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Get a Jump on Summer: How to Rent a Dacha

A primer in summer vacation rentals

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Ilya Galakhov / Interpress / TASS

Now that the snow is (almost) gone from Moscow and (some) leaves are appearing on the trees, you may be thinking about summer. And instead of imposing on your dacha-owning friends, maybe this year you ought to rent one yourself? Why not? There is nothing better than a weekend out of the city, snoozing in the sun and firing up the grill.

First Things First

Before you even begin your search for a dacha, you have to decide a number of issues.

Are you or is someone in your family going to live there full-time during the summer, or is this just for weekends? Do you have a car? Are you planning to always drive to the dacha or

would you take a commuter train or bus? If you are a one-car family, will the car stay at the dacha or go into the city on most days?

Do you want to live in the heart of a community or away from other houses? Do you want to be near a swimming spot or woods? Do you want a wooded lot or open space? Do you want to grow flowers or vegetables? Do you want a lot of land or just a yard? Do you need it fenced in?

What level of comfort do you want? Do you want to get away from it all at a dacha with spotty or no electricity, no WiFi, outdoor plumbing, a well, and a "summer kitchen" (a separate structure with a stove and sometimes water)? Or do you want to rent a suburban house with all the modern amenities?

Once you've thought this through, you'll know what to look for, like a dacha that is walking distance from a train station and shops (if the family car will stay in the city), or reliable WiFi and satellite television (if you need to stay in touch with the world).

The next issue is which direction from Moscow. If you live in the northeast of Moscow, you don't want a dacha 30 kilometers out of the city to the southwest — that would add one to three hours driving time. Try drawing a "pizza slice" on a map with the center point at your apartment and the crust at your preferred maximum number of kilometers out of the city. That's your search zone.

And then — how much can you pay? The smallest house with no modern conveniences might cost 15,000 rubles a month (or less); a modest dacha with some or all conveniences averages 25-60,000 rubles a month; a modern suburban-type house starts at about 100,000 rubles a month and goes up from there. The season is three to five months (June through August or May through September), and sometimes there is a security deposit (one half to one month's rent). If you go through a realtor, you will have to pay a commission (from a third to one month's rent).

All in the Family

People are sentimental about their dachas, which for decades were the only approximation of private property and represent the joys and freedoms of summer. Many dacha owners prefer to rent to someone they know, even if it's a friend of a friend of a friend. In some cases, dachas are passed down, as it were, at companies. For example, someone might rent a dacha to whomever is the head of the company, or they rent their dacha to someone in a group of foreign friends.

Once you have a general idea of the region you want to be in, drive around and note any dacha communities you like. And then ask around. In fact, ask everyone you know, especially older folks. At the dacha villages you like, walk around and talk to the residents or local shop clerks, who tend to know everything about their customers (and be willing to share their information for a finder's fee).

The best person to help you is the dacha village's unofficial caretaker. There's always a man who lives nearby year-round and keeps an eye on dachas in return for a few hundred rubles a month. He knows which dachas are empty, who is having financial problems, who is going to Crimea for the summer, and so on. Offer a finder's fee and see what he turns up.

Search the Web

If you aren't looking for a high-end property, forget agents and instead search on one of Moscow's many real estate web sites. The best sites for dachas are cian.ru, www.gdeetotdom.ru, avito.ru/rossiya/nedvizhimost, domofond.ru, and www.irr.ru. The real estate forum on expat.ru has a few offerings (and is in English). Even if your Russian is poor, you can still figure out square footage, price and number of rooms. Ask a Russian friend to help with the calls and go check out the properties. Some bargaining is possible.

Do

- Inspect the property (which may look quite different from the online photos).
- Check everything and make sure you understand what will be included in the price and what you can do on the property (like garden or set up a kiddie pool).
- Drive at rush hour. A dacha that is 35 minutes away at midnight might be three hours away on a weekday morning.
- Test the cell phone reception, WiFi, and other amenities.
- Check cell phone provider maps to find the best coverage (or to determine the provider to buy your wireless modem from).
- Ask about the neighbors or talk to them; a group of rowdy party animals next door will ruin your country idyll.
- Sign a contract.

Don't

- Sign a contract or hand over money before you see the property.
- Pay the entire summer's rent ahead of time.

Postscript

If you're not quite ready to commit — start easy. Airbnb.ru has plenty of offers for short-term dacha rentals starting at about 4,000 rubles per night. Try a few places and then book a couple of weeks at your favorite spot. And while you're there, talk to your neighbors to set up a summer rental for next year.

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