The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

English and Credit Cards Altering Russians' Travel Plans

By Alex Chachkevitch

July 26, 2011



Travelers arriving with their luggage at Belorussky Station on Tuesday. **Vladimir Filonov**

Svetlana Afonina got her first taste of independent travel five years ago when she mustered the courage for a weekend trip to Finland all by herself.

Just 30 euros and a four-hour car ride later, she was walking the streets of Helsinki, 400 kilometers from her home in St. Petersburg. Since then, she has been hooked.

The most recent addition to her impressive "been there" list, a one-week trip for two to London, cost about 31,000 rubles ($1,000) — which she said was $500 cheaper than the price of a prepackaged tour from a travel agency.

"Traveling on your own, first of all, saves money," Afonina, 27, a journalist, said in a telephone interview. "Individual tours are the future."

Afonina's discovery may seem nothing special in the West, but for Russia, it amounts to a

looming revolution in the tourist industry. Since the Iron Curtain crumpled two decades ago, making foreign travel possible for regular Russians, most have arranged their trips via travel agencies — until recently.

More and more travelers are now opting to handle their trips themselves, booking hotels online, applying for visas in person, arranging their own travel schedules, and sparing themselves the sometimes bothersome company of other tourists, tourist industry insiders said.

Tour operators — who still dominate the market — question the perceived benefits of independent travel. Yet they concede that the trend is on the rise and may change the industry within a decade, when the Facebook generation, now in their teens, has the time and money to travel.

About 57 percent of respondents in an online poll by Rambler's Rumetrica last month opted for independent travel instead of going through tour operators. This is a 10 percent increase from November and a 21 percent jump from May 2009. The survey of about 2,600 Russians had a margin of error of 7 percentage points.

Admittedly, only about one-third of Russians use the Internet. Yet an offline poll indicated that up to 40 percent of those who planned to go abroad this summer were willing to travel independently, according to the survey conducted in the spring by 2K Audit Deloviye Konsultatsy/Morison International.

Some 1.5 percent of Russians — or about 2 million — plan to spend their vacations abroad this summer, according to the Russian Tourism Union.

Union spokeswoman Irina Tyurina compared the growing trend toward independent travel to growing vegetables in a backyard garden. "Some people choose to grow their own vegetables, putting their time into buying the seeds, watering them and caring for them," Tyurina said. "But others would rather choose a more convenient route and buy the same vegetables in a food store for a higher price."

The tendency is not likely to affect large-scale tour operators such as Tez Tour and Neva Travel anytime soon, Tyurina said.

Big players agreed. "We have barely noticed anything," said Svetlana Drozdova, deputy director of Neva Travel, which has been operating since 1990.

But Drozdova, who said she first noticed the trend in the late 1990s, predicted that even large tourist companies would feel the change by the 2020s, when a new generation of travelers arrives.

Meanwhile, smaller companies said they are already feeling the pinch.

"Some of our long-time customers are starting to figure out our secrets and have quit using our services," said a representative of the Moscow-based Bon Voyage Tour agency.

The agency started to really feel the trend about a year ago, she said by telephone. She asked not to be identified in line with company policy.

Indeed, Moscow banker Ruslan Aliyev, a habitual traveler who arranges his trips through web sites such as hotel aggregators Booking.com and Marriot.com, said that from his experience, tourist agencies use the same sites as him and tag on commission fees.

Saving Money

Attempts to save money and a distrust of travel agencies are two main reasons that encourage people to travel independently, Tyurina said.

She acknowledged that travelers have good reason to be wary of travel agencies because the industry has its share of scammers and unstable operators, such as Capital Tour, which went bankrupt last year, stranding more than 8,000 clients abroad.

The saving part, though, can be an illusion, Tyurina argued.

The commission that tour operators add to the cost of a prepackaged tour is only 2 to 3 percent, she said. Travel agencies, which work as their proxies, may add another 10 to 17 percent.

But tour operators get cheaper deals on lodging because they buy out whole hotels and pay for them before the season even starts, Tyurina said. "Hotels like to work with tour operators because they buy a lot and pay right away," she said.

This means that popular vacation destinations such as Egypt and Turkey may be more expensive to independent travelers. But Europe, where tourism is not concentrated in a few select capitals, offers more opportunities to bargain seekers.

Banker Aliyev, 47, who has traveled independently through most of Europe and the Americas, said his trips cost him some 15 percent less than similar prepackaged tours.

Afonina, the journalist, said she keeps her expenses low by staying in hostels, which aren't normally used by tour operators even though they span Europe in a vast network of low-cost lodging.

"I noticed that I only use the hotel to sleep," she said. "So why should I spend more money on a bed in a five-star hotel when I can get a bed in a hostel for dirt cheap and have leftover money for more travel?"

Free Time

Moreover, tourists like Afonina and Aliyev are attracted to independent travel because they want to explore unbeaten paths and travel at an individual pace that suits them.

"Standard tours just don't appeal to a lot of Russians anymore," said Pyotr Klyuyev, an analyst with 2K Audit Deloviye Konsultatsy/Morison International. "They want to immerse in the atmosphere of the country. And tours with an 'all-inclusive' system limit those opportunities."

Love of company also plays a role. "Everything depends on the person," Aliyev said. "But I just don't like to be like everyone else and travel in packs."

Tyurina, of the Russian Tourism Union, listed three requirements for an independent traveler: free time to prepare a trip, basic knowledge of English, and a credit card for hotel reservations and plane tickets. All three are available to the country's slowly growing middle class.

Aliyev said he preferred independent travel right from the start, when, after the Soviet collapse, "the cork popped open and everyone dashed away to the once-forbidden land."

But traveling has become easier with the advent of the Internet, which offers endless opportunities to learn about a destination beforehand and plan each trip to the smallest detail, he said.

Research, however, takes time and energy. Afonina said this is why she opted for a prepackaged tour to Thailand when going there on her honeymoon in 2009. Later, she realized that they could have slashed the cost in half with some individual planning.

But with travel agencies, you can just board a plane and go, said Drozdova of Neva Travel.

"You won't be able to fly out to Turkey tomorrow and live in five-star hotel for a week, paying only 10,000 rubles for the whole trip," she said. "We can do that for you."

Stress Included

Indeed, some hurdles are easier to clear with the help of tour operators. One is visas, which can be hard to obtain for Russians traveling to Western countries.

Aliyev acknowledged that he asks for help from travel agencies in renewing his Schengen visa, even though he buys everything else, from tickets to museum passes, online on his own. "I just can't be bothered to stand in long lines and keep up with changes in the required visa documents," he said.

Tamara Rudneva, manager at Hazart travel agency, said that whenever she walks into embassies to apply for visas for her clients, she runs into groups of independent travelers upset over rejected visa applications. "I pity them," Rudneva said. "Why fray your nerves when you can use the services of professionals who know all the nuances and pitfalls? It's easier for us to do this work."

Then there are emergencies. Independent travel has its dangers like any other venture into unknown lands, Afonina said, recalling how a friend's documents were stolen in Spain during a road trip last year.

The friend, Irina Lomova, said in an interview that the situation "ended on a good note" and she still enjoyed the trip immensely. But she conceded that she did not wish the stress she had experienced on anyone.

Travel agencies can provide valuable support in solving tourists' problems and help them get out of unfortunate situations.

The gap between independent globetrotting and travel via tour operators is not as wide as it might seem.

Many travel agencies are adapting to independent-minded travelers by offering flexible tour packages that can be limited, for example, to hotel booking and visa services. Hazart even also offers individual tours, co-planning them with clients.

In the West, both types of travel co-exist without replacing each other, said Maya Lomidze, executive director of the Association of Russian Tour Operators.

"If you look at the United States and Europe, they still have thriving tourism agencies even though a much larger percentage of their population plans their vacations themselves," Lomidze said.

European and American tour operators provide travelers with additional offers like tickets to festivals and other events, she said, adding that such business was still in its rudimentary stages in Russia but would develop as clients' demands grow.

"Competition can only cause businesses to improve," she said. "From that point of view, the rise of independent travel is actually favorable to tourism in Russia."

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