

SASMA Portal 2010

RUSSIA TRAVEL RISK GUIDE - Dmitry Budanov

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This document was assembled from consultations with business security professionals, local law enforcement officials and foreigners who have visited, lived and worked in Russia and a review of current security bulletins in print for the region. The scope of this briefing includes relevant and significant safety and security related incidents that visitors to Russia's major cities would most likely encounter or should be aware of.

British statesman, Sir Winston Churchill, said that "Russia is a riddle wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma." Many things in Russia are not what they seem, so be careful not to be deceived by appearances in the world's largest country. If you pack for variably poor weather, keep an open mind, be flexible, empathetic to cultural differences and able to tolerate the lacking infrastructure of this country, home to over 141 million Russians, Central Asians, Caucasians, Tatars (& > 100 others) of Orthodox Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Catholic, Buddhist and other faiths.

Before

you

go

Arrange a transfer to your hotel from reliable, established transportation provider. Agree on plan to "meet and greet" (how to recognize, where to wait if you miss each other or if late arrival). Prepare 3 "files" (for home, office and suitcase) with copies of: passport, visa, credit card, and contact numbers for: local English speaking medical service provider, hotel, transportation provider, embassy, medical insurance provider, local partner's office and local security advisor (if available). Do try to learn the Cyrillic alphabet before visiting. It's not as hard as it looks, and it's helpful if you plan to travel independently.

Learn Russian for "hello", "excuse me", "please", "I do/don't understand", "thank you" and "goodbye". USD/ Euro/ GBP taken with you should be new, not torn banknotes. Check with mobile phone provider for rates and compatibility (option: buy/use a local phone & number in Moscow). Consider setting a daily limit on ATM withdrawals allowed. Pack medicines you may need. Leave costly jewelry at home.

Check the Russian Customs website for current information about required declarations on arrival:

<http://www.customs.ru/en/ftravelers/Undergoingcustomsinspectionproceduresforairtransportconveyance/>

On

Arrival

As you leave the Customs zone, you will be pestered by drivers offering you taxi rides which you should ignore or refuse by silently shaking your head “no”. (Talking to them increases their persistence.) Stick to the pre arranged “meet and greet” plan. If you’re forced to hire a taxi on the spot, only use an official taxi stand and get a cash register receipt. When exchanging money use official exchange office.

In

the

hotel

When checking in, request that your visa and migration card be registered and returned to you ASAP so that you have it when you go outside. Store your valuables in a safe. Use discretion in giving out personal and business information to strangers. Politely hang up if you receive a harassing phone call and report it to the manager. Refrain from inviting strangers to your room. Always inquire before opening your door. Beware of vulnerability of information when using business centers and WiFi networks - industrial espionage, hacking, etc. is common.

Out and about - general information

Most problems can be avoided by being constantly aware of the changes occurring in your surroundings, thinking defensively and using common sense, just as you would if visiting your first time any unfamiliar large world capital city. Most major cities are relatively safe for sensible visitors who realize “they aren’t in Kansas anymore”.

Beggars – Usually “controlled” by organized criminal groups and best not to patronize.

Communications – Keep a cell phone with you at all times. If you are without it in an emergency, offer to pay rubles to someone with a mobile phone & ask them to make the call for you. Overcome language barriers by speaking English slowly with vivid gestures. Do not speak loudly in public and attract unnecessary attention to yourself as a foreigner unless you’re in danger.

Civil unrest – Low risk since the economic & political environments are stable and under government control.

Crime – Following basic common sense rules will reduce the risk of crime. Individuals must be briefed about potential local dangers, particularly if visiting Russia for the first time and staying long. On the whole, the criminal environment has been continuously improving over

the last decade. For comparison, the total number of registered crimes in Russia is comparable to France and Italy.

Dealing with authorities – Bureaucratic procedures can be cumbersome and the level of corruption can be appalling. Be firm but patient and respectful; it is an offence to insult an official. Keep with you at all times: passport, visa, registration, and phone numbers of your security consultant, hotel, transportation provider, colleagues, host company, business partner and embassy/consulate.

Female travelers - There are no specific security threats facing foreign women visitors. However, they should always maintain standard security precautions, especially when traveling alone. In particular, they should order taxis through their hotels, as they have been vetted. Women have been assaulted by the drivers of taxis hailed in the street.

Although foreign women are generally safe in international hotels, when traveling alone they run the risk of being mistakenly identified as a prostitute by other hotel guests. A similar view may be taken of women visiting bars or restaurants alone. While unpleasant and possibly intimidating, it is unlikely to lead to security problems.

Female travelers may find that male colleagues and associates go out of their way to open doors and help women out of cars and trams. This social courtesy should be understood as just that, and no offence should be taken.

Fire safety – Poor implementation of regulations results in hazardous situations in many buildings. This means that many fire exits, windows and access doors are locked unexpectedly.

Health and Hygiene – Although Russia does not require any vaccinations to enter the country, consult your physician about updating your diphtheria, tetanus and tuberculosis vaccinations. Some doctors recommend protection against hepatitis as well. Air pollution can be a health concern in Moscow and in other large cities and the winter months are fraught with colds and influenza.

Sanitation levels vary. They are equal to Western standards in major hotels but are inferior in public restrooms and some restaurants. Keeping sanitary wipes handy is advisable. Avoid tap water: bottled water is readily available.

Make sure you have good medical insurance that uses Western run clinics (American Medical Center, European Medical Center, etc.) and allows for evacuation in the event of a serious medical emergency. Western standard health-care costs are astronomically high in large cities and the standard Russian medical system is unreliable and not prepared to treat foreigners in English.

Hotels – International hotel chains such as Marriott, Hyatt, Radisson, Ritz, Holiday Inn, Novotel, Kempinski etc., are only in large cities, in high demand and can be expensive. Make reservations well in advance. These hotels have Wi-Fi, business centers with computers, telex and fax machines. Less modern hotels lack central switchboards, and each room may have a

direct telephone number. Mafia-run prostitutes seeking hard-currency clients frequent all Russian hotels: prostitutes have been known to drug clients before robbing them.

Kiosks – Best to avoid. Food quality may be suspect, and stopping here would increase your chance of an encounter with pickpockets or undesirable local residents.

Local police – Can be corrupt and unreliable on occasion. Few police officers speak even basic English (or other foreign languages). Officers are underpaid, and frequently take bribes in exchange for dropping cases or releasing criminals. They sometimes stop foreigners to verify that your visa has been registered. Police officers are obligated to identify themselves when addressing you. Be polite and try to assist, but if their behavior is suspect, let them know that you must contact the embassy to request assistance/instructions. You may also want to ask them to show you their police ID card, which will have the following info which you can write down: name, rank, badge number & supervising officer (technically, you are entitled to request such.)

Local transportation – Use a reliable and established transportation provider or a vehicle provided by the hotel. Even official looking taxis near clubs/restaurants should be avoided. Never enter a cab which has a passenger. Mass transit is inexpensive yet difficult/more risky with no language skills. Traffic jams can eat up considerable time. Do give up your seat on a bus or the metro to an elderly or handicapped person or if there's a woman standing with young children.

Major events/concerts/public holidays – Best to avoid events that attract large crowds.

Money/credit cards/ATMs – Do not flash contents of your wallet. Ruble is official currency (Central Bank rates usually fluctuate around 30 RUB=\$1, 45 RUB=Euro1, 50 RUB=GBP1). Exchange hard currency for rubles in hotel or bank as independent exchange offices can defraud; ALWAYS check and recount money received BEFORE walking away! Keep credit card in sight when making purchases. Use ATMs in hotel/reputable bank; block view of keyboard when entering PIN and check that the ATM has not been modified with a faux façade/card reader.

Visitors should ensure that they have sufficient hard currency cash with them to cover all contingencies if necessary but should take extra security precautions when carrying large amounts of cash. Visitors should note that it is illegal to pay for goods and services with foreign currencies – only rubles may be used.

Museums – Do be aware that museums and other attractions often have two fee scales, one for Russians and a more expensive one for foreigners. If you're charged the higher price, you aren't necessarily being cheated.

Organized crime – Kidnappings, contract murders, extortion still occur in Russia (Western businessmen are very rarely targeted). If presented with an illegal proposition or faced with an extortion attempt, advise threatening party that you will pass along his request to decision

maker in your company. Immediately contact your local security advisor and/ or embassy.

Pedestrian safety – Cross only in official crosswalks (often underground) where indicated and never trust a vehicle to stop, even if it’s “supposed” to. Sidewalks are sometimes used by vehicles: PEDESTRIANS BEWARE! In winter, beware of falling icicles, which kill people every year.

Passenger safety – Buckle up and sit in the back seat as many drivers on the road are incompetent/reckless. Have the address of your destination written down to show the driver, presuming he won’t speak English.

Post – The national postal system is inefficient and unreliable. Correspondence can be opened without your knowledge by law enforcement.

Racial violence – Racially motivated violent attacks on people of color from local “skinhead” groups are growing, usually in public places frequented by lower income wage earners (e.g. metro, outdoor markets). Moscow, St. Petersburg and Voronezh have witnessed the most incidents.

Restaurants/discos/cafes – Remove valuables from coats before removing. Do not leave your drink unattended or you may wake up the next morning in a stupor without your valuables. Secure any WiFi traffic. Ask for advice from concierge/local host for establishments with a “good reputation” do not go alone and do not leave with strangers. Don’t be surprised by low standards of services in shops and restaurants. Employees are frequently brusque to the point of being impolite. Don’t expect smoke-free restaurants. As Moscow becomes more westernized, many newer establishments are setting aside areas for non smokers, but the Russians frequently ignore such distinctions. Tipping is typically from 5% to 15%, depending on the quality of service.

Scams to avoid – Street gambling (ponzi scheme), deaf/mute “beggars” (pickpockets) or a dropped wad of money found by a “passerby” who then offers to split with you, Keep walking and ignore those attempting to lure you into these costly traps.

Shopping – A calculator helps convert ruble prices to your currency. Never leave valuables in changing room unattended. Returns possible for 2 weeks with check. Many warranties invalid outside Russia. Avoid art/antiques (require special export permit & many frauds). Counterfeits are rampant (designer clothes/pharmaceuticals /music/DVD/FMCGs).

Social etiquette - Best to keep relationships/friendships within the group of people related to your business visit, as unsolicited interactions with strangers may be misunderstood/misused. Don’t speak loudly in public places—it’s considered rude. Russian men and women fill traditional roles for their respective genders. Small gifts and gratuities are accepted and expected. Birthday celebrations and holidays are important to acknowledge and celebrate.

Stray dogs – Current animal control policy discourages extermination of stray dogs, which are becoming more of a problem in large cities. They gather in packs, live in parks and near outdoor markets and can attack unexpectedly, so best to avoid if observed.

Street crimes – Theft is a serious problem for the underground metro, bars, big shopping malls, cafés and medium class restaurants. Criminals usually act in groups preying on large crowds. Thefts are aimed at getting money, personal belongings and even car keys. Secure your valuables and passport at all times. Avoid close contact with strangers and those who approach suddenly & attempt to engage you in a conversation or who attempt to touch/stand near you.

Robberies are not limited to specific areas of large cities and are usually committed in the evening or at night. To avoid robbery, minimize walking at night and stay on main, well lit streets with more traffic.

While less of a problem than it once was, every large city (often around train stations) still has its share of "gypsies." These children or adults (who may not be of Gypsy origin) may approach you, offering to tell your fortune, begging or simply swarming around you. If this happens, while continuing to walk away, hold tightly to your valuables keeping in mind that their aim is to distract you momentarily (perhaps by getting you to push them away), at which point they will snatch your valuables and be gone.

Taking photographs – Do be careful when photographing governmental buildings or private houses. If a guard approaches you and asks you to leave or stop, it's best to do so. Don't take photos in the metro (subway) or train stations without an official permit—while tourists often take photos, it is officially prohibited and could result in a fine.

Terrorism – Some large cities have seen some deadly terrorist acts (including hostage taking and suicide bombers) in the past few years, mostly related to violent Chechen based groups. Police are constantly on alert for such activity.

Thieves and pickpockets – Avoid close contact with strangers and those who approach suddenly & attempt to engage you in a conversation or who attempt to touch/stand near you. Secure valuables and passport.

Threat of physical violence – If you are threatened by a violent person, it is best to move away as quickly as possible to defuse the situation. If necessary, start yelling for help to call attention to your situation.

Getting around

By air – Security procedures for internal flights are flawed. Lack of funding and poor maintenance make travel with Aeroflot, Transaero, S7, Krasair and other airline operators less safe inside Russia than on international flights. Transaero is the best alternative to Aeroflot. Travelers should avoid unscheduled charter flights where possible. Particularly dangerous are regional helicopter services, common in remote areas of Siberia and North Russia. Indicator boards at regional airports are written in Cyrillic, and the information may not be continually updated. Information about flights is usually announced (in Russian) by staff who

often do not have public address systems. As a result, non Russian-speaking visitors can get confused and sometimes miss flights. A useful tip is to keep your eye on someone you have identified as a fellow passenger and board the plane at the same time.

By hired (rental) car - Short-term visitors should not drive hired cars themselves for many reasons: it is easy to commit driving offences by mistake, driver behavior can be aggressive, some traffic laws are obscure, signs can be half-hidden, and traffic police often stop cars to extract bribes and fines on trumped-up charges.

By public transport - Public transport in main cities is reasonably efficient, clean and safe during the day, though it is busy during peak hours. Do not travel late at night on near-empty vehicles: visitors are occasionally mugged. Underground metro trains, buses, trams and trolley-buses operate a flat fare regardless of destination. You can buy tickets for buses, trams and trolley buses from the driver or from kiosks near the stops. On the underground metro (subway) in Moscow, St Petersburg and some other large cities, magnetic cards available at station counters are used in automated gates. Monthly magnetic passes that cover all forms of transport are very convenient, even for short-stay visitors. Underground metro and buses normally run from 06.00 until 01.00. Many underground metro stations in Moscow and St. Petersburg are tourist attractions. Secure valuables while traveling to avoid being victimized by professional pickpockets.

By Taxi - Where possible, travelers should use only official taxis or their own transport provider. Most major hotels in Russia run their own taxi services, which are expensive, reliable and the safest means of transport after dark. Avoid offers for a ride from drivers who congregate outside international hotels; they are more expensive and usually less safe than even taxis hailed in the street. If no “safe” transport is available, it is possible to hail a taxi on the street by standing on the side of the road and holding out your arm. Taxis and private cars (and sometimes ambulances or other vehicles) will stop. Do not get into a vehicle if the driver makes you feel nervous or if the vehicle is already carrying passengers. Visitors using taxis hailed in the street should agree the price before getting in: taxi drivers ignore their meters, which in any case are usually broken. Find out the going rate from local residents. Prices are usually higher at night and when traveling to and from airports. It’s safer to sit in the back seat. Have the address of your destination written down to show the driver, presuming he won’t speak English.

By train – The railway network is extensive, but trains to most destinations are painfully slow. However, overnight services to St Petersburg, Nizhniy Novgorod and other destinations 8-10 hours from Moscow can be a quite pleasant alternative to flying. Sleeping cars are relatively comfortable, but sanitary facilities do not meet Western standards: take toilet paper, soap and drinking-water for long journeys. On international routes, expect long delays at borders for customs and border control procedures.

Robbery is an increasing problem on longer journeys, particularly on the Moscow – St. Petersburg route: passengers on night trains should take strong chains to lock their compartment doors. In general, it is inadvisable to travel alone on train services.

Note: Security situation in the breakaway republic of Chechnya makes travel there unacceptably dangerous. The threat of kidnapping in Chechnya is too high for any company to conduct operations involving expatriate staff. Whatever assurances Chechen officials may offer, nobody in Chechnya is capable of guaranteeing security for foreign visitors. Repeated kidnappings indicate that even high-level political contacts and teams of bodyguards are not sufficient protection against kidnapping.

Chechen groups are also capable of mounting kidnapping operations in other parts of the North Caucasus region, especially Dagestan, Ingushetia, South and North Ossetia, Kabardino-Balkaria. Expatriate personnel should avoid all travel to these regions.

On

Departing

Check the Russian Customs website for current information about required declarations on departure:

<http://www.customs.ru/en/ftravelers/Undergoingcustomsinspectionproceduresforairtransportconveyance/>

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