

Volga Region

ПОВОЛЖЬЕ

The Volga region (Povolzhye – literally ‘Along the Volga River’) is the heartland of Russia. ‘Mother Volga’, the majestic river that dominates the region, is one of the nation’s most enduring and endearing symbols. The cultural legacies of Russian merchants, Tatar tribes and German colonists are displayed in the ancient kremlins, spire-topped mosques and Lutheran churches along the river banks. The Volga was the site of WWII’s fiercest battle, now marked by a jaw-dropping monument.

The Volga River is immortalised in the *Song of the Volga Boatmen*: ‘Mighty stream so deep and wide. Volga, Volga our pride.’ Today the river’s lush environs attract boaters, bathers, hikers, birders and fishermen.

The Volga is Europe’s longest river at 3700km. Its headwaters lie in the Valdai Hills north-west of Moscow. The river flows eastwards to Kazan, from where it bends southwards, making its way unhurriedly to the brackish delta of the Caspian Sea.

Bisecting the Eurasian continent, the Volga has brought together different peoples and cultures throughout the centuries. It now almost resembles a chain of ethnic republics, a political legacy of Soviet federalism. After the Russians, the most prominent group is the Volga Tatars (6.6 million). The Volga Germans remain widely dispersed, although a small enclave still exists near Saratov.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Cruising ‘**Mother Volga**’ (p406), Europe’s longest river and Russia’s lifeline
- Visiting the Tatar mosques and markets in **Kazan** (p411)
- Snacking on *oblyoma* (dried, salty fish) and fresh, cold beer along the river banks of **Astrakhan** (p426)
- Remembering Stalingrad’s horrors and heroics at **Mamaev Kurgan** (p423)
- Scoping out the scene and soaking up the sun on Samara’s sand-swept **beaches** (p417)



History

Since ancient times, the Volga has supported agricultural settlements and served as a main link in transcontinental commerce. More than a thousand years ago, the Vikings plied its waters, establishing a trade route between Baghdad and the Baltic.

MEDIEVAL VOLGA

In the Middle Ages, the Lower Volga was dominated by the Khazars, notable among the Turkic tribes for religious tolerance. The Khazar capital stood at Itil (present-day Astrakhan). The Middle Volga was the domain of another Turkic tribe, the Bulgars. Descendants of the Huns and distant relatives of the Balkan Bulgarians, they migrated east-

wards, mixed with local tribes and adopted Islam in the 10th century. Their feudal state was northeastern Europe's most advanced economic and cultural centre at that time. The forests of the Upper Volga were originally settled by Ugro-Finnic tribes, who were eventually displaced by the migrating Slavs. The river was also a vital conduit in the lucrative fur trade for Novgorod's merchants.

THE GOLDEN HORDE

In the 13th century, the entire Volga region was conquered by the heirs of Chinggis (Genghis) Khaan, the Mongol-led Golden Horde, who made Sarai (near present-day Volgograd) their capital. For the next 200 years, the Volga's Slavic and Turkic commu-

nities swore allegiance and paid tribute to the great khan, or suffered his wrath. Challenged by Tamerlane's marauder armies in the south and upstart Muscovite princes in the north, the Golden Horde eventually fragmented into separate khanates: Kazan, Astrakhan, Crimea and Siber. In the 1550s Ivan the Terrible razed Kazan and Astrakhan, and claimed the Middle and Lower Volga for Muscovy (modern-day Moscow), the capital of the new Russian state.

COSSACKS

While the river trade was a rich source of income for Muscovy, it also supported gainful bandit and smuggling ventures. Hostile steppe tribes continued to harass Russian traders and settlers and the region remained an untamed frontier for many years.

In response, the tsar ordered the construction of fortified outposts at strategic points on the river. Serfs, paupers and dropouts fled to the region, organising semiautonomous Cossack communities (p37). The Cossacks elected their own atamans (leaders) and pledged their swords in service to tsar and Church. The Cossacks not only defended the frontier for the tsar, but also operated protection rackets, plundered locals, and raided Russia's southern neighbours.

Cossacks conducted large-scale peasant uprisings. In 1670 Stepan Razin led a 7000-strong army of the disaffected, which moved up the Lower Volga before meeting defeat at Simbirsk (Ulyanovsk). In 1773 Yemelyan Pugachev declared himself tsar and led an even larger contingent of Cossacks and runaway serfs on a riotous march through the Middle Volga region. The bloody revolt was forever romanticised by Alexander Pushkin in his novel *The Captain's Daughter*.

GERMANS IN THE VOLGA REGION

Astounded by the scale of rebellion, Catherine the Great responded with a plan for economic development in the region, particularly cultivation of the fertile southern river basin. In 1763 she issued an invitation to Germany's peasants to colonise the region. Eager to escape economic hardship and religious persecution, German Lutherans relocated to settlements along the Volga, with the largest concentration near Saratov. By end of the 19th century, the population had reached over 1.5 million ethnic Germans.

In the 1920s a German autonomous republic was established along the Lower Volga. Hitler's 1941 blitzkrieg across the USSR's western border prompted a wave of persecution against the Volga Germans, who were branded 'enemies of the state'. The German autonomous republic was eliminated, residents were forced into exile and their citizenship was revoked. After Stalin's death, nearly a million survivors were liberated from Siberian labour camps, but were not allowed to return to their old villages.

SOVIET DEVELOPMENT

The USSR harnessed the mighty Volga for its ambitious development plans. Eight complexes of dams, reservoirs and hydroelectric stations were constructed between the 1930s and 1960s. A network of canals connected Russia's heartland to Moscow, and the Baltic and Black Seas. Smoke-stacked factories, sulphurous petrochemical plants, sprawling collective farms and secret military complexes sprang up along its shores. Provincial trading towns, such as Nizhny Novgorod and Samara, grew into urban industrial centres and were closed to outsiders.

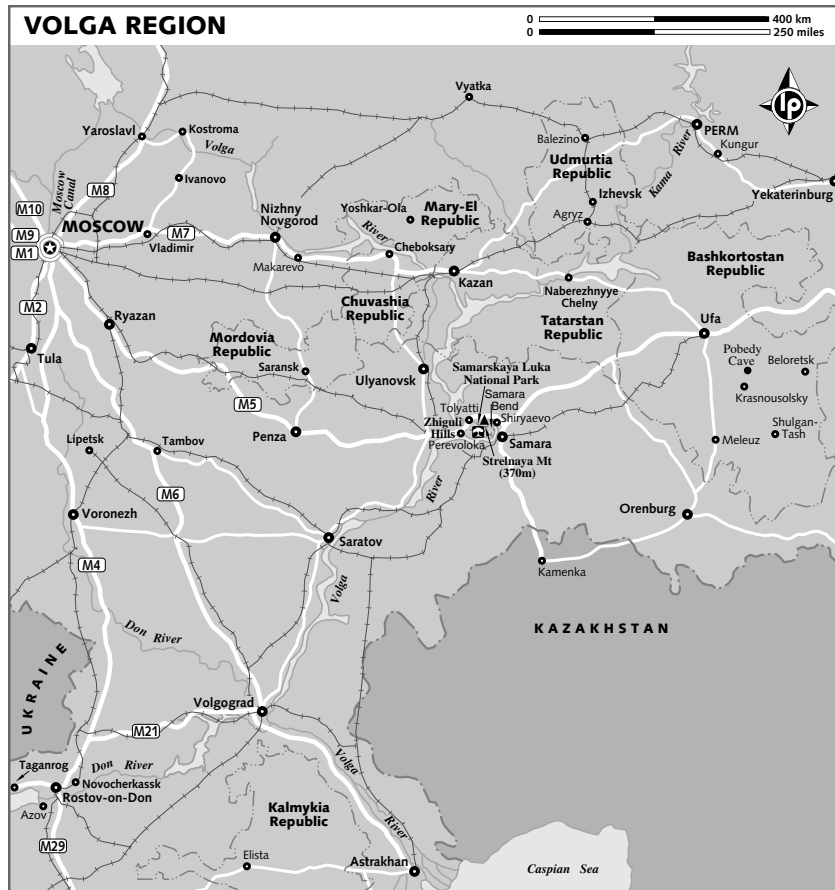
The river continues to convey as much as two-thirds of all Russia's overland cargo freight. The Volga Basin supplies one-quarter of all Russia's agricultural output and one-fifth of its total fish catch; however, the accumulated effects of Soviet-era development inflicted severe harm on the river's fish stocks and posed serious health risks to adjacent communities (p428).

THE VOLGA TODAY

Fundamentally transformed by communism, the Volga has recently reclaimed some of its historic identity. Closed cities have reopened and river trade has resurfaced. The frontier images of yore have reappeared in contemporary guise with organised crime and regional separatists; local khans have revived tribal customs and even the Cossacks have suited up in traditional regalia. Tatarstan, heir to the Kazan khanate, declared sovereignty and challenged Moscow's authority along the Middle Volga (p411).

Climate

The climate of the Volga region is still Continental, with slightly milder winters than other parts of the country. Summers



are very hot and humid, especially further south.

Getting There & Around

Trains run regularly between the Volga towns. In summer months, another, more romantic, option is available. From May to September cruise ships ply the Volga River from Moscow to Astrakhan or Rostov-on-Don. If you wish to follow in the wake of the merchants, the Cossacks and Donald Tyson (right), you have several options.

Similar to trains, transit ship cabins have two or four bunks, shared toilets and bland, cheap food. Stops along the way are too brief for sightseeing, but if your schedule is flexible, you can purchase tickets for individual segments of your route from river stations at each port of call.

Journey times vary depending on weather and currents, and prices vary according to class of service. Average times, distances and prices based on 'Middle class' (1B) quoted by Volga Flot are listed below.

Route	Duration	Distance	Price
Moscow– Nizhny Novgorod	65hr	860km	R2700
Nizhny Novgorod– Kazan	20hr	408km	R1560
Kazan–Ulyanovsk	10hr	228km	R1140
Ulyanovsk–Samara	12hr	216km	R1140
Samara–Saratov	24hr	429km	R1640
Saratov–Volgograd	18hr	385km	R1560
Volgograd–Astrakhan	20hr	494km	R1780

Companies also organise affordable, all-inclusive cruises targeted to Russians, like the one Donald Tyson undertook (see the boxed text, right). While the quality of accommodation varies, the cruises eliminate a lot of hassle and provide an opportunity to call at various ports along the way.

Cruise companies:

Capital Shipping Company (Map pp126-7; ☎ 495-458 9624; www.cck-ship.ru in Russian; Rechnoy Vokzal, Leningradsky sh 51; 📍 Rechnoy Vokzal) Operates transit boats departing regularly from Moscow's Northern River Station, as well as comprehensive cruise packages.

Cruise Company Orthodox (Map pp126-7; ☎ 495-943 8560; www.cruise.ru; ul Alabyana 5; 📍 Sokol) A Russian company that also caters to foreigners, meaning English-speaking staff and upgraded accommodation. Cruises go all the way to Rostov-on-Don, through the locks

ABOARD THE ENGINEER PTASHNIKOV

I risked a minicruise (46 hours) from Kazan to Nizhny to Kazan on the *Engineer Ptashnikov*, built in East Germany in the 1950s, and was extremely glad that I did. I rather liked the ship's décor. I had a smallish single cabin with a washbasin with hot and cold water; shower and loo were in the corridor.... Loo paper supply was intermittent – bring your own! Cabin linen consisted of two rather small sheets, a pillow but no pillowcase, a very tiny towel (bring a bath towel if you want a shower!) and a sort of quilt.

There were a few oldish people on the ship and a few family groups but the majority of the passengers were in their late teens or 20s. There was various optional entertainment, discos etc, and good sunbathing opportunities. The ship had two restaurants, one on each main deck, and meals were taken on a two-shift system in each. Food was OK, through unexciting.

The cruise provided a marvellous chance to speak a lot of Russian, though anybody with no Russian would be rather lost.

Donald Tyson, June 2004

of the Rostov-Don Canal. Cruise Company Orthodox also has a **Rostov-on-Don office** (☎ 8632-654 364; fax 8632-651 486; Bolshaya Sadovaya ul 87).

Cruise Marketing International (☎ 800-578 7742; www.cruiserussia.com in US; 3401 Investment Blvd, Ste 3, Hayward CA USA) Offers a series of 11- and 15-day cruises between Moscow and St Petersburg, with stops in little villages and Golden Ring towns.

Volga Flot (Volzhskoe Parokhodstvo; Map p408; ☎ 8312-313 449, fax 8312-303 660; www.volgafлот.com; Rechnoy Vokzal, Nizhny Novgorod) A Nizhny Novgorod-based shipping company that also provides transit passenger services.

NIZHNY NOVGOROD НИЖНИЙ НОВГОРОД

☎ 8312 / pop 1.31 million / 📍 Moscow
Sometimes called Russia's 'third capital', Nizhny Novgorod is markedly less cosmopolitan than Moscow and St Petersburg. But its ancient kremlin on the banks of the Volga and its pleasant pedestrian promenade make it an appealing place to spend a few days.

During Soviet times the city was named Gorky, after the writer Maxim Gorky, born here in 1868. Literature connoisseurs will find several museums in his memory. Everyone else will find one of Russia's most dynamic provincial capitals, replete with eating and entertainment opportunities.

History

Founded in 1221, Nizhny Novgorod has long been an important trading centre. Barges used to dock on the river and exchange goods; the floating market later became a huge trade fair, the Yarmarka, a tradition that continues to this day. In the 19th century it was said, 'St Petersburg is Russia's head; Moscow its heart; and Nizhny Novgorod, its wallet'.

The presence of many industries connected with the military (submarine construction, for example) meant that Nizhny Novgorod was closed to foreigners for many decades; this is one reason why the late Andrei Sakharov, physicist, dissident and Nobel laureate, was exiled here in the 1980s.

Orientation

Nizhny Novgorod, lying on the southern bank of the Volga River, is split by the Oka River. The kremlin sits on the high eastern bank overlooking the Volga. Outside its southern wall, the city's main streets spoke out from pl Minina i Pozharskogo. From here the pleasant and pedestrian Bolshaya Pokrovskaya ul heads south to pl Gorkogo. The train and bus stations are side by side on the western side of the Oka.

Information

Central post office (pl Gorkogo; ☎ 24hr)

Dom Knigi (☎ 442 273; pl Lenina; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat, 11am-4pm Sun) Carries maps with local transport routes, and some English-language books.

Pauteen.ru (ul Sergievskaya 1; per hr R40; ☎ 11am-5am) Internet café.

Post office (Bolshaya Pokrovskaya ul 7; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Sat, to 3pm Sun) Near the kremlin.

Sberbank (Bolshaya Pokrovskaya ul 3; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sun) ATM and currency exchange.

Team Gorky (☎ 651 999; www.teamgorky.ru; ul 40 let Oktyabrya 1a) Organises adventure tours in the Volga region and beyond, including several three-day trips in the region (from €85 per person) and a 10-day bike tour of the Golden Ring (€560 per person).

Volga Telecom (☎ 301 270; pl Gorkogo; per hr R40; ☎ 24hr) A convenient Internet facility with plenty of computers.

Sights KREMLIN

The mighty walls of the kremlin and its 11 towers date from the 16th century. Sometimes the ramparts are open for a sweeping view of the kremlin grounds and beyond; climb up through the restaurant in the Kladvaya Bashnya gate.

Inside, most of the buildings are government offices. The small, 17th-century **Cathedral of the Archangel Michael** (☎ 9am-2pm) is a functioning church. Behind it, an eternal flame burns near a striking **monument** to the heroes of WWII. At the northeast end of the grounds, the former governor's house is now the **Nizhegorodsky State Art Museum** (☎ 391 373; admission R30; ☎ 10am-5pm Wed-Mon). Exhibits range from 14th-century icons to 20th-century paintings by artists including Nikolai Nerikh and Vasily Surikov.

SAKHAROV MUSEUM

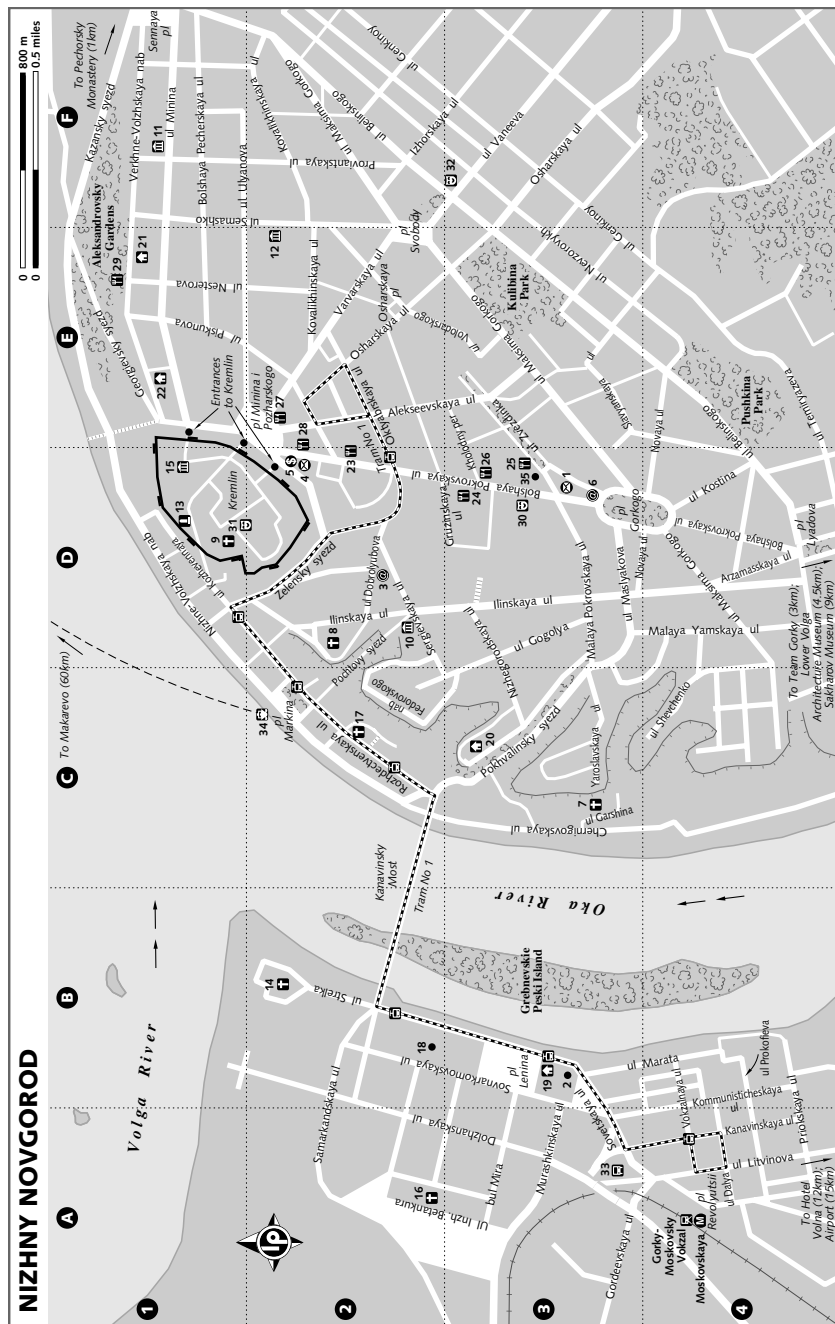
A reminder of more repressive times, the **Sakharov Museum** (☎ 668 623; pr Gagarina 214; admission R30; ☎ 10am-5pm) provides a sobering but fascinating view of Andrei Sakharov's life.

Sakharov was a nuclear physicist who was involved in developing the Soviet Union's first hydrogen bomb. Over the years he became one of the main figures opposing the Soviet regime from within. In 1975 Sakharov was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize but never dared to go and pick it up.

Sakharov was exiled to Gorky in 1980, and his wife Yelena Bonner joined him in 1984. Located in the actual flat in which they lived, the museum documents their lives before and after their exile. You can see the telephone that was installed in 1986, expressly so that Mikhail Gorbachev could call to inform Sakharov of his pending release. To get here catch *marshrutka* (fixed-route minibus) 104 or 4 from pl Minina i Pozharskogo.

GORKY MUSEUMS

Fans of Maxim Gorky can visit the historic wooden houses in which the writer lived and worked. The best is the **Gorky Museum** (☎ 361 651; ul Semashko 19; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Wed & Fri-Sun), where he lived during his 30s. **Gorky**



INFORMATION		SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES		EATING	
Central Post Office Центральный почтампт.....1	D3	Annunciation Monastery Благовещенский монастырь.....7	C3	Bar Bochka Бар Бочка.....23	D2
Dom Knigi Дом Книги.....2	B3	Assumption Church Успенская церковь.....8	D2		
Pauteen.ru.....3	D2	Cathedral of the Archangel Michael Собор Михаила Архангела.....9	D1		
Post Office Почтампт.....4	D2	Gorky House Дом Горького.....10	D2		
Sberbank Сбербанк.....5	D2	Gorky Literary Museum Литературный музей Горького.....11	F1		
Volga Telecom Волга Телеком.....6	D2	Gorky Museum Музей Горького.....12	E2		
		Monument to Heroes of WWII Памятник Отечественной войны.....13	D1		
		Nevsky Cathedral Невский собор.....14	B2		
		Nizhegorodsky State Art Museum Художественный музей.....15	D1		
		Saviour Old Market Cathedral Спасский староярмарочный собор.....16	A2		
		Stroganov Church Строгановская церковь.....17	C2		
		Yarmarka Ярмарка.....18	B2		
		Broadway Pizza Бродвей пицца.....24	D3		
		English Embassy Английское Посольство.....25	D3		
		Gorod Gorky Город Горький.....26	D3		
		Mexican Studies Мексиканские Этюды.....27	E2		
		Michelle Мишель.....28	E2		
		Potato Papa Картофельный Папа.....29	E1		
		ENTERTAINMENT			
		Jam Prestige Джем Престиж джаз клуб.....30		D3	
		Kremlin Concert Hall Кремлевский Концертный Зал.....31		D1	
		Pushkin Theatre of Opera & Ballet Театр оперы и балета.....32		F3	
		TRANSPORT			
		Bus Station Автостанция.....33		A3	
		River Station Речной вокзал.....34		C2	
		Turbyuro Турбюро.....35		D3	
		Volga Flot Волжский флот.....(see 34)			
		SLEEPING			
		Central Hotel Гостиница Центральная.....19		B3	
		Nizhegorodsky Hotel Complex Нижегородский Гостиничный Комплекс.....20		C3	
		October Hotel Гостиница Октябрьская.....21		E1	
		Volga Slope Hotel Гостиница Волжский Откос.....22		E1	

House (☎ 340 670; Pochtovy syezd 21; ☎ 10am-5pm Thu-Tue), accessible by tram 2, is where he spent his childhood years. For a more in-depth look at the events and personalities that influenced Gorky's work, visit the **Gorky Literary Museum** (☎ 338 589; ul Minina 26; ☎ 9am-5pm Wed-Sun).

LOWER VOLGA ARCHITECTURE MUSEUM

This open-air museum (☎ 651 598; Gorbatovskaya ul 39; admission R50; ☎ 10am-4pm Sat-Thu) has a pleasant woodland site and a collection of traditional wooden buildings, some of which are open for visitors. The highlight is the **Pokrovskaya church**, a beautiful wooden church dating from 1731.

CHURCHES & MONASTERIES

The proliferation of onion domes and golden spires is a ubiquitous reminder of the city's rich history. The 13th-century **Annunciation Monastery**, above Chernigovskaya ul, is the oldest church, but it is not open to the public. Nor is the prominent **Pechorsky Monastery**, overlooking the Volga, which dates from the 17th century.

The stone **Assumption Church** (llinskaya ul), also from the 17th century, is unique in that its design was normally exclusive to wooden churches. The baroque **Stroganov** (Rozhdestvenskaya ul) or Nativity Church has retained its magnificent stone carvings.

On the west bank of the Oka River is the eye-catching **Nevsky Cathedral** (ul Strelka). The **Saviour Old Market Cathedral** (ul Inzhenera Betankura) sits behind the **Yarmarka**, the handsomely restored exhibition hall on pl Lenina.

Sleeping

October Hotel (☎ 320 670; www.oktyabrskaya.ru; Verkhne-Volzhsкая nab 9A; s/d with breakfast from R2900/4500; ☎) This business hotel has a prime location overlooking the Volga. All of the rooms are renovated with new furniture, modern bathrooms and a hint of post-Soviet kitsch.

Volga Slope Hotel (☎ 390 530; fax 194 894; Verkhne-Volzhsкая nab 2a; s/d R800/1200) This Soviet relic has friendly staff and decent rooms for the price. Nicer, renovated rooms overlooking the Volga cost around R2500, while budget travellers may appreciate the cheapies (from R300) with shared facilities.

Nizhegorodsky Hotel Complex (☎ 305 387; www.hotel.r52.ru; ul Zalomova 2; s/d with breakfast from R900/1200) A 15-minute walk from Nizhny's main drag, this old-style place is good value. The facility is not the most attractive, but rooms are adequate and service is friendly.

Hotel Volna (☎ 961 900; www.volnahotel.ru; ul Lenina 98; s/d with breakfast from R4480/6700; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Nizhny's top hotel offers all the expected facilities, including tastefully decorated rooms, a well-equipped gym and a couple of upscale restaurants. The location, 9km south of the station (but near the end of the metro), is not in its favour.

Central Hotel (☎ 775 500; www.hotel-central.ru; Sovetskaya ul 12; s/d from R1100/1700) The location near the station is convenient, but it attracts a rough and tumble crowd (as does the casino in the lobby). Nonetheless, service and security are satisfactory. Upgraded rooms are R1700/2200 with breakfast, but the difference in comfort level is negligible.

Eating & Drinking

English Embassy (☎ 336 165; ul Zvezdinka 12; meals R300-500, business lunch R150; ☎ 8am-midnight Sun-Thu, 8am-2am Fri & Sat) This convivial British pub offers all your favourites, from steak and eggs for breakfast, to roast beef and pudding for dinner, to fish and chips for the late-night munchies. A good selection of draught beers is available from the wood and brass bar.

Gorod Gorky (☎ 332 017; Bolshaya Pokrovskaya ul 30; meals R150-400; ☎ 11am-midnight) Of several Soviet nostalgia places, this quietly upmarket choice is the most entertaining. Enter through the archway to Dom Ofitserov (look for the 'Muзей СССР' sign). Walk through a waxwork Leonid Brezhnev's office into the dining room, littered with Soviet memorabilia and Beatles photos. The food is surprisingly good, and you can compare how much it costs today with how little it cost in 1974.

Michelle (☎ 192 914; Bolshaya Pokrovskaya ul 6; meals R150-300; ☎ 10am-11pm) This place is – first and foremost – a coffee bar, offering several varieties of aromatic brew in a simple café setting. The menu also features soups and sandwiches and dishes with French nuances – innovative fare for the price.

Bar Bochka (☎ 335 561; Bolshaya Pokrovskaya ul 14; meals R200-400) An old-school Georgian place. The dark, basement location has a bar-like atmosphere, live crooners and shashlyk for every palette.

Mexican Studies (☎ 391 460; pl Minina i Pozharskogo 2; meals R300-600) This place takes Mexican seriously. See if you can pass the test by finishing off plates piled high with rice and beans, burritos, fajitas and *empanadas* (meat-filled pastries). Conveniently located opposite the kremlin, it is the place to go for something spicy.

Recommended for cheap eats:

Potato Papa (☎ 194 101; Verkhne-Volzhsкая nab; meals R60-100; ☎ 11am-9pm) Cafeteria with lovely river views.

Broadway Pizza (☎ 917 916; Bolshaya Pokrovskaya ul 31; pizza from R45; ☎ 8am-4am) A great stop for a late-night snack.

Entertainment

Jam-Prestige (☎ 333 246; Bolshaya Pokrovskaya ul 49A; admission R50-200; ☎ shows 8-9pm) For jazz, blues and rock and roll, this small basement dive is a great venue. The place also hosts swing dancing on Monday and Saturday, so bring along your dancing shoes.

The **Kremlin Concert Hall** (Kremlevsky Kontsertny zal; ☎ 391 187; ☎ shows 6pm) at the west end of the kremlin is the home of the philharmonic, playing a full schedule of classical concerts. For Russian classics, the beautifully renovated **Pushkin Theatre of Opera & Ballet** (☎ 351 640; ul Belinskogo 59) is also recommended.

Getting There & Away

AIR

The Nizhny Novgorod International Airport is 15km southwest of the city centre. Several flights go daily to Moscow (R1000 to R3000, one hour). **Lufthansa** (☎ 759 085) flies directly to/from Frankfurt three times a week. Airline tickets are available at agencies around the city, including the **Turburo** (☎ 104 503; ul Zvezdinka 10; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Sat).

BOAT

The **river station** (☎ 303 666) is on Nizhne-Volzhsкая nab, below the kremlin. Apart from short trips along the Volga (see opposite), this is where you can find out about the summer cruises linking Nizhny Novgorod with St Petersburg, Moscow and cities further down the Volga.

BUS

Buses go to/from Moscow's Shchyolkovskiy station (R300, nine hours, five daily), as well as Vladimir (R180, 4½ hours, four daily) and Kostroma (R325, daily, eight hours).

TRAIN

The Nizhny Novgorod train station still goes by its old name of Gorky-Moskovskiy vokzal (station), so 'Gorky' appears on most timetables. It is on the western bank of the Oka River, at pl Revolyutsii. Several trains go to Moscow (seven hours), including one fast train (R300, 4½ hours), which departs every morning at 6.30am. All of these stop at Vladimir (R240, two to three hours). One train also continues all the way to St Petersburg (R1500, 16 hours).

Heading east, trains stop at all routes along the trans-Siberian route – the next stop is Perm (R1700, 14 hours). Trains also depart to Samara (R710, 17 hours, every other day) and Kazan (R640, nine hours, daily).

The **service centre** (☎ 483 470) at the train station is helpful for buying tickets, and also offers other services like Internet access.

Getting Around

Tram 1 is convenient, starting from the train station, crossing the Kanavinsky Most and climbing the hill to the kremlin.

There are plans to extend the metro across the river but it's unlikely to happen in the life of this book. Currently the metro is only useful to get to Hotel Volna.

AROUND NIZHNY NOVGOROD

Makarevo Makapebo

The sleepy village of Makarevo is around 60km east of Nizhny Novgorod along the Volga. The fortified stone walls and church domes of its **Makarev Monastery** (☎ 249-26967; admission R150; ☎ 9am-5pm) look magnificent on the approach from the river. The monastery and surrounding village, founded in 1453, thrived on vibrant river trade through the 19th century. The monastery was closed during the Soviet period, but a few nuns returned in 1991 to help restore the churches. Today four churches are working, but only 20 nuns live here. The village of 180 people is made up of rustic wooden cottages, as well as a small **museum** in the old school house. Most locals come here for a day of sunbathing by the river; bring a picnic because there are only a few small shops.

From Nizhny Novgorod, boats depart for Makarevo (R125, 3½ hours) in the morning from near the river station, and return in the evening.

KAZAN КАЗАНЬ

☎ 8432 / pop 1.1 million / ☎ Moscow

Kazan is the capital of Tatarstan, home to the descendants of the nomadic Turkic tribe that wreaked particular havoc in ancient Rus. The atmosphere of this intriguing autonomous republic is redolent of Central Asia. The spires of many mosques dot the skyline – including the grand Kul Sharif Mosque inside the historic kremlin.

Nationalism is strong here – as evidenced by the bilingual signposts and the ubiquitous green, white and red of the Tatar flag. Ethnic pride was particularly passionate in 2005, when the city celebrated 1000 years since its founding. Many parks and buildings received a massive makeover in anticipation of the celebration, so the city centre is looking better than ever.

History

Kazan, one of Russia's oldest Tatar cities, dates back to 1005. Capital of the Kazan khanate in the 15th and 16th centuries, it was famously ravaged in 1552 by Ivan the Terrible, who forced the Muslim khan to become Christian. St Basil's Cathedral in Moscow was built to celebrate Kazan's downfall. The city later flourished as a gateway to Siberia.

During Soviet times, Kazan became the capital of the Tatar Autonomous Republic. In autumn 1990, this oil-rich region (now renamed Tatarstan) declared its autonomy from the rest of Russia, launching several years of political warfare with Moscow. But full independence remains unlikely given that 43% of the population is Russian.

Orientation

Kazan's city centre is flanked in the north by the Kazanka River and in the west by the Volga; the train station is on the east bank of the Volga. About 500m east of the Volga shore, a canal bisects the town centre, separating the train station and surrounding gritty residential area from the principle commercial area. The main drag, ul Baumana, is just east of the canal, running from the kremlin in the northwest down to busy ul Pushkina. South of the canal, ul Pushkina changes name to ul Tatarstan and continues south to the bus and river stations.

Information

Bookstore No 1 (☎ 924 510; ul Baumana 19; ☎ 9am-6pm) A centrally located bookshop with a good selection of maps, and books about Tatar history and culture.

Main post & telephone office (Kremlyovskaya ul 8; per hr R30; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-6pm Sat & Sun) Has Internet facilities.

Telephone office (cnr uls Pushkina & Profsoyuznaya; per hr R30; ☎ 8am-9pm Mon-Fri, 10.30am-6pm Sat & Sun) Has Internet facilities.

Unix (cnr Kremlyovskaya & Universitetskaya uls, 2nd fl; per hr R40; ☎ Mon-Sat) A student computer centre that is open to the public for Internet services.

Sights

KREMLIN

Declared a Unesco World Heritage site in 2000, Kazan's striking kremlin is the focal point of the city's historic centre. It is home to government offices, pleasant parks and a few religious buildings that are usually open

and operating. Some of the white limestone walls date from the 16th and 17th centuries.

Completely renovated for the 2005 celebrations, the **Annunciation Cathedral** was designed by the same architect responsible for St Basil's Cathedral in Moscow. The new iconostasis – designed in the Pskov style – is similar to that of the Assumption Cathedral inside the Moscow Kremlin.

Nearby, the slightly leaning 59m-high **Syyumbike Tower** is named after a long-suffering princess who was married to three successive khans. Ivan the Terrible launched his siege of Kazan as a result of Syyumbike's refusal to marry him – according to legend. To save her city, the princess agreed to marry the tsar, but only if he could build a tower higher than any other mosque in Kazan in a week. Unfortunately for Syyumbike, the tower was completed, driving her to jump to her death from its upper terrace shortly thereafter.

Today, the tower competes with a rival landmark inside the kremlin. The enormous **Kul Sharif Mosque** was constructed on the site of a mosque by the same name, which was burnt and destroyed after Ivan the Terrible captured the city in 1552.

OTHER SIGHTS

Opposite the kremlin's main entrance, the **National Museum of the Republic of Tatarstan** (☎ 928 984; Kremlyovskaya ul 2; admission R15-100; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) is in an ornate 1770 building. The museum has a range of exhibits, from Tatar history to water and wildlife to local artists. The Gallery of Zarif is a unique exhibit by a local artist-philosopher.

Of Kazan's several Orthodox churches, the most attractive is the **SS Peter & Paul Cathedral** (ul Musy Dzhalilaya 21; ☎ 1-3pm). Built between 1723 and 1726, this baroque cathedral, with its heavily decorated façade and soaring iconostasis, commemorates the visit of Tsar Peter I to the city in 1722.

At the foot of Kremlyovskaya ul, you can't miss the overbearing classical façade of the main building of **Lenin State University**, where Vlad Ilych himself was a student. Across the street, the statue of a young Lenin looks like he's on his way to class. However, the plaques don't tell us that he was actually expelled from the university for revolutionary activity and questionable connections. The

university library (cnr uls Astronomicheskaya & Kremlyovskaya) has an exquisite decorated exterior.

Many of the mosques are clustered in the rather dumpy southwest corner of town. Near the central market is the **Soltanov mosque** (ul Gabdull Tukaya 14), dating from 1867, and the **Nurullah mosque** (ul Kirova 74), which has been rebuilt several times since 1849.

Sleeping

Visa registration is tricky in Tatarstan, and cheaper hotels may be hesitant to accept foreign guests, especially those with tourist visas or those staying more than two nights

Hotel Fatima (☎ 924 636; ul Karla Marksa 2; s/tw R600/900) Spitting distance from the kremlin, this new hotel is a great bargain. Bathrooms are shared, but the whole place is modern and clean. You can't beat it, for the price.

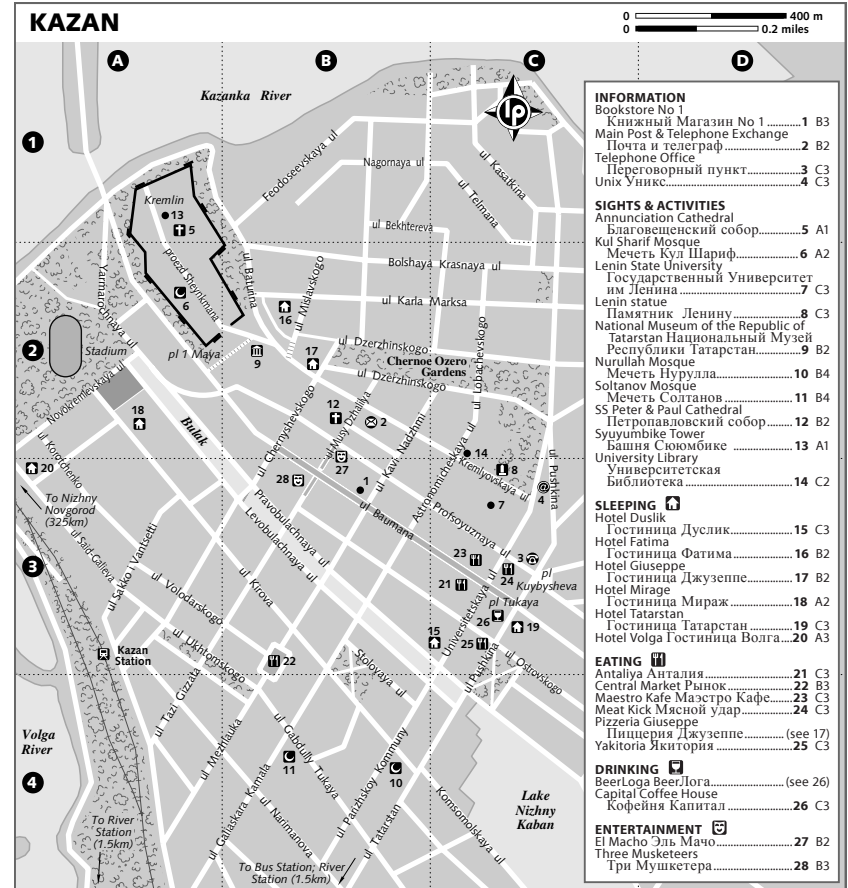
Hotel Volga (☎ 316 349; fax 921 469; ul Said-Galeeva 1A; s/d with breakfast & without bathroom R500/820, s/d with breakfast & bathroom from R900/1500) Convenient to the train station, this nicely revamped hotel has rooms for every budget (although the midrange rooms get booked early). Rooms facing the street can be noisy, but the place is clean and welcoming.

Hotel Giuseppe (☎ 926 934; hotelgiuseppe@mi.ru; Kremlyovskaya ul 15/25; s/d with breakfast from R3040/5700; ☎) Inside the restaurant of the same name, this friendly place has spacious, comfortable rooms – even plush, by Kazan standards. Weekdays they are often booked by business travellers, so reserve in advance. Cash only.

Hotel Mirage (☎ 780 505; www.summithotels.com; ul Kirova 1a; r from R6000; ☎) This new, international-standard hotel is ideally located between the train station and the kremlin. With a luxurious, modern décor, it somehow seems out of place in this ancient city, but it is still a welcome addition for business travellers and luxury minded guests.

Hotel Tatarstan (☎ 388 379; fax 316 704; ul Pushkina 4; s/d from R1400/1600) Location is the primary advantage of this concrete slab of a hotel. Rooms are Soviet standards – not exactly stylish nor particularly comfortable, but clean and functional.

Hotel Duslik (☎ /fax 923 320; Pravobulachnaya ul 49; s/d R1200/1800) Despite the stark lobby, this place has simple but nicely renovated rooms that are good value for the price. Unfortunately, the quality of the service – and the consistency of the prices – does not match the quality of the rooms.



Eating & Drinking

Pizzeria Giuseppe (☎ 326 934; Kremlyovskaya ul 15; pizza R50-100) A lively place for pizza and pastas, cappuccinos and *cannoli* (sweet pastry tubes with a rich, creamy filling). The place is not big on atmosphere, but it still attracts young couples and families, who fill up on tasty, inexpensive Italian treats.

BeerLoga (☎ 922 436; ul Pushkina 5; meals R300-500; ☎ noon-2am) Ten beers on tap and a whole range of spicy sausages feature at this Bavarian beer bar. The rustic décor and convenient location make it a popular spot.

Capital Coffee House (☎ 926 390; ul Pushkina 5; breakfast R50; ☎ 8am-midnight Mon-Fri, noon-midnight Sat & Sun) Next door to Kazan's trendiest brewpub is the city's trendiest coffee house.

Come for the wide range of coffee drinks or for free wi-fi access.

Yakitoria (☎ 922 713; ul Pushkina 3; sushi R40-60, meals R200-400; ☎ 11am-6am) Moscow's favourite sushi bar has gone national, with this popular outlet on Kazan's main square. Service is pleasant and efficient, turning over tables at this bustling place.

Meat Kick (☎ 929 332; Profsoyuznaya ul 9; meals R400-600) Besides the sought-after salad bar, this place offers Western-style steakhouse fare. To sample the Volga's riches, try the upscale seafood restaurant in the same building.

Other recommendations on ul Baumana: **Maestro Kafe** (☎ 921 338; ul Baumana 47; breakfast R50; ☎ 24hr) Specialises in bliny and coffee; a great place for breakfast or a late-night snack.

museum shows old-school classrooms (literally) and dioramas of old Simbirsk.

In a similar vein, the 19th-century **public library** (☎ 313 686; Kommunisticheskaya ul 3; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sat) has also been turned into a museum, with exhibits of old books, maps and other documents from the archives. The **Regional Art and Local Studies Museum** (☎ 313 784; bul Novy Venets 3; art/regional R20/15; ☎ 10am-5.30pm Tue-Sun) is opposite.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Venets (☎ 394 576; ul Sovetskaya 15; s/d with breakfast R1550/1850) A towering block opposite the Memorial Centre with standard Soviet fare. This place evokes 1970s Soviet Union, which is exactly when it was built.

Okna (☎ 427 877; ul Sovetskaya 15; meals R200; ☎ noon-2am) On the 2nd floor, this trendy café lends a touch of modernity to the dinosaur Hotel Venets. Trendy types are drawn by its bright atmosphere and Internet computers.

Maxi Pizza (☎ 421 465; ul Goncharova 21; meals R150; ☎ 10am-midnight) This cafeteria-style pizza place is almost always packed with students and other young folks. You can't go wrong with cheap, tasty pizza and beer.

Cafe in the Palace (☎ 416 698; ul Karla Marxa 9; meals R200-400; ☎ 11am-11pm) Decorated with heavy drapes and rich colours, reminiscent of the namesake palace, this upscale café serves classic Russian fare. The space is small, but it still squeezes in a dance floor for the romantics.

Bistro (☎ 318 634; ul Goncharova; meals R50-100; ☎ 9am-9pm) A sparkling Russian fast-food place next to the suburban bus station. There's a well-stocked food store next door.

Getting There & Away

Flights go once or twice a day to/from Moscow (R3100 to R3600, two hours); there's an **Aeroflot office** (☎ 394 750; ul Sovetskaya 15; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-4pm Mon-Sat) in the foyer of Hotel Venets. Several morning buses make the journey to Kazan (R230, five hours) and Samara (R230, five hours). Trains go to Moscow (R1100, 15 hours), Kazan (R320, six hours), Ufa (R650, 15 hours), Saratov (R520, 11 hours), Samara (R360, five hours) and Volgograd (R780, 15 hours).

Getting Around

For the airport, take bus 6 from the stop on ul Goncharova behind Hotel Venets.

Ulyanovsk-Tsentralnaya train station is 4.5km from the centre by bus 1, 2 or 117, or tram 4. The long-distance bus station is 4km from the centre, served by bus 9 and 20 from the corner of ul Karla Marxa and ul Goncharova. To get to the river station, take tram 4 from Hotel Venets, then walk down a lane to the Kuybyshev Reservoir.

SAMARA CAMAPA

☎ 8462 / pop 1.16 million / ☎ Moscow +1hr
On a summer day, Samara's river banks are packed with bathing beauties, in-line skaters and beer drinkers. The lazy Volga is indeed inviting on a hot day, and Samara is the place to jump in. If you're not a beach bum, Samara has a few good museums and also serves as the base for excursions into the nearby Zhiguli Hills.

History

Samara grew up where the Volga meets the Samara River, at a particularly sharp bend across from the Zhiguli Hills. The site provided a valuable vantage point for monitoring river activity; in 1568 a fortress was constructed here to guard the tsar's recently acquired territorial possessions. In 1606 a customs house was built that enabled the tsar to take a cut of the profitable river trade.

In 1670 Stepan Razin's rebel band came through, pausing to torch the town and drown the military governor. A hundred years later, Pugachev's peasant army also paid a call on Samara. The military governor, apparently a student of history, thought it best to flee on that occasion, leaving the town to the whims of the angry throng.

The Russian Civil War began in Samara, when a unit of Czechoslovakian prisoners of war commandeered their train and seized control of the city. They were quickly joined by a contingent of old regime officers, who formed the restorationist White Army.

The name of the city and province was changed in 1935 to Kuybyshev, in honour of a local Bolshevik hero who made it big in Moscow. In WWII, Kuybyshev became the 'second capital', housing much of the relocated central government, including Stalin's bunker. Industry developed along the river, oil was discovered in the province and the city was closed. With the fall of Soviet communism, the city was reopened and its original name restored.

Orientation

The centre of Samara is on the eastern bank of the Volga at its junction with the Samara River. The main street, ul Kuybysheva, runs from pl Revolyutsii in the west (a few blocks south of the river station), then changes name to Volzhsky pr as it continues east along the Volga.

Information

Alfa-Bank (☎ 420 624; ul Molodogvardeyskaya 151; ☎ noon-8.30pm Tue-Fri, noon-7.30pm Sat) Has an ATM.

Chakona (☎ 784 234; www.chaconne.ru; Ulyanovskaya ul 18; ☎ 10am-9pm) Packed with books and maps, and often packed with people. Located on the top floor of the Vafen shopping centre.

Post office (ul Kuybysheva 82; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, 9am-6pm Sat & Sun) Conveniently located and has a 24-hour telephone centre.

Samara Intour (☎ 792 060; www.samaraintour.ru in Russian; Samarskaya ul 51/53; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-3pm Sat) City tours, river cruises and excursions in the region, including rafting trips along Samarskaya Luka.

Vizit Internet Centre (☎ 704 391; Samarskaya ul 199; per hr R36-48; ☎ 9am-10pm) A crowded basement place with plenty of computers.

Sights

ALONG THE NABEREZHNYAYA

The Volga River is banked by a wide swath of lush parks and the city's main attraction: sandy beaches. Swimming, sunbathing and strolling along the naberezhnaya (embankment) are the locals' favourite pastimes.

Ploshchad Slavy is a memorial to Samara's role in WWII. The 53m-high statue of a worker holding a pair of wings symbolises the city's aviation-related contributions: local factories produced the IL-2, known as the 'flying tank', during WWII. On the east side of the square, the **St George Cathedral** honours the heroes of the Great Patriotic War.

The **Iversky Women's Monastery** (Vilonovskaya ul), founded in 1850, was home to 360 nuns, mostly daughters of local merchants.

Walk through **Strukovsky Garden** and up the steps to Teatralnaya pl, with its striking monument to Bolshevik hero Vasily Chap-aev, and the ornate 1888 **Drama Theatre**.

A slow walk from one end of the naberezhnaya to the other takes a few hours, longer if you stop for a cold drink at one of the *letny kafe* (summer cafés). Even better, head to the eastern side of the **Zhiguli Brewery**

(☎ 642 116; Volzhsky pr 4) and fill your bottle with fresh local beer for R15 per litre.

MUSEUMS

Stalin's Bunker (☎ 333 571; ul Frunze 167; ☎ 11am-1pm & 2-3pm Mon-Fri), built nine storeys below the Academy of Culture and Art, never actually served its intended purpose, as Stalin decided to stay in Moscow to direct events. The secret hideaway is nonetheless fascinating. Only guided groups can visit, so call in advance to make arrangements.

The massive **Alabin Museum** (☎ 322 889; www.alabin.ru in Russian; Leninskaya ul 142; admission R30; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) has exhibits on regional palaeontology and archaeology, including dinosaur fossils found in the Zhiguli Hills. The affiliated **Ulyanov family house-museum** (☎ 323 668; Leninskaya ul 131 & 135; admission R15; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) is where Vladimir Ilych and his family lived for three years from 1890 to 1893.

The **Samara Art Museum** (☎ 333 209; ul Kuybysheva 92; admission R50; ☎ 10am-6pm Wed-Mon) exhibits mainly Russian art, including works by artists who came to the region to paint. Look for *Boyarishina*, gifted by Surikov to a local doctor who treated him when he fell ill. The museum also holds an impressive collection of over 100 avant-garde paintings.

CHURCHES & SYNAGOGUES

The **Polkovsky Cathedral** (Leninskaya ul 75A), built in 1860, was once resplendent in gold, marble and artistry. Apparently these riches proved their value during the 1920s famine, when they were sold to Finland for 32 wagons of bread for Samara residents to eat.

After the suppression of Polish uprisings in the Russian empire in 1830, a small group of Polish exiles settled in Samara. In 1902 this community built the Gothic **Catholic Church** (☎ 334 188; ul Frunze 157; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 3-6pm). Reminiscent of a medieval German basilica, the **Lutheran Church** (ul Kuybysheva 115; ☎ service 10am Sun) was built by a growing German population, who settled here from the 1860s under Catherine the Great's agricultural development programme. This church often hosts concerts on Sunday afternoons.

When the **synagogue** (ul Sadovaya 49) was built in 1903, it served over 1000 people, the largest Jewish community in the Volga region. The building served as a bread factory during Soviet times.

GRUSHINSKY FESTIVAL

Every summer, the first Saturday in July kicks off one of Samara's most anticipated events, the Grushinsky Festival. The event has its roots in the 1960s, when the musical poetry known as 'Author's Song' gained popularity among intellectuals and hippy types. Simple melodies, acoustic guitar and poetic lyrics characterise this folksy music, making it difficult for non-Russian speakers to really appreciate it.

Since the 1960s, musicians from all over Russia and the former Soviet bloc collect in the Samara Bend National Park to perform their Authors' Songs, with as many as 200,000 gathering on 'spectator hill'. A stage in the shape of a guitar is set up on the lake below. Besides performances by better-known musicians, there is also a sort of 'open mike' competition, plus campfires, football and general merrymaking.

The festival is named after Valery Grushin, outdoorsman and hiker, student at the local aviation institute, and member of the trio 'Singing Beavers'. Grushin perished in 1967 while saving drowning children from the Uda river in Siberia.

hours, daily). Flights throughout the day go to Moscow (R2800 to R3500, 2½ hours) and St Petersburg (R5600, three hours). There are seasonal flights to Irkutsk, Novosibirsk and Baku.

The river station is at the west end of the naberezhnaya, in front of Hotel Rossiya. Long-distance cruises go to destinations along the Volga. There are also boats to regional destinations including Shiryaevo.

The central bus station is 6km southeast of the centre. Buses go to Ulyanovsk (R230, five hours, eight daily), Saratov (R325, twice daily) and Kazan (R290, daily). It is worth leaving Samara by train if only to wait in the ultramodern, clean and efficient station. In addition to several trains to Moscow (R1500, 18 to 20 hours), there are daily trains to Saratov (R570, eight hours), Kazan (R560, 13 hours), Astrakhan (R1100, 23 hours) and Ufa (R580, nine hours). Trains to St Petersburg and Volgograd go a few times a week.

Getting Around

Trolleybus 2 runs between the train and bus stations. From ul Kuybysheva, take bus 37, 46, 47 or 57 to the central bus station. Bus 24 runs from pl Revolyutsii to pl Slavy.

AROUND SAMARA

Shiryaevo Ширяево

In the 1870s, Ilya Repin spent two years in this village just north of Samara on the west bank of the Volga. Here he completed sketches for his famous painting, the *Barge Haulers on the Volga*, which is now in St Petersburg's Russian Museum (p252). Apparently Repin created somewhat of a scandal

when he was here, as local villagers felt objectified when used as models for the artist.

Today, the pleasant village is more welcoming to art lovers. The **Repin museum** (☎ 848-626 8257; ul Sovetskaya 14; 🕒 11am-4pm Tue-Sun) has a nice selection of Volga River paintings, including some Repin reproductions. The appeal lies less in seeing the art, however, and more in experiencing this quintessential Volga village.

The three-hour trip from Samara to Shiryaevo by hydrofoil makes for a pleasant day trip in summer months. In other seasons, the village is more difficult to reach, as only one bus per day makes the long journey.

Samara Bend Самарская Лука

While Samara sits on the left bank of the Volga, the right bank is dominated by the rocky Zhiguli Hills. The river loops around the hills creating a peninsula, encompassing 32,000 hectares of national forest reserve. The Samara Bend National Park (or Samarskaya Luka in Russia) is a prime area for hikes along rocky ledges and grand Volga vistas. The peaks – the highest being Strel'naya mountain at 370m – are in the northwest corner of the reserve.

These hills were the hide-out of peasant rebel Stepan Razin in the 17th century. He supposedly hid his loot in a large 20-sq-metre cave near the village of Perevoloka, in the southwest corner.

The traditional way to experience the Samara Bend is by boat. Every year, thousands of locals raft *zhigulyovskaya kruglosvetka* (around the world). The route follows the

loop in the river, then cuts back up north via a channel on the west side of the park. Samara Intour (p417) organises these trips for around R5000 for a 10-day trip.

Otherwise, the easiest way to reach the reserve is to take a riverboat to any of the villages on the right bank, such as Shiryaevo or Polyana, or just across the river to Rozhdestveno.

SARATOV САРАТОВ

☎ 8452 / pop 873,000 / 📍 Moscow

Although it lacks major tourist attractions, Saratov is a pleasant city with a thriving commercial centre and an attractive green river embankment. Founded in 1590, Saratov was initially a fortress forming a line of defence for the trade route along the Volga.

A large community of ethnic Germans, mostly farmers, settled along the Volga around Saratov in the 18th and 19th centuries and even got their own autonomous republic within Russia in 1924. However, this was abolished during WWII when Saratov was actually occupied by the Nazis. Emigration and deportation have since decreased their numbers.

The first man in space, cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, lived in Saratov and studied at the local university, which now bears his name. The lively café scene on pr Kirova and the town's distinctive German flavour (due mainly to the tourists it attracts) make Saratov an enjoyable place to spend a day.

Orientation

The centre of town is the pedestrian mall on pr Kirova, stretching 1km from the market at ul Chapayeva to ul Radishcheva. Three blocks north, busy Moskovsky pr links the train station to the river station.

Information

Crazy Mouse (☎ 277 450; pr Kirova 25; 🕒 24hr) This Internet café is located downstairs from the Fortuna casino.

Dom Knigi (☎ 243 292; ul Volskaya 81; 🕒 9am-7pm) Has a fine collection of maps and reference books.

Post office (cnr pr Moskovsky & ul Chapayeva; 🕒 9am-6pm) Near the market.

Sberbank (☎ 403 295; pr Kirova 7; 🕒 9am-2pm & 3-7pm Mon-Fri) Has foreign-exchange services and an ATM.

Volga-Heritage Ltd (☎ 280 975; volga-heritage@inbox.ru; nab Kosmonavtov 7a) Highly recommended for tours investigating German heritage in the Volga region.

SARATOV

A
B

INFORMATION

Crazy Mouse Безенная Мышь.....	1 A4
Dom Knigi Дом Книги.....	2 A4
Post Office Почтамт.....	3 A3
Sberbank Сбербанк.....	4 B4

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Gagarin Museum Музей Гагарина.....	5 B4
Radishchev Museum Музей Радищева.....	6 B4

SLEEPING 🏠

Hotel Volga Гостиница Волга.....	7 A4
----------------------------------	------

EATING 🍴

Buratino Буратино.....	8 B4
Cafe et Chocolat Кафе и Шоколад.....	9 A4
Restaurant Bavaria Бавария.....	10 A3

DRINKING 🍷

East West Восток Запад.....	11 A4
Papa's Irish Bar.....	12 A4
Seahorse Морской Конек.....	13 A4

ENTERTAINMENT 🎪

Grand Michel Гранд Мишель.....	14 A4
Opera & Ballet Theatre Театр оперы и балета.....	15 B4
Philharmonic Theatre Филармония.....	16 B4
Sobinov Conservatory Консерватория Собинова.....	17 B4

To Train Station (3km)

To Cosmonaut's Embankment (1.3km);
River Station (1.3km);
Trinity Cathedral (1.3km);
Hotel Slovakia (1.3km);
Regional Museum (1.3km);
Volga-Heritage Ltd

Sights

River views and shady walks are the highlights of the **Naberezhnaya Kosmonavtov** (Cosmonaut's Embankment) along the Volga, surveyed by a resolute Yuri Gagarin from the river's shore. The **Regional Museum** (Muzei Kraevedeniya; ☎ 282 491; ul Lermontova 34; admission R40; 🕒 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) has many news clips and photos from Gagarin's life, as well as the airplane in which he learnt to fly. The typical local nature and history displays are also here. Across the street, the 17th-century **Trinity Cathedral** is a heavily decorated church that was undergoing renovation at the time of research.

For the full story on Gagarin in Saratov, check out the **Gagarin Museum** (☎ 237 666; ul

Sakko i Vanzetti 15; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri). Not only did the cosmonaut live and study in Saratov, he also landed (crashed?) his rocket nearby after his much-lauded flight. The landing site, 40km out of town near the village of Kvasnikovka, is marked by a commemorative monument.

The **Radishchev Museum** (☎ 263 627; ul Peromyayskaya 75; admission R30, special exhibits R120; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) is the main branch of the Fine Arts Museum, with a good selection of art from the 18th to the 20th centuries.

Sleeping

Hotel Volga (☎ 243 645; fax 240 235; pr Kirova 34; s/d with breakfast from R960/1040) This early-20th-century mansion is the most atmospheric accommodation option. Rooms with high ceilings and an impressive art collection give the hotel a glorious, prerevolutionary air. Upgraded rooms are also available for about twice the price.

Hotel Slovakia (☎ 289 501; slovakia@mail.saratov.ru; ul Lermontova 30; s/d from R1000/1500) A towering Soviet block on the waterfront, Hotel Slovakia is the most common option for visiting business types. The cheapest rooms are adequate but not particularly appealing. Nicer, renovated rooms with river views start at R2500 with breakfast.

Eating & Drinking

Papa's Irish Pub (☎ 263 506; pr Kirova 20; meals R200-300, business lunch R150) Papa's has everything you need in your local Irish pub, including sports on the big screen, happy hour specials on weekday afternoons and Guinness on tap.

Bavaria (☎ 279 947; ul Volskaya 58; meals R300-400; ☎ 11am-midnight) The place to go for Wiener schnitzel and ale, Volga-style.

Buratino (☎ 277 479; pr Kirova 10; meals R200-300; ☎ 11am-midnight) If you want to do the café scene, head directly here, a favourite of expats. A funky retro-Soviet place is in the basement.

Seahorse (☎ 238 232; ul Maksima Gorkogo 16/20; ☎ noon-3am) This stylish place offers a restaurant, bar and nightclub bordering on swanky.

Recommended cafés:

Café et Chocolat (☎ 734 313; Volskaya ul 57; coffee R50-100; ☎ 9am-11pm) A Parisian café, lovely for breakfast or for an afternoon pick-me-up.

East West (☎ 436 272; Volskaya ul 48; drinks from R60; ☎ 9am-11pm) A travel-themed coffee shop where, appropriately enough, the walls and ceilings are covered with maps.

Entertainment

Sobinov Conservatory (☎ 230 652; pr Kirova 1) One of the best in Russia, holding frequent performances by resident and visiting musicians.

Philharmonic Theatre (☎ 224 872; Sobornaya pl 9) This is also a classical-music venue.

Opera & Ballet Theatre (☎ 263 164; Teatral'naya pl; ☎ shows at 6pm) Has opera and ballet performances.

Grand Michel (☎ 243 640; pr Kirova 22; ☎ 1pm-6am) A lively entertainment complex with bowling for about R600 an hour and billiards for R100 to R150 an hour.

Getting There & Around

The **train station** (Privokzal'naya pl) is at the western end of Moskovsky pr. Daily trains go to/from Moscow's Paveletsky vokzal (R1340, 15 hours), as well as Samara (R570, eight hours), Volgograd (R620, eight hours) and Astrakhan (R750, 12 hours).

The **river station** (☎ 269 324; Kosmonavtov nab) is at the eastern end of Moskovsky pr. The friendly port office has schedule details for long-distance and local tour boats.

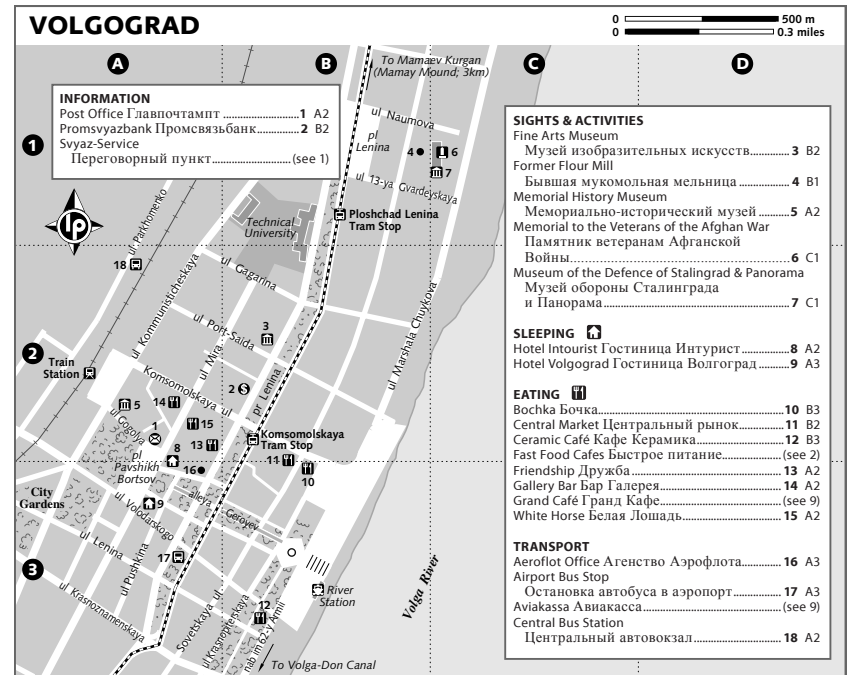
Trolleybuses 2 and 2A stop at the market at the western end of pr Kirova. Trolleybuses 1 and 9 ply pr Moskovsky from the train station to the river station.

VOLGOGRAD ВОЛГОГРАД

☎ 8442 / pop 1.01 million / ☎ Moscow
Volgograd was founded in 1589 as Tsaritsyn, a mighty fortress at the convergence of the Volga and Don rivers. Nothing is left of ancient Tsaritsyn, however, due to events in more recent history.

During the Soviet period, the city was renamed Stalingrad to honour the leader who took credit for organising its defences during the Civil War. As the locale of WWII's most decisive battle, the old city was levelled and hundreds of thousands died. See the boxed text, p424.

In 1952 the Lenin Ship Canal (also known as the Volga-Don Canal) was finished, connecting the two rivers and completing an intricate network of waterways from the Arctic to the Mediterranean. After Stalin's



fall from grace, the city was renamed once again in 1961, this time to pay tribute to the river that dominates its geography, economy and culture.

Rebuilt from scratch since WWII, Volgograd is a bit sterile, although memories of the 'Great Patriotic War' are still fresh. Even today Volgograd bears witness to the simultaneously most triumphant and tragic event in Soviet history, the Battle of Stalingrad.

Orientation

Volgograd's main north-south artery is pr Lenina. From the central pl Pavshikh Bortsov (Fallen Warriors' Square), the promenade alleya Geroyev (Avenue of Heroes) crosses pr Lenina to the river station on the Volga's west bank.

Information

Post office (pl Pavshikh Bortsov; ☎ 24hr)
Promsvyazbank (☎ 236 623; pr Lenina 17; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Sat) ATM available around the clock.
Svyaz-Service (☎ 331 660; per hr R30-60; ☎ 24hr) Fax and Internet facilities, adjacent to the post office.

Sights & Activities

MAMAEV KURGAN (MAMAY MOUND)

Known as Hill 102 during the Battle of Stalingrad, Mamaev Kurgan was the site of four months of fierce fighting. It's now a moving memorial to all who died in this bloody but victorious fight.

The complex's centrepiece is an evocative 72m statue of Mother Russia wielding a sword extending another 11m above her head. The area is covered with statues, memorials and ruined fortifications. The Pantheon is inscribed with the names of 7200 soldiers who died here. These names are meant to represent just a handful of the estimated one million Russian soldiers who were killed in this tragic battle. Take the high-speed tram to the Mamaev Kurgan stop, 3km north of the centre.

MUSEUM OF THE DEFENCE OF STALINGRAD & PANORAMA

This exhaustive **museum** (☎ 346 723; ul 13-y Gvardeyskoy Divizii; admission R70, guided tours R500; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) has dozens of exhibits on the Battle of Stalingrad and the soldiers

who fought in it. The model of the ruined city (post battle) is a moving display of the human capacity for both destruction and rebuilding. Captions are in Russian only.

Upstairs is the **Panorama 'Stalingradskaya Bitva'**, a 360-degree illustration of the battle as it might have been seen from atop Mamaev Kurgan. Viewers can relive the battle experience in the midst of the chaos and carnage. The Panorama is accessible only with a guided group, so listen for the loudspeaker announcements indicating the start of a guided tour.

Below the museum on the riverside is a **Memorial to Veterans of the Afghan War**. The startling ruins nearby are the only evidence of the Battle of Stalingrad left in the centre.

Ironically, this **former flour mill** had been constructed by the Germans in 1893. It has been left as a reminder of the devastating battle.

The complex is two blocks east of pl Lenina high-speed tram stop; otherwise, a 20-minute stroll through the river park from alleya Geroyev gets you here.

OTHER MUSEUMS

The small **Fine Arts Museum** (☎ 382 444; pr Lenina 21; admission R30; ☎ 10am-5.30pm Thu-Tue) has a typical collection of Russian paintings, porcelain and carved ivory. Enter from ul Port-Saida. The **Memorial History Museum** (☎ 361 705; cnr uls Kommunisticheskaya & Gogolya; ☎ 10am-5pm Wed-Mon) has several exhibits about the history of Tsaritsyn.

STALINGRAD

In June 1941 an unexpected Nazi blitzkrieg thundered across the Soviet Union. Caught off guard, Stalin at first refused to believe the news and then made matters worse by refusing the request of his generals to retreat and regroup. Nazi forces made short work of the unprepared Red Army troops and sped towards Moscow. Their advance was finally halted on the outskirts of the capital as the Russian winter set in.

In spring 1942, Hitler devised a new plan, Operation Blue, in which his forces would seize the food and fuel resources of the Soviet south. The strategic key to this campaign was control over the lower Volga, which would require the capture of the city of Stalingrad. The Nazis amassed over 250,000 troops for the assault, while Stalin was slow to respond, keeping Soviet forces in the north in fear of another attack on Moscow. In August, German Field Marshal Paulus launched the offensive; his troops quickly reached the river and entered the city. Victory seemed all but certain.

The Red Army's brilliant tactician, Marshal Zhukov, was dispatched to organise a desperate defence. For the next two months, the Battle of Stalingrad raged. Street by street, house by house, hand to hand. Neither side flinched, and a flood of reinforcements sustained the bloodletting.

By November threadbare Soviet forces somehow still held the city. The German armies were overextended and demoralised. Zhukov launched Operation Uranus, a one-million-man counter-offensive that severed German supply lines and isolated the 300,000 Nazi troops.

An embittered Hitler insisted there be no surrender. German efforts to break out of Zhukov's closing snare continued into winter. By the end of January, most of them were killed or taken prisoner. The fight for the Volga was over. The Nazis were finally stopped, and the Red Army's excruciatingly slow and devastating push westward towards Berlin had begun.

Stalingrad was the longest, deadliest and strategically most decisive battle of WWII. The level of physical destruction was immeasurable. The surrounding countryside lay in waste, the city a lifeless, smouldering shell. An estimated 750,000 German soldiers died; the number of Soviet deaths was never officially calculated, but estimates range upwards of one million. A few hundred thousand prisoners of war were sent off to perish in slave labour camps.

Stalingrad marked arguably the greatest triumph of the Soviet regime. The formidable Nazi war machine was defeated and the Soviet empire soon spread across Eastern Europe. The wartime experience brought together Soviet communism and Russian nationalism in a way that legitimised Stalin's rule. With more than 25 million deaths, the war touched virtually every family.

The cult of WWII, celebrating the ageing veterans and honouring the deceased, is still strong in Russia today, long after it has faded in much of the rest of Europe. After the Generalissimo's death, the city was renamed Volgograd. But the notion of Stalingrad would never die. It was, and remains, embedded in the collective memory of the Russian nation.

Sleeping

Hotel Intourist (☎ 364 553; fax 361 648; ul Mira 14; s/d from R1900/2270; ☎) After recent renovations, this vast place no longer feels faded. The level of service matches the bright, welcoming lobby. Rooms are light and comfortable, if slightly overpriced.

Hotel Volgograd (☎ 408 030; www.hotelvolgograd.ru; ul Mira 12; s/d R1350/1900; ☎) South across pl Pavshikh Bortsov, this is another vintage gem, with a wide range of rooms and prices. The cheapest rooms start at R800 per person. The ground floor Grand Cafe is among Volgograd's hottest spots to sip a cappuccino and scope out the scene (below).

Eating

Gallery Bar (☎ 331 458; ul Mira 11; meals R200-300; ☎ noon-11pm) A popular – if pricey – bar with tasty food and cold Guinness. If you come for dinner, head to the more convivial upstairs seating area.

Bochka (☎ 919 319; Sovetskaya ul 16; meals R200-400; ☎ 11am-midnight) This dark and cosy basement place has a good selection of beer and European cuisine. It draws a business lunch crowd, but it's more fun in the evening, when live music plays.

Ceramic Café (☎ 362 241; ul Chuykova 9; meals around R100; ☎ 10am-10pm) This cheerful and cheap place is always busy with Russian families and couples on dates. The decoration, provided by local artists, is for sale.

Friendship (☎ 383 348; pr Lenina 15; meals R500-800) Calls itself an English bar, for some reason. Despite the misnomer, this upscale restaurant has a decent reputation for food. The atmosphere is a bit stuffy with its ruffled violet curtains, but there is live music most nights.

White Horse (☎ 331 739; ul Ostrovskogo 5; meals R200; ☎ noon-2am) One of several divey places in this residential courtyard – all of which seem to be better for drinking than for eating. Local rock bands play on Fridays and Saturdays.

A few friendly fast-food cafés populate the square opposite the Fine Arts Museum. Stocked with typical fruit, veggies and cheeses, the **central market** (cnr uls Komsomolskaya & Sovetskaya) is the best place for self-caterers.

Getting There & Away

Buy airline tickets at the **Aviakassa** (☎ 408 066; Hotel Volgograd, ul Mira 12; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat) or at the **Aeroflot office** (☎ 300 515; alleya Geroyev 6; ☎ 9am-6pm) for flights to/from

Moscow (R4300, seven daily). Flights go once or twice a week to/from Baku and Yerevan.

The river station, just south of the foot of alleya Geroyev, was once one of the grandest on the river. Now, however, it shares the fate of many other public buildings and has much of its space given over to businesses peddling a variety of wares. Go around to the back on the ground level for ticket sales.

The Central Bus Station is a 10-minute walk across the tracks from the train station. Train services run daily to/from Moscow's Paveletsky vokzal (R1670, 20 hours), as well as to Astrakhan (nine hours), Volgograd (R620, eight hours) and Rostov-on-Don (R520, nine hours). A train to Ulyanovsk (R750, 20 hours) departs every second day.

Getting Around

The city centre is accessible on foot. To get to Mamaev Kurgan or the Stalingrad museum you can take the *skorostnoy tramvay* (high-speed tram), which is basically a single metro line that runs along or under pr Lenina. To get to the airport, catch a *marshrutka* from the stop in front of the TABC Volga Airlines office, at the corner of ul Volodarksogo and pr Lenina. Buses run every 30 minutes or so.

ASTRAKHAN АСТРАХАНЬ

☎ 8512 / pop 500,000 / ☎ Moscow

Situated at the upper end of the Volga River delta, about 100km from the Caspian Sea, Astrakhan is both a river and a sea port. The Golden Horde controlled this area in the 13th century and founded a city on the west bank of the Volga River. After Kazan fell to Ivan the Terrible, however, his troops took over the rest of the Volga River region and destroyed the original Tatar city. In 1558 the Russian troops built the kremlin on the east bank of the river and founded the modern city of Astrakhan.

As a trading centre between Europe, Central Asia and the Caucasus, Astrakhan has always been prosperous. Today its economic role hinges on its dwindling sturgeon population for caviar production (see boxed text, p428) and its disputed access to the Caspian Sea for oil production.

Astrakhan serves as a gateway to the beautiful Volga Delta and the carefully

ROE TO RUIN

Caviar: the very word evokes glamorous lifestyles, exotic travel and glittering festivities. But the sturgeon, the source of this luxury item, is in grave danger. Although it has survived since dinosaurs roamed the Earth, the question now is whether this 'living fossil' can withstand the relentless fishing pressure, pollution and habitat destruction that have brought many sturgeon species to the brink of extinction.

Sturgeon are remarkable fish: clad in bony plates and equipped with broad snouts, some species live to be more than 100 years old and can grow to be 1125kg and 4.5m long, although the very largest fish are extremely rare today, following decades of overfishing. Like humans, many sturgeon species reproduce relatively late in life; some do not reach sexual maturity until the ages of 15 to 25. A single sturgeon can produce hundreds of pounds of fish eggs, or roe.

Sturgeon today face several major obstacles to survival. Primarily, the global caviar market has placed a premium on sturgeon, prompting overfishing and poaching. Political turmoil in sturgeon-producing countries, including Russia, has resulted in a flourishing black-market trade. Many sturgeon migrate through the waters of different states and countries, resulting in a lack of effective management of their populations. Coupled with an ongoing loss of habitat and a slow pace of reproduction, the sturgeon are facing an upstream swim.

If you're thinking of buying caviar, read the box, p107, first.

(R1500, 30 hours), Volgograd (R620, eight hours) and Rostov-on-Don (R950, 24 hours). Trains also head south to Makhachkala in Dagestan (R550, 12 hours) and to Baku in Azerbaijan (R950, 24 hours).

Astrakhan is the end point of cruises on the Volga; the **river station** (ul Kremlevskaya 1) is located on the naberezhnaya. There are no regular passenger boats to the other Caspian Sea ports.

Getting Around

Bus 5 and trolleybus 3 go to/from the airport, train station and pl Lenina. Catch the bus from any stop along ul Pobedy, ul Sverdlova or ul Zhelyabova. Trolleybus 1, 2, 3 and 4 run to/from the train station and pl Lenina.

AROUND ASTRAKHAN

Volga Delta Дельта Волги

The delta of the lower Volga River, where the river divides into thousands of branches, is home to an immense treasure of flora and fauna. Among the reeds here are beavers, racoons, muskrats, foxes and otters. The waterways and marshes are also home to flocks of waterfowl and other birds, including herons, swans, cormorants and mag-

nificent bald eagles. Over 100 species of fish inhabit these waters, including carp, pike perch, shoot fish, bream, chub, roach and perch, not to mention the mighty sturgeon (see the boxed text, above).

About 90% of Volga Delta territory is uninhabited by humans and accessible only by boat. Whether fishing, bird-watching or sunbathing, a cruise through the delta's winding waterways is among the best ways to spend a day in the Volga region.

Fishing season is from April to November. In most cases, anglers will not be allowed to keep their prizes, but should throw the fish back after securing photographic evidence. (Birds abound during these months as they follow the fish.) April can be chilly, but still enjoyable. May and June are apparently unbearable in the delta due to the inescapable swarms of mosquitoes. In August, the area is abloom with floating lotus flowers, often growing over 2m high and featuring blossoms larger than your head. September and October are also pleasant.

Access to the delta is restricted to tour agencies and fisheries with special permission, so the only way to visit the area is to book a tour with a local agency such as Intourist Delta Volga (see p426).

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