Recent Embassy Notices for American Citizens
International Financial Scams

July 23, 2012

COUNTRY DESCRIPTION: Russia is a vast and diverse nation that continues to evolve politically, economically, and socially. Most U.S. citizens find their stay in Russia both exciting and rewarding, but travel and living conditions in Russia contrast sharply with those in the United States. Major urban centers show tremendous differences in economic development compared to rural areas. While good tourist facilities exist in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and some other large cities, they are not developed in most of Russia, and some of the goods and services taken for granted in other countries are not yet available. Russian visa requirements are complex, and U.S. citizens must take care that they do not unintentionally violate entry and exit regulations. Travel to the North Caucasus region of Russia is dangerous; the Department of State recommends U.S. citizens not travel to Chechnya and the rest of the North Caucasus region, including Mt. Elbrus. Read the Department of State’s Background Notes on Russia for additional information.

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SMART TRAVELLER ENROLLMENT PROGRAM (STEP)/ EMBASSY LOCATION: If you are going to live in or visit the Russian Federation, please take the time to tell our Embassy about your trip. If you enroll, we can keep you up to date with important safety and security announcements. It will also help your friends and family get in touch with you in an emergency. Here’s the link to the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program.
Local embassy information is available below and at the Department of State’s list of embassies and consulates.

The U.S. Embassy is located in Moscow U.S. Embassy Moscow
Novinskiy Bulvar 21, Moscow
American Citizen Services Unit Tel: (7) (495) 728-5577
American Citizen Services Fax: (7) (495) 728-5084
After-hours emergency: (7) (495) 728-5000
E-mail: moscowwarden@state.gov

U.S. Consulates General are located in:

**St. Petersburg**
15 Ulitsa Furshtadtskaya, St. Petersburg 191028
Tel: (7) (812) 331-2600
Fax: (7) (812) 331-2646
After-hours emergencies: (7) (812) 331-2600
Email: StPetersburgACS@state.gov

**Vladivostok**
32 Ulitsa Pushkinskaya, Vladivostok 690001
Tel: (7) (4232) 30-00-70
Fax: (7) (4232) 30-00-91
After-hours emergencies: (7) (4232) 71 00 67
Email: vladcons@state.gov

**Yekaterinburg**
Ulitsa Gogolya 15a, 4th floor, Yekaterinburg 620151
Tel: (7) (343)379-3001
Fax: (7) (343) 379-4515
After-hours emergencies: (7) 8 902 84 16653
Email: consulyekat@state.gov

**ENTRY / EXIT REQUIREMENTS FOR U.S. CITIZENS:** The Russian government maintains a restrictive and complicated visa regime for foreigners who visit, transit, or reside in the Russian Federation. A U.S. citizen who does not comply with Russian immigration laws can be subject to arrest, fines, and/or deportation. **Russian authorities will not allow U.S. citizens to depart the country if their visa has expired.** Travelers must wait until a new visa is approved, which may take up to 20 days. Please verify the expiration date of your Russian visa, and leave Russia before your visa expires!

**Sponsorship:** Under Russian law, every foreign traveler must have a Russian-based sponsor, which could be a hotel, tour company, relative, employer, university, etc. Even if you obtained your visa through a travel agency in the United States, there is still a Russian legal entity whose name is indicated on your visa and who is considered to be your legal sponsor. In many cases, organizations with sponsorship ability are being paid informally by travel agents to act as a legal sponsor, in violation of Russian law. Please
ensure the name of the sponsor indicated on your visa corresponds with the organization you intend to visit, or those who are arranging your travel in Russia. If the sponsor named on your visa is not the person or entity you intend to visit, you may encounter problems with Russian immigration authorities. If you intend to work for a non-government organization (NGO) or engage in religious work, be sure to apply for the specific type of visa required by Russian law (usually a humanitarian visa). Russian law requires that your sponsor apply on your behalf for replacement, extension, or changes to a Russian visa. You should ensure that you have contact information for your visa sponsor prior to arrival in Russia, as the sponsor's assistance will be essential to resolve any visa problems.

Entry Visas: To enter Russia for any purpose other than short transit by air, or some cruise ship and ferry passengers, (see below), you must possess a valid U.S. passport and a visa issued by a Russian embassy or consulate. You cannot obtain a visa upon arrival, so you must apply for your visa well in advance. U.S. citizens who apply for Russian visas in third countries where they do not have permission to stay for more than 90 days may face considerable delays in visa processing. If you arrive in Russia without an entry visa you will not be permitted to enter the country, and could face immediate return to the point of embarkation at your own expense.

A Russian entry/exit visa has two dates written in the European style (day/month/year) as opposed to the U.S. style (month/day/year). The first date indicates the earliest date a traveler may enter Russia; the second date indicates the date by which a traveler must leave Russia. A Russian visa is only valid for those exact dates and cannot be extended after the traveler has arrived in the country, except in the case of a medical emergency.

Russian visas are usually granted only for the specific dates mentioned in the invitation letter provided by the sponsor. U.S. citizens sometimes receive visas valid for periods as short as two days. You may wish to have someone who reads Russian check the visa before departing the United States. Please ensure that your visa reflects your intended activities in Russia (e.g., tourism, study, business, etc.) If you are denied a visa, you may seek clarification from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 32/34 Smolenskaya-Sennaya Pl., Moscow, Russia, 119200, ministry@mid.ru.

Limitations on Length of Stay: Most foreigners may remain in the Russian Federation for only 90 days in a 180-day period. This provision applies to business, tourist, humanitarian, and cultural visas, among other categories, and are typically noted on the Russian visa. Those whose visas permit employment or study are not normally subject to this rule. If you will remain in Russia for more than 90 days, consult your visa sponsor to ensure that this is not a violation of visa regulations. Exit Visas: You need a valid visa to depart Russia. If you overstay your visa validity by less than three days you may be granted an exit visa at the airport (at the discretion of the Russian Consular Officer). If you overstay your visa by more than three days, you will be prevented from leaving until your sponsor intervenes and requests a visa extension on your behalf. Russian authorities may take up to 20 calendar days to authorize an exit visa, during which time you will be stranded in Russia at your own expense. You may also have difficulty checking into a hotel, hostel, or other lodging establishment with an expired Russian visa. Again, be sure to leave Russia before your visa expires. If you lose your U.S. passport and Russian
visa by accident or theft, you must immediately replace your passport at the U.S. Embassy Moscow or one of the Consulates General. You must then enlist the assistance of your visa sponsor to obtain a new visa in order to depart the country. It is helpful to make a photocopy of your visa in the event of loss, but a copy is not sufficient to permit departure.

Visas for students and English teachers sometimes allow only one entry. In these cases, the sponsoring school is responsible for registering the visa and migration card and obtaining an exit visa. Obtaining an exit visa can take up to 20 calendar days, so students and teachers need to plan accordingly. Please see the section below regarding Teaching in Russia.

**Migration Cards:** U.S. citizens entering Russia must carry a migration card while in Russia. These two-part cards have traditionally been provided to foreign passengers before landing in Russia, to be filled out by the traveler. Upon arrival, Russian immigration authorities retain one of the identical halves, and the other half is carried in your passport for the duration of your stay in Russia. In 2011, Russian authorities launched a new program in Moscow's Vnukovo and Domodedevo Airports, by which migration cards are electronically completed and provided by immigration officials. If you receive an electronic card, continue to carry your migration cards in your U.S. passport and submit it to immigration authorities upon leaving; however, the loss of an electronic card does not present difficulties to departure, as the loss of a hand-completed form may. While only these two airports are currently issuing electronic migration cards, the Russian Federal Migration Service plans to expand their use to other international airports in the future.

**Visa Registration:** If you intend to spend more than seven days in Russia, you must register your visa and migration card through your sponsor. If staying at a hotel, the hotel reception should register your visa and migration card on the first day of your stay. If you choose not to register a stay of less than seven days, we advise you to keep copies of tickets, hotel bills, or itineraries in order to prove compliance with the law.

Russian police officers have the authority to stop people and request their identity and travel documents at any time and without provocation. Due to the possibility of random document checks by police, you should carry your original passport, migration card and visa with you at all times.

**Transit Visas:** If you intend to transit through Russia by land en route to a third country, you must have a Russian transit visa issued by a Russian Embassy or Consulate. If you are transiting through one international airport in Russia, and will depart again in 24 hours to an onward international destination, without leaving the customs zone, Russian law does not require you to have a transit visa. **However, this law is sometimes misinterpreted by travelers and customs officials alike, and we recommend you obtain a Russian transit visa if there is any doubt about your transit plans.** Foreigners who arrive in Russia without a valid visa, who do not meet visa-free transit requirements, may be forced to return to the point of origin at their own expense.

**International Cruise Ship/Ferry Passengers:** You are permitted to visit Russian ports without a visa for a period of up to 72 hours. If you wish to go ashore during port calls you may do so without visas, provided that you are with an organized tour at all times and accompanied by a tour guide.
operator who has been duly licensed by Russian authorities. These special entry/exit requirements do not apply to river boat cruise passengers and travelers coming to Russia on package tours. These travelers will need to apply for visas prior to entry, and should follow the general guidelines for entry/exit requirements.

**Restricted Areas:** There are several closed cities and regions in Russia. If you attempt to enter these areas without prior authorization you may be subject to arrest, fines, and/or deportation. You must list on the visa application all areas to be visited and subsequently register with authorities upon arrival at each destination. There is no centralized list or database of the restricted areas, so travelers should check with their sponsor, hotel, or the nearest office of the Russian Federal Migration Service before traveling to unfamiliar cities and towns.

**U.S. Citizens Also Holding Russian Passports:** If you are a dual U.S./Russian national, you are expected to enter and depart both Russia and the United States carrying the passport of that country. If you are a Russian citizen carrying a Russian passport, you should confirm that your Russian passport is valid beyond your planned departure; you will not be permitted to depart Russia with an expired Russian passport, and obtaining one in Russia, as a non-resident, is extremely difficult.

Russian external (international) passports extended by Russian consulates or embassies overseas are not considered valid for departure from Russia no matter how long the extension. Bearers of such passports must apply for a new passport inside Russia. Males of conscript age (18 - 27 years old) who are deemed to be Russian citizens may experience problems if they have not satisfied their military service requirement.

For further information, please see the Department of State’s webpage on dual nationality.

**Minors:** In an effort to prevent international child abduction, many governments have initiated special procedures at entry/exit points. These often include requiring documentary evidence of relationship and permission for the child’s travel from the parent(s) or legal guardian if not present. Having such documentation on hand, even if not legally required, may facilitate entry/departure. For further information, please see the Department of State’s webpage regarding the prevention of international child abduction.

Special note: U.S. citizen minors who also have Russian citizenship, and are traveling alone or in the company of adults who are not their parents, must carry a Russian passport as well as a power of attorney written in Russian and signed by their parents. Such minors will be prevented from entering or leaving Russia if they cannot present such a power of attorney.

**HIV/AIDS Entry Restrictions:** Some HIV/AIDS entry restrictions exist for visitors to, and foreign residents of, Russia. Short-term visitors (under three months) are not required to undergo an HIV/AIDS test, but applicants for longer term visas or residence permits may be asked to undergo tests not only for HIV/AIDS, but also for tuberculosis and leprosy. Travelers who believe they may be subject to the requirement should verify this information with the Embassy of the Russian Federation.
**Apostilles:** The U.S. Embassy and Consulates General in Russia cannot provide apostilles to documents; this process must be done by the Secretary of State of the U.S. state which processed the document (or in the case of a U.S. federal agency document, the State Department’s Office of Authentications.) For more information about Apostilles, visit the U.S. Embassy website.

**Embassy of the Russian Federation:** The Russian Federation has moved to an on-line visa application process in the United States, which can be initiated at this website. For additional information concerning travel to Russia, U.S. citizens may contact the Embassy of the Russian Federation, Consular Section, 2641 Tunlaw Rd. NW, Washington, DC 20007, tel. 202-939-8907.

In addition, there are Russian Consulates in:

- Houston: 1333 West Loop South, Ste.1300, Houston, TX 77027, tel. 713-337-3300;
- New York: 9 East 91 St., New York, NY 10128, tel. 212-348-0926;
- San Francisco: 2790 Green St., San Francisco, CA 94123, tel. 415-928-6878 or 415-202-9800; and

Information about dual nationality or the prevention of international child abduction can be found on our website. For further information about customs regulations, please read our Customs Information page.

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**THREATS TO SAFETY AND SECURITY:** Due to continued civil and political unrest throughout much of the North Caucasus region of Russia, the Department of State continues to warn U.S. citizens against travel to Chechnya and all other areas of the North Caucasus, including North Ossetia, Ingushetia, Dagestan, Stavropol, Karachayevo-Cherkessiya, and Kabardino-Balkariya. The U.S. Government’s ability to assist U.S. citizens who travel to the North Caucasus region is extremely limited. Throughout the region, local criminal gangs have kidnapped foreigners, including U.S. citizens, for ransom. U.S. citizens have disappeared in Chechnya and remain missing. Close contacts within the local population does not guarantee safety. There have been several kidnappings of foreigners and Russian citizens working for media and non-governmental organizations in the region. Due to the ongoing security concerns, U.S. Government travel to the region is very limited. U.S. citizens residing in these areas should depart immediately.

Acts of terrorism, including bombings and hostage takings, continue to occur in Russia, particularly in the North Caucasus region. However, Moscow and has also been the targets of fairly regular terrorist attacks, and cities such as St. Petersburg and Sochi have been threatened by terrorist groups. Bombings have occurred at Russian government buildings, airports, hotels, tourist sites, markets, entertainment venues, schools, and residential complexes, and on public transportation including subways, buses, trains, and scheduled commercial flights. Extremist groups occasionally threaten to set off bombs in market areas of major cities that are operated largely by migrant workers.
There is no indication that U.S. institutions or citizens have been targets, but there is a general risk of U.S. citizens becoming victims of indiscriminate terrorist attacks. U.S. citizens in Russia should be aware of their personal surroundings and follow good security practices. U.S. citizens are urged to remain vigilant and exercise good judgment and discretion when using any form of public transportation. When traveling, U.S. citizens may wish to provide a friend, family member, or coworker a copy of their itinerary.

**Demonstrations:** U.S. citizens should avoid public demonstrations, whether properly authorized or not, and avoid any large crowds and public gatherings that lack enhanced security measures. Occasional peaceful demonstrations near the U.S. Embassy do not generally interfere with public services, but U.S. citizens should avoid them when possible. Travelers should also exercise a high degree of caution and remain alert when patronizing restaurants, casinos, nightclubs, bars, theaters, etc., especially during peak hours of business.

**Mt. Elbrus:** Mt. Elbrus has become an increasingly popular destination with adventure travelers wishing to climb the highest mountain in Europe; however, the security situation in the regions surrounding the mountain remains highly unstable. The U.S. Embassy recommends against attempting to climb Mt. Elbrus, as it can only be done by passing close to volatile and insecure areas of the North Caucasus region.

Stay up to date by bookmarking our Bureau of Consular Affairs website, which contains current Travel Warnings, Travel Alerts, and Country Specific Information, as well as the Worldwide Caution.

If you don't have Internet access, call us for updates --1-888-407-4747 toll-free in the United States and Canada, or from elsewhere on a regular toll line at 1-202-501-4444. You can also call the U.S. Embassy in Moscow at 7-495-728-5577. You should always try to ensure your safety when traveling overseas. Take some time before travel to improve your personal security—things are not the same everywhere as they are in the United States. Here are some useful tips for traveling safely abroad.

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**CRIME:** Incidents of unprovoked, violent harassment against racial and ethnic minorities regularly occur throughout the Russian Federation. The U.S. Embassy Moscow and Consulates General continue to receive reports of U.S. citizens, often members of minority groups, victimized in violent attacks by "skinheads" or other extremists. Travelers are urged to exercise caution in areas frequented by such individuals and wherever large crowds have gathered. U.S. citizens most at risk are those of African, South Asian, or East Asian descent, or those who, because of their complexion, are perceived to be from the Caucasus region or the Middle East. These U.S. citizens are also at risk for harassment by police authorities.

While visiting Russia, be alert to your surroundings. In large cities, take the same precautions against assault, robbery, or pickpockets that you would take in any large U.S. city: keep wallets in inner front pockets, carry purses tucked securely under arms, wear the shoulder strap of cameras or bags across the chest, walk away from the curb, and carry purses and other bags away from
the street. The most vulnerable areas include underground walkways and the subway, overnight trains, train stations, airports, markets, tourist attractions, and restaurants. Foreigners who have been drinking alcohol are especially vulnerable to assault and robbery in or around nightclubs or bars, or on their way home. Some travelers have been drugged at bars, while others have taken strangers back to their lodgings, where they were drugged, robbed and/or assaulted.

**Internet Dating Schemes:** Reports of fraud committed against U.S. citizens by Internet correspondents professing love and romantic interest are common. Typically, the correspondent asks the U.S. citizen to send money or credit card information for living expenses, travel expenses, or “visa costs.” The anonymity of the Internet means that you cannot be sure of the real name, age, marital status, nationality, or even gender of the correspondent. We have received many reports of citizens losing thousands of dollars through such scams. **Never send money to anyone you have not met in person.** Please review our information on Internet Dating Schemes.

The Russian media report that the drug GHB is reportedly gaining popularity in local nightclubs, under the names butyrate or oxybutyrate. This drug can also cause amnesia, loss of consciousness, and/or extreme intoxication when mixed with alcohol, and death. The drug, typically in the form of a capful of liquid mixed with a beverage, gained notoriety in the United States after incidents of date-rape and death. In many cases, stolen credit cards are used immediately. Victims of credit card or ATM card theft should report the theft to the credit card company or issuing bank without delay. Be vigilant in bus and train stations and on public transport. Bogus trolley inspectors, whose aim is to extort a bribe from individuals while checking for trolley tickets, are also a threat.

Travelers have generally found it safer to travel in groups organized by reputable tour agencies. We discourage the use of unmarked taxis as passengers have been victims of robbery, kidnapping, extortion, and theft. The criminals using these taxis to rob passengers often wait outside bars or restaurants to find passengers who have been drinking and are therefore more susceptible to robbery. Robberies may also occur in taxis shared with strangers. Although there are few registered taxi services in Russia, you should always use authorized services when arriving at a major airport. A common street scam in Russia is the “turkey drop” in which an individual “accidentally” drops money on the ground in front of an intended victim, while an accomplice either waits for the money to be picked up, or picks up the money him/herself and offers to split it with the pedestrian. The individual who dropped the currency then returns, aggressively accusing both of stealing the money. This confrontation generally results in the pedestrian’s money being stolen. Avoidance is the best defense. Do not get trapped into picking up the money, and walk quickly away from the scene. To avoid highway crime, try not to drive at night, especially when alone, and do not sleep in your vehicle on the side of the road. Do not pick up hitchhikers; they pose a threat to your physical safety and also put you in danger of being arrested for unwittingly transporting narcotics.

Extortion and corruption are common in the business environment. Business disputes may involve threats of violence and even acts of violence. Organized criminal groups and sometimes local police target foreign businesses in many cities and have been known to demand protection money.
Small businesses are particularly vulnerable. Please report all extortion attempts to the Russian authorities and inform consular officials at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow or the nearest Consulate General.

Certain activities that would be normal business activities in the United States and other countries are either illegal under the Russian legal code or are considered suspect by the FSB (Federal Security Service). There are particular risks involved in any commercial activity with the Russian military-industrial complex, including research institutes, design bureaus, production facilities or other high technology, government-related institutions. Any misunderstanding or dispute in such transactions can attract the involvement of the security services and lead to investigation or prosecution for espionage. Rules governing the treatment of information remain poorly defined.

It is not uncommon for foreigners in general to become victims of harassment, mistreatment, and extortion by law-enforcement and other officials. Police do not need to show probable cause in order to stop, question, or detain individuals. If stopped, obtain the officer's name, badge number, and patrol car number, and note where the stop happened, as this information assists local officials in identifying the perpetrators. Authorities are concerned about these incidents and have cooperated in investigating such cases. Report harassment or crimes to the U.S. Embassy in Moscow or the nearest U.S. Consulate General.

**Personal Privacy:** Travelers should be aware that the Russian Federal Law on Operational Search Activity passed in 1995, in conjunction with Order No. 130 by the Minister of Information Technology and Communications (July 25, 2000), commonly known as SORM, permits the monitoring, retention and analysis of all data that traverses Russian communications networks. This may include fax transmissions, telephone calls, internet browsing and e-mail messaging. American citizens should be cognizant of this when using these means of communication.

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**VICTIMS OF CRIME:** If you or someone you know becomes the victim of a crime abroad, you should contact the local police and the nearest U.S. embassy or consulate (see the Department of State’s list of embassies and consulates). If your passport is stolen we can help you replace it. For violent crimes such as assault and rape, we can help you find appropriate medical care, contact family members or friends, and help them send you money if you need it. Although the investigation and prosecution of the crime are solely the responsibility of local authorities, consular officers can help you to understand the local criminal justice process and to find an attorney if you need.

The local equivalent to the “911” emergency line in Russia is 03 (Skoraya Pomosh).

Please see our information on victims of crime, including possible victim compensation programs in the United States.

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**CRIMINAL PENALTIES:** While you are traveling in Russia, you are subject to its laws even if you
are a U.S. citizen. Foreign laws and legal systems can be vastly different than our own. These
criminal penalties will vary from country to country. There are also some things that might be
legal in the country you visit, but still illegal in the United States, and you can be prosecuted
under U.S. law if you buy pirated goods. Engaging in sexual conduct with children or using or
disseminating child pornography in a foreign country is a crime prosecuteable in the United States.
If you break local laws in Russia, your U.S. passport won’t help you avoid arrest or prosecution.
It’s very important to know what’s legal and what’s not in the country you’re visiting.

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**SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES: Attitudes towards lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals** – Discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is widespread in Russia, as harassment, threats, and acts of violence have been targeted at homosexuals. Government officials have been known to make derogatory comments about LGBT persons, and St. Petersburg, Arkhangelsk, Ryazan, and Kostroma recently have banned “the promotion of homosexuality” to minors, effectively limiting public expression and assembly on LGBT issues. Legislatures in Moscow, Novosibirsk and Kaliningrad are considering similar measures, and there has been a push for a national ban, which has the support of a number of groups including the Russian Orthodox Church. It is unclear exactly how these statutes are being applied, although arrests have occurred under these laws, and one person has been fined approximately $170 in St. Petersburg for holding up a sign supporting LGBT rights. Public actions (including dissemination of information, statements, displays or perceived conspicuous behavior) contradicting or appearing to contradict such laws may lead to arrest, prosecution and the imposition of a fine.

In many countries around the world, including Russia, counterfeit and pirated goods are widely available. In Russia, CD and DVD piracy is an especially serious problem. Transactions involving such products are illegal under Russian law, and the Russian government has increased its enforcement activities against intellectual property rights infringements. In addition, bringing counterfeit and pirated products back to the United States may result in forfeitures and/or fines. The Computer Crime and Intellectual Property Division in the U.S. Department of Justice has more information on this problem.

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**SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES: Teaching in Russia**: Some U.S. citizens coming to Russia to teach English have complained about schools’ failure to facilitate proper visas and pay agreed salaries. If you are a prospective teacher, ensure that your employer is prepared to comply with Russian laws governing the employment and documentation of foreigners, including proper visa support, registration, and legal salary payments. Ask for references from other foreigners who have taught at the school being considered and consider insisting upon written contracts stipulating the provisions of employment, just as you would in the United States. Warning signs include instructions to arrive in Russia on a tourist visa and “change status” later, payment under the table (in cash with no documentation or tax withholding), and requirements that the school retain a passport for the length of the employment. (Upon arrival, a legal employee must surrender his or her passport for registration by the employer but this process should take less than three
weeks.)

**Currency:** The Russian ruble is the only legal tender currency. It is illegal to pay for goods and services in U.S. dollars except at authorized retail establishments. Worn U.S. bills or bills marked in any way are often not accepted at banks and exchange offices.

Automatic Teller Machines (ATMs) are plentiful in major cities. Travelers should follow all normal precautions about using ATMs. In particular, they should avoid “stand-alone” machines and opt for machines at banks or higher-class hotels and stores. Credit cards are not universally accepted, and travelers should check in advance to see if a specific store, restaurant, or hotel accepts credit cards. Outside of major cities, commercial enterprises still operate largely on a cash basis and travelers should plan accordingly.

**Customs Information:** Passengers must personally escort their luggage through Russian customs. Under a strict interpretation of this law, airline companies may not deliver a lost bag to the traveler’s final destination. Not all airlines will reimburse the traveler for expenses related to retrieving lost luggage.

Rigorous searches of baggage and stricter enforcement of customs regulations against the exportation of items of “cultural value” can occur. U.S. citizen visitors to Russia have been arrested for attempting to leave the country with antique items they believed were legally purchased from licensed vendors. Travelers should obtain receipts for all high-value items (including caviar) purchased in Russia. Any article that could appear old or as having cultural value to the Customs Service, including artwork, icons, samovars, rugs, military medals, and antiques, must have a certificate indicating that it has no historical or cultural value. Certificates may not be granted for certain articles, either due to their cultural value or antiquity. Where certificates are required, they may be obtained from the Russian Ministry of Culture. For further information, Russian speakers may call the Sheremetyevo-2 Airport Service Office in Moscow at (7) (495) 578-2125/578-2120. In St. Petersburg, the Ministry of Culture may be reached at 311-3496.

The importation and use of Global Positioning Systems (GPS) and other radio electronic devices are sometimes subject to special rules and regulations in Russia. The Russian Customs Service recently stated that terminal GPS devices can be imported upon their simple declaration on arrival. A special customs permit should be obtained in the case of importation of a GPS to be used as a peripheral device to a separate computer and/or antenna to increase its capability.

In general, mapping and natural resource data collection activities associated with normal commercial and scientific collaboration may result in seizure of the associated equipment and/or arrest. The penalty for using a GPS device in a manner which is determined to compromise Russian national security can be a prison term of ten to twenty years.

Visitors may bring regular cellular telephones to Russia without restriction. Satellite telephones require advance approval from the Russian authorities. The Russian agency responsible for telecommunications issues and which approves the importation of satellite phones is Rosnadzor.

There are no restrictions on bringing laptop computers into the country for personal use. The
software, however, may be inspected upon departure. Hardware and software found to contain
sensitive or encrypted data may be subject to confiscation.

Travelers entering Russia with $10,000 or more in cash may have to explain the money’s origin
and intended use. You may be required to present supporting documentation such as receipts
from the sale of personal items or for ATM cash withdrawals.

**Prescription Medication:** Russia also has very strict rules on the importation of large quantities
of medication. Certain prescription and over-the-counter drugs common in the United States are
prohibited in Russia, and large quantities of any medicine will receive scrutiny. Contact a Russian
embassy or consulate for specific information regarding this or other customs regulations.

The Embassy recommends that all U.S. citizens entering Russia with prescription medication carry
a copy of their valid U.S. prescription. U.S. citizen visitors have been detained in Russia for not
being able to prove that their prescription medication was lawfully obtained in the United States.

If a traveler is in doubt regarding the importation into Russia of a particular item, he or she should
address specific questions to the Federal Customs Service of the Russian Federation or email.

**Accessibility:** While in Russia, individuals with disabilities may find accessibility and
accommodation very different from what you find in the United States. Russian law requires that
most new public buildings and others with community space (e.g., shopping centers) be accessible
for persons with disabilities. However, many older buildings are not required to meet these
requirements. The Moscow Metro is not accessible to persons with disabilities.

Getting around in Russian cities and towns may be difficult at times since many sidewalks are
narrow and uneven. In general, mobility is easier in cities such as Moscow and St. Petersburg,
compared to smaller towns and rural areas. In general, public transport is not accommodating to
people with disabilities.

**MEDICAL FACILITIES AND HEALTH INFORMATION:** Medical care in most localities is below
Western standards due to shortages of medical supplies, differing practice standards and the lack
of comprehensive primary care. Those facilities in Moscow and St. Petersburg with higher
standards do not necessarily accept all cases. Access to these facilities usually requires cash or
credit card payment at Western rates at the time of service. The U.S. Social Security Medicare
Program does not provide coverage for hospital or medical costs in Russia. Elderly
travelers and those with existing health problems may be at particular risk. We do not recommend
elective surgeries requiring blood transfusions and non-essential blood transfusions, due to
uncertainties surrounding the local blood supply. Most hospitals and clinics in major urban areas
have adopted the use of disposable IV supplies, syringes, and needles as standard practice;
however, travelers to remote areas might consider bringing a supply of sterile, disposable syringes
and corresponding IV supplies. Do not visit tattoo parlors or piercing services due to the risk of
infection.
Outbreaks of diphtheria and hepatitis A have been reported throughout the country, even in large cities such as Moscow and St. Petersburg. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommend up-to-date tetanus and diphtheria immunizations before traveling to Russia and neighboring countries. Typhoid can be a concern for those who plan to travel extensively in the region. Rarely, cases of cholera have also been reported throughout the area. Drinking bottled water can reduce the risk of exposure to infectious and noxious agents. Outside of Moscow, tap water is generally unsafe to drink. Use bottled water for drinking and food preparation. Tuberculosis is an increasingly serious health concern in Russia. For further information, please consult the CDC's information on Tuberculosis.

Rates of HIV infection have risen markedly in recent years. While most prevalent among intravenous drug users, prostitutes and their clients, the HIV/AIDS rate in the general population is increasing. Reported cases of syphilis are much higher than in the United States, and some sources suggest that gonorrhea and chlamydia are also more prevalent than in Western Europe or the United States.

Information on vaccinations and other health precautions, such as safe food and water precautions and insect bite protection, may be obtained from the CDC hotline for international travelers at 1-877-FYI-TRIP (1-877-394-8747) or via the CDC website. For information about outbreaks of infectious diseases abroad, consult the infectious diseases section of the World Health Organization (WHO) website. The WHO website also contains additional health information for travelers, including detailed country-specific health information.

Alternative Medical Treatments: Foreigners occasionally travel to Russia to receive medical treatment that is more expensive or prohibited in the United States, including stem-cell therapy and surrogate birthing. These treatments may involve considerable risks. Standards of infection control in both surgical and post operative care may be inadequate. Patients undergoing treatment often develop secondary infections that cannot be handled by the facilities offering the procedures, in which case they must be admitted to local hospitals of uncertain quality. In these cases the patient is responsible for all additional costs, including repatriation back to the United States.

MEDICAL INSURANCE: You can’t assume your insurance will go with you when you travel. It’s very important to find out BEFORE you leave whether or not your medical insurance will cover you overseas. You need to ask your insurance company two questions:

- Does my policy apply when I’m out of the United States?
- Will it cover emergencies like a trip to a foreign hospital or a medical evacuation?

In many places, doctors and hospitals still expect payment in cash at the time of service. Your regular U.S. health insurance may not cover doctors’ and hospital visits in other countries. If your policy doesn’t go with you when you travel, it’s a very good idea to take out another one for your trip. For more information, please see our medical insurance overseas page.
TRAFFIC SAFETY AND ROAD CONDITIONS: You may encounter road conditions and driver safety norms that differ significantly from those in the United States. As a pedestrian, exercise great care near traffic, as vehicles frequently fail to yield to pedestrians. In some areas of Russia, roads are practically nonexistent. When driving, adhere to all local driving regulations; these are strictly enforced and violators are subject to severe legal penalties. Russia practices a zero-tolerance policy with regard to alcohol consumption prior to driving. The maximum punishment is a two-year suspension of a driver’s license. An intoxicated driver may also be detained until he or she is deemed to be sober.

Avoid excessive speed and, if at all possible, do not drive at night, particularly outside of major cities. In rural areas, it is not uncommon to find livestock crossing roadways at any given time. Construction sites or stranded vehicles are often unmarked by flares or other warning signals. Sometimes cars have only one working headlight and many cars lack taillights. Bicycles seldom have lights or reflectors. Due to these road conditions, be prepared for sudden stops at any time. Learn about your route from an auto club, guidebook, or government tourist office. Some routes have heavy truck and bus traffic, while others have poor or nonexistent shoulders; many are one-way or do not permit left turns. Also, some of the newer roads have very few restaurants, motels, gas stations, or auto repair shops along their routes. For your safety, have your vehicle serviced and in optimum condition before you travel. It is wise to bring an extra fan belt, fuses, and other spare parts. In the Russian Far East most vehicles are right-side drive, affording the drivers limited visibility on two-lane roads.

Temporary visitors to Russia may drive for up to 60 days with a valid U.S. driver’s license and a notarized Russian translation. Tourists may also use International Driving Permits issued by the American Automobile Association or the American Automobile Touring Alliance to drive in Russia. Foreigners in Russia on business or employment visas, or with permanent residence status in Russia, are required by law to have a Russian driver’s license. In order to obtain this license one has to take the appropriate exams in Russian. A U.S. driver's license cannot be exchanged for a Russian license. Travelers without a valid license are often subject to prolonged stops by police.

Drivers must carry third-party liability insurance under a policy valid in Russia. U.S. automobile liability insurance is not valid in Russia, nor are most collision and comprehensive coverage policies issued by U.S. companies. A good rule of thumb is to buy coverage equivalent to that which you carry in the United States.

Roadside checkpoints are commonplace. These checkpoints are ostensibly in place to detect narcotics, alien smuggling, and firearms violations; however, they are sometimes used by traffic police to extract cash "fines." See paragraph under Crime on mistreatment by police.

Please refer to our Road Safety page for more information.

AVIATION SAFETY OVERSIGHT: The U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has assessed the government of Russia’s Civil Aviation Authority as being in compliance with International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) aviation safety standards for oversight of Russia’s air carrier
operations. Further information may be found on the FAA’s safety assessment page.

Local air carriers in remote regions may not meet internationally accepted customer service standards. Some local airlines do not have advance reservation systems but sell tickets for cash at the airport. Flights often are canceled if more than 30% of the seats remain unsold. Carry your passport with you at all times.

CHILDREN’S ISSUES: For information see our Office of Children’s Issues web pages on intercountry adoption and international parental child abduction.

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This replaces the Country Specific Information for Russia dated October 12, 2011, to update Threats to Safety and Security and Special Circumstances.