

Regions Hope Foreign Tourists Float in Their Direction

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A cruise ship pulling away from the dock at the Ivanovo region town of Plyos, popular with tourists because of its artisans, along the Volga River. **Vladimir Filonov**

YAROSLAVL — Foreign languages are frequently heard in Moscow and St. Petersburg, especially around tourist destinations.

Standing in line for Lenin's Mausoleum on Red Square, Bill Montague and his family are just as traditional in the choice of cities they plan to visit in Russia as they are in their choice of Soviet relics.

"We've only seen pictures of Moscow and St. Petersburg," said Montague, who has come to Russia from the American Midwest. "We don't know what's in the regions. We don't know what to take pictures of."

His son Wyatt has lived in Moscow for three years and has ventured out to some of the

regions, but as the family's tour guide he limited their excursions to the country's two largest cities.

The regions are impossible to navigate for those who don't speak Russian, and the sights are not as dense, he said.

Regional officials are eager to change this perception. One of their plans for luring foreign tourists from the Moscow–St. Petersburg route is to develop water tourism, particularly cruise tours on the Volga River.

The central regions' representatives met last week at the Visit Russia 2012 forum in Yaroslavl with the aim of banding together to draw in more tourists.

"In the European Union as well as in the other countries of the world, there is a growing number of pensioners who have a lot of free time and want to travel," said Yevgeny Pisarevsky, deputy head of the Federal Tourism Agency. "I think that water tourism is exactly the kind of tourism that would be perfect for this category of people."

Cruise travel is seen to have a lot of potential in Russia because it can bypass some of the more entrenched problems of local tourism, including street markers only in Cyrillic, unsafe excursion routes and a lack of good hotels. Also attractive is its ability to minimize time spent on the infamous Russian roads.

Government officials and tour operators expected the number of foreign tourists coming in by boat to soar after the government passed a law in July allowing small foreign ships to enter Russian waterways and their passengers to stay in the country for 72 hours without visas.

But the legal change made little impact on the number of incoming tourists.

"The decision itself was good, but there is currently no infrastructure for tourism on the Volga or other rivers," said Igor Yelfimov, deputy governor of the Yaroslavl region.

Much of the infrastructure needed to support cruise tourism is crumbling or doesn't exist. Regional and federal powers are debating over responsibility to fix decrepit wharves, and legal barriers block efforts to put up floating fuel stations.

New initiatives are under way to solve those problems, but with no plans in place it is still unclear how long it will be before foreign tourists are flocking to Russia's waterways.

Opportunities Sailing By

Volga cruises are already popular among foreign tourists in Russia — and a preferred way to travel through the Golden Ring regions. Up to 90 percent of the foreign tourists visiting Uglich and Myshkin in the Yaroslavl region come by boat, Yelfimov said.

Other regions are also banking on water tourism. The Ivanovo, Voronezh, Kostroma, Moscow, Ryazan and Tver regions list this type of tourism as one of their main priorities.

But the overall number of foreigners that these areas are able to attract is still low. Only 39,000 foreign tourists staying in the water tourism regions were counted in 2010, as

compared with the 1 million foreign tourists who visited Moscow and the Moscow region in the same year, according to a report presented to a presidential representative at the Visit Russia forum.

Moreover, many of the tourists visit the regional cities for only one day and don't stay in hotels.

More than 450,000 tourists pass through the regions on routes between Moscow and St. Petersburg, but they don't bring any money into the local economy, Yelfimov said.

The tourists eat onboard the ship, their tour agencies are usually registered in one of the two big cities, and the average revenue that the region gets from each of these visitors is 300 rubles – mostly from the sale of China-made souvenirs.

"The ship sails in. People light a fire. Then we spend money to extinguish the fire. They leave," Yelfimov said. "We need to charge for fueling, service, mooring. We need to learn how to take this money, or this tourism simply becomes a headache."

The poor infrastructure still deters tourists from exploring regions along the Volga.

Floating fuel stations are a particularly sore subject. The stations can't be put in any water protection zones, and in most places boaters still have to cart in fuel in canisters.

This is not an option for foreign cruises, which require around two tons of fuel. The cruises simply avoid the route.

"There are no fuel stations and not even documents that say how to put up a fuel station on water. There are no directives, which means today any fuel station is a criminal offense," said Yelfimov, who encountered these legal barriers when he tried to help create a yacht marina.

Work to fix old wharves has progressed very little in recent years, Yelfimov added. He estimated that millions of rubles will be needed to make the necessary improvements.

The Yaroslavl Shipbuilding Plant is getting around the wharf problem by equipping ships with planks that can dock on undeveloped land.

Still a military stronghold, the shipyard recently branched out into building private cruise ships. It is currently offering to sell such custom boats to tour operators, said Lidya Gurevich, the plant's deputy marketing director.

The government is also putting more emphasis on building ships for tourists. Pisarevsky talked of plans to build new fuel-efficient liners and modernize old boats, whose history itself can become an attraction for visitors.

He suggested that the government may reduce tariffs to ease the importation of foreign-built boats.

Marketing Void

Moscow may not have an information center, but that doesn't mean that foreigners can't place it on a map or recall at least some of its famous sights. The same doesn't hold true for the regions.

Marketing campaigns in the regions are uncoordinated, generally unprofessional and confusing to foreign tourists, said Denis Yershov, regional projects director at Media Arts.

His company is responsible for rebranding Sochi and Kazan to make the cities more attractive for foreigners ahead of their role as hosts of the 2014 Olympic Games and the 2013 Universiade, respectively.

"Each region is trying to invent a bicycle," Ershov said. "You don't need to invent a bicycle. You need to study what the other countries have done, understand it and try to do the same here. But there must be a single coordinator and, ideally, not someone from the governor or mayor's administration."

The Federal Tourism Agency has launched a Welcome to Russia Internet portal and participated in European road shows to market the regions to foreign tourists.

Russia is also leading the movement to establish a global convention on the rights of tourists, which is expected to be ratified in 2013. Pisarevsky said he expects that the document will increase the confidence of foreign tourists coming to Russia.

It is still not clear what effect state marketing has on foreign tourists, but it has already inspired some investors to start new projects. Businesses were not keen to invest in regional tourism a few years ago, but that has changed, Yelfimov said.

A flagship example of this is the colossal Yaroslavskoe Vzmorye project, located on the Rybinsk Reservoir 300 kilometers from Moscow. The project envisions the development of a year-round tourism complex that would be accessible through the Volga.

The development, which encompasses a total of 8,600 hectares, will include a business center, hotels, yacht marina, restaurants, residential cottage district, school and kindergarten.

The developer, Agrant, has earmarked up to 15 billion rubles (\$467 million) for the site, which is scheduled to be completed by 2025, project manager Dmitry Rodionov said.

One hotel complex, managed by Heliopark, and a business center have already been completed and are open to guests.

Most of the travelers currently reach the hotel complex at Yaroslavskoe Vzmorye by car, but the developer plans to route sections of railroad to lead to the site and make it accessible to small planes and water transportation.

The administration is finishing registration for a fuel station, said Alexander Lekarev, deputy project manager.

Projects like this show that Russia is gradually becoming a major tourist destination, Pisarevsky said.

"This is a difficult process," he said "If we compare the Russian Federation, as our partners in the West like to do, to a bear, at first glance the bear is very sluggish. He takes a long time to rise and turn, but he runs fast."

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