

Destination Russia

'Oh, what a glittering, wondrous infinity of space the world knows nothing of! Rus!'

Nikolai Gogol, Dead Souls (1842)

For centuries the world has wondered what to believe about Russia. The country has been reported variously as a land of unbelievable riches and indescribable poverty, cruel tyrants and great minds, generous hospitality and meddlesome bureaucracy, beautiful ballets and industrial monstrosities, pious faith and unbridled hedonism. These eternal Russian truths coexist in equally diverse landscapes of icy tundra and sun-kissed beaches, dense silver birch and fir forests and deep and mysterious lakes, snow-capped mountains and swaying grasslands – those famous steppes. Factor in ancient fortresses, luxurious palaces, swirly spired churches and lost-in-time wooden villages and you'll begin to see why Russia is simply amazing.

To get the most from Russia, head way off the beaten track. After taking in old favourites such as dynamic Moscow, historic St Petersburg and beautiful Lake Baikal, dive further and deeper into the largest country in the world. Visit the soft, golden sands of the old Prussian resort of Kranz, now known as Zelenogradsk, in the far western Kaliningrad Region; the charming Volga river village of Gorodets, home to folk artists and honeycake bakers; fascinating Elista, Europe's sole Buddhist enclave and location of the wacky Chess City; the 400-year-old mausoleums of Dargavs, a North Ossetian 'city of the dead'; or the hot springs of Kamchatka's Nalychevo Valley in the Russian Far East.

Russia's vast geographical distances and cultural differences mean you don't tick off its highlights in the way you might those of a smaller country; the Russian Far East, for example, is the size of Europe. A more sensible approach is to view Russia as a collection of countries, each one deserving exploration. Rather than transiting via Moscow, consider flying direct to a regional centre such as Irkutsk to have an Eastern Siberian vacation, or to Yekaterinburg to explore the Urals mountain range.

If cultural and architectural highlights are what you're after, stick to European Russia, which is all of the country west of the Urals. If you don't mind occasionally roughing it and are in search of Russia's great outdoors, train your eye on the vast spaces of Siberia and the Far East. Alternatively, boost your adrenaline on the country's top ski resorts and raft-friendly rivers. You can also get a bird's-eye view of it all from the cockpit of a MiG-25 or even from outer space, as well as unique experiences such as getting a beating in a *banya* (traditional steam bath).

In the past decade Russia has evolved from the economically jittery, inefficient and disorganised basket case that Vladimir Putin inherited from Boris Yeltsin to a relatively slick petrodollar mover and shaker, the world's No 1 luxury goods market. Off the back of oil and gas sales, the world's biggest energy exporter has paid off its debts and stashed away reserves of R3.84 trillion (US\$162.5 billion). With the economy growing at an average 7% per year, the National Statistics Agency reported that the average monthly salary rose by 27% in 2007 to R13,500 (US\$550) and that unemployment was down to 6%. According to *Forbes* magazine in 2007, 19 of the 100 richest people in the world were Russians, while the country's tally of 87 US\$ billionaires makes it second only to the US. Lenin is surely spinning in his mausoleum!

FAST FACTS

Population: 141.4 million

Surface area: 17 million sq km

Time zones: 11

National symbol: double-headed eagle

Extent of the Russian rail network: 87,000km

Gazprom profits in 2007: R658 billion (US\$27.8 billion)

Rate of income tax: 13% flat

Number of deaths per year from alcohol poisoning: 40,000

Number of languages spoken (other than Russian): more than 100

Number of Nobel Prize winners: 20

The global financial turmoil of late 2008 may have put a significant dent in their bank balances, but it remains true that the *lyux* life enjoyed by the likes of aluminium mogul Oleg Deripaska or Roman Abramovich might as well be on a different planet from that of the 20 million or so Russians who subsist on less than R4500 a month. Luxury is hardly common to the growing Russian middle class, either, who nevertheless enjoy lives undreamed of by the vast majority of Soviet citizens less than two decades ago. Under such circumstances they have supported Putin and continue to support his successor Dmitry Medvedev, at the same time as gritting their teeth and tightening their purses to deal with steadily rising inflation, counted at 15% in the year to May 2008.

With no credible opponent, Medvedev's election to president in March 2008 was never in doubt, the only intangibles being how big his majority might be (71.25%) and how many Russians would bother to vote at all (73.73 million). Non-Russian observers worried about how democratic the outcome really was, and fretted even more in August of the same year when Russia came to blows with Georgia over the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

While the controversy inevitably stirred up extreme reactions, a more sober analysis would have that Russia – however heavy-handedly – is fumbling to find a way to deal with its sense of encirclement by NATO-leaning neighbours, such as Georgia, Ukraine and the Baltic States, who were once part of its 'sphere of influence' and whose borders continue to harbour Russian nationals. While claiming to not want to defy the international community, Medvedev has said, 'We are not afraid of anything, including the prospect of a new Cold War.'

Under such circumstances you may be understandably wary about visiting Russia. It would be a lie to say that travel here is all plain sailing. On the contrary, for all the welcome that its people will show you once you're there, Russia's initial face can be frosty. Tolerating bureaucracy, an insidious level of corruption and some discomfort, particularly away from the booming urban centres, remains an integral part of the whole Russian travel experience. However, a small degree of perseverance will be amply rewarded.

In 1978, in his commencement address at Harvard, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn talked about Russia's 'ancient, deeply rooted autonomous culture...full of riddles and surprises to Western thinking'. From the power machinations of the Kremlin and a resurgent Russian Orthodox Church to the compelling beauty of its arts and the quixotic nature of its people, whose moods tumble between melancholy, indifference and exuberance in the blink of an eye, Russia remains its own unique and fascinating creation that everyone should see for themselves.

Getting Started

WHEN TO GO

Early summer and autumn are many people's favourite periods for visiting Russia. By May the snow has usually disappeared and temperatures are pleasant, while the golden autumnal colours of September and early October can be stunning.

July and August are the warmest months and the main holiday season for both foreigners and Russians (which means that securing train tickets at short notice can be tricky). They're also the dampest months in much of European Russia, with as many as one rainy day in three. In rural parts of Siberia and the Russian Far East, May and June are peak danger periods for encephalitis-carrying ticks, though June and July are worse for biting insects. By September the air has cleared of mosquitoes.

Winter brings the Russia of popular imagination to life. If you're prepared for it, travel in this season is recommended: the snow makes everything picturesque, and the insides of buildings are kept warm. Avoid, however, the first snows (usually in late October) and the spring thaw (March and April), which turn everything to slush and mud.

COSTS & MONEY

Start saving up! Avoid the major cities and use the *platskartny* ('hard' class, or 3rd class) carriages of overnight trains as an alternative to hotels and it's possible – just! – to get by on US\$50 per day. However, if you visit the main cities, eat meals in restaurants and travel on *kupeyny* (2nd class) trains, US\$150 to \$US200 per day is a more realistic figure. Prices drop away from the metropolises, but not significantly, while in remote areas, such as the Russian Far East, everything can cost considerably more.

Dual pricing is also an issue (see the boxed text, opposite). As a foreigner you'll sometimes be charged more at hotels, too, although not in Moscow or St Petersburg where hotel prices are the same for everyone. It's often fair game for taxi drivers and sometimes market sellers to try to charge foreigners more – check with locals for prices, but don't expect that knowledge to be much use unless you can bargain in Russian. You'll rarely be short-changed by staff in restaurants, cafés and bars, though.

See Climate Charts (p717) for more information.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Getting a visa – we'll guide you through the paperwork (p730)
- Checking the security situation – travel to parts of the Caucasus is dangerous and not recommended
- Learning Cyrillic and packing a phrasebook or mini-dictionary – having a handle on the Russian language will improve your visit immeasurably
- Very warm clothes and a long, windproof coat for winter visits
- Thick-soled, waterproof, comfortable walking shoes
- Effective insect repellent for summer
- A sense of humour and bucket load of patience
- A stash of painkillers or other decent hangover cure

ABOUT MUSEUMS (AND OTHER TOURIST ATTRACTIONS)

Much may have changed in Russia since Soviet times, but one thing remains the same: foreigners typically being charged up to 10 times more than locals at museums and other tourist attractions. Higher foreigner fees generally go towards preserving works of art and cultural treasures that might otherwise receive minimal state funding.

Some major Moscow attractions, such as the Kremlin, State History Museum and St Basil's, have ditched foreigner prices. All adults pay whatever the foreigner price used to be; all students, children and pensioners pay the low price. However, in St Petersburg foreigner prices rule.

Moscow and St Petersburg apart, non-Russian labels, guides or catalogues in museums are fairly uncommon. In our reviews we mention if there is good English labelling at a museum. Otherwise assume that you'll need a dictionary to work out the precise details of what you're seeing, or be prepared to pay even more for a guided tour – particularly if you wish that tour to be in a language you understand.

A few more working practices of Russian museums to keep in mind are:

- Admittance typically stops one hour before the official closing time.
- If you wish to take photos or film a video there will be a separate fee for this, typically an extra R100 for a still camera and R200 for video camera.
- Once a month many places close for a 'sanitary day', in theory to allow the place to be thoroughly cleaned; if you specially want to see a museum, call ahead to check it's open.

TRAVELLING RESPONSIBLY

Ease your impact on the environment by travelling overland between Russia and Europe or Asia, as well as using trains to get around the country itself. Sure, it takes more time, but overland travel allows you to see plenty of interesting places en route and meet locals – far more fun than a boring flight. International trains and buses (see p737) are plentiful, and, as our Carbon Emissions Comparison Table shows (see p20), it's possible in some cases to make more than a 50% cut in your environmental footprint by using them.

Interestingly, when we calculated the emissions that would be generated by taking a (non-existent) bus from London to Vladivostok (1.104 tonnes), we found that this was actually more polluting than a flight – take note, trans-Siberian drivers! For further details on overland travel options see the websites *The Man in Seat Sixty-One* (www.seat61.com/Russia.htm) and *Way to Russia* (www.waytorussia.net/Transport/International/Bus.html).

Once in Russia you'll not fail to notice that as closely as some Russians live with nature, they don't always respect it: littering, hunting and poaching are common pastimes. Responsible travellers will be appalled by the mess left in parts of the countryside and at how easily rubbish is chucked out of train windows. Accept that you're not going to change how Russians live, but that you might be able to make a small impression by your own thoughtful behaviour.

It's obvious to not litter yourself, but also try to minimise waste by avoiding excess packaging. Rather than relying on bottled water, consider using purification tablets or iodine in tap water. Also avoid buying items made from endangered species, such as exotic furs and caviar (see p103) that isn't from legal sources.

Support local enterprises, environmental groups and charities that are trying to improve Russia's environmental and social scorecard. A good example is the Great Baikal Trail project helping to construct a hiking trail around Lake Baikal (see p640). Other possibilities include:

CARBON EMISSIONS COMPARISON TABLE

Journey	Transport	Carbon Emissions (tonnes)	Travel Time
London–St Petersburg (2315km)	Train	0.139	2 days
	Flight	0.3	3.5 hrs
London–Moscow (3097km)	Train	0.186	2 days
	Flight	0.359	3.5 hrs
London–Irkutsk (8282km)	Train	0.499	5.5 days
	Flight	0.75	8.5hrs
London–Vladivostok (12,386km)	Train	0.773	8.5 days
	Flight	0.983	10.5hrs

Calculations made on www.carbonfootprint.com.

Cross-Cultural Solutions (www.crossculturalsolutions.org) Runs volunteer programs in a range of social services out of Yaroslavl.

Dersu Uzala Ecotours (www.ecotours.ru/english) Works in conjunction with several major nature reserves across Russia on tours and projects.

EcoSiberia (www.ecosiberia.org) Has information on eco attractions, projects and tours in Siberia.

International Cultural Youth Exchange (www.icye.org) Offers a variety of volunteer projects, mostly in Samara.

Language Link Russia (www.jobs.languagelink.ru) Volunteer to work at language centres in Moscow, St Petersburg, Volgograd and Samara.

World 4U (www.world4u.ru/english.html) Russian volunteer association.

World Wise Ecotourism Network (www.traveleastrussia.com) Ecoadventure tour company specialising in Far East Russia and Siberia.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

Russia: A Journey to the Heart of a Land and its People by Jonathan Dimbleby – the hefty side product of a 16,000km journey the British journalist made for a BBC documentary across the country in 2007 – is a revealing snapshot of a multifaceted country.

Lost Cosmonaut and Strange Telescopes by Daniel Kalder are both blackly comic and serious explorations of some of Russia's quirkiest and least visited locations. In the former book, the 'anti-tourist' author puts Kalmykia, Tatarstan, Mary-El and Udmurtia under the microscope. In the latter, Kalder goes underground in Moscow, hangs out with an exorcist and extends his travels into Siberia to meet the religious prophet Vissarion (p591).

Motherland (www.motherlandbook.com) by Simon Roberts depicts in inspirational words and stark pictures the photographer's year-long journey from Kamchatka to Kaliningrad.

Black Earth: A Journey Through Russia after the Fall by Andrew Meier is acutely observed and elegiac. In dispatches from Chechnya, Moscow, Norilsk, Sakhalin and St Petersburg, he paints a bleak picture of the country.

Black Earth City by Charlotte Hobson is an eloquent account of the author's year studying in Voronezh in the turbulent period following the dissolution of the USSR. The book captures eternal truths about the Russian way of life.

Through Siberia by Accident and Silverland by Dervla Murphy are affectionate, opinionated discourses on the forgotten towns along Siberia's BAM rail route by one of the world's best travel writers.

TOP 10



MUST-SEE MOVIES

Hollywood did Russia proud in David Lean's romantic epic *Doctor Zhivago* and spy thrillers such as *Gorky Park* and *The Russia House*, but otherwise its interest in the country as a location has been limited. No matter, as Russia has its own illustrious movie-making record. Check out the following classics, listed in chronological order. For more on Russian cinema see p88.

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| 1 <i>The Cranes are Flying</i> (1957) Mikhail Kalatozov | 6 <i>Burnt by the Sun</i> (1994) Nikita Mikhalkov |
| 2 <i>Irony of Fate</i> (1975) Eldar Ryazanov | 7 <i>Prisoner of the Mountains</i> (1996) Sergei Bodrov |
| 3 <i>Moscow Doesn't Believe in Tears</i> (1979) Vladimir Menshov | 8 <i>Russian Ark</i> (2002) Alexander Sokurov |
| 4 <i>Stalker</i> (1980) Andrei Tarkovsky | 9 <i>The Return</i> (2003) Andrei Zvyagintsev |
| 5 <i>My Friend Ivan Lapshin</i> (1982) Alexey German | 10 12 (2007) Nikita Mikhalkov |

GREAT READS

Russian literature flourished in the 19th century when leviathans such as Pushkin, Gogol, Chekhov and Dostoevsky were wielding their pens. However, 20th- and 21st-century Russia has also bred several notable wordsmiths whose works afford a glimpse of the country's troubled soul. For more on Russian literature go to p91.

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| 1 <i>War and Peace</i> Leo Tolstoy | 6 <i>Eugene Onegin</i> Alexander Pushkin |
| 2 <i>Dr Zhivago</i> Boris Pasternak | 7 <i>Dead Souls</i> Nikolai Gogol |
| 3 <i>The Master and Margarita</i> Mikhail Bulgakov | 8 <i>Fathers and Sons</i> Ivan Turgenev |
| 4 <i>Quiet Flows the Don</i> Mikhail Sholokhov | 9 <i>Kolyma Tales</i> Varlam Shalamov |
| 5 <i>Crime and Punishment</i> Fyodor Dostoevsky | 10 <i>Ice</i> Vladimir Sorokin |

FANTASTIC FESTIVALS

When Russians throw a party they seldom hold back. Time your trip to coincide with one of these top events and festivals, most showcasing local music, and you're sure to have a ball.

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| 1 Sergei Kuryokhin International Festival (SKIF), late April, St Petersburg (p292) | 6 Naadym, mid-August, Tuva (p598) |
| 2 Victory Day, 9 May: most places celebrate this day but St Petersburg (p292) puts on a great parade | 7 Ysyakh, 21-22 June, Yakutsk (p693) |
| 3 Glinka Festival, 1-10 June, Smolensk (p340) | 8 Sayan Ring International Ethnic Music Festival, mid-July, Shushkenskoe, (p592) |
| 4 Sabantuy, mid-June, Tatarstan (p442) | 9 Dzhangariada, mid-September, Elitsa (p463) |
| 5 Grushinsky festivals, early July, Samara (p449) | 10 Ded Moroz's Birthday, 18 November, Veliky Ustyug (p420) |

In Siberia by Colin Thubron is a fascinating, frequently sombre account of the author's journey from the Urals to Magadan in post-Soviet times; it's worth comparing with his *Among the Russians* about a journey taken in 1981 from St Petersburg to the Caucasus.

Journey into Russia by Laurens van der Post might have been written 60 years ago, but many of the observations made by the author about Soviet life still seem pertinent today, particularly those about the Russian character.

INTERNET RESOURCES

CIA World Factbook (<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/rs.html>) Read what the US spooks have on the Russkies.

English Russia (www.englishrussia.com) Daily entertainment blog that exists, as its strapline says, 'just because something cool happens daily on 1/6th of the world's surface'.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Russian travel tips and blogs, plus the Thorn Tree bulletin board.

Moscow Times (www.moscowtimes.ru) All the latest breaking national news, plus links to sister paper the *St Petersburg Times* and a good travel section.

Russia! (www.readrussia.com) There's more to Russia than ballet, Leo Tolstoy or Maria Sharapova, as the website of this groovy quarterly magazine sets out to prove with its hip features on contemporary Russky culture.

Russia Beyond the Headlines (www.rbth.rg.ru) Wide-ranging online magazine, with interesting features, sponsored by the daily paper *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*.

Russia Prolife (www.russiaprofile.org) Expert analysis of Russian politics, economics, society and culture that promises to unwrap 'the mystery inside the enigma'.

Seven Wonders of Russia (www.ruschudo.ru, in Russian) A 2008 project in which Russians nominated and voted for their local wonders both natural and built. Even if you don't read Russian, the photos are inspirational.

Trans-Siberian Railway Web Encyclopedia (www.transsib.ru/Eng) It's not been fully updated for several years, but this site still has tonnes of useful information and a huge photo library. (There's also a German-language version at www.trans-sib.de.)

Way to Russia (www.waytorussia.net) Written and maintained by Russian backpackers, this site is highly informative and on the ball. However, please note that we've received complaints about buying train tickets through third parties associated with the site.

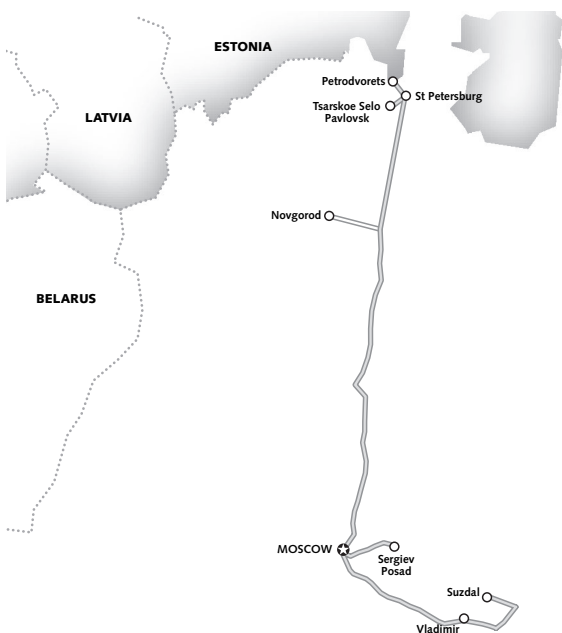
Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

RUSSIAN CAPITALS

Two Weeks

First time in Russia? Then start at the top with the awe-inspiring capital **Moscow** (p129) and the spellbinding imperial capital **St Petersburg** (p238); both encompass the best elements of the country's turbulent past and glittering present. Moscow highlights include the historic **Kremlin** (p158), glorious **Red Square** (p163) and classic **Tretyakov Gallery** (p174), while in St Petersburg do not miss the incomparable **Hermitage** (p260) and the **Russian Museum** (p263), or cruising the city's **rivers and canals** (p292). Enjoy nights dining and drinking at some of the best restaurants and bars in Russia, witnessing first-rate performances at the **Bolshoi** (p198) or **Mariinsky Theatres** (p281), or relaxing in a *banya* such as Moscow's luxury **Sanduny Baths** (p181). St Petersburg is ringed by grand palaces set in beautifully landscaped grounds such as **Petrodvorets** (p312), **Pushkin (Tsarskoe Selo)** (p316) and **Pavlovsk** (p318). From Moscow you have easy access to the historic Golden Ring towns of **Sergiev Posad** (p235), **Suzdal** (p219) and **Vladimir** (p216), where you will be rewarded with a slice of rural Russian life far from the frenetic city pace. Also leave time for ancient **Novgorod** (p343), home to an impressive kremlin, the Byzantine Cathedral of St Sophia and the riverside Yurev Monastery.



Moscow and St Petersburg are linked by a 650km-long railway. A week is the absolute minimum needed if you want to experience the cream of both cities. Add on another week if you plan on visiting the Golden Ring towns, the palaces around St Petersburg, and Novgorod, where it's best to stay at least one night.

Combining travel by road, rail and river, this 2500km route takes you from the Baltic coast to the Caspian Sea. Avoid the need for a Russian multiple-entry visa and visas to Belarus and Lithuania by flying direct from Kaliningrad to either St Petersburg or Moscow and picking up the route from there.

THE AMBER–CAVIAR ROUTE

Three Weeks

Ease yourself into Russia by exploring the geographically separate Kaliningrad region, Russia's far west outpost, sandwiched between Poland and Lithuania, and source of 90% of the world's amber. Four to five days is sufficient to get a taste of the historic city of **Kaliningrad** (p368), the delightful seaside resort of **Svetlogorsk** (p375) and the 'dancing forest' and sand dunes of the **Kurshskaya Kosa** (p378), a World Heritage-listed national park. Take a train through Lithuania and Belarus to re-enter 'big Russia', pausing in the charming walled city of **Smolensk** (p337), which has a connection to the composer Mikhail Glinka, before indulging in the bright lights and big nights of **Moscow** (p129). If it's summer, consider booking a berth on one of the cruise ships that frequently sail down Mother Russia's No 1 waterway, the **Volga River** (p743). Possible stops along the route include Russia's 'third capital' **Nizhny Novgorod** (p434), with its mighty kremlin and the Sakharov Museum; the Tatar capital **Kazan** (p439), also with a World Heritage-listed kremlin; and **Volgograd** (p454), sacred site of Russia's bloodiest battle of WWII. Follow the river to its mouth into the Caspian Sea to end your journey at the east-meets-west city of **Astrakhan** (p457), jumping-off point for exploring the glorious natural attractions, including rare flamingos, of the Volga delta, source of the endangered Beluga sturgeon and its caviar.



THE BIG TRANS-SIBERIAN TRIP

The classic Russian adventure is travelling the **Trans-Siberian Railway** (p748), one of the 20th century's engineering wonders and a route that holds together the world's largest country. We suggest going against the general flow by boarding the train in the port of **Vladivostok** (p671), at the far eastern end of Russia, so you can finish up with a grand party in either **Moscow** (p129) or, better yet, **St Petersburg** (p238). Vladivostok, situated on a stunningly attractive natural harbour, merits a couple of days of your time, and it's also worth considering a stop off at **Khabarovsk** (p664), a lively city of some charm on the banks of the Amur River – it's just an overnight hop to the west. Save a couple of days for **Ulan-Ude** (p644), a fascinating city where Russian, Soviet and Mongolian cultures coexist, and from where you can venture into the steppes to visit Russia's principal Buddhist monastery, **Ivolginsk Datsan** (p650). Just west of Ulan-Ude the railway hugs the southern shores of magnificent **Lake Baikal** (p616). Allow at least three days (preferably longer) to see this beautiful lake, basing yourself on beguiling **Olkhon Island** (p632); also check out historic **Irkutsk** (p628) on the way there or back. **Krasnoyarsk** (p605), on the Yenisey River, affords the opportunity for scenic cruises along one of Siberia's most pleasant waterways. Crossing the Urals into European Russia, the first stop of note is **Yekaterinburg** (p472), a historic, bustling city well stocked with interesting museums and sites connected to the murder of the last tsar and his family. Your last stop before Moscow could be of either the Golden Ring towns of **Yaroslavl** (p227) or **Vladimir** (p216), both packed with ancient onion-domed churches.

Two to Four Weeks

The 9289km journey between Moscow and Vladivostok can be done, nonstop, in a week, but unless you're into extreme relaxation we recommend hopping on and off the train, making more of an adventure of it. Spend time seeing the sights in Moscow and St Petersburg and you could easily stretch this trip to a month.



ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

Travel junkies will relish this off-beat trip involving overnight train journeys, hopping around on planes and helicopters, and possibly a bumpy ride by bus through forbidding stretches of taiga and tundra. In summer there's also the chance to relax on a languid river cruise between Khabarovsk and Komsomolsk-na-Amure.

RUSSIAN FAR EAST CIRCUIT

One Month

Travel in the Russian Far East isn't so much a holiday as an expedition. From the 'wild east' port of **Vladivostok** (p671) head north to **Khabarovsk** (p664), with a possible detour to the World Heritage-listed **Sikhote-Alin Nature Reserve** (p684). An overnight train from Khabarovsk heads to the lively border town **Blagoveshchensk** (p663) – China is on the opposite bank of the Amur River. Another overnight train from here will transport you to **Tynda** (p684), headquarters of the Baikal-Amur Mainline (BAM) construction company and a great place to refresh at the local *banya*. From here there's a choice. Train and hard-travel fanatics should head to **Neryungri** (p685) from where there's a very bumpy and erratic bus to **Yakutsk** (p689), the extraordinary permafrost-bound capital of the Sakha Republic. Alternatively, stick with the BAM route through to the proudly Soviet city of **Komsomolsk-na-Amure** (p685) and back to Khabarovsk, from where there are flights to Yakutsk. Once in Yakutsk, make time to cruise to the scenic **Lena Pillars** (p693) and to visit the city's fascinating **Permafrost Institute** (p690). A flight from either Khabarovsk or Vladivostok will take you over the Sea of Okhotsk to the highlight of this Far Eastern odyssey: **Kamchatka** (p704). Cap off your adventures by climbing one of the snowcapped volcanoes rising behind the rugged peninsula's capital, **Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky** (p707), which hugs breathtakingly serene Avacha Bay, and by visiting **Esso** (p712), as charming an alpine village as you could wish for at the end of a long bumpy road.



TYUMEN TO TUVA: SIBERIA OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

One to Two Months

Far from being the forbidding land of the popular imagination, Siberia is a vast, glorious, adventure-travel playground where you could spend months happily exploring areas away from the well-travelled trans-Siberian route. For a journey covering some of Siberia's lesser-known locations begin in the oil-rich city of **Tyumen** (p538), which for all its contemporary bustle includes several picturesque areas of traditional architecture. Journey northeast in the footsteps of the Siberian conqueror Yermak Timofeevich, the exiled writer Fyodor Dostoevsky and the last tsar to **Tobolsk** (p542), whose splendid kremlin lords it over the Tobol and Irtysh Rivers. Upriver and back on the main trans-Sib route is **Omsk** (p546), a pleasant, thriving city, from where you can head directly to the backwater of **Tomsk** (p556), a convivial university town dotted with pretty wooden gingerbread-style houses. Journey south next to **Barnaul** (p563), gateway to the mountainous **Altai Republic** (p562). Here you can arrange a white-water rafting expedition or plan treks out to **Lake Teletskoe** and the arty village of **Artybash** (p570), or along the panoramic **Chuysky Trakt** (p573), a helter-skelter mountain road leading to yurt-dotted grasslands, first stopping in **Gorno-Altai** (p567) where you'll have to register your visa. A train journey via **Novokuznetsk** (p578) will get you to **Abakan** (p588), where you can arrange onward travel to the wild republic of **Tuva** (p597). This remote and little-visited region, hard up against Mongolia (with which it shares several cultural similarities), is famed for its throat-singing nomads and mystic shamans. Use the uninspiring capital **Kyzyl** (p599) as a base for expeditions to pretty villages and the vast Central Asian steppes.

Direct overnight trains link the major cities on this Siberia-wide itinerary, save Kyzyl, which is best reached either by flight from Barnaul or by a shared taxi from Abakan along the spectacular mountain route, the Usinsky Trakt. In summer a three-day boat trip between Tobolsk and Omsk is also possible.



FROM THE WHITE SEA TO THE BLACK SEA

One to Two Months

Experience climatic and environmental extremes in this adventurous itinerary running from the frigid White Sea within the Arctic Circle to the sun-kissed Black Sea lapping at the foothills of the Caucasus. Start in **Murmansk** (p404), something of a boom town from its offshore gas fields; time your visit right and you might even witness the famous northern lights here. Take a train directly south through the Kola Peninsula, heading for **Kem** (p394), access point for the remote **Solovetsky Islands** (p395), infamous as the location of Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* but also known for their beautiful landscapes and evocative monastery. Back on the mainland keep on towards appealing **Petrozavodsk** (p384) where you can connect, either by hydrofoil across Lake Onega or by bus, to **Vytegra** (p418), which has a fascinating submarine museum, before continuing on to historic **Vologda** (p411), dotted with old churches and wooden houses. Trains chug on to lovely **Yaroslavl** (p227) from where you could take a short cruise on a river boat down to **Nizhny Novgorod** (p434) or even further along the Volga to the Tatarstan capital of **Kazan** (p439). The Volga continues to guide you south past Lenin's birthplace of **Ulyanovsk** (p444) and **Samara** (p446) from where you could go hiking in the rocky Zhiguli Hills. Ultimately you'll reach **Astrakhan** (p457) where you could dip your toe in the Caspian Sea before turning west to the fascinating Buddhist enclave of **Elista** (p461), a convenient breaking point en route to the Caucasus mineral-water spa region centred around attractive **Pyatigorsk** (p509). From here it's a straight shot to **Sochi** (p497), the Black Sea's premier resort and host city for the 2014 Winter Olympics, which will be mainly held up at the ski centre of **Krasnaya Polyana** (p506).

Connecting two of Russia's least visited (by foreigners) regions, this 3000km route is best travelled in May or June when access to the Solovetsky Islands is possible, Volga River cruises start running and the Black Sea beaches are warm enough for sunbathing.



TAILORED TRIPS

LITERARY RUSSIA

A tour of the locations associated with Russia's literary giants gives you an insight into what inspired their work, and makes for an offbeat trip across Russia, from the Baltic to the Pacific and back to the Black Sea. **St Petersburg** (p238) is arguably Russia's city of letters, with museums in the former homes of Fyodor Dostoevsky, Alexander Pushkin and the poet Anna Akhmatova. You can also pay your respects at Dostoevsky's summer hideaway in **Staraya Russa** (p350) and the Siberian prisons in which he languished in **Tobolsk** (p542) and **Omsk** (p546). In contrast Anton Chekhov, whose country estate is at **Melikhovo** (p211), made a voluntary trip across Siberia ending up on Sakhalin; a small museum in the island's capital, **Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk** (p698), commemorates the writer's epic journey as does one in **Aleksandrovsk-Sakhalinsky** (p703). Boris Pasternak's dacha in the writers' colony of **Peredelkino** (p210) is open for inspection, as is **Yasnaya Polyana** (p327), Leo Tolstoy's estate, which is surrounded by apple orchards, and **Spasskoe-Lutovinovo** (p335), the family manor of Ivan Turgenev. Recite your favourite Pushkin verses at his home in **Mikhailovskoe** (p357) before heading south, as the poet did in exile, to the romantic, troubled Caucasus and the resort of **Pyatigorsk** (p509), where fellow poet Mikhail Lermontov is commemorated all over town at a grotto, gallery, museum and gardens.



WORLD HERITAGE RUSSIA

There are 21 Unesco World Heritage sites in Russia. To visit many of them, from the **Kurshskaya Kosa** (p378) in Kaliningrad in the west to the volcanoes of **Kamchatka** (p704) in the Far East, could easily swallow up a couple of months but would also make an unparalleled tour of the nation's cultural and geographical highlights. From Kaliningrad head to imperial **St Petersburg** (p238), then continue to the fairy-tale churches on **Kizhi** (p390) in Lake Ladoga. Journey to the edge of the Arctic Circle to the beautiful **Solovetsky Islands** (p395), and on the way back south pause at ancient **Novgorod** (p343). In **Moscow** (p129), you can tick off the Kremlin, Red Square, Novodevichy Convent and Church of the Ascension at Kolomenskoe. The Golden Ring towns of **Vladimir** (p216), **Suzdal** (p219) and **Sergiev Posad** (p235) are all on the list, as are the spectacular mountains of the Western Caucasus such as **Mt Elbrus** (p525). Turning eastward, stop off at **Kazan** (p439) for its kremlin before making your assault on the **Altai Mountains** (p562). Beguiling **Lake Baikal** (p616) and the **Sikhote-Alin Nature Reserve** (p684) on the Pacific coast bring up the rear.



The Authors



SIMON RICHMOND

**Coordinating Author,
St Petersburg, Kaliningrad Region**

After studying Russian history and politics at university, Simon's first visit to the country was in 1994, when he wandered goggle-eyed around gorgeous St Petersburg and peeked at Lenin's mummified corpse in Red Square. He's since travelled the breadth of the nation, from Kamchatka in the far east to Kaliningrad in the far west, stopping off at many points in between. An award-winning writer and photographer, Simon has written about Russia for several publications, including the Russian edition of *Newsweek*. He's the coauthor of the first and subsequent editions of Lonely Planet's *Trans-Siberian Railway* as well as previous editions of *Russia & Belarus* in 2002 and 2005. Catch him online at www.simonrichmond.com.



MARC BENNETTS

Western Siberia

Initially enticed to St Petersburg by the works of Gogol and Dostoevsky, Marc later moved to Moscow, where he has lived since 1998. During that time he has followed the fortunes of Russian football, and in 2008 his book *Football Dynamo: Modern Russia and the People's Game* was published. He has also written about Russia for a number of guides and magazines. Marc currently works for a Russian news agency and is researching his second book – either a vampire novel set in Siberia or a look at Russia's changing attitudes to the West.



GREG BLOOM

Russian Caucasus

Greg cut his teeth in the former Soviet Union working as a journalist and later editor-in-chief of the *Kyiv Post*. He left Ukraine in 2003, but returns frequently to the region for writing assignments. Over the years he has been detained by authorities in Uzbekistan, taken a *shlagbaum* to the head in Kyiv, jumped out of helicopters atop volcanoes in Kamchatka and hit 100km/h in a Latvian bobsled – mostly in the service of Lonely Planet. These days Greg lives with his wife and daughter in Phnom Penh. His blogs about this and other research trips are at www.mytripjournal.com/bloomblogs.

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MARC DI DUCA

Eastern Siberia

In 1998, after a decade of mountain biking and ale consumption in rural Bohemia, Marc decided to go large and discover what all the fuss was about beyond the Carpathians. Almost 20 extended trips to assorted corners of the former USSR later, he has learnt to converse in Ukrainian-accented Russian, acquired an insatiable thirst for *kvas*, downed shots with Buryatiya's agriculture minister and frozen his gulags in Lake Baikal. Marc has updated and authored several Ukraine and Russia-related titles, most recently the Eastern Siberia chapter of this guide. When not competing for oxygen with fellow *platskart* passengers or counting Scythian standing stones in rural Tuva, Marc can usually be found in Sandwich, Kent, where he lives with his Kievite wife, Tanya.



MARK ELLIOTT

Northern European Russia

Mark first fell in love with Eastern Europe nearly 35 years ago when dragged most willingly to Romania by parental caravan. Since joining Prague's 1989 Velvet Revolution he has been venturing ever further east, quickly discovering that far from being morose, enemy Soviet clones (as was their image of the day), most Russians are in fact warm, deeply hospitable, free-thinking individuals. Having crossed Siberia twice for previous editions of this book, this time Mark updated and expanded the Northern European Russia chapter, seeking out Sami reindeer herders, drinking with Norwegian businessmen and having his aura analysed by Russian mystics.



MICHAEL KOHN

Western European Russia

All those semesters of studying literature at UC Santa Barbara finally came in handy on this research trip as Michael was able to visit the homes of some of his favourite authors: Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Turgenev. He now vows to start reading more Pushkin. Michael first visited Russia in 1995 and has since travelled widely in the former Soviet world. On various assignments with Lonely Planet he has stood on the shores of the shrinking Aral Sea, felt the heat of burning gas craters in Turkmenistan and infiltrated the forbidden ghost city of Agdam on the front line between Armenia and Azerbaijan. When not travelling he splits his time between Mongolia and California. He is online at www.michaelkohn.us.



LEONID RAGOZIN

Volga Region, The Urals

Leonid Ragozin devoted himself to beach dynamics when he studied geology at the Moscow State University. But for want of really nice beaches in Russia, he helped Australian gold prospectors in Siberia and sold InterRail tickets and Lonely Planet books to Russian backpackers before embarking on a career as a journalist. After eight years with the BBC, he was poached by the Russian version of *Newsweek* and became their foreign correspondent. In this capacity, he has coerced his superiors into sending him as far as Bhutan, Ecuador and dozens of similarly unlikely destinations, and gotten away with it. If you see a Russian boarding Bolivian Air Force One, searching for Circassians in Kosovo or celebrating St Patrick's Day in Belfast with ex-militants, that's probably Leonid.



ROBERT REID

Russian Far East

A Cold War child – tender and impressionable – Robert studied journalism and Russian at the University of Oklahoma and spent the 'first summer of Russia' (1993) studying Russian in St Petersburg and Moscow, talking about the rock bands on Echo Moscow radio, and throwing a few (now-regretted) vegetables at trams. After several years of various jobs and globetrotts, he joined Lonely Planet, where he oversaw the Shoestring series from the London office. Now he writes full-time from home in Brooklyn, New York, where he keeps up his website (www.reidontravel.com), and has updated many Lonely Planet guidebooks, including *Romania & Moldova*, *Eastern Europe* and the *Trans-Siberian Railway*. Occasionally he makes moustache-ratio graphs with crayons.



MARA VORHEES

Moscow, Golden Ring

Mara has been travelling to Russia since the days of the Cold War and communism. She spent the first half of the 1990s learning Russian and the second half working on a foreign-aid project in the Urals. As a travel writer, she has ridden the Trans-Siberian Railway, cruised the Volga River, circled the Golden Ring and mastered the Moscow metro. Her stories about Moscow have appeared in various publications, including *National Geographic Traveler*. She is the author of the *Moscow City Guide* and the *St Petersburg City Guide*. When not roaming around Russia, she lives in a pink house in Somerville, Massachusetts, with her husband and her cat. Follow her adventures at www.maravorhees.com.

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