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Moscow's Tour Guides Pray for Miracle as Summer Season Ebbs Away

With Russia's borders still shut, the country faces a year of lost tourist spending.

By Jake Cordell

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More than 32 million people visited Russia in 2019 — five million for tourism. **Sergei Kiselyov / Moskva News Agency**

As countries across Europe gradually ease their coronavirus restrictions, photos of near empty city centers usually awash with tourists at this time of year have flashed across social media.

While not as prone to summer influxes as the likes of Rome, Prague or Barcelona, Moscow is still being affected by the global travel crash. Russia's borders remain tightly closed to foreigners, and with no clues as to when the country will reopen, the capital's tour guides and travel agents are bracing for a full year of lost earnings.

"Since March, we are jobless," said Mariya Kotova, who has been a tour guide showing

foreign visitors around Moscow for the last 15 years.

"Nobody knows when the borders will be opened. There will be no season, no jobs and no tourists. The perspectives are really grim. If any tourists come it will be a gift — a miracle."

The United Nations' World Tourism Organization has said this year will be "by far the worst crisis" for global tourism since records began in the 1950s. It predicts a fall of between 60% and 80% in international arrivals, and a $1 trillion hit to global tourism spending — more than 10 times the impact of the 2008-2009 financial crisis.

Following the success of the 2018 World Cup, Russia has sought to boost its image as a must-visit tourist destination. The number of foreign tourists jumped 20% last year to pass five million, according to data from Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB), while the country brought in $11 billion in spending from foreign travellers, UN data shows.

Legislation is currently working its way through Russia's parliament that will expand the simplified e-visa regime already in place for St. Petersburg, Kaliningrad and the Far East, to the rest of the country from next year, cutting visa bureaucracy for citizens of 53 countries from 2021.

But to tour guides 2021 feels very far away, and caught between the cracks of Russia's economic response to the coronavirus and rigid labor rules, many of them say they are facing a critical situation right now.

Guides often work on a freelance basis, meaning they have been unable to benefit from Russia's strict labor rules which make it hard for firms to fire permanent employees even in financial crises. That status also complicates their access to government handouts designed to support people out of work as a result of the pandemic. Kotova says some of her colleagues are able to get support of 12,130 rubles per month ($172), but only after overcoming arduous bureaucracy. Faced with lengthy procedures and high failure rates many, including her, opted not even to apply.

Regulation is also creating problems for those in the industry looking for a new gig. Aleksey Cherkasov — another Moscow guide who suddenly found himself out of work — says he needs a new job "to survive," but pointed to strict licensing rules which means he can't just switch to working with domestic tourists.

Both he and Kotova are officially registered as "guide-interpreters" — guides who are licensed to conduct tours in a specific foreign language, such as English or Chinese. It means they are prohibited from working in Russian with Russian tourists.

While Russian-speaking guides "expect an increase in the local market, we, as guide-interpreters, have no jobs at all," Cherkasov said.

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Some guides are turning their hand to language tuition, although the economic climate is not on the side of job hunters. Despite tight labor laws, Russia's official unemployment rate has jumped 350% since the start of the crisis, Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin said Monday,

while economists say the hit to living standards could lead to almost a decade of lost income growth since the start of Russia's last economic crisis in 2014.

The desperate picture in the parts of Russia's tourism industry that rely on foreign visitors exposes the shortfalls of Russia's economic response to the coronavirus. For businesses, measures such as low-interest loans have been focused on the country's biggest employers, while for households, payouts have been dished out through the child welfare system, to reward families with young children.

Tour agents worry they could miss out on both important government support, and the most important period of the year, leaving them heading into winter in a precarious position.

"If you lose the summer, you lose the year," said Olga Sitnik, cofounder of private tour agency ExploRussia.

"During a usual year, you live from season to season. In spring, bookings start coming in for late summer, and you use this money for your current operations — to pay rents and salaries," she added. By the time customers started requesting refunds for their summer tours, such as trips on the trans-siberian railway, in March and April, she had already spent half of it.

"We're asking them not to cancel, but to postpone their trips. But many people are in the same position — they just need their money," Sitnik said.

Even if Russia were to open its borders later in the summer, it would be unlikely to lead to a sustained spike in tourist arrivals.

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"Russia has never been a last minute destination," Anton Solovev, co-founder of travel agent Artel Troika told The Moscow Times, estimating losses this summer to hit 90% of last year's takings.

Sitnik agreed. "It is usually a very long decision-making process for a person to come to Russia. You cannot make a decision like, 'let's go to Russia for the weekend.'"

Some agencies have tried to switch to online tourism to plug the hole in their finances and keep busy during the pandemic.

ExploRussia has started running online cooking classes from its staff's own kitchens, as well as guided tours of traditional Siberian houses and villages to connect with would-be travellers from Europe and the U.S. Another company — Moscow Private Tours, which usually runs 2,000 excursions a year — this week launched paid online guided tours through the center of Moscow.

But even this creativity can't replace stable income from well-heeled foreign tourists, its pioneers admit.

"The market is not really there. I'm not sure I can earn like that. I can have fun from it, but for

now it’s not something that will give us business,” said Sitnik.

For those without a financial safety net — around 60% of Russians, according to a survey conducted on the eve of the pandemic — a summer without physical tourists is a scary prospect. Kotova, who has had to borrow money to get by, says she has gone from living a comfortable middle class lifestyle to seeing her income wiped out.

“The situation is pretty critical. It’s basically like in the 1990s — your comfort zone has completely fallen apart and now you need to figure out how to survive.”

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