

Russia

Russia's vast size means that it is influenced by the culture and traditions of people throughout Asia and Europe. Spanning 11 time zones and two continents, the country wraps its way around almost a third of the globe, bordering Finland in Western Europe and ending over 6,000 miles later with a coastline 50 miles from the USA. The country's chequered political past has played a large role in stamping a distinct identity on present day Russia and it wasn't until the relatively recent collapse of the communist regime that the Russian people have been able to fully express their diversity in terms of religion, art and culture.

The western areas of Russia, as well as being the most densely populated, are the most popular with visitors and it is here that evidence of the country's imperial Tsarist origins can clearly be seen. St Petersburg was once the old Tsarist capital and the city is full of reminders of the vast opulence and wealth commanded by the Imperial family at this time. The Winter Palace, situated off Nevsky Prospect in the centre of St Petersburg, is home to the Hermitage museum which contains an impressive collection of art – including numerous works by Rembrandt, Picasso and Matisse.

Other imperial palaces built outside the city, at Tsarskoe Selo and Oranienbaum, have been restored since the end of the Second World War when they were all but demolished by the advancing German army. The Great Catherine Palace at Tsarskoe Selo – meaning Tsar's village – was the official summer residence of the Tsars for two centuries and home to the famous amber room, three walls of which were covered entirely in amber and precious stones. The amber was removed by the German army during the Second World War and its whereabouts today is still a mystery.

With the emergence of communist rule after the forced abdication of Tsar Nicholas II in 1917, the political centre of Russia moved to Moscow and it is here that visitors can visit the embalmed body of Lenin – the leader of the 1917 revolution – in a mausoleum in Red Square. Plans to remove Lenin's body from the mausoleum and bury him have so far not been realised, although an honour guard, which once flanked the entrance, has now been disbanded.

Moscow boasts a wide array of museums depicting the country's cultural heritage, including those displaying traditional folk costumes, samovas (decorated tea urns) and dymkovo toys (clay figures originally made to commemorate ancestors). One of the most interesting displays is the collection of ornamental Easter eggs at the museums of the Moscow Kremlin. Intricately decorated Easter eggs were often given as gifts between the Russian people and the most expensive and ornate are the Fabergé eggs that were commissioned by the Imperial family.

The city is also home to the famous Bolshoi ballet which was founded in



“[Russia] is a riddle wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma”
Winston Churchill (1874-1965),
former British Prime Minister

1773 as a dancing school for the Moscow orphanage. Russia is well known for producing legendary ballet dancers, such as Nadezhda Pavlova and Rudolf Nureyev, and the beautifully decorated theatres of the Bolshoi, or the Mariinsky in St Petersburg, offer visitors a chance to experience the full glory of the Russian ballet.

The winter festival is held in Russia every year during the month of January, and during this time, Russian people take part in theatrical performances of old fables, hold traditional outdoor parties with *troika* (sleigh) rides and folk games, and drink lots of vodka. Folk music, opera and numerous concerts also take place in the larger cities and Christmas – once banned under the communist regime – is now celebrated on the 7th January in accordance with the Russian calendar.

One favourite winter dish in Russia is *borscht*. The mainstay ingredient is beetroot, which gives it its distinctive red colouring, although ingredients can be as varied as mushrooms, cabbage, potatoes, and sometimes ham and sausage. It is often served with sour cream and dill and provides a hearty meal during the cold winters.