

Travel Briefing Russia

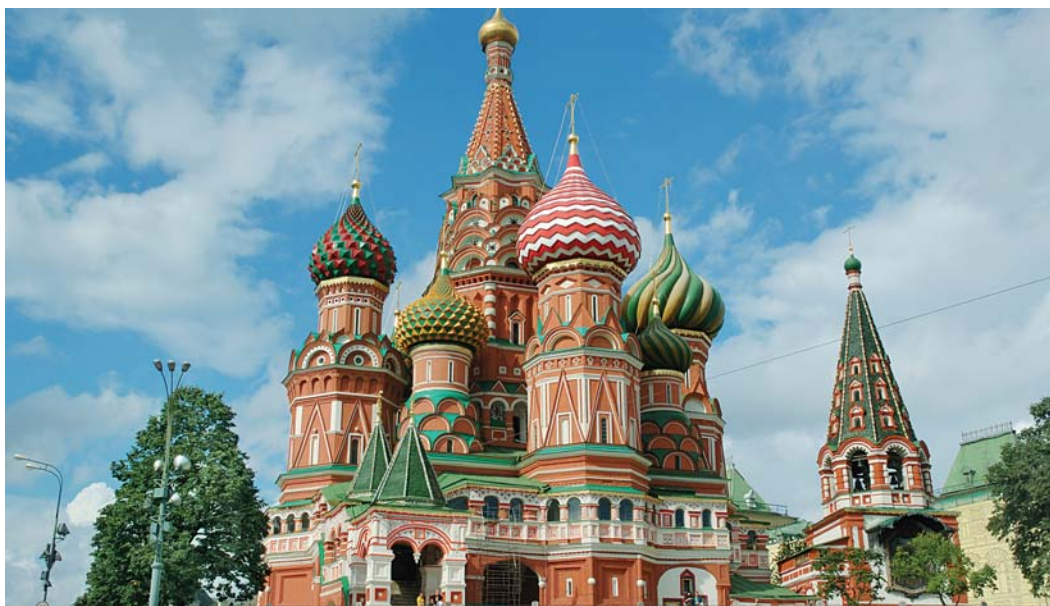
How to get the most out of your first visit to Russia

Stereotypes of Russia abound: bad food with even worse service, gruff, surly people and ugly, functional buildings. As with all stereotypes, the reality is somewhat different. Modern Russia is a place that fascinates with its history, inspires with its architecture and museums, and delights the senses with some of the world's best hotels and top class restaurants.

Moscow and St Petersburg are must-sees for any first time visitor to Russia. Moscow has a real buzz and swagger about it, while St Petersburg is a little more refined and aristocratic. Both cities have a plethora of world famous sites and easily combine into a week-long trip. For those looking to delve a little deeper into Russia, the Golden Ring – ancient towns which surround and pre-date Moscow – is highly recommended. For the ultimate journey, the Trans-Siberian trundles across the vast expanses of Siberia, and onto Vladivostok on the Pacific coast, or Beijing, the Chinese capital.



Catherine Palace, St Petersburg



St Basil's Cathedral, Moscow

St Petersburg

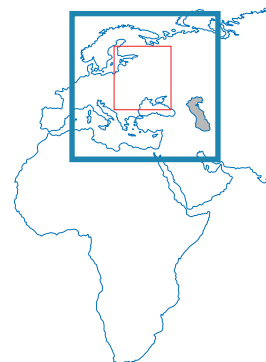
Once Russia's imperial capital and now a modern-day mix of sumptuous palaces, grand facades and glittering gilded domes, a visit to St Petersburg is a must for those with an interest in art, architecture and history. Designed as a 'window on the West', it is a city which feels as though it has much more in common with its cosmopolitan European neighbours than it does with the country's capital, Moscow.

As an environment in which many of the world's most celebrated artists, composers and writers were inspired to some of their greatest works, it is little surprise that St Petersburg is still renowned as a bastion of all things cultural. Indeed for many, the main highlight here is a visit to the stunning Winter Palace and the treasure trove which is the State Hermitage Museum. Home to a vast collection of some of the world's most important cultural treasures and housed in a building which itself played a part in some of Russia's most important historical events, the Hermitage draws in visitors from around the world keen to stroll through the exquisite state rooms and explore the vast galleries filled with paintings by the likes of Kandinsky and Matisse. It doesn't end at the Hermitage though – there are a wealth of other museums and palaces to be explored. Indeed, just wandering around this beautifully realised city is like walking through an open air museum, with virtually every corner having witnessed some historical or literary event.

Moscow

As a city which unashamedly buzzes with energy, glamour and a sense of real vitality, the Moscow of today is a far cry from the subdued and sometimes drab reputation it acquired in the aftermath of the Socialist collapse. Today it boasts a host of top class hotels and great restaurants, along with exhibitions from up-and-coming artists and designers. Abandoned warehouses and disused factories have been turned into cutting edge galleries, run down apartment blocks into boutique hotels and GUM, on Red Square where the masses once queued for bread and cheese, is now a shopping haven boasting the likes of Gucci and Prada.

Those less keen on the glitz and glamour of the capital do not have to look far to find Moscow's classical historical sights which chart the sometimes turbulent history of Russia and her people. Indeed at the very centre of the city the Kremlin still stands as it has for hundreds of years, proudly reminding inhabitants and visitors alike that the past is not far away and that the swift changes which are now taking place here are firmly rooted in a very different history. A visit here is immensely rewarding, with the Armoury and Kremlin cathedrals being home to a wealth of historical and cultural treasures, from a small but exquisite collection of Fabergé Eggs to the final resting place of Ivan the Terrible.



The Trans-Siberian Railway

Whilst Moscow, St Petersburg and the Golden Ring show differing facets of what Russia has to offer, the only way in which to really get to grips with the 'soul' of the country is to take the epic 6,000 mile journey along the Trans-Siberian Railway. A journey which is bursting with unique experiences; from negotiating for smoked fish from the train with industrious local traders, to dipping a toe in Lake Baikal or spending the night in a nomadic Mongolian Ger tent; a trip along the world's longest continuous railway, stretching from Moscow through to either Beijing or Vladivostok, is perhaps one of the most rewarding travel experiences around.



Train driver, Trans-Siberian train