



*Privyet!* That's the way my friends and I say hi here in Russia. My name is Irina, and I can't wait to tell you about my country.

Russia is a huge nation in area — the largest in the world. It stretches so far from west to east that it crosses 11 time zones. When it is noon in far western Russia, it is 11 p.m. in far eastern Russia. Talk about jet lag when you travel!

Most people live on the western side of Russia. Moscow, the nation's capital, is located there. More than 10 million people live in Moscow. The city is one of the most expensive places in the world to live, so having a large home and a big yard is not possible for most people. Instead, we live in apartments. I am fortunate because my parents, two brothers, and I have an apartment to ourselves. Many people share space with another family just to pay the rent.

The eastern part of Russia is called Siberia. Some people think of Siberia as an enormous wilderness. While it's true that this area has lots of open space, it also has many large cities. My favorite place in Siberia is Lake Baikal, the largest freshwater lake in the world. I love to go there to swim in the brilliant blue water on a hot summer day!

Someone once asked me to describe a person from Russia, but that is not possible. Russia has more than 100 people groups, and each one has its own way of life. In western Russia, people live much as they do in other European countries. In eastern Russia, people are influenced by Asian cultures. In far northern Russia, some people survive by herding reindeer! But wherever you go, one thing remains the same: Russia is a fascinating place filled with sights, sounds, and people you won't soon forget.



## The Country

- ♥ Russia has a land area of 6.6 million square miles, making it nearly twice the size of the United States. No other country has a larger area.
- ♥ Stretching 5,400 miles from west to east, Russia extends across part of Europe and all of Asia.
- ♥ Russia shares its borders with 14 other nations: Azerbaijan, Belarus, China, Estonia, Finland, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Mongolia, North Korea, Norway, Poland, and Ukraine. Only China has that many neighbors.
- ♥ Lake Baikal is the world's largest lake. At more than a mile deep, it contains about one-fifth of the world's fresh water.
- ♥ The Ural Mountains stretch down the length of Russia, creating the dividing line between the continents of Europe and Asia. Eastern Russia is often referred to as Siberia.
- ♥ Russia's climate varies from hot and dry to cold and damp, depending on the location. Some parts of the southern Russia are dry and desertlike; in far northern Russia temperatures rarely rise above freezing. Oymyakon, Russia, holds the record for the coldest recorded temperature — 90 degrees below zero!
- ♥ Mount Elbrus, located in the Caucasus Mountains of southern Russia, is the tallest mountain in Europe.
- ♥ Russia's currency is the ruble. About 32 rubles equal one U.S. dollar.
- ♥ Russia is home to several cold-weather animals, including polar bears, walruses, reindeer, and Siberian tigers. The brown bear, Russia's national animal, can grow up to nine feet and weigh 800 pounds.
- ♥ In 1917, Russia became a communist nation. In 1922 Russia and several other nations were joined to become the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). In 1989 these nations began declaring their independence, and the USSR officially ended in 1991.
- ♥ Russia's flag consists of three horizontal stripes — white at the top, blue in the center, and red at the bottom.

## The People

- ♥ Russia's population is about 139 million — not quite half the size of the United States.
- ♥ The first settlers in Russia were called Rus, which is where the nation gets its name.
- ♥ The largest minority group in Russia today is the Tatars, who make up about 4 percent of the population.
- ♥ Russian is the official language, but many people groups also speak their own traditional languages.
- ♥ The capital and largest city is Moscow. St. Basil's Cathedral, with its colorful onion-shaped domes on the city's Red Square, is the nation's most famous landmark.
- ♥ The main religion is Russian Orthodox. About 15 percent of the population is Muslim. Under the years of communism, churches were closed and people were forbidden to worship together. As a result, most people have never heard the gospel.
- ♥ Most people in Russia's cities live in enormous apartment complexes. Some people also have small country cabins, called *dachas*, where they go in the summer. They often plant gardens at the *dachas* to help provide food for their families.
- ♥ Russian is written in Cyrillic, an alphabet with 33 letters instead of the 26 used in the English alphabet.
- ♥ Soccer is Russia's most popular sport. The country is also known for its emphasis on hockey, gymnastics, and ballet. Cross-country skiing and sledding are popular in the snowy regions.
- ♥ Russians have a hearty diet, with lots of bread and potatoes. Some favorite foods are *blinis* (thin pancakes stuffed with jam or meat), *pierogi* (meat or vegetable dumplings), *stroganoff* (creamy beef stew), and *borscht* (beet soup).
- ♥ Sochi, a city in southwest Russia, will host the 2014 Winter Olympics.

## Did you know?

- ♥ The easternmost edge of Russia is only about 49 miles from Alaska.
- ♥ Nerpa, the only species of freshwater seal, lives nowhere but Lake Baikal.
- ♥ The Trans-Siberian Railway is the longest railroad system in the world. Running from St. Petersburg in the west to Vladivostok in the east, it extends about 6,700 miles. Traveling nonstop, it would take a passenger more than a week to make this long journey.
- ♥ One large city in western Russia has had many name changes. Originally called St. Petersburg, its name was changed to Petrograd during World War I. When communism took hold of the country, the name was changed again to Leningrad in honor of the nation's leader, Vladimir Lenin. After communism fell, the name was changed back to St. Petersburg.
- ♥ Chess is a popular pastime in Russia. Children begin learning how to play the game in first grade because people believe it stimulates mental activity.
- ♥ Traditionally, Russians greet guests to their home by presenting them with a loaf of bread and a dish of salt on a tray covered with an embroidered cloth. The visitors are expected to break off a chunk of bread, dip it in the salt, and eat it.
- ♥ Murmansk, Russia, is the largest city in the world located north of the Arctic Circle.
- ♥ The Russian diet is not nearly as spicy as other cultures, but some foods eaten in certain regions are unusual. In the cold, snowy arctic, some people eat dried elk noses and lips or chew on reindeer cartilage. In Tuva, a region of Russia near Mongolia, people drink *khoitpak* — fermented sour milk. The eggs of the sturgeon fish, called caviar, are a very expensive delicacy savored around the world. In some areas sturgeon are almost extinct because of people's demand for caviar.
- ♥ Tea is a popular drink wherever you go in Russia. Often it is sweetened with jam, but in some areas people add milk or butter to it.

## The Assemblies of God in Russia

Missionaries shared the gospel in Russia in the 1920s but had to leave when the communist government came to power. For the next 70 years no missionaries could live there, believers were not allowed to meet openly, and gospel literature was banned. When the Soviet Union crumbled, missionary Bob Mackish was the first Assemblies of God missionary to live in the newly independent Russia. The church today is growing, and believers have set a goal to share the gospel in every city in the nation in the next seven years.

## Christmas in Russia

Christmas is celebrated in Russia on January 7 — the date established by the Russian Orthodox Church. The traditional custom is to fast on Christmas Eve until the first star appears in the night sky, symbolizing the star that shone on the first Christmas night. Families then eat a special meal that contains no meat or dairy products. Later they go to a church service that lasts until after midnight. The next day families attend church again before going to visit extended families and sharing a special meal. Gifts are exchanged for those who can afford them. Children sometimes go caroling door to door. A common Christmas greeting is “*S Rozdestvom Khristovym* (srod-zshest-vum Kirst-o-vum),” which means “with the birth of Christ.”

Communism robbed the nation of celebrating Christmas, and today most people do not know what the holiday means. Instead, they celebrate New Year's Day with the Festival of Winter. At that time children hope Grandfather Frost and his granddaughter, Snow Maiden, will stop by to give them gifts.



## A Look at Language

Russian is written in the Cyrillic alphabet and is difficult to learn. Here are some common words:

### English

Good morning  
Goodbye  
Thank you  
Yes  
No  
Please  
One  
Two  
Three  
Four  
Five  
Six  
Seven  
Eight  
Nine  
Ten

### Mandarin

do-bra-ye u-tra  
da-svi-da-nya  
spa-si-ba  
da  
nyet  
pa-zhal-sta  
a-din  
dva  
tri  
chi-tih-ri  
pyat  
shest  
syem  
vo-sim  
dye-vyat  
dye-syat

## Foods From Russia

During the holiday season, have a Christmas tea party and serve these Russian treats.

### Traditional Russian Tea

You will need:

- ♥ 1 and one-half cups white sugar
- ♥ Grated rind of one medium orange
- ♥ 5 cups water
- ♥ 8 whole cloves
- ♥ 8 cups boiling water
- ♥ 1 and one-half tablespoons loose black tea leaves
- ♥ Juice from 1 lemon
- ♥ Juice from 4 oranges

What to do:

1. Combine first four ingredients in a saucepan and heat to boiling.
2. Let mixture boil 5 minutes, then strain and let cool.

3. In a larger pot, bring 8 cups water to a boil.
4. Remove from heat, add tea leaves and let steep for 3 to 4 minutes. Drain.
5. (Pour sugar mixture into strained tea and add the fruit juices.
6. Keep warm until serving but do not let tea boil.

### Russian Tea Cakes

You will need:

- ♥ 1 cup softened butter
- ♥ One-half cup powdered sugar plus extra for dusting
- ♥ 2 and one-fourth cups sifted flour
- ♥ 1 teaspoon vanilla
- ♥ Three-fourths cup finely chopped walnuts or pecans, optional

What to do:

1. Preheat oven to 325 degrees.
2. In a mixing bowl, cream butter and powdered sugar until light and fluffy.
3. Stir in flour and vanilla.
4. Roll into 1-inch balls and place on ungreased baking sheet.
5. Bake 12 to 14 minutes or until lightly browned. Do not overbake.
6. While tea cakes are still warm, roll in extra powdered sugar, and nuts if desired.

Makes about three dozen cookies.



# Things to do in

## Boaire

You know this popular Russian children's game as Red Rover.

1. Divide your friends into two teams.
2. Standing in two straight lines facing each other, each team links hands.
3. The first team yells across to the second team to send a certain player over to its side.
4. The requested player responds by running to the other team and trying to break through the line. If she succeeds, she gets to choose a player to go back to her team. If she fails, she must stay with the team that requested her.

(NOTE: Caraway is a variation of *Boaire*. In this game all the children stand in a circle and link hands. One girl stands in the center of the circle. As the girls sing and move about, the girl in the center tries to break out of the circle. If she succeeds, she joins the circle and another girl stands in the center.)

## Soap Sculpting

During Russia's bitter winter, some people sculpt intricate ice figures. You can do something similar to make a unique Christmas decoration.

You will need:

- ♥ Large bar of soft soap, such as Ivory
- ♥ Craft stick
- ♥ Dull butter knife

What to do:

1. Unwrap the soap and leave it out overnight to dry.
2. Use the craft stick to outline a simple shape — such as a star, Christmas tree, or an angel — in the soap. (If you wish, sketch the shape on paper, cut it out, then lay the pattern on the soap and trace around it with the craft stick.)

3. With the dull knife, carefully begin scraping away the soap outside the sketched line. You can scrape away only about an inch of soap from the area outside the outline to form a relief shape, or you can scrape away all the outer soap, leaving only the shape. (NOTE: Make sure your hands are dry so the soap won't get slippery.)
4. Use the sculpting tools to add as many details to the shape as you like.

## Russian Wisdom

Here are some Russian proverbs. What do you think they mean?

1. All cats are gray at night.
2. Any fish is good if it is on the hook.
3. As you cooked the porridge, so must you eat it.
4. You cannot break through a wall with your forehead.
5. A fly will not get into a closed mouth.

Russia