

Regional Directory

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The regional directory gives general overviews of conditions and information that apply to the whole of Eastern Europe. Given the vast size of the region, this has meant some generalisation, so for specifics on any given topic, see the relevant Directory for the country you require information on.

ACCOMMODATION

As a rule, for each accommodation listing we have used the currency you are most likely to be quoted a price in. This means that for some hotels we give hotel prices in local currency, others are listed in euros or US dollars.

In Eastern Europe, as in the rest of Europe, the cheapest places to rest your head are camping grounds, followed by hostels and student accommodation. Guesthouses, pensions, pri-

vate rooms and cheap hotels are also good value. Self-catering flats in the city and cottages in the countryside are worth considering if you're in a group, especially if you plan to stay put for a while. Eastern Europe remains relatively undeveloped in accommodation terms and in many places these options simply won't exist. Things are changing though, and nearly every country now has a decent hostel in its capital and a growing hotel market.

The concept of a B&B remains a somewhat mysterious one in most countries of Eastern Europe, where you stay either in a hotel or hostel. Central Europe and some of the Balkan countries have a long tradition of homestays, although breakfast is not always included. In Russia, Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova people sometimes let out rooms, but this is nowhere as homely as a British B&B or even a Hungarian pension.

See the Directory sections in the individual country chapters for an overview of local accommodation options. During peak holiday periods accommodation can be hard to find and, unless you're camping, it's advisable to book ahead where possible. Even some camping grounds can fill up, particularly popular ones near large towns and cities.

Hostels and cheap hotels in popular tourist destinations, such as Prague, Budapest and Kraków, fill up very quickly – especially the well-run ones in desirable or central neighbourhoods. It's a good idea to make reservations as many weeks ahead as possible – at least for the first night or two. A two- or three-minute international phone call to book a bed or room is a more sensible use of time than wasting your first day in a city searching for a place to stay.

BOOK ACCOMMODATION ONLINE

For more accommodation reviews and recommendations by Lonely Planet authors, check out the online booking service at www.lonelyplanet.com. You'll find the true, insider lowdown on the best places to stay. Reviews are thorough and independent. Best of all, you can book online.

If you arrive in a country by air, there is often an accommodation-booking desk at the airport, although it rarely covers the lower strata of hotels. Tourist offices often have extensive accommodation lists, and the more helpful ones will go out of their way to find you something suitable. In most countries the fee for this service is very low and, if the accommodation market is tight, it can save you a lot of running around.

The accommodation options in each city or town are listed according to price range. Starting with budget options, then midrange and top end, we try to include a balanced representation of what's available in each place. Of course, in some cities there's a lack of budget accommodation and too many top-end places to list, or vice versa. Within these subsections, the accommodation options are listed in ascending price order.

Camping

The cheapest way to go is camping, and there are many camping grounds throughout the region, although as cities make up such a large proportion of the region's attractions, you'll often find there simply aren't any camp sites. Those that exist are usually large sites intended mainly for motorists, though they're often easily accessible by public transport and there's almost always space for backpackers with tents. Many camping grounds in Eastern Europe rent small on-site cabins, bungalows or caravans for double or triple the regular camping fee. In the most popular resorts all the bungalows will probably be full in July and August. Some countries, including Albania and Belarus, have yet to develop any camping grounds at all.

The standard of camping grounds in the rest of Eastern Europe varies from country to country. They're unreliable in Romania, crowded in Hungary (especially on Lake Balaton) and Slovenia, and variable in the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia and Bulgaria. Croatia's coast has nudist camping grounds galore (signposted 'FKK', the German acronym for 'naturist'); they're excellent places to stay because of their secluded locations, although they can be a bit far from other attractions.

Camping grounds may be open from April to October, May to September, or perhaps only June to August, depending on the category of the facility, the location and demand. A few private camping grounds are open year-round. In Eastern Europe you are sometimes

allowed to build a campfire (ask first). Camping in the wild is usually illegal; ask local people about the situation before you pitch your tent on a beach or in an open field.

Farmhouses

'Village tourism', which means staying at a farmhouse, is highly developed in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Slovenia, and popular in Hungary. In these it's like staying in a private room or pension, except that the participating farms are in picturesque rural areas and may offer nearby activities such as horse riding, kayaking, skiing and cycling. It's highly recommended.

Guesthouses & Pensions

Small private pensions are now very common in parts of Eastern Europe. Priced somewhere between hotels and private rooms, pensions typically have less than a dozen rooms and sometimes a small restaurant or bar on the premises. You'll get much more personal service at a pension than you would at a hotel at the expense of a wee bit of privacy. If you arrive at night or on a weekend when the travel agencies assigning private rooms are closed, pensions can be a lifesaver. Call ahead to check prices and ask about reservations – someone will usually speak some halting English, German or Russian.

Homestays & Private Rooms

Homestays are often the best and most authentic way to see daily life in Eastern Europe. It's perfectly legal to stay with someone in a private home (although in countries such as Russia, where visa registration is necessary, you'll have to pay a travel agency to register your visa with a hotel). Any travel agency can register you at a hotel they have an understanding with if you're staying with friends, there's nothing strictly illegal or dangerous about doing this.

Staying with Eastern European friends will almost certainly be a wonderful experience, thanks to the full hospitality the region is justly famous for. Make sure you bring some small gifts for your hosts – it's a deeply ingrained cultural tradition throughout the region.

In most Eastern European countries, travel agencies can arrange accommodation in private rooms in local homes. In Hungary you can get a private room almost anywhere, but in the other countries only the main tourist centres have them. Some 1st-class rooms are

like mini apartments, with cooking facilities and private bathrooms for the sole use of guests. Prices are low but there's often a 30% to 50% surcharge if you stay less than three nights. In Hungary, the Czech Republic and Croatia, higher taxation has made such a deal less attractive than before, but it's still good value and cheaper than a hotel.

People will frequently approach you at train or bus stations in Eastern Europe offering a private room or a hostel bed. This can be good or bad – it's impossible to generalise. Just make sure it's not in some cardboard-quality housing project in the outer suburbs and that you negotiate a clear price. Obviously, if you are staying with strangers like this, you shouldn't leave your valuables behind when you go out; certainly don't leave your money, credit cards or passport.

You don't have to go through an agency or an intermediary on the street for a private room. Any house, cottage or farmhouse with 'zimmer frei', 'sobe' or 'szoba kiadó' displayed outside is advertising the availability of private rooms (these examples are in German, Slovene and Hungarian); just knock on the door and ask if any are available.

Hostels

Hostels offer the cheapest (secure) roof over your head in Eastern Europe, and you don't have to be a youngster to take advantage of them. Most hostels are part of the national Youth Hostel Association (YHA), which is affiliated with the Hostelling International (HI, www.hihostels.com) umbrella organisation.

Hostels affiliated with HI can be found in most Eastern European countries. A hostel card is seldom required, though you sometimes get a small discount if you have one. If you don't have a valid HI membership card, you can buy one at some hostels.

To join HI you can ask at any hostel or contact your local or national hostelling office. There's a very useful website at www.ihf.org, with links to most HI sites.

At a hostel, you get a bed for the night plus use of communal facilities, often including a kitchen where you can prepare your own meals. You may be required to have a sleeping sheet – simply using your sleeping bag is often not allowed. If you don't have a sleeping sheet, you can sometimes hire one for a small fee.

Hostels vary widely in their character and quality. The hostels in Poland tend to be ex-

tremely basic but they're inexpensive and friendly. In the Czech Republic and Slovakia many hostels are actually fairly luxurious 'junior' hotels with double rooms, often fully occupied by groups. Many Hungarian hostels outside Budapest are student dormitories open to travellers for six or seven weeks in summer only. In Budapest and Prague a number of privately run hostels now operate year-round and are serious party venues. The hostels in Bulgaria are in cities, resort and mountain areas.

There are many available hostel guides with listings, including the 'bible', HI's *Europe*. Many hostels accept reservations by phone, fax or email, but not always during peak periods (though they might hold a bed for you for a couple of hours if you call from the train or bus station). You can also book hostels through national hostel offices.

Hotels

At the bottom of the bracket, cheap hotels may be no more expensive than private rooms or guesthouses, while at the other extreme they extend to beautifully designed boutique hotels and five-star hotels with price tags to match. Categorisation varies from country to country and the hotels recommended in this book accommodate every budget. We have endeavoured, where possible, to provide a combination of budget, midrange and top-end accommodation in each city or town. Where the full gauntlet of price ranges isn't available, we simply make a note of what is.

Single rooms can be hard to find in Eastern Europe, where you are generally charged by the room and not by the number of people in it; many local people still refuse to believe that anyone would actually take to the road alone. The cheapest rooms sometimes have a washbasin but no bathroom, which means you'll have to go down the corridor to use the toilet and shower. Breakfast may be included in the price of a room or be extra – and mandatory.

University Accommodation

Some universities rent out space in student halls in July and August. This is quite popular in the Baltic countries, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Macedonia, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia. Accommodation will sometimes be in single rooms (but is more commonly in doubles or triples), and cooking facilities may be available. Inquire at the college or

university, at student information services or at local tourist offices.

ACTIVITIES

Canoeing & Kayaking

Those travelling with folding kayaks will want to launch them on the waterways surrounding Poland's Great Masurian Lakes district (p608), the Soča River in Slovenia (p843), the Vltava River in the Czech Republic (p292) and Latvia's Gauja River (p430). Special kayaking and canoeing tours are offered in these countries, as well as in Croatia (p241).

Cycling

Along with hiking, cycling is the best way to really get close to the scenery and the people, keeping you fit in the process. It's also a good way to get around many cities and towns and to see remote corners of a country you wouldn't ordinarily get to.

The hills and mountains of Eastern Europe can be heavy going, but this is offset by the abundance of things to see. Physical fitness is *not* a major prerequisite for cycling on the plains of eastern Hungary, but the persistent wind might slow you down. Popular holiday cycling areas in Eastern Europe include the Danube Bend in Hungary (p410), most of eastern Slovakia (p804), the Karst region of Slovenia (p846), and the Curonian Spit (p464) and Palanga (p460) in western Lithuania. The valleys of Maramureş (p663) in northern Romania are a great place for a cycling tour. Most airlines will allow you to put a bicycle in the hold for a surprisingly small fee. Alternatively, this book lists possible places where you can hire one.

See *Bicycle* in the *Transport* in Eastern Europe section (p932) for more information on bicycle touring, and the individual country chapters and destination sections for rental outfits as well as routes and tips on places to go.

Hiking

There's excellent hiking in Eastern Europe, with well-marked trails through forests, mountains and national parks. Public transport will often take you to the trailheads; chalets or mountain huts in Poland, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Romania and Slovenia offer dormitory accommodation and basic meals. In this book we include information about hiking in the High Tatras of Poland (p575) and Slovakia (p803), the Malá Fatra of Slovakia (p800), the Bucegi (p640) and Făgăraş Ranges (p652) in

Romania's Carpathian Mountains, the Rila Mountains of Bulgaria (p148) and the Julian Alps of Slovenia (p838), but there are many other hiking areas that are less well known, including the Bieszczady in Poland (p576) and the Risnjak and Paklenica National Parks in Croatia (p240). The best months for hiking are from June to September, especially late August and early September when the summer crowds will have largely disappeared.

Horse Riding

Though horse riding is possible throughout Eastern Europe, the sport is best organised – and cheapest – in Hungary, whose people, it is said, 'were created by God to sit on horseback'. The best centres are on the Great Plain, though you'll also find riding schools in Transdanubia and northern Hungary (see p405) for more information. Horse riding is also very popular (and affordable) in the Baltic countries, the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovenia.

Sailing

Eastern Europe's most famous yachting area is the passage between the long, rugged islands off Croatia's Dalmatian coast (p218). Yacht tours and rentals are available, although this is certainly not for anyone on a budget. If your means are more limited, the Great Masurian Lakes of northeastern Poland (p608) are a better choice, as small groups can rent sailing boats by the day for very reasonable rates. Hungary's Lake Balaton (p385) is also popular among sailing enthusiasts.

Skiing

Eastern Europe's premier skiing areas are the High Tatras of Slovakia (p804) and Poland (p575); the Carpathians near Braşov in Romania (p645) and Yablunytzia in Ukraine (p882); Borovets (p150) in the Rila Mountains near Sofia; Pamporovo (p157) in the Rodopi Mountains in Bulgaria and Slovenia's Julian Alps (p838). The Bosnian capital Sarajevo (p115), which hosted the 1984 Winter Olympics, is a growing place for skiing and you'll find some of the best-value slopes in Europe within an hour of the city. The skiing season generally lasts from early December to late March, though at higher altitudes it may extend an extra month either way. Snow conditions can vary greatly from year to year and region to region, but January and February tend to be the best (and busiest) months. Snowboarding is especially

popular in Slovakia, as is cross-country skiing in the Czech Republic and Ukraine.

Thermal Baths & Saunas

There are hundreds of thermal baths in Eastern Europe open to the public. The most affordable are in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovenia, as well as along the Black Sea in Romania. Among the best are the thermal lake at Hévíz (p390), the Turkish baths of Budapest (p364), the spa town of Harkány (p394) in Hungary and the *fin-de-siècle* spas of Karlovy Vary (Karlsbad; p285) in the Czech Republic.

The Baltic countries are famous for the proliferation of saunas – both the traditional 'smoke' variety and the clean and smokeless modern sauna. The traditionalist will find many opportunities to take in an old-style sauna in Lithuania. Another must for lovers of heat and sweat is the traditional Russian *banya* (p710) where you can be beaten into cleanliness with birch twigs!

White-Water Rafting

This exciting activity is possible in summer on two of Eastern Europe's most scenic rivers: the Tara River in Montenegro (p537) and the Soča River in Slovenia (p843). Rafting on the Dunajec River along the border of Poland and Slovakia is fun, but it's not a white-water experience.

BUSINESS HOURS

Eastern Europe tends to have similar working patterns to Western Europe and North America. Saturdays and Sundays are usually days off, although only banks and offices are shut – most shops, restaurants and cafés are open everyday of the week.

Banks are usually open from 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday, often with an hour or two off for lunch. During the hot summer months, some enterprises will shut for two or three hours in the early afternoon, reopening at 3pm or 4pm and working into the evening when it's cooler. See the *Directory* of whichever country you are in for more specific detail.

CHILDREN

Successful travel with young children requires planning and effort. Don't try to overdo things; even for adults, packing too much into the time available can cause problems. And make sure the activities include the kids as well – balance that morning at Budapest's

Museum of Fine Arts with a performance at the Puppet Theatre. A good resource is *Lonely Planet's Travel With Children* by Cathy Laniyan and Maureen Wheeler.

Include children in the trip planning; if they've helped to work out where you will be going, they will be much more interested when they get there. In Eastern Europe most car rental firms have children's safety seats for hire at a small cost, but it is essential that you book them in advance. The same goes for highchairs and cots (cribs); they're standard in many restaurants and hotels but numbers are limited. The choice of baby food, infant formulas, soy and cow's milk, disposable nappies (diapers) and the like can be as great in the supermarkets of many Eastern European countries as it is back home, but the opening hours may be quite different to what you are used to.

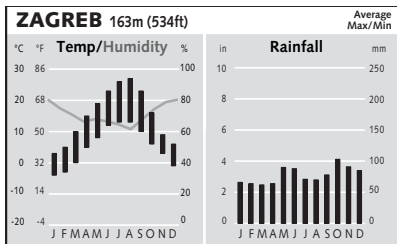
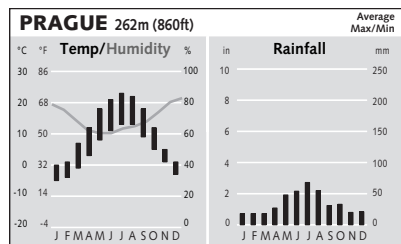
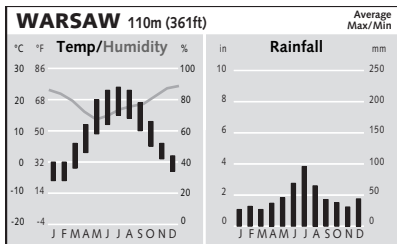
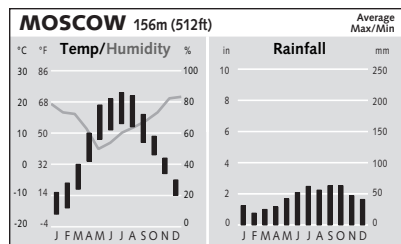
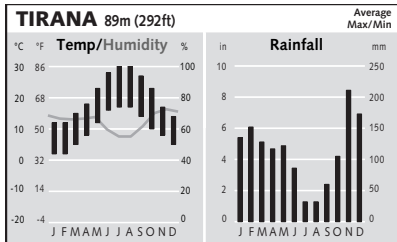
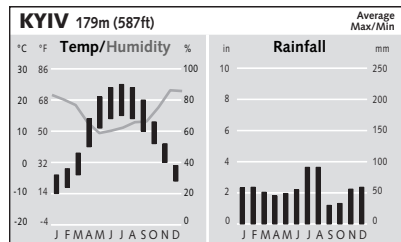
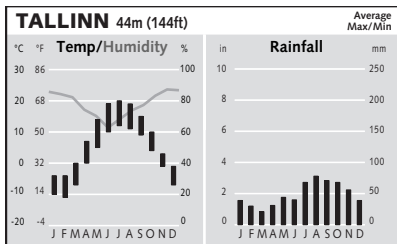
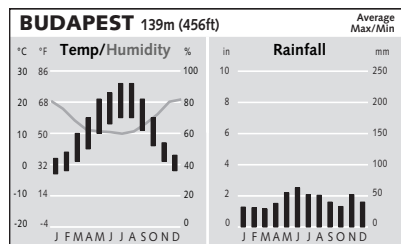
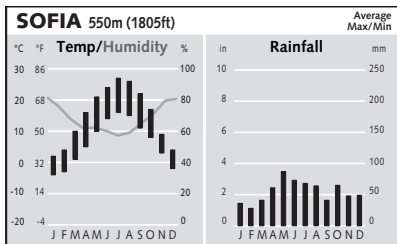
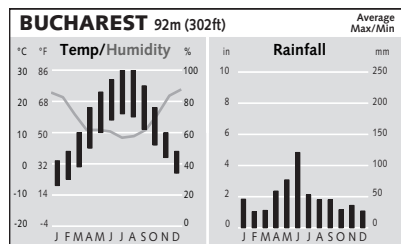
CLIMATE CHARTS

The weather in Eastern Europe can be fairly extreme at times, but very rarely enough to prevent travel. It's a fascinating place to visit any time of year – even during the icy winter (and that's particularly icy in the Baltic countries, Russia and Ukraine) when the cities take on a magical frosty charm. July and August can be uncomfortably hot in the cities and throughout the Balkans, but this is the time when the alpine areas such as the High Tatras, the Carpathians and the Rila Mountains are best to visit, not to mention the beaches. All in all, May, June and September are the best times to visit from a climatic point of view, as nowhere will be too warm or too cool.

COURSES

Apart from learning new physical skills by doing something like a ski course in Slovenia or horse riding in Hungary, you can enrich your mind with a variety of structured courses in Eastern Europe, on anything from language to alternative medicine. Language courses are often available to foreigners through universities or private schools, and are justifiably popular, as the best way to learn a language is in the country where it's spoken.

In general, the best sources of information are the cultural institutes maintained by many European countries around the world. Failing that, you could try national tourist offices or embassies. Student exchange organisations, student travel agencies, and organisations such as HI can also put you on the right track.



CUSTOMS

While there's no problem with bringing in and taking out personal effects, be aware that antiques, books printed before 1945, crystal glass, gemstones, lottery tickets, philatelic materials, precious metals (gold, silver, platinum), securities and valuable works of art may still have to be declared in writing or even accompanied by a 'museum certificate' (available from the place of purchase) in many Eastern European countries. There may also be restrictions on the import/export of local currency, although the amounts allowed these days are actually quite large.

Throughout most of Eastern Europe, the usual allowances for tobacco (eg 200 to 250 cigarettes, but a lung-busting 1000 cigarettes in Belarus), alcohol (2L of wine, 1L of spirits) and perfume (50g) apply to duty-free goods purchased at airports or on ferries. Customs checks are pretty cursory and you probably won't even have to open your bags, but don't be lulled into a false sense of security.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Eastern Europe is as safe – or unsafe – as any other part of the developed world. If you can handle yourself in the big cities of Western Europe, North America or Australia, you'll have little trouble dealing with the less pleasant side of Eastern Europe. Look purposeful, keep alert and you'll be OK.

Some locals will regale you with tales of how dangerous their city is and recount various cases of muggings, break-ins, kidnappings etc, often involving Roma or other popular scapegoats (most Eastern Europeans will tell you horror stories about the Romanians and Albanians). Bosnia and Kosovo have an unusual form of danger – land mines. It's the only time Lonely Planet will ever advise you *not* to venture off the beaten track.

Low-level corruption is disappearing fast as the back-scratching system, so common during the communist regimes, claims its rightful place in the dustbin of history. Do *not* pay bribes to persons in official positions, such as police, border guards, train conductors, ticket inspectors etc, although be aware that these very anachronistic systems still exist in Belarus, Moldova and Transdniestr. If corrupt cops want to hold you up because some obscure stamp is missing from your documentation or on some other pretext, just let them and consider the experience an integral part of

your trip. Insisting on calling your embassy is always a good move; if the situation is brought to the attention of the officer's superiors, they will, unsurprisingly, get in trouble.

Don't worry at all if you're taken to the police station for questioning as you'll have a unique opportunity to observe the quality of justice in that country from the inside, and more senior officers will eventually let you go (assuming, of course, you haven't committed a real crime). If you do have to pay a fine or supplementary charge, insist on a proper receipt before turning over any money; this is now law in Hungary, for example, where traffic police were once notorious for demanding (and getting) 'gifts' from motorists guilty of some alleged infraction. Russia is still a hot bed of corrupt officials. In some cases a \$50 bill will often end an unpleasant situation. In all of this, try to maintain your cool, as any threats from you will only make matters worse.

Drugs

Always treat drugs with a great deal of caution. There are a lot of drugs available in the region, but that doesn't mean they are legal. The continual fighting in the former Serbia and Montenegro in the 1990s forced drug traffickers to seek alternative routes from Asia to Western Europe, sometimes crossing through Hungary, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Poland. Now EU members, these countries do not look lightly upon drug abuse.

Scams

A word of warning about credit cards: fraudulent shopkeepers have been known to make several charge-slip imprints with your credit card when you're not looking and then simply copy your signature from the authorised slip. There have also been reports of these unscrupulous people making quick and very hi-tech duplicates of credit or debit card information with a machine. If your card leaves your possession for longer than you think necessary, consider cancelling it.

Now that most Eastern European currencies have reached convertibility, the days of getting five times the official rate for cash on the streets of Warsaw and Bucharest are well and truly over. Essentially, there is no longer a black market in most countries of this region; anyone who approaches you offering such a deal (an uncommon occurrence these days) is your average, garden-variety thief.

Theft

Theft is definitely a problem in Eastern Europe, and the threat comes from both local thieves and fellow travellers. The most important things to guard are your passport, other documents, tickets and money – in that order. It's always best to carry these next to your skin or in a sturdy leather pouch on your belt. Train-station lockers or luggage-storage counters are useful to store your luggage (but not valuables) while you get your bearings in a new town. Be very suspicious of people who offer to help you operate your locker. Carry your own padlock for hostel lockers.

You can lessen the risks by being wary of snatch thieves. Cameras or shoulder bags are great for these people, who sometimes operate from motorcycles or scooters and slash the strap before you have a chance to react. A small day-pack is better, but watch your rear. Be very careful at cafés and bars; loop the strap around your leg while seated. While it makes pickpocketing harder, carrying a backpack on your front will both let everyone know you are a tourist (and one who thinks everyone is a thief) as well as make you look like a prize idiot. Far better is to keep all valuables in inside pockets and only have things you could stand to lose in easily accessible pockets.

Pickpockets are most active in dense crowds, especially in busy train stations and on public transport during peak hours. A common ploy in the Budapest and Prague metros has been for a group of well-dressed young people to surround you, chattering away while one of the group zips through your pockets or purse.

Be careful even in hotels; don't leave valuables lying around in your room.

Parked cars containing luggage or other bags are prime targets for petty criminals in most cities, and cars with foreign number plates and/or rental agency stickers attract particular attention. While driving in cities, beware of snatch thieves when you pull up at the lights – keep doors locked and windows rolled up high.

In case of theft or loss, always report the incident to the police and ask for a statement. Otherwise your travel-insurance company won't pay up.

Violence

Though it's unlikely that travellers will encounter any violence while in Eastern Europe, skinheads and neo-Nazis have singled out the

resident Roma, blacks and Asians as scapegoats for their own problems, while foreigners have been attacked in Hungary and the Czech Republic. Avoid especially run-down areas in cities and *never* fight back. These people can be extremely dangerous. Russian neo-Nazis have developed a charming tradition of seeking out fights with nonwhite people on Hitler's birthday (20 April). People of non-European origin should exercise caution if they are in Moscow or St Petersburg on this date. In fact the situation in Russia had soured considerably at the time of research, with an extraordinary amount of violence against ethnic minorities, particularly in St Petersburg. While we don't discourage nonwhite people from visiting, we do urge a great deal of caution; avoid the suburbs, travel with friends and don't go out at night alone.

DISABLED TRAVELLERS

Eastern Europe can be very unpredictable when it comes to facilities for the disabled. The golden rule is never to expect much and you won't be disappointed, which is not exactly encouraging. Most major museums and sites have disabled access, although there are still exceptions. However, hotels outside the top bracket and public transport are still universally poor, and it's fair to say that access for the disabled has not been a priority in the region's past two decades of rapid reform.

If you have a physical disability, get in touch with your national support organisation (preferably the travel officer if there is one) and ask about the countries you plan to visit. They often have complete libraries devoted to travel, with useful things like access guides, and they can put you in touch with travel agencies who specialise in tours for the disabled. The **Royal Association for Disability & Rehabilitation** (Radar; ☎ UK 020-7250 3222, fax 7250 0212; www.radar.org.uk; 12 City Forum, 250 City Rd, London EC1V 8AF) is a very helpful association and sells a number of publications for the disabled.

DISCOUNT CARDS

Camping Card International

The Camping Card International (CCI) is a camping ground ID valid for a year. It can be used instead of a passport when checking in to camping grounds and includes third-party insurance. As a result, many camping grounds will offer a small discount (usually 5% to 10%)

if you have one. CCIs are issued by automobile associations, camping federations and, sometimes, on the spot at camping grounds. The CCI is also useful as it can sometimes serve as a guarantee, so that you don't have to leave your passport at reception.

Hostel Cards

No hostels in Eastern Europe require that you be a hostelling association member, but they sometimes charge less if you have a card. Some hostels will issue one on the spot or after a few days' stay, though this might cost a bit more than getting it at home.

International Student, Youth & Teacher Cards

An International Student Identity Card (ISIC), a plastic ID-style card with your photograph, provides discounts on many forms of transport (including airlines and local transport), cheap or free admission to museums and sights, and inexpensive meals in some student cafeterias and restaurants. If you're under 26 but not a student, you are eligible to apply for an International Youth Travel Card (IYTC, formerly GO25), issued by the Federation of International Youth Travel Organisations, or the Euro26 card (the latter card may not be recognised in Albania, Moldova, Romania, Serbia and Montenegro). Both go under different names in different countries and give much the same discounts and benefits as an ISIC. An International Teacher Identity Card (ITIC) identifies the holder as an instructor and offers similar deals. All these cards are issued by student unions, hostelling organisations or youth-oriented travel agencies.

Senior Cards

Many attractions offer reduced-price admission for people over 60 or 65 (sometimes as low as 55 for women). Make sure you bring proof of age. For a fee of around €20, European residents aged 60 and over can get a Railplus Card as an add-on to their national rail senior pass. It entitles the holder to train-fare reductions of around 25%.

Check before you leave home about age-related travel packages and discounts (on car hire, for instance) through organisations and travel agencies that cater for senior travellers. See p937 for one such organisation, Saga Holidays. Start hunting at your local senior citizens' advice bureau.

DVDS

DVDs are sold throughout Eastern Europe, and the further east you go, the less likely they are to be licensed. This can result in great bargains for those who don't mind buying pirated copies, but you should also realise that unlicensed DVDs are illegal in most countries, although you're unlikely to be caught bringing a few cheap DVDs home. In general, DVDs sold in Eastern Europe will be Region 2 DVDs, which mean that unless you have a multiregion DVD player, they will not play in North America (Region 1) or anywhere where Region 2 is not the norm. Even if a film has had its title and cover translated into a local language, if the original was English (and often even if it wasn't) there will usually be the option to watch the DVD in English, but check before you buy.

ELECTRICITY

Eastern European countries run on 220V, 50Hz AC; check the voltage and cycle (usually 50Hz) used on your appliances. Most appliances set up for 220V will quite happily handle 240V without modification (and vice versa). It's preferable to adjust your appliance to the exact voltage if you can (some modern battery chargers and radios will do this automatically). Don't mix 110/125V with 220/240V without a transformer, which will be built in if the appliance can, in fact, be adjusted.

Several countries outside Europe (the USA and Canada, for instance) have 60Hz AC, which will affect the speed of electric motors even after the voltage has been adjusted, so CD and tape players (where motor speed is all-important) will be useless. But appliances such as electric razors, hairdryers, irons and radios will work fine.

Plugs in Eastern Europe are the standard round two-pin variety, sometimes called the 'europlug'. If your plugs are of a different design, you'll need an adapter.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

See the individual country chapters for the addresses of embassies and consulates both in Eastern Europe and in your home country.

It's important to realise what your embassy can and cannot do to help if you get into trouble while abroad. Generally speaking, it won't be much help in emergencies if the trouble you're in is remotely your own fault. Remember that you are bound by the laws of the country you are visiting.

In genuine emergencies you might get some assistance, but only if other channels have been exhausted. For example, if you need to get home urgently, a free ticket back is exceedingly unlikely – the embassy would expect you to have insurance. If you have all your money and documents stolen, it might assist with getting a new passport, but a loan for onward travel is almost always out of the question.

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELLERS

Eastern Europe has an unpredictable reaction to homosexuality in all its forms. While gay and lesbian sex is legal in all countries covered by this book, this is often far more to do with governments earning kudos with the EU than an open-minded approach to sexual minorities. Whether or not this is the case where you are travelling, public displays of affection are still best avoided. Despite this, things are slowly changing – Latvia, Hungary, Poland and Russia have all had gay pride events in the past few years, but marchers have been outnumbered on most occasions by antigay protesters, and they have usually ended in arrests on both sides. Many gays and lesbians in Eastern Europe actually oppose such parades as they often provoke the majority into taking an antigay stance, whereas for the most part few heterosexuals are even aware of the gay and lesbian population.

Most Eastern European capitals have lively, if small, gay scenes, usually centred around one or two bars and clubs. Exceptions to this rule are Tirana, Skopje, Sarajevo and Chişinău where there is nothing gay- or lesbian-specific that is accessible to visitors. Outside large population centres, gay and lesbian life is almost nonexistent.

Good resources for gay travellers include websites such as www.gaydar.com and www.gay.com. Listings are given wherever possible in the individual country sections.

HOLIDAYS

Eastern Europe's school calendar is nothing unusual – children get the summer months off (usually July and August) as well as breaks for Easter and Christmas. Even in countries with a large Muslim population, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Albania, these dates are generally followed – a hangover from communist times. See the relevant country's Directory for details of local public holidays and festivals.

INSURANCE

A travel-insurance policy to cover theft, loss and medical problems is a good idea. The policies written by STA Travel and other student travel organisations are usually good value. Some policies offer lower and higher medical expense options, so check the fine print.

Some insurance policies will specifically exclude 'dangerous activities', which can include scuba diving, motorcycling and even trekking. Some even exclude entire countries.

You may prefer a policy that pays doctors or hospitals directly rather than you having to pay on the spot and claim later. If you have to claim later make sure you keep all documentation. Some policies ask you to call back (reverse charges) to a centre in your home country where an immediate assessment of your problem is made. Check that the policy covers ambulances and an emergency flight home. For more information on health insurance, see p940.

For details on car insurance, see p934.

Worldwide cover to travellers from over 44 countries is available online at www.lonelyplanet.com/travel_services.

INTERNET ACCESS

With a few exceptions, almost any decent-sized town in Eastern Europe has internet access. Connections may be slow, internet 'cafés' may not serve coffee or any other drinks, and sometimes you'll be limited to a monitor in a dark, smelly room full of teenage boys playing war games – but one way or another you'll never be far from your email account, even in less developed nations such as Albania or Moldova. Indeed, in some more developed cities, internet cafés can be a social hub and a great way of meeting locals as well as travellers. Make sure you have a web-based email account so you can pick up email on the road without your own laptop.

If you are carrying your laptop with you, the good news is that wi-fi has taken off in Eastern Europe. The Baltics are particularly good – Tallinn alone has over 300 wi-fi spots, most of them free. It's increasingly common for any high-standard or boutique hotel to have wi-fi in the rooms. Sadly, most business hotels charge for this service, while as a rule boutique hotels are more likely to offer it for free. Whenever a café, hotel or bar has wi-fi, we make a note of it in reviews.

MAPS

Bringing a good regional map will make things a great deal easier if you are planning a long trip taking in more than a couple of countries. There's a huge range available but we recommend *Eastern Europe*, produced by Latvian publishers Jana Seta, and *Eastern Europe*, from Freytag and Berndt.

In general, buying city maps in advance is unnecessary, as nearly all large towns produce them locally for a fraction of the price you'll pay at home. However, maps of Eastern European capitals and other major towns are widely available from travel bookshops if you want a particularly detailed map in advance.

MONEY

Things have simplified in Eastern Europe these days, with no real worries about 'soft' and 'hard' currencies. The main problem you'll face is constant currency changes as you flit between the crown, zloty, rouble, lei, lev, lek, dinar and various other national currencies. There is no longer any particular desire for 'hard' currency (long gone are the days where hoteliers would slash the rates if you paid in US dollars) and the convertibility of almost all Eastern European currencies makes them a stable and reliable way to carry cash. The euro remains the easiest currency to change throughout the region, particularly in light of the US dollar's weakness over the past few years.

With the accession of half of the region to the EU, there's a move for some countries to adopt the euro themselves. While countries have to meet complex economic criteria, it's pretty certain that at least four of them will have adopted it by 2010. On the other hand some countries such as Poland are sceptical about the common currency and have not set a target for entry.

ATMs & Credit Cards

The hassle of trying to change travellers cheques at the weekend and rip-off *bureaux de change* is a thing of the past in most parts of Eastern Europe, with the arrival of ATMs that accept most credit and cash cards. Nearly all Eastern European countries have plenty of ATMs, and not only in the capital city. Check the specific situation in each country's chapter before banking on this.

As purchase tools, credit cards are still not as commonly used as in Western Europe but they're gaining ground: especially Amex,

Visa and MasterCard. You'll be able to use them at upmarket restaurants, shops, hotels, car-rental firms, travel agencies and many petrol stations.

Cash or debit cards, which you use at home to withdraw money directly from your bank account or savings account, can be used throughout Eastern Europe at those ATMs linked to international networks like Cirrus and Maestro. The major advantage of using ATMs is that you don't pay commission charges to exchange money and the exchange rate is usually at a better interbank rate than that offered for travellers cheques or cash exchanges. Bear in mind that if you use a credit card for purchases, exchange rates may have changed by the time your bill is processed, which can work out to your advantage or disadvantage.

Charge-card companies like Amex, and to a lesser extent Diners Club, have offices in most countries in Eastern Europe and they can generally replace a lost card within 24 hours. That's because they treat you as a customer of the company rather than of the bank that issued the card. Their major drawback is that they're not widely accepted off the beaten track. Charge cards may also be hooked up to some ATM networks. Credit and credit/debit cards like Visa and MasterCard are more widely accepted because they tend to charge merchants lower commissions.

If you choose to rely on plastic, go for two different cards – this allows one to be used as backup in the case of loss, or more commonly, because a certain bank will accept one credit card and not another for no discernable reason. Better still is a combination of credit card and travellers cheques so you have something to fall back on if an ATM swallows your card or the banks in the area won't accept it (a not uncommon occurrence). There are also a couple of tricky scams involving credit cards; see p913.

Cash

This is, of course, the easiest way to carry money, but if you lose it, that's it. The two most favoured currencies throughout Eastern Europe are the euro and the US dollar. However, it is perfectly easy to exchange virtually any other major world currency in big cities, but you are inevitably at the mercy of the exchange office and their rates. Far better is to change your money into euros or US dollars before you leave home and you'll have no problems whatsoever.

Moneychangers

Shop around, never stop at the first place you see, and if you happen to be in a tourist area you can rest assured you'll be offered crappy rates everywhere. So don't bother shopping around, just leave for a less-touristed neighbourhood. Examples are around the Charles Bridge in Prague or the Old Town Square in Kraków. Borders, airports and train stations are typically places where rates aren't great but many people change money out of necessity. One alternative, certainly at airports and train stations, is to withdraw local currency from an ATM.

Tippling

Tipping practices vary from country to country, and often from place to place. Rurally, you'll find some people astonished if you give them a good tip, while employees at fashionable restaurants in big cities will be miffed if you don't. See the individual country chapters for specific advice, but in general rounding the bill up or adding a maximum of 10% is the norm. Porters at luxury hotels will expect a few euros for their trouble, but it's up to you at less-smart places.

Travellers Cheques

The main idea of using travellers cheques rather than cash is the protection they offer from theft, though they have lost their once-enormous popularity as more and more travellers – including those on tight budgets – withdraw cash through ATMs as they go along.

Banks usually charge from 1% to 2% commission to change travellers cheques (up to 5% in Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Romania). Their opening hours are sometimes limited. In the individual chapters, we recommend the most efficient banks of each country.

The privately owned exchange offices in Albania, Bulgaria, Poland, Romania and Slovenia change cash at excellent rates without commission. Not only are their rates sometimes higher than those offered by the banks for travellers cheques, but they stay open much longer hours, occasionally even 24 hours. However, do take care in Belarus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Slovakia and Ukraine, as some big moneychangers take exorbitant commissions unless you cash a small fortune with them. Before signing a travellers cheque or handing over any cash always check the commission and rate.

Amex and Thomas Cook representatives cash their own travellers cheques without commission, but both give poor rates of exchange. If you're changing more than US\$20, you're usually better off going to a bank and paying the standard 1% to 2% commission to change there.

Western Union

If all goes horribly wrong – your money, travellers cheques and credit cards are all stolen – don't despair. While it's a terrible (and highly unusual) situation, as long as you know the phone number of a friend or relative back home, they will be able to wire money to you anywhere in Eastern Europe via Western Union (WU). We don't bother listing WU representatives in this guide, as there are literally thousands of them. Just look for the distinctive yellow and black sign, and if you're somewhere remote, ask the person sending you the money to ask WU for the nearest office to you. The sender is then given a code that they communicate to you. You take the code to the nearest office, along with your passport, to receive your cash.

PHOTOGRAPHY & VIDEO

Film and camera equipment is available everywhere in Eastern Europe, but shops in the larger places offer a wider choice. Avoid buying film at tourist sites in Europe, such as the Castle District in Budapest or by Charles Bridge in Prague. It may have been stored badly or reached its sell-by date. It will certainly be more expensive than in normal photography shops.

Eastern Europe was once notorious for its photographic restrictions – taking shots of anything 'strategic' such as bridges or train stations was strictly forbidden. These days local officials are much less paranoid, but you need to use common sense when it comes to this issue; photographing military installations, for example, is never a good idea anywhere in the world. Most importantly, have the courtesy to ask permission before taking close-up photos of people.

In most countries, it is easy to obtain video tapes in large towns and cities, but make sure you buy the correct format. It is usually worth buying at least a few at home at the start of your trip.

Be aware that museums often demand that you buy permission to photograph or video their displays. Do this when you buy your tickets if you think you will get snap happy,

as you'll have to retrace your steps if you don't – no laughing matter in the enormous Hermitage in St Petersburg.

Anyone using a digital camera should check that they have enough memory to store your snaps – two 128MB cards will probably be enough. If you do run out of memory space your best bet is to burn your photos onto a CD. Even if you don't have your laptop with you, an increasing number of processing labs now offer this service.

To download your pics at an internet café you'll need a USB cable and a card reader. Some places provide a USB on request but be warned that many of the bigger chain cafés don't let you plug your gear into their computers, meaning that it's back to plan A – the CD.

POST

Details of post offices are given in the information sections of each city or town in the individual country chapters, and postage costs given in the country Directory. Both efficiency and cost vary enormously. There seem to be no set rules, but EU-accession countries are likely to be faster, more reliable and more expensive than the non-EU states. Don't send anything back home from Russia, Ukraine, Belarus or Moldova unless you can deal with its possible loss, although in practice things are quite reliable.

Poste restante (having letters sent to you care of local post offices) is unreliable, not to mention an increasingly unnecessary communication method in the 21st century. If you desperately need something posted to you, do your research – find a friend of a friend who could receive the mail at their address, or ask nicely at a hotel you plan to stay at. You can also have mail sent to you at Amex offices as long as you have an Amex card or are carrying its travellers cheques. When you buy Amex cheques, ask for a booklet listing all its office addresses worldwide. Amex will forward mail for a small fee, but what it won't do is accept parcels, registered letters, notices for registered letters, answer telephone inquiries about mail or hold mail longer than 30 days.

To send a parcel from Eastern Europe you usually have to take it unwrapped to a main post office. Parcels weighing over 2kg often must be taken to a special customs post office. They will usually wrap the parcels for you. They may ask to see your passport and note the number on the form. If you don't have a return

address within the country put your name care of any large tourist hotel to satisfy them.

SOLO TRAVELLERS

Travelling alone is a unique experience. There are a huge number of advantages – you do exactly what you want to do, see what you want to see and are more likely to meet locals and socialise with people you'd otherwise never speak to. However, it can also be lonely and less fun when things get frustrating or don't work out. Backpacking and hostel culture is well adapted to people travelling alone, and hostels are great places to meet others. Indeed, you may find you'll spend a few days here and there with others you've met in hostels and who are heading in your direction, or keen to share the cost of a day trip or two. The best advice for solo travellers, therefore, is to head for your nearest hostel if you feel like some company. Most big cities in Eastern Europe have expat bars (usually the ubiquitous Irish pubs) if you are missing a slice of ersatz-home.

TELEPHONE

Telephone service has improved throughout the region in a very short time. Cities in Eastern Europe have a huge number of call centres – increasingly the domain of entrepreneurs who offer discounted rates, although there are also the state-run call centres, which are often in the same building as the main post office. Here you can often make your call from one of the booths inside an enclosed area, paying the cashier as you leave. Public telephones are almost always found at post offices. Local telephone cards, available from post offices, telephone centres, newsstands or retail outlets, are popular everywhere in the region. In fact, in many countries they have become the norm.

There's a wide range of local and international phonecards. For local calls you're usually better off with a local phonecard.

To call abroad from a landline you simply dial the international access code for the country you are calling from (most commonly 00 in Eastern Europe, but 8/ wait for tone/10 in Russia, Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine). From a mobile phone simply dial +, the country access code, the city code and the local number. See individual country chapters for each country's international access number, for example +7 for Russia.

To make a domestic call to another city in the same country in Eastern Europe dial the

area code with the initial zero and the number. Area codes for individual cities and regions are provided in the country chapters.

Mobile Phones

Like being in some horribly saccharine mobile phone commercial, today you'll see farmers travelling by horse and cart chatting on their mobiles in rural Romania, while old grannies selling sunflower seeds on a quiet Moscow side street write text messages to their grandchildren. The expansion of mobile phones has been nothing short of breathtaking in the region and this can be great for travellers too. If you plan to spend more than a week or so in one country, seriously consider buying a SIM card to slip into your phone (check with your provider at home before you leave that your handset has been unlocked). SIM cards can cost as little as €10 and can be topped up with cards available at supermarkets and any mobile phone dealers. Alternatively, if you have roaming, your phone will usually switch automatically over to a local network. This can be expensive if you use the phone a great deal, but can be very useful for ad hoc use on the road.

Phone Codes

Every country's international dialling code and international access code is given in the Fast Facts section at the beginning of each chapter. Every town has its local or area code within the country listed directly underneath its chapter heading.

TIME

Eastern Europe spans three time zones. Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) is five hours ahead of New York, eight hours ahead of Los Angeles and 10 hours behind Sydney. Thus, at noon in New York, it's 6pm in Warsaw, 7pm in Minsk and 8pm in Moscow.

Central European Time (GMT+1 hour) Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Macedonia, Montenegro, Poland, Serbia, Slovakia and Slovenia.

Eastern European Time (GMT+2 hours) Belarus, Bulgaria, Estonia, Kaliningrad, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Romania and Ukraine.

Moscow Time (GMT+3 hours) Moscow and St Petersburg.

All countries employ daylight savings. Clocks are put forward an hour usually on the last Sunday in March. They are set back one hour on the last Sunday in September.

TOURIST INFORMATION

The provision of tourist information varies enormously. While countries that have successfully realised their potential as holiday destinations have developed a network of excellent Tourist Information Centres (TICs), there are still many countries that take little or no interest in the economic benefits tourism can bring. Among the best prepared are Slovenia, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Bulgaria, many of which have tourist offices abroad as well as throughout the country. Countries in the latter category are (unsurprisingly) Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova. Russia is similarly badly organised, although there are now two TICs in St Petersburg, although they're hardly dynamic. However, it's a start and things look set to improve. The Baltic countries, Montenegro, Albania and Macedonia fall in a middle category of places actively trying to encourage tourism, but whose efforts remain rather obscure at the moment. See individual country entries for details of TICs locally.

VISAS & DOCUMENTS

Copies

The hassles created by losing your passport can be considerably reduced if you have a record of its number and issue date or, even better, photocopies of the relevant data pages. A photocopy of your birth certificate can also be useful.

Also note the serial numbers of your travellers cheques (cross them off as you cash them) and take photocopies of your credit cards, air ticket and any other travel documents. Keep all this emergency material separate from your passport, cheques and cash, and leave extra copies with someone you can rely on at home. Add some emergency money (eg €50 to €100 in cash) to this separate stash as well. If you do lose your passport, notify the police immediately to get a statement, and contact your nearest consulate (listed in the Directory sections of individual destination chapters).

Passport

Your most important travel document is your passport, which should remain valid until well after you return home. If it's just about to expire, renew it before you travel. Some countries insist that your passport remain valid for a specified period (usually three months) beyond the expected date of your departure from that country. In practice, this is rarely checked.

SPONTANEITY VS PLANNING AHEAD

Visa regulations vary throughout Eastern Europe; for most countries you won't need a visa at all, while for others obtaining a visa is a trial of skill, patience and planning. This table outlines visa requirements for those countries requiring a visa at the time of writing (whether a visa is available on arrival and whether it can be obtained on arrival by citizens of the countries listed); see individual country chapters for more detail. Be aware, however, that visa regulations can and do change, so you should always check with the individual embassies or a reputable travel agency before travelling.

| | Visa on arrival | EU citizens | US citizens | Canadian citizens | Australian citizens | NZ citizens |
|-----------|-----------------|-------------|-------------|-------------------|---------------------|-------------|
| Albania | No* | No | No | No | No | No |
| Belarus | Yes** | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Macedonia | Varies | No | No | Yes | Yes | No |
| Moldova | Varies | No | No | No | Yes | Yes |
| Romania | No | No | No | No | Yes | Yes |
| Russia | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Ukraine | No | No | No | No | Yes | Yes |

* Compulsory €10 entry fee payable on arrival.

** Visa invitation still required in advance.

Once you start travelling, carry your passport (or a copy of it) at all times and guard it carefully. Camping grounds and hotels sometimes insist that you hand over your passport for the duration of your stay, which is very inconvenient, we suggest you avoid such establishments or offer to pay upfront. If you've paid upfront, anyone insisting they keep your passport for longer than one night to register it is up to no good.

Visas

A visa is a stamp in your passport or a separate piece of paper permitting you to enter the country in question and stay for a specified period of time. A decade ago a trip through Eastern Europe could take up several pages of your passport, whereas today you'll be lucky to even get an entry stamp in many cases. EU and US citizens now only need a visa for Russia and Belarus, while Australians and New Zealanders don't have it quite so easy. See the Directory of each individual country for specific requirements for entry and check the table Spontaneity vs Planning Ahead.

When you do need a visa, you can sometimes get it at the border or at the airport on arrival, but not always, especially if you're travelling by train or bus and the procedure is likely to hold up others. Check first with the embassies or consulates of the countries you plan to visit; otherwise you could find yourself

stranded at the border. With a valid passport and visa (if required) you'll be able to visit most Eastern European countries for up to three (and sometimes even six) months, provided you have some sort of onward or return ticket and/or 'sufficient means of support'.

In line with the Schengen Agreement, there are no longer strict passport controls at the borders between most EU countries, but procedures between EU and non-EU countries can still be fairly thorough. For those who do require visas, it's important to remember that these will have a 'use-by' date, and you'll be refused entry after that period has elapsed.

Consulates sometimes issue visas on the spot, although some levy a 50% to 100% surcharge for 'express service'. If there's a choice between getting a visa in advance and on the border, go for the former option if you have the time. They're often cheaper in your home country and this can save on bureaucratic procedure.

Decide in advance if you want a tourist or transit visa. Transit visas, usually valid for just 48 or 72 hours, are often cheaper and issued faster, but it's usually not possible to extend a transit visa or change it to a tourist visa.

The visa form may instruct you to report to police within 48 hours of arrival. If you're staying at a hotel or other official accommodation (camping ground, hostel, private room arranged by a travel agency etc), this

should be taken care of for you. If you're staying with friends, relatives or in a private room, you're supposed to register with the police yourself. During the communist days these regulations were strictly enforced, but things are pretty casual in most countries nowadays. However, consult the Visa section in the relevant country's Directory for full information. Russia is one country, for example, where not registering your visa can cause big problems.

WOMEN TRAVELLERS

Frustrating though it is, women travellers continue to face more challenging situations when travelling than men do. If you are a woman traveller, especially a solo woman, you may find it helpful to understand the status of local women to better understand the responses you elicit from locals. Hopes of travelling inconspicuously, spending time alone and absorbing the surroundings are often thwarted by men who assume a lone woman desires company, or who seemingly find it impossible to avert their penetrating gaze. Bear in mind that most of this behaviour is harmless, more often than not. Hopefully, the more women that travel, whether alone, in pairs or in groups, the less unwanted attention lone female travellers in the region will attract.

Despite feminism's grip on many European countries, women remain under-represented in positions of power, in both governmental and corporate spheres. Despite exciting progress to elevate the status of women in recent years, the percentage of women in the upper management levels of institutions still leaves a lot to be desired. In many areas, you may notice the glut of women in low-paid, menial jobs.

In Muslim countries, where conservative conceptions of the largely house-bound role of women still tend to prevail, women travelling alone or with other women will certainly be of interest or curiosity to both local men and women. Unmarried men rarely have contact with women outside their family unit, which is why many men in, for example, Albania and Bosnia and Hercegovina, may afford travelling women so much attention. In such areas, women travelling with a male companion will often experience the opposite, and may need to pinch themselves as a reminder that yes, they actually exist.

WORK

With the massive expansion of the EU in recent years, EU citizens at least have free reign to work in many countries in the region. However, with unemployment still a problem throughout the region, Eastern European countries aren't always keen on handing out jobs to foreigners. Outside the EU the paperwork involved in arranging a work permit can be almost impossible, especially for temporary work.

That doesn't prevent enterprising travellers from topping up their funds occasionally, and they don't always have to do this illegally. If you do find a temporary job in Eastern Europe, though, the pay is likely to be abysmally low. Do it for the experience – not to earn your fortune – and you won't be disappointed. Teaching English is the easiest way to make some extra cash, but the market is saturated in places like Prague and Budapest. You'll probably be much more successful in less popular places like Sofia and Bucharest.

If you play an instrument or have other artistic talents, you could try working the streets. As every Peruvian pipe player (and his fifth cousin) knows, busking is fairly common in major Eastern European cities like Prague, Budapest and Ljubljana. Some countries may require municipal permits for this sort of thing. Talk to other street artists before you start.

There are several references and websites that publicise specific positions across Eastern Europe. Transitions Abroad publishes *Work Abroad: The Complete Guide to Finding a Job Overseas* and the *Alternative Travel Directory: The Complete Guide to Work, Study and Travel Overseas* as well as a colour magazine, *Transitions Abroad*. Its website lists paid positions and volunteer and service programmes. **Action Without Borders** (www.idealists.org) and **Go Abroad** (www.goabroad.com) list hundreds of jobs and volunteer opportunities.

Work Your Way Around the World by Susan Griffith gives good, practical advice on a wide range of issues. The publisher, **Vacation Work** (www.vacationwork.co.uk), has many other useful titles, including *The Directory of Summer Jobs Abroad*, edited by David Woodworth. *Working Holidays* by Ben Jupp (Central Bureau for Educational Visits & Exchanges in the UK) is another good source, as is *Now Hiring! Jobs in Eastern Europe* by Clarke Canfield (Perpetual Press).

Volunteer Work

Organising a volunteer work placement is a great way to gain a deeper insight into local culture. If you're staying with a family, or working alongside local colleagues, you'll probably learn much more about life here than you would if you were travelling through the country.

In some instances volunteers are paid a living allowance, sometimes they work for their keep and other programmes require the volunteer to pay.

Several websites can help you search for volunteer work opportunities in Eastern Europe. The **Coordinating Committee for International Voluntary Service** (www.unesco.org/cdivs) is an umbrella organisation with over 140 member organisations worldwide. It's useful if you want to find out about your country's national volunteer placement agency. Check www.serveyourworld.com and www.transitionsabroad.com and search for vacancies and other volunteering opportunities in Eastern Europe.

Transport in Eastern Europe

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GETTING THERE & AWAY

The revolution in cheap air travel, so long confined to Western Europe, has well and truly spread to the east of the continent, opening up the region as never before. Given low prices for accommodation and getting around, it has traditionally been the prohibitive airfare that has put travellers off. Now there truly is no excuse if you're coming from Europe, and even if you're coming from much further afield, it's now much cheaper to connect to almost any region of Eastern Europe from a major Western European hub.

While it may be environmentally unsustainable, there are over 2000 low cost air routes criss-crossing Europe at the moment, run by 50 budget airlines serving almost 300 airports. There has never been a better time to take advantage of these bargains and explore Europe's fastest-changing region.

Some travellers choose alternatively and get to Eastern Europe by train – a far more exciting, atmospheric and environmentally friendly way to enter the region than flying. Particularly thrilling of course is to approach Eastern Europe from Asia on the mythical trans-Siberian, trans-Mongolian or trans-

Manchurian express trains. Not as pumped full of kudos perhaps, but still fun (not to mention cheaper and quicker), is taking the train from Western Europe over the psychological boundary between East and West that still exists, despite EU enlargement.

There are many ferry services operating in the Baltic Sea linking Scandinavia and Germany with countries such as Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. Other routes cross the Adriatic from Italy to Slovenia, Croatia, Macedonia and Albania. This is a truly old-world way to travel, and lots of fun as well. Of course, bus, bicycle and car are also popular ways to enter the region – whichever method you choose you'll find some helpful, practical information in the relevant sections in this chapter. Flights, tours and rail tickets can be booked online at www.lonelyplanet.com/travel_services.

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

All countries obviously require travellers to have a valid passport, preferably with a good window between the time of departure and the passport's expiration date. Increasingly, EU travellers from countries that issue national identity cards use these to travel within the EU, although it's impossible to use these as the sole travel documents outside the EU.

Visas are another thing to consider. Countries may require some nationalities to buy a document that allows entry to the country between certain dates. Visas are sometimes free, sometimes available at the border for a price, and sometimes only available in advance and with considerable bureaucratic wrangling. Wherever you are going, be clear on the visa requirements and plan on getting them in advance to save yourself headaches. See the Directory for each country for visa information.

AIR

Moscow, Prague, Budapest and Warsaw are the region's best-connected air hubs; all have trans-Atlantic flights as well as plenty of flights from Western Europe. With the exception of Moscow, all have plenty of budget airlines serving them. Other smaller hubs are Riga, Timișoara, Zagreb, St Petersburg, Kyiv and

CLIMATE CHANGE & TRAVEL

Climate change is a serious threat to the ecosystems that humans rely upon, and air travel is the fastest-growing contributor to the problem. Lonely Planet regards travel, overall, as a global benefit, but believes we all have a responsibility to limit our personal impact on global warming.

FLYING & CLIMATE CHANGE

Pretty much every form of motorised travel generates CO2 (the main cause of human-induced climate change) but planes are far and away the worst offenders, not just because of the sheer distances they allow us to travel, but because they release greenhouse gases high into the atmosphere. The statistics are frightening: two people taking a return flight between Europe and the US will contribute as much to climate change as an average household's gas and electricity consumption over a whole year.

CARBON OFFSET SCHEMES

Climatecare.org and other websites use 'carbon calculators' that allow travellers to offset the level of greenhouse gases they are responsible for with financial contributions to sustainable travel schemes that reduce global warming – including projects in India, Honduras, Kazakhstan and Uganda.

Lonely Planet, together with Rough Guides and other concerned partners in the travel industry, support the carbon offset scheme run by climatecare.org. Lonely Planet offsets all of its staff and author travel.

For more information check out our website: www.lonelyplanet.com.

Bratislava, all of which have regular flights to many European cities. Most of the small hubs also have budget airline connections, although as a rule the further east you go the fewer there are.

Airports & Airlines

Eastern Europe is covered in international airports. The biggest in the region is Moscow's Sheremetyevo airport, the hub of transport behemoth (and butt of many a joke) Aeroflot and its many 'baby' flots – the privatised parts of the company now making up innumerable strangely-named regional airlines.

THINGS CHANGE

The information in this chapter is particularly vulnerable to change. Check directly with the airline or a travel agent to make sure you understand how a fare (and ticket you may buy) works and be aware of the security requirements for international travel. Shop carefully. The details given in this chapter should be regarded as pointers and are not a substitute for your own careful, up-to-date research.

Other significant regional airlines are ČSA (Czech Airlines), whose hub is in Prague's Ruzyně airport, Malév (Hungarian Airlines), based in Budapest and LOT Polish Airlines, based in Warsaw.

Air Routes

ALBANIA

Albania's international flight provision is improving slowly. Recently British Airways added a daily flight from London Gatwick to Tirana's Mother Teresa airport, making the country far more accessible to long-haul travellers. There are also connections to Athens, Bologna, Cologne, Frankfurt, Istanbul, Milan, Rome, Turin, Venice, Vienna and Zurich.

BELARUS

Minsk-2 is the only airport that takes international flights (at least from non-CIS places). Foreign airlines include Czech Airlines, Austrian Airlines and Lufthansa. Belavia is the Belarusian airline, which has direct flights to Vienna (daily, shared with Austrian Airlines), Paris (Tuesday and Friday), Shannon (Thursday), Berlin (Thursday and Sunday), London (Wednesday and Sunday) and Frankfurt

FLYING TO EASTERN EUROPE ON THE CHEAP

Invaluable travellers website www.flycheapo.com is a great resource to see which budget airlines fly where. Schedules change almost every week, so it's always best to check online, but look out for some of the following airlines that provide the biggest selection of flights to/from Eastern Europe:

- Air Berlin** (www.airberlin.com)
- Alpi Eagles** (www.alpieagles.com)
- Blue Air** (www.blueair-web.com)
- Bmibaby** (www.bmibaby.com)
- Carpatair** (www.carpatair.com)
- Condor** (www.condor.com)
- DBA** (www.flydba.com)
- EasyJet** (www.easyjet.com)
- Germania Express** (www.gexx.de)
- Germanwings** (www.germanwings.com)
- Norwegian Air Shuttle** (www.norwegian.no)
- Ryanair** (www.ryanair.com)
- SkyEurope Airlines** (www.skyeurope.com)
- Smart Wings** (www.smartwings.net)
- Wizz Air** (www.wizzair.com)

(Wednesday and Sunday). Czech Airlines has direct flights to/from Stockholm thrice weekly.

BOSNIA & HERCEGOVINA

Austrian Airlines, Czech Airlines and Lufthansa connect Sarajevo to the world via the intercontinental hubs of Vienna, Prague and Frankfurt. There are also flights to Istanbul and Zurich. No discount airlines fly into Bosnia and Hercegovina yet, but a cheap flight to Zagreb or Dubrovnik and a bus trip could be an option.

BULGARIA

Bulgaria's main international hub is at Sofia, but there are also a huge number of (mainly chartered) international flights to Varna and Burgas, the gateways for popular Black Sea resorts. Sofia is connected to Amsterdam, Berlin, Frankfurt, Lisbon, London, Milan, Paris and Rome by a number of carriers including national airline Bulgaria Air and also British Airways and Lufthansa. Wizz Air has just commenced four flights weekly from London to Sofia, and two flights a week to Burgas.

CROATIA

Zagreb is connected to most European capitals as well as Frankfurt, Munich, Hamburg, Stuttgart, Cologne, Istanbul and Damascus. Dubrovnik has direct flights to Brussels, Glasgow, London (Gatwick), Manchester, Hannover, Frankfurt, Cologne, Stuttgart, Munich and Vienna. Split has direct flights to London, Frankfurt, Munich, Cologne, Manchester and Rome. Rijeka is directly connected to London (Luton), Hannover, Cologne, Stuttgart and Munich. Pula has nonstop flights to Manchester, London (Gatwick), Glasgow and Edinburgh. Note that there are no direct flights from North America to Croatia.

CZECH REPUBLIC

As the major gateway city to the region, Prague has a huge number of international flights, lots of no-frills airlines connecting to it. Prague's Ruzyně airport has links to all Western European capitals as well as Beirut, Cairo, Dubai, Jeddah, Kuwait, Montreal, New York, Riyadh, Seoul, Tbilisi, Tel Aviv and Yerevan.

ESTONIA

The national carrier Estonian Air links Tallinn with some 20 cities in Europe and Russia, and at reasonable prices. Destinations include Berlin, Copenhagen, Frankfurt, Helsinki and London. Copterline (www.copterline.ee) runs helicopter flights between Helsinki and Tallinn's Copterline Terminal.

HUNGARY

Big international carriers fly in and out of Budapest's Ferihegy 2, with main destinations including all major Western European capitals, the USA and Canada. Malév is the Hungarian national airline. Low-cost airlines such as easyJet, Wizz Air, SkyEurope and Air Berlin use Ferihegy 1 airport, a few kilometres down the road. Ryanair flies to Balaton airport from the UK and Ireland. Alternatively, Vienna's Schwechart airport is only about three hours from Budapest by bus or train and often has less expensive international airfares.

LATVIA

Riga airport is serviced by direct flights from dozens of Western European cities, including Amsterdam, Berlin, Brussels, Copenhagen, Dublin, Frankfurt, Glasgow, Helsinki, London and Stockholm. Flagship carrier Air Baltic serves some 30 cities, while the recent ar-

rival of budget airlines Ryanair, easyJet and Norwegian Air Shuttle has made it easier and cheaper than ever to visit Riga.

LITHUANIA

Vilnius is well connected throughout Europe with direct flights to most major cities including Amsterdam, Berlin, Brussels, Copenhagen, Dublin, Frankfurt, Helsinki, London, Moscow and Stockholm. Budget airlines Ryanair and Wizz Air now have regular flights linking Kaunas with about 10 cities in Western Europe, while local budget provider Lithuanian Airlines serves 15 Western European cities. Air Baltic is another option, it has services to about a dozen destinations in Western Europe.

MACEDONIA

Macedonia has two international airports, Skopje's Petrovec and the much smaller Ohrid airport. From Skopje there are regular flights to Berlin, Dusseldorf, Frankfurt, Istanbul, Hamburg, Milan, Rome, Vienna and Zurich, while Ohrid has services to Vienna and Zurich.

MOLDOVA

Moldova's only international airport is the originally named Chişinău international. Air Moldova is the national carrier. While most of Moldova's international flights are within Eastern Europe, Air Moldova has direct service to Athens and Vienna. Aerotour has three flights weekly to Amsterdam and Rome, two weekly flights to Paris and one or two flights daily to Istanbul and Vienna. Though no budget airlines connect Chişinău directly with Western Europe, Carpatair flies to Timișoara in Romania from where it connects with many major European cities.

MONTENEGRO

Apart from holiday charter flights, Montenegro is not well served by international airlines; this may change with independence. Currently Adria and Austrian Airlines are the only regional airlines serving Western Europe, with flights to London and Vienna respectively. European discount airlines have yet to fly to Montenegro and currently Dubrovnik and Split (Croatia) are the nearest airports.

POLAND

Warsaw is the major destination for most foreign airlines, though Katowice, Kraków,

Gdańsk, Poznań and Wrocław have flights to several European cities. National carrier LOT and all major European carriers fly to Warsaw. Apart from Europe, LOT connects Warsaw directly to Chicago, New York, Toronto and Tel Aviv. A recent development is the rapid growth of discount airline flights between Polish and British cities, and Dublin, in response to Poles' ability to work freely in the UK and Ireland as EU citizens. Ryanair is at the forefront of UK-Poland flights, often servicing major Polish cities daily from London, and less frequently from other centres. Other discount airlines frequently linking Western Europe and Poland include Wizz Air, SkyEurope, easyJet and Centralwings. SAS flies daily to Copenhagen.

ROMANIA

Romania has a surprisingly good array of connections to Western Europe, mainly thanks to budget airline Carpatair, which has its hub in Timișoara and flies to Dusseldorf, Frankfurt, Milan, Munich, Paris, Rome and Venice among others. Bucharest is the other big hub, where budget Blue Air link it to Barcelona, Istanbul, Lyon, Milan, Paris and Valencia. Wizz Air has just started flights between Bucharest and London. Other flights on national carrier Tarom and foreign airlines link Bucharest to most Western European capitals and throughout the Middle East.

ONLINE TICKETS

Some recommended air-ticket websites include those listed below. They usually levy a booking fee on any flights bought, but even if you don't buy through them, they can be very useful for checking that the flight prices offered to you by other travel agents are the best ones available. E-tickets are increasingly common with scheduled airlines, so often you won't even need a ticket, meaning you can complete your booking in minutes and print out your reference number.

- www.ebookers.com
- www.expedia.com
- www.opodo.com
- www.flybudget.com
- www.statravel.com

RUSSIA

Moscow is a huge air hub with three international airports, but it's all but ignored by budget flights. Germania Express, which flies to Moscow daily from several airports in Germany for reasonable (but not bargain) fares is one exception. Moscow is linked to nearly every European capital city as well as Bangkok, Beijing, Beirut, Damascus, Dubai, Hanoi, Hong Kong, Mumbai, Seoul, Tehran, Tokyo and Ulan Bator in Asia and the Middle East; Havana, Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, Seattle, Toronto and Washington in the Americas and with Cairo and Luanda in Africa.

St Petersburg is not as well connected with long-haul flights but has excellent connections with Western Europe including London, Paris, Frankfurt, Helsinki, Copenhagen, Rome and Vienna. Budget flights on Norwegian Air Shuttle connect it to Oslo, Germanwings to Cologne and Wind Jet from Bologna.

Kaliningrad has no international connections outside Eastern Europe.

SERBIA

Serbia is well served by regional airlines that pick up at intercontinental hubs. Travellers from Australasia can fly to Dubai and pick up a JAT flight to Belgrade or fly with Lufthansa via Frankfurt or Austrian Air via Vienna. Travellers from North America would pick up regional connecting flights in London or Frankfurt. Serbia remains ignored by budget airlines. At present Germanwings flies to Bel-

grade and Prishtina from Cologne, as well as to Prishtina from Hamburg and Stuttgart. The national carrier, JAT connects Belgrade to all major European cities as well as to Beirut, Cairo, Dubai, Lanaca, Tel Aviv and Tripoli. For information on Prishtina airport and flying into Kosovo, see p779.

SLOVAKIA

Bratislava's MR Štefánika airport is a growing European hub. Low-cost SkyEurope is headquartered there and flies to 22 European cities, including Amsterdam, Athens, Copenhagen, Paris, London and Rome. For long-haul flights to/from Australia and the Americas, you'll need to fly into Vienna's Schwechat airport (VIE), 60km west in Austria. A regular one-hour bus ride connects the two. There are also twice-weekly flights between Poprad and London. From Košice international airport, Austrian Airlines flies to Vienna several times a day. Air Slovakia very occasionally connects Košice to Birmingham in England, to Amritsar in India, to Larnaca in Cyprus, and to Tel Aviv. National carrier Slovak Airlines only connects Bratislava to Brussels and Moscow.

SLOVENIA

For a little country, Slovenia's Brnik airport near Ljubljana is surprisingly well connected throughout Europe, notably on Adria Airways, which serves Amsterdam, Brussels, Copenhagen, Dublin, Frankfurt, Istanbul, London, Manchester, Munich, Paris, Vienna and Zürich direct. EasyJet has low-cost flights from London and Wizz Air connects it to Brussels. Several other low-cost carriers serve a selection of nearby airports just across the Italian and Austrian borders.

UKRAINE

Kyiv's Boryspil airport is the major destination for most foreign airlines that come to Ukraine. Foreign airlines that serve Kyiv include Air Canada, Air France, British Airways, KLM, Lufthansa, Swiss, El Al, Northwest, Austrian Airlines and SAS. Ukraine International Airlines has direct flights to several destinations (sometimes partnering with a foreign airline), including Amsterdam (daily), Berlin (five weekly), Brussels (four weekly), Dusseldorf (three weekly), London (daily), Paris (daily), Vienna (dozens weekly), Zürich (daily). Aerosvit has direct flights to New York (six weekly) and Toronto (Sunday only).

**LAND
Border Crossings**

With the advent of the EU, border crossing in the region has never been simpler. Even candidate members, Bulgaria and Romania, have cleaned up their acts, with polite and efficient staff checking you on entry and exit, and levels of harassment falling hugely over recent years.

The region can be entered from all sides with no problem at all. Some of the major routes are from Germany and Austria into the Czech Republic, into Bulgaria from Turkey or Greece, into Slovenia from Italy and Austria and into Russia from Finland.

The only time real complications while crossing borders are likely to arise is when crossing between Kosovo and Serbia (opposite) and when crossing between Russia and Belarus (below).

For details of overland transport into individual countries refer to the Transport sections in the individual country chapters.

Bus

Never a great option for long-distance travel, buses have recently been undercut even by airlines in prices. However, not all places are served by budget airlines and so buses are always a useful fall-back and are reliably cheap. Major gateway cities to the region by bus from Western Europe include Budapest, Prague, Warsaw and Ljubljana, among others.

ALBANIA

Buses to Thessaloniki (10 hours) go daily from Tirana, and three times a week to Athens (24 hours).

BULGARIA

From Sofia there are bus services to Greece and Turkey: Athens (12 to 13 hours, one or two daily), Thessaloniki (six to seven hours, two to six daily) and Istanbul (eight to 10 hours, nine daily).

CZECH REPUBLIC

Prague's main international bus station is ÚAN Praha Florenc. From Prague there are daily buses to and from Amsterdam (15 hours), Frankfurt (8½ hours), London (20 hours), Geneva (15 hours), Paris (15 hours), Salzburg (7½ hours) and Vienna (five hours).

HUNGARY

Buses run from Budapest to Vienna (3½ hours, four daily), Frankfurt (15 hours, four weekly) via Munich (nine hours), Paris (22 hours, four weekly), London (26 hours, daily) and, finally, Rome (15 hours, six weekly) via Florence (11 hours).

LATVIA

Buses serve various cities in Western European countries, including Berlin (€43, daily), Amsterdam (€90) and London (€115, four weekly).

LITHUANIA

There are regular buses to/from a handful of Western European cities, including Berlin (€63), Munich (€77), Amsterdam (€95), London (€115) and Dublin (€150).

MACEDONIA

From Skopje buses travel to Thessaloniki (three hours, three weekly) and on to Athens.

THE KOSOVO PUZZLE

While Kosovo is still legally part of Serbia, it is administered separately by the UN and Serbia has no immigration facilities at Kosovan border crossings with Albania, Macedonia or Montenegro. However, there are also no borders on the boundary between Kosovo and Serbia either (as they are officially one country), so if you arrive overland in Kosovo from any country other than Serbia you will be there without a Serbian entry stamp in your passport. This means that you will have to leave Kosovo via Albania, Macedonia or Montenegro and then enter Serbia 'legally' via Macedonia or Montenegro if you want to carry on into Serbia proper.

CROSSING INTO RUSSIA: WARNING

Travellers have reported problems with entering Russia from Ukraine and Belarus. As there is often no border control (particularly between Belarus and Russia) and Ukrainians and Belarusians entering Russia don't need to have their passports stamped, travellers don't get a migration card when entering, or their passports aren't stamped on entry. Without a stamp in your passport showing you've entered Russia, hotels won't register your visa. And when leaving you again face problems for not having a migration card. Some travel agencies recommend that you fly into Russia from Belarus and Ukraine instead of taking the train, until this gets sorted out.

In addition to problems with train travel, flying to Moscow's Domodedovo airport from Minsk can be problematic, as you don't go through customs. There is no problem flying between Ukraine and Russia.

If you do not receive a migration card when entering Russia, contact your embassy immediately upon arrival to find out how to get one. If you do not receive an entry stamp, go to the local OVIR (Visa and Registration) office in Russia and bring a full supply of patience.

POLAND

From Warsaw there are regular buses to and from Amsterdam (20 hours, five weekly), Cologne (20½ hours, daily); London (27 hours, four weekly), Paris (24 hours, daily), Rome (28 hours, four weekly) and Vienna (13 hours, five weekly). Schedules and fares for a range of other destinations can be found (in English) at www.eurolinespolska.pl.

RUSSIA

There are regular buses between the Finnish capital, Helsinki, and St Petersburg (eight hours, four to six daily).

SLOVAKIA

Eurolines (www.eurolines.sk) connects Bratislava by bus with many major European cities including Hamburg (18½ hours, Wednesday), London (23 hours, five weekly), Paris (20 hours, three weekly) and Vienna (one hour, hourly).

SLOVENIA

Buses to Ljubljana arrive from various German cities including Frankfurt (12½ hours, daily) via Munich (6½ hours). Monday to Saturday there are buses from Koper to Trieste in Italy (one hour, up to 13 daily).

Car & Motorcycle

Travelling by car or motorcycle gives you an immense amount of freedom and is generally worry-free in Eastern Europe. Travelling by car between EU states is no problem at all, but trickier to non-EU members. Some insurance packages (especially those covering rental cars) do not include all European countries; for example hiring a car in Italy and driving it to Croatia will cause problems unless you have the correct insurance stamp (ask the agency to insure you for wherever you plan to travel). Due to high theft levels and terrible roads, Albania remains something of a no-go area for many, although the roads have been improving steadily and criminality declining slowly. Russia, Belarus and Ukraine still remain tediously difficult places to drive into – border controls can take a long time and bribes are often the order of the day.

Hitching

See the section under Hitching in Getting Around, p936.

Train

There are numerous routes into Eastern Europe by train, most of these from Western Europe. The big railway hubs in Eastern Europe are Prague, Budapest, Bucharest, Belgrade and Moscow. Albania is unique in Eastern Europe, having no international train services at all.

AUSTRIA

Services from Vienna include Budapest (3½ hours, five daily), Prague (4½ hours, six daily), Belgrade (11 hours, daily), Brno (1½ hours, daily) Bucharest (14 hours, daily), as well as Ljubljana (6¼ hours, daily) via Graz. From Salzburg there are also services such as that to Prague (eight hours, daily).

FINLAND

From Finland there are connections between Helsinki and St Petersburg (6 hours, two daily) and an overnight train to Moscow (16 hours, daily). From here you can connect throughout the region, although there are no direct trains to elsewhere in Eastern Europe from Finland.

GERMANY

Germany is great for connecting by train to Eastern Europe. The numerous routes include Berlin to Prague (five hours, seven daily), Frankfurt to Prague (7½ hours, one daily), Munich to Budapest (7½ hours, two daily), Munich to Ljubljana (6¾ hours, three daily), as well as Munich to Belgrade (17 hours, daily).

GREECE

Services to Eastern Europe include the daily service from Athens to Sofia (16½ hours), one daily service from Thessaloniki to Belgrade (16 hours) and a daily train runs between Skopje and Thessaloniki (five hours).

ITALY

Northern Italy is well connected to the central European capitals. Routes include Venice to Budapest (16 hours, one overnight train daily), Venice to Prague (14¾ hours, one daily) and Venice to Ljubljana (four hours, three daily) via Trieste, and Rome to Prague (20 hours, 4 weekly).

TURKEY

One of the main routes into Eastern Europe is the Istanbul–Sofia train (14½ hours, daily), the overnight Istanbul–Bucharest train (17 to

TOP FIVE UP-AND-COMING EASTERN EUROPEAN HOTSPOTS

- **Lviv, Ukraine** (p874) – Possibly ‘The New Prague’, this delightful medieval old town near Poland in newly visa-free Ukraine is our top tip, although go soon, as word is already well and truly out.
- **Veliko Tŕrnovo, Bulgaria** (p162) – Bulgaria’s most beautiful city is just waiting for a cheap airline to connect it to Western Europe. Be glad that hasn’t happened yet...
- **Chiŕinŕu, Moldova** (p506) – Newly visa-free Moldova’s fun capital draws those searching for adventure, cheap wine and good nights out.
- **Sarajevo, Bosnia & Hercegovina** (p106) – The exciting Bosnian capital is no longer synonymous with war, but with fun, cultural events and great day trips to the beautiful countryside.
- **Wroclaw, Poland** (p584) – Beautiful architecture, a student vibe and excellent nightlife has made people sit up and take notice of Wroclaw. You should too if the crowds in Kraków get too much.

19 hours, daily) and the daily Belgrade train (26 hours, daily).

ELSEWHERE

There are also connections from Switzerland, the Netherlands and France. For example: Zürich to Budapest (12½ hours, one overnight train daily), Basel to Prague (10 hours, daily), Amsterdam to Prague (15 hours, change in Berlin) and Paris to Prague (15 hours, change in Frankfurt or Cologne).

From Asia, there are of course the trans-Siberian, trans-Manchurian and trans-Mongolian express trains, which connect Moscow to the Russian far east, Ulan Bator (Mongolia) and Beijing. Central Asian cities such as Tashkent, Almaty and Dushanbe are also regularly connected by long-distance trains to and from Moscow. Moscow is so well connected to the rest of the region that travelling on from here is easy.

SEA

The expansion of budget airlines into Eastern Europe has made travelling by sea into the region far less attractive. Before the budget revolution a cheap flight to Italy, Greece or Finland followed by a boat connection to the West Balkans or Estonia was a good budget way of arriving in the region, but it’s rather unnecessary these days. However, it’s still atmospheric and exciting to travel by boat and not expensive. All the following prices are for a seat only – cabins (when available) quickly send the price soaring.

GREECE

There’s a daily boat (several daily in summer) from Corfu to Saranda in Albania (one hour).

ITALY

Regular boats from several companies connect Italy with Croatia, Slovenia, Montenegro and Albania. This is a popular way to enter the region, as the Balkans are still quite badly served by cheap flights.

Companies servicing routes between Italy and Eastern Europe include the following.

Adriatica di Navigazione (www.adriatica.it) Operates ferry services to Durrŕs from Bari (8½ to 12 hours, daily).

Agemar (www.agemar.it) Operates a luxury car ferry complete with swimming pool to Durrŕs from Trieste (24 hours, three weekly).

Azzurra Lines (www.azzurraline.com) Sails from Bari to Kotor (nine hours, weekly in summer).

Montenegro Lines (www.montenegrolines.net) Sails to Bari (nine hours, three weekly) and Ancona (11 hours, twice weekly in summer).

Jadrolinija (www.jadrolinija.hr) Croatia’s national boat line runs car ferries from Ancona to Split (nine or 10 hours, six weekly) and Zadar (six to eight hours, daily), and also a route from Bari to Dubrovnik (eight hours, six weekly).

SEM (www.sem-marina.hr) Connects Ancona and Split (nine hours), continuing on to Stari Grad (Hvar, 12 hours). Ferrys leave twice daily Saturday to Monday and daily on other days.

SNAV (www.snav.com) Has a fast car ferry that links Pescara and Ancona with Split (4½ hours, daily) and Pescara with Hvar (3½ hours, daily).

Venezia Lines (www.venezialines.com) Runs a weekly boat from Venice to Pula (three hours, four weekly) and six other Istrian coastal towns (from 2¼ hours, mid-April to late September).

SCANDINAVIA

Even during the cold winter months, ferries plough the Gulf of Finland connecting Helsinki with Tallinn and Riga with Stockholm,

as well as the wide open Baltic, linking Gdańsk and Gdynia with Sweden and Denmark.

The companies plying this area include the following.

Polferries (www.polferries.pl) Offers services between Gdańsk and Nynäshamn (18 hours) in Sweden every other day in summer (less frequently from October to April). It also has services from Świnoujście to Ystad (seven hours, daily) in Sweden, to Rønne (5½ hours, Saturdays) and to Copenhagen (11 hours, five weekly), both in Denmark.

Stena Line (www.stenaline.pl) Operates between Gdynia and Karlskrona (11 hours, daily) in Sweden.

Tallink (☎ Helsinki 09 228 311; www.tallink.fi) Does a fast Helsinki–Tallinn route (1¼ hours, at least six daily) as well as a new Stockholm to Riga service.

Viking Line (☎ Helsinki 09 123 577; www.vikingline.fi) Sails its luxury *Rosella* daily in both directions between Helsinki and Tallinn (three hours, twice daily).

TURKEY

There are twice-weekly ferries between Odesa and Istanbul. See www.ukferry.com for details.

GETTING AROUND

AIR

The major Eastern European cities are connected by a schedule of regular flights and with the advent of low-cost airlines, there's serious price competition with trains and even buses. Particularly well-connected regional airports are Moscow, St Petersburg, Prague, Budapest, Warsaw, Riga, Timișoara and Zagreb.

Many countries offer domestic flights, although, again, unless you are in a particular rush, there's rarely a need to take these. Russia is the exception – flying from either Moscow or St Petersburg to Kaliningrad saves you the trouble of getting a double-entry Russian visa (by boat or land, you are given an exit stamp, thus invalidating your single-entry visa).

BICYCLE

A tour of Eastern Europe by bike may seem a daunting prospect but help is at hand. The **Cyclists' Touring Club** (CTC; ☎ 0870 873 0060; www.ctc.org.uk; Parklands, Railton Rd, Guildford, Surrey GU2 9JX) is based in the UK and offers its members an information service on all matters associated with cycling (including maps, cycling conditions, itineraries and detailed routes). If the club is not able to answer your questions the chances are they will know someone who can.

The key to a successful bike trip is to travel light. What you carry should be largely determined by your destination and type of trip. Even for the shortest and most basic trip it's worth carrying the tools necessary for repairing a puncture. You might want to consider packing spare brake and gear cables, spanners, Allen keys, spare spokes and strong adhesive tape. Before you set off, ensure that you are competent at carrying out basic repairs. There's no point in loading up with equipment that you haven't got a clue how to use. Always check your bike thoroughly each morning and again at night when the day's touring is over. Take a good lock and always use it when you leave your bike unattended.

The wearing of helmets is not compulsory but is certainly advised.

A seasoned cyclist can average about 80km a day but this depends on the terrain and how much weight is being carried. Don't overdo it – there's no point burning yourself out during the initial stages.

One major drawback to cycling in Eastern Europe is the disgusting exhaust fumes put out by Eastern European vehicles, especially buses and trucks. You'll often find yourself gasping in a cloud of blue or black smoke as these vehicles lumber along quiet country roads. Likewise, roads in the south Balkans, particularly Albania, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Serbia, Macedonia and Montenegro can be terrible, not to mention the risk of landmines and unexploded ordnance Bosnia and Hercegovina and Kosovo.

Hire

Except for in a few of the more visited regions, it can be difficult to hire bikes in most of Eastern Europe. The best hunting grounds are often camping grounds and resort hotels during the summer months. See the country chapters for more details.

Purchase

For major cycle tours, it's best to have a bike you're familiar with, so consider bringing your own (see the following section) rather than buying on arrival. If you can't be bothered with the hassle then there are places to buy in Eastern Europe (shops selling new and second-hand bicycles or you can check local papers for private vendors), but you'll need a specialist bicycle shop for a machine capable

of withstanding touring. CTC can provide members with a leaflet on purchasing.

Transporting a Bicycle

If you want to bring your own bicycle to Europe, you should be able to take it on the plane. You can either take it apart and pack all the pieces in a bike bag or box, or simply wheel it to the check-in desk, where it should be treated as a piece of check-in luggage. You may have to remove the pedals and turn the handlebars sideways so that it takes up less space in the aircraft's hold; check all this with the airline well in advance, preferably before you pay for your ticket. If your bicycle and other luggage exceed your weight allowance, ask about alternatives or you may find yourself being charged a fortune for excess baggage.

Within Europe, bikes can usually be transported as luggage subject to a fairly small supplementary fee. If it's possible, book your tickets in advance.

BOAT

Eastern Europe's massive rivers, myriad canals, lakes and seas provide rich opportunities for boat travel, although in almost all cases these are very much pleasure cruises rather than particularly practical ways to get around. Boat travel is usually far more expensive than the equivalent bus or train journey, but that's not necessarily the point. Below, the authors of this book have chosen their favourite boat trips, a great chance to sit back and drink in some wonderful scenery. For details of getting to Eastern Europe by boat see p931.

FIVE GREAT BOAT JOURNEYS IN EASTERN EUROPE

- **Budapest–Bratislava (Hungary/Slovakia, p409)** From one gorgeous capital to another, this journey takes in the magnificent Danube Bend, Szentendre and lovely Esztergom with its grand cathedral.
- **Split–Dubrovnik (Croatia, p246)** The dramatic, stunning Croatian coastline can be cruised down on this great day trip. Some ferries stop at Mljet as well as Hvar and Korčula.
- **Lake Bled (Slovenia, p839)** Extremely touristy, but a cruise on Slovenia's lovely Lake Bled should not be missed.
- **Moscow–St Petersburg (Russia, p715)** This charming trip through the canals of Russia takes in lots of beautiful villages and is a slow and relaxing way to travel between the country's two biggest cities.
- **Lake Balaton (Hungary, p385)** Don't miss a pleasure cruise on Hungary's biggest lake, a beautiful haven of peace and tranquillity.

BUS

Buses are a viable alternative to the rail network in most Eastern European countries. Generally they tend to complement the rail system rather than duplicate it, though in some countries – notably Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia – you'll almost always have a choice.

In general, buses are slightly cheaper and slower than trains; in Russia, Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia they cost about the same. Buses tend to be best for shorter hops such as getting around cities and reaching remote rural villages. They are often the only option in mountainous regions. The ticketing system varies in each country, but advance reservations are rarely necessary. It's always safest to buy your ticket in advance at the station, but on long-distance buses you usually just pay upon boarding.

The only company covering the majority of the region is **Eurolines** (www.eurolines.com). See also the individual country chapters for more details about long-distance buses.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Travelling with your own vehicle allows increased flexibility and the option to get off the beaten track. Cars can be inconvenient in city centres when you have to negotiate strange one-way systems or find somewhere to park in the narrow streets of old towns. Also, theft from vehicles is a problem in many parts of the region – never leave valuables in your car.

Driving Licence & Documentation

Proof of ownership of a private vehicle should always be carried (a Vehicle Registration

Document for British-registered cars) when touring Europe. An EU driving licence is acceptable for driving throughout most of Eastern Europe, as are North American and Australian ones. But to be on the safe side – or if you have any other type of licence – you should obtain an International Driving Permit (IDP) from your local motoring organisation. You'll need a certified Russian translation for driving in Russia; so find a translation agency that can notarise their translation for you. Always check which type of licence is required in your chosen destination before departure.

Fuel & Spare Parts

The problems associated with finding the right kind of petrol (or petrol of any kind without special coupons) are all but over in Eastern Europe. Fuel prices still vary considerably from country to country and may bear little relation to the general cost of living; relatively affluent Slovenia, for example, has very cheap fuel while the opposite is true in inexpensive Hungary. Savings can be made if you fill up in the right place. Russia is the cheapest – then Romania, which has prices half those of neighbouring Hungary. Motoring organisations in your home country can give more details.

Unleaded petrol of 95 or 98 octane is now widely available throughout Eastern Europe, though maybe not at the odd station on back roads, or outside main cities in Russia. To be on the safe side in Russia, bring a 20L can to carry an extra supply, especially if your car is fitted with a catalytic converter, as this expensive component can be ruined by leaded fuel. Unleaded fuel is usually slightly cheaper than super (premium grade). Look for the pump with green markings and the word *Bleifrei*, German for 'unleaded'. Diesel is usually significantly cheaper in Eastern Europe.

Good quality petrol is easy to find in the Baltics, but stations seem to be placed somewhat erratically. Several may be within a few kilometres of each other and then there may not be any for incredibly long stretches. Make sure you fill up your tank wherever possible – especially if you are travelling off the main highways.

The embracing of western-made cars throughout the region has meant that spare parts for western cars are widely available from garages and spare parts dealerships. This is less the case in Belarus, Moldova and

Ukraine, and of course in more rural areas throughout the region.

Hire

Hiring a car is now a relatively straightforward procedure. The big international firms will give you reliable service and a good standard of vehicle. Prebooked rates are generally lower than walk-in rates at rental offices, but either way you'll pay about 20% to 40% more than in Western Europe. However, renting from small local companies is nearly always cheaper. Bear in mind that many companies will not allow you to take cars into certain countries. Russia, Belarus, Moldova and Albania all regularly feature on forbidden lists – there's usually a way around this, but check in advance with the car hire firm you're planning to use.

You should be able to make advance reservations online. Check out the following websites.

Avis www.avis.com

Budget www.budget.com

Europcar www.europcar.com

Hertz www.hertz.com

If you're coming from North America, Australia or New Zealand, ask your airline if it has any special deals for rental cars in Europe, or check the ads in the weekend travel sections of major newspapers. You can often find very competitive deals.

Although local companies not connected with any chain will usually offer lower prices than the multinationals, when comparing rates beware of printed tariffs intended only for local residents, which may be lower than the prices foreigners are charged. If in doubt, ask. The big chain companies sometimes offer the flexibility of allowing you to pick up the vehicle from one place and drop it off at another at no additional charge.

Insurance

Third-party motor insurance is compulsory throughout Europe. For non-EU countries make sure you check the requirements with your insurer. For further advice and more information contact the **Association of British Insurers** (☎ 020-7600 3333; www.abi.org.uk).

In general you should get your insurer to issue a Green Card (which may cost extra), an internationally recognised proof of insurance, and check that it lists all the countries you intend to visit. You'll need this in the event

of an accident outside the country where the vehicle is insured. The European Accident Statement is available from your insurance company and is copied so that each party at an accident can record information for insurance purposes. The Association of British Insurers has more details. Never sign accident statements you cannot understand or read – insist on a translation and sign that only if it's acceptable.

If the Green Card doesn't list one of the countries you're visiting and your insurer cannot (or will not) add it, you will have to take out separate third-party cover at the border of the country in question. This will probably be the case for Bulgaria and almost certainly for Russia. Note that the Green Card is also not accepted in the Baltic countries and you should allow extra time at borders to purchase insurance. Delays can sometimes last several hours.

Taking out a European breakdown assistance policy, such as the Five Star Service with **AA** (☎ UK 0870 550 0600) or the Eurocover Motoring Assistance with **RAC** (☎ UK 0800 550 055; www.rac.co.uk), is a good investment. Non-Europeans might find it cheaper to arrange for international coverage with their own national motoring organisation before leaving home. Ask your motoring organisation for details about free and reciprocal services offered by affiliated organisations around Europe.

Every vehicle travelling across an international border should display a sticker that shows the country of registration. It's compulsory to carry a warning triangle almost everywhere in Europe, which must be displayed in the event of a breakdown. Recommended accessories are a first-aid kit (this is compulsory in Croatia, Slovenia and Serbia and Montenegro), a spare bulb kit and a fire extinguisher (compulsory in Bulgaria). Contact the RAC or the AA for more information.

Road Rules

Motoring organisations are able to supply their members with country-by-country information on motoring regulations, or they may produce motoring guidebooks for general sale.

According to statistics, driving in Eastern Europe is much more dangerous than in Western Europe. Driving at night can be particularly hazardous in rural areas as the roads are often narrow and winding, and

you may encounter horse-drawn vehicles, cyclists, pedestrians and domestic animals. In the event of an accident you're supposed to notify the police and file an insurance claim. If your car has significant body damage from a previous accident, point this out to customs upon arrival and have it noted somewhere, as damaged vehicles may only be allowed to leave the country with police permission.

Standard international road signs are used throughout all of Eastern Europe. You drive on the right-hand side of the road throughout the region and overtake on the left. Keep right except when overtaking, and use your indicators for any change of lane and when pulling away from the kerb. You're not allowed to overtake more than one car at a time, whether they are moving or stationary.

Speed limits are posted, and are generally 110km/h or 120km/h on motorways (freeways), 100km/h on highways, 80km/h on secondary and tertiary roads and 50km/h or 60km/h in built-up areas. Motorcycles are usually limited to 90km/h on motorways, and vehicles with trailers to 80km/h. In towns you may only sound the horn to avoid an accident.

Everywhere in Eastern Europe the use of seat belts is mandatory and motorcyclists (and their passengers) must wear a helmet. In most countries, children under 12 and intoxicated passengers are not allowed in the front seat. Driving after drinking *any* alcohol is a serious offence – most Eastern European countries have a 0% blood-alcohol concentration (BAC) limit (0.02% in Poland).

Throughout Eastern Europe, when two roads of equal importance intersect, the vehicle coming from the right has right of way unless signs indicate otherwise. In many countries this rule also applies to cyclists, so take care. On roundabouts (traffic circles) vehicles already in the roundabout have the right of way. Public transport vehicles pulling out from a stop also have right of way. Stay out of lanes marked 'bus' except when you're making a right-hand turn. Pedestrians have right of way at marked crossings and whenever you're making a turn. In Europe it's prohibited to turn right against a red light even after coming to a stop.

It's usually illegal to stop or park at the top of slopes, in front of pedestrian crossings, at bus or tram stops, on bridges or at level crossings. You must use a red reflector warning

triangle when parking on a highway (in an emergency). If you don't use the triangle and another vehicle hits you from behind, you will be held responsible.

Beware of trams (streetcars) as these have priority at crossroads and when they are turning right (provided they signal the turn). Don't pass a tram that's stopping to let off passengers until everyone is out and the doors have closed again (unless, of course, there's a safety island). Never pass a tram on the left or stop within 1m of tram tracks. A police officer who sees you blocking a tram route by waiting to turn left will flag you over. Traffic police administer fines on the spot (always ask for a receipt).

HITCHING

Hitching is never entirely safe in *any* country, and we don't recommend it. Travellers who decide to hitch should understand that they are taking a small but potentially serious risk. People who do choose to hitch will be safer if they travel in pairs and let someone know where they plan to go.

Also, as long as public transport remains cheap in Eastern Europe, hitchhiking is more for the adventure than the transport. In Russia, Albania, Romania and occasionally times Poland, drivers expect riders to pay the equivalent of a bus fare. In Romania traffic is light, motorists are probably not going far, and almost everywhere you'll face small vehicles overloaded with passengers. If you want to give it a try, though, make yourself a small, clearly written cardboard destination sign, remembering to use the local name for the town or city ('Praha' not 'Prague', or 'Warszawa' not 'Warsaw'). Don't try to hitch from the city centres; city buses will usually take you to the edge of town. Hitchhiking on a motorway (freeway) is usually prohibited; you must stand near an entrance ramp. If you look like a Westerner your chances of getting a ride might improve.

Women will find hitchhiking safer than in Western Europe, but the standard precautions should be taken: never accept a ride with two or more men, don't let your pack be put in the boot (trunk), only sit next to a door you can open, ask drivers where they are going before you say where you're going etc. Don't hesitate to refuse a ride if you feel at all uncomfortable, and insist on being let out at the first sign of trouble. Best of all, try to find a travelling companion (although three people will have a very hard time getting a lift).

Travellers considering hitching as a way of getting around Eastern Europe may find the following websites useful. For general facts, destination-based information and rideshare options visit www.bugeurope.com. The useful www.hitchhikers.org connects hitchhikers and drivers worldwide.

LOCAL TRANSPORT

Public transport in Eastern Europe has been developed to a far greater extent than in Western Europe. There are excellent metro networks in Moscow, St Petersburg, Warsaw, Prague, Kyiv, Minsk, Budapest and Bucharest. It is a great way to cover distances for a small flat fare.

One form of transport (both city- and nationwide) that doesn't exist in Western Europe is the shared minibus (*marshrutka* in the former Soviet Union, *furgon* in the Balkans). These quick but cramped minibuses are used throughout Eastern Europe as a form of both intercity and city transport. St Petersburg would cease to function without them, and it's also the most likely way you'll travel between mountain towns in Albania.

Trolleybuses are another phenomenon of the one-time Soviet block. Despite their slowness, they are very environmentally friendly (being powered by electricity and having no emissions in the city) and can be found throughout the former Soviet Union, including the world's longest trolleybus route (see p895) running between Simferopol and Yalta in Ukraine.

Trams are popular throughout Eastern Europe and vary hugely in their speed and modernity. Those in Russia are borderline antiques that seem to derail on a daily basis, while Prague's fleet of sleek trams have everything from electronic destination displays to pickpockets.

TOURS

A package tour is worth considering only if your time is very limited or you have a special interest such as skiing, canoeing, sailing, horse riding, cycling or spa treatments. Cruises on the Danube are an exciting and romantic way to see Europe's most famous river, although they tend to be on the expensive side. Most tour prices are for double occupancy, which means singles have to share a double room with a stranger of the same sex or pay a supplement to have the room to themselves.

Probably the most highly experienced British company in booking travel to Eastern

Europe is **Regent Holidays** (☎ 0117-921 1711, fax 0117-925 4866; www.regent-holidays.co.uk; 15 John St, Bristol BS1 2HR). Their comprehensive fly/drive, individual tours and group tours take in everything from a two-week Hanseatic Baltic Tour to city breaks in Minsk and tours of Albania.

Other recommended travel agents in the UK include **Baltic Holidays** (☎ 0870 757 9233; www.balticholidays.com; 40 Princess St, Manchester M1 6DE) who exclusively run tours of the Baltic region, including weekend city breaks, activity holidays, cycling tours and organise independent travel (including the inevitable stag and hen dos).

Exodus (☎ 0870 240 5550; www.exodus.co.uk) and **Exploreworldwide** (☎ 0870 333 4001; www.exploreworldwide.com) are also recommended.

In Australia you can obtain a detailed brochure outlining dozens of upmarket tours (including to Russia) from the **Eastern Europe Travel Bureau** (☎ 02-9262 1144; www.eetbtravel.com; Level 5, 75 King St, Sydney, NSW 2000) and tours of the Balkans are organised by **Eastern Europe Holidays** (☎ in Australia 0400 994 265; www.e-europeholidays.com; 18 Jauncey Court, Charnwood, ACT 2615).

A general Australian tour operator that includes Eastern Europe and is generally good value is **Intrepid Travel** (☎ 1300 360 887; www.intrepidtravel.com).

Young revellers can party on Europe-wide bus tours. **Contiki** (☎ in London 020-8290 6422; www.contiki.com) and **Top Deck** (www.topdecktravel.co.uk) offer either camping or hotel-based bus tours for the 18-to-35 age group. See Top Deck's website

for multiple agents in the UK, US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. The duration of Contiki's tours that include Eastern Europe or Russia are 22 to 46 days. Another young people's coach tour company to look out for is **Beetroot Backpackers** (www.beetroot.org), a great way to see Russia, run by Russian specialists and highly recommended by some travellers.

For people aged over 50, **Saga Holidays** (☎ 0800 096 0074; www.sagaholidays.com; Saga Bldg, Mid-delburg Sq, Folkestone, Kent CT20 1AZ) offers holidays ranging from cheap coach tours to luxury cruises (and has cheap travel insurance).

National tourist offices in most countries offer trips to points of interest. These may range from one-hour city tours to excursions of several days' duration into regional areas. They are often more expensive than going it alone, but are sometimes worth it if you are pressed for time. A short city tour will give you a quick overview of the place and can be a good way to begin your visit.

TRAIN

Trains are the most atmospheric, comfortable and fun way to make long overland journeys in Eastern Europe. All major cities are on the rail network, and it's perfectly feasible for train travel to be your only form of intercity transport. Overnight trains also have the benefit of saving you a night's accommodation. It's a great way to meet locals – and it's not unusual to be invited to stay for a night or two with people who shared your cabin.

FIVE GREAT TRAIN RIDES IN EASTERN EUROPE

- **Moscow–St Petersburg (Russia, p730)** The overnight sleeper train won't afford you great views of flat central Russia, which is fairly dull even during the daytime, but pitch up in the dining car at midnight and drink vodka with your fellow passengers for a truly fun train trip.
- **Septemvri–Bansko (Bulgaria, p151)** This train clanks along a narrow gauge through the valley where the Rila and Rodopi Mountains meet. Get ready for some lovely mountain scenery and some chain-smoking shepherds jumping on and off the train.
- **Belgrade–Bar (Serbia & Montenegro, p780)** Take the day train on this charming route that passes through the Moraca canyon north of Podgorica.
- **Gdynia–Hel (Poland, p604)** This gentle train ride along the Hel peninsula stops at a number of sleepy villages on the way, then as the peninsula narrows towards its destination you get alternating views of the Baltic Sea on one side and the Gulf of Gdańsk on the other.
- **Elbasan–Pogradec (Albania, p74)** This trip, made with decades-old Italian trains with no electricity, takes you through lovely scenery as you wind your way slowly to Lake Ohrid through the valleys and over the rivers of Albania. Hang on to your bag when you go through the pitch-black tunnels!

When travelling overnight (nearly always the case when going between countries) you'll get a bed reservation included in the price of your ticket, although you may have to pay a few euros extra for the bedding once on board. Each wagon is administered by a steward or stewardess who will look after your ticket and – crucially, if you arrive during the small hours – who will make sure that you get off at the correct stop. Each wagon has a toilet and washbasin at either end, although their state of cleanliness can vary massively. Be aware that toilets may be closed while the train is at a station and a good half-hour before you arrive in a big city, so go to the toilet while you can. In general trains run like clockwork, and you can expect to arrive pretty much to the timetabled minute.

If you plan to travel extensively by train, it might be worth getting hold of the *Thomas Cook European Timetable*, which gives a complete listing of train schedules and indicates where supplements apply or where reservations are necessary. It is updated monthly and is available from **Thomas Cook** (www.thomascook.com) outlets in the UK. In Australia, look for it in a Thomas Cook outlet or one of the bigger bookstores, which can order in copies if they don't have any in stock. Elsewhere you'll have to order through www.raileurope.com.

If you intend to stick to one or a handful of countries it might be worthwhile getting hold of the national timetable(s) published by the state railway(s). A particularly useful online resource for timetables in Eastern Europe is the DeutscheBahn website at www.bahn.de, in German. Train fares in US and Canadian dollars and schedules for the most popular routes in Europe, as well as information on passes, can be found on www.raileurope.com. For fares in UK pounds go to www.raileurope.co.uk.

Classes

Throughout Eastern Europe there exists a similar system of classes on trains as there is in Western Europe. Short trips, or longer ones that don't involve sleeping on the train, are usually seated like a normal train – benches (on suburban trains) or aeroplane-style seats (on smarter intercity services).

There are generally three classes of sleeping accommodation on trains – each country has a different name for them, but for the sake of simplicity, we'll call them 3rd, 2nd and 1st class.

Third-class accommodation is not available everywhere, but it's the cheapest way to sleep, although you may feel your privacy has been slightly invaded. The accommodation consists of six berths in each compartment (in the former Soviet Union this is called *platskartny*; there are no compartments as such, just one open carriage with beds everywhere).

Second class (known as *kupeyny* in the former Soviet Union) has four berths in a closed compartment. If there are a couple of you, you will share your accommodation with two strangers. However, if there are three of you, you'll often not be joined by anyone.

First class, or 'SV' in the former Soviet Union, is a treat, although you are paying for space rather than décor or unsurly service in most countries. Here you'll find two berths in a compartment, usually adorned with plastic flowers to remind you what you've paid for.

Costs

While it's reasonable, train travel is pricier than bus travel in some countries. First-class tickets are double the price of 2nd-class tickets, which are in turn approximately twice the price of 3rd-class tickets.

Reservations

It's always advisable to buy a ticket in advance. Seat reservations are also advisable but only necessary if the timetable specifies one is required. Out of season, reservations can be made pretty much up to an hour before departure, but never count on this. On busy routes and during the summer, always try to reserve a seat several days in advance. For peace of mind, you may prefer to book tickets via travel agencies before you leave home, although this will be more expensive than booking on arrival in central Europe. You can book most routes in the region from any main station in central Europe.

Safety

Be aware that trains, while generally extremely safe, can attract petty criminals. Carry your valuables on your person at all times – don't even go to the bathroom without taking your cash, wallet and passport. If you are sharing a compartment with others, you'll have to decide whether or not you trust them. If there's any doubt, be very cautious about leaving the compartment. At night, make sure your door is locked from the inside. If you have a compartment to yourself, you can ask the steward/ess

to lock it while you go to the dining car or go for a wander outside when the train is stopped. However, be aware that most criminals strike when they can easily disembark from the train, and – in a tiny minority of cases – the stewards have been complicit.

In the former Soviet Union, the open-plan 3rd-class accommodation is by far the most vulnerable to thieves.

Train Passes

Not all countries in Eastern Europe are covered by rail passes, but passes do include a number of destinations and so can be worthwhile if you are concentrating your travels around the region. They may also be useful for getting to or from neighbouring countries. These are available online or through most travel agents.

Of the countries covered in this book, Eurail passes are valid only in Hungary, so it's not a good pass to have for travel here; check out the excellent summary of available passes and their pros and cons at www.seat61.com/Railpass.htm.

BALKAN FLEXIPASS

The new Balkan Flexipass includes Bulgaria, Romania, Greece, Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia and European Turkey. This pass is available to anyone not resident in the above countries and is valid for 1st-class travel only (not a bad thing at all considering the quality of 2nd-class in these countries). In the USA, **Rail Europe** (www.raileurope.com) charges US\$197 for five days of 1st-class travel within one month; extra rail days (maximum five) are also available. The Balkan Flexipass can also be bought via **RailChoice** (www.railchoice.co.uk) in the UK for £69/117 under 26s/over 26s for five days unrestricted travel over a month.

EURODOMINO

There is a Eurodomino pass for each of the countries covered by the InterRail pass, and they are probably only worth considering if you're concentrating on a particular region. Adults (travelling 1st or 2nd class) and people aged under 26 can opt for three- to eight-days' travel within one month. Note that Eurodomino passes are only for people who've been resident in Europe for six months or more.

EUROPEAN EAST PASS

The European East Pass can be purchased by anyone not permanently resident in Eu-

rope (including the UK). The pass is valid for travel in Austria, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland, with benefits such as discounted Danube river trips with DDSG Blue Danube.

This pass is sold in North America, Australia and the UK. Within the USA, **Rail Europe** (www.raileurope.com) charges US\$124/172 for five days of 1st-/2nd-class travel within one month; extra rail days (maximum five) cost US\$29/23 each.

The European East Pass can also be bought via **RailChoice** (www.railchoice.co.uk), which charges UK£124 (2nd class) for five days plus approximately an extra UK£15 per extra day of validity.

INTERRAIL

These passes are available to European residents of more than six months' standing (passport identification is required), although residents of Turkey and parts of North Africa can also buy them. Terms and conditions vary slightly from country to country, but when travelling in the country where you bought the pass, there is only a discount of about 50% on normal fares. The InterRail pass is split into zones. Zone D is the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Hungary and Croatia; G includes Slovenia; and H is Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia.

The normal InterRail pass is for people under 26, though travellers over 26 can get the InterRail 26+ version. The price for any single zone is UK£145/223 for those aged under 26/26 and over for 16 days of travel. Two-zone passes are valid for 22 days and cost UK£205/295, and the all-zone Global Pass is UK£285/405 for one month of travel.

NATIONAL RAIL PASSES

If you're intending to travel extensively within either Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary or Romania, you might be interested in their national rail passes. You'll probably need to travel extensively to recoup your money but they will save you the time and hassle of buying individual tickets that don't require reservations. You need to plan ahead if you intend to take this option, as some passes can only be purchased prior to arrival in the country concerned. Some national flexipasses, near-equivalents to the Eurodomino passes (left), are only available to non-Europeans. See www.raileurope.com for details.

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Health

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Travel health largely depends on your pre-departure preparations, your daily health care while travelling and how you handle any medical problem that does develop. Eastern Europe is generally an exceptionally safe place to visit from a medical point of view, with no tropical diseases and an extensive, if sometimes basic, healthcare system throughout the region.

BEFORE YOU GO

Prevention is the key to staying healthy while abroad. A little preplanning, particularly for pre-existing illnesses, will save trouble later: see your dentist before a long trip, carry spare contact lenses or glasses, and take your optical prescription with you. Bring medications in their original, clearly labelled, containers, along with a signed and dated letter from your physician describing your medical conditions and medications, including generic names. If carrying syringes or needles, be sure to have a physician's letter documenting their medical necessity.

INSURANCE

In 2004 the European Health Insurance Card (EHIC) was introduced for all EU citizens, replacing the E111 form that was previously

necessary to receive free or reduced-price treatment. With large numbers of Eastern European countries now EU members, this is a very useful card to have, although it will not cover you for nonemergencies or emergency repatriation.

Others should find out if there is a reciprocal arrangement for free medical care between their country and the country visited. If you do need health insurance, strongly consider a policy that covers you for the worst possible scenario, such as an accident requiring an emergency flight home. Find out if your insurance plan will make payments directly to providers or reimburse you later for overseas health expenditures. The former option is generally preferable, as it doesn't require you to pay out-of-pocket expenses in a foreign country.

RECOMMENDED VACCINATIONS

The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that all travellers should be covered for diphtheria, tetanus, measles, mumps, rubella and polio, regardless of their destination. Since most vaccines don't produce immunity until at least two weeks after they're given, visit a physician at least six weeks before departure.

INTERNET RESOURCES

The WHO's publication *International Travel and Health* is revised annually and is available online at www.who.int/ith/. Some other useful websites include the following.

www.mdtravelhealth.com Travel health recommendations for every country, updated daily.

www.fitfortravel.scot.nhs.uk General travel advice for the layperson.

www.ageconcern.org.uk Advice on travel for the elderly.

www.maristopes.org.uk Information on women's health and contraception.

FURTHER READING

'Health Advice for Travellers' (currently called the 'T7.1' leaflet) is an annually updated leaflet by the UK's Department of Health, available free in post offices. It contains some general information, legally required and recommended vaccines for different countries and information on reciprocal health agreements. Lonely Planet's *Travel with Children* includes advice on travel health for younger children. Other

recommended references include *Travellers' Health* by Dr Richard Dawood and *The Traveller's Good Health Guide* by Ted Lankester.

IN TRANSIT

DEEP VEIN THROMBOSIS (DVT)

Blood clots may form in the legs during plane flights, chiefly because of prolonged immobility. The longer the flight, the greater the risk. The chief symptom of DVT is swelling or pain of the foot, ankle, or calf, usually but not always on just one side. When a blood clot travels to the lungs, it may cause chest pain and breathing difficulties. Travellers with any of these symptoms should immediately seek medical attention.

To prevent the development of DVT on long flights you should walk about the cabin, contract the leg muscles while sitting, drink plenty of fluids and avoid alcohol and tobacco.

JET LAG & MOTION SICKNESS

To avoid jet lag (common when crossing more than five time zones) try drinking plenty of nonalcoholic fluids and only eating light meals. On arrival, get exposure to sunlight and readjust your schedule (for meals, sleep and so on) as soon as possible.

Antihistamines such as dimenhydrinate (Dramamine) and meclizine (Antivert, Bonine) are usually the first choice for treating motion sickness. A herbal alternative is ginger.

IN EASTERN EUROPE

AVAILABILITY & COST OF HEALTH CARE

Good basic health care is readily available and for minor illnesses pharmacists can give valuable advice and sell over-the-counter medication. They can also advise when more specialised help is required and point you in the right direction. The standard of dental care is usually good, however it is sensible to have a dental check-up before a long trip.

Medical care is not always readily available outside of major cities but embassies, consulates and five-star hotels can usually recommend doctors or clinics. In some cases, medical supplies required in hospital may need to be bought from a pharmacy and nursing care may be limited. Note that there can be an increased risk of hepatitis B and HIV transmission via poorly sterilised equipment.

In general health-care costs are still relatively low in Eastern Europe, and tend to be more expensive in EU member states than in non-EU member states, but bear in mind that in most non-EU member states for anything more than a doctor's consultation you'll probably want to go to a private clinic, and therefore comprehensive health insurance is essential.

INFECTIOUS DISEASES

Poliomyelitis

Poliomyelitis is spread through contaminated food and water, and its vaccine is one of those given in childhood and should be boosted every 10 years, either orally (a drop on the tongue) or as an injection.

Rabies

Spread through bites or licks on broken skin from an infected animal, it is always fatal unless treated promptly. Animal handlers should be vaccinated, as should those travelling to remote areas where a reliable source of post-bite vaccine is not available within 24 hours. Three injections are needed over a month. If you have not been vaccinated, you will need a course of five injections starting 24 hours or as soon as possible after the injury. If you have been vaccinated, you will need fewer injections and have more time to seek medical help.

Tickborne Encephalitis

Spread by tick bites, tickborne encephalitis is a serious infection of the brain and vaccination is advised for those in risk areas who are unable to avoid tick bites (such as campers, forestry workers and walkers). Two doses of vaccine will give a year's protection, three doses up to three years'. Anyone walking in the Baltics and Russia for any length of time should consider vaccination, as cases have been steadily rising.

Typhoid & Hepatitis A

Both of these diseases are spread through contaminated food (particularly shellfish) and water. Typhoid can cause septicaemia; hepatitis A causes liver inflammation and jaundice. Neither is usually fatal but recovery can be prolonged. Typhoid vaccine (typhim Vi, typherix) will give protection for three years. In some countries, the oral vaccine Vivotif is also available. Hepatitis A vaccine (Avaxim, VAQTA, Havrix) is given as an injection; a single dose will give protection for up to a year, and a booster after a year gives 10 years' protection. Hepatitis

A and typhoid vaccines can also be given as a single dose vaccine, hepatyrix or viatim.

TRAVELLER'S DIARRHOEA

To prevent diarrhoea, only eat fresh fruits or vegetables if cooked or peeled; be wary of dairy products that might contain unpasteurised milk. Eat food which is hot through and avoid buffet-style meals. If a restaurant is full of locals the food is probably safe.

If you develop diarrhoea, be sure to drink plenty of fluids, preferably an oral rehydration solution (eg dioralyte). A few loose stools don't require treatment, but if you start having more than four or five stools a day, you should start taking an antibiotic (usually a quinolone drug) and an anti-diarrhoeal agent (such as loperamide). If diarrhoea is bloody, persists for more than 72 hours or is accompanied by fever, shaking, chills or severe abdominal pain you should seek medical attention.

ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS Heat Exhaustion & Heatstroke

Heat exhaustion occurs after excessive fluid loss with inadequate replacement of fluids and salt. Symptoms include headache, dizziness and tiredness. Dehydration is already happening by the time you feel thirsty – aim to drink sufficient water to produce pale, diluted urine. To treat heat exhaustion, replace lost fluids by drinking water and/or fruit juice, and cool the body with cold water and fans. Treat salt loss with salty fluids such as soup or Bovril, or add a little more table salt to foods than usual.

Heat stroke is much more serious, resulting in irrational and hyperactive behaviour and eventually loss of consciousness and death. Rapid cooling by spraying the body with water and fanning is ideal. Emergency fluid and electrolyte replacement by intravenous drip is recommended.

Insect Bites & Stings

Mosquitoes are found in most parts of Europe. They may not carry malaria but can cause irritation and infected bites. Use a DEET-based insect repellent.

Bees and wasps cause real problems only to those with a severe allergy (anaphylaxis). If you have a severe allergy to bee or wasp stings carry an 'epipen' or similar adrenaline injection.

Sand flies are found around the Mediterranean beaches. They usually cause only a nasty

itchy bite but can carry a rare skin disorder called cutaneous leishmaniasis.

Bed bugs lead to very itchy, lumpy bites. Spraying the mattress with crawling-insect killer after changing the bedding will get rid of them.

Scabies are tiny mites that live in the skin, particularly between the fingers. They cause an intensely itchy rash. Scabies is easily treated with lotion from a pharmacy; other members of the household also need treatment to avoid spreading scabies between asymptomatic carriers.

Snake Bites

Avoid getting bitten – do not walk barefoot or stick your hand into holes or cracks. Half of those bitten by venomous snakes are not actually injected with poison (envenomed). If bitten by a snake, do not panic. Immobilise the bitten limb with a splint (eg a stick) and apply a bandage over the site firmly, similar to a bandage over a sprain. Do not apply a tourniquet, or cut or suck the bite. Get the victim to medical help as soon as possible so that antivenin can be given if necessary.

Water

Tap water may not be safe to drink so it is best to stick to bottled water or boil water for 10 minutes, use water purification tablets or a filter. Do not drink water from rivers or lakes as it may contain bacteria or viruses that can cause diarrhoea or vomiting. St Petersburg is a particular hotspot for dangerous water – NEVER drink from the tap here. Brushing your teeth with tap water is very unlikely to lead to problems, but use bottled water if you want to be ultrasafe.

TRAVELLING WITH CHILDREN

All travellers with children should know how to treat minor ailments and when to seek medical treatment. Make sure the children are up to date with routine vaccinations, and discuss possible travel vaccines well before departure, as some vaccines are not suitable for children less than one year old.

In hot, moist climates any wound or break in the skin is likely to let in infection. The area should be cleaned and kept dry.

Remember to avoid contaminated food and water. If your child has vomiting or diarrhoea, lost fluid and salts must be replaced. It may be helpful to take rehydration powders for reconstituting with boiled water.

TRAVEL HEALTH WEBSITES

It's usually a good idea to consult your government's travel health website before departure, if one is available:

- Australia www.dfat.gov.au/travel/
- Canada www.travelhealth.gc.ca
- UK www.doh.gov.uk/traveladvice/
- US www.cdc.gov/travel/

Children should be encouraged to avoid and mistrust any dogs or other mammals because of the risk of rabies and other diseases. Any bite, scratch or lick from a warm-blooded, furry animal should immediately be thoroughly cleaned. If there is any possibility that the animal is infected with rabies, immediate medical assistance should be sought.

WOMEN'S HEALTH

Emotional stress, exhaustion and travelling through different time zones can all contribute to an upset in the menstrual pattern. If using oral contraceptives, remember some antibiotics, diarrhoea and vomiting can stop the pill from working and lead to the risk of pregnancy – remember to take condoms with you just in case. Time zones, gastrointestinal upsets and antibiotics do not affect injectable contraception.

Travelling during pregnancy is usually possible but there are important things to consider. Always seek a medical check-up before planning your trip. The most risky times for travel are during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy and

after 30 weeks. Antenatal facilities vary greatly between countries and you should think carefully before travelling to a country with poor medical facilities or where there are major cultural and language differences from home.

Illness during pregnancy can be more severe so take special care to avoid contaminated food and water and insect and animal bites. A general rule is to only use vaccines, like other medications, if the risk of infection is substantial. Remember that the baby could be at serious risk if you were to contract infections such as typhoid or hepatitis. Some vaccines are best avoided (eg those that contain live organisms). However there is very little evidence that damage has been caused to an unborn child when vaccines have been given to a woman very early in pregnancy, before the pregnancy was suspected.

Take written records of the pregnancy with you. Ensure your insurance policy covers pregnancy delivery and postnatal care, but remember insurance policies are only as good as the facilities available. Always consult your doctor before you travel.

SEXUAL HEALTH

Emergency contraception is most effective if taken within 24 hours after unprotected sex. The International Planned Parenthood Federation (www.ippf.org) can advise about the availability of contraception in different countries.

When buying condoms, look for a European CE mark, which means they have been rigorously tested, and then keep them in a cool dry place or they may crack and perish. Safe condoms are available throughout the region.

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