

Getting Started

WHEN TO GO

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

July and August are the warmest months and the main holiday season for both foreigners and Russians (which means securing train tickets at short notice can be a problem). They're also the dampest months in most parts of Belarus and 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 the 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, though, the first snows (usually in late October) and the spring thaw (April), which turn everything to slush and mud.

COSTS & MONEY

While it's possible to travel on next to nothing (p731), on the whole, Russia and Belarus are not cheap destinations. 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 to live on US\$30 per day (US\$20 in Belarus). However, if you visit the main cities, eat Western-style meals in restaurants and travel on *kupeyny* (2nd class) trains, US\$80 per day is a more realistic figure. Prices drop away from the metropolises, but not significantly, but in remote areas, such as the Russian Far East, everything can cost considerably more.

In both countries dual pricing is also an issue. As a foreigner you'll find yourself pretty much always paying more than a local as far as entrance to museums and tourist sites is concerned and sometimes 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.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Getting a visa – we'll guide you through the paperwork (p713)
- Checking the security situation – travel to areas such as Chechnya and Dagestan is dangerous and not recommended
- Very warm clothes and a long, windproof coat, if you're visiting during winter
- Thick-soled, waterproof, comfortable walking shoes
- Strong insect repellent for summer
- A sense of humour
- A stash of painkillers or other decent hangover cure

See Climate Charts (p700 & p716) for more information.

It's not unusual for a foreigner to be charged 10 times what Russians are charged to enter museums, not entirely unfairly given the vast disparity between average Western and Russian incomes. Remember your extra money is desperately needed to protect the very works of art and artefacts you've come to see.

TOP TENS

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 classic movies, listed in chronological order, and for more on Russian cinema see p88.

- *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) Sergei Eisenstein
- *Ivan the Terrible* (1945) Sergei Eisenstein
- *The Cranes Are Flying* (1957) Mikhail Kalatozov
- *Irony of Fate* (1975) Eldar Ryazanov
- *Stalker* (1980) Andrei Tarkovsky
- *My Friend Ivan Lapshin* (1982) Alexey German
- *Burnt by the Sun* (1994) Nikita Mikhalkov
- *Brother* (1997) Alexey Balabanov
- *Russian Ark* (2002) Alexander Sokurov
- *The Return* (2003) Andrei Zvyagintsev

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 p89.

- *War and Peace* Leo Tolstoy
- *Dr Zhivago* Boris Pasternak
- *The Master and Margarita* Mikhail Bulgakov
- *Quiet Flows the Don* Mikhail Sholokhov
- *Crime and Punishment* Fyodor Dostoevsky
- *Eugene Onegin* Alexander Pushkin
- *The Overcoat* Nikolai Gogol
- *Fathers and Sons* Ivan Turgenev
- *Kolyma Tales* Varlam Shalamov
- *A Hero's Daughter* Andrei Makine

Quintessential Experiences

- Bunk down on a train – even if you don't have time for the full trans-Siberian trip (p742), taking an overnight train is a rite of passage in Russian travel.
- Scrub yourself in a *banya* – wallow in a steamy communal sauna and allow yourself to be thrashed with birch leaves (p71).
- Whisper your wishes to Father Frost – Russia's Santa Claus holds court in the picturesque village of Veliky Ustyug (p401).
- Drink vodka – any time, any place. And if you want to learn something of the history of this great national drink head to the vodka museums in St Petersburg (p262) and Smolensk (p325).
- Sail down the Volga – the greatest of Russia's rivers is best experienced from the deck of one of the many boats that cruise its length each summer (p406).
- Weekend at a dacha – accept any invitation you get to a Russian's rural retreat (p72).
- Take the cure at a sanatorium – sign up for relaxation, health regimes and medicinal baths in Soviet-era spas, some of which are grand enough for a tsar, such as those at Sochi (p467).
- Attend a Victory Day parade – be reminded of Russia's indomitable fighting spirit and tumultuous past during the colourful street marches in early May (p706).
- Swim in Lake Baikal – locals claim a full body dip in the frigid waters of this supreme Siberian lake (p563) will grant you several decades of good health.
- Attend the ballet or opera – Moscow's Bolshoi (p182) and St Petersburg's Mariinsky (p287) theatres are the obvious choices, but many other Russian cities have grand performance halls, including Siberia's Novosibirsk (p513).

TRAVEL LITERATURE

Andrew Meier's *Black Earth: A Journey Through Russia after the Fall* is acutely observed and elegiac. In dispatches from Chechnya, Norilsk, Sakhalin and St Petersburg, as well as Moscow, he sums up Russia's current situation superbly. Also worth dipping into is Vanora Bennett's lyrical *The Taste of Dreams*, in which she heads south to the Caspian Sea in search of news and the luxurious grey eggs.

Black Earth City, an eloquent account of Charlotte Hobson's year studying in Voronezh in the turbulent period following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, captures eternal truths about the Russian way of life. The 1960s USSR encountered by Laurens van der Post in *Journey into Russia* seems awfully familiar, too, as does the Russia that Colin Thubron details in *Among the Russians* (published in some countries as *Where Nights Are Longest*). More up to date is Thubron's *In Siberia*, a fascinating but often sombre account of the author's journey from the Urals to Magadan.

Mark Taplin's *Open Lands: Travels through Russia's Once Forbidden Places* is an engrossing read, covering some of Russia's once off-limits cities, including Vladivostok and Nizhny Novgorod.

The Trans-Siberian Railway has been a rich source of inspiration for many writers. Paul Theroux covers the journey, caustically as usual, in both *The Great Railway Bazaar* and, a decade later, *Riding the Iron Rooster*. Eric Newby's classic *The Big Red Train Ride* is a hilarious account of hopping on and off the *Rossiya* between Moscow and Nakhodka. The legendary Dervla Murphy hobbles through Siberia on a crook leg in *Through Siberia by Accident*, characteristically taking the less glamorous BAM route to Tynda.

In *The Bronski House*, Philip Marsden travels with his friend back to her childhood village of Mantuski, now in Belarus; it's a poignant and evocative read.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Russia

CIA World Factbook (www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/rs.html) Read what the US spooks have on the Russkies.

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.

Tourism Department of Russian Federation (www.russiatourism.ru/eng) The official tourist website has a few useful bits of information.

Trans-Siberian Railway Web Encyclopaedia (www.transsib.ru/Eng) The best trans-Siberian site, regularly updated with tons 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) This incredibly useful Russian travel site is written and maintained by Russian backpackers. Lots of cool information, including details on arranging visas.

Your Train (www.poezda.net/en/) Invaluable site for planning train journeys to, from and inside Russia.

Belarus

A Belarus Miscellany (www.belarus-misc.org) Not the most user-friendly interface, but this site has tons about current news and historical facts from a patriotic view.

Karta Minska (www.kartaminska.by.ru/belorusian-tours.htm) Much of this made-in-Russia site is in Russian, but it's the funkiest one around about Minsk and Belarus, chock-full of cheeky and amusing photos.

Virtual Guide to Belarus (www.belarusguide.com) Well-organised site containing more than you could ever want to know about Belarus.

HOW MUCH?

In Russia/ Belarus

3-star double room

R3500-4000/

BR110,000-170,000

1hr online R50/BR2000

Meal & drink in a decent

restaurant R600-1000/

BR20,000-35,000

Short taxi ride R100/

BR6000

1L of petrol R15-20/

BR2400-2600

LONELY PLANET INDEX

In Russia/ Belarus

1L of bottled water

R12/BR1200

Bottle of local beer

R70/BR900

Souvenir *matryoshka* doll

R150-300/

BR15,000-20,000

Blin R30/BR1500

Metro ticket R10/BR360

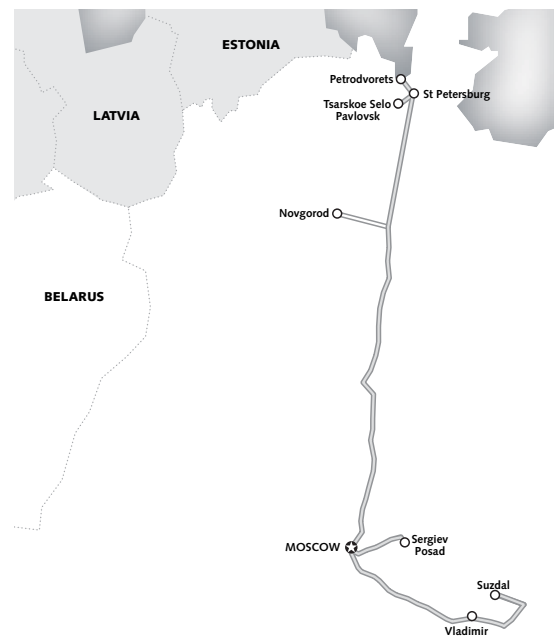
Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

RUSSIAN CAPITALS

Two Weeks

If you've never been to Russia before, start with the awe-inspiring capital **Moscow** (p120) and the spellbinding imperial capital **St Petersburg** (p224); Russia's tumultuous history and fast-evolving future are writ large across both. Moscow highlights include the historic **Kremlin** (p138), glorious **Red Square** (p147) and classic **Tretyakov Gallery** (p160), while in St Petersburg do not miss the incomparable **Hermitage** (p244) and the **Russian Museum** (p252), or cruising the city's **rivers and canals** (p272). Enjoy nights dining and drinking at some of the best restaurants and bars in Russia, witnessing first-rate performances at the **Bolshoi** (p182) or **Mariinsky Theatres** (p287), or relaxing in a *banya* such as Moscow's luxury **Sanduny Baths** (p167). St Petersburg is ringed by glittering palaces set in beautifully landscaped grounds such as **Petrodvorets** (p295), **Tsarskoe Selo** and **Pavlovsk** (p299). From Moscow you have easy access to the historic Golden Ring towns of **Sergiev Posad** (p221), **Suzdal** (p206) and **Vladimir** (p203), where you will be rewarded with a slice of rural Russian life far from the frenetic city pace. Also leave time for ancient **Novgorod** (p327), 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.

FROM THE BALTIC TO THE CASPIAN

Three Weeks

There's plenty to see and do in European Russia as this itinerary from the Baltic coast to the Caspian Sea shows. Kick off in the geographically separate region of Kaliningrad, Russia's most westerly outpost, sandwiched between Poland and Lithuania. Check out the evolving maritime city of **Kaliningrad** (p342) and the World Heritage area **Kurshkaya Kosa** (p350), the Russian half of the sandy Curonian Spit, then head south through Poland to enter Belarus at the historic border town **Brest** (p682). Pause to marvel at the Brest Fortress, a colossal WWII memorial, and enjoy Belarus' most laid-back city before spotting mammoth bison in the centuries-old oak and pine forests of the **Belavezhskaja Pushcha National Park** (p686). Head to the squeaky-clean capital **Minsk** (p666), where the heart of the Soviet Union still beats loud, then take a side trip to the artistic town of **Vitsebsk** (p691), birthplace of Marc Chagall. Reentering Russia, linger in the charming walled city of **Smolensk** (p322), which has a connection to the composer Mikhail Glinka, before indulging in the bright lights and big nights of **Moscow** (p120). 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** (p406). Possible stops along the route include Russia's 'third capital' **Nizhny Novgorod** (p406), with its mighty kremlin and the Sakharov Museum; the Tatar capital **Kazan** (p411), also with a World Heritage-listed kremlin; and **Volgograd** (p422), sacred site of Russia's bloodiest battle of WWII. Follow the river to its delta on the Caspian Sea and you'll arrive at **Astrakhan** (p425), which has a lively market and a well-preserved kremlin, but is most famous for its black gold: caviar.

Combining the possibilities of travelling by road, rail and river this 2500km route takes you from the Baltic coast to the Caspian Sea and the very edge of Central Asia. Remember to sort out a multiple-entry visa to Russia and a visa to Belarus and you'll be ready for a full exploration of western European Russia.



THE BIG TRANS-SIBERIAN TRIP

Two to Four Weeks

The classic Russian adventure is travelling the **Trans-Siberian Railway** (p742), one of the 20th-century's engineering wonders and a route that holds together the world's largest country. Although it can be done in either direction we suggest going against the general flow by boarding the train in the port of **Vladivostok** (p614), at the far eastern end of Russia, so you can finish up with a grand party in either **Moscow** (p120) or, better yet, **St Petersburg** (p224). 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** (p607), 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** (p589), 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** (p594). Just west of Ulan-Ude the railway hugs the southern shores of magnificent **Lake Baikal** (p563). Allow at least three days (preferably longer) to see this beautiful lake, basing yourself on beguiling **Olkhon Island** (p578); also check out historic **Irkutsk** (p563) on the way there or back. **Krasnoyarsk** (p553), 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** (p436), 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 either of the Golden Ring towns of **Yaroslavl** (p213) or **Vladimir** (p203), both packed with ancient onion-domed churches.

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

Travel in the Russian Far East isn't so much a holiday as an expedition. From the 'wild east' port of **Vladivostok** (p614) head north to **Khabarovsk** (p607), with a possible detour to the World Heritage-listed **Sikhote-Alin Nature Reserve** (p623). An overnight train from Khabarovsk heads to the lively border town **Blagoveshchensk** (p606) – China is on the opposite bank of the Amur River. Another overnight train from here will transport you to **Tynda** (p623), 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** (p624) from where there's a very bumpy and erratic bus to **Yakutsk** (p627), the extraordinary permafrost-bound capital of Sakha Republic. Alternatively, stick with the BAM route through to the proudly Soviet city of **Komsomolsk-na-Amure** (p624) and back to Khabarovsk, from where there are flights to Yakutsk. Once in Yakutsk, make time to cruise to the scenic **Lena Pillars** (p631), and to visit the city's fascinating **Permafrost Institute** (p627). A flight from either Khabarovsk or Vladivostok will take you over the Sea of Okhotsk to the highlight of this far-eastern odyssey: **Kamchatka** (p642). Cap off your adventures by climbing one of the snowcapped volcanoes rising behind the rugged peninsula's capital, **Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky** (p644), which hugs breathtakingly serene Avacha Bay, and by visiting **Esso** (p650), as charming an alpine village as you could wish for at the end of a long bumpy road.

One Month

TYUMEN TO TUVA: SIBERIA OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

One to Two Months

Far from 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** (p497), 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** (p501), whose splendid kremlin lords it over the Tobol and Irtysh Rivers. Upriver and back on the main trans-Sib route is **Omsk** (p504), a pleasant, thriving city, from where you can head directly to the backwater of **Tomsk** (p515), a convivial university town dotted with pretty wooden gingerbread-style houses. Journey south next to **Barnaul** (p522), gateway to the mountainous **Altai Republic** (p520). Here you can arrange a white-water rafting expedition or plan treks out to **Lake Teletskoe** and the arty village of **Artybash** (p528), or along the panoramic **Chuysky Trakt** (p531), a helter-skelter mountain road leading to yurt-dotted grasslands, first stopping in **Gorno-Altai** (p526) where you'll have to register your visa. A train journey via **Novokuznetsk** (p536) will get you to **Abakan** (p538), where you can arrange onward travel to the wild republic of **Tuva** (p546). 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** (p548) 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 two-day boat trip between Tobolsk and Omsk is also possible.



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** (p224) 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** (p333) and the Siberian prisons in which he languished in **Tobolsk** (p501) and **Omsk** (p504). In contrast Anton Chekhov, whose country estate is at **Melikhovo** (p198), made a voluntary trip across Siberia ending up on Sakhalin; a small museum in the island's capital, **Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk** (p635), commemorates the writer's epic journey. Boris Pasternak's dacha in the writers' colony of **Peredelkino** (p198) is open for inspection, as is **Yasnaya Polyana** (p199), Leo Tolstoy's estate, which is surrounded by apple orchards, and **Spasskoe-Lutovinovo** (p319), the family manor of Ivan Turgenev. Recite your favourite Pushkin verses at his home in **Mikhailovskoe** (p339) before heading south, as the poet did in exile, to the romantic, troubled Caucasus and the resort of **Pyatigorsk** (p472), where fellow poet Mikhail Lermontov is commemorated all over town at a grotto, gallery, museum and gardens.



WORLD HERITAGE RUSSIA & BELARUS

There are 21 Unesco World Heritage sites in Russia and two in Belarus. To visit many of them, from the **Kurshkaya Kosa** (p350) in Kaliningrad in the west to the volcanoes of **Kamchatka** (p642) in the Far East, could easily swallow up a couple of months but would also make an unparalleled journey across both nations' cultural and geographical highlights. From Kaliningrad head to Belarus for the **Belavezhskaja Pushcha National Park** (p686) and the castle complex at **Mir** (p681). Aim next for **St Petersburg** (p224), travelling via **Novgorod** (p327), then continue to the fairy-tale churches on **Kizhi** (p361) in Lake Ladoga. Journey to the edge of the Arctic Circle to the beautiful **Solovetsky Islands** (p391), then turn back south to **Moscow** (p120), to tick off the Kremlin, Red Square, Novodevichy Convent and Church of the Ascension at Kolomenskoe. The Golden Ring towns of **Vladimir** (p203), **Suzdal** (p206) and **Sergiev Posad** (p221) are all on the list, as are the spectacular mountains of the Western Caucasus such as **Mt Elbrus** (p487). Turning eastward, stop off at **Kazan** (p411) for its kremlin before making your assault on the **Altai Mountains** (p520). Beguiling **Lake Baikal** (p563) and the **Sikhote-Alin Nature Reserve** (p623) on the Pacific coast bring up the rear.



Snapshot

Normalno. That's the word Russians most commonly use to describe their lives – not good, not bad, just *normalno*. So, is Russia, after the authoritarianism of the Soviet era and the economic chaos of the Yeltsin years, becoming a more 'normal' (ie Western) country under Vladimir Putin? In some ways yes, but in others no.

In economic terms it's clear that Russia, coasting along on a wave of petrodollar profits, is in far better shape than at any time in recent memory. Growth is running at over 7% per annum. Inflation – rampant in the 1990s – is under control, with a consequent stabilisation of the rouble. Three-quarters of state enterprise has been either fully or partially privatised (albeit with much corruption along the way). In all the major cities you'll notice a burgeoning middle class, and the commercial trappings that go with it.

Despite these improvements, Russia's economy still has a way to go before it can be said to have fully capitalised on its astonishing natural resources. The boom and bust period of the late 1990s as well as the abandonment of the social safety net provided by communism has left many people worse off. According to World Bank figures published in 2004, 20% of Russians live below the poverty line, defined as a monthly income of R1000 (less than €30 or US\$38). At least 5.5 million people are unemployed, although many others considered 'employed' have jobs with little work and less pay.

Democracy is another sticky subject. In the December 2003 elections the pro-presidential party United Russia won two-thirds of the Duma's seats, while in the subsequent presidential election Putin comfortably romped home for a second (and probably final) term of office, but few people would say that either of these victories reflected the true political opinions of Russians. More telling was the nose dive in Putin's popularity, from a high of 70% to around 40%, in the wake of a series of spontaneous public protests across the nation in early 2005 as the government passed controversial laws replacing important transport, housing and utility subsidies for pensioners, invalids and army veterans with extra pension payments. Nonetheless, Putin still remains the most popular of Russia's often dubious bunch of politicians.

A substantial part of the public's growing cynicism with the Kremlin boils down to the failure of Russia to become what is seen in the West as a fully democratic country. In 2005 increased control of the media, politicisation of the law enforcement system and the imposition of central government control on local government caused the US-based organisation Freedom House to classify Russia as 'not free', for the first time since the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991. The KGB might be history, but ordinary Russians now look over their shoulder for Putin's shadowy *siloviki* (power people), an unholy alliance of power-hungry law enforcers and bureaucrats who many believe really run the country.

Putin has been accused of exploiting the recent wave of terrorist attacks, such as the 2004 hostage crisis in Beslan (p69) and the bombing of Moscow's metro, to further curb civil liberties (not a topic the former KGB agent has ever shown much true concern over anyway). The Kremlin insists that life in the breakaway republic of Chechnya is getting back to normal, but human rights groups beg to differ, accusing government forces of regularly abducting innocent civilians for interrogation. The

FAST FACTS: RUSSIA

Population: 143.4 million

Surface area:
17 million sq km

Time zones: 11

National symbol:
double-headed eagle

Extent of the Russian rail
network: 87,000 km

State pension: about
R2000 per month

Net worth of the 27
richest Russians:
US\$90.6 billion

Per capita consumption of
alcohol: 15.1L per year

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

Number of Nobel Prize
winners: 20

**FAST FACTS:
BELARUS**

Population: 9.9 million

Surface area:

207,600 sq km

Average monthly wage

(2005): US\$170

Incarceration rate:

390/100,000

(world rank: 3)

Per capita consumption of

alcohol: 8.2L per year

Length of gas pipelines:

5,223km

Number of Mt Everest

ascents by Belarusians: 1

World rank for most

US green card lottery

winners: 1

Price of a used

Belarusian tractor on

eBay: US\$4000-6000

Number of Olympic

medals won: 156

(80 gold)

assassination by Russian special forces in March 2005 of separatist leader Aslan Maskhadov, one of the few figures in the Chechen resistance to offer peace talks with Moscow, did nothing to bring the conflict any nearer to resolution.

The international fight against terrorism has brought Russia well and truly out of the diplomatic cold. However, a neat illustration of the delicate position that Russia finds itself in with regard to foreign policy came with the celebration of the 60th anniversary of WWII. President Bush standing side by side with Putin in Red Square watching a very Soviet-style parade of Russian military might spoke volumes about how far relations between the former Cold War enemies have progressed. But the fact that Bush had visited Latvia beforehand, supporting the Baltic States' calls for apologies from Russia for the post-WWII annexation of their countries into the Soviet Union, also showed how far Russia still has to go before it's fully trusted in the region again.

Having seen popular revolutions recently sweep away the old guard in Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, there is understandably a certain nervousness in the Kremlin that similar events could happen in Russia in the run-up to the 2008 presidential election. Meanwhile in neighbouring Belarus, Alexander Lukashenka, its autocratic leader, has proclaimed that no revolutions, coloured or otherwise, would be happening there. 'Batka' (Daddy, or Little Father, as he's ironically dubbed by many locals) gives the impression that his hands guide every shimmer and sway of society. While most city folk don't regard him favourably, be cautious about your anti-Batka proclamations – being against the system is a touchy subject here!

Privately the debate in Belarus is all about whether to open up to or close off from the rest of the world. While the government erects barriers against the evil West, ordinary folk are caught between the desire to maintain stability, and wanting to make a decent living in a free and open society. In Minsk especially you are bound to be drawn into conversations about the latest ludicrous law or street name change; it's also where you'll most feel the surreal mix of Belarus as both a living Soviet museum and modern European city.

The Authors



SIMON RICHMOND

Coordinating Author, St Petersburg

The globetrotting descendant of Eastern European immigrants to the UK, Simon knows there must be some Russian blood flowing in his veins, such has been the constant pull of Russia. After studying Russian history and politics at university, his first visit to the country was in 1994 when he wandered goggle-eyed around gorgeous St Petersburg and sank beers at the Australian embassy in Moscow (hard to believe there were few decent pubs in the capital back then!). Having coauthored both the 1st edition of Lonely Planet's *Trans-Siberian Railway* in 2001 and the previous edition of *Russia & Belarus* in 2002, Simon was back in the driving seat for the current edition.

My Favourite Trip

Group tours are not my thing, but when it comes to Kamchatka, unless you have bucketloads of cash or time to spare there's no other option. Temperamental weather kept our group grounded for a few days in the regional capital Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky (p644), where I learnt more than I cared to know about the peninsula's even more unpredictable 68 active volcanoes, several within easy lava-flow distance. But, oh how magnificent those volcanoes are! I'll never forget choppering into the lush, steaming Valley of the Geysers (p650), or reaching the sulphur-stained summit of Mt Mutnovskaya (p649). Best of all though was spending a night at the camp of Even reindeer herders, another thrilling helicopter flight from the pretty alpine village of Esso (p650).



MARK ELLIOTT

Siberia

Mark updated and expanded the Siberia chapter. He first fell in love with Eastern Europe 30 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. Beneath their deadpan exteriors, it's the great humanity and warmth of Russians' souls that keep drawing Mark back to Siberia. Where else can one drink birch sap with Vissarion devotees, vodka with Rasputin's alter ego, or *samagon* firewater with off-duty mercenaries while bathing outdoors at -25°C ? He now lives in Belgium with the lovely Danielle, who he met while jamming blues harmonica in a Turkmenistan club.

LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

Why is our travel information the best in the world? It's simple: our authors are independent, dedicated travellers. They don't research using just the Internet or phone, and they don't take freebies in exchange for positive coverage. They travel widely, to all the popular spots and off the beaten track. They personally visit thousands of hotels, restaurants, cafés, bars, galleries, palaces, museums and more – and they take pride in getting all the details right, and telling it how it is. For more, see the authors section on www.lonelyplanet.com.



PATRICK HORTON

Russian Caucasus

Patrick has been intrigued by Russia ever since he saw a jet engine mounted on a truck blasting away the snow outside a Moscow hotel. Inside the service was equally icy and unmelting in the face of his charm. Oh those Soviet days! He's even more intrigued now that western Russia is becoming more European and every visit reveals more change. Patrick has travelled across Russia from St Petersburg to the Mongolian border by train but is still drawn to the emotional majesty of the Caucasus. He is however intrigued that women seem to run the Russian railways; is that why they're generally efficient and run on time?



STEVE KOKKER

Belarus

Steve is a die-hard Eastern Europe lover, having spent most of his time since 1996 living away from his native Montreal. He bases himself in his father's homeland of Tallinn, Estonia, despite a dislike of Scandinavian techno, sour cream and pickles. A film critic, filmmaker, freelance writer and photographer, he's lived in Russia and has had a ball in places most travellers avoid, like Belarus, Kaliningrad, Moldova, northern Russia and Chernobyl. He's been writing and photographing for Lonely Planet since 1998.



JOHN NOBLE

Northern European Russia

John, with colleague John King, pioneered Lonely Planet's coverage of Russia back in the *perestroika* days by writing *USSR*, a magnum opus about a country that abolished itself while the book was at the printer. So John turned to writing Lonely Planet guides to the Soviet successor states: *Baltic States & Kaliningrad 1*, *Central Asia 1* and *Russia, Ukraine & Belarus 1*. He then took a 10-year breather in other countries before returning to Russia for this edition. He found the country as beautiful and challenging as ever, its people far happier and its restaurants in a whole new league!



ROBERT REID

Russian Far East

Prompted by rebellion and the library's air-con on hot Oklahoma days, Robert picked up old copies of *Soviet Life* as a kid, then Dostoevsky paperbacks as a college kid. He studied Russian and spent the 'first summer of Russia' (1992) in St Petersburg and Moscow, where he also volunteered at Echo Moscow radio. He's travelled around Eastern Europe loads, updating Bulgaria for Lonely Planet's *Eastern Europe* guide. While updating coverage of Russia's Far East he counted 151 moustaches along Russian pavements, railways and boats. He lives barefaced in Brooklyn, New York.



REGIS ST LOUIS

Western European Russia

Raised with an unhealthy dread of nuclear annihilation, Regis became deeply interested in Russia after watching evil-empire films like *Threads*, *Red Dawn* and *Rocky III*. In high school, a teacher introduced him to Dostoevsky, and from that point on he was hooked. At Indiana University he immersed himself in the world of Rus, spending an academic year at Moscow State University and majoring in Slavic languages and literature. Since then, his interest in Russia has led him to Cuba (the unsightly legacy of Soviet engineers lives on), Mexico (Trotsky's home when he was assassinated) and Japan (site of the historic, but ineffectual, Shimoda peace treaty). He lives in New York City.



MARA VORHEES

Moscow, Golden Ring, Volga Region, Urals Region

Mara has been travelling to Russia since the days of the Cold War and communism. After the Soviet collapse, she lived for two years in Yekaterinburg, where she worked on a foreign aid project. In her adventures as a travel writer, she has spent two months riding the Trans-Siberian Railway, four weeks cruising the Volga River, two weeks circling the Golden Ring and seven seconds swimming in Lake Baikal. She is the author of Lonely Planet's guide to *Moscow* and coauthor of the *Trans-Siberian Railway*.

CONTRIBUTING AUTHOR

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, then sold InterRail tickets and Lonely Planet books to Russian backpackers. He's been on Auntie's service for seven years now, lately focusing on its burgeoning Russian-language website. Leonid is based in Moscow, though when it gets cold he is likely to be spotted in London or South America. Leonid wrote the Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia sections of this guide.

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