COUNTRY DESCRIPTION: Russia is a vast and diverse nation that continues to evolve politically, economically and socially. 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. Travel to the Caucasus region of Russia is dangerous. The Department of State recommends Americans not travel to Chechnya and adjoining areas, and recommends that Americans who are in these regions depart immediately.

Read the Department of State Background Notes on Russia for additional information.

ENTRY/EXIT REQUIREMENTS: The Russian government maintains a restrictive and complicated visa regime for foreign travelers who visit, transit, or reside in the Russian Federation. The Russian system includes requirements of sponsorship, visas for entry and exit, migration cards, and registration. American citizens who also carry Russian passports face additional complicated regulations. Dual citizen minors who travel on their Russian passports also face special problems.

Russian immigration and visa laws change regularly. The implementation of immigration laws has not always been transparent or predictable. In addition, Russian immigration officials at times implement laws and regulations governing entry and exit inconsistently, especially in remote areas.

The Russian government does not recognize the standing of U.S. consular officers to intervene in visa cases. The U.S. diplomatic mission in Russia is not able to act as sponsor, submit visa applications, register private travelers, or request that visas or migration cards be corrected, replaced, or extended.

Entry Visas: Before traveling to Russia, U.S. citizens should verify the latest requirements with the nearest Russian Embassy or Consulate (for contact information for the Russian Embassy and Consulates in the United States, please refer to the last paragraph of this section).

U.S. citizens must always possess a valid U.S. passport and appropriate visas for travel to or transit through Russia, whether by train, car, ship or airplane. It is impossible to obtain a Russian entry visa upon arrival. Travelers must obtain visas well in advance of travel from a Russian Embassy or Consulate in the United States or in a third country. Travelers who arrive without an entry visa are not permitted to enter Russia and face immediate expulsion by route of entry, at the traveler’s expense.
U.S. citizens transiting Russia en route to any other country are advised to have transit visas. It is theoretically possible to transit Russia without a visa but in several instances, travelers experienced delays and hardships because they did not have a transit visa. Similarly, Russia-bound U.S. citizens attempting to transit Belarus or the Central Asian republics without visas have encountered difficulties. U.S. citizens are strongly advised to check the visa requirements for all countries on their itinerary.

A Russia entry/exit visa has two dates written in the European style (day. month, year) as opposed to the American style (month/day/year). The first date indicates the earliest day 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.

Russian tourist visas are often granted only for the specific dates mentioned in the invitation letter provided by the sponsor. U.S. citizens often receive visas valid for periods as short as four days. Even if the visa is misdated through error of a Russian Embassy or Consulate, the traveler will still not be allowed into Russia before the visa start date or be allowed to leave after the visa expiration date. Any mistakes in visa dates must be corrected before the traveler enters Russia. It is helpful to have someone who reads Russian check the visa before departing the United States.

Visas are valid for specific purposes and dates. Travelers should ensure that they apply for and receive the correct visa that reflects their intended action in Russia (i.e., student visa, religious worker visa, commercial visa). Foreigners can be expelled for engaging in activities inconsistent with their visas.

All travelers must list on the visa application all areas to be visited and subsequently register with authorities upon arrival at each destination (see details below). This is normally done through the traveler’s hotel or local sponsor. There are several closed cities throughout Russia. Travelers who attempt to enter these cities without prior authorization are subject to fines, court hearings and/or deportation. Travelers should check with their sponsor, hotel, or the nearest Russian visa and passport office before traveling to unfamiliar cities and towns.

Sponsorship: Under Russian law, every foreign traveler must have a Russian-based sponsor (a hotel, tour company, relative, employer, etc). The official sponsor is listed on the visa. Generally speaking, visas sponsored by Russian individuals are “guest” visas, and visas sponsored by tour agencies or hotels are “tourist” visas. Note that travelers who enter Russia on “tourist” visas, but who then reside with Russian individuals, may have difficulty registering their visas and migration cards and may be required by Russian authorities to depart Russia sooner than they had planned.

Even if a visa was obtained through a travel agency in the United States, there is always a Russian legal entity whose name is indicated on the visa and who is considered to be the legal sponsor. It is important for travelers to know who their legal sponsor is and how to contact that sponsor. Russian law requires that the sponsor must apply on the traveler’s behalf for replacement, extension, or changes to a Russian visa. U.S. citizens are strongly advised to obtain the contact information of the visa sponsor from their tour company or hotel, in advance. To
resolve any visa difficulties (lost visa, expired visa), the traveler’s sponsor must contact the nearest Russian visa and passport office (OVIR/UVIR) for assistance. Resolving the visa problem usually requires the payment of a fee and a wait of up to twenty calendar days.

Exit Visa: A valid visa is necessary to depart Russia. Generally, the visa issued by a Russian Embassy or Consulate is valid for entry and exit. It is helpful to make a photocopy of your visa in the event of loss, but note that a copy of your visa will not be sufficient for leaving the country, as Russian immigration officials always ask for the original.

Visitors who lose or have their U.S. passport and Russian visa stolen must replace their passport at the U.S. Embassy or one of the Consulates General, and then obtain a new visa to depart with the assistance of their sponsor (see above). Without a valid visa in their new U.S. passports, U.S. citizens cannot leave Russia. As noted above, the U.S. Embassy and Consulates General are not able to intercede in cases in which visas must be replaced, corrected, or extended.

Travelers who overstay their visa’s validity, even for one day, will be prevented from leaving until their sponsor intervenes and requests a visa extension on their behalf (see above). United States citizens without valid visas face significant delays in leaving Russia and may have trouble finding adequate accommodation. Travelers with an expired visa may have difficulty checking into a hotel, guesthouse, hostel, or other lodging establishment in Russia. There are no adequate public shelters or safe havens in Russia and neither the U.S. Embassy nor the Consulates General have means to accommodate such stranded travelers.

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 twenty days so students and teachers need to plan accordingly.

Migration Card: All foreigners entering Russia must fill out a migration card, depositing one part with immigration authorities at the port of entry and holding on to the other part for the duration of their stay. Upon exit, the migration card, which serves as a record of entry, exit, and registration, must be submitted to immigration authorities. The card is also necessary to register at hotels.

Migration cards, in theory, are available at all ports of entry from Russian immigration officials (Border Guards). The cards are generally distributed to passengers on incoming flights and left in literature racks at arrival points. Officials at borders and airports usually do not point out these cards to travelers; it is up to the individual travelers to find them and fill them out. From time to time, various ports of entry – even the major international airport in Moscow – run out of these cards. There is no mechanism to obtain such cards once a traveler has entered into Russia. The Russian government has not indicated what a traveler should do in such a case.

Replacing a lost or stolen migration card is extremely difficult. While authorities will not prevent foreigners from leaving the country if they cannot present their migration cards, travelers could experience problems when trying to reenter Russia at a future date.
Although Russia and Belarus use the same migration card, travelers should be aware that each country maintains its own visa regime. U.S. citizens wishing to travel to both nations must apply for two separate visas, and obtain a new migration card upon entering each country.

Transit Through Russia: Travelers transiting through Russia en route to a third country should be aware that a Russian transit visa is normally required. Even travelers who are simply changing planes in Moscow or another international airport in Russia for an onward destination will be asked to present a transit visa issued by a Russian Embassy or Consulate. Russian authorities may refuse to allow a U.S. citizen who does not have a transit visa to continue with his or her travel, obliging the person to immediately return to the point of embarkation.

Visa Registration: Travelers who spend more than three days in the country must register their visa and migration card through their sponsor. However, travelers spending less than three days are advised to register their visas as well, since they may encounter problems finding lodging without proper registration. Travelers staying in a hotel must register their visa and migration card with their hotel within one day. A failure to register is unlikely to result in problems leaving Russia but travelers could experience problems when trying to reenter Russia at a future date.

Police have the authority to stop people and request their documents at any time without cause. Due to the possibility of random document checks by police, U.S. citizens should carry their original passports, registered migration cards, and visas with them at all times. Failure to provide proper documentation can result in detention and/or heavy fines. It is not necessary for travelers to have either entry or itinerary points in the Russian Federation printed on their visas.

Special Entry/Exit Requirements for International Cruise Ship Passengers: International cruise ship passengers are permitted to visit Russian ports without a visa for a period of up to 72 hours. Passengers who wish to go ashore during port calls may do so without a visa only if they are part of an organized tour, operated by a licensed Russian tour company approved by the Russian Immigration Service. According to Russian legislation, cruise passengers on organized tours must remain with their tour group and/or a representative of their tour company at all times while ashore. Tour operators affiliated with cruise companies as well as a variety of local tour operators in Russia are licensed to provide tour services to cruise passengers. Note: 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 provided for entry/exit requirements.

American Citizens Also Holding Russian Passports: The U.S. government recognizes that dual nationality exists, but does not encourage it as a matter of policy because of the problems it may cause. It expects American citizens to travel on U.S. passports. However, possessing and traveling on a Russian passport outside of the United States does not negate a traveler’s American citizenship. American citizens who choose to enter Russia on a Russian passport do face several possible difficulties.

U.S. citizens who have at one time held Russian citizenship are often required to renounce Russian citizenship before applying for a Russian visa in their U.S. passport. Unless a Russian
citizen has formally renounced his or her Russian citizenship through a Russian Embassy or Consulate, he or she always risks being considered a Russian citizen and not allowed to depart on any travel document except a Russian passport. This can also interfere with access to U.S. consular services in case of an emergency. This risk is greatly diminished if the traveler enters Russia on a U.S. passport and Russian visa.

Dual nationals should also be aware that Russian authorities will not permit departure from Russia using a U.S. passport if that person’s Russian passport has expired. The traveler will be required to obtain a new Russian passport – a process that can take several months. Russian external 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 will have to apply for a new passport inside the country.

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.

In an effort to prevent international child abduction, many governments have initiated 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.

American citizen minors, who also have Russian citizenship, and who are traveling on their Russian passports, must have a power-of-attorney, written in Russian, allowing them to travel if they are traveling alone or in the company of adults who are not their parents. Such minors will be prevented from leaving Russia if they cannot present such a power-of-attorney.

For additional information concerning entry and exit requirements, travelers 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


See our information on dual nationality, the prevention of international child abduction and Customs regulations.

SAFETY AND SECURITY: Due to continued civil and political unrest throughout much of the Caucasus region, the Department of State continues to warn U.S. citizens against travel to Chechnya and all areas that border it: North Ossetia, Ingushetia, Dagestan, Stavropol, Karachayevo-Cherkessiya and Kabardino-Balkariya. The U.S. government’s ability to assist Americans who travel to the northern Caucasus is extremely limited. Throughout the region,
local criminal gangs have kidnapped foreigners, including Americans, for ransom. U.S. citizens have disappeared in Chechnya and remain missing. Close contacts with the local population do not guarantee safety. There have been several kidnappings of foreigners and Russians working for non-governmental organizations in the region. Due to the ongoing security concerns, U.S. Government travel to the area is very limited. American citizens residing in these areas should depart immediately as the safety of Americans and other foreigners cannot be effectively guaranteed.

Acts of terrorism, including bombings and hostage taking, have occurred in Russia over the last several years. Bombings have occurred at Russian government buildings, hotels, tourist sites, markets, entertainment venues, schools, residential complexes, and on public transportation including the subway and scheduled commercial air flights. Hostage taking incidents have included a raid on a school that resulted in horrific losses of life of children, teachers, and parents.

There is no current indication that American institutions or citizens are targets but there is a general risk of American citizens being victims of indiscriminate terrorist attacks. American citizens in Russia should be aware of their personal surroundings and follow good security practices. Americans are urged to remain vigilant and exercise good judgment and discretion when using any form of public transportation. When traveling, Americans may wish to provide a friend, family member, or coworker a copy of their itinerary. Americans should avoid large crowds and public gatherings that lack enhanced security measures. 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.

American citizens living in Russia or traveling there for even a few days are strongly urged to register with the U.S. Embassy or nearest Consulate General. Registration will allow the embassy to provide direct information on the security situation as necessary. Registration can be done on-line and can be done in advance of travel.

For the latest security information, Americans traveling abroad should regularly monitor the Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affair’s Internet site at http://travel.state.gov, where the current Travel Warnings and Public Announcements, including the Worldwide Caution Public Announcement, can be found.

Up-to-date information on safety and security can also be obtained by calling 1-888-407-4747 toll free in the U.S. and Canada, or for callers outside the U.S. and Canada, a regular toll-line at 1-202-501-4444. These numbers are available from 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. eastern time, Monday through Friday (except U.S. federal holidays).

The Department of State urges American citizens to take responsibility for their own personal security while traveling overseas. For general information about appropriate measures travelers can take to protect themselves in an overseas environment, see the Department of State’s pamphlet A Safe Trip Abroad.

CRIME:
The U.S. Embassy and Consulates General continue to receive reports of unprovoked, violent harassment against racial and ethnic minorities, including well-publicized cases in which members of minorities have been beaten and in several instances, murdered. Travelers are urged to exercise caution in areas frequented by “skinhead” groups and wherever large crowds have gathered. Americans 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 Caucus region or the Middle East. These Americans are also at risk for harassment by police authorities.

Visitors to Russia need to be alert to their surroundings. In large cities, they need to take the same precautions against assault, robbery, or pickpockets that they would take in any large U.S. city:

- keep billfolds 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 away from the street.

The most vulnerable areas include underground walkways and the subway, overnight trains, train stations, airports, markets, tourist attractions, and restaurants.

Groups of children and adolescents have been aggressive in some cities, swarming victims, or assaulting and knocking them down. They frequently target persons who are perceived as vulnerable, especially elderly tourists or persons traveling alone. Some victims report that the attackers use knives. Persons carrying valuables in backpacks, in back pockets of pants and in coat pockets are especially vulnerable to pickpockets.

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.

In many cases involving stolen credit cards, thieves use them immediately. Victims of credit card or ATM card theft should report the theft to the credit card company or bank without delay.

Travelers are advised to be vigilant in bus and train stations and on public transport. Always watch for pickpockets in these areas. Bogus trolley inspectors, who aim 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. Robberies may occur in taxis shared with strangers. Travelers should be aware that there are few registered taxi services in Russia and should be aware of the safety risks inherent in flagging down informal or “gypsy” cabs.

A common street scam in Russia is the “turkey drop” in which an individual “accidentally” drops the money on the ground in front of an intended victim, while a confederate either waits for the money to be picked up, or picks up the money himself and offers to split it with the pedestrian.
The individual who dropped the currency 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, travelers should try not to drive at night, especially when alone, or sleep in vehicles along the road. Travelers should not, under any circumstances, pick up hitchhikers: they not only pose a threat to physical safety, but also put the driver in danger of being arrested for unwittingly transporting narcotics.

Extortion and corruption are common in the business environment. Threats of violence and acts of violence are commonly resorted to in business disputes. Organized criminal groups and sometimes local police target foreign businesses in many cities and have been known to demand protection money. Many Western firms hire security services that have improved their overall security, although this is no guarantee. Small businesses are particularly vulnerable. U.S. citizens are encouraged to report all extortion attempts to the Russian authorities and to inform consular officials at the U.S. Embassy or nearest Consulate General.

Travelers should be aware that 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). Americans should be particularly aware of potential 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, travelers should try to obtain, if safe to do so, 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. Travelers should report crimes to the U.S. Embassy or the nearest Consulate General.

Internet Dating Schemes: The U.S. Embassy receives reports almost every day of fraud committed against U.S. citizens by Internet correspondents professing love and romantic interest. 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 the U.S. citizen cannot be sure of the real name, age, marital status, nationality, or gender of the correspondent. The U.S. Embassy has received many reports of citizens losing thousands of dollars through such scams. American citizens are advised never to send money to anyone they have not met in person. See our flyer on Internet dating schemes.

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 markedly 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. More information on this serious problem is available at http://www.ustr.gov/Document_Library/Reports_Publications/2006/2006_Special_301_Review/Section_Index.html.

INFORMATION FOR VICTIMS OF CRIME: The loss or theft abroad of a U.S. passport should be reported immediately to the local police and the nearest U.S. Embassy or Consulate. If you are the victim of a crime while overseas, in addition to reporting to local police, please contact the nearest U.S. Embassy or Consulate for assistance. The Embassy/Consulate staff can, for example, assist you to find appropriate medical care, contact family members or friends and explain how funds could be transferred. Although the investigation and prosecution of the crime is solely the responsibility of local authorities, consular officers can help you to understand the local criminal justice process and to find an attorney if needed.

See our information on Victims of Crime.

MEDICAL FACILITIES AND HEALTH INFORMATION: Medical care in most localities is below Western standards; shortages of medical supplies, differing practice standards and the lack of comprehensive primary care all combine to make the medical system difficult to negotiate as well as suspect. The few facilities in Moscow and St. Petersburg that approach acceptable standards do not necessarily accept all cases (i.e., they may not be licensed to treat trauma, infectious disease or maternity cases). Access to these facilities usually requires cash or credit card payment at Western rates at the time of service.

Elderly travelers and those with existing health problems may be at particular risk. Elective surgeries requiring blood transfusions and non-essential blood transfusions are not recommended, 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 for eventualities. Travelers should refrain from visiting 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 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. Tap water in Russia, outside of Moscow, is generally considered unsafe to drink. Travelers are strongly urged to use bottled water for drinking and food preparation.
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 U.S., and some sources suggest that gonorrhea and chlamydia are also more prevalent than in Western Europe or the U.S. Travelers should be aware of the related health and legal risks.

Information on vaccinations and other health precautions, such as safe food and water precautions and insect bite protection, may be obtained from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s hotline for international travelers at 1-877-FYI-TRIP (1-877-394-8747) or via the CDC’s web site at http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/default.aspx. For information about outbreaks of infectious diseases abroad consult the World Health Organization’s (WHO) web site at http://www.who.int/en/. Further health information for travelers is available at http://www.who.int/ith/en.

MEDICAL INSURANCE: The Department of State strongly urges Americans to consult with their medical insurance company prior to traveling abroad to confirm whether their policy applies overseas and whether it will cover emergency expenses such as a medical evacuation. Please see our information on medical insurance overseas. Medicare does not provide benefits for medical care overseas. Travelers should consider obtaining traveler’s insurance prior to going abroad.

TRAFFIC SAFETY AND ROAD CONDITIONS: While in a foreign country, U.S. citizens may encounter road conditions that differ significantly from those in the United States. The information below concerning Russia is provided for general reference only, and may not be totally accurate in a particular location or circumstance.

In some areas of Russia roads are practically non-existent. Persons planning to drive in Russia should adhere to all local driving regulations; these are strictly enforced and violators are subject to severe legal penalties. Drivers should be aware that 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 they are 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 headlight with many cars lacking brake lights. 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-hand 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.
A valid U.S. driver’s license with a notarized Russian translation or a valid Russian license is necessary to drive a vehicle in Russia. Tourists may use international driver’s licenses issued by the American Automobile Association to drive in Russia. Foreigners in Russia on a business visa or with a 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. An American driver's license cannot be exchanged for a Russian license. Travelers without a valid license are often subject to prolonged stops by police and fines.

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 generally viewed as a means for traffic police to extract cash “fines.” See paragraph under Crime on mistreatment by police.

For specific information concerning Russian driving permits, vehicle inspection, road tax and mandatory insurance, please refer to the Russia national tourist organization at http://www.russia-travel.com.

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. For more information travelers may visit the FAA’s web site at http://www.faa.gov/safety/programs_initiatives/oversight/iasa/.

Travelers should be aware that 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. Travelers should have their passport with them at all times.

SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES:

TEACHING IN RUSSIA: Many Americans come to Russia to teach English, and some have complained about schools’ failure to facilitate proper visas and pay agreed salaries. Prospective teachers should ensure that schools are prepared to comply with Russian laws governing the employment and documentation of foreigners, including proper visa support, registration and legal salary payments. Prospective teachers should ask for references from other foreigners who have taught at the school being considered and should consider insisting upon written contracts stipulating the provisions of their employment, just as they 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.

Travelers need no longer bring large amounts of hard currency unless they expect to travel in rural areas. 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 card acceptance, while not universal, is rapidly spreading in Moscow and to a lesser extent in other large cities. Travelers should check in advance whether 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: There have been increasing reports of rigorous searches of baggage and stricter enforcement of customs regulations against the exportation of items of “cultural value.” Visitors to Russia have been arrested for attempting to leave the country with antique items which 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 will not be granted for the export of articles that are more than 100 years old, irrespective of the value. These certificates may be obtained from the Russian Ministry of Culture. For further information, Russian speakers may call the Airport Sheremetyevo-2 Customs Information Service in Moscow at (7) (495) 578-2125/578-2120. In St. Petersburg, the Ministry of Culture may be reached at 311-3496.

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. It is advisable to contact a Russian Embassy or Consulate for specific information regarding this or other customs regulations.

Please see our Customs Information.

The importation and use of Global Positioning Systems (GPS’s) and other radio electronic devices are sometimes subject to special rules and regulations in Russia. The Russian Customs Service has most recently stated that terminal GPS’s 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 State Customs Committee has stated that there are no restrictions on bringing laptop computers into the country for personal use. The software, however, can be inspected upon departure. Hardware and software found to contain sensitive or encrypted data may be subject to confiscation.

Travelers should address specific questions to the Federal Customs Service of the Russian Federation, e-mail: webmaster@mail.customs.ru, web site: http://www.customs.ru/en/.

Great care should be taken to safeguard against the loss of airline tickets for Russian carriers. Generally, a central office must authorize the replacement of lost airline tickets, which can take 24 hours or more. In some cases, Americans who have lost their tickets just prior to their flights on local airlines have been forced to buy new full-fare tickets or miss the flight because replacements tickets were not authorized in time.

CRIMINAL PENALTIES: While in a foreign country, a U.S. citizen is subject to that country's laws and regulations, which sometimes differ significantly from those in the United States and may not afford the protections available to the individual under U.S. law. Penalties for breaking the law can be more severe than in the United States for similar offenses. Persons violating Russian laws, even unknowingly, may be expelled, arrested or imprisoned. Penalties for possession, use, or trafficking in illegal drugs in Russia are severe, and convicted offenders can expect long jail sentences and heavy fines. Engaging in sexual conduct with children or using or disseminating child pornography in a foreign country is a crime, prosecutable in the United States. Please see our information on Criminal Penalties.

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

REGISTRATION / EMBASSY LOCATION: Americans living or traveling in Russia are encouraged to register with the nearest U.S. Embassy or Consulate through the State Department’s travel registration web site so that they can obtain updated information on travel and security within Russia. Americans without Internet access may register directly with the nearest U.S. Embassy or Consulate. By registering, American citizens make it easier for the Embassy or Consulate to contact them in case of emergency.

The U.S. Embassy's consular section is located at Novinskiy Bulvar 21, Moscow, metro station Barrikadnaya. The Embassy's switchboard is tel. (7) (495) 728-5000, and the American Citizen Services Unit at tel. (7) (495) 728-5577. In the event of an after-hours emergency, please contact the main switchboard. The American Citizens Services Unit may also be contacted by fax at (7) (495) 728-5084, by e-mail at moscowwarden@state.gov and through the Embassy web site at http://moscow.usembassy.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
Email: acsstpete@state.gov
Web site: http://stpetersburg.usconsulate.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
E-mail: vladcons@state.gov
Web site: http://vladivostok.usconsulate.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
Web site: http://yekaterinburg.usconsulate.gov

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This replaces the Consular Information Sheet dated June 2006, to update the sections on Entry/Exit Requirements, Special Circumstances, and Customs Information.