

welcome to Russia



Eternal Russia

For centuries the world has wondered about Russia. The country has been reported 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, deep, mysterious lakes, snow-capped mountains and swaying grassland 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.

Urban & Rural

If cultural and architectural landmarks are what you're after, focus on European Russia, which is all of the country west of the Ural Mountains. Moscow and St Petersburg are the must-see destinations, twin repositories of eye-boggling national treasures, political energies and contemporary creativity. Within easy reach of either are charming historical towns and villages where the vistas dotted with onion domes and lined with gingerbread cottages measure up to the rural Russia of popular imagination.

To get the most from Russia, however, make your way off the beaten track. The nation's vast geographical distances and

*'Oh, what a glittering,
wondrous infinity of space
the world knows nothing of!
Rus!' Nikolai Gogol, Dead
Souls (1842)*

(left) GUM, Red Square, Moscow (p74).
(below) Lake Baikal (p524).



cultural differences mean you don't tick off its highlights in the way you might those of a smaller country. 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 or Yekaterinburg.

A Riddle Worth Solving

It would be a fib to say that travel here is all plain sailing. Russia's initial face can be frosty. Tolerating bureaucracy, corruption and occasional discomfort, particularly away from the booming urban centres, remains an integral part of the Russian travel experience. However, a small degree

of perseverance will be amply rewarded and one of the great joys of Russian travel is being swept away by the locals' boundless hospitality.

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 can tumble from melancholy to indifference or exuberance in the blink of an eye, Russia is a fascinating creation that will perplex, delight and ultimately seduce you.