

Volga Region

ПОВОЛЖЬЕ

The Volga is synonymous with travel. Europe's longest river (3530km) has been a part of the continent's longest highway since times immemorial (see p445). Fortunately, people no longer have to carry boats across watersheds on their shoulders – huge canals were built in the Soviet period to allow free movement between five seas: the Baltic, the White, the Azov, the Black and of course the Caspian, which is fed by the Volga's mighty stream.

Communist leaders proudly declared that they had 'conquered' the river by building mammoth dams and effectively turning the Volga into a chain of lakes that Russians call seas. Check out the view in Ulyanovsk to appreciate why. Volga cities are as laid-back as you can possibly get in this country, with better preserved historical centres than in most of Russia, and the thousands of kilometres of largely uninterrupted sandy beach along the river's shores is a great alternative to Russia's crowded Black Sea coast.

Although the Volga is dubbed 'the great Russian river', a dozen ethnic groups rightfully claim the river as theirs. It takes some mental effort to figure out how the Turkic Tatars are related to Slavic Bulgarians, whether the Maris are closer to Finns or Hungarians, where the Volga Germans have gone and what a whole bunch of Mongolians is doing here. When you've finished pondering this appealing multicultural mix, don't forget to take a break and sample some Volga fish and Astrakhan watermelons.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Chase that evasive flamingo and gorge on Astrakhan watermelons in the **Volga delta** (p461)
- Spin a prayer drum and smell the steppe in Europe's only Buddhist enclave in **Elista** (p461)
- Say you want a revolution, then get arrested – by the river view – in Lenin's native town of **Ulyanovsk** (p444)
- See lilacs bloom on the world's bloodiest battlefield in **Volgograd** (p454)
- Witness the clash of cultures and catch a Tatar at the Sabantuy fest in **Kazan** (p439)
- Paint your own story at the Children's Museum in **Gorodets** (p438)
- Fall in love under the golden lights of **Saratov** (p452)



History

Since ancient times, the Volga has supported agricultural settlements and served as a main link in transcontinental commerce. More than a thousand years ago, the Vikings plied its waters, establishing a trade route between Baghdad and the Baltic.

MEDIEVAL VOLGA

In the Middle Ages, the Lower Volga was dominated by the Khazars, a Turkic tribe whose leaders were converted to Judaism. The Khazar capital stood at Itil (present-day Astrakhan). The Middle Volga was the domain of another Turkic tribe, the Bulgars. Descendants of the Huns and distant relatives of the Balkan Bulgarians, they migrated eastwards, mixed with local Finno-Ugric tribes and adopted Islam in the 10th century. Their feudal state was northeastern Europe's most advanced economic and cultural centre at that time. The forests of the Upper Volga were originally settled by Finno-Ugric tribes, who were partly displaced by the Turkic and Slavic migration. The river was also a vital conduit in the lucrative fur trade for Novgorod's merchants.

THE GOLDEN HORDE

In the 13th century, the entire Volga region was conquered by the heirs of Chinggis (Genghis) Khaan, the Mongol-led Golden Horde, who made Sarai (near present-day Volgograd) their capital. For the next 200 years, the Volga's Slavic and Turkic communities swore allegiance and paid tribute to the great khan, or suffered his wrath. Challenged by the marauder armies of Timur (Tamerlane) in the south and upstart Muscovite princes in the north, the Golden Horde eventually fragmented into separate khanates: Kazan, Astrakhan, Crimea and Siber. In the 1550s Ivan the Terrible razed Kazan and Astrakhan, and claimed the Middle and Lower Volga for Muscovy (modern-day Moscow), the capital of the new Russian state.

COSSACKS

While the river trade was a rich source of income for Muscovy, it also supported gainful bandit and smuggling ventures. Hostile steppe tribes continued to harass Russian traders and settlers, and the region remained an untamed frontier for many years.

In response, the tsar ordered the construction of fortified outposts at strategic points on the river. Serfs, paupers and dropouts fled to the region, organising semiautonomous Cossack communities (p37). The Cossacks elected their own atamans (leaders) and pledged their swords in service to tsar and Church. The Cossacks not only defended the frontier for the tsar but also operated protection rackets, plundered locals and raided Russia's southern neighbours.

Cossacks conducted large-scale peasant uprisings. In 1670 Stepan Razin led a 7000-strong army of the disaffected, which moved up the Lower Volga before meeting defeat at Simbirsk (Ulyanovsk). In 1773 Yemelyan Pugachev declared himself tsar and led an even larger contingent of Cossacks and runaway serfs on a riotous march through the Middle Volga region. The bloody revolt was forever romanticised by Alexander Pushkin in his novel *The Captain's Daughter*.

GERMANS IN THE VOLGA REGION

Astounded by the scale of rebellion, Catherine the Great responded with a plan for economic development in the region, particularly cultivation of the fertile southern river basin. In 1763 she issued an invitation to Germany's peasants to colonise the region. Eager to escape economic hardship and religious persecution, German Lutherans relocated to settlements along the Volga, with the largest concentration near Saratov. By the end of the 19th century, the population had reached over 1.5 million ethnic Germans.

In the 1920s a German autonomous republic was established along the Lower Volga. Hitler's 1941 blitzkrieg across the USSR's western border prompted a wave of persecution against the Volga Germans, who were branded 'enemies of the state'. The German autonomous republic was eliminated, residents were forced into exile and their citizenship was revoked. After Stalin's death, nearly a million survivors were liberated from Siberian labour camps, but were not allowed to return to their old villages.

SOVIET DEVELOPMENT

The USSR harnessed the mighty Volga for its ambitious development plans. Eight complexes of dams, reservoirs and hydroelectric stations were constructed between the 1930s and 1960s. A network of canals connected Russia's heartland to Moscow, and the Baltic