

Despite Visa Hassles, Russia Promotes Itself as Tourist Destination

By [Manik Mehta](#)

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Regions and tour operators are vying for visitors attention, although visa hassles remain a stumbling block.

BERLIN — In an attempt to refurbish its image as a tourist destination, Russia went on a charm offensive to court international travelers at the recent Berlin International Tourism Bourse, the world's largest tourism show.

Conceding that visa rules were a big problem, a large contingent of Russian tour operators, hoteliers and local tourism promotion agencies tried to correct the perception in the Western and other markets that Russia is not exactly a hospitable and warm destination for tourists.

Mariola Markiel, the London-based regional sales and marketing manager of Best Western Hotels in Moscow, said she had noticed increased interest in Russia, and in St. Petersburg and Moscow in particular.

"People are increasingly getting tired of seeing the same old destinations in the Mediterranean, and are even willing to undertake short visits of three to four days to Russia, particularly St. Petersburg and Moscow," she said.

She added that Russia was also attracting interest because of the Seventh Rugby Championship to be held in Moscow in June and the Winter Olympics in Sochi next February.

She said a hotel stay in Russia was an "affordable luxury," with prices averaging about 100 euros a day in off-season times.

Russia's huge size also fascinates many travelers, who frequently take the Trans-Siberian Railroad to enjoy the country's "enchanted landscape," she said. But, she admitted, many foreign tourists were deterred by visa requirements and the incumbent fee of 150 euros for one visit. "We can only plead with the authorities to relax the visa system to attract more tourists," she said.

Georgy Gavrillev, head of the National Tourist Co. Yakutia in the Sakha republic, was attending the ITB for the first time. "We are promoting various segments of tourism such as ecotourism, extreme tourism to places with extremely low temperatures, fishing/hunting tours and diamond tours," Gavrillev said.

Sakha gets the bulk of foreign tourism traffic from Germany, China, France and Italy.

"I had a good response from the travel and tourism travel trade at this show," he said. "With tour operators looking for new destinations, Yakutia is a unique region to visit. We have tour operators who offer tour packages costing 1,500 euros for a week's stay, excluding airfare."

Transaero, Russia's largest private airline, hawked its plans to expand and modernize its aircraft fleet. Konstantin Nesterenko, the airline's representative, said that Transaero's fleet of 94 aircraft would get at least three Airbus A380s in three to five years and touted the airline as the sixth-largest airline in Europe and 16th largest in the world.

"We made some good contacts with tour operators from France," he said. "We have been flying to Paris since last year. We also operate charter flights to Goa and Bangkok."

"Transaero is the only airline to operate from all three airports in Moscow," he added.

Alexander Martynov, head of the innovative tourism committee for tourism development of the St. Petersburg government, touted St. Petersburg as an "entirely different city" because of its European character. "This was the city that Peter the Great conceptualized in 1703," he said. "We had 2.7 million international tourists and 2.5 million Russian tourists visit St. Petersburg last year. Tourism accounts for 7 percent of the GDP."

Germans constitute the second-largest foreign group of tourists, after the Finns, to visit St. Petersburg, Martynov said, pointing out that nonstop flights offered by Air Berlin and German Wings had helped bolster tourism from Germany. He also described Brazil, India and China as "important sources of tourism" and said visitors were interested in Russian theater, classical music, the works of Tchaikovsky and Dostoevsky, and Russian cuisine.

But he agreed that there would be much greater traffic to St. Petersburg if the visa system

were relaxed.

Russia needs to iron out a long-term strategy to promote tourism, which has received little attention in the past, trade show exhibitors said. There was great interest on the part of the outside world after the collapse of the Soviet Union, but that interest has not been strategically tapped by Russian planners to translate into a sustained traffic.

Raimund Hosch, chief executive of Messe Berlin, which organizes the ITB show in Berlin, is a highly respected tourism expert. Hosch said in an interview that although Russia might not be the typical sun and sand destination, the country had some of the finest skiing resorts, which could attract good traffic for tourism.

"St. Petersburg, Moscow and other places are good destinations and should be publicized and promoted strategically. Russia is a fascinating destination and should be appropriately marketed," Hosch said.

Meanwhile, Intercontinental Hotels Group (IHG) confirmed at the ITB that it had signed a franchise development agreement with the regional hotel chain to develop 15 new Holiday Inn Express hotels in Russia by 2019. The 15 new hotels, the first of the Holiday Inn Express brand in Russia, will add a further 2,250 rooms to the group's present Russian development pipeline of over 1,700 rooms. The first two such hotels will be located at Chelyabinsk and Voronezh.

Describing the hotel agreement as a "breakthrough" for IHG in Russia, Angela Bray, IHG's CEO for Europe, said that this would mark the debut of the Holiday Inn Express in the country, enabling the group to double the size of its system as it stands in Russia today.

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