

From Russia with love

Russia, the largest country in the world, is a fascinating country and an amazing place to visit at least once. In recent years, this former iron curtain country has reduced travel restrictions to welcome tourists. But travel to and with-in this exotic country can still be frustrating and sometimes intimidating. Russia is an ancient land with a world of contrasts.

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Applying for visas is not cheap (\$75 per person for Canadians) and time consuming. For a visa picture, you must make sure your, “face must be square to the camera with a neutral expression, neither frowning nor smiling and with your mouth shut.” The Russian consulate in Montreal does not accept cash or credit cards and if you are paying by cheque, it must be certified, adding another \$10 to the cost of the visa. The granting of a visa is at the discretion of the consulate. Payment does not guarantee a visa and the money is not refundable if your application is rejected.

Since the fall of the great Soviet empire, Russia has relaxed its grip a lot. In the past, travel was very difficult because of a healthy and over used bureaucratic system. If you ever plan to visit Russia, make sure you plan ahead and fulfill the necessary requirements. An estimated 3,000,000 tourists visit Russia every year. This number could be much higher if Russia really opens up its door.

Arriving in Russia can be a cultural shock when encountering typical Russian behaviour, even for seasoned tourists. At first, I thought many Russians had forgotten to take their smile pills when they started their day. I quickly learned that Russians reserve smiles for things they find amusing, or for greeting close friends. Russians view excessive smiling as suspect. In western countries, we are used to smiling and even greeting strangers because it does not cost anything. However, not smiling should not be taken as unfriendliness or harshness of Russians. Russians usually don't smile at strangers until strangers prove trustworthy or acceptable to them. Also, don't forget that Russians have gone through extremely tough times in the past.

They still don't have much to smile about because day to day has not changed that drastically. The Russians accept that their lives are difficult and pride themselves on being able to survive and flourish in conditions that others could not.

Russia is a huge country, which borders with Norway, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus, Poland and a host of other countries including China and North Korea. Spanning nine time zones, Russia is the largest country in the world in terms of surface area, although large tracts of land in the north and east are sparsely populated.

The total population of Russia is 144.7 million, with about 72.9 per cent urban population. The country has 160 ethnic groups, speaking about 100 languages and countless dialects. The official language is Russian but every autonomous republic uses its own language as the second official language. The main religions include Russian Orthodox, Muslim, Judaic and others. The largest lakes and rivers are located in Russia.

Russia is a rich country and has an extremely wide natural resource base including major deposits of oil, natural gas, coal, strategic minerals, timber, diamonds and gold. Yet, according to western standard, Russia is a “poor” country and travelling across the country leaves you with an impression, this is a third world country with too much bureaucracy, dilapidated homes, the ever widening gap between the very rich and the poor and a poor living standard.

The Russian Federation was carved out in 1991. It is one of the coldest countries in the world. The town of Oymyakon in north-east is the coldest inhabited place on earth, with temperatures recorded at more than 70 degrees Celsius below zero.

Travelling across Russia is a treat for visitors, filling them with rich history and culture. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, it is now possible to explore the huge array of Russia's exciting ancient cultures. Many of these cultures have been left relatively untouched. Many people rightly think of Russian culture filled with classical music, ballet, museums, castles, folklore and circuses. The Russian culture is rich and its architecture is

unique and simply stunning.

It has many beautiful and amazing churches and mosques. Visitors find credit card facilities are still scarce in parts of Russia. Always make sure you have some cash with you. You need some cash even to use washroom facilities. Russia is generally a clean and a safe country. However, once you travel outside the major cities, you see old discarded tires along the roadside and rubbles piled up everywhere. Many people remember that in April 1961, the first human to orbit the earth was Yuri Gagarin in Vostok 1. In 1991, the now famous Red Square was added to UNESCO's list of world heritage sites. This is the focal point of Moscow.

St. Basil's cathedral is the iconic building in Russia. It is one of the world's most recognizable public spaces. The Red Square is as impressive in reality as it is on images on TV and newspapers and glossy magazines. It is a marvellous piece of architecture with instant appeal like the Taj Mahal in India. The Russian word “Kremlin” means fortification, and there are many Kremlins in Russia.

Russia is still trying to struggle to reassert itself as a world power. Income from oil and natural gas is helping the country overcome the economic collapse of 1998. Economic strength is allowing Vladimir Putin to improve and enhance state control over political institutions and the media. This former KGB agent has enjoyed extensive public support for his policies as prime minister, president and now prime minister again. Many in Russia are convinced he will be president again. Many agree he will eventually take over the power from the present president Dmitry Medvedev.

Both, Putin and Medvedev have been associated since the early 1990s when they were both involved in politics in St. Petersburg. It is widely reported the present Russian government is made up of 6,000 former KGB people.

Today, the life expectancy in Russia is 59 for men and 70 for women. For most Russians, television is the main source of domestic and international news. The country has more than 400 daily newspapers.

During our trip, we visited Moscow, St. Petersburg and Novgorod. Russians pride themselves on their famous vodkas, and also several brands of popular beer. In some places, vodka is cheaper than bottled water. It is customary for Russians to drink shots of vodka between meal courses. These vodkas are never sipped, always gulped.

Russian cuisine is not spicy at all. Portions are small. The main meals normally include soup and pork. The meals are heavy on starches. Russian hotels serve a vast array of food ranging from fast foods items like pizza and burgers to traditional Russian dishes. Fast food outlets, commonly seen in western countries, are everywhere.

Most cities in Russia have an efficient public transport system. Most transit systems are a necessary eyesore. Not in Moscow, where 9,000,000 people use the metro every single day. Visits to the metro are now included in itineraries for tourists. Trains run every 90 seconds. This system is impressive, clean and efficient. This system dates back to 1930s. This metro system is heavily used after Tokyo's twin subway.

Credit cards are not extensively used in Russia. Dollars and other currencies like Euros are not allowed as payment but can be freely converted at banks. Carrying money is safe but be careful about pick pockets and gypsies. Don't show large amounts of money or walk alone at night along dark lonely streets.

Rains in Russia are usual for any season – so take an umbrella with you and a warm jacket. It will come in handy.

Russian culture is rich in style and variety, reflecting their love of education, arts and humanities. Russians pride success in almost every field of endeavour. Four out of 10 Russians have university degrees. The country has produced many world champions in many fields. Reading ranks among the most popular past times. Chess is a spectator sport.

Colourful skirts and shawls highlight women's clothing. Men, on the other hand, love western suits but are quite comfortable in their work clothes.

Russians are extremely good at gymnastics, ballet and love folklore dancing and cultural events. Patriotic songs and poems extol the virtues of their homeland. They take a lot of pride in their culture and heritage and expect the rest of the world to admire it. It is a special treat to see a Russian ballet, visit a theatre or an opera.



A river cruise in St. Petersburg. Photo by Sultan Jessa



Folklore shows are a real delight. Photo by Sultan Jessa



One of the many attractions in Russia. Photo by Sultan Jessa



Russian museums have amazing artifacts. Photo by Sultan Jessa



Sultan Jessa and his wife Rosila. Photo by Sultan Jessa



Travelling on the Moscow metro is an experience. Photo by Sultan Jessa



A Russian lady ready to pose for pictures with tourists. Photo by Sultan Jessa



Map of Russia. Submitted photo



Russian dolls. Photo by Sultan Jessa



Russian folklore shows are worth seeing. Photo by Sultan Jessa



Russians are not fond of smiling. Photo by Sultan Jessa



Russia has amazing churches. Photo by Sultan Jessa