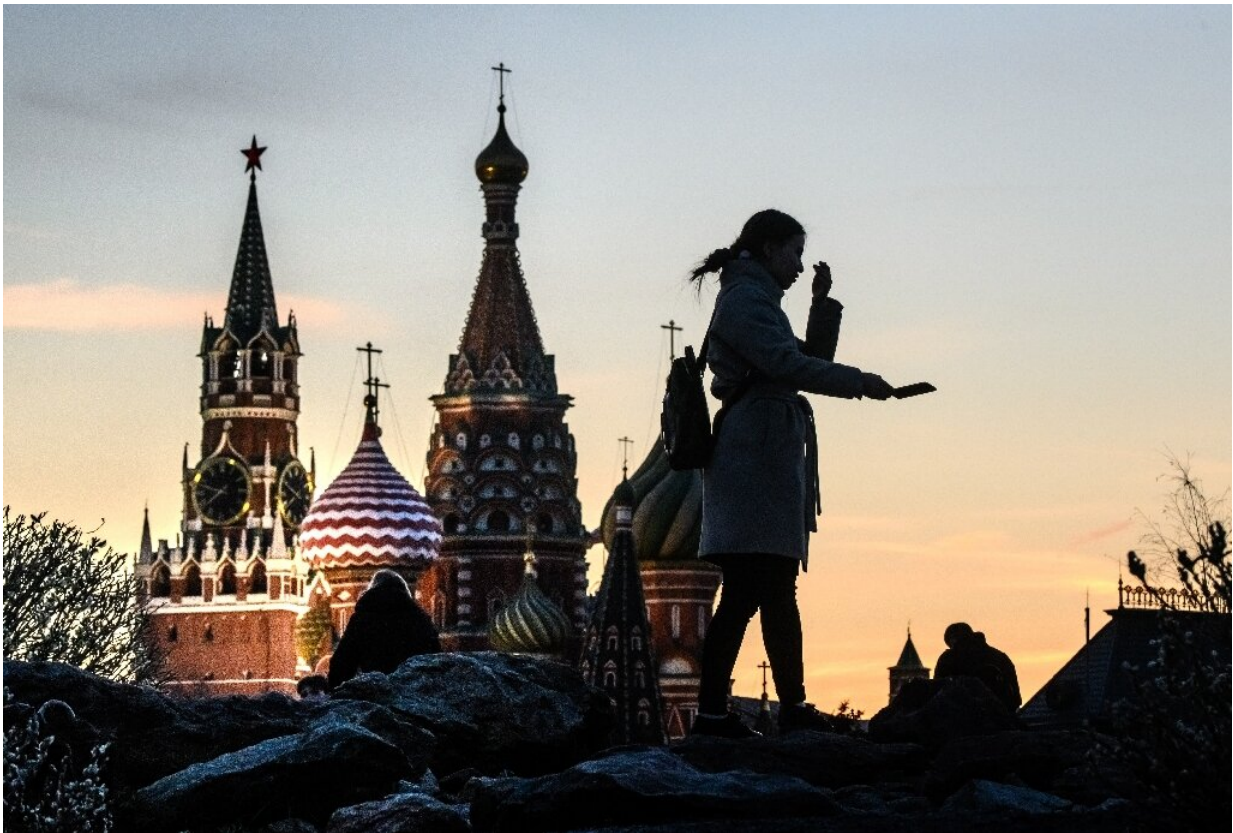


Russia hatches plan to become top tourist draw

July 25 2019, by Marina Lapenkova



Russia's tourism industry wants to make visiting much more than taking a selfie in front of the Kremlin and St. Basil's Cathedral

Fancy a tank ride in the snow, then a night in a Tsarist-era palace?

With ambitious plans to become one of the world's top 10 travel destinations, Russia is offering tours off the beaten track and lifting visa restrictions to attract more visitors.

A year after it successfully hosted the World Cup, the ex-Soviet country is looking for new ways to attract [international visitors](#) with the goal of more than doubling tourism revenues to \$25 billion by 2035.

"Young people will now be able to see Russia in a way their parents could not," Maya Lomidze, executive director of the Association of Russian Tour Operators, told AFP.

Russia's rich cultural heritage and its spectacular scenery ranging from subtropical Black Sea resorts to Siberia's Lake Baikal and the volcanoes of Kamchatka make the country an obvious draw for visitors.

But the difficulty of obtaining visas, a lack of contemporary-style accommodation and transport links outside the main cities still put off many visitors.

Nearly 25 million tourists visited Russia last year, making it the world's 16th most popular destination, according to the World Tourism Organisation. They largely came from the ex-Soviet bloc and China.



Russian tour operators want visitors to be able to do more than just pose by old models of tanks

During last summer's World Cup, Russia offered visa-free entry for international fans and Lomidze said the tourism sector had hoped for a substantial boost from the tournament played in 11 Russian cities.

"But the effect of the World Cup was practically reduced to zero by the eternal problems with visas," she said.

Apparently aware of the problem, President Vladimir Putin has ordered the government to introduce electronic visas, which are free of charge and issued quickly, for citizens of a number of countries.

Electronic visas will come into force in October for stays of up to eight

days in the former imperial capital of Saint Petersburg and the surrounding region, though Russia has not yet said which countries' citizens can apply.

From July, there has been a similar deal for travellers from 53 countries visiting the Western exclave of Kaliningrad, formerly part of Germany.

Since 2017, nationals of 18 countries have been eligible to receive free e-visas to visit Russia's Far East including the Kamchatka region where tourists can ski and trek in pristine landscapes.



A reindeer-drawn sleigh ride is one way to enjoy Russia in winter

Arctic tours

Tour operators are seeking to diversify, luring visitors with Arctic tours featuring reindeer herders, rides in Soviet-era tanks or a night at a palace that belonged to Peter the Great.

But Russia as a whole only spends around one million euros per year on promoting itself to visitors, according to estimates from the Association of Russian Tour Operators.

The country needs to invest billions of dollars in infrastructure and new facilities for travellers but equally crucial is a major publicity campaign to improve its image tarnished by the conflicts in Ukraine and Syria and spying scandals, experts say.

Stares from Soviets

Unlike Russia, the USSR made concerted efforts to lure foreign tourists, with posters and magazines extolling the thrill of travels through the steppes of Central Asia and the Caucasus mountains.



The mausoleum of Soviet state founder Vladimir Lenin is another must see for tourists

"First and foremost, the Soviet Union's draw was in its sense of forbiddenness, a bit like North Korea now," said Andrei Sivitsky, deputy director at Intourist, which was founded 90 years ago as the state travel agency.

Juliette Spigolis, a retired French engineer from Nice, is revisiting Russia for an epic bus trip that began in Brittany in northwestern France and will end in the Pacific port of Vladivostok.

Speaking to AFP, she recalled that she could not find a map of Moscow on sale when she first visited 35 years ago, due to the secrecy surrounding nearly every aspect of Soviet life.

"At the time, foreigners got just as many stares from the Soviets as they did from us," said the retiree as she tried to make her way through a crowd of Chinese tourists milling around Red Square.

Spigolis said she was delighted to discover a new "globalised" Russia but complained that outside popular tourist areas many signs are still only in Cyrillic, making life more difficult for those like her who are "eager to discover this vast country".

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