



Eastern Siberia

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Why Go?

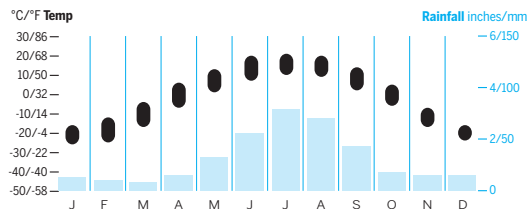
Endless ice-bound winters, oven-hot summers, a history of imperial exile and Stalinist brutality – Eastern Siberia (Восточная Сибирь) may not sound like everyone's first choice of holiday destination, but there's much more to this vast region than blood-craving mosquitoes and blizzard-lost Gulag camps.

Focus is given to the map by glorious Baikal, the world's deepest lake. Only Siberia could possess such a phenomenon with its crystal waters, mind-boggling stats and a long list of outlandish endemic species. The lake presents a major obstacle to the Trans-Siberian Railway, which cradles Siberia in a string of intriguing cities such as architecturally grand Irkutsk, exotically Asian Ulan-Ude and youthful, oil-rich Krasnoyarsk.

But the trick to enjoying Eastern Siberia is in escaping the cities – hit the Great Baikal Trail, go hunting for Tuvan standing stones or seek out far-flung Buddhist temples in Buryatiya – the possibilities are endless, almost as endless as the immense sweep of geography they occupy.

When to Go

Irkutsk



Mar Take a stroll on Lake Baikal when the Siberian winter turns its surface hard as steel.

Jul Get on down at Shushenskoe's Sayan Ring International Ethnic Music Festival.

Sep Watch larch trees around Lake Baikal turn a fiery yellow during the brief autumn.

History

For century after tranquil prehistoric century, Eastern Siberia's indigenous peoples, such as the Evenki (Tungusi) north of Lake Baikal and the Kets of the Yenisey River, lived a peaceful existence in harmony with nature, harvesting game and berries in the thick taiga, fishing the rivers and building their *chumy* (tepees), largely oblivious of the outside world. In the south, horse-riding nomads of the Scythian culture (700 BC–AD 300) thrived in what is now Tuva, leaving behind fields of standing stones and circular *kurgany* (burial mounds) packed with intricately fashioned gold.

Gradually, however, Mongol-Turkic tribes began their expansion north and west, led by fearsome leaders such as Attila the Hun. The Buryats filtered north from Mongolia during the 11th and 12th centuries to assimilate local peoples and become the dominant ethnic group in Eastern Siberia. In the early 13th century, Chinggis (Genghis) Khan united Mongol tribes across the region and went on to conquer China. Subsequent khans would sweep west across the steppe to sack the great cities of European Russia.

ENTER THE RUSSIANS

With a firm foothold in Western Siberia, small Cossack units began arriving further east in the early 17th century, establishing an *ostrog* (fortress) at river confluence positions such as Krasnoyarsk (1628), Ulan-Ude (1666, originally Verkhneudinsk) and Irkutsk (1651). Traders from European Russia followed and pressed indigenous peoples into supplying sable pelts at bargain prices (a cruel tax called the *yasaki*). The Buryats put up some resistance to the European invaders, but were no match for the Russian firearms.

European peasants were the next group to make the treacherous journey from the west, followed by banished prisoners and Old Believers after the religious rift of 1653; the original defensive forts burst like popcorn into ramshackle timber towns. Other Siberian settlers included the influential Decembrists (see p632), who'd failed to pull off a coup in 1825, and political prisoners from the uprisings in Russian-occupied Poland. The end of serfdom in 1861 brought a tsunami of land-hungry peasants escaping the cramped conditions of European Russia.

In the 18th century, Tibetan Buddhism arrived in Buryat settlements east of Lake Baikal and was successfully superimposed

onto existing shamanist beliefs. The western Buryats were never converted and shamanism still dominates west of the lake.

THE IMPACT OF THE RAILROADS

Siberia's fur-based economy rapidly diversified and the discovery of gold further encouraged colonisation. Trade with China brought considerable wealth following the treaties of Nerchinsk in 1689 and Kyakhta in 1728. Lucrative tea caravans continued trudging the Siberian post road until put out of business by the Suez Canal and the Trans-Siberian Railway. The railway instantly changed the fortunes of cities, most notably Kyakhta on the border with Mongolia. Once one of the richest towns in all Russia, it plunged into provincial obscurity when the tea trade dried up. In the early 20th century the newly finished line brought yet another influx of Russian settlers east.

Following the 1917 Bolshevik revolution and the outbreak of the Russian Civil War, Siberia declared itself firmly in the White camp under Admiral Kolchak. After much fierce fighting along the Trans-Siberian Railway, Red forces finally took the region in 1919. Kolchak was arrested and executed in Irkutsk in 1920, and the last shots of the civil war were fired in Tuva. From 1920 to 1922, Eastern Siberia was nominally independent with the pro-Lenin Far Eastern Republic centred on Chita.

As the USSR stabilised and Stalin's infamous Gulag camps were created, Siberia reverted to its old role as a land of banishment. Nonetheless, enforced colonisation continued apace, especially after WWII when much heavy industry was shifted east for strategic security. Prisoners, volunteers and Soviets seeking higher pay for working in the east arrived to construct dams and transport infrastructure. The greatest of these projects was the ill-conceived Baikal–Amurskaya Magistral (BAM) railway stretching over 4200km from Tayshet to Sovetskaya Gavan on the Pacific coast.

POST-SOVIET SIBERIA

Since the end of the USSR in 1991, many towns and villages away from the economic beaten track (such as along the BAM and the Yenisey River) have deteriorated into virtual ghost towns. Others, such as Krasnoyarsk and Irkutsk, have benefited from Russia's new-found economic strength on the back of high oil and gas prices. Lake Baikal is attracting more tourists than ever, and Moscow has declared certain areas on its shores special