

BACK IN THE USSR

Northern European Russia

If Siberia is 'Russia's wild west', then North European Russia is 'Russia's New England'. This is a land of sea and islands, lakes and forests. The highlight is undoubtedly the hauntingly beautiful Solovetski Islands, located just beneath the Arctic Circle. Here is a microcosm of Russian history – heroic monks conquering the harsh natural environment to build one of the most powerful monasteries in Russia, the conversion of the monastery into one of the Soviet Union's harshest prison camps, followed by the monastery's rebirth and renaissance in the 1990s. A visit here will stay with you a long time – you cannot help but be captivated by the island's beauty and history.

Kamchatka and the Altai

Kamchatka, in the far east of Russia, was completely inaccessible in Soviet times. What is now revealed is a beautiful land of fire and ice (a 'mini Alaska'). Nine hours ahead of Moscow, transport in this remote region is for the most part by helicopter or six wheel drive vehicle, and travellers here can expect a truly unique experience, with pristine volcanic landscapes and abundant wildlife. The Altai Mountains straddle Russia, China, Kazakhstan and Mongolia and offer opportunities for hiking, horse-trekking and relaxation amongst Siberia's highest mountain range.

Baltic States and Ukraine

After years of domination by Russia, the Baltic states have emerged to finally take their rightful place amongst the countries of Europe. The capitals are vibrant, cosmopolitan places, each with their own character and history, and can easily be combined with Ukraine, Moscow and St Petersburg. Ukraine – 'the Breadbasket of the Soviet Union' – is a huge, verdant country with a variety of possibilities for the visitor. Ancient Kiev, father of the Russian Orthodox Church and of the Russian state itself, is an amazing city with a great swagger. Lvov is the cultural capital, while Odessa is an energetic port built in a

grand neo-classical style as the Russian Empire's window to the south. A trip to the Crimea and the Black Sea coast offers relaxation amongst beautiful and historic palaces, as well as some stunning inland scenery.

Central Asia

Outside of the capital cities it can be hard to tell that the Soviets were ever here. Donkey carts proliferate in the countryside, families still thread their way to market on Sundays and kebabs and tea are the staple diet. During the Cold War this region fell into obscurity, perceived to be primarily good for gulags and cotton. Since independence, though, the Silk Route cities of Samarkand,

Local men outside a Dungan mosque, Kyrgyzstan





Monastery, Armenia



Samarkand, Uzbekistan



Kamchatka, Russia

Bukhara and Khiva, and the amazing Pamir and Tien Shan Mountains, have reopened to western eyes, offering a glimpse of a once-forbidden world. Indeed there is a “renaissance” occurring here, with long-oppressed traditions finally resurfacing.

The Caucasus

The main gift of the Caucasus to the Soviet Union was not Stalin, or Beria, or the MiG aircraft – it was wine. Georgian wine has long been popular at the high tables of Moscow but the biggest star in the alcoholic firmament is cognac, specifically that made in the Armenian capital Yerevan. At the Yalta conference in 1945 Churchill

mentioned his love of Armenian cognac, and was thereafter supplied with free cases of it for the rest of his life. Elsewhere there are some breathtaking churches (Armenia and Georgia have been Christian countries for 1700 years) and the utterly charming old quarters of Tbilisi, Sheki and Baku.

FACT FILE

Prices and seasons vary considerably when travelling to this vast region. To discuss your travel plans please contact either Thomas or Huw on 01993 838 200.



Riga, Latvian capital

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The Russian Altai

