakery-grocery and the excellent **MasterFood Cafeteria** (meals R70-180; ☎ 11am-9pm).

'Coffee Please' Kofeynya (☎ 358 983; Sotsialisticheskyy pr 78; coffees R45-80; ☎ 24hr) Maestro macchiatos (R49) and al-dente pasta meals (R70-90) served in a stylish, bean-themed coffee house.

Granmulino (☎ 363 600; Peschanaya ul 83; ☎ 24hr) Low-key modern café-restaurant with a vast, pictorial menu ranging from sushi (R40-90 per piece) to pizzas (R120-200) and cakes (R50-140). Service very variable.

Rok'n'Roll (☎ 237 606; ul Anatoliya 68; beers from R35; ☎ 10am-11pm) Designer-graffiti music bar-café whose menu reads like a Beatles lyric sheet.

Mexico (Traktoriya Mekhiko; ☎ 368 688; pr Lenina 44a; meals R150-500, cover R50-100 from 8pm on music nights; ☎ noon-1am) Plastic flashing palm trees and canned merengue but the Mexican food is underspiced. Beside is a much cheaper beer-and-snack terrace.

Dezhavyu (Komsomolsky pr 75; beers R50-150, meals R160-450; ☎ 10am-9pm) Relaxed local pub-café serving Staropramen (R55) and Kwak (R120) beers in trademark *ampolo* funnel-glasses.

Bliny Bar (pr Lenina 2b; pancakes R15-80, tea R6) Superb stuffed bliny made to order in a fast-food-style diner. There's another branch on the 3rd floor of the **City Tsentr** (Krasnoarmeysky pr 47a; ☎ 10am-9pm) shopping mall which has a useful 1st-floor supermarket and whose Voskhod Bakery stand has great cheese strudels (R7.90).

Khoroshee Nastroenie (ul Chkalova 62a; ☎ 24hr) Grocery with takeaway salad bar.

Getting There & Away

There are flights to Moscow (R7300, twice daily), Krasnoyarsk (R1730 to R3100, four weekly), St Petersburg (R7030, Friday) and Vladivostok (R8190) via either Irkutsk (R5925, Thursday) or Abakan (R1620, Tuesday). For more choice fly from Novosibirsk. Near the main **Aerokassa** (☎ 368 181; ul Sovetskaya 4; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-5pm Sat & Sun), English-speaking **KrasAir** (☎ 242 251; ul Sovetskaya 10; ☎ 8am-7pm) provides free airport taxis for air-ticket customers.

Trains leave daily to Novokuznetsk (from R210 *platskart*, 7½ hours), Almaty (Kazakhstan, approximately R1250, 31 hours) and most usefully overnight to Tomsk (R442, 15 hours) on odd days at 3.23pm. On even days a train to St Petersburg runs via Moscow. Buses are better for Novosibirsk (R160, five hours, 20 daily), Biysk (R138, three hours, hourly) or Gorno-Altaysk (R200, five hours, seven daily).

Getting Around

From the Aerokassa, rare bus 112 runs to Barnaul's airport in the northwestern suburbs. From the river station frequent buses 1 and 10 go straight up pr Lenina, trolleybus 5 connects to the train station and the handy bus 43 swings past pl Demidov, turns north up Krasnoarmeysky pr, then passes pl Pobedy (near the bus and train stations) before rejoining pr Lenina at pl Oktyabrya.

БИЙСК

☎ 3854 / pop 236,000 / ☎ Moscow +3hr

Friendly Biysk, 160km southeast of Barnaul, is not worth a special detour but its modest attractions may warrant a brief stop en route to or from the Altai Mountains, for which it's the nearest railhead.

In 1709, a group of 70 Russian soldiers with five cannons built a fort at the junction of the Biya and Katun Rivers. This didn't impress the Dzhungarian Mongols, who sent 3000 men to burn it down. Biysk was re-established 20km to the east in 1718, and after the peace of 1756 was rapidly developed as a prosperous trade entrepôt protected by a big, Vauban-style star-shaped fortress (now completely disappeared).

Information

Bars Travel (☎ 328 050; www.tbars.narod.ru; Hotel Tsentralnaya) Runs various Altai tours for Russian groups

with weekend rafting trips (R2800 including food, transport and two nights' accommodation) departing most Fridays.

Dobry (ul Lenina 246; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Fri, to 5pm Sat, to 3pm Sun) There's a bookshop for maps (R40) and postcards within this multishop.

Newsstand (☎ 335 500; Krasnoarmeyskaya ul 43; ☎ 24hr) Also for maps and postcards, beside the air-ticket bureau Aviaflot.

Post office (ul Merlina 17; Internet per MB R3.5, per min R0.35; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 1-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat) One block south of the bus station.

Sberbank (ul Lenina 244 & Krasnoarmeyskaya ul 73; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-7pm Mon-Sat) Changes money.

Sights

From the market near the bus station take northbound bus 23 to see the tumbledown patches of once-impressive old town which hide intriguingly behind a vast, unprepossessing curtain of Soviet-era concrete. Get off at the once-mighty, now decrepit **Firsova ex-Department Store** (ul Tolstogo 144) with its crown-shaped corner domes. Walk a block east then north to find the excellent **museum** (☎ 337 698; ul Lenina 134; R10; ☎ 10am-4.30pm Wed-Sat), housed in a grand if dilapidated 1912 merchant's house with its original Art Nouveau fittings. Further east, wobbly wooden homes and a few maudlin mansions hint at long-past wealth, but it's better to walk down towards the riverbank and backtrack along Sovetskaya ul where there are several 1890s brick edifices, the silver-domed **Assumption Church** (Sovetskaya ul 13) and the grand, renovated 1916 **theatre** (Sovetskaya ul 25).

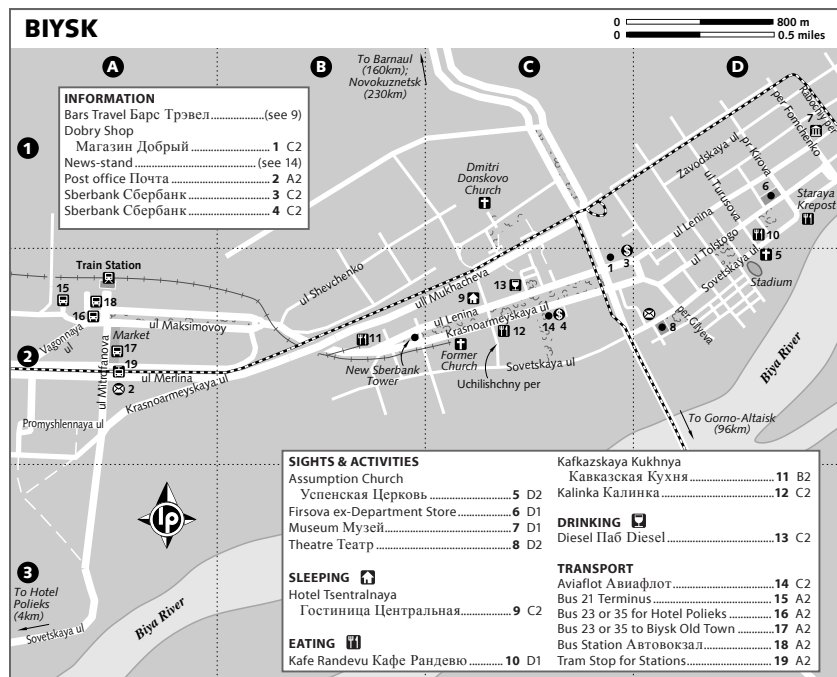
Sleeping

Hotel Tsentralnaya (☎ 338 307; Krasnoarmeyskaya ul; s/tw from R400/600) Three storeys have been pretty well renovated and even the older floors are pleasant for a Soviet-era hotel. All rooms have private bathroom with hot shower.

Hotel Polieks (☎ 236 440; pl 9i Yanvara 3; s/d/tw/tr from R390/550/700/990) Very friendly with great-value en-suite rooms but inconveniently far from the old town. Take westbound bus 23 to Kapelka Kafe (ul Vasilyeva 46) and walk back past Fortuna grocery.

Eating & Drinking

Kavkazskaya Kukhnya (☎ 245 883; ul Lenina 314; meals R90-200, beers R14, cover R20 from 7pm; ☎ 11am-midnight) Understandably Biysk's most popular dinner spot, with reasonable prices, huge



portions and the best shashlyk in a thousand kilometres. Slightly raucous and down-to-earth, but it's easy to miss almost beneath the tram bridge.

Kafe Randevo (☎ 327 416; Sovetskaya ul 4; meals R180-450, espresso R30, cover R30 from 7pm; ☎ 11am-2am) Behind a beautifully renovated old-town façade, this midrange café has the most convivial atmosphere of three options on Sovetskaya ul.

Kalinka (Krasnoarmeyskaya ul 81; meals R140-280, espresso R30; ☎ 10am-10.30pm) Appealing wood-interior café within a shop, diagonally opposite the Hotel Tsentralnaya. Good-value meals but pricey beer.

Diesel (☎ 332 316; ul Lenina 252; lunch R150 till 5pm, beers R40-100; ☎ 11am-2am) Biysk's own Irish pub, within the Altai Cinema complex.

Getting There & Away

The bus and train stations face each other across a large square at the north end of ul Mitrofanova, 2km west of the Hotel Tsentralnaya and 4km from the historic centre. Useful overnight trains to Novosibirsk (R280 *platskart*, 11 hours) leave at 8.15pm.

Buses leave frequently until 7.30pm for Gorno-Altaiisk (R65, two hours) and Barnaul (R138, three hours). Shared taxis are faster. Handy, if slow, daily buses rattle across to Novokuznetsk (R200, six to seven hours, four daily).

GORNO-ALTAISK ГОРНО-АЛТАЙСК

☎ 38541 / pop 48,000 / ☎ Moscow +3hr
Gorno-Altaiisk, the capital of the Altai Republic, is a narrow ribbon of Soviet concrete blandness scarring an otherwise attractive valley. From Mayma on the M52, Gorno-Altaiisk's main street, Kommunistichesky pr, winds on for 7km before reaching central pl Lenina.

Before heading elsewhere in the Altai Republic you should register your visa at the **MVD Office** (☎ 62012; top fl, Kommunistichesky pr 95; ☎ 9am-1pm Mon-Wed & Fri). It's beside the Gorny Shopping Centre, 500m east of the market, bus stop Zhilmassiv. Enter via the central door-stairs. Importantly you'll need a *khod-ataystvo* – a letter from whoever sponsored your visa, listing where in Altai you'll be visiting. Get this before departing as having

your sponsors fax it to Gorno-Altaiisk can cause days of delays and annoyance. With the letter, registration takes only 15 minutes assuming you can figure out the Russian forms. If you list Aktash or Kosh-Agach as destinations the necessary border-zone permits are automatically issued.

Information

The **post office** (Kommunistichesky pr 61; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri) near the bus station has an **Internet centre** (per hr R40; ☎ 9am-9pm Mon-Fri, noon-6pm Sat & Sun). **Bank Zenit** (side entrance, ul Churos-Gurkina 28; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-4pm) has good US dollar rates.

Sights

A moustachioed *kameny baba* (standing stone idol, p531) welcomes visitors to the interesting **museum** (☎ 27875; ul Churos-Gurkina 46; admission R30; ☎ 10am-4.30pm Wed-Sun). There's a reconstruction of a 2000-year-old Pazyryk grave pit and some intriguing archaeological finds from the Turkic and Dzhungarian periods. Much of the top floor is a gallery featuring local landscapes by celebrated Altai artist Grigory Churos-Gurkin (1870-1937). A small but attractive wooden **church** (pr Kommunistichesky 130) is nearing completion towards the market area.

Sleeping & Eating

There's further choice in Mayma, Aya and Souzga.

Hotel Gorno Altaiavtodor (☎ 62256; 4th fl, Kommunistichesky pr 182; dm R200-350, tw/d 1600/2500)

Clean, well-kept, three-bed dorms share decent new facilities. Pricier rooms have private bathrooms. Disconcertingly, you have to ring at the rear entry-phone buzzer and give your reservation details before being let in. Book ahead.

Dormoststroy (☎ 62149; 3rd fl, per Granitny 1; tw R1000) Five cramped but comfy new twin rooms with kettle and fridge share a sparkling-clean new toilet and hot shower. You can pay per bed (R500).

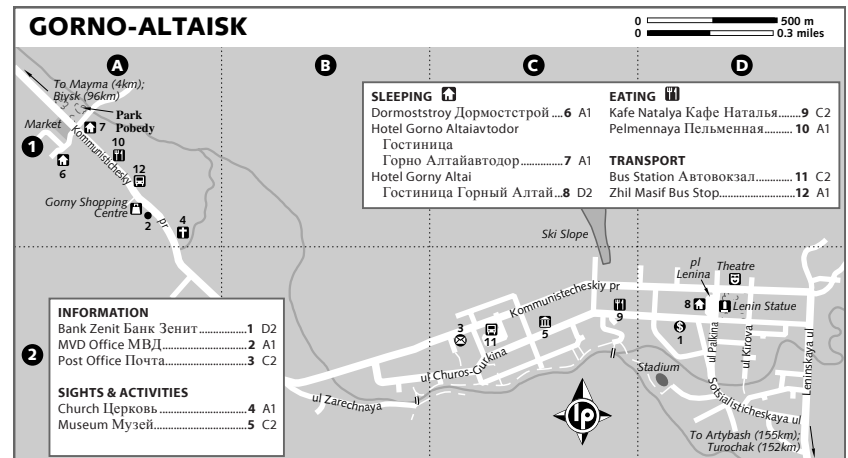
Hotel Gorny Altai (☎ 95086; ul Palkina 5; dm R201, s R350-390, tw/tr R560/603) This crumbling Soviet slab usually has a room available when all else is full. Perfectly central, it has new beds but shared seatless toilets and no showers whatever. Lenin points accusingly to its door.

Kafe Natalya (☎ 24393; ul Churos-Gurkina 32; meals R110-170; ☎ 10am-11pm) Cosy, with quiet good taste, this remains by far Gorno-Altaiisk's nicest. Delicious daily specials are displayed in the heated cabinet making point-and-pick an easy option. The *kuritsa pa-tekhasski* (stuffed chicken breast, R75) is superb. Omelettes (from R25) make a good breakfast. Cover charge R25 on musical nights.

Pelmennaya (☎ 22314; 2nd fl, Kommunistichesky pr 178; meals R35-70; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, to 4pm Sat & Sun) This Soviet-era cafeteria has apparently negatively phototropic pot plants and serves cheap if uninspiring breakfasts.

Getting There & Away

There's no railway but a **booth** (☎ 9am-1pm & 2-5pm) within the bus station sells train tickets.



Buses run to Barnaul (R200, five hours, seven daily) and Biysk (R65, two hours, eight daily), and serve most Altai Republic villages at least daily including Tyungur (R403, 2.20pm) and Onguday (3.30pm). Timetabled minibuses for Ulagan and Kosh-Agach (both 7.10am, via Aktash) don't run on Tuesday or Saturday. If passenger numbers are low, only one of these buses runs so you might not get beyond Aktash (R265, seven hours).

Private alternatives leave until mid-morning according to demand. Much faster shared taxis usually cost 70% more than buses but can be hard to differentiate from private taxis.

Getting Around

From central Gorno-Altaiisk virtually all east-bound city buses take Kommunisticheskyy past the bus station, MVD office and market. Buses numbered over 100 continue to Mayma, with the useful bus 102 (R9) ideal for all of Mayma's restaurants and hotels.

AROUND GORNO-ALTAISK

☎ 38844

Mayma Майма

Hugging the M52 (ul Lenina), Mayma is effectively Gorno-Altaiisk's western lobe. There's nothing to see but the settlement does have a large market and Internet-connected post office right where the road turns off to Gorno-Altaiisk. Around 2km further south (on bus 102) there are some pleasant eateries and minihotels.

SLEEPING & EATING

Hotel Nika (☎ 21673; ul Lenina 129 at km443/520; s/tw/d R350/700/700) Brand new in an old-style log mansion just beyond the Nika petrol station with three great-value rooms suffering somewhat from road noise.

Hotel Ostrov Yuzhny (☎ 8-903 074 7062; ul Pribrezhnaya 10; tw/d R800/1000) Three minutes' walk towards the river from the Nika, this peaceful, modern house-hotel has a big sitting room and shared kitchen.

Kafe Pristen (☎ 22875; ul Lenina 62; meals R120-250, cover R30 from 7pm; ☎ 11am-midnight) Quality Russian food and kebabs served at heavy wooden bench tables overlooked by hunting trophies.

Kafe Solechny (☎ 23004; ul Lenina 87, km442/521; meals R50-90; ☎ 8am-10pm) Unusually pleasant new cafeteria with decent toilets.

Aya & Souzga Ая и Соузга

The rock-punctuated Katun riverside has many idyllic spots south of Mayma though hotels, *turbazy* (holiday camps) and homestays dotted every kilometre or two tend to mar the views. Accommodation is most concentrated around **Aya most**, a suspension bridge leading to the famous but laughably pitiful 'warm' Lake Aya. Beside the bridge many agencies offer **rafting trips** (per hr R200-250) and horse rides at short notice; handy if you haven't reserved anything more adventurous.

Souzga village starts 500m beyond the Aya Bridge with the comfortable little **Gostiny Dvor** (☎ 27630; ul Naberezhnaya 64; s/d R1500/1800), whose rooms have good, modern toilets and showers. Prices drop 20% from September to April.

Very basic hut-camps abound here. The cheapest huts are simply two beds and a window. Easy to find and nicely positioned 4km north of Aya most is **Bely Kamen** (☎ 8-903 919 2297; tw R400-600; ☎ Jun-Aug).

Souzga marshrutky run very rarely from opposite Mayma market. Chermal and Chuysky Trakt buses also pass by. If you have no accommodation booked consider chartering a taxi from Mayma market to check out various options, saving you very long sweaty walks.

LAKE TELETSKOE ОЗЕРО ТЕЛЕЦКОЕ

Deep, delightful Lake Teletskoe is Altai's serene answer to Lake Baikal, a great place to simply relax and catch your breath. Ridge after forested ridge unfolds as you scuttle along on one of the myriad little pleasure boats that buzz out of Artybash village, the lake's charming tourist hub.

Artybash & Iogach Артыбаш и Иогач

☎ 38843 / pop 4500 / ☎ Moscow +3hr
At Lake Teletskoe's westernmost nose, little Iogach village is the main population centre and bus stop. Across the bridge, Artybash is a ribbon of cottages, homestays and minihotels straggling three pretty kilometres along ul Teletskaya to the big Turbaza Zolotoe Ozera. June to September, the *turbaza* offers horse rental and at 10am and 3pm daily runs lake trips (R250, four hours) to **Korbu Waterfall**. The falls are hardly memorable but the journey is very beautiful despite the

blaring commentary. Most accommodation places can arrange motorboat (*lodki*) rentals. Rafting trips run twice daily from Pensionat Edem. Out of season when the lake is frozen, the village is idyllically peaceful.

SLEEPING & EATING

Iogach is convenient for transport but the walking and views are generally better from Artybash. Many of the cheaper places open peak season only. However, all places listed here (except Turbaza Zolotoe Ozera) operate year-round with reservations highly advisable in July and August.

Iogach

Hotel Tayozhnaya (☎ 27445; ul Naberezhnaya; dm R200-450, tw/d R900/920) Just two minutes east of the bus stand, this handy, friendly place has some very pleasant views of the lake. Cheap rooms share outdoor long-drops (lit and clean) while double rooms share a single indoor loo. Using the *banya* costs extra.

Artybash

Every second house in Artybash seems to have rooms or huts to rent. Prices start from R250 without any facilities but many demand minimum groups of three or more guests in summer. Look for signs marked 'Сдаю Дом' and 'Сдаётся Дом' (house for rent). Beyond Turbaza Zolotoe Ozera, there are more 'mini-resorts', a wide, grassy free-camping area which gets very noisy on weekends plus some cheap but very basic hut-camps. Hotel distances given are from the Iogach-Artybash bridge.

Stary Zamok (☎ 26460; km1.4; off season/summer/Jul d with bathroom R1600/1800/2000) This sweetly kitsch little 'castle' has the village's best-value upper-range accommodation. There are shared terraces, lake-view sitting rooms and a dining area. Rooms with shared bathrooms cost roughly half.

Pensionat Edem (☎ 26434; km2.5; d/tw from R1000/1400) A variety of comfy rooms and organised activities make the Edem a popular choice though it's in trees slightly set back from the road and lacks any lake views.

Kemping Laguna (☎ 26489; km3; beds/tw R450/900 off season, tw R2000-2400 Jun-Aug) Right at the gates of the *turbaza*, the Laguna's fully furnished en-suite rooms are great value out of season. However, in summer they're 99% booked out.

Turbaza Zolotoe Ozera (☎ 26440; km3.2; beds R120-250 Jun & Sep, R170-300 Jul-Aug) Despite the perfect position for views and lake excursions, this big, institutional place has mainly old, shed-like units offering cheap, unappealing accommodation. However, major building works are under way to erect much more attractive hotel-style options.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

From Gorno-Altaiisk the 11.05am bus (R137, 5½ hours) detours via Turochak, where you spend over an hour for lunch. In summer a faster direct service should run most afternoons. Returning to Gorno-Altaiisk, a few direct shared taxis leave between 6.30am and 7.30am (R200, 2¼ hours). Biysk to Artybash is only 168km but timetables mean that public transport will leave you stranded overnight in Turochak, where the very basic **Hotel Lyzhny Baza** (☎ 22730; ul Nagomaya 1; beds R100) is an awkward 2km walk from the bus stop.

Around the Lake

Around Lake Teletskoe, half a dozen small, simple *turbazy* lie in complete, idyllic isolation accessible only by boat. Novosibirsk's Zhemchuzhina Altaya (p511) organises bookings and access by weekly boat (R800 return, Thursday) from Iogach.

Probably the best choice is **Altyn-Tuu** as it's the closest to the mouth of the dramatic Chulyshman Valley. A 4WD track from here gets you relatively close to the phallic erosional quirks known as **Mushroom Rocks** (Kamennye Griby) and you can hike onwards to see the powerful 160m **Uchar Waterfall**. When the mud road is passable (easiest in autumn) it's possible to reach Altyn-Tuu and Balykcha from the Chuysky Trakt via Balyktuyul (p533). Hike-and-raft adventure tours sold by **STA-Novosibirsk** (www.sibtravel.com) approach this way.

ALONG THE KATUN RIVER TO CHEMAL

Between Mayma and Chermal the rock-dotted Katun River weaves prettily through forests and between tall grey cliffs. Villages all along the route have a range of accommodation from basic summer huts to swanky new hotel-style complexes, many operating from May to September only. Most people simply come to unwind but between all those vodka-drinking sessions

with holidaying Siberians you can usually arrange easy rafting day trips. Tour agencies in Barnaul, Novosibirsk or beyond have extensive catalogues, but in July and August many have minimum three-day stays and most are heavily prebooked.

Many local homes rent rooms from around R250 per bed without facilities and from R500 with shared indoor bathroom. Nicknamed *Zelyoni Doma*, some are bookable through the Russian-only website www.zel-dom.narod.ru. Otherwise, just look for door signs saying 'Сдаётся Дом'.

Manzherok to Ust-Sema

☎ 38844 / 📶 Moscow +3hr

In the woods towards sprawling **Manzherok** village, there are modestly priced riverside *turbazy* at km461.8, 462.2, 465.2 and 468.3. At km469, **Turkomplex Manzherok** (☎ 24399; dm/d R250/1100) sits behind a mock-Cossack stockade in a riverbank pine grove. Relatively good-value doubles have private shower and toilet.

Manzherok's best homestays are at the village's prettier southern edge around km474.

At km478.7, **Arzhaan Suu** is a 'holy' cold-water spring at the roadside, shrouded by summer souvenir sellers. Just across the new suspension bridge is **Talda Park** with caves and a café in a bizarre wooden galleon.

Further south, development is ever less intrusive. The scenery is prettiest around **Ust-Muni** (where there are some homestays) and **Barangol**, where **Tsarskaya Okhota** (☎ 26410; ram@alt.ru) has an eye-catching, castle-style entrance. Its café is a great place to stop and has arguably the most beautiful Katun-side position for miles around. A long suspension bridge allows footpath access to a waterfall (3km). However, its accommodation is rather overpriced.

Ust-Sema to Chermal

☎ 38841 / 📶 Moscow +3hr

A dead end road from Ust-Sema follows the Katun River towards Chermal through thick cedar forests which steadily open out into patchworks of slopes and fields that make for good walking. Several rural accommodation options lie within a few km of the **Turbaza Katun** (dm from R130/190 Jun-Sep/Jul-Aug) which is cheap, if rather institutional, and has an attractive riverside position with regular rafting and other outdoor activities. Bookings

are through Sibir Altai (p511) in Novosibirsk; they can book your stay but if you only want to do some sports it's better just to turn up. Somewhat nicer **Berel** (dm from R300) has cramped huts but also R450 beds in nicer buildings with shared sit-down toilets.

On the 'wrong side' of the Katun, attractive **Anos** village has a tiny Churos-Gurkin museum and a comfortable **guesthouse** (s/tw €20/30) run by Novosibirsk-based Sibalp (p511). Easiest access from the Chermal road is by pedestrian suspension bridge.

Chermal Чемал

☎ 38841 / pop 9000 / 📶 Moscow +3hr

At the attractive junction of the Chermal and Katun Rivers, ever-expanding Chermal is heavily touristed in summer but remains a good base for regional explorations and makes a very pleasant day trip from Gorno-Altai, 95km further north.

Chermal **bus station** (☎ 22517; ul Pcholkina 62) is opposite a cute brick **church** (ul Pcholkina 69a) with a metal-spined wooden tower. Walk two blocks south past the central shops and a small park, then turn right to find the **Altaysky Tsentr** (☎ 22327; ul Beshpekskaya 6; individual/group R100/300). This comprises three Altai-style wooden *ail*-huts with pointed metal roofs. One is an Altai library, another celebrates Churos-Gurkin's ethnographic work, but most interesting is the traditional 'home' *ail* (tent-like dwelling) where septuagenarian curator Alexander Bardin demonstrates Altai crafts, shows how traditional fire-stones work, explains sheepskin nappies and brews *talkan* Altai tea. It's well worth the entry fee if your Russian (or Altai/Kazakh/Turkish) is good enough; opening hours vary.

Ul Beshpekskaya becomes Sovetskaya ul and, after 700m, dead-ends at a pedestrian suspension footbridge. This dizzyingly wobbly construction leads across a small canyon to a craggy island in the Katun River on which is perched the tiny wooden **Ioanno Bogoslavski Chapel** (🕒 9am-7pm), rebuilt in 2001 to the original 1849 design. Beside it, the rock miraculously shaped like a Madonna-and-child sculpture is supposedly natural.

A narrow but well-trodden footpath winds high along the Katun riverbank into the **Varota Sartikpayev Canyon**, an important place within Altai mythology. Despite power lines and summer crowds, views remain very pretty. After walking for about

15 minutes you emerge behind a small 1935 **dam** (GES in Russian, an acronym for hydroelectric scheme) backed by souvenir stalls. Here you can make 15m **bungee jumps** (прыжки ve vodu; per jump R90; 🕒 10am-1pm & 2-7pm May-Sep) into the frothing outpour waters or 'fly' across on the **kanatnaya daroga** (per ride R150), an amusing elastic-pulley contraption. For much more peaceful Katun views walk, drive or cycle at least 3km further south.

Elekmonar, 5km north of Chermal, is the starting point for multiday hikes or horse rides to the seven attractive **Karakol Lakes** amid picturesque bald mountaintops. The lakes are approximately 30km beyond Elekmonar – start up ul Sadovaya. A sturdy 4WD could get you most of the way.

SLEEPING & EATING

Pensionat Radna (☎ 22257; altayradna@inbox.ru; ul Zelyonaya 8; s R500, tw R700-1000) At the northern end of Chermal, three good-humoured lady-doctors have gone 'back-to-nature' milking their cow, growing vegies and baking bread. They rent comfy rooms, some of which share a hot-water bath and sit-down indoor toilet (but go outside for number twos, please!) With bicycle hire (R80 per hour), massage, hiking trips and the best vegetarian food in Altai, you might not want to leave.

Marin Ostrov (☎ 22403; ul Yozhanskaya 58; tw Oct-Apr/May-Sep R1800/2400; 📶 📶) Large, fully Western-standard rooms have river-facing balconies, while four cheaper rooms (R1200/1600) share two bathrooms. There's a pub and a delightful terrace café. Idyllically quiet, it's 2.5km south of central Chermal towards Areda (a trio of upper-market hotels hidden in a narrow forest gully).

In Elekmonar, very basic homestays are available for under R400 at over a dozen homes, including Sovetskaya ul 53, 107 and 157, and Tsentralnaya ul 32 and 61.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses run thrice daily from Gorno-Altai (R91, two hours). In summer additional services run from Barnaul (seven hours) via Biysk (4½ hours) and overnight from Novosibirsk.

CHUYSKY TRAKT ЧУЙСКИЙ ТРАКТ

South of Ust-Sema, the dramatic M52 road to Olgii in Mongolia is known as the Chuysky Trakt. It offers 400km of forested

DOMES, STONES AND MOUSTACHES

Kurgany are ancient domed burial mounds. Some are over 2500 years old, while others, like those at Shiba (6km west of Tuetka), date 'only' from the 6th century AD, though to the casual observer they're somewhat more impressive. Nonetheless, even these are still just barely discernable piles of stones. Much more interesting are **kameny baba** figures, literally 'stone granddads'. The best were carved in human form with Terry Thomas moustaches, shewn holding a cup that symbolically housed the soul of the dead. Just a few *kameny baba* have avoided being carted off to museums. Accessible if very eroded (mostly now faceless) examples appear beside the Chuysky Trakt. Much finer is the brilliant Chinggis Khaan stone near Ak-Dovurak (p552). There are also many groups of animal-shaped **petroglyphs** (rock drawings) of debatable origin. These may be fascinating but most are so faint that you might miss the scratches even when you're staring right at them.

mountains, canyons and glimpsed vistas, emerging eventually into peak-rimmed steppe dotted with Kazakh yurts. The views are arguably better driving northbound as the woodlands are less dense on the south-facing slopes, leaving visible the photogenic rocky cliffs. Transport is incredibly limited but shared taxis run all the way to Kosh-Agach for around R500 per seat (R1500 to R2000 per car) and drivers are generally happy enough to make brief stops en route for photos of landscapes, stone idols and petroglyphs.

Onguday Area Онгудай

☎ 38845 / pop 5100 / 📶 Moscow +3hr

High but relatively unspectacular, the Seminsky Pass is topped with a winter sports training centre and some snack kiosks from which the road descends to **Onguday**. Translating literally as '10 gods' (for the 10 surrounding peaks) the large village isn't especially appealing but its very basic, central **hotel** (☎ 21196; ul Erzumashva 8; dm/tw R300/600) makes a possible base for archaeologists visiting *kurgany* at Karakol, Tuetka and Shiba. There's a small museum in the school and the Torko Chachak handicraft shop

sells Altai felts and fur hats. Onguday's Eloyin Festival is a big Altai cultural celebration held some years in early July.

To Onguday's northwest, a dead-end side road to Kulada village passes through **Bichiktu-Boom** (with some traditional tepee-shaped Altai *aily*) and an attractive valley which offers hiking and free-camping possibilities. **Kulada** itself is built around a rocky knob and is a holy place in Burkhanism, a curious but almost extinct Altai religion founded in 1904 by shepherd Chet Chelpan, fusing Orthodox Christianity, Buddhism and folk traditions.

Southeast of Onguday the Chuysky Trakt crosses the beautiful, serpentine **Chike-Taman Pass**. It descends close to the **Ilgumen Rapids**, which offer challenging rafting (grades 4 to 5); five-day adventures to Manzherok start by camping at the beautifully positioned **Kür-Kechü** (Kordon Kurechy; tent sites R50), perched just above the river, 800m east of km681. There are a few summer huts here too. See p520 for more on rafting in Altai.

In a cliff-ringed curl of river, **Maly Yaloman** has a microclimate allowing local villagers to grow cherries, apples and naughty weeds. Up 12km of rough side track **Bolshoy Yaloman** has several *kameny baba*. A faceless but much more accessible trio stand right beside the Chuysky Trakt just beyond the southern end of **Inya** village (km706.4).

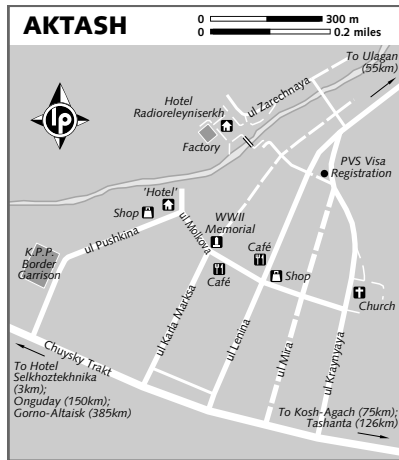
At km712.6, overshadowed by an unsightly pylon, picnic tables and prayer flags tempt you to stop for wonderful views of the meeting Ilgumen and Katun Rivers far below. Just beyond, beside the slip road for the Chuy-Oozy truck stop (km714.2), very lightly scored road-side petroglyphs depict little antelope figures. There's another petroglyph group at Kalbak Tash crag, a five-minute walk north of km721. The road then snakes scenically through the Chuya Canyon to Aktash (km790).

Aktash Area

AKTASH АКТАШ

☎ 38846 / pop 3400 / 📶 Moscow +3hr

This nondescript little garrison-village commands a dramatic area of craggy valleys. If bus timetables leave you stuck here, stroll 3km towards Balyktuyul through the striking rocky canyon named **Red Gate** (Krasnyye Vorota). Aktash could make a base for mountain adventures in the lovely



Northern Chuysky Range with its challenging mountaineering on **Mt Aktru** (4044m) and **Mt Maashey** (4177m) or for trekking to the **Shavlinsky Lakes** for idyllic mountain views. However, for all of these you will need outside help as in Aktash itself there are no tourist facilities and no waiting guides. Chartering a suitable 4WD to reach Mt Aktru base camp isn't easy but the trip is lovely if you succeed.

PVS Visa registration (☎ 23381; ul Mira 1a) is required if you missed registering in Gorno-Altaysk. The unmarked **Hotel Radioreleyniserkh** (☎ 23311; ul Zarechnaya 17; d R60) has four excellent rooms for a token fee. It's designed for invited business guests but tourists might be allowed to stay one night by prior arrangement. Finding the keyholder in the bowels of the factory at ul Zarechnaya 15 can be quite an adventure.

Hotel Selkhoztekhnik (Chuysky Trakt km767; dm/s/tw R200/250/500), isolated 3km north of town, is much more basic. A 2003 earthquake left its walls bowed and floors strangely twisted.

The central, two-room unnamed **'hotel'** (gostinitsa; ☎ 23831; ul Pushkina 1; dm R250) is scary – rooms are hidden within a Kafka nightmare of collapsing offices and unidentifiable detritus. Avoid except in case of emergency.

Neither Aktash nor Onguday have professional taxis but shopkeepers can suggest potential drivers. Aktash to Kosh-Agach by car can cost anywhere from R700 to R1200.

ULAGAN & BALYKTUYUL УЛАГАН И БАЛЫКТУЙУЛ

☎ 38846 / pop 2500 & 1300 / 📶 Moscow +3

From Aktash, a mostly asphalted road via the disreputable town of **Ulagan** (Ust-Ulagan, 56km from Aktash) winds through a lovely high valley to **Balyktuyul** with its cute wooden Altai church. However, both places are notorious for dangerous drunkards and locals suggest reporting your arrival to the village offices for 'protection'. The excavation sites of the classic **Pazyryk kurgan** (5th century BC tumuli) are about 5km beyond Balyktuyul off the very rough jeep track that continues all the way to Balykcha on Lake Teletskoe's southern tip. Ulagan has a small Pazyryk museum and a tiny hotel, often unnamed.

Kosh-Agach Area Кош Агач

☎ 38842 / pop 4500 / 📶 Moscow +3hr

Clouds allowing, the best views on the whole Chuysky Trakt are between Aktash and Kosh-Agach. Wide if distant panoramas of perennially snow-topped peaks rise formidably behind valleys known somewhat misleadingly as the Kuray and Chuy Steppe (km821 to km840 and km870 onwards). These are interspersed by more great canyons and a colourful mountainside that looks like marbled chocolate pudding (km856). The Kuray Steppe hosted Russia's 2005 paragliding championships (www.triadaclub.com/kurai).

Kosh-Agach itself has a strange, end-of-the-world feeling about it, with its shantytown homes petering out into magical flat steppe just beyond the Hotel Tsentralnaya. When the dusty air clears, the nearby mountains appear from nowhere like apparitions. A useful landmark is the little wooden **Khazret Osman Mosque** (ul Sovetskaya 62), which marks the intersection of the Chuysky Trakt with ul Sovetskaya. It's on ul Sovetskaya that you'll find the bus stand and three hotels. Parallel, one block west, is ul Kooperativnaya with a **post office** and **police station** (☎ 22433; ul Kooperativnaya 34) for visa registration.

Sberbank (ul Pogranychaya 1a; 🕒 9am-noon & 2-4.30pm Mon-Fri) changes money if no-one in the market will.

Sergei Erlenbaeva, at the Hot Bread Hotel knows the location of some photogenic local **urts** where you can sample fresh

kumiss with Kazakh nomad herders. The nearest are just 5km away on steppe that rises imperceptibly towards the distant twin peaks of Mt Saylyugem (3411m) and Mt Tapduary (3305m).

Very adventurous travellers with a few weeks to spare have bought **horses** in Kosh-Agach and ridden all the way to Tyungur, Lake Teletskoe or even to Tuva.

SLEEPING

All hotels are small and ultrabasic with outside horror-hole toilets.

Hot Bread Hotel (☎ 22682; ul Sovetskaya 50-52; dm R150). The nickname 'hot bread' comes from the bakery sign reading 'Горячий Хлеб'. This very friendly crash pad has doorless three-bed dorms upstairs off the baker's family living room. No English is spoken but the charming owner understands tourist interests and has travelled the world.

Hotel Tsentralnaya (☎ 22162; ul Pogranychaya; s/tw R150/260) Small, very simple governmental place exaggeratedly criticised by locals. Others include **Hotel Shankhai** (ul Sovetskaya 63; dm R125) and **Hotel Bazar** (ul Sovetskaya 61; dm R150).



CROSSING TO MONGOLIA AT TASHANTA-KYZYL-UUY

In desolately lonely grassland and hills 51km beyond Kosh-Agach, **Tashanta** is a tiny settlement with a wooden-towered stockade. After years of rumours, the **Mongolian border** (☎ 9am-noon & 2-6.30pm) here finally opened to foreigners in 2004. Actor Ewan McGregor and his *Long Way Round* TV crew were among the first across. There's 28km of no-man's-land between Tashanta and **Kyzyl Uuy** (Red Door) which you may not cross on foot. Neither settlements have regular transport so your best bet is to arrange 4WD transport all the way between Kosh-Agach and Olgii markets. Taking your own vehicle into Mongolia requires special paperwork. See www.xor.org.uk/silkroute/siberia2004/for tales and photos.

EATING

Despite posted '24-hour' opening times, most shops and cafés actually close by 6pm. **Vostochnaya Kukhnya** (ul Kooperativnaya 37a) is reckoned best for Central Asian food. The **Stolovaya** (ul Sovetskaya 62a) has simple Russian fare.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

From the **bus stand** (ul Sovetskaya 28), the 7am minibus to Gorno-Altai (R370, nine hours) can't be relied upon. Shared taxis (R500 per seat) also leave around 7am; they offer much better views and by arrangement will collect you from your hotel for no extra charge. For transport to the Mongolian town of Olgii (seats R250) it's best to find a 4WD 'UAZ' vehicle at the **Mongolian market** (Mongolski Rynok; ul Kooperativnaya 44). Weekdays around midday are the best times to try.

TOWARDS MT BELUKHA

Tiny Tyungur village sits in an appealing valley. Although lacking viewpoints itself, it's the normal staging point for treks towards **Mt Belukha** (4506m), Siberia's highest peak. Surrounding valleys and lakes are among Russia's most spectacular but access requires strenuous guided hiking.

The road to Tyungur branches off the northern Chuysky Trakt at Cherga and crosses a delightfully isolated, mostly for-

ested area via Baragash. After the high grasslands of **Ust-Kan**, there's a brief glimpse of the distant white-tops from the Kyrlyksky Pass as the road descends into the Koksa Valley. Though less dramatic than the Chuysky Trakt, the landscape is attractive with bucolic meadows framed by hills and bluffs.

Ust-Koksa & Tyungur

Усть-Кокса и Тюнгур

☎ 38848 / ☎ Moscow +3hr

The valley meets the Katun River at **Ust-Koksa**, which has the delightful wooden **Pokrovskoe Church** (ul Nagornaya 31). Across the Katun River, around 10km beyond Multa, there's a maral deer farm with a small summer *turbaza* en route to the beautiful **Multinsky Lakes**. These offer yet more great hikes if you can find a guide. In the 1930s the many old believers of the Koksa and Uymon Valleys offered fierce armed resistance to collectivisation, leading to the almost total destruction of their villages by the peeved Soviet state. Nonetheless, **Verkhny Uymon** village has an Old Believers' Museum (Muzei Staroobryadchestva) as well as a small Nikolai Rerikh House Museum.

Tyungur is a tiny village but its well-organised **Turbaza Vysotnik** (opposite) is a fantastic place to go to organise trekking, rafting or ascents of the mighty Mt Belukha. Decent tents, climbing equipment and even sleeping bags can be rented here. Maps, guides and horses are also available and there's the possibility of meeting other travellers to form a trekking group with. It's worth emailing ahead with your requests. If you speak some Russian ask about joining an existing Russian group (much cheaper, from around US\$20 per person per day). Bring trekking supplies as Tyungur has minimal groceries. If you want to spy Mt Belukha without a full-blown expedition, take a long day hike from Tyungur partway up **Mt Bayda**.

HIKING ROUTES

Before setting off on any of Tyungur's five- to 12-day trekking adventures, be aware that you're heading for real wilderness. Discuss your plans carefully with staff at one of the *turbazy* in Tyungur, or join one of the many organised groups by booking

well ahead with one of the many trekking companies, notably those in Barnaul, Novosibirsk, Omsk or beyond.

Hiking alone or without a guide is highly discouraged. Renting packhorses for your baggage will make the treks more pleasant and horsemen often double as guides, though none speak any English.

To reach the lovely **Akkem Lake** from Tyungur you could cross the 1513m Kuzuyak Pass. Alternatively, start by rafting 20km down the Katun River to the mouth of the Akkem River past some *kameny baba*. From there, hiking the forested Akkem River valley (two days) is somewhat dull so consider a four- to five-day high loop to the east, with many marvellous mountain views en route. Camping is popular around Akkem Lake's hydro-meteorological station where there's also a rescue post (but don't play hurt as an 'easy way out' – helicopter evacuation costs from US\$6000 minimum).

Stupendous panoramas of Mt Belukha are the reward for crossing the boulder-strewn Kara-Tyurek Pass (3060m), which loops from Lake Akkem to peaceful **Lake Kucherla**; it takes one day if you don't get lost but is tricky for horses. Returning down the Kucherla River valley to Tyungur takes at least two days but add more time for exploring and mishaps.

From the confluence of the Akkem and Katun Rivers it's also possible to hike along the **Katun River** to Inya (three days) on the Chuysky Trakt.

CLIMBING BELUKHA

Ascents of Belukha (grade 3A–5A) are only for experienced mountaineers but don't require special permits. A two-week package (from around US\$450 per person) available from **Turbaza Vysotnik** includes guides, food and acclimatisation climbs for individuals or small groups. Specialist mountaineering groups such as K2 Adventures in Omsk (p504) have successfully guided mountaineers up the toughest 'Bottle' ascent.

SLEEPING & EATING

Ust-Kan has a basic hotel at its bus station, and there's a small hut-camp beside the main Tyungur road 4km east of town near an archaeological cave site.

In Ust-Koksa, the grocery shop **Lada** (Sovetskaya ul 71; beds R200), with multicoloured roof, has decent rooms upstairs, let down by a meet-the-neighbours shared squat toilet. Another unmarked three-room **guesthouse** (Sovetskaya ul 58; beds from R100) has a kitchen and real bathroom, but to get the key you must visit the **Komkhoz office** (☎ 22393; ul Nagornaya 23) during business hours.

There are two options in Tyungur across the suspension bridge from the village. Keep left for the simple but very well organised **Turbaza Vysotnik** (☎ 22024; hut dm/tw/tr/q R150/300/400/500, tent dm R90). Sheets or sleeping bags cost R40 extra. There's a helpful English-speaking manager and a great café which is the nearest you'll find to an international traveller hang-out in Altai. Almost anything you'll need for mountaineering or treks into the wilderness is available for rental here, including tents and guides, but it's worth reserving in advance through Lenalptours (p490) in St Petersburg. Its **Akkem Camp** (dm R60) has pre-erected four-man tents en route to Lake Akkem.

A five-minute walk to the southwest of the Tyungur Bridge is the slightly more comfortable but less traveller-orientated **Turbaza Uch-Sumer** (☎ 29424, 38841-38822; fax 22872; www.uch-sumer.ru; yurt space/dm R150/600). Dorm prices in the hotel section include a shared indoor toilet. There are also some private huts. The owners offer many tour options, notably hunting around Lake Kucherla and elsewhere in the mountains where they maintain cabins.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

From Gorno-Altai (a strangely timed 2pm bus runs daily to Tyungur (R403, nine hours) arriving just before midnight. It returns at 8am via Ust-Koksa and Ust-Kan. *Marshrutky* run from Gorno-Altai to Ust-Koksa (R450) when full, usually two or three times each morning, departing from a corner of the bus station parking area. Departures are possible as late as 10am southbound but northbound all will have usually left by 8am.

Taxis plying the Ust-Koksa–Verkhny Uymon route charge R500 return with waiting time; buses only run twice a week. The **Turbaza Vysotnik** in Tyungur (above) arranges transfers to Biysk.

SOUTHERN KEMEROVO REGION

The Kemerovo region is often considered synonymous with the mines of the Kuzbass district. However, south of the industrial mayhem, the Gornaya Shoriya Mountains are locally considered a 'little Switzerland'. While this may be overstating things, there's a popular skiing area at **Sheregesh** (www.sheregesh.ru), 25km from the railhead at **Tashtagol**. A very adventurous trek takes mountaineers over a tough trail to Turochak in Altai.

Visiting Novokuznetsk is a vastly less daring proposition. The Kemerovo region's biggest city, it makes a handy stop between Abakan and Biysk when overlanding between Altai and Tuva.

NOVOKUZNETSK НОВОКУЗНЕЦК

☎ 3843 / pop 563,000 / 📶 Moscow +4hr

Founded on the right bank of the Tom River in 1618, the frequently enlarged Kuznetsk Fortress became one of the most important guardians of imperial Russia's southeastern frontier. The chunky remnants remain Novokuznetsk's modest main attraction. The city's left bank, named Stalin'sk until 1961, developed from 1932 as a gigantic steel town and is now the city centre. A day is ample to survey Novokuznetsk's intriguingly pompous early-Stalinist boulevards fanning out to towering smokestacks.

Sights

An easy stroll due north from the cohabiting bus and train stations takes you up pr Metallurgov, which is a good example of Novokuznetsk's memorable 'Brave New 1930s' feel.

To your right in Gagarin Park is the grandly colonnaded main **theatre** (☎ 743 505; pr Metallurgov 28). On the left at the corner of Pionersky pr, the 80-year-old **Regional Museum** (Kraevedchesky muzey; ☎ 741 995; admission R25; 🕒 10am-6pm Tue-Sat) concentrates mostly on mining and steel industries.

If you want to visit the sparse remnants of old Kuznetsk, take frequent *marshrutka* 5 from the stations. You'll pass the vibrant **art museum** (☎ 476 848; ul Kirova 62; admission R15; 🕒 10am-6pm Wed-Sun) and a **Biznes Tsentr** (ul

Kirova 102) in an eye-catching wooden-spired old building before crossing the wide Tom River. Get off at Sovetsky pl and follow the road that leads steeply up beside the beautiful 1792 **Transfiguration Cathedral** (Preobrazhenskoi sobor; 🕒 8am-2pm & 4-7pm). On the hilltop, the restored stone ramparts of the **Kuznetsk Fortress** (krepost; ☎ 360 092; ul Geologicheskaya; admission R35, photography/video R25/50; 🕒 10am-5pm) are massive and topped with canons but represent only 20% of their 1810 extent. There's a great little gift shop upstairs within the copper-domed Barnaul Gate and an exhibition hall in the renovated barrack house.

Return to Sovetsky pl and walk five minutes south down ul Dostoevskogo. One of several wooden homes set in riverside gardens is the artistically presented **Dostoevsky Museum** (☎ 376 586; ul Dostoevskogo 40; admission R25; 🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-3pm Sat) in the log cabin where the writer stayed for three weeks in 1856-57. Request the key from ul Dostoevskogo 29.

Sleeping

For a fuller Russian-language listing of hotels and cafés consult www.i2n.ru.

Hotel Aba (☎ 424 460; www.abahotel.ru; ul Kuybysheva 8; d from R1500; 🛏) Rooms in this polite, modern hotel are bright and fairly stylish with clean, new shower booths and toilets. Much bigger R2600 suites have air-conditioning but the same somewhat undersized double beds. It's 1.5km northwest of the stations; three huge blocks up pr Kurako then left.

Hotel Novokuznetsk (☎ 464 647; ul Kirova 53; s R780-1470, tw from R860) This presentable Soviet giant has clean rooms but standards vary widely; few are as smart as the renovated reception area implies. It's on the large traffic circle, 1.5km northeast up pr Bardina from the stations by *marshrutka* 5.

Hotel Metallurg (☎ 746 185; pr Metallurgov 19; s/tw/tr/q R380/500/510/680) Clean, lower-grade Soviet rooms have private sinks but the shared toilets lack seats and the sex-segregated showers are whiffy. A few good-value R850 rooms are much nicer with private facilities and small double beds. It's in a college building beside the main post office with Gorky and Lenin statues loitering outside like a couple of plinthead tramps.

Eating

There are many cheap cafés near the stations. Several places on ul Kirova near the Biznes Tsentr have much more style.

Shafra (☎ 352 609; ul Kirova 103; meals R150-280; 🕒 11am-11pm) Semimodernist café in a shopping centre with supermarket and ATM. American-style filter coffee R30.

Traktir Zhily-Bili (☎ 392 055; ul Kirova 97; meals R1180-350, salad bar R195) Hansel-and-Gretel ambience beneath a great artificial oak tree for various traditional Russian-Siberian meals. Opposite is a 24-hour Internet club.

Getting There & Around

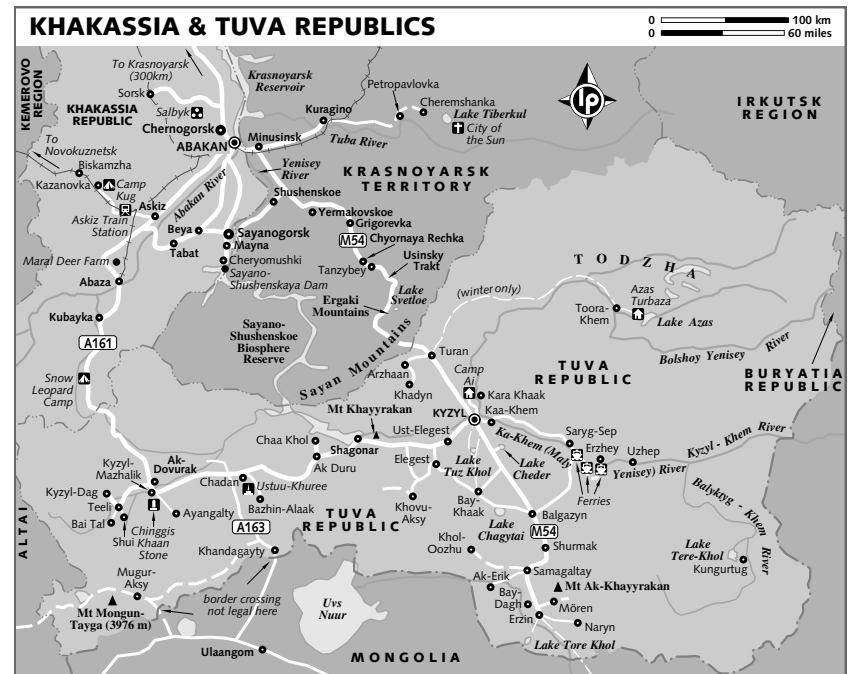
Handy overnight trains run to Abakan (train 696, R266 *platskart*, 10 hours) and Novosibirsk (train 605, R312 *platskart*, eight hours). The ski-train to Tashtagol (train 679, seven hours) leaves at 6.20am in season.

Slow, bumpy buses run across Lonely, undulating agricultural landscapes to Biysk (R200, six to seven hours) departing at 9.30am, 11.25am, 1.27pm and 1.45pm. Infuriatingly, ticket sales normally start only one hour before departure.

Taxis (☎ 390 111) charge around R200 per hour for city tours.

KHAKASSIA REPUBLIC & SOUTHERN KRASNOYARSK TERRITORY ХАКАССИЯ И ЮЖНЫЙ КРАСНОЯРСКИЙ КРАЙ

The Ireland-sized Khakassia Republic rises from lake-dotted taiga through a vast agricultural plain to meet richly forested mountains on the Tuvan border. Geographically, it is inextricably linked with Southern Krasnoyarsk Territory. For both areas, transport connections focus on the city of Abakan.



colour scheme and a portrait of Old Boney ignoring a startled turkey. Tasty *akula* (stuffed squid) comes with olive-ring 'eyes' while 'Marshal Ney potatoes' are smothered in cheese and gently brushed with garlic. Evening cover charge R70.

Coffee House (☎ 27355; ul Shchetinkina 26; espresso R45; ☎ 9am-11pm; ☎) Stone and dark-wood interiors. Real coffee.

Pizza Iceberg (☎ 23122; ul Vyatkinskaya 25; pizza slices R35; ☎ 8am-11pm Mon-Fri, 10am-11pm Sat & Sun) Abakan's youth hang-out with pleasant, modern décor. A R40 *kurnik* (pastry stuffed with mushrooms, rice and chicken paste) is better than the microwaved pizza.

Taverna Kakadu (☎ 50336; ul Pushkina 36a; meals R190-450, cover R20 from 8pm; ☎ 11am-4pm & 5pm-2am) Small, dimly lit bar-restaurant with pirate-themed interior. There's good Russian food but the place overheats even in winter.

VSK Bistro (Sovetskaya ul 40; meals R40-100, coffee R9; ☎ 9am-11pm) Cheap but tidy cafeteria chain with bliny (R7 to R29), fresh bread, cakes and light meals. Is that Marilyn Monroe? Second branch at ul Shchetinkina 22.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Abakan's airport is 2km northwest of the city. **Vladivostok Airlines** (www.vladavia.ru) links Moscow (R8350) and Vladivostok (R7920) via Abakan with connections including Barnaul (R1710, Tuesday and Sunday) and Tomsk (R1530, Monday and Thursday). There's also a Thursday hop to Kyzyl (R1690). Buy tickets from the **Aviakassa** (☎ 38363; ul Chertygasheva 104; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, to 6pm Sat & Sun).

BUS

From the **bus station** (ul Shevchenko) several day and night buses serve Krasnoyarsk (R215, 6½ to nine hours) via Divnogorsk. Others run frequently to Sayanogorsk (R55, 1¼ hours), eight times daily to Shushenskoe (R50, 1¾ hours), five daily to Yermakovskoe (R77, two hours), hourly to Abaza (R100 to R130, 3½ hours) via Askiz and to Kuragino (R56, 2½ hours) at 1.40pm, 3.20pm and 5.30pm.

Road transport for Tuva leaves from the **Mezhorod Taxi Booth** (☎ 37888) outside the train station. For Kyzyl, snail-paced, wheezing buses (R280, nine to 11 hours) depart at 7.30am, noon and 7pm daily. Shared taxis ask between R600 and R800 per seat and will collect you from your hotel if you book ahead. No extra charge. To Ak-Dovurak there are no buses and shared taxis are rare.

TRAIN

To Krasnoyarsk, overnight train 124 (R696, 10½ hours) is the best of three alternatives. Train 695 to Novokuznetsk (R504, 10 hours) is handy if you're heading to Altai. The daily *Khakassia* to Moscow's Yaroslavlsky vokzal (R3800, 73 hours) runs via Novosibirsk (24 hours) and Yekaterinburg (46 hours).

Getting Around

Bus 15 and trolleybus 3 run from the airport to central ul Shchetinkina. Passing near the train station frequently is bus 11 that heads east to TsUM then up ul Shchetinkina and pr Druzhba Narodov to the cathedral,

looping back via Mikro-Rayon 4 Market. Bus 10 also passes the train station but adds a loop via ul Marshala Zhukova (beyond the bus station) and pr Lenina before heading up ul Shchetinkina and pr Druzhby Narodov to Mikro-Rayon 4 Market, returning via the cathedral.

AROUND ABAKAN

Minusinsk Минусинск

☎ 39132 / pop 75,000 / ☎ Moscow +4hr

Minusinsk's scattering of partly derelict 18th- and 19th-century buildings offers more architectural interest than Abakan, and its riverside houses can look picturesque when very selectively photographed. The old section is 25km east of Abakan across the protoka Minusinskaya waterway from new-town Minusinsk's domineering concrete blandness. Jump off buses 120 or 10 beside the elegant 1803 **Saviour's Cathedral** (Spasskoe sobor; ul Komsomolskaya 10) and cross the square to find the excellent **Martyanov Museum** (☎ 20752; ul Martyanova 6; admission R50; ☎ 10am-6pm Wed-Sun). Over a century old, highlights include splendid archaeological and cultural exhibits, and the preserved little library in which Lenin occasionally studied while genteelly exiled at Shushenskoe. The museum's gift shop sells town maps.

One block along ul Lenina then two blocks northeast up ul Kravchenko is overgrown pl Lenina, dotted with crumbling mansions including the gutted **Vilner Palace** (ul Oktyabrskaya 65) with maudlin echoes of former grandeur. A block southwest, the complex of wooden buildings where Lenin was a regular guest (1897-1900) is now a **museum** (ul Oktyabrskaya 73; admission R25; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Tue-Sun).

The award-winning 1882 **Drama Theatre** (ul Podinskaya 75) is a block northwest of the cathedral, hidden behind an old factory.

SLEEPING & EATING

Hotel Amyl (☎ 51026; ul Lenina 74; dm/s/tw R200/310/560, d with bathroom R740) This old house-hotel, half a block southeast of the Martyanov Museum, has faint hints of style. Most rooms are very basic but the R740 lux doubles are quite inviting.

Hotel Severnoe Sijane (☎ 25906; ul Oborony 32; dm/s/tw R280/350/560) Clean, basic rooms sharing good clean showers (R15 extra) hidden

within an unlikely apartment block five blocks northeast of the theatre.

Kafe Sibir (☎ 21668; ul Lenina 97; meals R35-60, beer R16, tea R3) Unlovely but the only old-town choice. Enter from ul Kravchenko.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

The easy way from Abakan bus station is by big bus 120 (R12, 40 minutes) direct to old-town Minusinsk. But *marshrutky* are faster and much more frequent to new Minusinsk (R15, 25 minutes), where you jump off at the last stop and switch to Minusinsk city bus 10 for the old town. Returning buses are rare after 6.30pm.

Salbyk Салбык

This Stonehenge-sized remnant of a 'royal' *kurgan* is Siberia's most impressive ring of **standing stones**. Excavated in 1956, it's in open fields, 5.6km down unsurfaced tracks south of km38 on the Chernogorsk-Sorsk road. About 2km before Salbyk notice the large, grassy dome of the unexcavated '**Princess' kurgan** which it once resembled. Taxis from Abakan want at least R500 return. Bring buckets of mosquito repellent.

Kuragino & the Vissarion Villages

Курагино

☎ 39136 / ☎ Moscow +4hr

The pleasant market town of **Kuragino** has an eccentric new church but little else to see unless you're interested in Vissarion (see the boxed text, p542). If so, start by contacting the religion's **Info Tsentr** (☎ 23594; www.vissarion.ru; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 1-7pm), a R30 taxi ride from central Kuragino - ask for Motorskoe Obshchizhitye. **Petropavlovka** village, 83km east of Kuragino, is the most accessible Vissarion village with a particularly attractive wooden church. Considerably further east is the utterly isolated **City of the Sun** where Vissarion and his apostles are building their 'new Jerusalem' above beautiful Lake Tiberkul. Entry is by invitation only, and pilgrim jeeps from Cheremshanka to the trailhead (whence you trek the last four hours on foot) generally only run on Sunday so expect to stay a while.

A block from Kuragino bus station, the basic **Hotel Tuba** (ul Partizanskaya 108; s/tw R420/650) has private indoor toilets in a few river-facing rooms. Vissarion villagers in Petropavlovka are often happy to welcome

IN THE MARTYANOV MUSEUM *Mark Elliott*

'What are you doing here?' gasped Marina. Guard-guide to the 'Minusinsk Life' room, she blankly refused to illuminate the room's darkened exhibits. 'Have you seen the Polish diaspora room? No? Of course not - you're going the wrong way!' Unable to defeat her Russian tirade I dutifully retreated. Elsewhere I examined long-nosed Tashtyk death masks, peeped in a Khakass *ail* and passed cursorily through that requisite Polish room. Finally I dared to return...the 'correct' way. Marina had shed any signs of her previous prickliness. Proudly she now unveiled case after unexotic case of consumer products manufactured in Minusinsk's factories. 'Those biscuits...OUR biscuits, they're...MMMMmm. And our jams. So much fruit - look there. You see. We even TIN the fruits too! Oh we have everything here! You can't imagine.' She extolled the remarkable virtues of Minusinsk yogurt. She swooned over dried milk powder. Then she stunned me with the revelation that the town had not one but TWO mineral water producers. Half bursting with suppressed laughter, half genuinely moved by her heartfelt enthusiasm, I wanted to hug her. What love, what dogmatic energy, what a perfect Siberian experience.

VISSARION – MESSIAH OF SIBERIA

Perceiving modern society to be on a destructive collision course with nature, the 30,000-strong Church of the Last Testament follows an ecologically based philosophy for clean living. It was formulated by Vissarion, the 'teacher', who many of his euphoric followers believe to be a second Jesus. He realised his divinity in 1991 and even dresses like a Hollywood Christ. But he was born Sergei Torop and is a former traffic cop from Krasnodar.

Settled in remote, beautiful but harsh Siberian countryside villages, Vissarionites are mostly vegans growing their own food and espousing an eventual goal of independence from the global energy and financial systems. Nonetheless, the community has its own computers, TV- and recording-studios, and doctors from Western, herbal and oriental traditions. Tobacco and alcohol are considered vices, and a woman's place is seen very traditionally as homemaker and loyal supporter for her husband. Horse carts are preferred over polluting tractors, and low-technology agriculture is encouraged both as a meditation and for its ecological sustainability.

The Church calendar's year 1 was 1961 (year of Torop/Vissarion's birth) and 14 January (his birthday) is the Vissarion Christmas. However, the best time to visit Petropavlovka is during the 18 August summer festival.

Devotees continue heading to Siberia to be close to this mysterious messiah, and almost all seem radiantly happy...unlike the families they left behind.

and accommodate guests, feed you great vegetarian food and discuss plenty of interesting philosophy (in Russian, naturally).

Competition is fierce for seats on the two buses each morning from Kuragino to Abakan via Minusinsk (R50, 2½ hours). Share taxis are an hour faster. Bone-shattering buses from Kuragino to Chermshanka via Petropavlovka (R38, 2½ hours) depart at 4pm, returning 6am next day.

Abakan-bound overnight train 768 from Krasnoyarsk arrives at Kuragino's inconveniently located train station at 8.43am.

Shushenskoe Шушенское

☎ 39139 / pop 20,000 / ☞ Moscow +4hr

As every good Soviet knows, Shushenskoe played host to Lenin for three years of (relatively comfortable) exile. But fewer of them know that in 1898 the young atheist was married in Shushenskoe's **Peter & Paul Church** (ul Novaya; ☞ 10am-3pm), much to his later embarrassment.

For Lenin's 1970 birth centennial a two-block area of the village centre was reconstructed to look as it had in 1870. These well-kept 'old' Siberian houses now form the **Lenin Memorial Museum** (ul Novaya 1; admission R35, photography/video R20/50; ☞ 9am-5pm). Many are convincingly furnished, and in summer costumed craftsmen sit around carving spoons. It's gently interesting, but as all trips are guided (in Russian unless you pay R200 extra for a translator) the visit

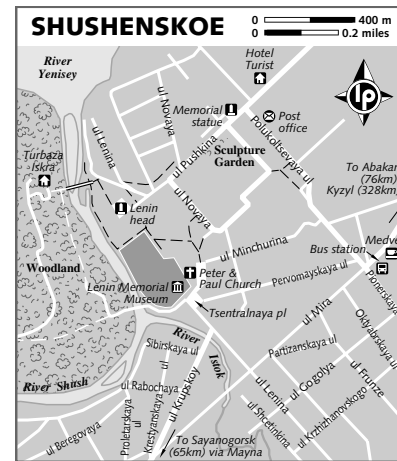
is somewhat slow and you're locked into spending over an hour seeing everything. At the entrance, a gift shop sells good town maps and a guide to Lenin-related sites in Siberia.

Behind the fenced museum area, but with no direct access from it, a pink **Lenin head** perches on a disproportionately tall plinth. Along ul Pushkina towards the hotel from there is a **sculpture garden** dotted with troll-like figures, and beyond the cinema is a striking mother-and-dove **memorial statue**.

The **post office** (ul Polukoltsevaya 5; ☞ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat) offers Internet and telephone connection.

Half-hearted restoration continues at **Hotel Turist** (☎ 32841; fax 32941; ul Pushkina 1; upper floors s/tw/tr R290/580/870, 2nd fl s/tw R575/1150), but many rooms remain worn and rather musty. Prices aren't unreasonable given the private bathrooms, though the basic showers tend to flood the toilet floor. Better 2nd-floor rooms are haphazardly re-decorated and somewhat more comfy but retain a Soviet soul. There's also ultrasimple summer-only accommodation in old huts at **Turbaza Iskra** (☎ 32151; dm R150), across the river by a footbridge from the Lenin head.

With dark-wooden hunters' décor and great prices, **Medved** (☎ 31 261; ul Pervomayskaya 50; meals R75-160, wine R15-54 per glass; ☞ 11.30am-3pm & 9pm-4am) is Shushenskoe's most ap-



pealing café. It's just 100m from the bus station.

Buses serve Abakan (R50, 1¼ hours, eight daily), Krasnoyarsk (R300, 10½ hours) morning and evening, Kyzyl (R239, eight hours) at 9am and Sayanogorsk (R50, two hours) departing 5.30am, 9.20am and 3.45pm. Ice-cream-stand attendants in the bus station operate a small makeshift baggage room (R2 per hour).

Sayanogorsk Саяногорск

☎ 39042 / pop 57,000 / ☞ Moscow +4hr

The vast Khakassian grasslands slam into the forested Sayan Mountains at Sayanogorsk. The city is just a huddle of concrete towers but within 30km lie the modern ski resort of **Gladenkaya** (www.sky-gladenkaya.ru, in Russian; ☞ Nov-Apr), pleasant valley getaways at Zharki and Babik, and the very impressive Sayano-Shushenskaya Dam (p544).

Sberbank (ul Lenina; ☞ 9am-1pm & 2-5.30pm Mon-Fri) cashes travellers cheques for US\$5 commission. **Sayan Tour Service** (M/R Sovetsky 41), behind the Hotel Meridian, and **Gladenkaya Agency** (☎ 26642; fax 73811; gladenkaya@sayan.rusal.ru; M/R Sovetsky 38) can book accommodation at Zharki, Babik or Gladenkaya. They also arrange ski packages and offer tours of the **marble factory** and **Sayano-Shushenskaya Dam** given two working-days' notice to prepare the necessary permits.

Central Sayanogorsk addresses confusingly bear no relationship to the road lay-

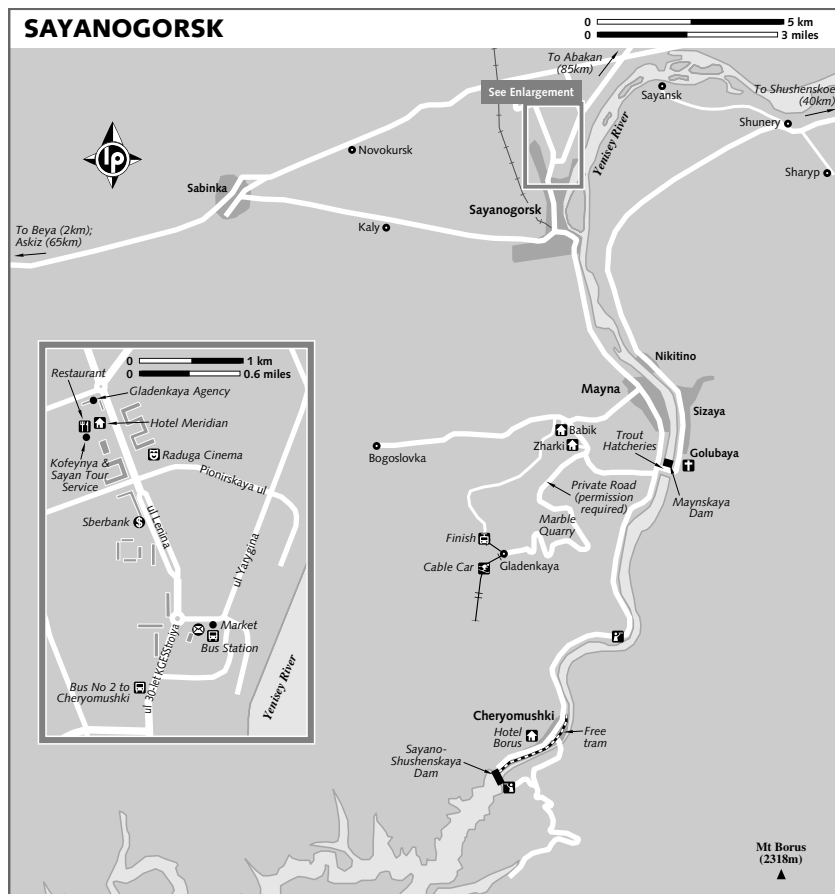
out. **Sayanogorsk Online** (<http://city.sayan.ru/info/map/>, in Russian) has a basic city map.

Hotel Meridian (☎ 62460; ul Lenina, M/R Sovetsky 40; apt/s/d R820/1600) offers large, well-equipped apartments; great value with breakfast included. Behind is a bright cafeteria-style *kofeynya* (espresso R33) and an excellent **restaurant** (☎ 62466; meals R110-250, cover R50-120 evenings; ☞ noon-2am) which, despite its somewhat Soviet ambience, serves imaginative meals including vegetarian options. For great budget accommodation in a lovely rural valley take a R140 taxi ride to Zharki or Babik.

Zharki Resort (☎ 42378; fax 73811; s Mon-Thu/Fri-Sun from R250/450) is a former sanatorium 3.5km east of the Maynskaya Dam (18km from Sayanogorsk). The main building (*glavny korpus*) has freshly renovated rooms with showers and toilets shared between pairs of rooms. Rooms in other buildings have private facilities from R600 for a single, R900 for a twin. With chunky beams and wagon-wheel décor the excellent **café-restaurant** (breakfasts R35-80, meals R140-350; ☞ 8.30am-1am) offers a range of garlic-enriched dishes at very fair prices. Try the trout or the *otbivnaya po-ministersky* (cheesy-pork). In winter, five daily shuttles (R20, 8km) run to the lower Gladenkaya cable car.

Babik Motel (☎ 42701; dm R150) is 2.6km east of Zharki by road but only a 20-minute walk if you head across the boggy fields. Its gloriously lonely riverside position will soon be somewhat diminished as a big ski hotel nears completion nearby. Nonetheless, the motel offers a lovely, budget getaway, with the bonus of strolls in its impressive mountain-sided valley. Accommodation is in simple six-bedded units with shower. However, the toilets are outside unless you pay the R60 supplement for the honour of an in-room chemical portable loo.

Sayanogorsk's bus station, 1km south of the Hotel Meridian, has services to Abakan (R55, 1½ to 2¼ hours, twice hourly), Shushenskoe (R50.50, two hours) at 7.20am, 11.10am and 5.40pm, and Askiz (R72, 2½ hours) at 7.10am and 3.30pm. The latter, via Beya, passes through some archetypal Siberian villages and follows a lovely foothill ridge with wide views over the plains below.



Around Sayanogorsk

SAYANO-SHUSHENSKAYA DAM

САЯНО-ШУШЕНСКАЯ ГЭС

Beside a trout hatchery near the Zharki-Babik turning (15km south of Sayanogorsk) there are pleasant views of the steep-sided river valley from the unremarkable **Mayn-skaya Dam**.

The vastly more impressive **Sayano-Shushenskaya Dam**, Russia's biggest and the world's fourth in terms of energy production, is 15km further south. Privatised in 1993, it cunningly survived a recent renationalisation battle with the Khakassian government by nominally 'relocating' itself in Krasnoyarsk territory. No physical move was needed as the dam straddles the

provincial border. To join by-appointment Russian-language tours of the dam's **turbine rooms** (☎ 71800; admission R300) you'll need copies of your passport, visa and registration plus an invitation letter arranged by a local hotel or Sayanogorsk agency.

Taxis from Sayanogorsk charge R200 return to the dam. Alternatively, Sayanogorsk city bus 2 (R4, 30 minutes, every 40 minutes) runs as far as 'Tsentralny' in **Cheryomushki**, from where the free dam (GES) workers' tram (10 minutes, hourly on the half-hour) continues 4km to the dam. Alternatively, observe the dam distantly from the Cheryomushki bridge. Valley views are more photogenic from the main Mayna-Cheryomushki road at around km29, where

you'll catch several glimpses of beautiful **Mt Borus** (2318m).

Above the main road in Cheryomushki, **Hotel Borus** (☎ 31919; hotel-borus@yandex.ru; s/tw/ste/apt R1500/2500/3500/10,000) is fairly stylish but rooms are slightly small and not as luxurious as the extensive advertising suggests. Some English is spoken.

The enormous reservoir that the dam created is surrounded by largely untouched wilderness, now constituting the **Sayano-Shushensky Biosphere Reserve**. Sightings of its estimated 30 snow leopards are exceedingly rare, though ibex are easier to spot. Abakan Tours (p538) in Abakan can help you organise a visit and operates a three-day boat ride right down the lake to Chaa Khol in Tuva.

USINSKY TRAKT

УСИНСКИЙ ТРАКТ

First built in 1910, the Usinsky Trakt is the main road between Minusinsk and Kyzyl in Tuva. It skirts the modest, historical township of **Yermakovskoe** and passes the little fruit-growing villages of **Grigorevka** and **Chyornaya Recha** before climbing into pretty birch-wood foothills. After a tea stop in **Tanzybey** (km560) the route climbs more steeply. A truly magnificent view of the crazy, rough-cut Ergaki Mountains knocks you breathless just before km598. Powerful views continue to km601 and resume between km609 and km612. A **roadside cross** (km603-4) marks the spot where hero-of-Chechnya and former Krasnoyarsk governor or Alexander Lebed died in 2002 when his helicopter snagged the power lines. Walk 1.5km up the steep track towards the radar station above for fabulous views from the ridge.

As the trakt descends, the scenery morphs through wooded river valleys into Tuva's panoramic roller-coaster grasslands. **Turan**, an attractive village of old wooden homes, has a cute little **museum** (ul Druzhby 44). The big-sky side road barrelling west off the trakt towards Arzhaan passes through Tuva's **Valley of the Kings**. Four pancake-shaped burial mounds here look like mere lumps in the grassland but in 2002 archaeologists found some magnificent artefacts from the 7th century BC within. The dig is featured in Kyzyl's Aldan Maadyr National Museum (p549).

Ergaki Mountains Хребет Ергаки
Rising in magnificent horned peaks above forests and glistening lakes, roadless Ergaki is one of the most beautiful regions in all of Siberia. If you want more than the glimpses from the Usinsky Trakt, consider making a two-day trek to the classic viewpoint above **Lake Svetloe**. Start from Turbaza Yermak where there's guarded parking, a left-luggage service and tent and sleeping-bag rental. A popular forest path follows the stream, dodging fallen trees and swampy patches, flower-filled meadows and fields of eccentric rocks. Wonderful. A guide is sometimes available to show you the way (R350) – recommended, as getting lost is easy. Bring all food supplies. For many mountaineering ideas and some beautiful photos see Russian websites <http://ergaki.krasu.ru/gallery.jsp> and www.nkz.tourism.ru/climb/ergak/.

Sleeping

Turbaza Yermak (☎ 39138-21762; Tushanchik Most, km622/445) rents one bare room (R500) with a heating stove and a wooden bench-bed big enough for five. The small, new **Tarmazakovski Most Turbaza** (☎ 3912-231 796; km614.5) is used predominantly as a climbing base. There's a further **Baza Otdykh Ergaki** (☎ 39022-56923; www.ergaki.com, in Russian; km605) near Lake Oyskoe, with several multibedded huts from R600 to R1400. All the above are utterly isolated without associated village or shop. Bring food and emergency camping gear. If you're stuck in Yermakovskoe, the friendly **Hotel Oya** (☎ 39138-21274; ul Lenina 7; dm/tw R150/400), on the central square, is perfectly survivable.

Getting There & Away

Buses run from Abakan and Shushenskoe to Yermakovskoe, and from Kyzyl to Arzhaan via Turan, but for the central, spectacular mountain passes the only public transport is on Abakan-Kyzyl buses and shared taxis. The latter are well worth the extra cash and will usually stop for photos if politely requested.

SOUTHWEST KHAKASSIA

Askiz АСКИЗ

☎ 39045 / pop 24,000 / ☎ Moscow +4hr
Culturally Askiz is the most Khakass town of Khakassia. However, there's little to

see and it's really only interesting during Tun Payran (Pasture-Opening Festival). The event features wrestling, horse racing, archery and much merriment. It's held in June but dates are infamously changeable.

About 30km west, appealing **Camp Kug** (Akhtas Yurt Camp; beds US\$35) offers comfy *ail* accommodation in a lovely rural setting, close to a series of shamanic sites and sacred bluffs. At the far western end of very quaint Kazanovka village, turn right immediately after crossing the river bridge. Just after you've turned you should see a sign 'Музей' which will confirm you're on the right track. Follow the bumpy track for 4km, bearing right at the only fork. The *aily* have washbasins and chemical toilets plus there are shared hot showers. Khakass cultural shows are performed when tour groups stay. Book ahead through Sayan Ring Travel (p553) in Krasnoyarsk. The camp is deserted when no guests have booked but should you be passing without a reservation you could try calling **Viktoria Kulimeyevna** (☎ 94531; Kazanovka village) who keeps the keys.

Towards Western Tuva

Between Askiz and the iron-ore mining town of **Abaza** are hundreds of ancient **standing stones**, notably at km109/307, where remarkable concentrations stand right beside the A161. If you're not squeamish, visit the roadside **Maral Deer Farm** (admission R35; km163/253) in May when you can watch the cutting of the animals' antlers, valued for their aphrodisiac properties.

Abaza's passable, shared-facility **Hotel Kedr** (☎ 39047-29870; ul Parkovaya 2a) has a pleasant restaurant. Alternatively, hidden within the trees off the Ak-Dovurak road are two decent summer places for those with their own transport; prices for both include full board and *banya*. **Kubayka Camp** (☎ 39022-54855; dm/tw US\$35/80) has 10 riverside log houses at a pretty spot 1km off the main road from Kubayka hamlet. Toilets are outside. Abaza tour agency **Rodnik** (☎ 39047-23281; www.rodniktd.ru, in Russian; ul Filatova 8-1) runs the ecofriendly **Snow Leopard Camp** (Turbazka Snezhny Bars; tw R2120-2700, tr R2880-3710) in thick, tick-free woodland 1.6km west of km296/120. A few R900 single-bed lofts are also available. English-speaking guides can organise hikes and horse treks taking

WHICH WAY TO TUVU?

There are two road routes from Abakan to Tuva. Krasnoyarsk and Abakan agencies tout the full loop as the 'Sayan Ring', including side trips to Minusinsk and Shushenskoe en route. Doing the loop independently is possible but you might have to pay a taxi for the Abaza-Ak-Dovurak section. That route has some lovely scenery in the Tuvan half, crossing a high, *Sound of Music*-style alpine pass topped with idyllic flower-filled fields, but as you descend into Khakassia the thick forest hides all views until you reach Abaza. Thereafter the mountains are replaced by grasslands with some interesting clumps of standing stones on the outskirts of Askiz (left).

Safer and easier for public transport, the Abakan-Kyzyl road is also more scenically spectacular, especially when clouds clear to reveal the gorgeous Ergaki Mountains (p545). Flying one way Kyzyl-Irkutsk (Saturday only) is a great time-saver, making it much more viable to add Tuva to a trans-Siberian trip. Annoyingly, tickets go on sale just two weeks before departure.

you to associated hunting lodges and tent camps in the lake-dotted mountains above. In Abaza call ☎ 23893 for a taxi.

TUVA TYBA

Independent before WWII, fascinating Tuva (Тыва in Tuvan) is culturally similar to neighbouring Mongolia but has an international cult following all of its own. Philatelists remember Tannu Tuva's (opposite) curiously shaped 1930s postage stamps. World-music aficionados are mesmerised by self-harmonising Tuvan throat-singers. And millions of armchair travellers read Ralph Leighton's *Tuva or Bust!*, a non-travel book telling how irrepressible Nobel Prize-winning physicist Richard Feynman failed to reach Soviet-era Kyzyl despite years of trying. Now that visitors are finally allowed in, Leighton's **Friends of Tuva** (www.fotuva.org) organisation keeps up the inspirational work with an unsurpassed collection of Tuvan resources on its website. With forests, mountains, lakes and vast undulating

waves of beautiful, barely populated steppe, Tuva's a place you'll long remember.

History

Controlled from the 6th century by a succession of Turkic empires, in the 1750s Tuva became an outpost of China, against whose rule the much-celebrated Aldan Maadyr (60 Martyrs) rebelled in 1885. Tibetan Buddhism took root during the 19th century, coexisting with older shamanist nature-based beliefs; by the late 1920s one man in 15 in Tuva was a lama.

With the Chinese distracted by a revolution in 1911, Russia stirred up a separatist movement and took Tuva 'under protection' in 1914. The effects of Russia's October Revolution took two years to reach Tuva, climaxing in 1921 when the region was a last bolt hole of the retreating White Russians. They were swiftly ejected into Mongolia by 'Red Partisans', to whom you'll see monuments in Kyzyl and Bay Dagh. Tuva's prize was renewed, if nominal, independence as the Tuvan Agrarian Republic (Tyva Arat Respublik, TAR), better known to philatelists as Tannu Tuva. However, to communist Russia's chagrin, Prime Minister Donduk's government dared to declare Buddhism the state religion and favoured reunification with Mongolia. Russia's riposte was to install a dependable communist, Solchak Toka, as prime minister, and, later, to force Tuvans to write their language in the fundamentally inappropriate Cyrillic alphabet, creating a cultural divide with Mongolia. Having 'voluntarily' helped Russia during WWII, Tuva's 'reward' was incorporation into the USSR. Russian immigration increased, Buddhism and shamanism were repressed and the seminomadic Tuvans were collectivised; many Tuvans slaughtered their animals in preference to handing them over.

Today, some people have reverted to traditional pastoralism but, unlike in neighbouring Mongolia, yurt camps are often hidden away in the remoter valleys, largely because gangs of ruthless rustlers have scared herders off the most accessible grasslands. Buddhist-shamanist beliefs survived the oppressions rather better. Even avowed atheists still revere local *arshaan* (sacred springs), offer food to fire spirits and tie prayer ribbons to cairns and holy

trees using the colours of the national flag: blue for sky, yellow for Buddhism and white for purity and happiness.

Tuvan Culture

Of the republic's 310,000 people, about two-thirds are ethnic Tuvans; Buddhist-shamanist by religion, Mongolian by cultural heritage, and Turkic by language. Confusingly in Tuvan *ekii* is 'hello' while *eki* is 'good'. Tuvan Cyrillic has a range of exotic extra vowels and most place names have different Russian and Tuvan variants.

Colourful *khuresh* is a form of Tuvan wrestling similar to Japanese sumo but without the ring, the formality or the huge bellies. Multiple heats run simultaneously, each judged by a pair of referees, flamboyantly dressed in national costume. They'll occasionally slap the posteriors of fighters who seem not to be making sufficient effort. Tuvans also love Mongolian-style long-distance horse races but are most widely famed for their *khöömei* throat-singers. *Khöömei* is both a general term and the name of a specific style in which low and whistling tones, all from a single throat, somehow harmonise with one another. The troll-like *kargyraa* style sounds like singing through a prolonged burp. *Sygyt* is reminiscent of a wine glass being rung by a wet finger: quaintly odd if you hear a recording but truly astonishing when you hear it coming out of a human mouth. Accompanying instruments often include a jew's-harp, a bowed two-stringed *igil* or a three-stringed *doshpular* (Tuvan banjo).

Ironically, it is often easier to get CDs of Tuvan music in the West than in Tuva itself. The most interesting groups are all-star Chirgilchin, inventive Alash and Kaigal-ool's Huun Huur Tu (literally, 'Sun Propeller'). Better-known Kongar-ol Ondar has collaborated with Frank Zappa and worked on the soundtrack for the Oscar-nominated film *Genghis Blues*. You can listen to and download various *khöömei* gems from slow-loading www.tarbagan.com.

Festivals

Tuva's most dramatic festival is **Naadym**, usually held in mid-August. Vastly less touristy than the Mongolian equivalent, Naadym is your best chance to hear *khöömei* concerts, watch horse races and to see if Russia's sumo champion Mongush 'elephant' Ayas

(www.sumo.boom.ru/eng/sumotori_m.html) wins the *khuresh* wrestling as usual. Similar elements accompany the **International Khöomei Symposium** (held roughly every three years) and the brilliant but as yet one-off **Dembildei festival**. More significant for local families is **Shagaa**, Tuvan New Year (February), with *sangalyr* purification ceremonies, gift giving and temple rituals.

Tuvan Food

Almost every rural household keeps a vat of *khoitpak* (fermenting sour milk), which tastes like ginger beer with a sediment of finely chopped brie. *Khoitpak* is drunk as is or distilled into alcoholic *araka*. Roast *dalgan* (a cereal, similar to Altai's bran-rich *talkan*) can be added to your salted milky tea, or eaten with *oreme* (sour cream). Local cheeses include stringy *byshtag* and rock-hard Kazakh-style *kurut* balls.

Tuvans are said to have learnt from Chinggis Khaan a special way to kill their sheep without wasting any of the animal's blood. Collected with miscellaneous offal in a handy intestine, this blood makes up the local delicacy, *han* sausage. You may be less than disappointed to find that restaurants rarely serve it – not that there are many restaurants anyway! Beyond Kyzyl, truck stops, *pelmeni* steamers and the temperamental village *stolovaya* are your best hopes for a hot meal unless you're staying with families. Kyzyl residents take their own supplies when travelling to the provinces.

Dangers & Annoyances

Meeting locals is the key to experiencing Tuva but be aware that many friendly Tuvans react badly to alcohol, becoming disproportionately aggressive, even amongst friends. A proliferation of knives and other weapons doesn't help. Chadan in Western Tuva is particularly notorious and even in tiny, apparently peaceful villages, steer well clear of drunks, travel with trusted, sober Tuvans and avoid drinking vodka with local 'friends'. Be streetwise and consider going to bed early!

KYZYL КЫЗЫЛ

☎ 39422 / pop 95,000 / ☎ Moscow +4hr

The most memorable attractions in Kyzyl are ephemeral – meeting shamans, hearing throat-singing or watching a wrestling competition. Tuva's capital may grandly claim

to be the 'centre of Asia', but architecturally it's mostly disappointing Soviet-era concrete. Fortunately, the central area's streets are pleasantly tree lined. From the riverside are quietly picturesque views across to a tiny Buddhist shrine on the unpopulated north bank. Behind that the steppe is backed by a horizon of arid, low mountains.

The town was founded in 1914 as Belotsarsk (White Tsarville). Whether to be pedantic or humorously ironic, the Soviet regime changed the name to Kyzyl, a Tuvan word which simply means 'red'.

Orientation

The spread-out street grid is centred around the theatre with ul Kochetova as the main commercial thoroughfare. Maps are very hard to find but are sometimes stocked in **Delovye Melochi Bookshop** (basement, Krasnoarmeyskaya ul 100; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-3pm Sat), which also sells decent Russian-language guides to Tuva (R100). Alternatively, buy maps mail-order from the USA through **Tuva Trader** (www.scs-intl.com/trader/) for US\$8 plus postage.

Information

Tuvan visa registration is required and sometimes checked elsewhere in the republic. Kyzyl hotels will do this, or visit **PVS** (Pasportno-Vizovaya Sluzhba; ul Lenina 64; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Tue-Fri), west entrance, window No 2. **Alash Travel** (☎ 34826; www.alash-travel.narod.ru, in Russian; ul Kochetova 60/12) Offers full-scale rafting and climbing expeditions, and can arrange horse-back trips between Tuva and Altai. English spoken by some guides but not in the office.

Aldar Tamdyn (☎ 54176; tamdyn@rambler.ru) Instrument-maker and member of group Chirgilchin. He speaks OK English and can help you contact local musicians when he's not on tour.

Aylana Irguit (☎ 13796 home, 34790 work; www.tyvantranslator.com; boraldai@hotmail.com) Charming translator (US\$15-40 per hour) with perfect English and many local contacts.

EcoTuva (☎ 10527, 14579; www.ecotuva.ru; ul Kochetova 100/17) Offers horse-back trips with throat-singing and yurt-erectations organised by experienced English-speaking agent Rada. Will be moving eventually to Apt 32a, top floor, ul Lenina 43, central rear door.

Post office (ul Kochetova 53; Internet per hr R60;

☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat) Internet room and telephone office attached. For parcels use entry at ul Druzhby 156a.

INFORMATION	
Alash Travel Алаш Трэвел	1 B2
Delovye Melochi Bookshop	2 B2
Дом Книги Деловые Мелочи	2 B2
EcoTuva	3 B2
EcoTuva Эко-Тыва	4 A2
Mongolian Consulate	5 C1
Консулат Монголии	5 C1
Parcel Office	6 B2
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PVS ПВУ	8 A2
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Hydrofoil ticket office	30 C1
Post Office Train ticket booth	31 B2
Shared taxi stand	32 D2
Shared taxis to Krasnoyarsk	33 D2
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Sberbank (ul Kochetova 34a; ☎ 8.30am-7pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-noon & 1-6pm Sat) Exchange counter and ATM inside.

Sviyaz-Bank (ul Kochetova 53; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-4pm Mon-Fri) Changes US dollars and euros.

Tourist Department (☎ 36436; Government House, ul Chuldum 18) Seems to have lost its former energy.

Tsentr Asii (☎ /fax 32326; asiatur@tuva.ru; Hotel Odugen) Helpful, friendly agency that can arrange air tickets and vehicle transfers.

Sights

If you take a map of Europe, cut out Asia and balance the continent on a pin, the pinprick will be Kyzyl. Well, only if you've used the utterly obscure Gall's stereographic projection. However, that doesn't stop the town perpetuating the 'Centre of Asia' idea first posited

by a mysterious 19th-century English eccentric and still marked with a concrete globe-and-obelisk **centre-of-Asia monument** on the riverbank, at the end of Komsomolskaya ul.

Beyond the stuffed animals of the ramshackle **Aldan Maadyr National Museum** (☎ 30096; ul Lenina 7; admission US\$2; ☎ 11am-5pm Tue-Sun) are some banknotes, stamps and photos from the 1930s independence period, a Todzha reindeer-herders' tepee (through dark glass in the WWII room) and some fine *kameny baba* (p531). Many more 6th- to 12th-century stone figures are outside in the back yard (via a padded door between the fish exhibits). A big, new museum building (ul Kochetova) has been built but technical problems currently prevent the collection from moving.

A tiny **Museum of Oppression** (Gööguzuneng muzeyi; Komsomolskaya ul 5; donation) has moving, dog-eared, copied photos of those who disappeared in the Stalin years. Across the grass is the chest-puffing statue of a **Nepokorennyy** ('undefeated') Aldan Maadyr martyr in his pointy slippers.

Activities

TUVAN MUSIC

Throat-singing is Tuva's great draw, yet finding performances is rather haphazard. Sometimes they're listed on www.tyvantranslator.com. If not, try asking at the distinctive white concrete **National Theatre** (☎ 11566; ul Lenina 33), whose slightly oriental wooden flourishes make it the city's most architecturally distinctive building. On the 1st floor of the sizable **Cultural Centre** (ul Shchetinkina-i-Kravchenko 46), the **Khöömei Centre** (☎ 33424) can help arrange throat-singing lessons – to find it, walk between the cloakroom and snack bar and keep going. However, to simply hear a sample try going up to the 3rd floor from here (by the back rather than the main stairs) to a room where Tuvan musicians practise most afternoons around 2pm. Alternatively, contact Aylana Irguit or Aldar Tamdyn (p548), who can usually arrange a short demonstration of the various styles. Around US\$20 is an appropriate donation.

SHAMANISM CENTRES

Visiting a shaman is fascinating if you have a translator and a tangible 'problem' to have examined. This might be a medical, mental or emotional purification or perhaps seeking 'luck' with your travels. Typical ceremony costs are in the R2000 to R3000 range. Less authentic 'shaman shows' are organised for tourist groups.

Riverfront totem poles and reception yurts make **Tos Deer Shaman Centre** (☎ 32023; ul Krasnykh Partizan 18a; ☎ 8am-8pm) the most photogenic centre. If someone has stumped up the cash, there might be sunset ceremonies here but shamans are touchy about (unpaid) photography.

Adyg-Eeren Shaman Centre ('Bear's Spirit' Shaman Centre; ☎ 14483; ul Shevchenko 225-7; ☎ 8am-8pm) looks like a used-car lot but in one very ordinary room there is a stuffed bear and all the shamanic accoutrements. A third option is **Dungur Shaman Centre** ('Drum' Shaman Centre; ☎ 31909; Rabochaya ul 245; ☎ 8am-8pm).

Sleeping

Hotel Kottedzh (Gostiny Dvor; ☎ 30503; ul Krasnykh Partizan 38; s R700-1200, tw R1200-2000) In peeling electric pink, this 12-room hotel has reasonably cosy rooms and acceptable private bathrooms. Two cheaper rooms have toilet only. Breakfast is included.

Hotel Odugen (☎ 32518; ul Krasnykh Partizan 36; s R700-900, tw R1100-1800, ste R1800) The cheaper rooms here are slightly less comfortable than at the Kottedzh, but top-floor suites have sitting rooms and much better décor. There are river views from even-numbered rooms.

Camp Ai (Biy-Khem Yurta; s/tw R1265/1820; ☎ May-Sep) Traditional-style yurt tents with private chemical toilets and shared hot showers on a wonderfully isolated riverside 18km north of Kyzyl (R150 by taxi). Nearby are some minor petroglyphs. Shaman 'ceremonies' and throat-singing demonstrations are arranged for visiting tour groups. Book ahead through **Sayan Ring Travel** (☎/fax 3912-522481; www.gotosiberia.ru) in Krasnoyarsk. For last-minute vacancies try calling local manager **Artur** (☎ 38900). It's unwise to show up unannounced.

Hotel Mongulek (☎ 31253; ul Kochetova 1; dm R400-450, s R530, d R900-1100, tr R1200) Considerable cosmetic improvements have made the rooms bright and fairly fresh, but the private toilets are mostly old Soviet issue, and only the most expensive rooms have dowdy bath-shower units.

Hotel Kyzyl (☎ 11107; ul Tuvinskikh Dobrovoltsev 13; dm/s/tw with toilet R220/350/600, s/tw with bathroom & TV R450/800) Tatty but bearable and wonderfully central.

Eating

Most hotels have basic eateries while the **market** (ul Druzhby) has a range of fresh produce and is ringed by several cheap cafés and shashlyk grills.

Kafe Shek-Peer (☎ 13319; ul Druzhby 151; meals R90-140; ☎ 10am-10pm) Presentable café with a short menu of tasty dishes that include rice or potato garnish in the price. Wine available by vodka-sized glass.

Arlekina Kafe (☎ 10207; ul Kochetova 99; espressos R31, meals R100-230; ☎ 10am-11pm) Bright colours, aquariums and big-screen DVD make this family-friendly place an upbeat choice. The menu is extensive and the R100 lunch is filling if unexotic.

Art Kafe (☎ 14836; Theatre Bldg; meals R120-350) Neither arty nor a café, central Kyzyl's only

real restaurant has affordable lunch menus, but R50 evening cover charges.

Kafe Dom Pechati (ul Krasnoarmeyskaya 100; meals R40-100; ☎ 11am-6pm) Unremarkable basement canteen reckoned by most locals to offer the best-value lunch in town.

Getting There & Away

Tyva Avia (☎ 12064; ul Bukhtueva 3; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat) flies to Krasnoyarsk (R3210, four weekly), Novosibirsk (R3750, three weekly), Ust-Kut via Irkutsk (R3950, Saturday) and Abakan (R1150, Thursday). To Todzha (four weekly, weather permitting) it's R2050 by plane or R2800 by helicopter. **Astair** (Hotel Mongulek; ☎ 9am-6pm) plans to restart direct flights to Moscow.

For the lovely drive to Abakan, shared taxis (R600 to R800 per seat, 5½ hours) are well worth the difference over the grindingly slow, overbooked buses (R280, 10 hours), which depart from the bus station daily at 6.50am, 8pm and 9pm. Cars congregate behind **Hotel Mongulek** but if you book ahead through **Mezhgorod** (☎ 14343) they'll collect you from anywhere in town once almost full. Shared taxis/*marshrutky* are best for Chadan (R200/120), Ak-Dovurak (R350/230) and Saryg-Sep (R100/60) but these cannot usually be prebooked.

There's no railway but train tickets ex-Abakan are sold from the post office (special entrance on ul Chuldum).

Summer hydrofoils shoot along the Yenisey rapids up to Toora-Khem in Todzha (R870, 10 hours upstream, seven hours back) on alternate days. Prebook at the **hydrofoil ticket office** (☎ 11897; ul Tuvinskikh Dobrovoltsev; ☎ 9am-4pm) beside the quay. You'll need your passport. Window seats 19, 25 or 31 are best for views with least spray.

Getting Around

The airport is 7km southwest of the centre by bus 1A (R8). Almost all *marshrutka* routes use ul Kochetova. *Marshrutky* 1, 2, 6 and 10 pass the bus station.

AROUND KYZYL

The giant **Kadarchy herder statue** surveys the city from a bare hill, five-minutes' drive from Kyzyl's southernmost edge. Beyond, prayer rags photogenically deck a small roadside **spring** which is the closest such *arzhaan* to the capital. To get a taste for the steppe, con-

sider the relatively easy excursions to **Cheder salt lake**. Slightly more awkward to reach, **Lake Tuz Khol** is crowded with comically mud-blackened health-vacationers; its waters are so salty that you float Dead Sea-style. It's 20km off the main road down sandy, unsurfaced access tracks; taxis charge R650 return plus R100 per hour waiting time.

Following the Ka-Khem (Maly Yenisey) River southeast of Kyzyl, the steppe gives way to agricultural greenery around low-rise **Saryg-Sep**, beyond which an appallingly muddy road continues through woodland to the pretty Old Believers' village of **Erzhey**. Despite the extraordinary inaccessibility, there are several bungalow-hotels and hunting lodges en route and beyond. A good deal is at Bilbey (33km from Saryg-Sep) where the surprisingly pleasant **Turbaza Vasilyevka** (☎ 39432-22253; tw from R250) lies beside a curious cable-ferry in a flower-filled field.

FROM KYZYL TO ERZIN

The paved M54 offers a wonderfully varied scenic feast with archetypal Central Asian grassland, then parkland-style rolling woodlands after Balgazyn, thickening to pine forest beyond the two tiny cafés at **Shurmak**. Spot shamanic cairns and prayer-rag ticker tape on passes and herders' yurts in picturesque meadows. The landscape gets starkly drier descending past Samagaltay and **Bay Dagh**, a former camel-breeding centre where memorials commemorate the last scuffles of the civil war in 1921. Between km1023 and km1024, radar posts look down on the junction of a smooth, scenic but unpaved road to Mören, 18km away, passing near holy mountain **Ak-Khayryakan**. EcoTuva (p548) can show you its revered spring (whose seasonal flow is aided each summer by multiple shamanic ceremonies) and arrange unforgettable yurt-stays with nomadic cattle herders in the glorious valleys beyond.

The asphalt main road ends at **Erzin**, which has a clean, basic, mural-brightened **hotel** (ul Komsomolskaya 31) near the bus stand and a photogenic competitor for the world's smallest **Buddhist temple** (ul Komsomolskaya 22) competition.

Sandy tracks continue 20km south past Dali-esque rocky outcrops to Lake Tore-Khol, a popular local picnic spot. Although at the edge of the desert zone, herded horses trotting through the shallows give the area

a slight feel of the Camargue in France. Across the water is Mongolia but the border is closed to foreigners.

TODZHA (TODZHU) ТОДЖА (ТОДЖУ)

'If you haven't seen Todzhu you haven't seen Tuva' sighs a popular local saying. Most Tuvans haven't. Mainly lake-dappled forest, this roadless northeastern lobe of the republic has a distinctly different culture, traditionally based on reindeer herding. Above unnavigable rapids on the Biy-Khem (Bolshoy Yenisey) River, salmon-like *taimen* grow to 15kg (even 30kg by some reports), safe for any fisherman unable to fork out nearly US\$10,000 for helicopter rental.

Without time and extensive planning casual visitors are limited to the area around Toora-Khem village, accessible from Kyzyl by air or splashing up the beautiful Biy-Khem (Bolshoy Yenisey) River by somewhat claustrophobic hydrofoil. Register immediately with the police upon arrival.

Some 40-minutes' drive down a jeep track from Toora-Khem, the area's main attraction is serene, forest-edged Lake Azas, famed for its water lilies. Beautifully positioned at the lakeside is the basic, astonishingly isolated **Azas Turbaza** (beds R100; ☎ mid-Jun–mid-Sep). Well before leaving Kyzyl ask an agency to warn the manager of your arrival date so he can buy food and pick you up from the boat dock or airfield. At Azas you can row on the lake, walk to smaller **Noghaan Khol** and imagine that the bears in the woods are only aural mirages.

WESTERN TUVA ЗАПАДНАЯ ТУВА

The route looping round to Abakan from Tuva via Askiz is scenically varied, often beautiful and mesmerisingly vast in scale, though the Chinggis Khaan stone near Ak-Dovurak is the only real 'sight'. Independent travellers should be aware of Western Tuva's fearsome reputation for wild lawlessness and unprovoked knife attacks. Even other Tuvans are nervous about travelling without a truly local companion. Sayan Ring tours (opposite) come this way.

At km107, the grassland route from Kyzyl passes dramatic **Mt Khayyrakan**, a spiky ridge blessed by the Dalai Lama in 1992. **Chadan** town (Chadaana) is attractively dotted with wooden cottages and there's an appealing

little **museum** (ul Lenina 33; ☎ 9am–4pm Mon–Fri), but the **guesthouse** (aalchylar bazhnyng; ul Pobedy 1) closed in 2003. Stay off those mean streets at night.

Chadan is most famous as Tuva's former spiritual centre. However, the once-great **Ustuu Khuree temple** was utterly devastated in the Soviet era. Only sad, chunky stumps of mud wall now remain, lost in peaceful woodlands some 6km south of Chadan and accessed via tracks off the road to Bazhin-Alaak. Stalled repairs are due to restart in the coming years, and to fund the reconstruction a large annual **music festival** (www.ustuhure.ru) is held on the grounds in late June/early July, embracing everything from *khöömei* to grunge rock. Participants camp in tents and yurts.

From **Khandagayty**, where the Mongolian border remains closed to foreigners, a glorious but notoriously tough truck track runs to Kosh-Agach in Altai via Mugur-Aksy, passing high, bald, glacier-topped **Mt Mongun-Tayga** (3976m). Bring food, a reliable guide, ample extra fuel and spare parts if you plan a truck or jeep convoy. With many deep fords, this route is impassable after rain. It's much more pleasant on horseback; Alash Travel in Kyzyl can help you organise horses. In ideal conditions it's possible to make the trip by mountain bike in around a week but getting lost is dangerously easy. For a mountaineering report see www.mountain.ru/eng/adventure/2004/na_grani/.

Ak-Dovurak Ак-Довурак

☎ 39441 / pop 13,300 / ☎ Moscow +4hr

The world's largest open-pit asbestos mine dominates Ak-Dovurak, Tuva's unlovable second city. Around 10km away, the only 'sight' is the **Chinggis Khaan Stone**, a remarkably well preserved moustachioed stone idol (*kameny baba* in Russian or *kizhigozher* in Tuvan). To find it, cross the Shui River to marginally nicer **Kyzyl-Mazhalik** town then drive 8km towards Ayangalty. About 500m after passing the turn-off to tiny Bizhiktigh Haya village, the stone stands all alone in a field, 400m west of the road. Ak-Dovurak taxis want R200 return. Another scenic excursion heads 38km west to Teeli – where there's a very basic hotel, **Chonar Dash** (☎ 24222, 21192; ul Lenina 25, Komsomolskaya ul 121) – and continues to the soapstone-carving

village of Kyzyl-Dag. Personal security is a worry.

Ak-Dovurak's **Hotel MPP ZhKhk** (☎ 1255; ul Tsentralnaya 6; tw R320) has Western-style toilets. It's upstairs in the rear of the building whose giant Soviet-era mural faces the east side of bright **Kafe Mirazh** (ul Tsentralnaya 2; ☎ 9am–5pm & 6–11pm). However, Ak-Dovurak's lawless reputation makes it preferable to pre-arrange a homestay with a trusted local family who can meet you on arrival. Contacts in Kyzyl can help.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

From Kyzyl, sporadic shared taxis (R350) and *marshrutky* (R230) plus three daily buses (R126, departures 9am, 1pm and 4pm) serve Ak-Dovurak (five to seven hours) via Chadan. Two buses a day run from Ak-Dovurak to Teeli, continuing to Kyzyl-Dag on Wednesday and Sunday. For the A161 via Abaza it's sometimes possible to find shared taxis leaving at dawn between Ak-Dovurak bus station and Abakan train station (R700 per seat, six hours), but it's hit and miss. You might have to pay for the whole car. Ak-Dovurak city buses link the centre of town via the bus station (1.5km) to Kyzyl-Mazhalik.

KRASNOYARSK REGION КРАСНОЯРСКИЙ КРАЙ

Vast and beautiful, the Greenland-shaped Krasnoyarsk Region stretches all the way from the Arctic islands of Severnaya Zemlya to a mountainous tip at Mt Borus near Sayanogorsk. Formerly divided into three autonomous regions, it was reunited following a 2005 referendum. This is likely to further aid the growth of its lucrative petroleum industries which make Krasnoyarsk city such a buzzing, forward-looking metropolis.

KRASNOYARSK КРАСНОЯРСК

☎ 3912 / pop 871,000 / ☎ Moscow +4hr

Vibrant, youthful and backed by attractive spikes of jagged forested foothills, Krasnoyarsk has a much more appealing setting than most typically flat Siberian cities. While

its architecture isn't a particular strength, amid the predominantly unaesthetic concrete of post-WWII industrialisation are a few outstandingly well-embellished timber mansions and a sprinkling of Art Nouveau curves. Pleasant river trips and the nearby Stolby Nature Reserve as well as the region's best concert halls, theatres and museums make Krasnoyarsk a most agreeable place to break a trans-Siberian journey between Tomsk (612km west) and Lake Baikal.

Orientation

Near the Yenisey River's north bank, the centre is a pedestrianised, ferroconcrete square where ul Uritskogo is gashed by thundering ul Veynbauma. The zoo and Stolby Reserve are over 10km west along the Yenisey's south bank. Extremely useful Krasnoyarsk transport maps (R38) are sold within the bus, train and river stations, at bookshops such as **Russkoe Slovo** (ul Lenina 28; ☎ 10am–2pm & 3–7pm Mon–Fri, 10am–3pm Sat) and within the Regional Museum. The museum gift shop also stocks unusually helpful maps of other nearby towns.

Information

lnpexbank (pr Mira 5; ☎ 10am–8pm Mon–Sat, 10am–1pm & 2–5pm Sun) Long hours and good rates for euros.

Internet Klub (ul Lenina 153; per hr R35; ☎ 9am–10pm) Beneath Mister Dzhin.

Internet Termen (☎ 653 290; ul Parizhskoy Kommuny 33; per hr R40; ☎ 9am–10pm Mon–Fri, 11am–10pm Sat & Sun) Has a photocopier.

KBPE (Krasnoyarskoe Byuro Putishestvy i Ekskursy; ☎ 271 626; alftur@hotelkrs.ru; 1st fl, Hotel Krasnoyarsk; ☎ 10am–6pm Mon–Fri, to 3pm Sat) Commercial tour agency.

Paradoks (☎ 239 795; pr Mira 96; Internet per hr R25 for up to 3MB; ☎ 24hr) The best, central Internet access. Enter from an inner courtyard; follow the signs to the Alazani Georgian restaurant, which is opposite Paradoks.

Post office (ul Lenina 62; ☎ 8am–7pm Mon–Sat)

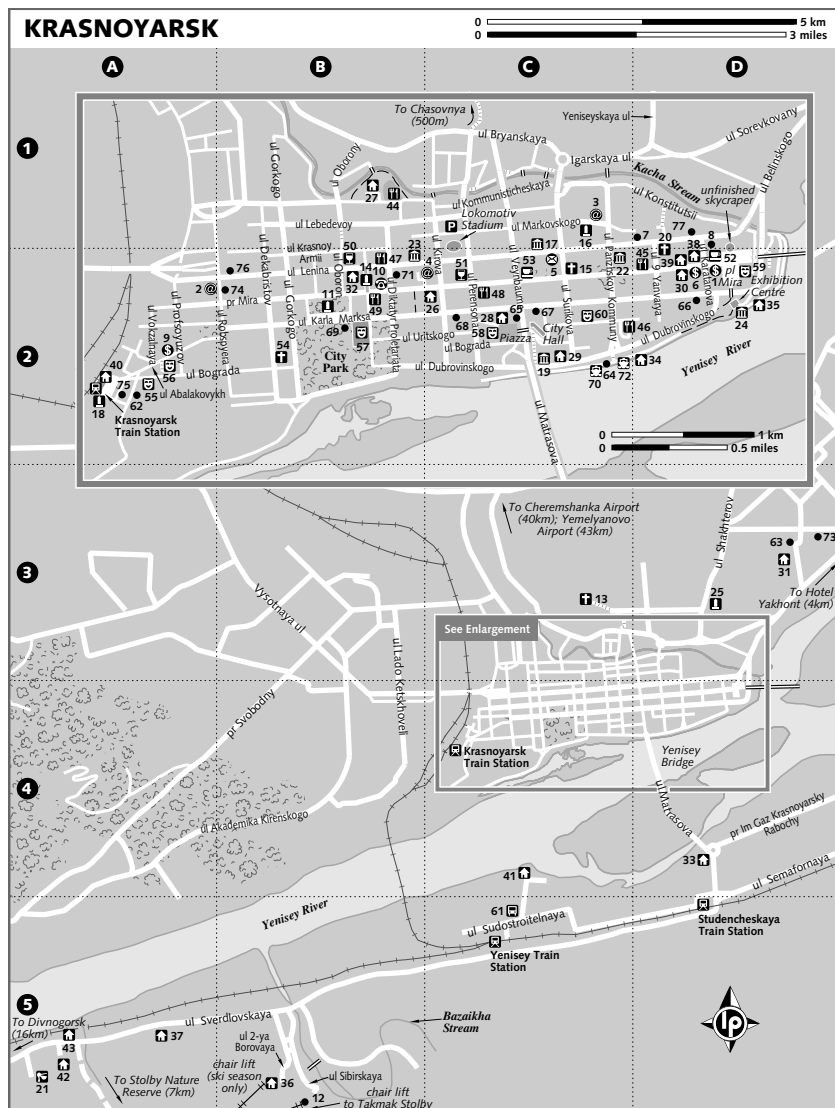
ROSBank (pr Mira 7; ☎ 9am–7pm Mon–Fri, 10am–5pm Sat) Good rates for US dollars; changes travellers cheques.

Sayan Ring Travel (☎ /fax 522 481; www.gotosiberia.ru; office 545, Metropol Bldg, pr Mira 10; ☎ 10am–7pm Mon–Fri) Specialist agency for Tuva-Khakassia tours.

Sberbank (ul Abalakovykh 2; ☎ 9.30am–7pm Mon–Sat) Exchange fairly handy for the train station.

SibTourGuide (☎ 512 654; www.sibtourguide.com)

Youthful university teacher Anatoly Brehvanov offers thoughtfully personalised English-speaking tour services aimed at independent travellers. Useful website, congenial homestays and imaginative trips.



Telephone office (pr Mira 102 & ul Lenina 49; ☎ 7am-2pm & 3pm-midnight)

Sights MUSEUMS

The **Regional Museum** (Kraevedchesky muzey; ☎ 226 511; ul Dubrovinskogo 84; admission R30; ☎ 11am-7pm Tue-Sun) is one of Siberia's best. Its wonder-

fully incongruous 1912 building combines Art Nouveau and Egyptian temple-style features. Arranged around a Cossack explorer's ship are models, icons, historical room interiors and nature rooms where you can listen to local birdsong and animal cries. The basement hosts a splendid ethnographic section comparing the histor-

INFORMATION		SLEEPING		DRINKING	
Inpehbank Инпексбанк	1 D2	Hotel Gostiny Dvor	26 C2	Bar Chemodan Бар Чемодан	50 B2
Internet Klub Интернет Клуб	2 A2	Гостиница Гостинный Двор	26 C2	bar	(see 17)
Internet Termen Интернет Термен	3 C1	Hotel Kolos Гостиница Колос	27 B1	Kinopark Pikra	Кинопарк Пикра
KBPE	(see 28)	Hotel Krasnoyarsk	28 C2	Кинопарк Пикра	51 C2
Paradoks Парадокс	4 C2	Гостиница Красноярск	28 C2	Krem Крем	52 D2
Post office Почта	5 C2	Hotel Ogn'i Yeniseya	29 C2	Luch Луч	53 C2
ROSBank	6 D2	Гостиница Огни Енисея	29 C2	Opera-Ballet Theatre	Театр оперы и балета
Sayon Ring Travel	8 D1	Hotel Oktyabrskaya	30 D2	Филармония Филармония	59 D2
Sberbank Сбербанк	9 A2	Гостиница Октябрьская	30 D2	Rock-Jazz Kafe	Рок-Джаз Кафе
Telephone office	10 B2	Hotel Polyot Гостиница Полёт	31 D3		60 C2
Междугородный телефон	10 B2	Hotel Sever Гостиница Север	32 B2		
		Hotel Turist Гостиница Турист	33 D4		
		Hotel-ship Mayaк	34 D2		
		Гостиница Маяк	34 D2		
		Hotel-ship Viktoria	35 D2		
		Гостиница Виктория	35 D2		
		Chair lift Фуниколёр	35 B5		
		Iris Ирис	36 B5		
		Chasovnya Chapel Часовня	13 C3		
		Khutorok Хуторок	37 A5		
		Krasnoyarskstroystrategiya	38 D2		
		Гостиница Красноярскстройстратегия	38 D2		
		Intercession Cathedral	15 C2		
		Покровский Собор	15 C2		
		Lenin house & statue	16 C1		
		Памятник и Дом Ленину	16 C1		
		Literature Museum	17 C1		
		Литературный Музей	17 C1		
		Mosaic	18 A2		
		Regional Museum	19 C2		
		Краеведческий музей	19 C2		
		Resurrection Church	20 D2		
		Благовещенская Церковь	20 D2		
		Roev Ruchey Zoo	21 A5		
		Зоопарк Роев Ручей	21 A5		
		Surikov Art Museum Художественный музей имени В И Сурикова	22 C2		
		Музей имени В И Сурикова	22 C2		
		Surikov Museum-Estate	23 B2		
		Музей-усадьба В И Сурикова	23 B2		
		SV Nikolay СВ Николай	24 D2		
		Музей-усадьба В И Сурикова	24 D2		
		Victory Memorial	25 D3		
		Памятник Победы	25 D3		
		EATING			
		Central Market	44 B1		
		Центральный Рынок	44 B1		
		Mama Roma	45 D2		
		Столовая ОК Столовая ОК	46 C2		
		Subito Субито	47 B2		
		Sultan Сулейман	48 C2		
		Султан Сулейман	48 C2		
		Telega Телега	49 B2		
		Terrasa Kafe Терасса Кафе	(see 57)		
		Терраса Кафе	(see 57)		
		Bus 36	61 C5		
		Bus 50a to Zoo	62 A2		
		Bus station Автовокзал	63 D3		
		Buses to Divnogorsk	64 C2		
		Buses to Hotel Turist and Zoo	65 C2		
		Eastbound trolleybus 7	66 D2		
		Eastbound trolleybus 7	67 C2		
		Eastbound trolleybus 7	68 C2		
		bus 50a to zoo	69 B2		
		Eastbound trolleybus 7	70 C2		
		Hydrofolis to Divnogorsk	71 B2		
		KrasAir	72 C2		
		river station Речной вокзал	72 C2		
		SIAT Сибантракс	73 D3		
		Trolleybus 5 from train station	74 B2		
		Trolleybus 7 to centre	75 A2		
		trolleybus 7 to train station and	76 B2		
		bus 91 to Vyetuzhanka	76 B2		
		Westbound trolleybus 7	77 D1		
		bus 50 to Zoo	77 D1		

ical fashion sense of shamans from various tribal groups. The gift shop sells old coins, medals, postcards and excellent maps.

The **Surikov Museum-Estate** (Muzey-usadba V I Surikova; ☎ 231 507; ul Lenina 98; admission R30; ☎ 11am-6pm Tue-Sat) preserves the house, sheds and vegetable patch of 19th-century painter Vasily Surikov (1848–1916). The heavy-gated garden forms a refreshing oasis of rural Siberia right in the city centre. More of Surikov's work is on show at the cute **Surikov Art Museum** (☎ 272 558; ul Parizhskoy Kommuny 20; ☎ 11am-6pm Tue-Sun).

The **Literature Museum** (Literaturny muzey; ☎ 276 202; ul Lenina 66; admission R20; ☎ 10am-4pm Tue-Sat) is within a glorious 1911 wooden mansion.

A fascinating little **museum** (☎ 277 487; pl Pobedy; admission free; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) at the **Victory Memorial** relates Krasnoyarsk's role in WWII, when much Soviet industry was strategically shifted east away from potential bomber raids.

HISTORIC BUILDINGS

Dotted about Krasnoyarsk are some very fine wooden houses, notably ul Lenina 88 and 67 and ul Karla Marksa 118. There are

also many Art Nouveau façades such as pr Mira 76, ul Lenina 62 and ul Parizhskoy Kommuny 13. Attractive old churches abound including the fancy 1795 **Intercession Cathedral** (Pokrovskoe sobor; ul Surikova) and the top-heavy but elegant 1804–22 **Resurrection Church** (Blagoveshchensky tserkov; ul 9 Yanvarya), which was decapitated in the 1930s but retowered in 1998–99. Its icon-filled interior billows with incense. For great city views climb Karaulnaya Hill to the pointy little **Chasovnya** (Chapel) which features on the Russian 10-ruble banknote. At midday there's a deafening one-gun salute here.

LENIN MEMORABILIA

In April 1897 the goateed wonder stayed in Krasnoyarsk at ul Markovskogo 27, now preserved and surveyed by a pensive, replinthed **statue**. A big, much prouder, **Lenin statue** stands opposite the popular city park. Permanently docked below an ugly brown-concrete exhibition centre is the boat **SV Nikolay** which transported Vladimir to exile in Shushenskoe. Other communist curiosities include a splendid **mosaic** (ul Vyboysky 9) on the outer wall of the station

square post office and a bust of proto-KGB founder **Felix Dzerzhinsky** (ul Dzerzhinskogo).

STOLBY NATURE RESERVE & ROEV RUCHEY ZOO

Arguably Krasnoyarsk's greatest attractions are the spiky volcanic rock pillars called **stolby**. These litter the woods in the 17,000-hectare Stolby Nature Reserve (Zapovednik Stolby) south of the Yenisey River. To reach the main concentration of pillars, start by walking 7km down a track near Turbaza Yenisey. Alternatively, there is much easier access via a long **chair lift** from beside Kafe Bobrovyylog (ul Sibirskaya). This usually runs year-round on request, but was closed throughout 2005 during a massive ski-slope redevelopment. From the top of the chair lift, walk for two minutes to a great viewpoint or around 40 minutes to reach the impressive **Takmak Stolby**. Infected ticks are dangerous between May and July. Tours are available, personalised in English with SibTourGuide (priced according to itinerary) or all in Russian through KBPE (R500/700/1000/1500 per person for groups of many/three/two/one, six hours).

The relatively humane **Roev Ruchey Zoo** (☎ 698 101; adult/child R50/free; 🕒 10am-6pm, to 9pm Wed-Sun Apr-Oct) is home to Siberian species rare and not so rare, along with happily humping camels. Access is on bus 50 or 50A.

Sleeping

There are plenty of accommodation options in Krasnoyarsk, including many budget choices.

Though way out of the centre, there are several small, peaceful hotels in the Stolby area, relatively handy for skiing and trips to the Stolby Nature Reserve. Use bus 50.

For a great insight into local life take an English-speaking homestay organised by SibTourGuide. Most such homestays are in the high-rise Vyetluzhanka area, which is 20-minute's drive west of the centre but well served by bus 91 and close to attractive forest and ski areas. Vyetluzhanka's petal-towered St Nicholas Church is a striking landmark. Prices include a free station pick-up.

BUDGET

City Centre

Hotel Gostiny Dvor (☎ 232 857; pr Mira 81; dm R300-550, s R700-850, tw R600-1100) Superb central position, lovely façade and, despite the ropey recep-

tion area, rooms are fully renovated sharing brand-new toilets and showers between two or three rooms. Kettles in some rooms.

Krasnoyarskstroystrogiya (☎ 276 612; pr Mira 12; s R280-530, tw R650-910) Good value if utterly unpronounceable. Rooms are very pleasant by ex-Soviet standards with share-pair bathrooms. Enter from ul Karatanova.

Hotel-ship Mayak (☎ 276 355; ul Dubrovinskogo; s/tw berths R350/500, lyux berths R650) This antique river steamer is moored handily close to the river station and rents well priced but cramped cabins that can be noisy and are not always secure – windows are rarely lockable. Toilets are shared. Preferable to the musty **Hotel-ship Viktoriya** (☎ 525 152; s/tw berths R500/850).

Other cheap possibilities:

Hotel Kolos (☎ 235 667; ul Kerchinskogo 65; dm/s/tw R300/560/820) Simple, acceptable rooms but with dubious, market-trader clientele.

Hotel Ogni Yeniseyya (☎ 275 262; ul Dubrovinskogo 80; s R590-820, tw R1380-1500) Has miserable rooms off bile-green corridors, but there are private bathrooms and visa registration is possible.

Hotel Sever (☎ 662 266; Hotel-sever@mail.ru; ul Lenina 121; s/tw R500/600)

Once grand, now cheap but friendly with some peeling wallpaper and paint.

Resting rooms (komnaty otdykha; ☎ 586 086; train station; dm per 12hr from R180) Excellent brand-new dorm rooms.

South of the Yenisey

Hotel Turist (☎ 361 470; http://tlcom.krs.ru/tourist/index.html, in Russian; ul Matrasova 2; dm/s/tw R500/1100/1600) On a busy roundabout directly across the long Yenisey Bridge from the city centre, this 16-storey Soviet monolith has variable rooms with toilet and shower. Some are pleasantly renovated. At night the dubious disco sets the whole tower vibrating.

Stolby Area

Turbaza Yenisey (☎ 698 110; ul Sverdlovskaya 140/7; d/tw from R400; (P) ☒) Despite the name this is a two-storey hotel not a camp. Good-value renovated rooms are simple but neat and share sparkling-clean showers. Some R1700 doubles have private facilities. There's a glimpse of river view from the small communal terrace but no café.

Khutorok (☎ 698 325; ul Sverdlovskaya 245; d R800) Above this popular Ukrainian restaurant are eight newish if already scuffed rooms with shower and toilet. Sauna R500 per hour.

MIDRANGE City Centre

All rates include breakfast.

Hotel Oktyabrskaya (☎ 273 780; www.tlcom.krs.ru/october; pr Mira 15; s/d/tw R2300/2600/2900) Comfortable and professionally run with rooms approximating chintzy Western standards, albeit without air-conditioning. Satellite TV includes CNN and some English is spoken. The trendy lobby area has a very stylish juice bar.

Hotel Krasnoyarsk (☎ 273 754; www.hotelkrs.ru; ul Uritskogo 94; s/tw/ste from R1440/1900/2660; ☒) This sprawling eight-storey concrete slab dominates Krasnoyarsk's central square. It retains the Soviet-vintage *dezurnaya* (floor-lady) system but is well kept with bright corridors, totally rebuilt full-service rooms and English-speaking receptionists. Only the suites have air-conditioning.

Metelitsa Guest House (☎ 625 298; pr Mira 14a; s R1895-2295, d R2295-2895; (P)) Small, central and reasonably comfy but aimed at Russian *biznesmen*.

South of the Yenisey

Siberian Safari Club (☎ 613 335; http://tlcom.krs.ru/safari/; ul Sudostroitel'naya 117a; s/d R2500/3000) This intimate 20-room hotel occupies a pleasantly quiet spot on the riverbank and, although walls are thin, it's arguably Krasnoyarsk's best option. Attentive staff speak English, there's a classy terrace restaurant (meals R300 to R800) and booking is advisable (booking fee is 25% of the cost of the first night's accommodation). Three smaller single rooms cost only R1300. Bus 36 stops a 10-minute walk away.

Stolby Area

Iris (☎ 617 762; ul 2nd Borovaya 67; d/ste R1700/2200; (P)) At the base of a kilometre-long winter-only ski lift, the position would be wonderfully peaceful in summer if fellow guests didn't overwork their bedsprings. The comfortable rooms come in various styles, some in bright primary colours with satin bedspreads and lurid nudes. In winter, ski hire (R50 per hour) is available at the atmospheric but surprisingly expensive Kashtak restaurant next door.

Northwestern Suburbs

Hotel Polyot (☎ 651 778; fax 201 047; ul Aerovokzal'naya 16; s R1000, tw R1100-1600) The freshly reno-

vated Polyot is two-minutes' walk from the bus station; airport buses depart from here, so it's worth considering for the night before a flight. Presentable rooms have toilets and short bathtubs; some are much smarter than others.

Hotel Yakhont (☎ 566 767; www.yahont.ru; ul Telmana 44a; s/d/ste R2100/3000/3300) Popular with tour groups; rooms are modern and well furnished, but prices seem excessive given the very inconvenient suburban location near the far end of trolleybus route 7. Singles with share-pair bathrooms cost R1500. There's juvenile amusement in mispronouncing the hotel's name and in observing the free minibar's postmodernist selection: Sprite, water and a tea bag.

TOP END

Stolby Area

Snezhnaya Dolina (☎ 693 033; d R3000-5450; (P)) Excellent full-facility cottages form slightly cramped rows within a peaceful walled orchard. Each has kitchen, covered terrace and no reservation fee. There's also a shared tennis court.

Eating

There are plenty of eateries along pr Mira, summer cafés on the promenade near the river station and cheap stalls selling *samsas* (Central Asian pastries), *shawarma* (grilled meat and salad wrapped in flat bread) and *khachapuri* (Georgian cheese bread) in the extensive **central market** (🕒 8am-6pm). On summer evenings, lively beer bars and shashlyk grills give the concrete, fountain-filled square outside Hotel Krasnoyarsk a convivial piazza feel.

RESTAURANTS

Telega (☎ 595 987; pr Mira 91; biznes lunch R120; 🕒 noon-2am) Enter Telega beneath a dangling cart, and you'll find an extensive hot and cold buffet, ideal for avoiding linguistic problems. All-you-can-eat deals for R250.

Sultan Suleyman (☎ 270 070; ul Perenona 20; meals R180-350; 🕒 10am-11pm Mon-Sat, noon-11pm Sun) Behind the lovely 1913 Dom Ofitserov building, midpriced Turko-Russian food is served in a semi-oriental basement. In front is a handy fast-food joint.

Luch (☎ 662 064; www.kinoluch.ru; ul Karla Marksa 149) The Luch entertainment complex contains several eateries, including fast food,

fine Russian cuisine and notably the airy glassed-in **Terrasa Kafe** (top fl; meals R100-350, coffees R50-80; ☎ noon-6am). Enjoy fine views across pl Lenina, menus ranging from Japanese to Uzbek and a remarkably filling R100 lunch deal, available daily.

Mama Roma (☎ 661 072; www.mamaroma.ru; pr Mira 50a; pizzas R192-480, pastas R144-256; ☎ 11am-1am) Herb-filled air wafts temptingly from the best Italian eatery in town. Pizzas are freshly baked, menus bilingual.

QUICK EATS

Stolovaya OK (ul Uritskogo 33; meals R20-50; ☎ 11am-6pm Mon-Sat term-time) Super-cheap student canteen with perfectly acceptable R17 *plov* (Uzbek rice dish with diced meat and carrot).

Subito (ul Lenina 110; pizza slices R38; ☎ 10am-10pm) Relatively well-laden microwave pizza and various alternatives.

Drinking

Krem (☎ 581 538; pr Mira 10; ice creams R65-100, coffees R50-80; ☎ 10am-1am) Krasnoyarsk's top coffee house has black-and-white photography and dark, modern wooden furniture, spotlight by metallic pod-lamps.

Tsentr (☎ 273 737; pr Mira 80; meals R190-350, coffees R54-101) Inviting patisserie-café ambience, though the cakes (R30 per 100g) aren't Krasnoyarsk's best.

Kinopark Pikra (☎ 277 531; ul Perensona 29a; beers R25) An atmospheric, great-value basement pub within a cinema-bar complex that's easily spotted by the plane crashing through its front wall. The bar is easy to miss though: follow signs to the toilets.

Bar Chemodan (☎ 230 259; ul Oboron 2b; biznes lunch R200, beers R159-169) is a wonderfully atmospheric if fiercely expensive 1920s-themed pub-restaurant stocking dozens of whiskies. There's also a smoky **bar** (R50; ☎ 6pm-midnight) attached to the Literature Museum.

Entertainment

Krasnoyarsk has a variety of concert halls and theatres.

Opera-Ballet Theatre (☎ 278 697; ul Perensona 2; tickets from R60) The architecturally nondescript theatre has up to five after-evening shows per week October to June.

The **Philharmonia** (☎ 274 930; pl Mira 2b) has three concert halls showcasing folk, pop and classical music. Organ concerts are

held in the twin-spired **Catholic Church** (☎ 210 566; ul Dekabristov 20).

Luch (☎ 661 595; www.kinoluch.ru; ul Karla Marksa 149) A futuristically angular entertainment complex with cinemas, video games, pool tables and a Moai-guarded nightclub. Plenty of fun for children.

Che Guevara (☎ 595 857; ul Bograda; admission after 7pm R300-500, cocktails R100-190; ☎ noon-1am Sun-Wed, to 5am Thu-Sat) Has dancing or live music in a fun saloon-club with 1950s pin-ups and a commie-Cuba theme.

Rock-Jazz Kafe (☎ 523 305; ul Perensona 20; admission R80, beers R30) Entered through a small bar beside the Dublin Irish Pub, this dark venue showcases live bands around an upturned motorcycle from 6pm on weekends.

Havana Club (☎ 216 416; ul Abalakovykh; admission R30-180) A big nightclub with three dance floors and celebrity DJs on Saturday. Themed nights include Russian nostalgia (Monday), student night (Wednesday) and Latin dance (Thursday).

Getting There & Away

AIR

From Krasnoyarsk's Yemelyanovo Airport, you can fly to Germany plus almost anywhere in Russia. Handy **KrasAir** (www.krasair.ru, in Russian) connections include Moscow (R8700, three daily), Barnaul (R3100, four weekly) and Kyzyl (R3210, four weekly). **SIAT** (SibAviaTrans; www.siat.ru, in Russian) flies to Igarka and Turukhansk. Just a handful of flights use Chermshanka Airport, 3km south of Yemelyanovo: double check that yours isn't one of them.

BOAT

Every few days in summer passenger boats from Krasnoyarsk's spired **river station** (☎ 274 446; ☎ 8am-7pm) ply the Yenisey to Dudinka (1989km, 4½ to five days) but foreigners may not proceed beyond Igarka (p560).

Summer hydrofoils to Divnogorsk depart at 11am, 1pm, 3pm and 5pm daily plus 7pm at weekends, returning an hour later. Buy tickets (R70) on board.

BUS

The main **bus station** (☎ 230 512; ul Aerovokzalnaya 22) is reached by trolleybus 2 from the train station or bus 53 from ul Karla Marksa. Destinations include Yeniseysk (R243, seven

hours, nine daily), Abakan (R294, 8¾ hours, five daily), Shushenskoe (10½ hours at 10am and 9.30pm) and Sayanogorsk (R354, 10½ hours, six daily).

From the lower west side of the river station, **marshrutka** 106 to Divnogorsk (R25, one hour) runs 30 times per day from 7.10am to 9.10pm, albeit with timetable gaps. Buy tickets from a window halfway down the steps. Several Yeniseysk **marshrutky** (R250, 5½ hours) use this bus stand too.

TRAIN

Useful overnight hops include Tomsk (R420 *platskart*, 14 hours) and Lesosibirsk (R320 *platskart*, 11 hours) for Yeniseysk. Six or more trains daily take around 19 hours to Irkutsk (R520 *platskart*). Train 055 is the best sleeper choice for Novosibirsk (R541 *platskart*, 12½ hours), Yekaterinburg (33 hours) and Moscow (60 hours). Train 092 along the BAM takes 30 hours to Severobaikalsk, continuing alternate days to Tynda. Three overnight trains run to Abakan; train 124 (*kupe* R630, 11 hours) is much the fastest, while train 658 is better for Kuragin. All services use the main Krasnoyarsk station.

There are railway **booking offices** (☎ 9am-6pm) in the river and bus stations.

Getting Around

Bus 135 (R26, 1¼ hours) runs 14 times daily from the bus station to Yemelyanovo Airport, 46km northwest of the city. It passes Chermshanka Airport en route. The 3am, 5.50am, 8.30pm and 10pm buses cost R70.

Within the city centre, almost all public transport runs eastbound along ul Karla Marksa or pr Mira, returning westbound on ul Lenina. Eastbound buses marked 'Matrasovo' will veer south, stopping at both ends of the long Yenisey Bridge; this is handy for hotels Krasnoyarsk and Turist respectively.

Frequent, if slow, trolleybus 7 trundles from the train station via ul Karla Marksa, up ul Surikova passing Hotel Yakhont after more than half an hour. Bus 21 from ul Karla Marksa is faster. Trolleybus 2 links bus and train stations via pr Mira. Useful bus 50 starts beyond the zoo, passes the Turbaza Yenisey and comes through the centre of town, winding on to the bus station. Bus 50A repeats the first half of the

route then turns left along ul Lenina and passes the train station.

AROUND KRASNOYARSK

Divnogorsk ДИВНОГОРСК

☎ 39144 / pop 29,000 / ☎ Moscow +4hr

From Krasnoyarsk a popular day trip by bus and/or summer hydrofoil follows the Yenisey River 27km to Divnogorsk town through a wide, wooded canyon. Some 5km beyond Divnogorsk's jetty is a vast 90m-high dam. Turbine-room visits are not permitted but if you're lucky you might see ships being lifted by a technologically impressive inclined plane to the huge Krasnoyarsk Sea reservoir behind. A few kilometres beyond you can observe ice fishing from December to March or rent boats and yachts from **Aly Parus** (☎ 3912-403 187; pr hr R700-1000; ☎ summer).

The Krasnoyarsk-Divnogorsk road has a panoramic overlook point at km23 and passes quaint **Ovsyanka** village. From the main road walk 100m (crossing the train tracks) to Ovsyanka's cute though new wooden **St Inokent Chapel** (ul Shchetinkina) then 50m right to find the **House Museum** (ul Shchetinkina 26; admission R30; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) of famous local writer Victor Astafiev, who died in 2001. Directly opposite in Astafiev's grandma's cottage-compound is the more interesting **Last Bow Museum** (ul Shchetinkina 35; admission R30; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun), giving a taste of rural Siberian life.

SLEEPING

Under five-minutes' walk south of Divnogorsk's jetty (bus 1 from Divnogorsk bus stand), the riverside **Hotel Biryuza** (☎ 23761; 2nd fl, ul Lenina 55; s/tw with toilet R280/400, s/tw/tr with bathroom R500/600/1000) is much nicer than it looks. Rooms with river views cost R200 extra.

Beside Aly Parus yacht club on the Krasnoyarsk Sea, **SKIF** (☎ 3912-581 682) has basic but acceptable **summer cabins** (beds R280-400).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Both hydrofoils (R70, 45 minutes, five daily) and **marshrutky** (R25, 30 daily) depart from behind Krasnoyarsk's river station. Taxis meet boats on arrival in Divnogorsk and want around R200 return to shuttle you to a dam-overlook point. **SibTourGuide** (p553) offers various tailored excursions in

English (US\$50 to US\$65 per car) or will include the Divnogorsk loop as part of its '10-Rouble Tour'.

Buses going from Krasnoyarsk to Abakan pick up in Divnogorsk and drive right in front of the dam.

NORTH ALONG THE YENISEY

From the end of May to early October, elegant Yenisey passenger ships with wood panelling and shiny brass fittings depart Krasnoyarsk for Dudinka (4½ days) via Yeniseysk (17 hours) and the depressing ex-Gulag town of Igarka (R1800 to R4278, 74 to 79 hours), which is somewhat redeemed by its award-winning **permafrost museum** (Vechnoy Merzloty muzey; ☎ 24110; fax 23011; www.museum.ru/M1405; ul Bolshoy Teatr 15a; admission R200; ☎ 9am-12.45pm & 2-5pm Sun-Fri). There are three to four sailings per week, most departing at 7am. Returning upstream, journeys take 50% longer. Trips are more meditational than scenic, days merging as the northern sun barely sinks below the Arctic horizon. Beware that independent travellers may not go beyond Igarka: Dudinka and nearby Norilsk are 'closed' to foreigners. It might be possible to get Dudinka permits by joining a luxury 12-day return cruise with **Acris** (www.acris.ru; US\$810-2000) but triple check well in advance and allow a couple of months' processing time. For more details of this route see Lonely Planet's *Greenland & the Arctic* guide. Visiting Yeniseysk is vastly easier.

Yeniseysk Енисейск

☎ 39115 / pop 16,000 / ☎ Moscow +4hr

Using Lesosibirsk overnight trains, historic Yeniseysk makes a pleasant two-night, one-day excursion from Krasnoyarsk, 340km away. Founded in 1619, this was once Russia's great fur-trading capital, with world-famous 18th-century August trade fairs and 10 grand churches gracing its skyline. Eclipsed by Krasnoyarsk despite a burst of gold-rush prosperity in the 1860s, the town is now a delightfully peaceful backwater with a good **Regional Museum** (ul Lenina 106; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat), the faded commercial grandeur of ul Lenina and many old houses; over 70 are considered architectural monuments. Most appealing of the surviving churches are the walled 1731 **Spaso-Perebrazhensky Monastery** (ul Raboche-Krestyanskaya 105) and the **Assumption Church** (Uspenskaya tserkov; ul Raboche-Krestyanskaya 116) with its unusual metal floor and splendid antique icons.

Should you wish to linger, **Hotel Yenisey** (☎ 23149; ul Khuzinskogo 2; dm/s/tw R105/490/660), near the quay, has burping old toilets and washbasins in the best rooms. The cheap **Hotel Avto-vokzal** (☎ 22030; ul Babkina 13; dm R190) is a handful of ultrabasic beds above the bus station.

Between Yeniseysk and Krasnoyarsk there are buses (R243, seven hours, two daily), *marshrutky* (R260, 5½ hours, nine daily), hydrofoils (R468, 10 hours, weekly) and Yenisey River passenger ships (R685 to R1487, 17 hours downstream, several monthly).

Lesosibirsk Лесосибирск

☎ 39145 / pop 77,000 / ☎ Moscow +4hr

This uninteresting timber town is only really useful as the railroad for Yeniseysk, 36km further north. But do stop to admire its breathtaking new **Krestovozdvizhensky Church**, south of ul Gorkogo 81, with gleaming clusters of golden domes. To Yeniseysk there are buses (R30, 45 minutes) from the bus station at least hourly, plus one direct service from the train station departing 15 minutes after the arrival of the overnight train from Krasnoyarsk (R320 *platskart*, 11 hours). Bus 13 links the bus and train stations very infrequently.

WESTERN BAM ЗАПАДНЫЙ БАМ

The 3100km-long Baikal-Amur Mainline (Baikalo-Amurskaya Magistral, BAM) is an astonishing victory of belief over adversity. This 'other' trans-Siberian line runs from Tayshet (417km east of Krasnoyarsk) around the top of Lake Baikal to Sovetskaya Gavan on the Pacific coast. Begun in the 1930s to access the timber and minerals of the Lena Basin, work stopped during WWII. Indeed the tracks were stripped altogether and re-used to lay a relief line to the besieged city of Stalingrad (now Volgograd). Work effectively started all over again in 1974 when the existing Trans-Siberian Railway was felt to be vulnerable to attack by potentially hostile China. Much of the route was cut through virgin taiga and pesky mountain ranges. To encourage patriotic volunteer labourers the BAM was labelled 'Hero Project of the Century'. Even so, building on permafrost pushed the cost of the project to US\$25 billion, some 50 times more than the original Trans-Siberian Railway.

New 'BAM towns' grew with the railway, often populated by builders who decided to stay on. However, the line's opening (1991) coincided with the collapse of the centrally planned USSR and the region's bright Soviet future has not really materialised. While Bratsk and Severobaikalsk have thrived, many other smaller, lonely settlements have become ghost towns.

The BAM route crosses virtually virgin territory that is more impressively moun-

tainous than anything along the trans-Siberian mainline. For most travellers the most popular BAM stop is Severobaikalsk, as a hub for visiting north Baikal. For details on eastern BAM towns Tynda and Komsomolsk-na-Amure, Vanino and Sovetskaya Gavan, see the Russian Far East chapter.

The official start of the BAM is Tayshet, but through services from Krasnoyarsk and Moscow and elsewhere mean there's little reason to stop there. Bratsk is famous for its giant dam. Ust-Kut-Lena has irregular hydrofoil services along the Lena River to Lensk for Yakutsk. Between the two is the claustrophobic 1960s iron-ore processing town of Zheleznogorsk-Ilimsky (train station Korshunikhina Angarskaya), whose sole, modest attraction is the **Yangel Museum** (☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri), celebrating a local astroscientist friend of Yuri Gagarin.

There are particularly fine mountain views between Kunerma and minispa Goudzhekit, with the line performing a full 180-degree switchback before tunnelling through to Daban.

The line between Severobaikalsk and Nizhneangarsk offers flashes of dazzling Lake Baikal views. It then continues to Tynda via Dzelinda, another tiny spa, and the 15km-long Severomuysk Tunnel.

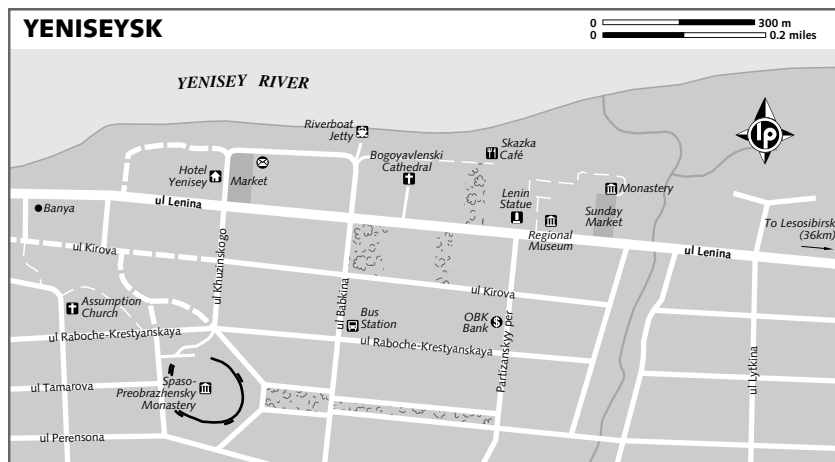
BRATSK БРАТСК

☎ 3953 / pop 258,000 / ☎ Moscow +5hr

A stop in Bratsk neatly breaks a Krasnoyarsk to Severobaikalsk trip into two overnight rides, but a day here is plenty. Its *raison d'être* is a gigantic 1955 **dam** (GES), which caused the drowning of the original historic town. New Bratsk is a confusing necklace of disconnected concrete 'subcities' with a high-rise Tsentralny area that is spirit-crushingly dull. It does, however, have two English-speaking tour agencies: **Taiga Tours** (☎ 413 951; taigat@bratsk.net.ru; 2nd fl, Hotel Taiga) and **Lovely Tour** (Lavli Tur; ☎ 433 290; baikal@lovelytour.ru; ul Sovetskaya 3, Tsentralny; ☎ 10am-8pm Mon-Fri, to 5pm Sat). Given two days' notice, either agency can organise permits and guides to visit the dam's turbine rooms.

The dam itself is 30km further north in Energetik and the BAM trains go right across it.

Between the two, the impressive **Angara Village** (☎ 412 834; locals/foreigners R12/90; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun, longer hr in summer) is an



open-air ethnographic museum featuring a rare wooden watchtower and buildings rescued from drowned old Bratsk. A series of shaman sites and Evenki (also known as Tungsui) *chum* (tepee-shaped conical dwellings) lie in the woods behind. The attractive lakeside site is a lonely 3km walk from Sibirsky Traktir, an isolated highway café off the main *marshrutka* routes 10 or 50. Taking a taxi makes more sense.

Sleeping

PANDUN/ENERGETIK

Hotel Turist (☎ 378 743; ul Naymushina 28, Energetik; s R350-900, tw R700-1800, ste R2500-3000) Good-value cheaper twins (half-price for single occupancy) are clean if typically Soviet with just-functional bathrooms. 'First-class' rooms look better but new wallpaper and carpet don't justify paying almost triple prices. You can walk to the dam in 15 minutes.

Hotel Lyuks (☎ 363 146; ul Naberezhnaya 62, Padun; s/d/ste R1000/1200/1400) In a quiet, low-rise neighbourhood in woods beside the Bratsk Sea, this six-room wooden mansion was once an exclusive Communist Party retreat. Opt for the large if unstylish suites with their superb lake views and extensive, somewhat ageing bathrooms. Khrushchev, Brezhnev, Yeltsin and even Jacques Chirac have all stayed here. Cheaper rooms are forgettable and wantonly overpriced. It's a R80 taxi ride from Padunskie Porogie station.

TSENTRALNY

Hotel Taiga (☎ 414 000; ul Mira 35; s/d/tw R1800/1800/2100) Behind a smart new façade, wobbly Soviet-era corridors host very green bedrooms – good singles but cramped, overly intimate doubles. Some staff speak English, guest visas are registered and rates include breakfast.

Hotel Bratsk (☎ 438 436; ul Deputatskaya 32; s/tw from R350/700; (P)) Upstairs a wide variety of clean but essentially Soviet rooms all have private bathrooms and peeling paint, so unless you want a malfunctioning old TV, take the cheapest available.

Eating

Kalipso (☎ 376 781; ul Naymushina 54; meals R150-400; ☎ noon-7pm & 8pm-3am) The nicest pub-café in Energetik is at bus stop GES. It has a nautical interior, porthole windows and a

beer-garden terrace that almost overlooks the lake.

Getting There & Away

The three main train stations are an hour's ride apart. Padunskie Porogie is closest to Energetik and Padun. Gidrostritel is several kilometres east of the dam. For Tsentralny, get off at Anzoybi and transfer by bus or *elektrichka*.

Eastbound there are afternoon and night trains to Severobaikalsk (R760, 15 hours) via Lena-Ust-Kut (R650, eight hours). On odd days a useful 3pm train runs overnight to Krasnoyarsk (16 hours). For Irkutsk there's daily train 87 (R970, 18 hours), buses (R500, 11 hours) from the Tsentralny bus station (ul Yuzhnaya) and, in summer, hydrofoils (13 hours, three per week) down the Angara River from a river station in south-east Tsentralny.

Getting Around

Marshrutky 10 and 50 shuttle regularly between Hotel Turist in Energetik and Tsentralny bus station (45 minutes).

Bus 8 starts at the GES stop beside the Kalipso café and wiggles around Energetik's Mikro-Rayon 7 estate to a no-man's-land bus stop nearly opposite Padunskie Porogie train station. For taxis call ☎ 368 482 or 377 707.

UST-KUT & LENA УСТЬ-КУТ И ЛЕНА

☎ 39565 / pop 70,000 / ☎ Moscow +5hr

Quietly attractive old Ust-Kut, centred 8km west of Lena station, is worth a stroll if you're stuck here a while, but the only real reason to stop is for hydrofoils up the Lena River towards Yakutsk, 2000km downstream. This requires changing boats in Lensk, for which departures leave several times weekly in summer. The Osetrovo river station is handily across the central square from Lena train station past the **Lena Hotel** (☎ 51507; ul Kirova 88; s R550-900, d R1100), which has neat rooms with shower and toilet.

Lena station (not the tiny Ust-Kut halt) is a major stop on the BAM railway with useful overnight trains to Severobaikalsk (7½ hours) via Goudzhokit (seven hours) leaving nightly around midnight. At least two westbound trains a day stop here, including one bound for Moscow.

LAKE BAIKAL ОЗЕРО БАЙКАЛ

Crystal-clear Lake Baikal is a vast body of the bluest water, surrounded by rocky or tree-covered foreshores behind which mountains float like phantoms at indeterminate distances. Baikal's meteorological mood swings are transfixing spectacles, whole weather systems dancing for your delectation over Siberia's 'climatic kitchen'.

Shaped like a banana, Baikal is 636km from north to south and up to 1637m deep, making it the world's deepest lake. Incredibly, it contains nearly one-fifth of the planet's unfrozen fresh water, more than North America's five Great Lakes combined, and despite some environmental worries (p106) it's drinkably pure.

In the past, foreign tourists have typically visited Baikal from Listvyanka via Irkutsk, but options are rapidly expanding and it's now equally feasible to approach via Ulan-Ude (for eastern Baikal) or Severobaikalsk (on the BAM railway). Choosing well is important as there's no round-lake road nor even a trekking path, at least not until the **Great Baikal Trail** (www.baikal.eastsib.ru/gbt/index_en.html) is completed. Hydrofoil-ferry connections are limited to local services plus the Irkutsk-Olkhon-Severobaikalsk-Nizhneangarsk run. Round-Baikal cruises can be fiercely expensive: Irkutsk agencies quote between US\$600 and US\$850 per day for liveaboards (where you sleep on board during the trip) holding between eight and 12 people, though you can pay vastly less

by starting in Nizhneangarsk. March is arguably one of the best times to visit the region: the scenery is pristine white and there's no need to charter expensive excursion boats as (in places) you can hop in a taxi and drive across the world's deepest lake – a thrilling proposition. Other adventurous if potentially foolhardy crossing methods include **kayaking** (www.chargefile.com), **motor-biking** (www.iceride.com) and **skating** (www.transbaikal.nl).

Note that this section also includes the beautiful inland Tunka and Barguzin Valleys as they're accessed via Baikal towns.

IRKUTSK ИРКУТСК

☎ 3952 / pop 591,000 / ☎ Moscow +5hr

Historic if vaguely seedy Irkutsk, 1090km southeast of Krasnoyarsk, is the nearest big city to glorious Lake Baikal, though it's still 70km inland. With some fancifully rebuilt churches and areas of grand 19th-century architecture it's well worth at least a brief stop. If your Russian is poor, Irkutsk has plenty of Anglophone agencies eager to help, and now has some real (if small) hostels too.

Founded in 1651 as a Cossack garrison to control the indigenous Buryats, Irkutsk was the springboard for 18th-century expeditions to the far north and east including Alaska, then known as 'Irkutsk's American district'.

As eastern Siberia's trading and administrative centre, Irkutsk dispatched Siberian furs and ivory to Mongolia, Tibet and China in exchange for silk and tea. Three-quarters of the city burnt down in the disastrous fire of 1879. However, the 1880s Lena Basin gold rush quickly saw its grand brick mansions and public buildings restored. Known

FISHY FUN

No trip to Baikal is complete without tasting **omul**, a distant relative of salmon that's delicious raw and better still freshly smoked. Over 50 other varieties of Baikal fish include perch, black grayling, ugly frilly nosed bullheads and tasty sig (whitefish). While the lake isn't Russia's greatest place for anglers, from February to April it offers the unusual spectacle of **ice fishing**. There are two forms: individuals with immense patience dangle hooked lines through Eskimo-style ice holes; elsewhere, especially in shallow waters, whole teams of villagers string extraordinarily long thin nets beneath the ice and pull out omul by the hundred, carting them home on horse-drawn troikas.

You can get beneath the ice yourself with Irkutsk's very professional scuba-diving outfits **Aqua-Eco** (Akva-Eko; Map p568; ☎ 3952-334 290; www.aquaeco.eu.org; ul K Libknekhta 12) and **SVAL** (Map p568; ☎ 3952-211 748; <http://svaldiving.com>; ul Dekabrskikh Sobyty 55). But the lake's greatest divers are the almost-unique **nerpa** (freshwater seals). Their moist, black eyes are so lovably emotional that few observers fail to be smitten.

Guta Bank (foyer booth, ul Dzerzhinskogo; ☎ 11am-3pm & 4-6.45pm Mon-Fri) Good US dollar rates.

Valyutnaya Kassa No 1 (Guta Bank, ul Dzerzhinskogo; ☎ 9am-2pm & 3-5pm Mon-Fri) Travellers cheques swiftly cashed.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Yustas Photo-Salon (ul Sukhe-Batora; ☎ 10am-6pm) Passport photos for those Mongolian visas.

POST

Post office (ul Stepana Razina 23; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, 9am-8pm Sat & Sun) Bigger branches at per Bogdanov 8 and ul Karla Marksa 28.

TELEPHONE

Main telephone office (ul Proletarskaya 12) Also has 24-hour ATMs.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Visitor Information Office (☎ 406 706; http://baikal.info.ru; ul Karla Marksa 26b; ☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Fri, to 4pm Sat & Sun) Useful and very unusual for Russia, but this information office is also commercial and not always very imaginative beyond the tours it sells. The website is extensive if clunky.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Local tour operators are useful not only for organising excursions (of which there are many) but also for booking hotels and train tickets. Note that most have only one or two overstretched English speakers, so you may need some patience.

BaikalComplex (☎ 389 205; www.baikalcomplex.irk.ru) Busy, well-organised operation, offering homestays and trips tailored for Western travellers. Call to arrange a meeting.

Baikal Discovery (☎ 243 715; www.baikal-discovery.com/en; Chermchovski per 1a)

Baikaler (☎ 336 240; www.baikaler.com) Imaginative Jack Sheremetoff speaks good English and is well tuned to budget-traveller needs. Imaginative, personalised tours and a great central house-hostel.

BaikalExplorer (☎ 172 440; www.baikalex.com)

Baikalhostel (☎ 527 798; www.baikalhostels.com; ul Lermontova 136-1) Tours, a hostel and lots of useful information.

Baikal Safari (☎ 287 527; www.baikal-safari.ru; ul Chkalova 35/3) Offers homestays in Bolshoe Goloustnoe and Maloe More trips; competitive but mostly for local tourists. Minimal English is spoken.

Green Express (☎ 563 400; www.greenexpress.ru; 7th fl, ul Baikalskaya 291; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri) Big, professional outfit with a hotel in Listvyanka, yurts on

Olkhon Island and many mountain-biking, horse-riding and other tour options.

Sputnik (☎ 341 733; www.baikalsp.com; ul Chkalova 33; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Fri) Publishes a comprehensive guidebook, *Mini-Encyclopaedia Bokrug*, which it plans to translate into English.

Sights

MUSEUMS

Irkutsk's pleasant if fairly standard **Regional Museum** (Kraevedchesky muzey; ☎ 333 449; ul Karla Marksa 2; foreigner admission R100; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) is within a fancy 1870s brick building that formerly housed the Siberian Geographical Society, a club of Victorian-style gentlemen-explorers. The small gift shop is good for birch-bark boxes (from R80) and jewellery made from purple chaorite, a unique Siberian mineral. Across the road, a newly recast **statue of Tsar Alexander III** stands bushy-bearded on the riverfront promenade, copying a 1904 original.

A short walk behind the pretty pink **Pre-obrazheniya Gospodnya Church** (ul Timiryazeva) then through big heavy gates is the **Volkonsky House Museum** (☎ 207 532; per Volkonskogo 10; admission R50; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun). It's the preserved home of Decembrist Count Sergei Volkonsky, whose wife Maria Volkonskaya cuts the main figure in Christine Sutherland's book *The Princess of Siberia*. The mansion is set in a courtyard with stables, barn and servant quarters (beware of the dog). Downstairs is an (over-) renovated piano room; upstairs is a photo exhibition including portraits of Maria and other 1820s women who romantically followed their husbands and lovers into exile (see the boxed text, opposite). Labels are only in Russian but a R70 English-language pamphlet tells the stories. On Monday, when the museum is closed, the smaller **Trubetskoy House Museum** (☎ 275 773; ul Dzerzhinskogo 64; admission R40; ☎ 10am-6pm Thu-Mon) offers a similar Decembrist experience.

The grand old **Art Gallery** (ul Lenina 5; foreigner admission R50; ☎ 10am-6pm Wed-Mon) has a valuable though poorly lit collection ranging from Mongolian *thangka* (Buddhist religious paintings) to Russian-Impressionist canvases. Behind a photogenic 1909 façade is its **sub-gallery** (ul Karla Marksa 23; admission R60; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) is strong on Siberian landscapes and petroglyph rubbings and has some superb 17th-century icons.

A collection of Soviet tanks and missile launchers guard the **Dom Ofitserov** (ul Karla Marksa 47) which has a sporadically open museum and occasional concerts of patriotic songs.

Small, far from central, but well presented, the **City History Museum** (ul Chaikovskogo 5; admission R30; ☎ 10am-6pm Thu-Tue) shows various eras through shop window-style displays. Take the rare bus 11 about 2km west of town.

ARCHITECTURE & CHURCHES

Don't miss strolling along ul Karla Marksa, whose grand brick façades exude 19th-century architectural charm. Some fine **wooden houses** are sparsely dotted around town, notably on ul Dekabrskiikh Sobyty, east of ul Timiryazeva.

The magnificent Annunciation Cathedral that once dominated pl Kirova was demolished during one of Stalin's bad moods. It was replaced by a hulking concrete **regional administrative building**, the ex-Communist Party headquarters. Tragic. Behind this ugly centrepiece, however, two notable churches survive. The whitewashed 18th-century **Saviour's Church** (Spasskaya tserkov; admission R100; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) has remnants of murals on its façade and contains an ethnographic museum which is most exciting for allowing access to the bell tower – great views if you're allowed to the very top. Much more eye-catching is the fairy-tale ensemble of the **Bogoyavlensky Cathedral** (ul Nizhnaya Naberezhnaya; ☎ 8.30am-5pm), whose on-going restoration continues to add a colourful dazzle to the otherwise rather grimy riverfront.

Set in a leafy garden behind a noisy traffic circle, the 1762 **Znamensky Monastery** is 1.5km

northeast of the Bogoyavlensky Cathedral. Echoing with mellifluous plainsong, the interior has splendidly muralled vaulting, a towering iconostasis and a gold sarcophagus holding the miraculous relics of Siberian missionary St Inokent. Celebrity graves outside include that of Grigory Shelekhov, the man who claimed Alaska for Russia. White-Russian commander Admiral Kolchak was executed by Bolsheviks near the spot where his **statue** was controversially erected in November 2004 at the entrance to the monastery grounds, on a plinth that's exaggeratedly high enough to reduce vandalism.

The 1758 baroque **Raising of the Cross Church** (Krestovozdvizhenskaya tserkov; ul Sedova 1; donation) has a fine interior of gilt-edged icons and several examples of unusually intricate brickwork in a rounded style that's unique to Irkutsk and the Selenga Delta village of Posolskoe.

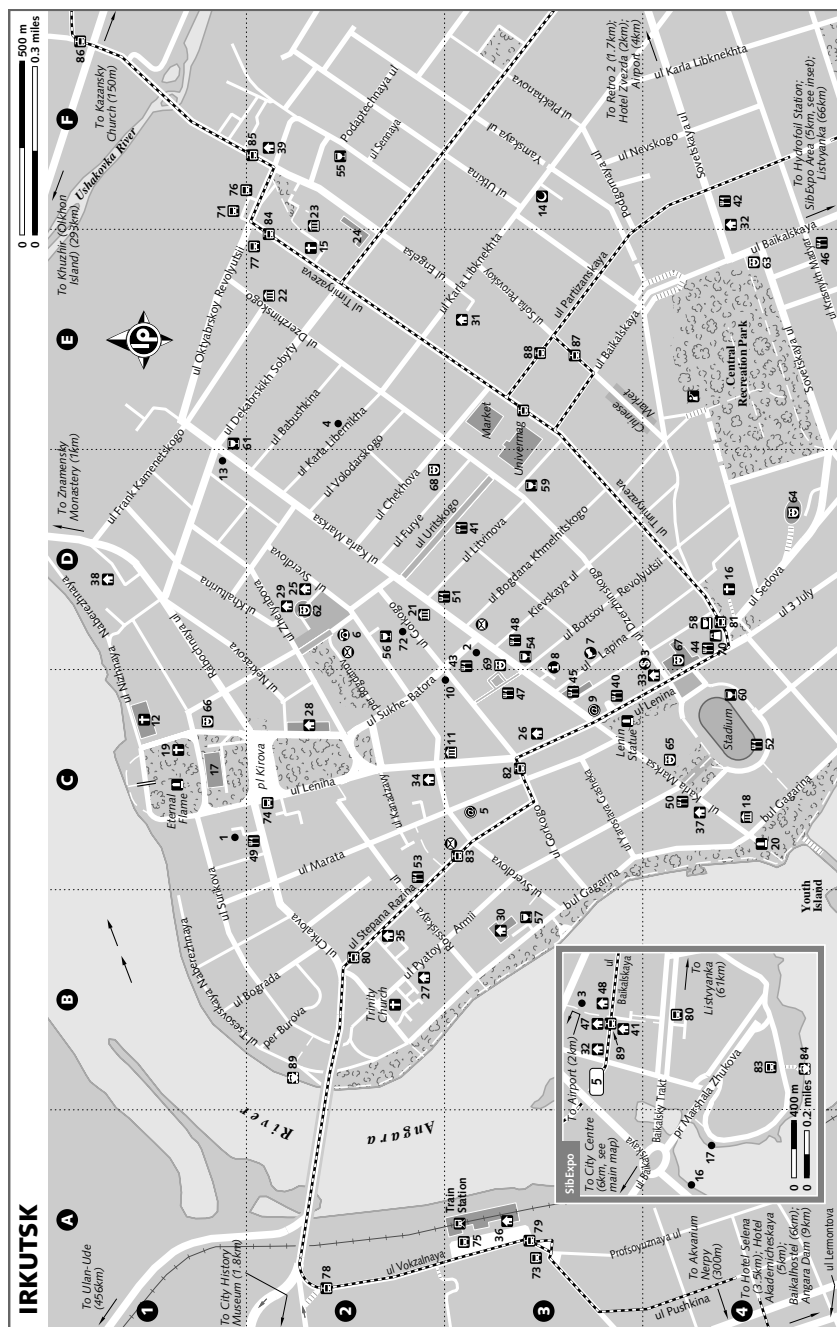
Nearing completion, the gigantic **Kazan-sky Church** is a Disneyesque confection of salmon-pink walls and fluoro turquoise domes topped with gold babled crosses. Get off tram 4 two stops northeast of the bus station.

NERPA SEALS

Nessie and Tito, two much-loved nerpa (freshwater seals), live at **Akvarium Nerpy** (☎ 435 047; ul 2-Zheleznodorozhnaya 66; admission R70; ☎ 11am-6.30pm Wed-Sun) and perform 'shows' every half-hour with no minimum attendance. Unlike some small 'zoos' elsewhere, the experience is positive and relatively humane. Feats include 'singing' (nasal flatulence?), break-dancing, ball-tossing and even basic mathematics.

THE DECEMBRIST WOMEN

Having patently failed to topple Tsarist autocracy in December 1825, many prominent 'Decembrist' gentlemen-revolutionaries were exiled to Siberia. They're popularly credited with bringing civilisation to the rough-edged local pioneer-convict population. Yet the real heroines were their womenfolk who cobbled together the vast carriage fares to get themselves to Siberia: in pre-railway 1827, the trip from St Petersburg to Irkutsk cost the equivalent of US\$200. And that was just the start. Pauline Annenkova, the French mistress of one aristocratic prisoner, spent so long awaiting permission to see her lover in Chita that she had time to set up a fashionable dressmakers' shop in Irkutsk. By constantly surveying the prisoners' conditions, the women eventually shamed guards into reducing the brutality of the jail regimes while their food parcels meant that Decembrists had more hope of surviving the minimal rations of their imprisonment. The Decembrist women came to form a core of civil society and introduced 'European standards of behaviour'. As conditions eventually eased, this formed the basis for a liberal Siberian aristocracy, especially in Chita and Irkutsk where some Decembrists stayed on even after finishing their formal banishment.



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DAM & SIBEXPO AREA

Some 6km southeast of the centre, the 1956 **Angara Dam** is 2km long. Its construction raised Lake Baikal by up to 6m, causing various human and environmental problems, but the dam itself is hardly an attraction. Moored nearby, the **Angara steamship** is an ice-breaker ferry originally imported in kit form from England to carry Trans-Siberian Railway passengers across Lake Baikal (the trains went on her bigger sister ship *Baikal*, which sank years ago). Officially closed to visitors, the ship is currently used as drinks storage for a nearby summer café, but the impressive engines still work, as you might see, should the café owner decide to befriend you.

Sleeping

Although options are expanding, Irkutsk accommodation still gets very full in summer. Bookings are generally a very good idea.

Travel agencies arrange homestays in Irkutsk and villages around Lake Baikal. Prices typically start at R500 per bed, though

R800 (sometimes with full board) is more common. Check the location: the cheapest places can be 10km or more from the city centre.

BUDGET

Hostels

Irkutsk has three tiny new private hostels. All have good, shared toilets, shower and kitchen. They are ideal for finding English-speaking assistance, arranging tours or meeting fellow travellers, and unlike hotels they don't charge booking fees.

Baikaler Hostel (☎ 336 240; apt 11, ul Lenina 9; www.baikaler.com; dm R500; 🚻) Beds are limited at this wonderful, super-central homestay-hostel. No drop-ins without prior reservation.

Irkutsk Downtown Hostel (☎ 334 597; www.downtownhostel.irkutsk.ru; apt 12, ul Stepana Razina 12; dm/d R400/1080) Cosy, 10-bed apartment-hostel above the Yantar grocery. Enter using the rear door spray-painted with the word 'Hostel'; phone ahead for the door entry code. Though central this area is slightly dubious at night. Take tram 1 from the train station.

Baikalhostel (☎ 525 742, 527 798; www.baikalhostels.com; apt 1, ul Lermontova 136; dm €8-10) This German-owned hostel receives rave reviews from several travellers, despite the inconvenient and insalubrious location, several kilometres south of the train station; take *marshrutka* 12 to stop Mikrochirurgia Glaza. Excellent website.

Hotels

Hotel Profsoyuznaya (Obshchezhitiye Gostinichogo Tipa Profsoyuznaya; ☎ 357 963; fax 357 855 for bookings; ul Baikalskaya 263; dm/tr R295/826, tw R590-708) Simple but well-kept Soviet-era rooms, albeit far from the centre in the distant SibExpo area. Tram 5 stops outside.

Hotel Gornyyak (☎ 243 754; ul Lenina 24; s R900-1200, tw R1800) Friendly, central and small, this hotel has reasonably presentable rooms with private shower and toilet, though some are affected by road noise. Per-hour rates available. The entrance is on ul Dzerzhinskogo.

Hotel Akademicheskaya (☎ 427 872; ul Lermontova 271a; s R1070-1210, d R1390) Were it nearer the centre, the renovated standard rooms with new toilet and curtained shower here would be fairly decent value. However, it's way out in Akademgorodok: take *marshrutka* 3 to Gosuniversitet stop then walk across a grassy area from ul Lermontova 265 (map at www.irkutsk.org/fed/pic/akad.jpg). There are cheaper R820 doubles (5th floor, no lift) with toilet and washbasin, but these are rather miserable unreconstructed affairs.

Uzory (☎ 209 239; ul Oktyabrskoy Revolyutsii 17; s/tw/tr R550/800/1200) Clean, unpretentious rooms with leopard-skin-patterned blankets. The communal toilets and shower are being rebuilt. Apocryphal backpacker folklore claims that impecunious travellers can get discounts for sleeping on the billiard table.

Arena Obschchezhitiye (☎ 334 663; ul Sverdlova 39; s/tw/tr/q R300/600/900/1200) Staff are grumpy and rooms are ragged but no worse than you'd expect for the price. Entered through a warren of prison-like brown-metal doors, this place is very central and often full.

Hotel Agat (☎ 242 320; ul Pyatoy Armii 12; tw R1000) Uninspired but with clean communal toilets and showers. Plenty of peeling paint.

Hotel Selena (☎ 397 859; ul Igoshina 1; dm/s/tw R680/750/1040) Overlooking the new Angara bridge site on the west bank, this crumbling eyesore is depressing and awkward to reach but might have rooms available when

everything else is full. It's a 15-minute walk from the southern terminus of tram 1, passing the Technical University, around which there are many eateries.

There are also **resting rooms** (komnaty otdykha; R18 per hr plus R40 for sheets) at the train station.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Central

Hotel Zvezda (☎ 540 000; www.zvezdahotel.ru; ul Yadrintseva 1x; s/d 2900/3300, ste R5500-9000; ☎ ☎ ☎) Within a new, Swiss chalet-style building, rooms here are modern and comfortable, service is pleasant and English is spoken. The peaceful location is 300m south of Retro 2. Its atmospheric restaurant specialises in game and exotic meats.

Hotel Gloria (☎ 540 326; www.gloriahotel.ru; Sovetskaya ul 58; s R3200, tw/d R3600, ste R5000-5500; ☎) This new pastel-beige tower has nine international-class rooms and two bigger suites which have bath as well as shower. English is spoken and the minibars overflow with alcoholic choice.

Santerra Bar-Hotel (☎ 201 518; ul Nizhnaya Naberezhnaya 126; s/d R3000/3100) This tiny all-suite minihotel has very stylish, fully equipped accommodation, bamboo screens shading generously sized king beds. Oddly, guests must access their rooms through the director's private office. No English. Rooms are half-price for 12-hour stays.

Hotel Delta (☎ 217 876; www.grandbaikal.ru; ul Karla Libknekhta 58; s/d R2000/3000) The functional new motel-standard rooms here have little panache, but are good value for their relatively central position; vastly preferable to the old Soviet hotels.

Irkutsk has two exclusive house-hotels in restored historic buildings with plush if sometimes over-fussy décor. Both open only by appointment. **Retro 1** (☎ 333 251; http://rus.baikal.ru/english/hotels/retro1/; ul Karla Marksa 1; ste R2640-4580) is perfectly central and was reconstructed for a presidential visit. **Retro 2** (☎ 271 534; http://rus.baikal.ru/english/hotels/retro2/; ul Yadrintseva 1; ste R2660-3620) is in a small park off Sovetskaya ul, three stops from the airport on *marshrutka* 20.

Location is the only advantage of Irkutsk's old Soviet-era hotels which mostly offer budget quality rooms at midrange prices. Despite their overpriced mediocrity, most are still full in summer. **Hotel Angara** (☎ 255 105; www.angarahotel.ru; ul Sukhe-Batora 7) is cen-

tral but outrageously overpriced; beware of considerable quality variation between and within different floors. The standard rooms on the 3rd floor (single/double R1400/2100) are the Angara's worst, with worn carpets and dizzying wallpaper, but the 3rd floor's upgraded rooms (single/double R2000/2500) are the Angara's best. Despite crooked lamps and scratchy towels, these are generally more presentable than the pokey little renovated rooms on the 5th to 7th floors (single/twin R2240/3680); rooms on the 6th floor have fridge and safe. Rooms on the 2nd and 4th floors (single/double R1600/2360) are repainted but retain scuffed Soviet-era furniture and teeny tiny toilets.

Other Soviet-era dinosaurs:

Hotel Arena (☎ 344 642; ul Zhelyabova 8a; s/tw R1206/1872) The small rooms renovated some years ago are now getting increasingly scruffy with dirty carpets and battered furniture. Reasonable bathrooms are shared between room-pairs.

Hotel Baikal (Hotel Intourist, Hotel Irkutsk; ☎ 250 167; fax 250 314; www.baikal-hotel.ru; bul Gagarina 44; s/tw R1500/2370, d R2370-3200) Rooms are upgraded but only the most expensive doubles come close to Western standards in this riverside slab-hotel. Some have good views.

Hotel Rus (☎ 242 715; http://rus.baikal.ru; ul Sverdlova 19; s; R1457-1603, d R1845, ste R2710-2981) Cosy by Soviet standards but redecoration of the rooms is skin deep. Breakfast is included and the contrastingly appealing Siberian cottage-style restaurant is recommended.

SibExpo Area

The SibExpo-Solnichny area is some 6km south of the centre by tram 5. Rates include breakfast.

Sun Hotel (☎ 255 910; www.xemi.com/sunhotel; ul Baikalskaya 295b; s €100-115, d €120-135; ☎ ☎ ☎) Impressive bathrooms and minibar complement stylish dark-wood furnishings in the Sun's modern rooms. Reception staff speak English but the lobby lacks facilities.

Solnyshonok (3rd fl, ul Baikalskaya 259; s/d €50/65) Sister hotel to the Sun Hotel, this has cheaper motel-standard rooms. The rooms have more style than pricier equivalents at the Baikal Business Centre, but their bathrooms are slightly musty and lack shower curtains. The Solnyshonok's three flights of stairs (no lift) are off-putting in midsummer heat.

Baikal Business Centre (☎ 259 120; www.bbc.ru; s/tw R3400/4200; ☎ ☎) This functional business hotel is a white and blue-glass tower approximating international standards.

Bathrooms have showers but no bathtub, and there is BBC World TV.

Eating

RESTAURANTS

Pervach (☎ 202 288; ul Chkalova 33; meals R240-350) Pervach offers imaginative Baikal-based menus in a vaulted stone-and-brick cellar, heated by real fires in winter. Some English is spoken.

Arbatski Dvorik (☎ 200 633; ul Uritskogo; meals R450-800; ☎ 11am-midnight) An upmarket restaurant with English menu and a remarkable interior of imitation houses, doorways and lanterns. Incongruously, access is by walking through Fiesta fast food.

Korchma (☎ 209 102; ul Krasnykh Madiyar 52; meals R230-580; ☎ noon-last client) Home-cooked traditional Russian food in a one-room cottage restaurant. It's set amid other more-genuine Siberian log homes which have so far survived rapid development pressures. Meals are presented on two-tone ceramics while an accordionist accompanies a talented, costumed folk singer (R40 cover). There's a 10% service charge.

Snezhinka (☎ 344 862; opposite ul Karla Marksa 25; meals R220-330; ☎ 11am-midnight) Warm, *cosy belle époque* café-restaurant with attentive service and consistently good food. The swirling ironwork furniture is suitably padded.

Lancelot (☎ 202 328; ul Kievskaya 2; meals R350-800; ☎ noon-midnight Sun-Thru, noon-2am Fri & Sat) Flaming torches lead down through a portcullis into an amusing neomedieval castle interior. There's a menu in English with Arthurian-named dishes and European prices.

U Dzhuzeppe (☎ 258 348; stadium arches; meals R70-170; ☎ 11am-11pm) Cloyingly cute puppy photos undermine the otherwise understated elegance of high ceilings and wrought-iron fittings. Fruity eggplant (R90) and stuffed squid (R110) are much better than the microwaved pizza slices (R35). Menu in English.

The most authentic pizzeria in town is **Figaro Pizza** (☎ 270 607; ul Sovetskaya 58; pizzas R100-270, beers from R50; ☎ 10am-midnight), while at **Kyoto** (Kioti; ☎ 550 505; ul Karla Marksa 15a; meals R400-1000; ☎ 10am-2am) there's Japanese ambience and non-Japanese rice.

CAFÉS

Kafe 16 (☎ 242 682; ul Sukhe-Batora 16; meals R270-500, coffees R40-80; ☎ 10am-11pm) Enticing brown and beige tones purring with jazz beckon you

BEST OF BAIKAL – WHAT'S BEST WHERE?

Accommodation (choice) Listvyanka, Maloe More
Accommodation (charm) Port Baikai, Olkhon Island
Beaches (photogenic) Eastern Baikai
Beaches (swimming) Maloe More
Buddhist datsans Tunka Valley
Cruises (best value) Nizhneangarsk
Cycling Olkhon Island
Day trip Irkutsk–Bolshie Koty
Dog-sledding (winter) Listvyanka
Dog-sledding (summer) Olkhon Island
Easiest lake access Slyudyanka
English-speaking help Irkutsk, Severobaikalsk, Olkhon
Gulag near Nizhneangarsk
Hiking (easy) Port Baikai, Arshan
Hiking (expedition) Goudzhikht
Hot springs Khakusy

Ice driving Severobaikalsk
Ice fishing (through a hole) off Slyudyanka or Severobaikalsk
Ice fishing (with a net) Katun village (Chivyrkuysky Gulf)
Lakeside church Posolskoe
Meeting foreign travellers Khuzhir (Olkhon), Irkutsk hostels
Nerpa seals (captive) Irkutsk
Nerpa seals (wild) Ushkanny Islands (Svyatoy Nos)
Quaint villages Baikalskoe, Uro (Barguzin Valley)
Scenic train rides Baikalsk to Slyudyanka, Circumbaikal Railway
Scenery Ust Barguzin, Barguzin Valley, Tunka Valley
Scuba diving Irkutsk agencies
Shamanism Olkhon Island
Skiing and snowboarding Baikalsk

through a unique Art Deco clamshell archway. Try the hard-hitting espressos (R40), and tastily garlic-edged fried cheese starters.

Wiener Café (Venskoe Kafe; ☎ 202 116; ul Stepana Razina 19; meals R180-300, coffees R40-70; ☎ 10am-11pm) Alluring coffee house with marble-top tables, Parisian-bar chairs and sepia photos. Reasonably priced pastries are available to takeaway.

Na Zamorskiy (☎ 290 891; ul Timiryazeva; meals R200-400, coffees R35-200; ☎ 9am-11.30pm) Fresh roses, rattan furniture, raffia-threaded blinds and lots of potted plants make this a comforting breakfast oasis. Enjoy delicious ham-and-cheese stuffed bliny (R65) and an excellent latte (R45). Nice church views.

Russkaya Chaynaya (☎ 201 678; ul Karla Marksa 3; meals R200-350, coffees R40-100; ☎ 10am-11pm) Boasts a splendid *fin de siècle* interior and summer beer garden.

Kino Kafe (ul Karla Marksa 22; snacks R10-40, tea R3, beers R20; ☎ 11am-10pm) Ultrabasic, super-cheap snack tables and a handy toilet, all within the foyer of the architecturally delightful Khudozhestveny Cinema.

QUICK EATS

Fiesta fast food (ul Uritskogo; snacks R45-120; ☎ noon-11pm) is the most atmospheric and congenial of Irkutsk's numerous fast-food outlets, though **Domino** (ul Lenina 13a; meals R70-140; ☎ 24hr) is popular for its all-night service.

Most appealing of the city's cheap cafeterias is the neat little **Blinnaya** (ul Sukhe-Batora;

meals R40-90; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat). However, for a slice of pure Soviet ambience try **Kafe Temp** (ul Lenina 25; meals R40-70; ☎ 10am-8pm), a sit-down cafeteria with archetypal 1970s décor. Amusingly surly staff bark bad-temperedly from behind gently vibrating displays of typical per-served *stolovaya* stodge.

Drinking

Liverpool (☎ 202 512; ul Sverdlova 28; imported beers R50-100; ☎ noon-last client) Superbly idiosyncratic Beatles theme-pub with a room for live acoustic music and a second bar decorated with typewriters and antiquated reel-to-reel tape recorders. Newcastle Brown Ale in Irkutsk – whatever next? Food is imaginatively named but so-so.

U Shveyka (☎ 242 687; ul Karla Marksa 34; beers R50-55, meals R170-400; ☎) This olde-worldle cavern with staring elk head and yin-yang condiments has a good summer beer terrace. Much better value than Bierhaus.

Bierhaus (☎ 550 555; ul Karla Marksa; beers R120-180; ☎ noon-2am) Upmarket Bavarian-style *bierstube* (beer-hall with heavy wooden furniture) serving Hoegaarden and Guinness as well as German beers and sausages.

Cheshskaya Pivovarnaya (☎ 538 482; ul Krasnoarmeyskaya 29; beers R47-53, meals R180-300) Irkutsk's unpretentious microbrewery-pub creates its own Czech-style Pils.

Monet (☎ 201 771; bul Gagarina 42; coffees R75-150, meals R250-650; ☎ 9am-11pm) Overpriced and pretentiously dubbed a 'coffee fashion

club', the Monet's most intriguing feature is its cushioned oriental parlour downstairs for smoking water pipes (R450 to R850).

Shch17 (☎ 203 109; stadium arches; beers R34-40; ☎ 24hr) The extraordinary interior here is designed like a submarine.

Ryumochnaya (ul Litvinova 16; vodkas R14, beers R28-40; ☎ 24hr) Get slammed with rough-edged locals at tables that are too chunky to be thrown at anyone...hopefully.

Entertainment

On summer evenings romantic couples and jolly groups of locals stroll the Angara promenade and the grassy areas behind the fine **Okhlopov Drama Theatre** (☎ 333 361; ul Karla Marksa 14).

Circus (☎ 336 139; ul Zhelyabova; tickets R100-250) Puts on eye-boggling Cirque du Soleil-style performances. Avoid the cheapest front seats where you'll get poor views and a regular splashing.

Other options:

Kukul Theatre (☎ 270 666; Sovetskaya ul) Puppet shows.

Musical Theatre (☎ 342 131; ul Sedova; tickets R60-300; box office ☎ 11am-6.30pm Tue-Sun) Pantomimes, ballets and costumed musical-comedy shows in a big concrete auditorium.

Organ Hall (pl Kirova) Organ concerts are held in the Polish Catholic church.

Philharmonic Hall (☎ 245 076; ul Dzerzhinskogo 2) Historic building staging regular children's shows and musical programmes from pop to classical.

Poznaya Disko-bar (ul Chekhova 17; admission R50; beers R45; ☎ 9pm-late) Tobacco-fugged dive popular with student drinkers on modest budgets.

Stratosfera Night Club (www.strata-club.ru; ul Karla Marksa 15; cover from R100; ☎ 6pm-6am Fri-Sun) Irkutsk's late-night hotspot, with bowling alley, two-storey disco and three-storey drink prices.

Shopping

Fanat (ul Timiryazeva; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Fri, to 6pm Sat) Sells Western-brand camping, fishing and skiing equipment, hiking boots and mountain bikes.

Getting There & Away

For regularly updated boat, bus and local train schedules consult kbzd.irk.ru/Eng/shedule.htm.

AIR

Irkutsk's antiquated little 'international' airport is handily placed near the city

centre. Foreign destinations include Baku (US\$250), Tashkent (US\$280) and Dushanbe (US\$290), as well as the Chinese cities Shenyang (US\$170, Tuesday and Saturday) and Tianjin (US\$330, Thursday and Sunday). **MIAT** (☎ 203 458; www.miat.com; Mongolian consulate, ul Lapina) flies thrice weekly to Ulaan Baatar (US\$210). Prices are discounted to as little as US\$64 in winter.

There are dozens of domestic destinations. For Moscow Domodedovo there are direct flights with Siberian (R7980 to R10,150, daily) and TransAero (R6650, twice weekly). Bargain deals abound for early bookings possibly via Omsk (Friday and Sunday) or Krasnoyarsk (three weekly). Tickets are sold by a convenient **Central Air Agency** (☎ 201 517; ul Gorkogo 29; ☎ 8am-7pm).

Some other options:

Destination	Cost	Frequency
Barnaul	R6100	Fri
Bratsk	R2870	daily
Chita	R2700	5 weekly
Khabarovsk	R5450-6200	6 weekly
Kyzyl	R3940	Sat
Magadan	R8500	Fri
Nizhneangarsk	R2160	2 weekly
Novosibirsk	R6500	7 weekly
St Petersburg	R7500-9000	3 weekly
Yekaterinburg	R7680	8 weekly
Yuzhno Sakhalinsk	R7600	Mon & Thu

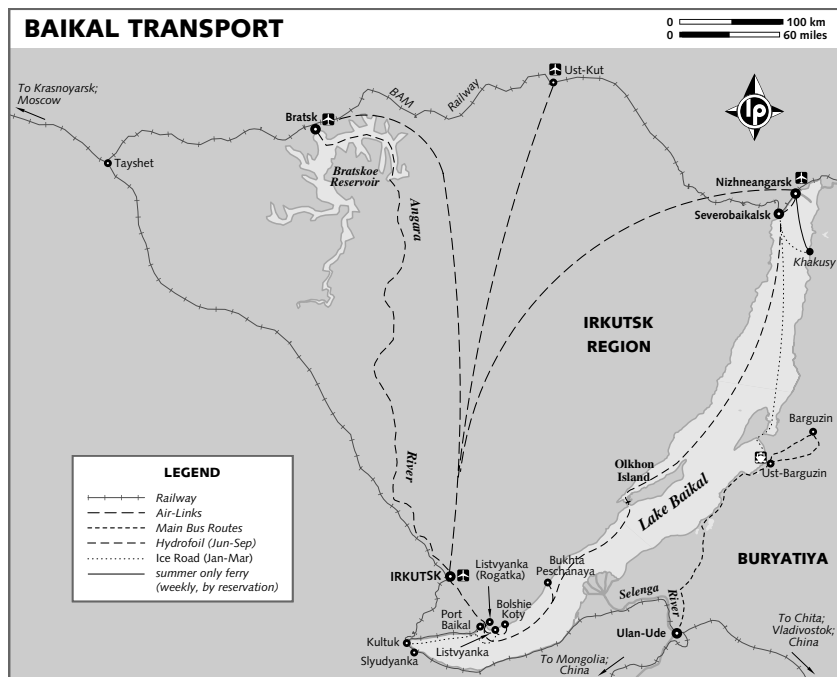
BOAT

In July and August hydrofoils buzz up Lake Baikai to Severobaikalsk and Nizhneangarsk (R1400, 1½ hours) stopping off in Port Baikai and Olkhon Island (R1100). Departures from Irkutsk are timetabled at 8.50am on Tuesday and Friday returning next day but changes and cancellations are frequent. An extra Irkutsk–Olkhon–Irkutsk service might run on certain summer Thursdays. There's an airline-style baggage limit.

Between once and four times daily, June to September, hydrofoils also serve Listvyanka (R130, 1¼ hours) and Bolshie Koty (R180, 1¾ hours).

All of the above depart from the Raketa hydrofoil station beyond the Angara Dam in Solnechny Mikro-Rayon, two-minutes' walk from bus 16 stop 'Raketa'.

From a different jetty beside floating Kafe Iveriya, **VSRP** (☎ 287 467) hydrofoils run



to Bratsk (R460, 12½ hours) on Tuesday, Saturday and certain Thursdays, June to late September.

BUS

From the **bus station** (☎ 209 115; 🕒 6am-7pm) book tickets ahead for Arshan (R220, 8am) and Khuzhir on Olkhon Island (R370, 9am, frequency varies seasonally). Listvyanka buses (R30, 1¼ hours, five daily) are supplemented by regular *marshrutky* (R60, 50 minutes) leaving when full. For Bratsk, comfortable private express buses have special ticket booths opposite the bus station.

The Visitor Information Office organises seasonal minibuses to Maloe More and Olkhon Island, departing from the yard outside its office.

TRAIN

The elegant old train station has numbered sections. Northernmost section No 1 has advance domestic ticketing; No 2 sells same-day tickets. Upstairs in area No 3 is the **Servis Tsentr** (☎ 636 501; 🕒 8am-7pm) for international tickets and the resting rooms,

while downstairs is left-luggage. An unnumbered fourth area beyond sells *elektrichka* tickets (eg to Slyudyanka, R38.20) and is the access route to all platforms.

The best, if most expensive, train to/from Moscow is the No 9/10 *Baikal* (R4150, 77 hours) but *platskart* berths on slower trains such as No 240/250 (87 hours) cost only R1820 via Krasnoyarsk (R505, 19 hours).

There are several alternate-day trains for Vladivostok including No 2 (R3840, 72 hours) and No 230 (R3400, 75 hours) via Khabarovsk (58 to 60 hours). Trains for Beijing (R3800, 73 hours) via Chita pass through Irkutsk on Tuesday at 9am. Those via Mongolia depart Saturday at 6am. Alternatively, for Ulaan Baatar (R1600) fast train No 6 (Friday and Saturday) is a full 10 hours quicker than the daily No 364 (35 hours). If you're heading east, consider stopping first in Ulan-Ude (eight hours), enjoying views of Lake Baikal en route. Train tickets are sold at the Central Air Agency (commission R80), upstairs in the airport (commission R70) and in Hotel Baikal (commission R100 domestic, R300 international).

Getting Around

Within the central area, walking is usually the best idea as one-way systems make bus routes confusing. Expect some routes to change significantly if and when the big new Angara bridge is completed.

Frequent *marshrutka* 20 runs from the airport, up ul Dekabrskiikh Sobyty, ul Karla Marksa and ul Lenina before passing the Hotel Angara and crossing to the train station. Trolleybus 4 (R5) takes a similar route but via ul Sovetskaya and Hotel Gloria.

From the train station trams 1 and 2 run to uls Lenina and Timiryazeva, while bus 7 crosses to pl Kirova, then loops round the centre and out past the Znamensky Monastery. Bus 16 continues down ul Lenina, past the Raising of the Cross Church and (eventually) the Angara Dam. It then passes within 500m of the SibExpo hotels before looping back beside the Raketa hydrofoil station to the *Angara* steamship. Slow tram 5 from the Sun Hotel trundles to the central market, and from here tram 4 goes past the bus station and Kazansky Church.

For the west bank, both bus/*marshrutka* 3 from the central market and *marshrutky* 12 and 72 (to Solnichny) from the train station cover the whole length of ul Lermontova.

AROUND IRKUTSK

Taltsy Museum of Wooden Architecture

Музей Деревянного Зодчества Тальцы About 47km east of Irkutsk, 23km before Listvyanka, **Taltsy** (locals/foreigners R20/80 plus photography permit; 🕒 10am-6pm summer, to 4pm winter) is an impressive outdoor collection of old Siberian buildings set in a delightful riverside forest. Amid the renovated farmsteads are two chapels, a church, a watermill, some Tungusi graves and the eye-catching 17th-century Iliminsk Ostrog watchtower. Listvyanka-Irkutsk buses stop on request at Taltsy's apparently deserted entrance access road. Don't worry; the ticket booth is only a minute's walk through the forest.

LISTVYANKA ЛИСТВЯНКА

☎ 3952 / pop 2500 / 🕒 Moscow +5hr

The nearest Lake Baikal village to Irkutsk, Listvyanka offers winter dog-sledding and summer boat and horse rides, and is ideal for watching the Siberian nouveau riche at play. Outside busy weekends, the village is still reasonably quiet with inspiring views

towards the distant snow-capped Kamar Daban Mountains. Basic maps are available on www.irkutsk.org/fed/maps/listmap.jpg and from a **tourist information booth** at the port's bus stand, which also has accommodation listings.

Sights & Activities

Having glimpsed Lake Baikal and eaten fresh-smoked omul fish at the port, many visitors are left wondering why they came. Fishing-boat rides (charters from R800 per hour) or gentle strolls are a common time-filler with old log cottages to photograph up uls Gudina and Chapaeva, though ongoing gentrification is starting to impinge on their architectural integrity. About 2km west in **Krestovka**, the pretty if unremarkable **Svyato-Nikolskaya Church** was named for an apparition of St Nicholas which supposedly saved its sponsor from a Baikal shipwreck.

Another 2km towards Irkutsk at **Rogatka**, tour groups are herded into the **Limnological Institute** (☎ 250 551; ul Akademicheskaya 1; locals/foreigners R180/80; 🕒 9am-5pm Oct-May, to 7pm Jun-Sep), where gruesomely discoloured fish samples and seal embryos in formaldehyde are now supplemented with tanks containing a sad, living nerpa seal and various Baikal fish that you'd otherwise encounter on restaurant menus.

From December to March, the **Baikal Dog Sledding Centre** (☎ 112 829, 112 799; ole-tbaik sledog@mail.ru; ul Gornaya 17, Krestovka) offers thrilling dog-sledding on forest tracks. The shortest run, 3km with three dogs, costs R600, but whole multiday cross-Baikal expeditions are possible with bigger dog-teams. The owners' sons speak English.

On warmer winter weekends snowmobiles and even horses can be informally hired on the ice near the Proshli Vek restaurant, while hovercraft rides are available from the main port area. On the beachfront, locals photograph one another in front of weirdly shaped frozen waves.

Sleeping

There is a vast choice of accommodation. However, with minimal public transport, no taxi service and no left-luggage office, finding a room in summer without reservations can take some tiresome trekking around. Leave heavy bags in Irkutsk. Anything under R500 is likely to be very basic

with outside squat toilet, dorm-style beds or both. Virtually every Irkutsk tour agent has its own guesthouse or homestay in Listvyanka; value varies.

In the port area, handy but predominantly unexotic homestays abound on lake-front ul Gorkogo and along the two ribbons of attractive wooden cottages rising steeply up inland valleys nearby, ul Chapayeva (eg Nos 6, 44 and 64) and ul Gudina (Nos 77 and 13a). Slightly less convenient than the port area for public transport, Krestovka is nonetheless more of a 'real' village and offers an ever-expanding choice of accommodation.

BUDGET

Galina Vasilievna's homestay (☎ 112 798; ul Kulikova 44, Krestovka; dm/tr R300/900) Galina offers cheap, saggy dorm beds in a delightfully genuine old home with a large traditional stove-heater but minimal facilities. Ask for keys at the Dariya grocery shop in front. An indoor toilet functions in summer.

Spitting distance from the lake in the port area, **Priboy** (☎ 112 839; upper fl, ul Gorkogo 101; dm/tw R250/1200) has cheap if unappealing dorms and some basic rooms with shared toilet, shower and dubious taste in wallpaper. Add R300 for lake views. Request keys from the **Askat shop** (☎ 8am-8pm) or the **restaurant** (☎ noon-11pm) downstairs.

MIDRANGE

Port Area

Ersi (☎ 112 546; www.ersi.baikal.ru; ul Chapayeva 65; tw R1000-1289) In the garden behind the house is a Mongolian *ger* (yurt) which tourists pay R25 to visit – but you can sleep inside for R480. There's a good indoor toilet and shower. Helpful Nikolai speaks English and can arrange boat and bicycle excursions. However, when he's away his lovable granny gets quickly flummoxed by foreigners.

Devyaty Val (☎ 112 814; ul Chapayeva 24; d R1200-1400) The better rooms are relatively good value with big beds, TV and private shower and toilet in a long timber extension. Out of season, single occupancy costs half.

Baikal Dream (☎ 112 758; ul Chapayeva 69; d R1300-1800) Baikal Dream offers big bright comfortable rooms with flush toilets, but décor is minimal; a chip-chinned Lenin in one room is the only adornment. The urban-

style brick architecture cruelly disregards its rural surroundings.

Briz (☎ 250 468; www.baikal-briz.ru; ul Gudina 71; standard s/tw R1500/1700 summer, s/tw R1200/1400 winter) A good price-quality balance with in-room toilets and distant Baikal views from the nicer rooms, plus more basic hut beds are available for R750 in summer only. Out of season a few basic singles cost only R400 but call ahead to have them prewarmed.

Krestovka Area

Derevenka (☎ 250 459; www.village2002.narod.ru; ul Gornaya 1; s/d R1300/1400, s/d midsummer R1400/1700, banya R200) On a ridge behind the Baikal-front road, lovely little wooden huts with stove-heaters, private toilets and hot water (but shared showers) offer Listvyanka's most appealing semibudget choice. Very friendly owners can organise snowmobile, sled and boat rentals.

Baikalskie Terema (☎ 112 599; info@greenexpress.ru; ul Gornaya 16; s/d R2500/2700) For Western comforts this fully equipped pine-furnished hotel remains Listvyanka's snazziest option so far. There are half-price room rates for 12-hour stays – handy if you arrive on the last bus from Irkutsk and are continuing next day by hydrofoil to Bolshie Koty. There's a sports-activities centre but compare prices.

U Ozera (☎ 250 444; Irkutsk Hwy km3; d winter/summer R1800/2500) New, reasonably comfortable if cramped motel overlooking the lake between Krestovka and Rogatka.

Eating

Near the port numerous vendors pedal delicious smoked omul fish, and café **Shury Murly** (☎ 250 452; meals R150-350, sandwiches R25-60; ☎ 10am-11pm) has a lakeside summer terrace. The most atmospheric eatery is the **Proshli Vek** (☎ 112 554; ul Lazlo 1; meals R200-470) 2.5km west of the port between U Ozera and Krestovka. The hotel Baikalskie Terema also has an excellent restaurant.

Several cheaper homestays allow their guests use of communal cooking facilities, but note that grocery shops are rather rare and poorly stocked. The best are in Krestovka, either the Dariya (in front of Galina Vasilievna's homestay) or another on the coast road at the ul Kulikova junction. There's a sporadically open bakery stand beside the port and a small grocery 800m

east of the port, some way beyond the turning for ul Gudina.

Getting There & Away

Five daily buses (R30, 1¼ hours) and roughly hourly *marshrutky* run from Listvyanka port to Irkutsk passing the Limnological Institute and Taltsy Museum. Taxis from Irkutsk want at least R1000.

Mid-May to late September, hydrofoils stop at Listvyanka port between Irkutsk (R180) and Bolshie Koty (R80) at least daily, more frequently at weekends.

Year-round a tiny, battered car-ferry lurches across the never-frozen Angara River – mouth to Port Baikal from Rogatka. It supposedly departs at 8.15am, 4.15pm and 6.15pm but times are by no means guaranteed.

Various short trips by yacht, fishing boat or even hovercraft are available at the main port depending on the season. For longer cruises inquire well ahead through Irkutsk agencies.

AROUND LISTVYANKA

Hydrofoils (in summer), ferries (all year-round) or taxis (across the winter ice) lead on to more isolated roadless villages. Port Baikal and Bolshie Koty are the most accessible and are easy to visit as a day trip. In winter, Jack Sheremetoff at Baikalor (p566) runs a one-day excursion from Irkutsk to Listvyanka, Bolshie Koty and across the ice to a tunnel on the Circumbaikal Railway for R1200 per person.

Port Baikal Порт Байкал

☎ 3952

Seen from Listvyanka across the unbridged mouth of the Angara River, Port Baikal looks like a rusty semi-industrial eyesore. But the view is misleading. A kilometre southwest of Stanitsa (the port area), Baranchiki is a ramshackle 'real' village with lots of unkempt but authentic Siberian cottages and a handy selection of accommodation options. The village rises steeply, making excellent Baikal viewpoints easily accessible. Awkward ferry connections mean that Port Baikal remains largely uncommercialised, lacking Listvyanka's 'attractions' but also its crowds. Thus it's popular with meditative painters and walkers, but its main draw is the Circumbaikal train ride from Slyudyanka.

From 1900 to 1904 the Trans-Siberian Railway tracks led to Port Baikal from Irkutsk. They continued on Lake Baikal's far eastern shore at Mysovaya (Babushkin), and the rail-less gap was plugged by ice-breaking steamships, including the *Angara*, now restored and on view in Irkutsk (p569). Later, the tracks were extended south and around the lake. This Circumbaikal line (see below) required so many impressive tunnels and bridges that it earned the nickname 'The Tsar's Jewelled Buckle'. With the damming of the Angara River in the 1950s, the original Irkutsk to Port Baikal railway section was submerged and replaced with an Irkutsk-Kultuk shortcut (today's trans-Sib). That left poor little Port Baikal to wither away at the dead end of a rarely used branch line.

SLEEPING & EATING

B&B Baikal (☎ 250 463; www.baikal.tk, in Russian; ul Baikalskaya 12, Baranchiki; bed R500, bed with half-board R800) Set 400m back from the lakeside in a house with a conspicuous, wood-framed new picture window. Various newly decorated but unpretentious rooms share two Western-style toilets and a shower.

Anastasia Shishlonova's homestay (ul Naberezhnaya 12-1, Baranchiki; bed R150, bed with half-board R300) This delightful, ever-smiling family offer rooms in their wonderfully positioned Baikal-facing home and a cute but minuscule hut-room in the yard. There's fresh milk from the cow who greets you on the walk to the challenging pit toilet. No running water.

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Yakhont (☎ 250 496, 622 977; www.yahont.irk.ru, in Russian; ul Naberezhnaya 3, Baranchiki; dm/tw R800/2400) could be the Siberian boutique hotel you've been dreaming of. It's a traditionally designed log house decorated with eclectic good taste by well-travelled, English-speaking owners. There's even a little hookah-smoking salon. Guests congregate in the stylish communal kitchen/dining room, above which rooms have perfect Western bathrooms. For those on tighter budgets a cute but waterless cliff-front cottage offers an appealing dormitory option. Advance bookings are essential.

Lyudmila Masalitina's homestay (ul Volkzalnaya 7/2, Stanitsa; dm/q R150/600) In the unattractive Stanitsa area, this homestay is great value and very handy for the Listvyanka ferry. The toilet is a scary outhouse.

As yet Port Baikal has no café but there are three grocery kiosks at Baranchiki and two in Stanitsa. All accommodation options listed here have either kitchen or meals included (or both).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The ferry to Rogatka near Listvyanka (20 minutes) runs year-round, supposedly three times daily at 7.10am, 3.50pm and 5.15pm, but times can change at whim. There are direct hydrofoils to Irkutsk (50 minutes) in summer. All trains come via the very slow Circumbaikal route. For guests, the Yakhont offers speedboat charters (R2000 per hour) and R300 pick-ups to/from Listvyanka.

Circumbaikal Railway

Кругобайкальская Железная Дорога
Excruciatingly slow or a great social event? Opinions are mixed but taking one of the four weekly Slyudyanka to Port Baikal trains along this scenic, lake-hugging branch line remains a very popular tourist activity. You'll need to juggle sunglasses, fan and torch as the carriages are unventilated and unlit. The most picturesque sections of the route are the valley, pebble beach and headland at Polovinaya (around halfway), and the bridge area at km149 where there's also a small **Rerikh museum** (one hour from Slyudyanka). Views are best if you can persuade the driver to let you ride on the front of the locomotive – possible on certain tour packages. Note that most trains from Port Baikal travel by night and so are useless for sightseeing.

The old stone tunnels, *stolby*-cliff cuttings and bridges are an attraction even for nontrain-buffs who might drive alongside sections of the route on winter ice roads from Kultuk. Hiking sections of the peaceful track is also popular. Walking from Port Baikal leads to some pleasant if litter-marred beaches. Or get off an Irkutsk–Slyudyanka *elektrichka* at Temnaya Pad and hike down the stream valley for about an hour. You should emerge at km149 on the Circumbaikal track, from where you can continue by train to Port Baikal if you time things well.

SLEEPING

There are roughly a dozen isolated *turbazy* of varying quality along the route. Perhaps the most usefully positioned is the rambling, very basic **Baza Alpinistov** (☎ 902-178 3502; Ludmilla Arteminka; dm R100) at km149. Bring your own food.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

From a side platform at Slyudyanka I station, short, wooden-seated Matanya trains (R32, six hours) currently depart at 1pm, two to four times weekly – check timetables carefully. To get a seat you'll need to join the scrum to board around half an hour before departure. Get off at Baranchiki, the penultimate halt, for Port Baikal's best accommodation. In summer an additional tourist train direct from Irkutsk departs at around 7am on Saturday. Wonderfully detailed website <http://kbzd.irk.ru/Eng/> has regularly updated timetables plus photographs of virtually every inch of the route.

Several Irkutsk agencies run organised Circumbaikal tours. BaikalComplex (p566) includes a charter ferry to get you to Listvyanka, avoiding a forced overnight stay in Port Baikal.

Bolshie Koty БОЛЬШИЕ КОТЫ

Founded by 19th-century gold miners, roadless Bolshie Koty makes an easy day trip by boat or ice-drive from Listvyanka or a picturesque if somewhat hair-raising hike. The little **museum** opposite the jetty has a few pickled crustaceans and stuffed rodents. Otherwise, the village is simply a pleasant place to stroll, snooze and watch fish dry. A few basic homestays include ul Baikalskaya 55 (lovely lakeside position) and neater, inland ul Zarechnaya 11b. Great fresh-smoked omul are sold at the port when boats arrive.

Hydrofoils originating in Irkutsk (R180) depart Listvyanka (R80, 25 minutes) at least daily in summer, staying nearly two hours before returning. That's plenty for most visitors.

OLKHON ISLAND ОСТРОВ ОЛЬХОН

pop 1500 / ☎ Moscow +5hr

Halfway up Lake Baikal's western shore and reached by a short ferry journey from Sakhyurta (aka MRS), the serenely beautiful Olkhon Island is a wonderful place from

which to view the lake and relax during a tour of Siberia. Considered one of five global poles of shamanic energy by the Buryat people, the 72km-long island's main settlement is Khuzhir, which has seen something of a tourist boom over the last few years mainly thanks to the inspiring efforts of Nikita's Guest House, which also runs the **tourist information office** (☎ 9am-9pm) outside its premises. For a good map of the island go to www.baikalex.com/info/map_olkhon.html.

Although peak season is July and August, also consider visiting during the quiet winter months, when you can drive across the ice to the island until early April. Olkhon was reconnected to the electricity grid in 2005 and mobile phones now work in Khuzhir.

Sights & Activities

There are unparalleled views of Baikal from sheer cliffs that rise at the island's northern end, culminating in dramatic **Cape Khoboy**. Day-long jeep trips here including lunch (R350) can be arranged through Nikita's and Khuzhir's other guesthouses.

Khuzhir's small **museum** (ul Pervomayskaya 24; admission free; ☎ 10am-6pm), next to the village school, is worth a look. Consider dropping by Nikita's even if you aren't staying there to admire the inventive kid's playground and general atmosphere of the place. A short walk north of Nikita's, the unmistakable **Shaman Rocks** are neither huge nor spectacular, but they make a perfect meditative focus for the ever-changing cloudscapes across the picturesque Maloe More (Little Sea). East of the rocks is a long strip of sandy beach.

The island's southern end is rolling grassland – great for off-road mountain biking or gentle hiking, and if Baikal proves too cold for a dip you can cool off in the small **Shara-Nur Lake**.

Sleeping & Eating

The large complex of upmarket-looking wooden cabins under construction on the north edge of town at the time of research will be the latest in an ever-growing range of places to stay in Khuzhir. Irkutsk agencies (p566) offer a choice of basic cottage homestays in Khuzhir at around R600 with full board. If you just show up there's a fair chance of finding a similar place from around R450. Toilets are always outside the rooms and the *banya* will typically cost

extra. The village is small enough that it won't take you long to find the following recommended places.

Nikita's Guest House (<http://olkhon.info/>; ul Kirpichnaya 8, Khuzhir; full board per person R530) Run by a former Russian table-tennis champ and his wife, Siberia's premier travellers hang-out is a wonderful place to stay and ecofriendly to boot. If it's full (as it often is in high season) the owners will find you a place to stay elsewhere in the village. The basic rooms on site are attractively decorated. Scrub up in an authentic *banya* and pig out on delicious home-cooked meals. There's a tourist information centre out front and a packed schedule of excursions and activities.

Solnechnaya (☎ 3952-389 103; www.web-olkhon.com; ul Solnechnaya 14; full board R510-570) Not quite as happening a scene as Nikita's but still a pleasant place to stay offering a good range of activities. Accommodation is in two-storey cabins, cooler 1st-floor rooms being the more expensive.

Ventsak (ul Baikalskaya 42; full board per person R480) The most appealing of Khuzhir's smaller guesthouses has a handful of cabins in a quiet spot just off the village's main street. The shower and *banya* block is in good condition and there's a comfortable communal lounge area.

Several kilometres north of Khuzhir near the tiny hamlet of Kharansty, Green Express (p566) runs **Yurt Camp Harmony** (www.greenexpress.ru; full board per person in 4-bed yurt R800) with some 20 large circular felt tents shaded by trees in a lakeside camp site. It's used for the company's tours but independent travellers can stay if there's room. Curious dog-cart rides are available in summer.

Getting There & Away

From June to August there are at least two and usually three daily buses between Khuzhir and Irkutsk (R370, seven hours), with an additional minibus leaving from Nikita's daily at 8.30am (R300). Frequency drops off drastically outside peak summer season. With a little warning, agencies or hostels can usually find you a ride in a private car to Irkutsk (5½ hours), R700 per seat, R2500 for the whole car. Prices include the short ferry ride to MRS – mid-January to March an ice road replaces that ferry. When ice is partly formed or partly melted, the island is completely cut off for a few weeks.

In summer a hydrofoil service operates three times weekly from Irkutsk to Olkhon (R1100, seven hours), dropping passengers near the ferry terminal, from where it's possible to hitch a lift into Khuzhir.

Maloe More Малое Море

The relatively warm, shallow waters of the Maloe More (Little Sea) offer a primary do-nothing holiday attraction for Siberians. Main attractions are swimming, hiking to waterfalls and drinking. Dozens of camps, huts and resorts are scattered amid attractive multiple bays backed by alternating woodland and rolling grassland scenery. Since each widely spaced 'resort' is frequently pre-booked and hard to access without private transport, you'd be wise to first visit Irkutsk agencies and leaf through their considerable catalogues. Booking something not too far from MRS makes it easier to continue later to Olkhon Island. Arguably the most appealing bay is **Bukhta Kurkutsкая** where the Baza Otdykha Naratay has showers and bio-toilets. Several new resorts offer weekly transfers from Irkutsk for guests (around R400), including **Baikal-Dar** (☎ 3952-266 336; www.dar.irk.ru; d/tr incl full board R1600/2400). The further north, Olkhon-facing **Khadarta Bay** between Sarma and Kurma is becoming ever more popular.

From June to late August *marshrutky* run to Kurma (R380, 5½ hours) at 9am via Sarma (R320) from the courtyard of Irkutsk's Visitor Information Office. They return at 2pm the same afternoon. Public buses from Irkutsk serve MRS.

SOUTH BAIKAL

From trans-Siberian train windows there are attractive lake-glimpses along much of Baikal's south coast. Lacking any architectural charm, neither Slyudyanka nor smelly Baikalsk tempt many Westerners off the train, yet these drab, functional places have superb mountain-backed lakeside settings and accommodation that's cheaper than Irkutsk's. Slyudyanka is also the best place to start Circumbaikal train rides or excursions to the lovely Tunka Valley.

Slyudyanka Слюдянка

☎ 39544 / pop 18,800 / ☞ Moscow +5hr Slyudyanka 1, the famous all-stone **train station**, is a mere five-minutes' walk from Lake Baikal's shore. En route you pass a

photogenic timber **church** in multicoloured, Scooby Doo style. Across the tracks, former locomotive workshops host an interesting though all-in-Russian **museum** (Kraevedchesky muzey; ☎ 2351; ul Zheleznodorozhnaya 22; admission R30; ☞ 11am-5pm Sun-Thu) with archaeological finds, old railway-switching boxes and an identification guide to 47 locomotive types.

The simple, friendly **hotel** (☎ 23071; ul Frunze 4, M/R Perival; dm/s/tw R300/400/800), with shared showers and seatless toilets, charges half-price for 12-hour stays. To get there from the train station cross the long footbridge and walk two blocks further to a little **bus station** (ul Lenina); from here the hotel is 4km west by very frequent *marshrutka* 1 (last at 11pm). A taxi costs R40. Lugubriously Uv-lit **Kafe Germez** (☎ 51089; ul Lenina 54; meals R50-70) is halfway along.

Trains from Irkutsk take around 3¼ hours (*elektrichka*) or 2½ hours (express). Slyudyanka 1 is the usual starting point for the **Circumbaikal Railway** trip (p578). Two cheap but very scenic *elektrichky* run daily to Baikalsk (R18) and *marshrutky* from outside the station depart to both Kyren and Arshan at an ungodly 4.45am (or earlier depending on when train 125 arrives from Ulan-Ude). An additional bus to Arshan (R75, two hours) leaves at 2pm from the bus station. From here bus 103 also runs six times daily to Baikalsk.

Baikalsk Байкальск

☎ 39542 / pop 15,500 / ☞ Moscow +5hr Lakeside Baikalsk is the site of a huge, controversial Baikal-polluting pulp mill (p106) which gives the town a faint but unpleasantly pervasive perfume of decomposing cellulose. However, the mountains that rise abruptly behind town offer the region's best **snowboarding** (www.worldsnowboardguide.com/resorts/Russia/Baikalsk/) and skiing at the very active **Gora Sobolinaya Resort** (http://baikalsk.irk.ru, in Russian). The complex has a handy **left-luggage office** (per day R80) as well as modern **ski-lifts** (per hr/half-day/day R150/200/300; ☞ 10am-5pm) which cost double at weekends. Equipment rentals range from R200 to R1000 for ski-boot-pole sets or R500 to R750 for snowboards.

SLEEPING

All hotels charge a 50% first-day booking premium and ask big weekend and seasonal surcharges.

Hotel Uyt (☎ 37312; www.baikaltur.ru; Stroitel'naya 13; d/low/mid-season R800/1000, d/high season R1200-1600) Comfortable new rooms are individually designed though the tiger-skin, floral and wave motifs may not appeal to every taste. You can also watch BBC World TV from vivid lemon-yellow settees in the airy communal hallway/billiard room. The hotel is 5km from the ski slopes and 400m from a pretty Baikalsk beach where the gregarious Armenian owner can arrange water-skiing, boat trips and ice-pulls on the frozen lake (you ski while being towed behind a 4WD).

Hotel Sobolinaya (☎ 32455; dm R240, s R540-600, d R800-100, tr R1050-1200) Just 600m from the ski-pulls, Hotel Sobolinaya is somewhat dreary but all rooms have a good new toilet and shower (some shared between pairs). The R2580 *lux* suite hosted President Putin when he slapped on his skis in 2002.

Taxi driver and part-time chainsaw sculptor **Yuri Sklyarov** (☎ 8-9025 681 807; www.sklyarovtur.boom.ru, in Russian) speaks a few words of English and can arrange homestays from R300.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Baikalsk's main station on the trans-Siberian mainline is bizarrely inconvenient, 9km east of the centre – that's 12km from the ski slopes. Handier Baikalsk Passageryskiy station is only used by the twice-daily *elektrichka* services to Slyudyanka.

Selenga Delta Villages

Posolskoe was the site where Imperial Russia's first trans-Baikal diplomatic mission to the Mongolian khan got ambushed and robbed in 1651; by the 1680s its monastery was spearheading the evangelism of Buryatiya. Closed in the 1920s but recently renovated, the monastery's **Spaso-Preobrazhensky Church** dominates what is now a quiet little wooden-cottage fishing village. The church stands on a slight rise overlooking a long, pebbly beach where inhabitants quietly fill horse-drawn barrels with Baikal water.

Tvorogovo also has a notable old church, beside the Posolskoe-Kabansk road. Quietly attractive **Kabansk** has a museum and a big Soviet 'flame' monument.

Shared taxis (R10) run between Kabansk and Timlyuy station on the Trans-Siberian Railway. Posolskoe buses are rare from Kabansk and run twice daily from Ulan-Ude train station (3½ hours, last return at 6pm).

TUNKA VALLEY ТУНКИНСКАЯ ДОЛИНА

☞ Moscow +5hr

When the clouds clear, sawtooth Sayan peaks rise spectacularly above the cute Buddhist villages of the wide, rural Tunka Valley, which starts about 30km west of Kultuk and continues all the way to the Mongolian border near Mondy. Smoke rising gently from cottage chimneys adds to the wisps of romantic morning mist. Beyond justifiably popular Arshan, there's minimal tourist infrastructure and the grandly panoramic mountains are generally set too far back for easy access. Nonetheless, hiking maps are sold in Irkutsk and **Tunkinskiye Goltzy** (http://tunki.baikal.ru, in Russian) has great photos and useful mountaineer's schematics.

Arshan Аршан

☎ 30156 / pop 900-3800, seasonal

This popular hot-springs village is nestled right at the foot of soaring forested mountains. Relaxing short walks take you to a series of rapids and waterfalls but there are plenty of longer, more challenging treks and climbs with detailed information (in Russian) on http://tunki.baikal.ru/.

From the big, six-storey Sayan Sanatorium, Arshan's patchily attractive main street (ul Traktovaya) fires itself 2km straight towards the mountains. Beyond the post office, **Internet Zal** (ul Traktovaya 32, per hr R50; ☞ 11am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 12.30-6pm Sat & Sun) and **bus-ticket kiosk** (ul Traktovaya 3), it swerves west past the **Altan Mundarga Information Booth** (☎ 97502; ul Traktovaya 6) and the sprawling Kurort Arshan resort. Keep walking 20 minutes through the forest to find the dinky little **Badkhirkhurma Datsan** (Buddhist temple), set in an idyllic mountain-backed glade, or walk up the stream to access the mountain footpaths.

SLEEPING & EATING

Many log cottages offer basic homestays from R100 per bed. Look for 'Дом Жилье' signs.

Priyut Alpinista (☎ 97697; www.iwf.ru; ul Bratev Domshevikh 8; tw R800-1000, tr R1300) This characterful new climbers' centre has the atmosphere of a Western youth hostel, but rooms have private toilets and better ones have hot showers. Rent bicycles (R65 per hour), buy climbing maps (R25) and watch videos of Arshan's attractions in the comfortable sitting room before adding comments to the

'magic tree'. It's a modest wooden building three-minutes' walk along ul Pavlova from the bus stand. The owners offer pre-erected tent places, including supplies, high in the mountains (R350 per person including food) so that hikers and mountaineers don't need to carry a rucksack.

Hotel Zamok Gornogo Korolya (☎ 97384; ul Gagarina 18; d R1700-2100) This modern pseudo-castle has crenellations, green-tipped towers and four comfortable rooms with questionable 'artistic' taste in nude *derrières*.

Kurort Arshan (☎ 97745; ul Traktovaya 1; dm/s R150/215; ☎ reception 8am-8pm summer, 9am-1pm & 4-7pm winter) Basic institutional sanatorium with various sized buildings spread through the forest, used mostly by those seeking a cure at its hot springs.

Pensionat Sagaan Dali (☎ 97468; www.sagaan.ru; ul Deputatskaya 14; s/d/ste R390/780/1170; (P) Inexpensive but with all the charm of a 1970s council block, rooms here are cosmetically upgraded but still have rather sad old toilets. Suites are bigger but not better. The access footpath from ul Traktovaya skirts the Sayan Sanatorium, passing a spluttering sulphurous spring-water faucet marked by prayer flags.

Easily missed within the grounds of the Sayan Sanatorium, the small **Sayan Kafe** (meals R200-400; ☎ noon-11pm) is Arshan's nicest eatery. Much cheaper snacks are available from a rustic unmarked **teahouse** (ul Traktovaya 1; beers R30) beside Visit grocery shop and from a bright if unrepentantly Soviet **stolovaya** (ul Traktovaya 13; meals R35-50; ☎ 9am-7pm) near the post office.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses or *marshrutky* (slightly more expensive) run to Kyren (R35, 1½ hours, 10.30am, noon and 2pm), Slyudyanka (R75, 7.30am and 2pm), Ulan-Ude (R332, 11 hours, 7.30am Tuesday to Sunday) and Irkutsk (R220, 2pm).

Kyren Кырен

☎ 30147 / pop 5500

The valley's unkempt, low-rise little 'capital' is home to the **Tunka National Park HQ** (☎ 91793; ul Lenina 69). Its small, onion-topped **church** (ul Kooperativenaya) adds foreground to the photogenic alpine backdrop. Walk south between the cottages of muddy ul Kooperativenaya to find open fields for carefree strolls across bird-serenaded grasslands. A few hours is probably enough in Kyren, and a 150%

supplement dissuades foreign guests from using the very basic **Hotel Druzhba** (☎ 91580; upstairs, ul Lenina 109; dm/s/tw R312/557/991), with shared toilet and no showers whatsoever.

From outside the **Poznaya Chayna** (ul Lenina 112; meals R30-50; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri), about 1km east of the hotel, buses or *marshrutky* depart for Slyudyanka (R70, 3½ hours, 6am and 6pm), Arshan (R35, 1¼ hours, 10am and 2pm), Nilova Pustyn (11.40am) and Irkutsk (3.30pm).

Beyond Kyren

The Tunka Valley road leads to **Mondy** near the peak of Munko-Saridak, the highest mountain in eastern Siberia. Borders to open the nearby Mongolian border to foreigners were rejected again in 2005, but one day it might be feasible to join Russian vodka-and-fishing tourists who already visit Mongolia's appealing Khövsgöl Lake. Check with Irkutsk tour agents, notably Baikal Discovery (p566). En route the road passes near **Nilova Pustyn**, a minor spa where locals voluntarily subject themselves to radioactive radon baths. It's tucked into an attractive pine valley, from where a tough 70km trek crosses a 2700m pass to reach the wild, forested **Shumak** region, famous for its medicinal rhododendrons.

EASTERN BAIKAL

☎ Moscow +5hr

Sparsely scattered beach villages of old-fashioned log cottages dot the pretty east Baikal coast. They are well described in a usefully practical Prebaikalsky booklet, available for free download from www.tahoebaikal.org. Further north is the dramatic Barguzin Valley, from which Chinggis Khaan's mother, Oilun-Ehe, is said to have originated. Access is across a forested pass from Ulan-Ude via tiny **Baturino** village with its elegantly renovated Sretenskaya Church.

After around 2½ hours' drive, the road first meets Lake Baikal at pretty little **Gremyachinsk**. Buses stop at a roadside café from which Gremyachinsk's sandy but litter-strewn beach is a 15-minute walk up Komsomolskaya ul past several shadoof-style leverwells. *Marshrutky* back to Ulan-Ude are often full so consider prebooking your return. If you're stuck overnight there's a basic one-room **homestay** (Komsomolskaya ul 41) and a fortress-themed tourist complex is under

construction at the north end of the beach. Approximately 5km from Gremyachinsk (no taxis), many more tourist camps and rest huts are strung around **Kotokel Lake**, whose thermal springs keep it warm year-round.

The main road offers surprisingly few Baikal views until fishing port **Turka**, which has a small, rather overpriced house-hotel (US\$35 to US\$60) and a museum. Bigger **Goryachinsk**, around 3km inland, is centred on a typically institutional hot-springs **kurort** (sanatorium complex; ☎ 55135; beds from R220) with cheap cottage homestays in the surrounding village. *Marshrutky* run to Ulan-Ude (R140, 3½ hours) at 8am and 4pm. Picturesque Baikal beaches stretch northwest of quaint little **Maksimikha** fishing hamlet with several huts and *turbazy* including **Svetlaya Polyana** (tw R1200-1800; ☎ Apr-Oct). Book ahead through agencies in Ulan-Ude or Ust-Barguzin.

Ust-Barguzin Усть-Баргузин

☎ 30131 / pop 10,200

Low-rise Ust-Barguzin has streets of traditional log homes with blue-and-white carved window frames. These are most attractive towards the northern end of the main street, ul Lenina, where it reaches the Barguzin River ferry. From here, views are magical towards the high-ridged peaks of the Svyatoy Nos Peninsula. Nearby **Shik Poznaya** (☎ 91913; ul Lenina 2b; ☎ 10am-10pm; meals R35-60) is a wholesome if modest eatery. There's no formal accommodation but experienced tour agent **Alexander Loginov** (☎ 91591; aloginov@bk.ru, alex157@mail.ru; ul Komsomolskaya 19) speaks passable English, arranges various standards of homestay (R100 to R700) and organises boat trips. He lives one block west of ul Lenina, about 600m south of the river ferry.

Buses to Barguzin leave at 8.15am and 5pm (R42, 1¼ hours) from either the north ferry quay (summer) or the distant town office on ul Chernoshevskogo (other seasons). When the river is part-thawed, buses divert via a long, rough forest track. Several daily buses and *marshrutky* to Ulan-Ude (R192, six hours) depart around 8am. In February or March driving across Lake Baikal to Severobaikalsk takes around five hours.

Svyatoy Nos (Holy Nose) Peninsula

Полуостров Святой Нос

Rising 1800m almost vertically out of shimmering waters, dramatic Svyatoy Nos is one

of Lake Baikal's most impressive features. It's within the mostly impenetrable **Barguzin National Reserve** (Barguzinsky zapovednik) and joined to Ust-Barguzin by a muddy 20km sand-bar that's possible but painful to drive along (toll). **Nepra seals** are particularly abundant off the peninsula's west coast around the **Ushkanny Islands**, accessible by charter boat from Ust-Barguzin. You'll pay around R3000 (speedboat) or R7000 (sailing boat). Add R1000 per person and R500 per boat park fees if caught by rangers.

The warm and fish-filled waters of the **Chivyrkuysky Gulf** appeal to rich-but-hardy Russian tourists who pay absurd sums to stay in minimalist boat-hotels off **Kurbulik** village or in **Snake Bay** (up to US\$200 without bathrooms). Access is by boat from uninhabited Monakhovo where the already bad Ust-Barguzin track degenerates into a mudslide. Gulf access is much easier in February and March when the ice-road to Severobaikalsk passes right beside **Katun** village, a great place to observe villagers ice fishing in teams.

Barguzin & the Barguzin Valley

Баргузин

☎ 30131 / pop 7000

The road north from Ust-Barguzin emerges from thick forests at Barguzin, a low-rise town of wooden cottages that dates back to 1648. Walking from the bus station you can see its handful of dilapidated historic buildings in about 20 minutes by heading along ul Krasnoarmeyskaya then around pl Lenina towards the cursorily renovated old **church**. Opposite the quaint little post office, the wooden-colonnaded **former Uezdnoy Bank** (ul Krasnoarmeyskaya 54) was once the grand home of Decembrist Mikhail Kyukhelbeker.

Barguzin's real interest is as a base for visiting the timeless Barguzin Valley as it opens out into wide horse-grazed meadows, gloriously edged by a vast Toblerone of mountain peaks. These are most accessibly viewed across the meandering river plain from **Uro** village. Similarly inspiring panoramas continue for miles towards the shamanist-Evenki village of **Suvo**, passing near **Bukhe Shulun** (Byk), a rocky outcrop considered to have magical powers. You'll pass through widely scattered, old-fashioned villages where horse carts and sleighs outnumber cars. Way up on the

rooms with attached hot showers. Views of Baikal are across the railway marshalling yard – light sleepers might tire of the ever-disgruntled train dispatcher and her distorting loudspeaker.

Zolotaya Rybka (☎ 22231; ul Sibirskaya 14; tw R1100-1700) Thoroughly renovated ‘cottages’, each containing three rooms which share a modern shower, kitchen, tasteful sitting area and two toilets. The pleasant setting between pine trees offers glimpses of Baikal and the Neptuna area below. Search for the receptionist in unrenovated cottage No 1.

Baikal Service Bungalows (☎/fax 23912; dm €15, d/tr incl breakfast €50/90) Hidden in a peaceful pine grove at the otherwise unpromising northeast end of town, Baikal Service (p584) has comfortable chalets with well-appointed doubles and less appealing upstairs triples with sitting room. Cheaper options include summer yurts, camping pitches and dorm beds in the ‘student’ house sharing a fridge and good hot shower.

Resting rooms (komnaty otdykha; train station; dm per hr R16-30) Clean, cheap dorm beds are charged by the hour with a six-hour minimum. Hot shared showers.

Hotel Cherenbas (☎ 23654; dm R150-250) Springy beds are packed together in a tidy but very basic former youth centre. There is a kitchen for self-catering.

Eating & Drinking

Most cafés and restaurants double as drinking dens and the music can be deafening. To avoid ear damage and cover charges (common after 7pm) eat at one of the cheap but unlovely *poznye* (cafés serving Central Asian food) beside the market such as **Goryache Pozi** (pr Leningradsky 6; pozi R12; ☎ 9am-8pm; ☒).

Restaurant Rus (☎ 23914; pr 60 let SSSR 28; mains R40-90, garnish R30, cover R50; ☎ 8pm-1am Mon-Sat) Lively tavern restaurant with wood-and-stone alcoves in which to sup full-bodied home-brewed beer (R25).

Gril Bar (pr Leningradsky 6; meals R60-80, cover R30-50; ☎ 8pm-2am Mon-Sat) Small cellar bar-restaurant where you can avoid the cover charge by sitting at bar stools. Perhaps.

Sportsbar OverTaim (meals R80-120, beers R40; ☎ 8pm-1am) No sports but no cover charge either, this slightly more upmarket new pub-restaurant is popular with the youth crowd.

Kafe Ayana (☎ 21224; pr Leningradsky 6; meals R60-100, beers R30, cover after 7pm R60; ☎ 10am-11pm) Puls-

ing coloured lights and the arrangement of tables around a central dance floor set the tone, though food prices are reasonable.

Kafe Tyya (☎ 22292; pr Leningradsky 6; meals R60-100, beers R21; ☎ 10am-11pm) Furnished with a more modern interior than the Ayana, Kafe Tyya is a fundamentally similar concept.

Kafe Nostalgie (2nd fl, pr Proletarsky 7; mains R270-300; ☎ noon-3pm & 7pm-1am) Ostensibly a plush, upmarket Chinese restaurant but the strobe light might put you off your Manchurian *goyuju*. UN weapons inspectors should examine the murderously bone-barbed fish dumplings.

For cheap groceries try **VIST supermarket** (pr Leningradsky 5; ☎ 8.30am-9pm).

Getting There & Away

An **aerokassa** (☎ 22746; Tsentralny pl; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-4pm Wed-Fri & Sun-Mon) in Dom Kultury Zhelezne Dorognikov sells tickets for flights from Nizhneangarsk, 30km northeast.

BOAT

From late June to late August a hydrofoil service should run the length of Lake Baikal between Nizhneangarsk, Severobaikalsk and Irkutsk (R1400, 12 hours) via Olkhon Island. Unfortunately, the precise timetable is only announced days before the service begins, making advance planning difficult.

Boat trips are fun and reveal the lake’s vastness. Baikal’s mountain backdrop looks most spectacular from about 3km offshore, so going all the way across doesn’t add a lot scenically and you’ll need permits to land on the almost uninhabited east coast (p588). It’s possible to negotiate cheap charters with fishermen at Severobaikalsk, Nizhneangarsk or Baikalskoe, but think carefully before taking a boat that’s small, slow or seems unreliable if you’re going far: storms can come from nowhere and getting help in the middle of icy-cold Baikal is virtually impossible. To rent better, long-distance boats typically costs from R1000 to R1800 per hour. For a reliable charter, contact the charming Viktor Kuznetsov in Nizhneangarsk (p588).

BUS

From outside Severobaikalsk’s train station *marshrutky* run to Baikalskoe (six per week) and Goudzhekit (four daily). The half-hourly *marshrutka* 103 to Nizhneangarsk airport

(R29, 25 minutes) passes Severobaikalsk’s hydrofoil port and yacht club (2km), then follows the attractive Baikal shore.

In February and March locals regularly drive across Lake Baikal to Ust-Barguzin, en route to Ulan-Ude. For a paid hitchhike to Ust-Barguzin, around R800 per person is appropriate. Ideally, ask local contacts to find you a ride, offering to pay ‘petrol money’. Otherwise, try going out to a lonely but well-known hitching spot on the ice near the Profilaktoriya (Lager) children’s camp. It’s on an attractive curve of Baikal shore: take a *marshrutka* 2km south of the museum towards Zarechny, then turn left and walk another 2km via either fork. Best chances are between 6am and 9am on Friday and Saturday but it’s hit and miss, and waiting can get lonely and very cold.

TRAIN

Heading towards Moscow, locals consider train 91 (even-numbered days) somewhat better than train 75 (odd days). Train 91 attaches a Tomsk-bound carriage (42½ hours). On odd days train 71 loops round to Irkutsk (33 hours) while on even days train 347 runs to Krasnoyarsk (33 hours). All go via Lena (seven hours), Bratsk (14 to 16 hours) and Tayshet (24 hours). They also stop in Goudzhekit (R130, 35 minutes), though the trip is vastly cheaper by *elektrichka* (R20, one hour, twice daily).

Eastbound trains 76 (28½ hours, odd days) and 98 (26 hours, Tuesday and Saturday) go all the way to Tynda (train 76, 28½ hours). There are also daily trains to Novaya Chara (14½ hours) and very slow *elektrichki* to Uoyan via Kichera (departs 6.15am).

Getting Around

Marshrutka 3 connects the low-rise Zarechny suburb to Tsentralnaya pl via the museum, then continues to the train station and loops right around to the far side of the tracks, passing the Baikal Resort one way. *Marshrutka* 1 passes the access road for Baikal Service en route to the train station, Tsentralnaya pl and the museum.

AROUND SEVEROBAIKALSK Baikalskoe Байкальское

This timeless little fishing village 45km south of Severobaikalsk has an old bridge and a jawdroppingly picturesque lakeside

location. From the fishing port, walk past the cute **wooden church** and 20 minutes up the cliff-side path towards the radio mast for particularly superb **views**. Continue to the bay beyond for possible camping spots. With a knowledgeable guide you might even find Baikalskoe’s shamanic **petroglyphs**, as pictured in the Severobaikalsk museum.

Marshrutky leave Severobaikalsk at 8am and 5pm on Tuesday, Friday and Sunday, returning an hour or so later. A taxi for the ¾-hour drive costs from R250 each way plus waiting time; you can stop at an appealing viewpoint en route.

You’ll need to charter a boat to reach **Cape Kotelnikovskiy**, from which a difficult trek on overgrown, ill-defined trails leads to lovely **Gitar Lake**, several waterfalls around **Tazik Lake** and eventually to the glaciers which descend from **Mt Chersky**, the region’s highest peak. A guide is essential.

Goudzhekit Гуджечикит

Goudzhekit’s lonely BAM station is beautifully situated between bald, high peaks that stay dusted with snow until early June. Five-minutes’ walk to the right, the only habitation is a low-rise spa and **hotel** (dm R200-350, d R800-1000) where the best bungalows have private toilets and showers. Tour agency Khozyain in Severobaikalsk handles bookings. With suitable guides, a 12-day trekking expedition can take you through the lovely, though mosquito-plagued, mountains behind Goudzhekit into the impressive, very isolated **Tyya Valley**.

Nizhneangarsk Нижнеангарск

Severobaikalsk might be much bigger but Nizhneangarsk, 30km northeast, is much older and remains the administrative centre of northern Baikal. A small **museum** in the high school traces the history of the settlement back to the 17th century. Most buildings are wooden and the town forms a quietly attractive low-rise ribbon of long parallel streets stretching 5km along the lakeside from the port to the airport. Opposite a red triangular monument on the coast road, the centre is marked by the **tourist office** (room 1, ul Pobedy 55; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri). Staff book rooms and ferry tickets for Khakusy, and issue permits for Khakusy, Frolikha and Ayaya Bay. In the same building are a small commercial **art**

salon (☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat) and a seasonal *poznyaya*. For boat rentals or expeditions track down hunter, fisherman and connoisseur of nature **Viktor Kuznetsov** (☎ 47005; fax 47030; frolicha@mail.ru, baikal.nordtour@mail.ru; ul Pobedy 9/7). Though he understands minimal English or German, Viktor's enthusiasm, humanity and energy are utterly infectious. His bigger boats (R1000 per hour, US\$200 per day) have a decent turn of speed and basic berths for five people, offering shelter from unpredictable weather. He also has an *aerosami* (propeller-powered sledge), several horses and reindeer to act as pack animals when trekking.

The very appealing **Gostiny Dom Portal** (☎ 47280; ul Rabochaya 10; tw/ste R720/960) is a new wooden house-hotel. Well-appointed standard rooms have attached bathrooms. The two suites have big double beds and great views across the mudflats towards Baikal. It's 2.8km east of the tourist office: a wonderfully peaceful location but there's no restaurant nor any nearby café.

Curiously, the town's **hospital** (☎ 47719) maintains two no-frills, saggy-bed hostels ideal for penny-pinching escapists. Open year-round are eight beds in the east wing of the green-and-white **Polyclinic** (ul Lenina 123; dm R220), accessed from the rear. In summer more beds are available in a block further east in a red-brown timber **clinic** (ul Lenina 133; beds R176). There's a communal kitchen and toilet but no showers.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Scenic low-altitude flights cross Lake Baikal to Ulan-Ude (R1810, four to six per week) and Irkutsk (R2250, two per week) when weather conditions allow.

Marshrutka 103 from Severobaikalsk runs every 30 minutes along ul Pobedy to the tourist office. It continues along the coast road (ul Rabochaya) to the airport then returns via uls Kozlova and Lenina. The last service is at 8pm, or 6pm on weekends.

Akokan Gulag

The northernmost part of Baikal has a shalower, marshy persona most photogenically viewed from tiny **Dushkachan** hamlet. Some 15km beyond, 3km north of the turning to Kholodnaya village, a track to your left is the start of a forest hike to remnants of the small mica-mining **Akokan Gulag** (1931-33). As-

suming you have a reliable guide, it's about an hour's walk to reach some 'officers' huts'. Above is the main prison-camp ruins with a collapsed watchtower and a kitchen area, where three Marie Celeste-like cauldrons seem to await use. About 15-minutes' climb beyond, a small railway has tiny bucket wagons and a magical pile of mica remnants leading to the collapsed mine entrance.

Nikolai Sorokin, a hearty taxi driver who can usually be found at Severobaikalsk train station, speaks no English but manages to guide foreigners to the site, show them animal tracks and point out various Gulag secrets. Reckon around R800 including transport. Don't forget to bring good tick-protection.

Khakusy & Northeast Baikal

The virtually impenetrable **Frolikha Reserve** (Frolikhinsky zapovednik) is the northern extension of the Barguzin National Park (Russia's oldest). Despite being on Baikal's east coast, access is generally from Nizhneangarsk where you can also get the necessary permits. These are required to land your boat on lovely, shaman-haunted **Ayaya Bay** or to trudge seven mud-soaked kilometres to visit biologically unique **Lake Frolikha**.

Khakusy, an idyllically isolated hot-spring **turbaza** (dm/tw/tr R400/1100/1450; ☎ mid-Jun-early Sep) also requires permits in summer but these are waived in February and March when it takes about an hour to drive across the ice from Severobaikalsk (around R1200 return taxi). Bathing (per person R40) is fun in the snow and frozen steam creates curious ice-patterns on the otherwise unremarkable wooden spa buildings. Most local summer guests stay two weeks (from R7586 per person full board including ferry ride from Nizhneangarsk). This ferry is generally fully prebooked, but if there's space it offers the cheapest way for individual travellers to cross the unfrozen lake (R800 return, R914 if booked through Khozyain in Severobaikalsk).

Even less accessible, the mostly deserted village at **Davsha** (population five) has been partly restored as a scientific hamlet and there's now a little museum.

In spring and autumn, when the ice is half-melted or half-formed, all these places are totally cut off.

SOUTHERN BURYATIYA & CHITA REGION

ЮЖНАЯ БУРЯТИЯ И ЧИТИНСКАЯ ОБЛАСТЬ

Scenically magnificent, Buryatiya crouches on the Mongolian border like a cartographic crab squeezing Lake Baikal with its right pincer. Much of the Baikal region covered above also falls within the republic, including Severobaikalsk and the Tunka Valley. Though its English version is limited, Buryatiya now has a tourism website at www.baikaltravel.ru.

The vast, sparsely populated Chita region stretches as far east as the wild Chara Mountains on the BAM railway, but in its more accessible southern reaches it's most interesting for the vibrant capital (Chita), the Buddhist culture of its autonomous Agin-Buryat enclave and as an access route to China.

Buryat Culture

Indigenous ethnic Buryats are a Mongol people who now comprise around 30% of Buryatiya's population, as well as 65% of the Agin-Buryat Autonomous District southeast of Chita. Culturally there are two main Buryat groups. During the 19th century, forest-dwelling western Buryats retained their shamanic animist beliefs, while eastern Buryats from the southern steppelands mostly converted to Tibetan-style Buddhism, maintaining a thick layer of local superstition. Although virtually every Buryat *datsan* (Buddhist temple) was systematically wrecked during the Communists' antireligious mania in the 1930s, today Buryat Buddhism is rebounding. Many (mostly small) *datsans* have been rebuilt and seminaries for training Buddhist monks now operate at Ivolginsk and Aginskoe. The Buryat language is Turkic, though very different from Tuvan and Altai. Dialects vary considerably between regions but almost everyone speaks decent Russian. Hello is *sainbena/sambaina*, thank you (very much) is (*yikhe*) *bai yer la*. Buryat

oral history is traditionally recited to the twangs of a *khuchir* (two-stringed lute).

ULAN-UDE УЛАН-УДЕ

☎ 3012 / pop 380,000 / ☎ Moscow +5hr
The appealing capital of Buryatiya, 'UU' is 456km east of Irkutsk by rail and makes a sensible staging post for visiting Mongolia or eastern Lake Baikal. Founded as Verkhneudinsk in 1775, the city prospered as a major stop on the tea-caravan route from China via Troitskosavsk (now Kyakhta). Ulan means 'Red' in Buryat, yet Ulan-Ude is pleasantly green, cradled attractively in rolling hills. Despite the inevitable concrete suburban sprawl, it remains one of the most likable cities in eastern Siberia.

Orientation

The city's heart is pl Sovetov and its backbone ul Lenina, but most traffic bypasses the latter on uls Borsoeva and Baltakhinova. The commercial centre is increasingly focused around 'Elevator', a clothing market and new shopping mall across the railway tracks on pr 50-let Oktyabrya.

Information

There are exchange bureaus in the Geser and Buryatiya hotels. Witty, widely travelled schoolteacher **Petr Ishkin** (☎ 410 334; mobile 8-914 843 3287; petr_first@mail.ru, petr_great@hotmail.com, petroishkin@yahoo.com) speaks great English and enjoys voluntarily helping foreign visitors find their feet during his free time.

BOOKSHOP

Knigi Bookshop (ul Kuybysheva 28; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat) Sells excellent *Karta-Skhema* city maps (R30) and Turistskaya Buryatiya advertorial tourist pamphlets (R70).

MONEY

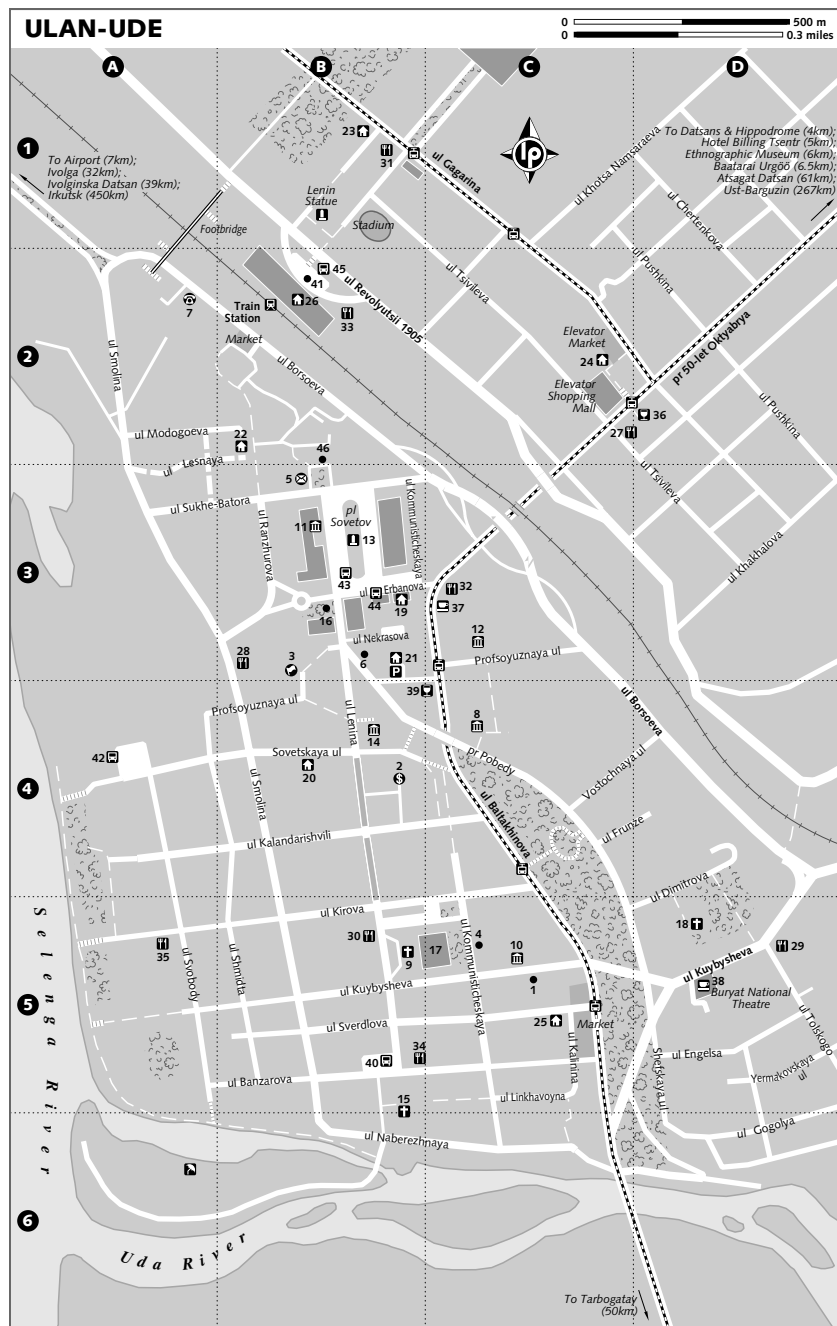
MDM Bank (Sovetskaya ul 32a; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-4pm Mon-Fri) Decent rates for US dollars.

PHOTOGRAPHY

PhotoPlus (ul Kommunisticheskaya 16; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-5pm Sun) Three-minute passport photos for that Mongolian visa, R70.

POST

Post office (ul Lenina 61; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-6pm Sat & Sun) The rather slow Internet room (per hour R35) stays open longer.

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TELEPHONE

Telephone office (ul Borsoeva; ☎ 9am-9pm) Internet access here is R30 per hour.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Ulan-Ude has many agencies happy to sell you Buryatiya and Baikal tours. The following companies are among those more orientated to Westerners and have at least some English-speaking staff.

Buryat-Intour (☎ 219 207; tgomboeva@yahoo.com; room 209, Hotel Baikal) Very well organised with its own bus service to Ulaan Baatar. Also sells air tickets.

Firm Travel (☎ 216 250; http://firmtravel.ru; Kommunisticheskaya ul 16) Ecological projects and tours.

MorinTur (☎ 443 647; info@morintour.com; tgomboeva@yahoo.com; Hotel Sagan Morin) Focuses on east Baikal, offering various ice and fishing adventures, a horse-sledge trip, seal-watching, rafting in the Barguzin Valley and climbing on Svyatoy Nos (Holy Nose) Peninsula.

Naran Tur (☎ 215 097; baikalnaranatour@mail.ru; room 105, Hotel Buryatiya) Director Sesegma (aka Svetlana) is infectiousy passionate about Buryatiya, offers horse-riding adventures and has dozens of fascinating one-off ideas.

Siberia Tours (☎ 222 277; ul Nekrasova; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat) New, English-speaking travel and tour agency.

Sights**CITY CENTRE**

A certain 19th-century opulence is still visible in the attractive commercial buildings on and around ul Lenina. Viewed from near the splendid **Opera House**, this street is given a photogenic focus by the gold-tipped spires

of the 1785 **Odigitria Cathedral** (ul Lenina 2), which was rescued from near collapse in the late 1990s. It commands an appealing area of the old town, with carved wooden cottages extending as far as ul Kirova. At the other end of ul Lenina the main square, pl Sovetov, is awesomely dominated by the world's largest **Lenin head** which looks less domineering than comically cross-eyed. Located beside a recently rebuilt 1830 **chapel** (ul Lenina), the renovated 1838 **trading arcades** are now filled with modern shops. Ul Lenina's pedestrianised section, extending two blocks north, is a popular early-evening hang-out.

Backed by a park with a Ferris wheel and Gaudi-esque fountain, the active **Trinity Church** (ul Dimitrova 5a) sprouts a series of green bulb-domes.

The **Historical Museum** (☎ 215 961; Profsoyuznaya ul 29; admission per fl R80; ☎ 10am-5.30pm Tue-Sun) charges per single-room floor. The best is *Buddiyskoe Iskustvo* (3rd floor), displaying *thangka*, Buddhas and icons salvaged from Buryatiya's monasteries before their Soviet destruction. Note-sheets in English fail to explain the fascinating, gaudy papier-mâché models of Khvashan's eight unruly sons urinating at one another. Note the Gungarba shrine table (every Buryat home once had one), the Atsagat medical charts (Tibetan medicine was apparently standard here until the 1940s) and the walnut necklace on grey, clown-faced Sagan Obugen (walnuts were exotic in Buryatiya). The less-interesting 2nd floor traces Buryat history in maps,

documents and artefacts. Spy it for free from the balcony above.

In an attractive 1847 wooden house, the **Buryatiya Literary Museum** (Literaturny muzey; ☎ 213 722; admission R50; 🕒 9am-5pm Tue-Sat) contains old photos and manuscripts. A rare 108-volume *Atsagat Ganzhur* (Buddhist chant book) is inscribed in multicoloured Tibetan script on special black lacquer made from blood, sugar and pounded sheep's vertebrae.

The **Nature Museum** (Muzey Pripody Buryati; ☎ 214 833; ul Lenina 46; admission R30; 🕒 10am-6pm Wed-Sun) has big stuffed animals and a scale model of Lake Baikal showing you just how deep it is.

The **Geological Museum** (Geologichesky muzey; ul Lenina 59; admission free; 🕒 1-4pm Mon-Fri) is modest but well presented, while the **Fine Arts Museum** (Khudozhestvenny muzey; ☎ 212 909; ul Kuybysheva 29; admission per exhibition R30-70; 🕒 10am-6pm Wed-Sun) has small, regularly changing exhibitions.

OUTSKIRTS

In a forest clearing 6km from central Ulan-Ude is the worthwhile **Ethnographic Museum** (Etnografichesky muzey; ☎ 443 210; adult/student/child R60/35/25, photography/video R60/120; 🕒 9am-5pm Tue-Sun), an outdoor collection of local architecture plus some reconstructed burial mounds and the odd stone totem. Although lacking the pretty lakeside setting of equivalents in Bratsk and Irkutsk, it features occasional craft demonstrations, has a splendid wooden church and sports a whole strip of Old Believers' homesteads. *Marshrutka* 8 from pl Sovetov passes within 1km and upon request will detour to drop you at the door for no extra charge.

En route you'll notice Ulan-Ude's attractive new pair of **datsans** (Barguzinsky Trakt) backed by stupas and trees that flutter with prayer flags; there are services from 9am to 11am most mornings. The nearby **hippodrome** is the venue for major Buryat festivals, including the Buryatiya Folk Festival, which features horse riding, wrestling and other folkly delights.

Sleeping

In summer, when the city's central hot water system goes off, showers can run very cold.

BUDGET

Hotel Baikai (☎ 213 718; ul Erbanova 12; s R650-700, tw R900-1000, tr R1200) The Baikai has unreconstructed Soviet rooms, but with water heat-

ers in most attached bathrooms and a perfect position overlooking pl Sovetov.

Hotel Zolotoy Kolos (top floors, ul Sverdlova 43; dm R140, s R187-252, tw R304-804) Repainted, simple but modestly priced, the best singles here have private toilets but showers cost R25 extra. This is a reasonable budget option, though the area is slightly dubious late at night and there's an 11pm curfew.

Hotel Barguzin (☎ 215 746; Sovetskaya ul 28; s/tw/tr R600/820/990) Well positioned for the old town, the lacklustre Barguzin has faded corridors and a stuffed bear lurking in the foyer. Just two twins have their own water heaters.

Hotel Odon (☎ 342 983; ul Gagarina 43; s R330-540, tw R650-890) Uninspiring and usually full of Chinese merchants but only five-minutes' walk from the train station, the Odon has a popular though pricey Chinese restaurant.

Resting rooms (komnaty otdykha; Ulan-Ude train station; dm R500) These decent resting rooms charge R270 for half-days, or R150 for three hours. Showers cost R60.

MIDRANGE

Hotel Sagaan Morin (White Horse; ☎ 444 019; fax 443 647; www.morintour.com/tours/acc_uu/index.php, in Russian; ul Gagarina 25; s/tw/tr R800/1700/1925) This perfectly appointed new three-star tower is so obviously the best hotel in town that you might need to book (by fax) months ahead for summer. The entrance is somewhat hidden by the melee of Elevator market.

Hotel Buryatiya (☎ 211 835; ul Kommunisticheskaya 47a; s R725-860, tw R910-1100) A big Soviet tower with decent rooms but no hot water in summer. English-speaking receptionists are friendly but watch out for the room-cleaners' trick of 'tidying away' items of your luggage into the back corners of wardrobes and drawers.

Hotel Geser (☎ /fax 216 151; ul Ranzhurova 11; s/tw/ste R1850/2800/6000) For a Soviet place this former Party hang-out has relatively spacious rooms, some of which have been passably modernised. However, others retain clunky old toilets and one would expect vastly better facilities for these prices. Rates include breakfast and drop 20% October to April. One or two staff members speak English.

Hotel Billing Tsentr (☎ 267 770; km9, Barguzinsky Trakt) This new complex, near the Ethnographic Museum, is nearing completion. Fully equipped, totally rebuilt wooden houses are dotted about a partly wooded field, which

should make this a pleasantly relaxing retreat. Prices aren't yet decided but are estimated at around R1500 to R2000 a night.

Eating

In summer many open-air cafés appear near the river and around the opera house serving mostly beers and shashlyk. A few fast-food vans sell burgers and snacks near the trading arches.

RESTAURANTS

Samovar (☎ 464 188; ul Gagarina 41; meals R130-250; 🕒 11am-11pm) Friendly, costumed staff add to the old-Russia atmosphere of this cute basement restaurant with wooden ceiling beams, spinning wheels and garlands of medicinal herbs.

Stolitsa (☎ 552 836; ul Revolyutsy 1905 31; meals R160-320; 🕒 11am-11pm) This elegant upstairs restaurant has red, black and gold décor, modernist Buddhist-influenced art and old photos of Ulan-Ude. There's a menu in English and a vastly cheaper *zakusochhnaya* (café; meals from R40 to R70) around the side. Handy for the train station.

Geser Restaurant (☎ 211 178; Hotel Geser, ul Ranzhurova 11; meals R120-280; 🕒 noon-4pm & 6-11pm) Smart restaurant with a menu in English and a variety of sensibly priced Siberian specialties, including omul fillet in cream sauce (R101) and five vegetarian options.

Zolotoy Drakon (☎ 212 109; ul Kirova 8; meals R150-350; 🕒 11am-midnight) Redecorated in contemporary scarlet-and-white chinoiserie, Ulan-Ude's best predominantly Chinese restaurant usefully offers choices of portion sizes plus several European options. One room has an open fire in winter.

Drakon (☎ 215 283; ul Smolina 38; mains R25-50; 🕒 11am-1am) Enjoy enormous servings of great Chinese food in this dungeon-effect chamber. Vegetarians might try the delicious *chi-san-tsi* (braised aubergines).

Baatarai Urgöö (Yurta; ☎ 447 492; Barguzin Rd; pozi for 4 people R59.30; 🕒 noon-11pm) Two carved Mongol warriors guard this unusual collection of restaurant yurts. The central dining hall is how you'd imagine Chinggis Khaan's spaceship, powered by a central dragon-stove. The menu includes many Buryat specialties: liver and onions, battered omul, *shangi* (scone-bread) and *khuushuur* (meat turnovers) washed down with astringent *arsa* (a warm, sour milk concoction).

Blues Café (Kafe Blyuz; ☎ 443 333; pr 50-let Oktyabrya 6; beers R30; 🕒 10am-11pm) It's not Beale St, but there's a short menu of good-value meals and a cup of Nescafé costs only R6.

QUICK EATS & SELF-CATERING

Zakusochhnaya Real (ul Banzarova 11; meals R21-30, pozi R12, beers R20; 🕒 10am-11pm) A friendly, unadorned, ultracheap snack-café facing the cathedral. Next door is a gorgeous wooden-lace house.

King's Burger (ul Lenina 21; burgers R30-38, pizzas R90-110; 🕒 8am-10pm) is a tasteful fast-food emporium, or you can get pizzas delivered from **Pepino** (☎ 272 366; 🕒 24hr).

Sputnik Supermarket (ul Kommunisticheskaya 48; 🕒 24hr) is a handy central grocery, but **Ekonomi Supermarket** (ul Tolstoy 3; 🕒 9am-9pm) is the cheapest around.

Drinking

Mir Igry (ul Kommunisticheskaya 52; meals R90-220, beers R37-60; 🕒 10am-11pm) This casino complex has three great bar-restaurants, each with its own atmosphere. It's popular with young professionals and a great place to strike up conversations over a shot of vodka or 10. Food menus are appealing but the more-intriguing Buryat options have limited availability.

Kakadu (☎ 440 553; pr 50-let Oktyabrya 10; snacks R18-30, beers R23; 🕒 10am-11pm) Smoky, upbeat basement pub with a very nominal Mexican theme. Entry is from a side alley opposite the Dauriya bar (a real dive).

Kofeynya Shokolad (☎ 223 659; ul Kuybysheva 38; coffees R30-55, ice creams from R30; 🕒 8.30am-11pm) Remarkably suave for the surroundings, this minicafé makes the best macchiato in town. It's built into the front terrace of the Buryat National Theatre building and uniquely enjoys simultaneous views of Ulan-Ude's two finest churches.

Kofeynya Marco Polo (ul Kommunisticheskaya 46; coffees R45-60; 🕒 10am-10pm) Cosy, fairly characterful Western-style coffee house with great cakes and cocktails.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Siberia Airlines (☎ 220 125; ul Sukhe-Batora 63; 🕒 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, to 5pm Sat & Sun) flies to Novosibirsk and Vladivostok, and offers deep discounts for early-purchase tickets to Moscow (daily, R9980 full price, R3500 two-week advanced purchase). Buryatavia

has very scenic flights to Nizhneangarsk near Severobaikalsk (R1860, four to six per week) purchasable through Buryat Intour (p591).

BUS

At 8am on Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday, Buryat Intour runs buses from outside the Hotel Baikal to the Bayangol Hotel in Ulaan Baatar (R750, 12 hours) via Kyakhta.

Use the **main bus station** (Sovetskaya ul) for Barguzin (R228, 8.10am), Kurumkan (R295, 8am) and Ust-Barguzin (R192, six to seven hours, 7am) supplemented by similarly timed *marshrutky* from the yard opposite. *Marshrutky* to Goryachinsk (R140, 3½ hours) leave at noon and 4pm and to Kyakhta (R150, 4½ hours) via Novoselenginsk in the morning when full. There's also a 7.45am bus to Arshan (R332, 11 hours).

Marshrutky to Arshan (R350), Irkutsk and Chita run overnight from the courtyard of the train station, usually departing around 9pm. Sporadic daytime *marshrutky* serve Kabansk and Posolskoe from the same place.

From the Banzarova bus station bus 104 departs for Ivolginsk Datsan at 7am, noon and 4.20pm. Alternatively, use frequent bus 130 to Ivolga then switch to a taxi.

TRAIN

Beijing-bound trains pass through Ulan-Ude on Tuesday (via Chita) and Saturday (via Mongolia). Fast trains to Ulaan Baatar pass through on Sunday and Monday at 1.30am and waste vastly less time at the border than train 364 (R1350, 24 hours), which departs 6am daily. Buy international tickets from the **servis tsentr** (☎ 282 696; ☎ 8am-1pm & 2-6.45pm) upstairs at the train station. For Chita, train 340 (R295 *platskart*, 10½ hours) is the handiest overnight option. Towards Irkutsk day trains (from R280 *platskart*, from seven to 10½ hours) are popular for Baikal views.

Getting Around

Ulan-Ude has a vast, frequent but confusing public transport web. From pl Sovetov *marshrutka* 55 (R10, 20 minutes) runs a few times hourly to the airport while *marshrutka* 8 passes the *datsans*, hippodrome, Ethnographic Museum and Baatarai Urgöö restaurant – last return around 9pm. Tram 7

(R6) between ul Baltakhinova and the Hotel Odon is a relatively direct way to approach the train station, avoiding the sometimes convoluted *marshrutka* routes.

AROUND ULAN-UDE

The most popular attractions are the local *datsans* (Buddhist temples) although even interesting Ivolginsk, Buryatiya's biggest, is somewhat 'tinny' and far less visually impressive than the Tibetan-style equivalents at Tsugol and Aginskoe in Chita region.

First founded in 1741, **Tamchinski Datsan** (160km south of Ulan-Ude by rail) was Buryatiya's first Buddhist monastery. The original was destroyed in the 1930s, and the modern reconstruction is fairly small and surrounded by the disappointing little town of Gusinoe Ozero (30km south of Gusinoozersk). It's briefly visible from the west-facing windows of Naushki-Ulan-Ude trains.

Atsagat Datsan was once the centre of Buryat Buddhist scholarship and has an important scriptorium. Fine examples of Atsagat manuscripts are displayed in Ulan-Ude's literary museum (p592). Like Tamchinski, the *datsan* was completely destroyed in the 1930s, but has crawled back to life and has a tiny **Ayvan Darzhiev museum** commemorating the Atsagat monk who became a key counsellor to the 13th Dalai Lama. Photogenically gaudy, the little monastery sits on a lonely grassy knoll set back from km54 of the old Chita road – there's no convenient public transport. Tours from Ulan-Ude cost around US\$70 for up to three people.

The hilly steppe around Ulan-Ude is pimped with forgotten **Hun 'castles'**, so ancient that they are effectively invisible undulations in the flower-filled grass. Naran Tur (p591) can show you one such area but butterflyes, flowers and the guide's enthusiasm are the biggest attractions of the trip. There are several relatively accessible **Old Believers' villages**, notably Tarbagatay (50km south) with its new church, but visits are only really interesting when costumed shows are put on (ie for larger tourist groups).

Ivolginsk (Ivolga) Datsan

ИВОЛГИНСКИЙ ДАЦАН

This multibuilding **datsan complex** (admission free, guided tour R60) was founded in 1946 and is the centre of Siberian Buddhism. Flanked by a few log cottages and a small canteen, it

DATSAN ETIQUETTE

Datsans, the temples of Siberian Buddhism, are easy-going places that visitors are generally welcome to explore. However, whether spinning prayer wheels or just walking around, you should politely maintain a clockwise direction, keeping your right side respectfully towards the shrines. Enter any temple via the left door and don't use the central stairs unless you're a self-realised lama. Bowing prayer-style with clasped-palms or prostrating yourself using wheelie-board contraptions is optional. If joining in the prayers and prostrations, do so three or seven times – 108 times is even better but that's just showing off. There's no entry fee but donation boxes abound. Once inside you could light *zula* (butter candles, R10) or fill in wish slips to post in the *Amgalanay* box for wellbeing or the *Yurööl* box to remember the dead. Don't forget to attach the cash register receipt – the more you pay, the better the chances of a wish come true, right?

sits in a wide green valley edged by mountain foothills. Viewed distantly across grassy fields, low morning sunlight glints entrancingly from the gilded roof-wings of the 1972 main temple building. Closer up, however, the exterior is less impressive, with slapdash paintwork, tacky tiger guardian statues and brick-patterning painted onto the whitewashed walls. Some of the lovably basic prayer wheels are crafted from old tin cans. The main temple's interior (no photography please) is colourful and very atmospheric despite discordantly chuntering cash registers. Nearby notice the glassed-in **bodhi tree**, convolutedly descended from the Bodhi Gaya original beneath which the Buddha achieved enlightenment.

Nearing completion within the *datsan* complex is the beautiful, Korean-style wooden **Etigel Khambin Temple** honouring the 12th Khambo Lama, whose body was recently exhumed. To general astonishment, seven decades after his death his flesh had still not decomposed. Some 'experts' have even attested that the corpse's hair is still growing, albeit extraordinarily slowly. The new temple plans to display the revered cadaver in a refrigerated display box that looks more suited to housing soft drinks.

The *datsan's* unheated **hostel** (dm R250) is for pilgrims but Buddhist-minded tourists just might be accommodated upon polite request.

The first direct bus from Ulan-Ude arrives well before the 9am *khural* (prayer service), giving ample time to wander among the prayer flags of the mosquito-infested surrounding swamp. Returning buses leave at 1.30pm, 5.30pm and 8.30pm. Alternatively, share a taxi to uninteresting Ivolga (Ivolginsk town, R12 per seat, R35

per car). From here, *marshrutka* 130 shuttles to Ulan-Ude several times hourly (R20). Several Ulan-Ude tour agencies offer small group excursions combining visits to Ivolginsk, a local stupa and a hill-top *oova* (sacred whitewashed boulders) site with lovely views and shamanistic overtones. The typical cost is US\$30 to US\$40 per person.

TOWARDS MONGOLIA

Although there are faster weekend expresses, the daily Ulaan Baatar-bound train from Irkutsk is excruciatingly slow, taking a mind-numbing 11 hours to clear the borders. It's just one or two *kupe* carriages appended to train 364, which has no restaurant car and doesn't make food stops between Naushki (on the border) and Ulan-Ude (six to eight hours). Southbound you can save money by travelling *platskart* to Naushki, buying the Naushki-Sükhbaatar ticket separately then purchasing a Sükhbaatar to Ulaan Baatar ticket on arrival in Mongolia (paid in Mongolian tögrög).

Much faster is the through bus to Ulaan Baatar organised three times weekly by Buryat Intour in Ulan-Ude (opposite). More interesting than either is to make *marshrutka* hops to the Mongolian border via Novoselenginsk and the once-opulent tea-route city of Kyakhta.

Novoselenginsk НОВОСЕЛЕНГИНСК

☎ 30145 / pop 9500 / ☎ Moscow +5hr Stockades and wooden houses on broad dust-blown roads give this small, 19th-century town a memorable Wild West feel. Learn something of Novoselenginsk's interesting history at the **Decembrist Museum** (Музей Дикабристов; ☎ 96716; ul Lenina 53; admission R10; ☎ 9am-5pm Wed-Sun), which is housed in an unmissable

200-year-old colonnaded house in the town's centre. Lower floors are stocked with 19th-century furnishings, while upstairs are maps and photos relating to the Decembrist exiles and their wives (p567), as well as a long-armed naive-style crucifixion scene rescued from the town's 18th-century church.

If you walk a couple of kilometres east of the museum through the town towards the Selenginsk River you'll see on the grassy far bank the isolated ruins of the whitewashed **Spassky Church**; this is all that remains of Staroselenginsk, the original settlement which was abandoned around 1800 due to frequent floods. Some low hills here provide photogenic viewpoints across the landscape. You'll also find an unremarkable **obelisk** commemorating Glaswegian missionaries Robert Yuille and Martha Cowie who worked here back in 1829.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Marshrutky from Ulan-Ude (R100, 1½ hours, six or seven daily) all pause here on their way to Kyakhta. Novoselenginsk has no hotel, and just a simple *pozi* canteen where the bus stops, but there's little reason to linger beyond the couple of hours it takes to see the town. Beware: we have received one horrific though fortunately atypical report of foreign visitors being brutally mugged at 4am while they were camping near Novoselenginsk.

Kyakhta Кяхта

☎ 30142 / pop 18,400 / ☎ Moscow +5hr
Kyakhta lacks the cinemascopic landscapes of Novoselenginsk but retains three once-grand churches, a great museum and a surprisingly good hotel. Formerly called Troitskosavsk, Kyakhta was a town of tea-trade millionaires whose grandiose cathedral was reputed to have had solid silver doors embedded with diamonds. By the mid-19th century, as many as 5000 cases of tea a day were arriving via Mongolia on a stream of horse- or camel-caravans, which returned loaded with furs. Compressed tea 'bricks' were used as money, a practice continued by Buryat nomads as recently as the 1930s.

This gloriously profitable tea trade was brought to an abrupt end with the completion of the Trans-Siberian Railway. Almost overnight, all commerce was redirected via Vladivostok or Harbin and Kyakhta withered

into a remote border garrison town, bristling with weapons instead of gilded spires.

Modern Kyakhta is effectively two towns. The main one is centred around ul Lenina, where you'll find the bus terminus next to the 1853 trading arcade (*ryady gostinye*). Kyakhta's smaller Sloboda district, 4km south of the commercial centre (R50 by taxi), is where you'll find the border post.

SIGHTS

The impressive shell of the 1817 **Trinity Cathedral** (Troitsky sobor) lies at the heart of the overgrown central park. Northeast along ul Lenina, the delightfully eccentric **museum** (ul Lenina 49; admission R40; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sat) retains its original 1922 hardwood exhibition cases full of pickled foetuses and pinned butterflies. Enjoy imaginative displays of treasures salvaged from Soviet-plundered churches and *datsans*.

Running parallel to ul Lenina, ul Krupskaya has several attractive wooden buildings, including No 37 where the first meeting of the Mongolian Revolutionary Party was held in 1921. The street ends at Kyakhta's only working church, the **Uspenskaya Church**, with a subdued iconostasis and frescoed dome.

In Sloboda, a dwarfish Lenin glares condescendingly at the extraordinarily grand but sadly ruined **Voskresenskaya Church** (1838) and its splendid Italianate cupola. Behind Lenin is the big but rather mutilated 1842 **Historic Customs Warehouse** (Zdanie Gostinogo Dvora) with appended Communist-era spire. Directly behind is the frontier station for crossing into Mongolia.

SLEEPING & EATING

Hotel Druzhba (☎ 91 321; ul Krupskaya 8; dm from R280, ste R560) Beside the Uspenskaya Church, 10-minutes' walk south of Kyakhta's main centre, this place has good-value suites with hot water, sitting room and king-size bed. Its restaurant-bar is one of the better places to eat in town, too.

Hotel Tourist (☎ 92431; cnr uls Lenina 21 & Sovetskaya; beds R135) With shared cold showers, this small, basic place is in a chocolate-box wooden house near the market.

Eating options are very limited. **Kafe Viola** (upstairs, ul Lenina 40; meals from R50; ☎ 10am-3am), near the market, is a reasonably pleasant place with booth seating and a decent menu.

For a snack try **Buryatskaya Kukhnya** (ul Menina; *pozi* each R9; ☎ 10am-1am), a small Buryat-style decorated room tucked between the trading arches and Sberbank.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Ulan-Ude-Kyakhta **marshrutky** (R150, 3½ hours) take a pleasantly scenic route with a meal break in Novoselenginsk.

The **Mongolian border** (☎ 9am-noon & 2-6pm) is open to bicycles and vehicles, and some officials speak English. You can't walk across, so pedestrians need to negotiate passage with private drivers. Start asking as close as possible to the front of the chaotic queue: processing takes about an hour with only a handful of vehicles allowed through at any one time. The going rate is R150 per passenger across no-man's-land, but it's well worth negotiating a ride all the way to Sükhbaatar train station (around R100 extra) rather than becoming prey to rip-off taxi drivers in Altanbulag, the dreary Mongolian border village. From Sükhbaatar to Ulaan Baatar, nightly trains (*obshchiy/kupe* 3300/8400 tögrög, nine hours) depart around 9.20pm – they're rarely full.

Naushki Наушки

The only reason to come here is to catch the border-hop train to Sükhbaatar (R230 *kupe*, one hour). This is often a single carriage, but when officially 'full', a suitably tipped *provodnik* might still be prepared to get you aboard. Naushki to Ulan-Ude (R210 *platskart*) is an attractive but excruciatingly slow ride, taking six to eight hours to travel 255km. Two or three buses shuttle the 35km between Kyakhta and Naushki (R35, one hour) to connect with Ulaan Baatar-Irkutsk trains.

ЧИТА ЧИТА

☎ 3022 / pop 370,000 / ☎ Moscow +6hr

The golden domes of Chita's new cathedral entice train travellers to hop off and explore this historic, patchily attractive city. If its architectural gems were less widely dispersed the city might be considered one of Siberia's more appealing. Sadly, each attractive area is a little too diffuse to make the overall impact particularly memorable. Nonetheless, the friendly, go-ahead atmosphere and lack of (non-Chinese) tourists makes Chita a pleasant place to spend a day or two.

Founded in 1653, Chita developed as a rough-and-tumble silver-mining centre till force-fed a dose of urban culture after 1827 by the arrival of more than 80 exiled Decembrist gentlemen-rebels – or more precisely by their wives and lovers who followed, setting up homes on what became known as ul Damskaya (Women's St). That's now the southern end of ul Stolyanova, where sadly only a handful of wooden cottages remain amid soulless concrete apartment towers.

As gateway to the new East Chinese Railway, Chita boomed in the early 20th century, despite flirting with socialism. Following the excitement of 1905, socialists set up a 'Chita Republic' which was brutally crushed within a year. After the 'real' revolutions of 1917, history gets even more exciting and complex. Bolsheviks took over, then lost control to Japanese forces who possibly intercepted part of the famous gold train (p505) before retreating east. By 1920 Chita was the capital of the huge, short-lived Far Eastern Republic, a nominally independent, pro-Lenin buffer state whose parliament is now garishly over-renovated at ul Anokhina 63. The republic was absorbed into Soviet Russia in December 1922 once the Japanese had withdrawn from Russia's east coast. Closed and secretive for much of the Soviet era, today Chita is prosperous, rejuvenated and once again flooded with Chinese traders.

Orientation

Three blocks north of the main Chita 2 train station, uls Butina and Leningradskaya form the sides of the wide pedestrianised expanse of pl Lenina. Perpendicular to this, attractively tree-lined ul Lenina parallels the train tracks from either side of the square. Parallel uls Amurskaya and Babushkina are major thoroughfares.

Information

Bookshop (Dom Knigi shopping centre; ul Amurskaya 58; ☎ 10am-2pm & 3-7pm Mon-Sat) Stocks various local and regional maps.

Dauria Ecology-Centre (☎ 232 619; http://dauria.chita.ru/english/index.html; ul Chkalova 120) Protecting and promoting the gorgeous, little-known landscapes of the Transbaikalian region. It hosts some great web photos, but is not tourist orientated.

Flamingo Travel (☎ 359 353; www.flamingo.chita.ru, in Russian; office 7, ul Lenina 120; ☎ 9am-6pm) Small tour agency, with some English-speaking staff.

CHITA

0 500 m
0 0.3 miles

INFORMATION

Bookshop Книжный Магазин.....	1	B4
Dauria Ecology Centre.....	2	C3
Эко-Центр Даурия.....	2	C3
Flamingo Travel Фламинго Трэвел.....	3	A3
Foreign Languages Faculty.....	4	B3
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SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Magellan Internet Интернет Марееллан.....	7	B3
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Telephone Office Междугородный телефон.....	10	B3
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Wooden House, ul Anokhina 53.....	21	C4
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SLEEPING

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TRANSPORT

Station Hotel
Chita 2 Train Station
New Cathedral
Theatre
Former ul Damskaya
Hotel
Hotel Turist
Hotel Zabaikale

CHITA

1 2 3 4 5 6

To Panama City Hotel (4km),
Kadala Airport (17km),
Ulan-Ude (633km)

To Ulan-Ude (633km)

To Aginskaya (157km)

To Khabarovsk

SIBERIA

Foreign Languages Faculty (ul Butina 65) Helpful students here are keen to practise their English with those rare tourists.

KiberPocht (ul Butina 35; per MB R4, per hr R25;

☎ 8am-9pm) Internet access and stamps.

Magellan Internet (ul Chaikovskogo 24; per hr R50;

☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, to 5pm Sat)

Main post office (ul Butina 37; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, to 6pm Sat & Sun) Quaintly spired wooden building on pl Lenina.

Promstroibank (ul Petrovskaya 41) Changes US dollars, euros and Chinese yuan.

Telephone office (ul Chaikovskogo 22; ☎ 8am-11pm) Has an ATM.

Sights

Chita has a wealth of grand, century-old mansions liberally mixed with modern and Stalinist edifices of lesser quality. To enjoy the greatest concentration, walk along uls Anokhina, Amurskaya and Lenina for three blocks southeast of pl Lenina. That central square is also fairly imposing, dominated by a stately-looking pink granite **Lenin statue**, surrounded in midwinter by ice sculptures. Chita also has a fair sprinkling of delightful old **wooden houses**, notably at ul Lenina 104, ul Chkalova 125, ul Babushkina 82 and ul Anokhina 53. Although the former historic centre is now mostly trampled by concrete towers, some timber cottages also remain on ul Dekabristov, southeast of the city centre. Hemmed in behind apartment blocks is the lovely 1771 **Archangel Michael log church** (ul Selenginskaya). It houses a small but interesting **Decembrist's Museum** (Музей Декабристов; ☎ 356 223; admission R20; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun), with a cooing nest of lovable babushkas as potential guides. The church's position close to an impressive 1907 **former synagogue** (ul Ingodinskaya 19) and eye-catching 1909 brick **mosque** (ul Anokhina 3a) has led certain Chita residents to declare rather absurdly that the area is some sort of 'Siberian Jerusalem'.

The excellent **Kuznetsov Regional Museum** (Kraevedchesky muzey; ☎ 226 709; ul Babushkina 113; admission R50; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) is housed in an early-20th-century mansion. Beyond the gratuitous stuffed elk, you'll find some pretty interesting local exhibits, including a very thorough examination of the heritage and architectural renaissance of the city and region.

The **Art Museum** (Oblastnoy khudozhestvenny muzey; ul Chkalova 118; admission R15; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun)

shows frequently changing exhibitions by school children and local artists, not always especially talented.

The previously interesting **Military Museum** (Музей истории воysk ЗаВВО; ul Lenina 86) was under reconstruction at the time of research. Its collection of tanks and artillery can still be seen by walking up the passage between the museum and the impressive Officers' Club building next door.

Sleeping BUDGET

Chita's big military presence means many transients and lots of accommodation, but cheap dorms can be uncomfortably male dominated and off-putting for individual women travellers.

Hotel Dauria (☎ 262 350; Profsoyuznaya ul 12; dm R350, s R600-800, tw/tr R1200/1200) Big, unsophisticated old rooms are repainted and airy. Beds in a dormitory triple (with attached toilet and bathrooms) are Chita's best backpacker option. It's above the Kharbin Chinese Restaurant.

Hotel Taiga (☎ 262 332; 4th fl, ul Lenina 75; dm R190; ☎) Sheets in this survivable crash pad are clean and guests are usually segregated by gender. There's a shared kitchen and shower. The front door is locked at midnight.

Hotel Chitaavtotrans (☎ 355 011; ul Kostyushko-Grigovicha 7; s/tw R550/1000) Cosmetically improved rooms retain wobbly old shower floors. Quiet yet central.

Hotel Ingoda (☎ 356 356; Profsoyuznaya ul 25; s/tr R550/1500, tw R600-1100) Peeling paint bubbles off the walls of these unreconstructed Soviet rooms. Pay only R300 per person for rooms where the toilets don't work.

MIDRANGE

Hotel AChO (Gostinitsa Upravleniya delami Administratsi Chitinskoi Oblastu; ☎ 351 966; ul Profsoyuznaya 19; tw R1400-2700) Painted taupe and white, this fine brick mansion was built in 1906 for a printing magnate and used as a WWI hospital and tobacco factory before becoming a hotel. Rooms are now fully renovated with polished wooden floors, a fridge and showers with doors! Admire the wrought iron-work of the grand doorway and banisters.

Hotel Zabaikale (☎ 359 819; Hotel-zabaikal@yandex.ru, zabaikalie@yandex.ru; ul Leningradskaya 36; s/tw R1450/2000; ☎) Unbeatably located overlooking the main square, a thorough Western

makeover has given the Zabaikale's rooms minibars and Russian MTV. Showers are piping hot if poorly mounted. Rates include ham-and-egg breakfast in the kitschily grand new 2nd-floor restaurant.

Panama City Motel (☎ 443 747; http://panama.chita.ru/, in Russian; M/R Severny 64; d R1950-2950; (P) (2)) Fully equipped Western-style motel rooms off a poorly lit corridor cost from R2350. Older octagonal cottages at R1950 are somewhat better value. There's a bar, restaurant and bowling alley (lanes per hour R360 to R600) but otherwise the motel's stuck in a suburban no-man's-land, some 5km north of the centre – take *marshrutka* 2 eastbound from ul Amurskaya (opposite the cathedral) or from uls Butina or Babushkina.

Eating

RESTAURANTS

Kafe Kollazh (☎ 978 138; ul Bogomyagkova 27; meals R110-300; ☎ 11.30am-11pm) Mood-lit and cosy with spinning wheels, old samovars and dried flowers. The food is tasty and beautifully presented.

Kafe Traktyr (☎ 352 229; ul Chkalova 93; meals R170-400; ☎ noon-2am) Russian home-style cooking is served at heavy wooden tables in this rebuilt wooden-lace cottage, with a quietly upmarket Siberian-retro atmosphere.

Kafe Minimo (☎ 323 338; ul Babushkina 62a; meals R80-240; ☎ noon-2am, last food 11pm) Genuine, if somewhat underspiced, Georgian food is easy to select from helpful picture menus. Dine in the beamed upstairs restaurant-hall (music show and R30 cover after 7pm) or in the small, pleasant bar area. *Khachapuri* (R50) takes 25 minutes to cook.

Tsipyaka Tabaka (☎ 239 739; ul Ostrovskogo 20; meals R180-250; ☎ noon-5pm & 6pm-1am) Floral murals and fake stone carvings contrast intriguingly with Austin Powers-style lighting. Roast chicken priced by weight is the only main course (reckon R130 for a half bird). Add salads, julienne vegetables and reasonably priced wine.

Kafe Morozhenoe (☎ 266 867; ul Babushkina 50; meals R30-70; (2)) In primary blue and yellow this striking ice-cream parlour serves cheap meals, wine by the glass (from R20) and trendy terracotta pots of Chinese green tea.

QUICK EATS

Evrika (ul Amurskaya 67; ☎ 8.30am-8pm) From behind a historic façade, this plain but well-

kept *stolovaya* does out very cheap *chebureki* (meat turnovers) and *poci*.

Gril Master (ul Pushkina 5; burgers R42-56; ☎ 11am-11pm) Chita's fast-food joint is better for stuffed chicken roulade (R50) than for its microwaved burgers.

Drinking

Several dive bars fill basements on ul Amurskaya, two blocks north of the train station. Super-cheap beers (R15) mean you'll meet many swaying, overfriendly local drunks.

Expostroi (ul Chkalova 144; espresso R40; ☎ 10am-2pm & 3-7pm Mon-Sat) This tiny but excellent coffee bar is plonked incongruously within a hardware store.

Pivnoy Tryum (☎ 352 680; ul Babushkina 127; meals R100-190, beers from R30) Guarded by a hook-handed pirate, this nautically themed pub-restaurant is entered down a stairway from ul Zhuraleva.

Kino Teatr Tsentavr (ul Amurskaya 69; beers from R25; ☎ 10am-midnight) The inexpensive bar of this cinema complex is a popular youth hang-out.

Entertainment

Zolotoy Drakon (☎ 371 288; ul Amurskaya 78; admission R200-250; ☎ 9pm-6am) This discordant glass and yellow-concrete monstrosity is Chita's top disco and bowling alley.

Dvoret's Iskusstv (ul Butina; concerts R20-70) Cultural centre with mixed offerings of theatre and music including local rock bands. Events often start around 5pm.

Getting There & Away

Kadala airport (☎ 338 404) is 18km west of central Chita on *marshrutka* 12 or 14. Limited flights connect to Moscow (R7000), Krasnoyarsk (R5900) and Yekaterinburg. **AviaExpress** (☎ 371 288; www.aviaexpress.ru, in Russian; ul Lenina 55; ☎ 9am-7am Mon-Sat) sells tickets from anywhere to anywhere else with sharp discounts for purchasing three weeks ahead.

The main train station is Chita 2. For China the *Vostok* (train 020) runs to Beijing (R2950, 56½ hours) very early Wednesday morning while trains to Manzhouli (R1100, 25 hours) depart on Thursday and Saturday evening. Alternatively, take the nightly service to the border town of Zabaikalsk (R660 to R940, 14 hours) then bus hop into China.

Other destinations include Blagoveshchensk (train 250, R1470, 34½ hours, odd

days), Tynda (train 078, R1250, 27 hours) and several Ulan-Ude services (R700, eight to 12 hours), some overnight. For R72 commission, the helpful **service centre** (Chita 2 train station; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-7.30pm) issues tickets while you relax on comfy settees.

From near Chita 2 train station buses and *marshrutky* run to Olovyannaya (R220, 8.30am) and Aginskoe (R120, three hours, hourly), shared taxis (R180 to R200) taking up any slack. Buy bus tickets in advance from the kiosks opposite. For Alkhanay use services to Duldurga, Uzon or Aksha.

AROUND CHITA

Aginskoe & Mogoytuy

Агинское и Могойтуй

For an intriguing trip from Chita, take a shared taxi (R180, two hours) to the dusty Buryat town of **Aginskoe** (☎ 30289, population 15,000), capital of the Agin-Buryat Autonomous District. Scenery en route transforms from patchily forested hills via river valleys into rolling grassy steppe. In Aginskoe, visit the beautiful old Buddhist **datsans** (5.5km west of the centre), see the shaman's *gabala* cup (made from a human skull) in the **Tsybikova Museum** (☎ 34462; ul Komsomolskaya 11; admission R30; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Fri) and take a taxi to have lunch at one of the three great restaurants at **Hotel Sapsam** (☎ /fax 34590; www.megalink.ru/sapsam/, in Russian; tw/d R1200/1500, meals R200-500). Around 2km north of the centre, the **Hotel Dali** (☎ 34196; 3rd fl, ul Komsomolskaya 79; dm/d R400/600) offers cheaper, simpler rooms with bathrooms, though it's easy enough to get a *marshrutka* back to Chita until mid-afternoon.

Continuing the same day to brilliant Tsugol Datsan is feasible but more awkward. First take the hourly *marshrutka* (R30) across the endlessly undulating grasslands to **Mogoytuy** (population 7400), where there's a dismal, unmarked **hotel** (☎ 30255-21656; ul Zvaskaya 6; dm R88.60) but no reason to linger. From Mogoytuy, trains to Olovyannaya are poorly timed but taxis ask only R800 to Tsugol including waiting time and a drop-off in Olovyannaya.

Tsugol, Olovyannaya & Zabaikalsk

Цугул, Оловянная и Забайкальск Set just 2km from the 'holy' Onon River, Tsugol village is not particularly pretty but the perfectly proportioned **Tsugol Datsan** is

surely the most memorable Buddhist temple in Russia. Built in 1820, it is just four years younger than Aginskoe Datsan and even more photogenic, with gilded Mongolian script-panels, wooden upper façades and tip-tilted roofs on each of its three storeys. The interior is less colourful than Ivolginsk, but clinging to the front is a unique, colourfully painted wrought-iron staircase. Make sure your taxi waits unless you're happy to walk the 13km to **Olovyannaya**, home to the nearest train station. The nightly train to Chita (R210 *platskart*, five hours) reaches this depressing railway town at 2.30am, so consider hopping on the 5pm *elektrichka* south, returning to Chita from Borzja gives you two hours' extra sleep en route. Alternatively, from Borzja you could attempt to find transport into the **Dauria Biosphere Reserve** (Daurky Zapovednik; www.nature.chita.ru), whose vast, periodically emptying **Torey Lakes** attract rare crane species and where you'll find the magical but very hard-to-reach **Adon-Chelon Oboo** (Buddhist-shamanist pilgrim stones).

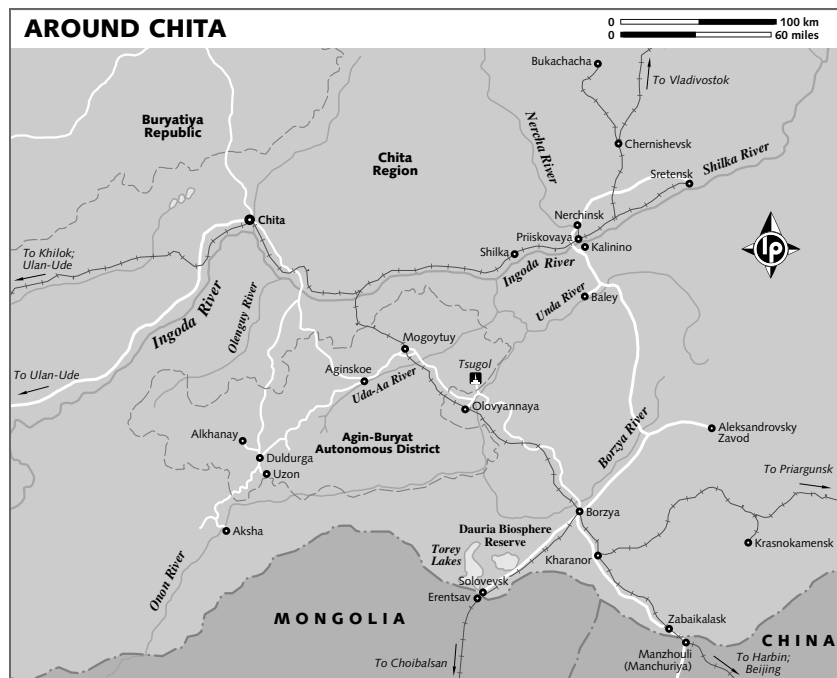
Before leaving from Chita, consider pre-booking the return train ticket from Borzja or Olovyannaya as train occupancy is high, with Chinese traders on board. Alternatively, if you're heading for China there are *elektrichky* (3½ hours from Borzja) to the bustling border town of **Zabaikalsk**, then minibuses ferry you across no-man's-land.

Alkhanay & Duldurga

Алханай и Дулдурга

☎ 30256 / pop 7000

Alkhanay, a Buryat-run national park 130km south of Chita, is reckoned by local Buddhists to be the religion's fifth most important holy 'mountain'. In fact you'll see forested hills, not mountains, through which a devotional six- to seven-hour return trek takes pilgrims to a small stupa and a window rock (a curtain of rock with a hole in it), considered the Gate of Shambala, an entry to spiritual paradise. The beautiful flowers, pious pilgrims and bird-watching opportunities are as interesting as the scenery. Alkhanay's entrance is 20km (R200 by taxi) from **Duldurga** village, where there's a helpful **Alkhanay National Park Office** (☎ 21458; alkhanaia@yandex.ru; ul Gagarina 47) and two simple hotels. There's more accommodation in *turbazy* around the park entrance including a **yurt camp** (beds R500).



July to September, Chita-based agency **Lanta** (Map p598; ☎ 3022-262 368; ul Leningradskaya 56; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) runs R1000 weekend tours, departing Friday and including two-nights' accommodation; no English is spoken. *Marshrutky* from Chita to Duldurga (R150, three hours) run several times daily and a single daily bus links Duldurga to Aginskoe (90km) on a terribly bumpy road.

NERCHINSK НЕРЧИНСК

☎ 30242 / pop 15,300 / ☎ Moscow +6hr

Once one of eastern Siberia's foremost towns, forgotten Nerchinsk is quietly intriguing. While hardly worth a special 300km trip from Chita, a day here handily breaks up a long Chita–Blagoveshchensk journey.

Founded in 1654 by Petr Beketov's Cosacks, Nerchinsk was the venue where China signed the immensely important 1689 border treaty recognising Russia's claims to the trans-Baikal region. The town profited from resultant Sino-Russian trade and boomed from the 1860s with the region's development of rich silver mines. Mikhail Butin, the local silver baron, also created steel and

wine industries and built himself an impressive crenellated palace, furnished with what were then claimed to be the world's largest mirrors. He'd bought the mirrors at Paris's 1878 World's Fair and miraculously managed to ship them unscathed all the way to Nerchinsk via the China Sea and up the Amur River.

Sights

Butin's mirrors form the centrepiece of the recently restored **Butin Palace Museum** (☎ 44515; lit@rambler.ru; Sovetskaya ul 83; admission R50; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Tue-Sat), along with a delightful pair of hobbit-style chairs crafted from polished tangles of birch roots. Three-quarters of the palace, including the grand, triple-arched gateway (demolished in 1970), have yet to be rebuilt.

A block from the museum, the active 1825 **Voskresensky Cathedral** (ul Pogodaeva 85) looks like an opera house from the outside; its interior is plain and whitewashed.

Head across the sports pitch, passing a little silver Lenin, to the imposing though somewhat dilapidated 1840 **Trading Arches**

(*gostiny dvor*). Nearby is a fine colonnaded pharmacy and the very grand façade of the pink former **Kolobovnikov Store** (ul Shilova 3), now a barn-like Togorvy Tsentri filled with some desultory stalls and kiosks. Trains stop just behind at an unmarked platform facing Kolobovnikov's former wooden-lace home, now the **children's music school** (ul Yaroslavskaya 24).

About 1km south of the museum, just before the post office and bank, a little pink column-fronted building was once the **Dauriya Hotel** (Sovetskaya ul 32). As locals will proudly tell you, Chekhov stayed here in June 1890. Diagonally across the same junction, the Uglavoy shop doubles as a minuscule bus station with a minibus to Chita at 6am and a few daily runs to Priiskovaya.

In **Kalinino village**, 25km away, the terribly neglected shell of the **Uspensky Monastery church** sits in a picturesque small village that was in fact the original 17th-century site of Nerchinsk (it moved twice). Kalinino is some 10km from Priiskovaya but taxis are easier to arrange from Nerchinsk (R200 including drop-off at Priiskovaya station).

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel PU (☎ 41745; ul Dostovalova 3; dm R150) This unmarked small white building has a green fence and turquoise metal gate, and is half a block west of the museum. Camp beds share a kitchen and sitting room but there's no shower and toilets are outdoor longdrops.

Kafe Russkaya Dusha (☎ 47523; Gostiny Dvor; meals R30-50; ☎ 11am-4pm & 5pm-late) Simple meals are served here, beneath plastic grapes and disco balls that hardly suit the crumbling grandeur of the old trading arches.

Getting There & Away

Nerchinsk is up a 10km dead-end railway spur from Priiskovaya on the trans-Siberian mainline. A single Nerchinsk-bound *plat-skartny* carriage from Chita (R209, 10 hours) is attached to the Erofey Pavlovich-bound train 392 departing Chita at 10pm daily. For much more choice, taxi-hop back to Priiskovaya, where connections include the 1.20pm train to Blagoveshchensk, the 8.55pm to Khabarovsk or the 6.11pm back towards Irkutsk: all run on odd days only. Taxis from Priiskovaya evaporate when there's no train due, so don't hang around too long if arriving there.

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