

# RUSSIA OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

## OVERVIEW

Tour Date: 1 May 2018 – 22 May 2018

Duration: 22 days

Tour Cost (\$AUD): \$18,250

Single Supplement (\$AUD): \$2,750

*Centred on Victory Day in Stalingrad, Russia off the Beaten Track traverses an entirely different path from the mainstream. This is a tour that is so diverse, it will astonish even the most experienced traveller. It has massive appeal for railway enthusiasts, those with more than a passing interest in history, people who have been to Russia before and those who want to discover this vast country for the first time.*

Using Russia's famed railway network, the tour explores pockets of the country that have been little visited by westerners. Indeed, its very intent is to connect the country's complex tapestry that extends from the Black Sea to the Baltic. The tour starts in Sochi on the so called 'Russian Riviera', where some of the most beautiful parts of the Caucasus overlook the azure waters of the Black Sea. From Sochi, the journey continues to Krasnodar, home of the Kuban Cossack Chorus, the most revered ensemble in Russia. After an astounding private performance, we arrive in Stalingrad for one of the major highlights of the tour – the Victory Day celebrations. From here we head to the mighty Ural Mountains and the city of Ekaterinburg. Sitting directly on the Asia/Europe border, this is where the last Tsar and his family were murdered in 1918. We visit the cellar where the family were held for nearly a year and where today, a church sits atop in memory of the brutal killings. From Europe's longest mountain chain, we move to the shoreline of the continent's longest river, The Volga. Visited only by Volga cruise ships for an hour, our tour will explore Kazan, the capital of the Republic of Tartarstan for three days! A remarkable city, Kazan is a kaleidoscope of great golden domes and impossibly beautiful minarets. We then take the train to the Baltic and Russia's European masterpiece, St Petersburg. The city has a dizzying array of attractions which include the Hermitage and the fantastic amber room of St Catherine's Palace. Newly opened and a fitting climax to the tour is a railway museum that houses an unbelievable set of Soviet steam engines that have been lovingly restored by volunteers. It seems almost beyond the realms of possibility, that a tour encompassing just one country can canvas such enormous diversity, yet *Russia off the Beaten Track* does just that. Join us on a remarkable train journey through the backroads of Russia, from the Black Sea to the Baltics!

Tour Fitness Level: Moderate

# RUSSIA OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

## TOUR ITINERARY

### 01/05/2018 Australia – Dubai

Depart from your chosen Australian airport on the Emirates flight to Dubai.

### 02/05/2018 Dubai – Moscow (D)

Depart Dubai Emirates EK133, 09.40

Arrive Moscow 13.50

Depart Moscow S7 1027, 17.00

Arrive Sochi 19.20

Sochi is the gateway to the 'Russian Riviera' and was host to the 2014 Winter Olympics. The biggest and busiest summer sea resort in Russia, it boasts an amazing mountainous coastline and is noted for its glorious sunsets. Many of the Russian political elite have homes here including the Russian Prime minister, Dmitry Medvedev, who hosted Bono of U2 at the resort in 2010. On arrival in Sochi we transfer to our hotel.

**Hyatt Regency Hotel**

Sochi

### 03/05/2018 Sochi (BLD)

We begin this morning with a spectacular drive along an 11km winding road to the top of Mount Akhun, a stand-alone mountain whose peak rises 663m above sea level. We climb the fantastic Romanesque observation tower for spectacular panoramic views of Sochi, the great expanse of the Black Sea, and the western slopes of the Caucasus Mountains. Here, amongst the towering peaks, sits Mt Elbrus, the highest mountain in Europe at 5,642m – 800m higher than Mont Blanc. We visit Stalin's summer house which was built in 1937, and later explore the amazing botanical gardens – the crown jewel in the crown of Sochi's attractions. Founded at the end of the 19th century and occupying an area of 60 hectares, these colourful gardens showcase a rich collection of nearly 2,000 species of tropical and subtropical plants, as well as a large number of evergreens.

### 04/05/2018 Sochi (BLD)

After breakfast we drive to Krasnaya Polyana, the amazing alpine mecca that hosted the 2014 Winter Olympics ski events. The journey takes us through simply spectacular scenery, with wonderful views of the azure blue waters of the Black Sea, majestic snow-capped mountains, alpine meadows, fast rivers, and beautiful waterfalls. Krasnaya Polyana – or Red Valley – is a favourite weekend retreat for many people, including a number of top Russian officials.

### 05/05/2018 Sochi (BLD)

Situated about an hour's drive from Sochi is the amazing Vorontsov cave system, a miracle of nature which scientists believe dates back to more than a billion years ago. The system comprises four major caves with a total length of 11,720 meters. The caves were formed millions of years ago as a result of many cataclysms, such as earthquakes and volcanic activity, and today there are still fossils of this ancient period found within. After our exploration of the Vorontsov cave system we take a walk on the world's longest pedestrian suspension bridge – the 425m SkyBridge – which spans a canyon more than 200m above ground level.

### 06/05/2018 Sochi – Krasnodar (BD)

This morning we transfer to Sochi rail station for the journey to Krasnodar.

Depart Sochi train N346, 09.45

Arrive Krasnodar 16.13

Few westerners would have ever visited the city of Krasnodar, yet it is home to the great ensemble of Russian Cossacks, the Kuban Cossack Chorus. The modern choir was created in 1811 by Kiril Rossinsky and Grigory Grechinsky and, during its first century, regularly gave public concerts which included classical works as well as folk songs. During the post-USSR years, the Chorus revived and channelled its energy into a rebirth of Cossack traditions and local customs. Today, despite a turbulent Soviet past, the Chorus has grown to become the leading concert ensemble in Russia and regularly tours abroad to such places as China, Japan, Australia and Western Europe. Tonight we experience the magnificent spectacle of this unique choir in their home of Krasnodar.

Hilton Garden Inn

Krasnodar

07/05/2018 Krasnodar – Volgograd (BL)

This morning we take a walking tour of Krasnodar and after lunch we transfer to the rail station for the journey to Volgograd, formerly Stalingrad.

Depart Krasnodar train N462, 16.20

08/05/2018 Volgograd (LD)

Arrive Volgograd 08.07

The highest point of Volgograd is Mamayev Kurgan which dominates the city from its central location. Here, during the historic Battle of Stalingrad, Russian soldiers defended the city fanatically in what was the most significant land battle in human history and a turning point in WWII. Today the hill is a memorial complex whose key element is the monumental statue – ‘The Motherland Calls!’ – which is well-known all over the world and symbolises the heroism and patriotism of the Soviet nation and pays tribute to those who died. The statue’s total height is 85 meters with a weight of 8,000 tons: the sword alone is 33 metres and weighs 14 tons. On arrival in Volgograd we visit this most iconic site and enjoy spectacular views of the city below.

Volgograd Hotel

Volgograd

09/05/2018 Volgograd (BLD)

Today is a particularly special day as we witness the remarkable Victory Day parade in Volgograd – a truly overwhelming emotional experience. The 9<sup>th</sup> of May marks the Soviet Union's victory over Nazi Germany in the Second World War, which is also referred to as the Great Patriotic War. The surrender document was signed in Berlin on 8 May 1945, and the Soviet government announced the victory early on the following day. This national holiday – which became a non-labour day only in 1965 – commemorates the 28 million children, parents, spouses and friends killed in the Soviet Union during the war. The battle of Stalingrad is considered by historians to be the most brutal turning point of war, and its importance in the Russian psyche cannot be overestimated.

10/05/2018 Volgograd – Ekaterinburg (BL)

After breakfast we visit the extraordinary Battle of Stalingrad museum complex, which features thousands of exhibits and poignant displays that evoke the atmosphere of the famous battle and its aftermath. Chief among the exhibits is the astonishing 360-degree Battle of Stalingrad Panorama – a gigantic circular painting that depicts the battle and gives you the sense of being right there in the thick of it. Today it is the largest canvas in Russia with a painting surface area of 2,000 square

metres. After lunch we transfer to the railway station for the two-night journey to Ekaterinburg.

Depart Volgograd train 045, 15.55

11/05/2018 On board train

The train heads west towards the Ural Mountains and the European/Asian frontier, passing through picturesque scenery dotted with typical Russian villages and beautifully decorated dachas.

12/05/2018 Ekaterinburg (BLD)

Arrive Ekaterinburg 06.32

Ekaterinburg is the fourth largest city in Russia, beautifully situated on the eastern side of the Ural Mountains. Its geographical location is unique in that it lies on the border of Europe and Asia. On arrival, we transfer to our hotel for breakfast before heading out to this continental frontier, 40kms from the city. Here we visit the obelisk which marks the spot where Europe and Asia meet, and you have a unique opportunity to take photographs with one foot in each continent! Later we visit one of Russia's most sacred sites – the place where Tsar Nicholas, his wife, and their children were executed on 17 July 1918, after spending almost a year imprisoned by the Bolsheviks. The home which stood on the site was demolished in 1977, but the basement of the structure remained. In 2000 approval was given to erect a church on the spot of the murders, and construction was completed in 2003, with the basement from the original home becoming a part of the present structure.

Novotel

Ekaterinburg

13/05/2018 Ekaterinburg (BLD)

After breakfast we explore one of the largest military museums of Russia – the Ural Military Glory. This museum contains an enormous collection of tanks, armoured vehicles, artillery pieces, rocket launchers, boats, war planes and other weaponry. A large number of museum objects were used during the Second World War including the huge collection of Soviet cars and motorbikes. After lunch, we visit the State Stone Cutting and Jewellers Art History Museum which was founded in 1992, and contains incredible mineralogical riches of the Ural Mountains. The earliest stone cutting tools in the museum date back to the 18th century and multiple halls showcase the modern art of stone cutting, which continues to preserve the traditions of the past. After dinner we transfer to the train station for our overnight journey to Kazan.

Depart Ekaterinburg train N335, 22.44

14/05/2018 Kazan (LD)

Arrive Kazan 11.45

Kazan is quite simply the 'Istanbul on the Volga'. The ancient capital of the Tatarstan Republic is an astonishing kaleidoscope of great golden domes and exquisite tiled mosques and minarets. The people here are Volga Tartars who possess a strong sense of nationalism yet live in perfect harmony with their Slavic Christian neighbours. This afternoon we embark on a tour of this fascinating city.

Double Tree by Hilton Hotel

Kazan

15/05/2018 Kazan (BLD)

Today we walk to the nearby Kazan Kremlin in the centre of the city on a high peninsula that juts out into the Kazanka and Volga Rivers. A fortress has been in this location since ancient times but the present Kremlin was built on the orders of Ivan the Terrible after his conquest of Kazan in 1552. Today the Kremlin is the heart of

Kazan and its most famous sight, which was inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage list in 2000. Continuing our exploration of the city, we visit the impressive Kul-Sharif Mosque, one of the largest mosques in Europe, which was completed in 2005. The original mosque which stood here was destroyed by Ivan the Terrible during the Russian conquest of Kazan in 1552, and there is a theory that the design of this original mosque may have inspired the design of St Basil's in Moscow which was built to commemorate the Russian victory. The mosque is named after Kul-Sharif, a religious leader who was killed whilst defending the city from the Russians.

#### 16/05/2018 Kazan (BLD)

Today we head down the Volga River to the island of Sviyazhsk, which is located in the picturesque estuary of the Sviyaga River. The cultural gem of the Republic of Tatarstan, the island has attracted people to its shores since ancient times. The medieval fortress, built during the reign of Ivan the Terrible, served as a military outpost in the Volga region and a place of rest and preparation of military units to march on the impregnable fortress of Kazan. In 1957 the entire area around Sviyazhsk was flooded, wiping out three-quarters of the town, and leaving only the historic downtown area above water: this area was declared as a monument of Russian history and culture in 1960.

#### 17/05/2018 Kazan – St Petersburg (BL)

After lunch, we board our train for the 1,202km journey to the Baltic Sea. Within an hour of leaving Kazan we cross the Volga and soon after we pass through some beautiful old railway stations as we continue to head north.

Depart Kazan train N133, 13.10

#### 18/05/2018 St Petersburg (LD)

Arrive St Petersburg 11.15

Formerly known as Petrograd and Leningrad, this most European of Russian cities is the country's intellectual and cultural heart. Perched on the banks of the Neva River, it is often referred to as the 'Venice of the North' because of its glorious canal system. After lunch we visit the newly opened Railway museum. Hidden behind the dilapidated Varshavsky station, is one of Russia's finest collections of Soviet steam trains, all of which have been lovingly restored by volunteers. A stroll along these platforms is like stepping through the pages of Soviet history. Here we see the L-2298 locomotive with Lenin and Stalin emblazoned on its nose, and the SO-2413 bearing the slogan 'Onwards towards Communism!' – both of which, symbolically perhaps, have come to their final halt.

Angleterre Hotel

St Petersburg

#### 19/05/2018 St Petersburg (BLD)

This morning we visit the Winter Palace. Completed in 1762, the palace was home to the tsars until the Russian Revolution in 1917. It now houses the Hermitage Museum, arguably the world's greatest art collection. The afternoon is at leisure, providing the option of spending more time in the Hermitage, or perhaps taking a stroll down the city's great boulevard, Nevsky Prospekt.

#### 20/05/2018 St Petersburg (BLD)

Today we travel out of St Petersburg to the town of Pushkin where we visit the beautiful palace of Catherine the Great. We explore the palace interior, including the centrepiece, the magnificent Amber Room. This world-famous chamber, which was looted by the Nazis during World War II and taken to Germany for reconstruction, was considered to be an "Eighth Wonder of the World". Its whereabouts has never been discovered, and in 2003, after decades of work by Russian craftsmen and

donations from Germany, a reconstruction of the Amber Room was opened to the public. It is a faithful copy of the original and is simply breathtaking.

21/05/2018 St Petersburg – Dubai (B)

Early this morning we transfer to the airport for our flight home via Dubai.

Depart St Petersburg Emirates, EK 176, 17.00

Arrive Dubai 23.59

22/05/2018 Dubai – Australia

Connect with the flight to your chosen Australian city.