

Russia



The Russian Federation is a vast country, which encompasses over 150 ethnic minorities and 21 autonomous republics. To travel the 10,000 kilometres that separates the east and west takes 12 hours in a plane, while the continuous Trans-Siberian rail route from Moscow to Vladivostok takes just over six days.

The cities of Moscow and St Petersburg are the most frequently visited of all the Russian cities and their Imperialist heritage, historical importance and cultural attractions provide many opportunities for sightseeing. However, with 1,045 other cities and towns to explore, Russia is certainly more than the sum of these cities.

On the European side of the country lies the city of Nizhny Novgorod, which is famous for being the birthplace of the author, Maxim Gorky – after whom the city was renamed during Soviet times. The city is in the heart of the Volgo-Vyatsky region, which is renowned for traditional crafts such as the matryoshka dolls that can be found throughout Russia. The dolls, which fit inside each other with ever decreasing dimensions, are a symbol of motherhood and fertility and are named after the traditional girl's name Matryona or Matryosha that stems from the Latin word, *mater*, meaning mother.

Another of Russia's larger cities is Ekaterinburg, which is situated in the centre of the Ural Mountains, on the cusp between the two continents of Europe and Asia. The city was named after the wife of the Emperor Peter the Great and played a crucial role in the destruction of the Imperialist regime when it became the site of the execution of the last Tsar, Nicholai II, and his family in 1918. Ipatiev house, where the execution took place, has since been knocked down but now a Russian Orthodox Church, Cathedral-on-the-Blood, marks the spot.

Re-named Sverdlosk during the Soviet era, Ekaterinburg was once an important military base for the Russian army and was closed to all foreign visitors after the Second World War until 1990. Now, however, the city provides a gateway to the magnificent Ural Mountains where there are opportunities for camping, hiking and rock climbing.

On the eastern side of the Urals lies Siberia – named after a Mongolian word meaning sleeping land – which

makes up more than 75 per cent of Russia's land mass. Eastern Siberia and the far east experiences some of the lowest temperatures in the Northern Hemisphere, reaching -40°C in Omyakon in the east.

Due to the region's vast size and harsh environment, Siberia is scarcely populated with the largest centres of population concentrated around the route of the Trans-Siberian railway. Some nomadic herders still live in the northern part of the country while farmers and hunters live spread out in isolated areas. In this part of the country the famous Russian ushankas – caps with ear-flaps made of mink, rabbit, beaver or lamb fur – are particularly useful in winter.



“Every peasant is proud of the pond in his village because from it he measures the sea”
Russian proverb

Lake Baikal, which is located in Siberia's southern region close to the Mongolian border, is a vast natural lake that is larger than the area of Belgium and contains over 20 per cent of the world's fresh water. It is home to more regional species – including the world's only freshwater seal – than any other lake in the world and is fed by 336 rivers. There are 30 rocky islands in the lake and the largest, Olkhon Island, is reputed to be the birthplace of the legendary Mongolian ruler, Genghis Khan. The island is now a local centre of Shamanism.

The Primorsky region, of which Vladivostok is the capital, is a beautiful wilderness area encompassing mountains, forests, rivers and caves that offer lots of outdoor activities. White-water rafting, trekking, caving and scuba diving are all available in the six reserves and five national parks that exist in the region.

Food specialities vary greatly throughout Russia due to its vast size and varying influences. However, popular dishes such as shashlick (lamb kebabs cooked over an open fire), blini (pancakes) and pelmeni (pork dumplings) are traditional dishes found throughout the country.