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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russians Spend More, Travel Independently

By Khristina Narizhnaya

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Canine border guards will not stop $40 billion of Russian spending abroad. **Igor Tabakov**

Russian tourists took a record 60 million trips abroad in the first half of this year, spending a record amount of money via their credit cards, according to tourism and credit card companies.

Citibank experts predict Russians will spend $40 billion — 3 percent of the country's gross domestic product — abroad by year-end.

Nearly a third of all charges made by Russia-based Citibank credit card holders were made outside of the country in the first half of 2011. Last year, that number was 20.1 percent.

The most popular travel destinations for Russians were Turkey, China, Egypt, Thailand and Finland in the first half of this year, according to the Russian Union of Travel Industry.

For Citibank cardholders, the top destinations, based on spending, were the United States,

followed by Italy, Great Britain, France and Spain.

Italy was the top-spending destination for Visa cardholders, who left $557 million in the country — 39 percent more than they did last year. Other top destinations for Visa clients were Ukraine, the United States, Germany and France, according to a recent report by Visa.

Russian tourists spent most of their money on retail items in Italy and the United States, while in Ukraine the biggest spending was on accommodation.

Last year, Russians charged $5.8 billion abroad on their Visa cards, and the number of Russian tourists using Visa cards while traveling climbed 36 percent from 2009. The number of transactions abroad increased 43 percent from the previous year, the Visa report said.

North African countries, although still popular among Russian tourists, have lost nearly half of their visitor volume because of the series of revolutions that shook the Arab world. Russian tourism to Japan is also down 50 percent because of the March tsunami and Fukushima nuclear power plant meltdown, the Russian Union of Travel Industry reported.

Caribbean countries like Cuba and the Dominican Republic benefited from the Arab Spring, with the number of Russian tourists increasing 106 percent and 65 percent, respectively. Hong Kong also experienced an increase of 55.2 percent compared with the same period last year.

More than 18 million Russian tourists traveled abroad as part of organized tour groups during the first six months of 2011, which is 15 percent more than in the first half of 2010. Nearly a third of that travel was to the CIS, while 68.6 percent of tourists went further to other countries, according to the Association of Tour Operators of Russia.

Spending last year with travel agencies rose across the top five tourist markets of Italy, Ukraine, the United States, Germany and France. But the Visa tourism report showed that Russians are increasingly trading all-inclusive organized tours for independent travel. Visa cardholders spent more on airline tickets, auto rentals, accommodation and other travel-related expenses, the report stated.

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