

The Vibrant Culture & Ecology of Northern Russia

August 21–September 2, 2011

If you are ready to meet the real Russia and make authentic connections with one of Europe’s true centers of culture, art, and sustainability, this low-impact tour of Saint Petersburg and the Lake Ladoga region of Northern Russia is for you. Explore the culture, history, and ecology of the region through its vibrant landscapes and inhabitants. Discover places few travelers ever reach.



Day 1: Saint Petersburg: “The Venice of the North”

The moment you arrive in Saint Petersburg, you’ll be swept away by the magically overlapping centuries in this Venice of the North. The modern cultural capital and the former seat of the Russian Empire will display its renowned elegance. We’ll take a leisurely evening walk downtown and through the historic Summer Gardens by the Summer Palace of Peter the Great. Prepare to be awed by the medieval Russian architecture and the stunning wall and ceiling mosaics at the Cathedral of the Resurrection (“Our Savior on the Spilled Blood”).

Day 2: State Hermitage Art Museum: Repository of World Culture

Stroll through the streets of Saint Petersburg and encounter its dramatic setting. Spend part of the day basking in the beauty of the State Hermitage, one of the largest museums of art and culture, founded in 1764 by Catherine the Great. With more than three million works of art and artifacts housed in the Winter Palace and other historic buildings, you’ll soon discover why the Hermitage boasts the world’s most extensive collection of masterpiece paintings. Get to know your fellow travelers over an ethnic meal in a very Russian atmosphere.

Day 3: Pushkin, the “Royal Village” & Pavlovsk

Our next destination is the palaces and parks of the historic town of Pushkin, founded in the eighteenth century as a summer residence for the Tsars. Visiting the Catherine Palace, the Rococo-style summer home of Catherine I, you’ll encounter the legendary Amber Room with wall-sized panels of meticulously carved amber. Just as fascinating is the room’s history, its disappearance during World War II, and the later search for its recovery. We’ll take in the charming formal gardens of Pavlovsk, the imperial estate.

Day 4: Peterhof, the “Russian Versailles”

Peter the Great single-handedly designed our next stop, the Peterhof (Peter’s Court). This former official residence of the royal family remains one of the most cherished sites of the region. Spend the morning exploring the palace ensemble and stunning cliff-top gardens overlooking the Gulf of Finland. Enjoy the beautiful Lower Park with 150 fountains and 4 waterfalls, including the Great Cascade at the entrance to the Great Imperial Palace. Return to Saint Petersburg for more exploration.

Day 5: Staraya Ladoga, an Ancient Village

As difficult as it will be to leave Saint Petersburg—even for a few days—there’s more beauty to explore as we travel to Staraya Ladoga (Old Ladoga), Russia’s ancient capital and twelfth-century fortress. At this prosperous eighth- and ninth-century trading center, located at the confluence of the Yelena and Volkhov rivers, you’ll feel immersed in the art and living culture of the region. After viewing Viking burial grounds along the Volkhov River, we’ll enjoy a regional dining experience and overnight in the ancient village.

Day 6: Grishino Ecological Village, The Art of Harmonious Living: “Chop Wood, Carry Water”

Experience firsthand true Russian dedication to balanced living as we arrive at the Grishino Ecological Village. We’ll join hands and hearts with this true back-to-the-earth community through learning their household customs. We’ll stay in authentic wooden guesthouses. You will have plenty of time to connect with the village residents, to discover the landscape with a restorative hike in the surrounding forest, and to immerse yourself in the traditional Russian ritual of the “black” banya (sauna).

Bridging cultures through ecological adventure

Day 7: Vach Lake: Healing Water

After our forest adventure, we'll drive to the beautiful respite of Vach-ozero (Vach Lake). En route, we'll stop at a nearby traditional village to explore a wooden church built in 1696. We'll have a lakeside picnic lunch at Vach Lake and discover an ancient chapel in the forest. For a refreshing break, you can choose to swim in the transparent waters, collect wild berries and mushrooms in the forest, or visit the lush and picturesque islands by boat.

Day 8: An Eco-Pilgrimage

The Grishino villagers open their traditional homes to us for an eco-pilgrimage. The residents will share their folk culture and art through songs and dances, woodcraft, ceramics and village architecture. Following an "eco-pathway" through lush fields and pristine forests to ancient sacred sites, we will stop to smell the wildflowers and pick herbs. We'll arrive at a very pure spring along the Vazhinka River then cross the river to Bolshoy Kamien (Big Rock).

Day 9: Karelia: Forests of Silver Birch & Fir

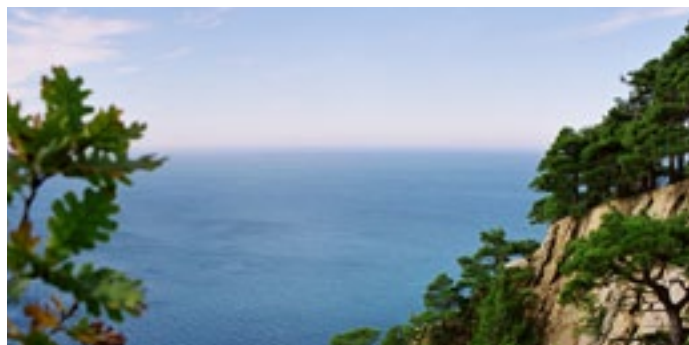
The inspiring Karelia region was immortalized in Finnish composer Jean Sibelius's celebrated "Karelia Suite." As we travel to Sortavala, the main city at the northern tip of Lake Ladoga, you'll understand his inspiration. En route, we visit the fifteenth-century Alexandro-Svirskiy Russian Orthodox Monastery situated in the forest. Step back into time as you view the majestic medieval clock tower of the Trinity Cloister. Traverse the most beautiful sites around Lake Ladoga, Europe's largest freshwater lake, and enjoy a picnic on the Ladoga shore.

Day 10: Nevo-Ecoville: Find Meaning in Nature

As our journey in nature continues, we visit Nevo-Ecoville, the Center for Ecological Initiatives, another rich sustainable community of the region. Discover how this community's wisdom and meaning manifests in a life lived in harmony with the earth. Visit the welcoming ecovillagers, take part in the traditional Russian banya, and delve into the surrounding wilderness.

Day 11: Valaam Archipelago

We'll take a motorboat across Lake Ladoga to the Valaam archipelago to visit the Valaam Monastery, a spiritual center of Russian Orthodoxy. The lush land, ringed by iron-rich red rocks, is covered in pine and more than 480 species of plants, some of which are lovingly tended to by the monks. We visit the magnificent Spaso-Preobrazhensky Cathedral (Church of the Transfiguration) and some of the small chapels set in forests of Siberian stone pine, English oak, and rough-bark poplar.



Day 12: We Have Come Full Circle

In the morning, we return to where this rich and magical journey started, Saint Petersburg. We'll arrive with plenty of time to take in this beautiful city one last time (for now!). Optional: Enjoy a cultural performance at a historic theatre.

Day 13: Reflect & Return

Depart Saint Petersburg. It's time to reflect on our adventure and integrate the profound experiences we have shared.

Tour Price: \$3,250.00

The price includes:

- 12 days of Russian adventure (Sunday through Friday).
- Local transportation and accommodations.
- All meals, including local and regional restaurants and with Russian families. Please note: meals in the ecovillages are vegetarian.
- Local tours by foot, car, and boat.
- Non-resident admission to museums, galleries, and palaces.
- Cultural performances.
- Travel insurance.
- A coffee-table book with professional photographs of our voyage together.

Airfare and visa additional. We make all travel arrangements. Nonrefundable \$300 deposit required at the time of registration. Full amount due June 21, 2011. Tour itinerary subject to change. For example, on day 4, we might visit the Peter and Paul Fortress, Saint Petersburg's original citadel, and Saint Isaac's Cathedral, the grande dame of basilicas.

We are dedicated to providing travelers with an amazing journey to the rich cultural centers and ecovillages of Northern Russia. Engage with the real heart of this little-discovered part of the world. Join us on a tour and see the world and yourself with new eyes!

Call us at 503.877.4858 or email us at tours@russianvisions.org.