

The Urals Урал

The Ural Mountains – the celebrated division between Europe and Asia – stretch 2000km from the arctic Kara Sea in the north to Kazakhstan in the south.

The physical reality of the Urals is not as dramatic as it sounds. The Urals are as low as famous mountain ranges go, failing to top 2000m anywhere. Nonetheless, for outdoorsy types the mountains provide endless opportunities – from hiking and biking to skiing and spelunking. Rafting in the Urals is a spring tradition, when the melting snow augments the river waters. Adventurers will appreciate the undulating hills covered with birch and pine forest, and vast stretches of taiga dotted with mountain lakes and rocky outcrops.

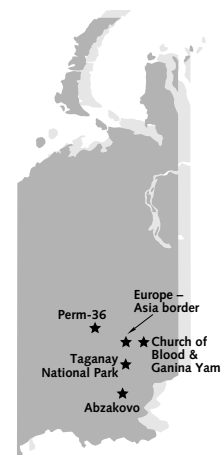
While the Urals are a goldmine for outdoor adventurers, it is difficult to organise such expeditions independently, which explains why the region is still relatively undiscovered by foreign travellers. A few agencies in Yekaterinburg offer active excursions.

The Urals have been vital to Russia for centuries as a major source of metals and minerals, which gave rise to industrial cities such as Perm, Yekaterinburg and Chelyabinsk. Today, these cities are vibrant economic and cultural centres, each with its own intriguing – and sometimes dark – history.

Yekaterinburg is on the east side of the Middle Urals – the lowest part of the mountains – which is why many travellers miss the mountains entirely. The highest peaks are in the far north, culminating at Mt Narodnaya (1894m).

HIGHLIGHTS

- Hiking or biking the Urals in **Taganay National Park** (p447)
- Shivering in the darkness of a cell at **Perm-36** (p436)
- Following the pilgrims from the Romanovs' execution site at the **Church of Blood** (p438) to their original burial site at **Ganina Yama** (p444)
- Speeding down the snowy slopes at **Abzakovo** (p447)
- Straddling continents at the **Europe–Asia border** (p444)



History

Russia's medieval princes and merchants liked to speculate on the store of riches that lay within the dense forests east of the Volga. But the mountainous terrain and murderous tribesmen of the Urals region long kept their ambitions in check.

BEFORE THE SLAVS

The Urals are one of the world's oldest mountain chains, the geological consequence of a colossal continental collision that occurred over 300 million years ago. The Urals still mark the borderline of the more-recent geographical heirs to these once separate landmasses – Europe and Asia. The mountains run north to south, stretching from the Arctic ice to the Central Asian steppe. Because of their advanced age, the mountains have been worn down over time by wind, rain and snow.

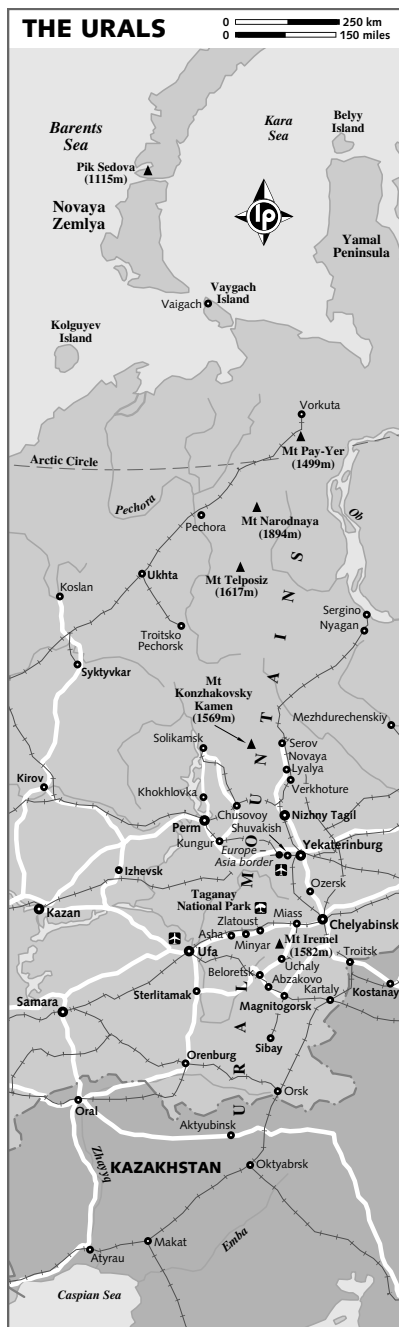
Before the Slavs moved in, the region was populated by various Uralic tribes, whose contemporary descendants include the Khanty and Mansi peoples of western Siberia as well as the Finns and Hungarians of central Europe.

SLAVIC EXPANSION

In the 16th century, the rising Muscovite principality won a series of strategic battles against their tribal foes that finally opened the way for eastward expansion. Russian settlement of the Urals was led by monks, merchants and Cossacks.

Russia gained control over the lands between Moscow and the Urals through the work of St Sergei, the bishop of Perm, who built a string of monasteries and converted the native tribes. Seeking to exploit the natural wealth of the taiga, pioneering merchants followed the clergy. They set up markets next to the monasteries, erecting great churches with their profits from the fur trade.

Little was known about the lands on the other side of the mountains, except that they possessed hidden wealth and danger. More than a few traders crossed the Urals and were never heard from again. Tsar Ivan the Terrible entrusted the development of this territory to the Stroganov family, who reaped a huge fortune from the salt and fur trades and kept the state treasury filled with tax revenues.



INDUSTRIAL EXPANSION

The discovery of mineral wealth in the Urals during the reign of Peter the Great led to the first large-scale Russian settlements. Yekaterinburg, founded in 1723 and named for the Empress Yekaterina (Catherine I), wife of Peter the Great, emerged as the economic centre of the Urals. Rich deposits of coal, iron ore and precious stones gave rise to a mining industry, including science and engineering institutes. By the early 19th century, the Urals metals industry supplied nearly all the iron produced in Russia and exported to European markets. The Statue of Liberty in New York and the roof on the Houses of Parliament in London were made from copper and iron from the Urals region.

In 1917 the Russian empire was consumed by the outbreak of revolution and civil war. Red radicals and White loyalists fought back-and-forth battles across the Urals. Yekaterinburg became the site of one of history's most notorious political murders, when Tsar Nicholas, Tsaritsa Alexandra and their children were shot in middle of the night and disposed of in an abandoned mine.

The Urals region figured prominently in the Soviet Union's rapid industrialisation drive in the 1930s. Some of the world's largest steelworks and industrial complexes were built there, including Uralmash in Sverdlovsk (modern-day Yekaterinburg) and Magnitogorsk in Chelyabinsk.

During WWII more than 700 factories were relocated to the Urals, beyond the reach of the advancing Nazis. The Urals became a centre of Soviet weapons manufacturing: Kalashnikov rifles from Izhevsk, T-34 tanks from Nizhny Tagil, and Katyusha rockets from Chelyabinsk. During the Cold War, secret cities, identified only by number, were constructed in the Urals to house the military nuclear and biochemical industries.

THE URALS AFTER COMMUNISM

In the late Soviet period, a Urals-bred construction engineer turned anticommunist crusader toppled the Soviet dictatorship. Boris Yeltsin had gained a reputation as the energetic and populist-leaning communist governor of Sverdlovsk when the reform-minded Mikhail Gorbachev first introduced him to the national political stage, a move that Gorbachev would soon regret.

In his political fights against the old Soviet order and the neocommunist of the post-Soviet transition, the Urals provided Yeltsin with strong support. Despite the hardships that radical economic reform inflicted on the heavily subsidised industrial sector, Yeltsin scored big election victories in the Urals cities in the 1991 and 1996 Russian presidential campaigns.

As elsewhere in Russia, the postcommunist transition in the Urals did not go according to the early optimistic plans. The region suffered the severe collapse of its manufacturing and agricultural sectors. Public employees went without wages. Rocket scientists became taxi drivers. Mafia turf wars were waged over the right to 'protect' the nascent private business sector. A regional autonomy movement, the short-lived Urals Republic, was not able to forestall a recentralisation by the Kremlin. Meanwhile, former communist political bosses entrenched themselves in elected office.

But after this harsh first decade, signs of economic recovery are now visible, at least in the larger cities. The region's rich export commodities, especially metals, and the revival of the military industrial sector have helped sustain the region.

National Parks

Founded in 1991, Taganay is the first national park in the Urals. The park covers 564 sq km in the western part of the Chelyabinsk Oblast, adjoining the northern suburbs of Zlatoust. It is a long narrow band, 52km long and 10km to 15km wide. Taganay contains a wide variety of landscapes, from flower-filled meadows to mountain tundra, as well as some of the southern Urals' notable ridges (Small, Middle and Big Taganay and Itsyl). It is also well known for its mineral reserves, including Russia's largest deposit of aventurine (known locally as taganit). The park is a popular destination for hiking, mountain biking and rafting.

In the far northern Komi Republic, the Virgin Komi Forests are designated as a World Heritage Site by Unesco. Its three million hectares are mostly tundra and mountain tundra, as well as an extensive area of virgin boreal forest (one of the largest expanses remaining in Europe). This vast area of conifers, aspens, birches, peat bogs, rivers

LIZARD QUEENS AND STONY CULTS

Legend attributes the mineral wealth of the Urals to the workings of a mysterious queen, who lived within a copper-lined mountain. She was a black-haired beauty with magical powers, appearing at times endearing and at other times wrathful towards the mortals she encountered in the hills, doting on shepherd boys and dropping boulders on mining bosses. The queen often took the form of a lizard.

The Lizard Queen is an enduring Russian myth about the Ural Mountains. Her story was passed down generations of Urals inhabitants by oral tradition. The adventures of the reptilian heroine were finally put to pen by writer Pavel Bazhov. Born in Perm in 1879, Bazhov learned the stories as a boy from old miners. His collection of 52 interconnected fairy tales, *The Malachite Box*, was published in 1939 and quickly became a standard of Soviet children's literature.

Perhaps the most popular Bazhov tale is *The Stone Flower*, which concerns a young man, Danil, who left home to learn the art of stone cutting. He journeyed into the mountains and was enticed into the cave of the queen, where she taught him the craft, but then refused to allow him to leave. The story is the subject of a famous ballet by the composer Sergei Prokofiev.

The magic of minerals is not confined to the lizard people of yore. New Age mystics tout the hidden powers of Urals stone. Malachite is said to strengthen spirituality, while jasper increases intellectual capabilities. The pink-coloured rhodonite is supposed to increase self-reliance. Dreamy green amazonite brings a sense of calm or – if used to excess – laziness. Agate leads to well-being and longevity.

After decades of communist-imposed atheism, some Russians, looking to fill a spiritual void, have formed a Bazhov-inspired pagan cult. The followers meet in the woods of the Urals each summer to worship the Lizard Queen of Copper Mountain. After paying homage to a wooden effigy of Her Scaliness, they set the figure ablaze. This Bazhov Academy of Secret Knowledge has been officially deemed an unworthy and destructive sect by the Russian Orthodox Church.

and natural lakes is a valuable resource for scientists studying biodiversity.

Getting There & Around

The major cities of the Urals are all accessible by train: in the Middle Urals, Perm and Yekaterinburg are on the main line of the trans-Siberian route; while the southern Urals cities, Chelyabinsk and Ufa, also have direct routes from the west. The trickier part is travelling from north to south within the Urals, where the mountains tend to make train routes winding and slow. In these cases, travelling by bus is often the better option.

PERM ПЕРМЬ

☎ 3422 / pop 1 million / 🚗 Moscow + 2hr
Dominated by heavily trafficked avenues and concrete blocks, Perm is a modern, industrial city that most travellers could bear to miss. Its chequered history, however, draws them in to bear witness to the combined thousands of years that were lost by prisoners at the notorious labour camp Perm-36, and to discover what has become of the once-secret city of Molotov (named

during the Soviet period for the foreign minister who was also the namesake of the explosive cocktail).

Today, Perm is not as menacing, but its reputation as a bland, provincial capital persists. (Chekhov used Perm as inspiration for the city his Three Sisters were so desperate to leave.) It is unfortunate, as the city boasts its fair share of cultural attractions, from a championship basketball team to the one-of-a-kind Prikamye art collection

Economically, the city is thriving. Evidence of its military history is everywhere, but so are signs of ongoing economic development, from shiny new bank buildings to sushi bars.

Orientation

Perm sprawls along the south bank of the Kama River. The city centre is at the intersection of ul Lenina and Komsomolsky pr, and Perm-II station is about 2.5km south-west of here.

Information

Internet Centre (☎ 373 605; ul Kommunisticheskaya 77; per hr R30; 🕒 24hr) Often crowded with young boys

playing video games, but the large, dark hall has plenty of computers.

Main post office (ul Lenina 29; per hr R30; 🕒 24hr) Also offers Internet access.

Permtourist (☎ 906 237; www.permtourist.ru in Russian; ul Lenina 58) Arranges local excursions as well as cruises along the Kama River and further to the Volga.

Sberbank (ul Lenina 31; 🕒 10am-8pm Mon-Sat) Cashes travellers cheques and gives credit card advances.

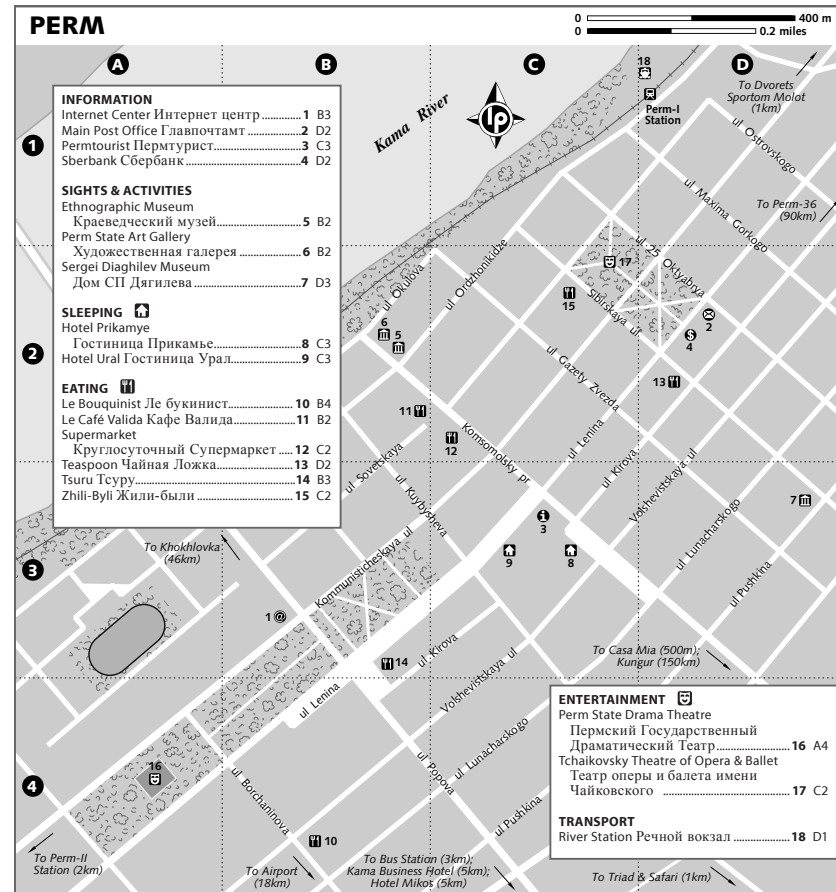
Sights

Housed in the grand Cathedral of Christ Transfiguration on the banks of the Kama, the **Perm State Art Gallery** (☎ 129 524, 122 395; www.sculpture.permonline.ru; Komsomolsky pr 4; admission R30; 🕒 10am-6pm Tue-Fri, 11am-7pm Sat, noon-6pm Sun) is renowned for its collection of

Prikamye wooden sculpture. Dating back to the 17th century, the religious figures are examples of a primitive style that is unique to the Perm region. The museum also contains a large collection of icons, some works by the Peredvizhniki ('the Wanderers', a group of 19th-century Russian artists) and temporary exhibits by contemporary artists.

Next door, the **Ethnographic Museum** (☎ 122 456; Komsomolsky pr 6; admission R10; 🕒 10am-6pm Sat-Thu) features mainly stuffed animals but houses some exhibits on local history.

The **Sergei Diaghilev Museum** (☎ 120 610; Sibirskaia ul 33; admission free; 🕒 9am-6pm Mon-Fri) is a small, lovingly curated exhibition on this world-famous ballet and opera impresario



(1872–1929), whose family came from the Perm region.

Sleeping

Hotel Ural (☎ 906 258, 906 220; ural-hotel@permtourist.ru; ul Lenina 58; s/d from R720/1000, 25% reservation fee) Average distance from front desk to drab room is about 1km. This monolith has the charm of a Soviet appartchik, but the central location is convenient. For R1500/1800, you'll get a slightly upgraded room with telephone and TV, as well as breakfast.

Hotel Prikamye (☎ /fax 348 662; Komsomolsky pr 27; s without bathroom R700, s/d with bathroom from R1200/1600) If Hotel Ural is full, another decent option is right around the corner.

Two small, upscale hotels are located about 5km southeast of the city centre on the way to the airport. **Kama Business Hotel** (☎ 280 248; www.kama-hotel.ru; ul Baumana 25b; s with breakfast from R2900; ☑ ☒) and **Hotel Mikos** (☎ 241 999; www.micos.perm.ru in Russian; Stakhanovskaya ul 10a; s/d from R2400/2900; ☒ ☒). Both are popular with business travellers and require advanced booking.

Eating

The terrace overlooking the Kama River just outside the Art Gallery is a good place for beer and shashlyk from a *letny kafe* (summer café).

Zhili-Byli (☎ 125 771; Sibirskaya ul 9; meals R150-200; ☒ 11am-2am) A chain with outlets around the region, this *traktir* (country inn) is a popular spot for affordable Russian favourites. You can fill up from the salad bar, which is a godsend for vegetarians.

Teaspoon (☎ 126 048; Sibirskaya ul 19a; meals R30-60; ☒ 9am-10pm) Serving tea (R12), coffee and bliny (R18), this little café is a perfect stop for breakfast or for a light lunch. Service is cafeteria-style, but the setting is bright and clean, attracting lots of students and young people.

Other recommendations:

Le Bouquinist (☎ 449 582; ul Borchaninova 12; business lunch from R150, meals R400-500; ☒ 9.30am-midnight) A romantic French café with live music on Friday and a DJ on Thursday and Saturday.

Casa Mia (☎ 377 647; Komsomolsky pr 47; business lunch R160, meals R250-400) Indulge in pasta or pizza at this friendly trattoria.

Supermarket (cnr Komsomolsky pr & ul Sovetskaya; ☒ 24hr) Stock up for your train ride at this central shop.

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

'Coffee...like Art' reads the menu at **Le Café Valida** (☎ 103 393; Komsomolsky pr 7; meals R500-800; ☒ 8am-2am). Coffee is not the only thing that is artistic at this trendy place: a DJ works the wax in the midst of funky, modern décor, and Perm's fashionable set nibbles on creative salads and snacks while checking each other out.

Tsuru (☎ 363 460; ul Lenina 66a; business lunch R120, meals R200-400) Evidence that the sushi craze has not bypassed Perm.

Entertainment

Triad (☎ 347 256; ul Kuybysheva 66; ☒ noon-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6am Sat & Sun) Check out this neon-lit entertainment complex for bowling (R300 to R600) or billiards (R100 to R200), but skip the overpriced bar.

Safari (☎ 450 556; ul Kuybysheva 66; cover R100-250; ☒ 11pm-8am Thu-Sat) Tucked in behind Triad, this dark, smoky nightclub attracts a very young crowd that likes to get down on the dance floor. Don your sexiest clubwear, and don't bother show up before midnight.

Tchaikovsky Theatre of Opera & Ballet (☎ 123 087; Kommunisticheskaya ul 25) If your cultural inclinations lean towards the classical, take in a performance at the beautiful baroque theatre that dominates Reshetnikova Garden. It is home to one of Russia's top schools of performing arts.

Perm State Drama Theatre (☎ 361 092, 360 767; ul Lenina 53) Another venue that stages classical performances.

Dvoretz Sportom Molot (☎ 773 897; www.ural-great.ru in Russian; ul Lebedeva 13; tickets from R50; box office ☒ 10am-7.30pm) Perm's professional basketball team, Ural Great, has not won the championship for a few years, but they still have a loyal fan base. They play from September to April.

Getting There & Away

The **ticket office** (☒ 9am-8pm; ☎ 906 030) in the lobby of Hotel Ural is useful for airline and train tickets.

AIR

There are three daily Aeroflot flights to/from Moscow Domodedovo (R3500),

with additional flights to Yekaterinburg (R2500, four weekly), Samara (R3300, three weekly) and St Petersburg (R5100, two weekly). Weekly flights go to Novosibirsk, Baku and Tashkent. **Lufthansa** (☎ 284 442) flies to/from Frankfurt twice a week.

BOAT

The **river station** (☎ 199 304) is at the eastern end of ul Ordzhonikidze, opposite Perm-I station. Boats depart here for cruises down the Kama River to the Volga.

BUS

Plans for a new bus station near Perm-II train station will probably not be realised until 2007. In the meantime, use the old station at the southern end of ul Popova for buses to Khokhlovka and Chusovoy.

TRAIN

Perm-II, the city's major train station, is on the trans-Siberian route. Many trains travel the route from Moscow, including the *firmeny* train (a nicer, long-distance train) called the *Kama* (20 hours, R1950). Heading east, the next major stop is Yekaterinburg (R650, six hours). Trains also travel every second day, more frequently in summer, to Chelyabinsk (R1050, 12

hours) and Kazan (R706, 16 hours). Note that some trains to Kazan depart from the *gorny trakt* (mountain track) on the north side of Perm-II, as opposed to the *glavny trakt* (main track).

The crumbling Perm-I station, 1km northeast of the centre, is used only for suburban trains, such as those to Kungur.

Getting Around

Buses 110, 119 and 120 serve the airport (35 minutes), or take a taxi for about R250. Take tram 7 or any bus or trolleybus between Perm-II station and Hotel Ural.

AROUND PERM

Khokhlovka ХОХЛОВКА

The **Architecture-Ethnography Museum** (☎ 997 182; admission R35; ☒ 9am-6pm Mon-Sun late-May – mid-Oct) is set in the rolling countryside near the village of Khokhlovka, about 45km north of Perm. Its impressive collection of wooden buildings includes two churches dating from the turn of the 18th century. Most of the structures are from the 19th or early 20th centuries, including an old firehouse, a salt production facility and a Khanty *izba* (traditional wooden cottage). A few buses a day serve Khokhlovka from Perm (one hour, R50).

EVEN WALLS HAVE EARS *Yakov L Klots*

'Even walls have ears,' goes the Russian saying. At Perm-36, the former camp for political prisoners, the walls have survived...unlike most of those who were kept behind them. Dissidents, poets, intelligentsia. Ordinary people whose lives had been taken away and silenced. Concrete floors, barred windows, plank beds, aluminium bowls, spoons and mugs, and the barbed wire coiling along the borders of the restricted areas: all outlived the inmates.

Nowadays, representing the camp's daily routine with an existential accuracy, the walls keep the memory of bygone times – of prisoners who were not fated to see their place of detention become a museum, of halls walked by prison guards instead of high-school students.

Before the first prisoners were brought to Perm-36, all of the trees around the grounds were destroyed. The purpose was to prevent convicts from determining in which part of our vast country they had landed. Prisoners were not allowed to leave their cells, so they could not hear the gush of the Chusovaya river, which flowed a few hundred metres from the camp's gate. And now the rich local landscape that they might spy through narrow window slits was wiped out.

But the guards were powerless to prevent local birds from flying and singing above the camp barracks. So an inmate – a biologist sentenced to 25 years of 'special regime imprisonment' – identified the bird species by their songs, and determined he was in the Urals.

One can never know for sure what tomorrow is going to be like. Perhaps the darkest side of life in imprisonment is the constant awareness that tomorrow is *not* going to be different from yesterday. The deathly silence that resounds in the damp, dark cells at Perm-36 reminds us of what this place was like yesterday.

Perm-36 Пермь-36

Once an ominous island in the Gulag Archipelago, **Perm-36** (☎ 120 030; www.perm36.ru in Russian; admission R60, ☎ by appointment) is now a fascinating museum and moving memorial to the victims of political repression.

For most of its history since 1946, Perm-36 was a labour camp for political prisoners, in other words, dissidents. Countless artists, scientists and intellectuals spent years in the cold, damp cells, many in solitary confinement. They worked at mundane tasks like assembling fasteners and survived on measly portions of bread and gruel.

Much of the evidence of this history was destroyed when the camp closed in 1988, but the museum staff is dedicated to recreating the camp as it was. Windowless cells and barbed wire are eerie reminders that this history is not so distant. The exhibits make the reality of prison life all too clear.

The memorial centre is about 10km from the town of Chusovoy, which is 100km east of Perm. A new road makes the museum accessible by bus from Perm. Alternatively, museum staff can make arrangements for a taxi for about R3000. A guided tour costs R600. Museum management plans to build a small on-site hotel and conference facility, expected to open in 2007.

Kungur Кунгур

Founded in 1663, the town of Kungur was a copper-smelting centre during the 17th and 18th centuries. Many notable (though dilapidated) buildings remain from this heyday, including **All Saints Church**, a 17th-century **governor's house** and the 19th-century arcade, **Gostiny Dvor**. Get the full story at the **Regional Local Studies Museum** (ul Gogolya 36; admission R20; ☎ 11am-5pm).

Kungur was long a popular destination for potential spelunkers investigating the **Kungur Ice Cave** (Ledyanaya peshchera; admission R350; ☎ 10am-5pm), about 5km out of town. The extensive network of caves stretches for more than 5km, although only about 1.5km are open to explore. The grottos are adorned with unique ice formations, frozen waterfalls and underground lakes. Permtourist (see p433) arranges tours here, as well as accommodation in the adjacent **Stalagmit Hotel** (☎ /fax 34271-39 723; r R600, upgraded r from R1200).

Trains from Perm (R60, 2½ hours, eight daily) arrive at the station on ul Bachurina in Kungur. A day trip is possible if you start early but check the train schedule in advance.

YEKATERINBURG ЕКАТЕРИНБУРГ

☎ 343 / pop 1.29 million / ☎ Moscow +2hr
From the execution of Tsar Nicholas II and his family in 1918 to the high-profile Mafia killings in the 1990s, Yekaterinburg is notorious for its bloody history. Contemporary Yekaterinburg remembers these events, attracting pilgrims and tourists alike to the sites associated with the Romanov deaths.

As the economic and cultural capital of the Urals region, however, the city offers visitors much more than a dramatic history. The Urals' mineral wealth is on display in the city's many museums, while the ongoing economic boom is evident in the crowded cafés and clubs around the centre. Yekaterinburg also has the accommodation options and facilities to serve as a convenient base for adventure activities and winter sports in the Urals.

History

Yekaterinburg was founded as a factory-fort in 1723 as part of Peter the Great's push to exploit the Ural region's mineral riches. The city was named after two Yekaterinas: Peter's wife (later Empress Catherine I), and the Russian patron saint of mining.

Yekaterinburg is most famous as the place where the Bolsheviks murdered Tsar Nicholas II and his family in July 1918. Six years later, the town was renamed Sverdlovsk, after Yakov Sverdlov, a leading Bolshevik who was Vladimir Lenin's right-hand man until his death in the flu epidemic of 1919.

WWII turned Sverdlovsk into a major industrial centre, as hundreds of factories were transferred here from vulnerable areas west of the Urals. The city was closed to foreigners until 1990 because of its many defence plants. Remnants of this era still litter the city, with fighter planes proudly displayed in schoolyards and missiles arranged outside the city's Military History Museum.

It was one such missile that in 1960 brought down US pilot Gary Powers and his U2 spy plane in this area. Powers, who

bailed out successfully, was exchanged for a Soviet spy in 1962.

During the late 1970s a civil engineering graduate of the local university, Boris Yeltsin, began to make his political mark, rising to become regional Communist Party boss before being promoted to Moscow in 1985.

In 1991 Yekaterinburg took back its original name. After suffering economic depression and Mafia lawlessness in the early 1990s, business has been on the upswing for the past decade.

Orientation

The city centre lies between the main boulevards, pr Lenina and ul Malysheva, and runs from pl 1905 goda in the west to ul

Lunacharskogo in the east. The train station is 2km north of the centre on ul Sverdlova, which changes its name to ul Karla Libknekhta closer to the centre.

Information

Alfa Bank (☎ 371 4226; ul Malysheva 33a) Has a 24-hour ATM that dispenses roubles or US dollars.

Coffee.IN (☎ 277 6873; ul 8 Marta 8; per hr R50; ☎ 24hr) Internet café located in the shopping centre Mytny Dvor. Enter from the back.

Dom Knigi (☎ 358 1898; ul Antona Valeka 12; ☎ 9am-7pm) Best for foreign-language and local-interest books.

Ekaterinburg Guide Center (☎ 268 1604; www.ekaterinburg-guide.com; ul Krasnoarmeyskaya 1) An enthusiastic group that organises English-language tours of

BONES OF CONTENTION

What happened to the Romanovs – even after their 1918 execution – is a mixture of the macabre, the mysterious and the just plain messy.

The Romanov remains resurfaced back in 1976, when a group of local scientists discovered them near Porosinkov Log, about 3km from Ganina Yama. So politically sensitive was this issue during Soviet times that the discovery was kept secret until the remains were finally fully excavated in 1991. The bones of nine people were tentatively identified as Tsar Nicholas II, his wife Tsaritsa Alexandra, three of their four daughters, the royal doctor and three servants.

Absent were any remains of the royal couple's only son, Tsarevitch Alexey. Also notably absent was the fourth daughter, which gave a new lease of life to theories that the youngest daughter, Anastasia, had somehow escaped.

In 1992 bone samples from the excavated skeletons were sent to the British government's Forensic Science Service, to be tested by DNA identification techniques. Using blood and hair samples from distant descendants of the tsar and tsarina, the scientists established with 'more than 98.5%' certainty that the bones were those of the royal family.

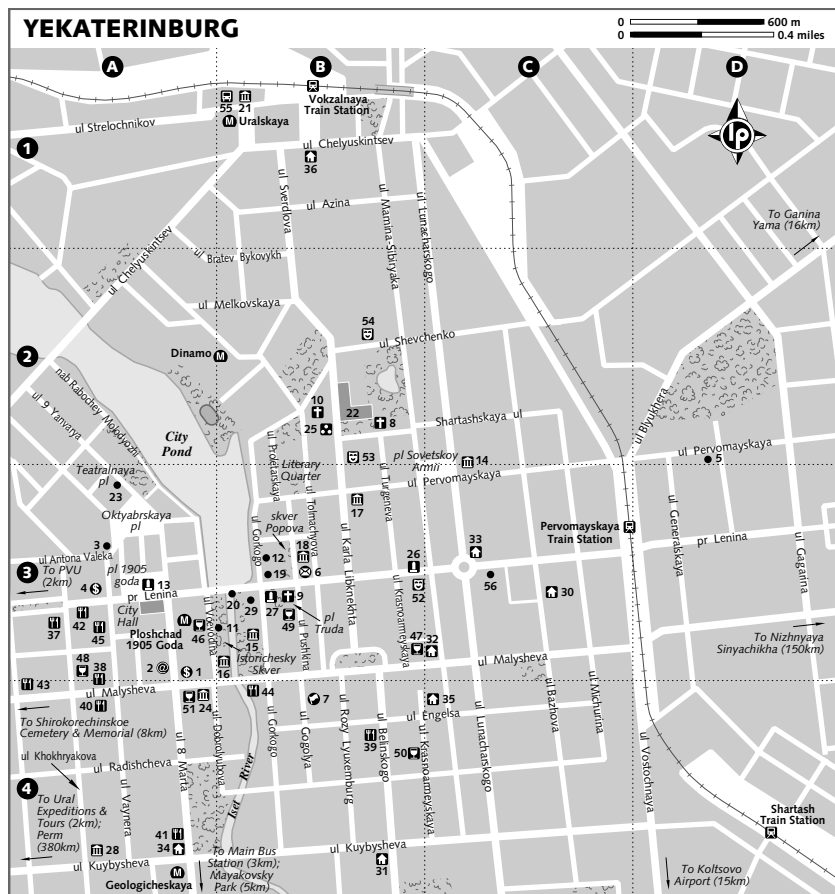
In 1994, an official Russian inquiry team in Yekaterinburg managed to piece together the skulls found in the pit, badly damaged by rifle butts, hand grenades and acid. Using plaster models of the faces, DNA tests and dental records, they determined that the three daughters found were Olga, Tatyana – and Anastasia. The missing daughter was Maria.

Maria and Alexey's bodies have never been discovered. But the now-official story of the Romanov execution explains their absence. And what a tale of ghoulish bungling it is.

According to the Russian team, all five children died with their parents in the cellar of Dom Ipatyeva. The bodies were dumped at Ganina Yama, an abandoned mine 16km away, followed by several grenades intended to collapse the mine shaft. The mine, however, did not collapse. It was then decided to distribute the bodies among various smaller mines and pour acid on them. But the expert in charge of the acid fell off his horse and broke his leg; and the truck carrying the bodies became bogged in a swamp.

By now understandably desperate, the disposal team opted to bury the corpses. They tried burning Alexey and Maria in preparation, but realised it would take days to burn all the bodies properly, so the others were just put in a pit and doused with acid. Even then, most of the acid soaked away into the ground – leaving the bones to be uncovered 73 years later.

In mid-1998 the royal remains were finally buried at St Petersburg's SS Peter & Paul Cathedral, alongside their predecessors dating back to Peter the Great. The Orthodox Church, however, has never recognised that the royal remains were removed from Ganina Yama, and church officials were not in attendance at the burial in St Petersburg.



the city and trips into the countryside. Popular excursions include rafting, hiking and biking trips in the Urals (€40 to €52 per person), as well as Ganina Yama and the Europe-Asia border (see p444). Enter through the side entrance of Bolshoy Ural Hotel. Also arranges discounted accommodation and home stays.

Gutabank (☎ 359 2621; pr Lenina 27; ☎ 9am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) One of the few places in the city that accepts travellers cheques.

Karta (☎ 375 6290; ul Pervomayskaya 74; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat) An extensive selection of maps of Yekaterinburg and Sverdlovsk Oblast, as well as other cities and regions.

Main post office (pr Lenina 39; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Fri) Offers Internet and international telephone connections.

Ural Expeditions & Tours (☎ 376 2800; http://welcome-ural.ru; 23 Posadskaya ul) This group of geologists

from the Sverdlovsk Mining Institute has found a unique way to market their skills and knowledge – leading trekking, rafting and horse-riding trips to all parts of the Urals, including Taganay National Park. English-speaking guides.

Sights & Activities ROMANOV DEATH SITE

On the night of 16 July 1918, Tsar Nicholas II, his wife and children were murdered in the basement of a local merchant's house, known as Dom Ipatyeva (named for its owner, Nikolay Ipatyev). During the Soviet period, the building housed a local museum of atheism, but it was demolished in 1977 by then-governor Boris Yeltsin, who feared it would attract monarchist sympathisers.

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Today, the site is marked by an iron cross dating from 1991, and a second marble cross from 1998 when the Romanovs' remains were sent to St Petersburg for burial in the family vault.

The massive Byzantine-style **Church of the Blood** (☎ 371 6168; ul Tolmachyova 34) now dominates this site. While many believe these funds might have been better spent, this new church was built to honour the Romanov family, now elevated to the status of saints. Rumour has it that this controversial church contains the most expensively commissioned icon in all of Russia.

Nearby, the pretty wooden **Chapel of the Revered Martyr Grand Princess Yelizaveta Fyodorovna** (☎ 9am-5.30pm) honours the royal family's great-aunt and faithful friend. After her relatives' murders, this pious nun met an even worse end, when she was thrown down a mineshaft, poisoned with gas and buried. You can visit this spot, where a monastery has recently been built, on a trip to Nizhnyaya Sinyachikha.

MUSEUMS

The city of Yekaterinburg grew up around Istorichesky skver (Historical Sq), where today you'll find a clutch of tiny museums housed in the historic buildings. Peek into the old **water tower**, one of the city's oldest

structures, then head over to the old mining-equipment factory and mint buildings. These contain the **Museum of Architecture & Industry** (☎ 371 4045; ul Gorkogo 4 & 5; ☎ 11am-6pm Tue-Sat), which displays the machinery used in the mining industry from the 18th and 19th centuries up through WWII.

On the opposite side of the river, the star exhibit of the **Museum of Fine Arts** (☎ 371 0626; ul Voevodina 5; admission R50; ☎ 11am-6pm Wed-Sun) is the elaborate Kasli Iron Pavilion that won prizes in the 1900 Paris Expo.

The **Regional Studies Museum** (☎ 376 4762; ul Malysheva 46; admission R30; ☎ 11am-5pm Mon-Fri) has some interesting exhibits on the Romanovs and the Old Believers in the Ural region.

For a stunning introduction to the Urals semiprecious stones, visit Vladimir Pelepenko's private collection, also known as the **Ural Mineralogical Museum** (☎ 350 6019; ul Krasnoarmeyskaya 1A; admission R50; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat & Sun), in Bolshoy Ural Hotel. This impressive collection contains thousands of examples of minerals, stones and crystals from the region, many crafted into mosaics, jewellery and other artistic pieces.

More-serious geologists will appreciate the **Ural Geology Museum** (☎ 251 4938; ul Kuybysheva 39; admission R50; ☎ 11am-5pm Mon-Sat), which has over 500 carefully catalogued Ural region minerals and a collection of meteorites.

The **Military History Museum** (☎ 350 1742; ul Pervomayskaya 27; admission R30; 🕒 9am–4pm Tue–Sat) is a must for military buffs.

Other unique museums:

Museum of Photography (☎ 371 0637; ul Karla Libknekhta 36; admission R20; 🕒 11am–5.30pm Wed–Mon) Features evocative photos of old Yekaterinburg.

Nevyansk Icon Museum (☎ 365 9840; ul Tolmachyova 21; admission free; 🕒 noon–8pm Wed–Sun) Icons from the 17th to the 20th century, from the local Nevyansk school.

Railway Museum (☎ 358 4222; ul Chelyuskintsev; 🕒 noon–6pm Tue–Sat) Housed in the old train station, dating from 1881. Exhibits highlight the history of the railroad in the Urals, including a re-creation of the office of the Stalin-era railway director.

WINTER SPORTS

Winter in the Urals lasts a long time, making this a terrific place for winter sports. The rolling hills that surround Yekaterinburg are breathtaking when covered with a fresh layer of snow. Urals Expeditions & Tours (p438) can arrange dogsledding excursions (per person €65), as well as winter hikes and snowmobile trips.

If there's no time to leave the city, head to **Mayakovsky Park**, 5km south of town, for cross-country skiing. Take tram 3 from the train station or tram 29 from ul Lenina. Equipment is available to rent.

Walking Tour

A walking tour is the ideal way to take in the scope of the city's tumultuous history. Start at Istorichesky skver where pr

Lenina crosses a small dam forming the Gorodskoy prud (City Pond) on its north side. This area, better known as the *plotinka* (little dam), was where Yekaterinburg began back in 1723. Water from the dam powered an iron forge for mining equipment and a mint; these historic buildings now house the **Museum of Architecture & Industry** (1; p439).

The bridge on ul Lenina holds the striking, red, sculpted **Order of Lenin** (2) given to the city for honourable service during WWII. On the west side of the *plotinka* is **Geological Alley** (3), a small park dotted with rocks from the Ural region.

About 100m west along pr Lenina is **ploshchad 1905 goda** (4). The impressive Stalinist building with the clock tower is the **town hall** (5). The looming **statue of Lenin** (6) occupies the spot where once stood one of Yekaterinburg's main cathedrals and a statue of Tsar Alexander II Romanov, both destroyed in 1930 by Bolshevik radicals. Further west, artists sell their wares along the tree-lined strip in the centre of pr Lenina.

Cross the bridge heading east on pr Lenina, where the founders of Yekaterin-

burg – Tatishchev and de Gennin – proudly hold the tsar's decree. This **monument to the founders of the city** (7) was unveiled on the city's 275th anniversary in 1998. The nearby **Chapel of St Catherine** (8) was erected in the same year on the site of a former cathedral honouring the patron saint of mining.

Across the street, the architecture demonstrates the radical changes of the 19th and 20th centuries. The eclectic 19th-century **Nikolai Sevastianof mansion** (9), which is now a trade union's headquarters, was a rich merchant's attempt to outshine the **governor's mansion** (10), which stands next door. In total contrast are the clean lines of the **regional government building** (11) across the pond, a prime example of 1930s constructivism. Further east, a **statue of Yakov Sverdlov** (12) stands in front of the Opera & Ballet Theatre (p443).

At the roundabout, head north on ul Lunacharskogo towards **ploshchad Sovetskoy Armii** (13), dominated by a powerful monument. The giant soldier with downcast head commemorates primarily losses in Russia's Afghanistan War (1979–89), but plaques around the statue also note those lost in other conflicts during the Cold War years.

Continue north from the square along ul Mamina-Sibiriyaka. A pretty park climbs up the hill known locally as the Yekaterinburg Acropolis. At the top is the ostentatious **Rastorguev-Kharitonov mansion** (14) and the restored **Ascension Church** (15; ul Klara Tsetkin 11). Immediately ahead of the church is the **Romanov execution site** (16; p438).

Walk a few blocks west along ul Pervomayskaya. The block north of here on ul Proletarskaya is known as the **Literary Quarter** (17). Several of these wooden houses are museums dedicated to local writers. Once

you reach the City Pond, follow the shoreline south back to Istorichesky skver.

Sleeping

BUDGET

Ekaterinburg Guide Center (☎ 268 1604; www.ekaterinburg-guide.com; ul Krasnoarmeyskaya 1, 1-/2-/3-person home stays with breakfast €22/36/52) Experience real Russian living by staying with a local family. The agency also rents apartments for €40 to €50 per night – a bargain if you are travelling in a group.

Bolshoy Ural Hotel (☎ 350 6695; fax 355 0583; ul Krasnoarmeyskaya 1; s with/without bathroom R1450/500) This place lives up to its name: if nothing else, it is indeed *bolshoy* (large), occupying an entire city block. The somewhat seedy atmosphere is buffered by the prime location – steps from the Opera Theatre and the all-important Gordon's Scottish pub.

MIDRANGE

Academy of Geology Hotel (☎ 350 0508, 350 0510; pr Lenina 54, Bldg 6; r with breakfast R1200) This decent budget option offers attentive service and four smart, spacious rooms. Located in a quiet complex off the main road, it is difficult to find. Enter the courtyard from ul Bazhova and look for the marble entrance with the unmarked metal door. Unfortunately, this place does not register visas, so it is not a good option for visitors staying more than a day or two.

Hotel Sverdlovsk (☎ 353 6574; fax 353 6248; ul Chelyuskintsev 106; s/d from R1200/1500) Gives a choice between cheap and dilapidated rooms or upgraded and overpriced. In its favour is its location opposite the station.

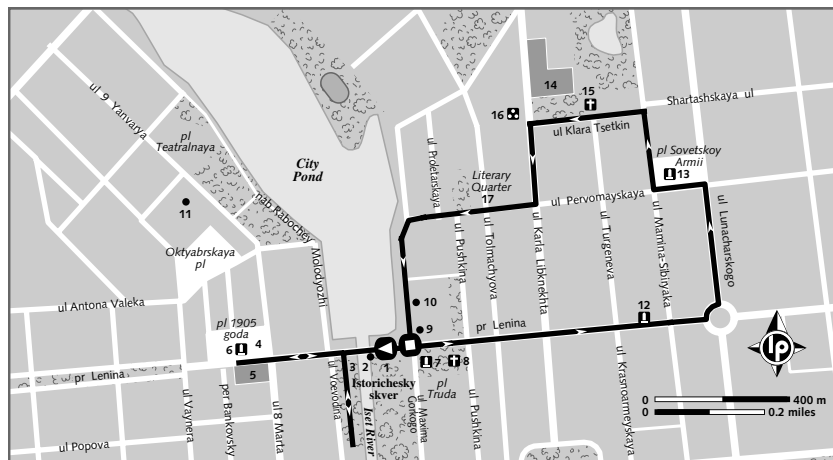
Country Inn (ul Malysheva) Under construction at the time of research, this hotel is expected to be a Western-managed three-star tourist hotel, filling a void of midrange options. It is due to open in 2006; contact the Ekaterinburg Guide Center for information.

TOP END

Hotel Premier (☎ 563 897; fax 563 880; www.premier-hotel.ru; ul Krasnoarmeyskaya 23; s/d with breakfast R4000/5300; 🚰 📺) Another small and personable European-style hotel. Rooms can be a bit stuffy in winter when air-con is not working, but otherwise they are spacious and stylish. The location offers the best of both worlds: a quiet residential street, just a few steps from the main drag.

WALK FACTS

Start Istorichesky Skver
Finish Istorichesky Skver
Distance 3½km
Duration 2 hours



AUTHOR'S CHOICE

If **Hotel Iset** (☎ 350 0128; hotel_resr@etel.ru; pr Lenina 69; s/d with breakfast from R2900/3600) looks funky from the street, it is because it's shaped like a hammer and sickle when seen from the sky. All of the rooms at this retro Soviet-style hotel have been upgraded, featuring hardwood floors, new bathrooms and odd furniture ensembles. It's all part of the charm.

Hotel Magister (☎ 229 7044, 257 4206; magister1@etel.ru; ul 8 Marta 50; s/d with breakfast R4100/4600; ☒ ☑) Quaint, comfortable rooms and accommodating staff make the Magister a long-standing favourite with visitors to Yekaterinburg. New windows block out the noise from the busy street below. This small, private hotel is 'home' for many long-term business travellers, so book well in advance.

Atrium Palace Hotel (☎ 359 6000; www.atriumhotel.ru; ul Kuybysheva 44; s/d incl breakfast €210/260; ☒ ☑ ☑) Atrium Palace once claimed to be the only five-star hotel east of Moscow. This snazzy place has several pricey restaurants, a popular bar and nightclub, plus a fitness centre and sauna. Rack rates are quoted, but discounts are usually available, especially if you make your reservation through the Ekaterinburg Guide Center.

Eating

RESTAURANTS

Dacha (☎ 379 3569; pr Lenina 20a; meals R200-300) Each room in this restaurant is decorated as a room in a Russian country house, from the casual garden to the more formal dining room. It's a great place to enjoy unbeatable Russian cuisine and hospitality.

Port Stanley (☎ 355 1955; ul Gorkogo 10; meals R600-1000) The sunny terrace on the banks of the Iset makes this a top spot for dining in summer, while the modern interior is also pleasant. The menu is seafood – not from the Iset, we hope. Sample Russian favourites, like grilled sturgeon or herring salad, or more-exotic fare, like sea bass or lobster.

Nigora (☎ 376 3941; ul Malysheva 19; meals R200-300) Nigora offers spicy, filling Uzbek food – soup and *plov* (rice with lamb and carrot) to fill the belly and warm the soul. Heavy wooden tables and a low, painted ceiling add to the cosy, welcoming atmosphere.

Georgian Kitchen (☎ 350 0541; ul Belinskogo 20; meals with wine R300-500; ☒ 24hr) This is a classic Georgian place, complete with kitschy art and Christmas lights. But the shashlyk, *kharcho* (rice with beef or lamb soup) and *khachapuri* (cheese bread) are spicy and delicious. The keyboardist-crooner belting out the ballads never fails to inspire some dancing (or perhaps that's the Georgian wine).

Grand Buffet (☎ 359 8366; ul Malysheva 36; meals R250-350) All-you-can-eat buffet with Russian fare. You'll find nearly anything you are

craving, as the basement saloon serves Tex-Mex and there's an Italian place next door.

Em Sam (☎ 376 6066; Malysheva 27; meals R150-300; ☒ 11am-midnight) Sushi is the rage all over Russia, and Yekaterinburg is no exception. Nice lunch specials and a convenient location make this place particularly popular. There is another outlet in Bolshoy Ural Hotel.

QUICK EATS & SELF-CATERING

Uspensky Food Court (☎ 371 6744; ul Vainera 10; meals R30-100; ☒ 10am-8pm) On the top floor of the Uspensky shopping centre, this food court offers burgers, pizza, sandwiches, sushi and more. Floor-to-ceiling windows provide a sweeping view of the city centre and a new perspective on the activity below.

Mak Pik (☎ 371 6898; pr Lenina 24/8; meals R100; ☒ 9am-10pm) Now in several locations around the city, Yekaterinburg's original fast-food restaurant specialises in burgers like the 'Big Mak Pik'; it also has pizza, *pelmeni* (Russian-style ravioli) and, of all things, sushi.

Kupets (ul 8 Marta 48; ☒ 24hr) If you're looking for a large, Western-style supermarket with a wide selection of Russian and imported food items, head here.

Drinking

Coffee Shop No 7 (☎ 378 9370; ul Voevodina 4; breakfast R100-200; ☒ 8am-midnight) A pleasant location on the *plotinka*, smooth jazz and frothy cappuccinos. What more can you ask from your local coffee shop?

Old Dublin Pub (☎ 376 5173; ul Khokhryakova 23; meals R400-600, ½l Guinness R140; ☒ noon-2am) A long-standing favourite among expats in Yekaterinburg, this place is actually owned – partially – by an Irish bloke.

Gordon's (☎ 355 4535; Krasnoarmeyskaya ul 1; business lunch R180, meals R400-600; ☒ noon-2am) The aforementioned Irish bloke opened this Scottish pub in 2005, and it promises to be a popular spot, thanks to the excellent food and 12 beers on tap. Bartenders in kilts don't hurt, either.

Rosy Jane (☎ 371 0607; ul Lenina 34; ☒ 24hr) An English pub – not to be confused with the Scottish pub down the street and the Irish pub around the corner. The dark wood bar features seven different draught beers and more than 150 kinds of whisky.

Tinkoff (☎ 378 4008; Krasnoarmeyskaya 64; ½l beer R120; ☒ noon-2am) This microbrewery features seven home-grown brews as well as some

seasonal specialities, plus a menu of sausages, sandwiches and other tasty snacks. You will recognise the restaurant's open layout and industrial décor if you have been to Tinkoff outlets in other cities.

Entertainment

Vodoley (☎ 377 7277; ul Shevchenko 9; ☒ 1pm-6am) There is something for everyone at this entertainment complex – from bowling to billiards to dining to dancing. There is strict control at the door, so be sure to dress the part.

Zebra (☎ 377 6891; ul Malysheva 44; ☒ 10pm-10am) If you are serious about dancing, this is the place to strut your stuff. Progressive, house and techno play all night long.

Philharmonic (☎ 371 4682; www.filarmonia.e-burg.ru in Russian; ul Karla Libknekhta 38) Yekaterinburg's top venue for the classical performing arts often hosts visiting directors and soloists, as well as the regular performances of the acclaimed Urals academic orchestra.

Opera & Ballet Theatre (☎ 350 8057; pr Lenina 45A; tickets from R100) The level of professionalism is not quite on par with the Philharmonic, but the ornate baroque theatre is still a lovely place to see the Russian classics.

Getting There & Away

AIR

The main airport is **Koltsovo** (☎ 226 8909, 264 4202), 15km southeast of the city centre. Flights go three times a day to/from Moscow (R6000, 2½ hours).

Flights leave almost daily for Irkutsk (R7500, four hours), Novosibirsk (R5200, two hours), Samara (R4000, two hours), St Petersburg (R6000, 2½ hours) and Vladivostok (R13,000, 11 hours). Flights go less frequently to Baku, Khabarovsk, Krasnodar, Mineralnye Vody, Odesa, Rostov, Saratov, Sochi, Tashkent, Volgograd and Yerevan. Note that some of these flights are operated by Urals Airlines, which has a poor record for safety violations (including seven emergency landings in 2004!). A US consulate advisory warns against flying on any Urals Airlines flights until this record improves.

Several airlines operate direct flights to Europe, two or three times a week: **Lufthansa** (☎ 264 7771; €400 return) flies to Frankfurt; **British Airways** (☎ 264 4216; €500 return) to London; and **Czech Airlines** (☎ 264 4214) flies directly to Prague. **Transaero City Centre** (☎ 365 9165; pr lenina 50) handles bookings for all airlines.

BUS

The main **bus station** (☎ 229 9518, 229 4881; ul 8 Marta 145) is 3km south of the city centre. This is the place to catch buses to Chelyabinsk (R160, three hours, 10 daily). Buses to Alapaevsk (R110, three hours, three daily) and Verkhoturie (R216, five hours, daily) are more likely to leave from the **northern bus station** (☎ 353 8166, Volkznaya ul 15) near the train station.

TRAIN

Yekaterinburg – sometimes still 'Sverdlovsk' on timetables – is a major rail junction with connections to all stops on the trans-Siberian route. Trains to/from Moscow go frequently, but the most comfortable one is the *Ural* (R2050, 26 hours, daily). All trains to Moscow stop at either Perm (R650, seven hours) or Kazan (R1275, 15 hours). Heading east, the next major stops are Omsk (R1200, 12 hours) and Novosibirsk (R1280, 21 hours). You can buy tickets at outlets throughout the city, including the convenient **Railway and Air Kassa** (☎ 371 0400; ul Malysheva 31; ☒ 7am-9pm).

Getting Around

Bus 1 links the train station and Koltsovo airport (45 minutes) from 5.30am to 11pm.

Many trolleybuses (pay on board) run along ul Sverdlova/ul Karla Libknekhta between the train station and pr Lenina. Trams 4, 13, 15 and 18 and bus 28 cover long stretches of pr Lenina, with bus 4 continuing to the main bus station. The smaller northern bus station, primarily serving regional destinations, is near the train station.

A single metro line runs between the northeastern suburbs and the city centre, with stops at the train station (Uralskaya), pl 1905 goda and ul Kuybysheva near the Magister hotel (Geologicheskaya).

AROUND YEKATERINBURG Shirokorechinskoe Cemetery & Memorial to the Victims of Political Repression

Широко́речинское кладбище и Мемориальный комплекс Жертв Политического Репрессии
A trip out to Shirokorechinskoe cemetery, 8km west of the city centre along the Moskovsky Trakt, reveals Yekaterinburg's more recent history. At the entrance are the monumental graves of the victims of 1990s

gang warfare. They are hard to miss: look for the life-sized engraving of the 35-year-old gangster, his hand dangling Mercedes car keys as a symbol of his wealth.

Across the road is a vast memorial, opened in 1992 and dedicated to victims of the political repression of the 1930s. Some 25,000 people were killed in Yekaterinburg during Stalin's rule, and many of their bodies were later discovered here.

Bus 9 and 24 go from the west end of ul Lenina to nearby pl Kommunarov. Alternatively, catch a taxi from the city to the cemetery for R150 per hour.

Ganina Yama Ганина Яма

After the Romanov family was shot in the cellar of Dom Ipatyeva, their bodies were discarded in the depths of the forests of Ganina Yama, 16km northeast of Yekaterinburg. In their honour, the Orthodox Church has built the exquisite **Monastery of the Holy Martyrs** (☎ 343-2179146) at this pilgrimage site. Set deep in the peaceful birch forest, the wooden buildings were constructed using ancient methods, which preclude the use of nails. An observation platform overlooks the mine shaft where the remains were deposited and burned. According to the Orthodox Church, this is the final resting place of the Romanov family and is therefore sacred ground (see the boxed text, p437).

To reach Ganina Yama by public transport, take the *elektrichka* (suburban train) to Shuvakish. Be sure to check the return train schedule in advance. If you hire a taxi from

Yekaterinburg, take the road to Nizhny Tagil and look for the wooden signpost in the median strip 16km out of the city. Follow the signs to the monastery. Alternatively, Ekaterinburg Guide Center (p437) offers a three-hour tour for €20 to €27 per person.

Nizhnyaya Sinyachikha & Around

Нижняя Синячиха

The pretty village of Nizhnyaya Sinyachikha, about 150km northeast of Yekaterinburg and 12km north of the town of Alapaevsk, is home to an open-air **Architecture Museum** (☎ 246-75118; admission R20, guided tour R50; ☹ 10am-4pm). Here there are 15 traditional Siberian log buildings, featuring displays of period furniture, tools and domestic articles. The stone cathedral houses a collection of regional folk art, which is one of the best of its kind. This impressive grouping of art and architecture was gathered from around the Urals and recompiled by the single-handed efforts of Ivan Samoylov, an enthusiastic local historian.

About 2km west of Nizhnyaya Sinyachikha is a new monastery dedicated to Grand Princess Yelizaveta (see p438), on the spot where she died. Three buses a day go to Alapaevsk (R110, 3½ hours).

Verkhoturie Верхотурье

This small town on the Tura River, about 310km north of Yekaterinburg, is the site of the 400-year-old **St Nicholas Monastery**, one of the region's oldest and most important religious centres.

STRADDLING THE CONTINENTS

If you wish to have one foot in Europe and one in Asia, you can head 40km west of Yekaterinburg on the Moskovsky Trakt to the **Europe-Asia border**. Erected in 1837 at a 413m high point in the local Ural Mountains, the marker is a popular spot for wedding parties on their postnuptial video and photo jaunts.

In an attempt to make this geographic landmark more accessible to intercontinental travellers, city officials are in the process of erecting a new, more prominent marker at a new spot along the border. Conveniently, the new marker will be just 17km out of Yekaterinburg. The city has grand plans for monuments, museums, parks and gift shops, as well as European and Asian restaurants on their respective sides of the border.

Sceptics should be assured that this is more than a symbolic meeting of east and west. The site – on the watershed of the Iset and Chusovaya Rivers – was confirmed by scientists who examined geological records and studied the patterns of water flow. This clash of continents is the real deal.

Hire a taxi from Yekaterinburg for R150 per hour or make arrangements for this excursion through Ekaterinburg Guide Centre (p437) for €20 to €27 per person.

As the story goes, a mysterious peasant known as Simeon lived in a nearby village in the 17th century. For years, he lived simply, earning his keep by making clothes for local residents. When he died, nobody thought too much about it; but years later his grave was inexplicably unearthed and his body had not decayed – a sure sign of sainthood. The holy relic was brought to the monastery in the early 20th century, when the impressive Krestovozdvizhensky Cathedral was built to accommodate the pilgrims.

Although the cathedral was used as a garbage dump during the Soviet period, it is gradually being restored to its former grandeur. The unusual ceramic iconostasis has been replaced, as has the elaborate coffin of St Simeon. Today, pilgrims still come to kiss the coffin of this saint to absorb his healing powers.

Grigory Rasputin lived here for three years and – in fact – learned to read and write here. He long intended to bring the tsarevitch to cure his haemophilia, but this pilgrimage was never undertaken.

Today, the monastery is home to about 30 monks, and 20 students aged 14 to 16. Besides the two large cathedrals, it contains a small **museum** (☎ 219-22604; admission R10; ☹ 9am-5pm Wed-Sun) with some exhibits about the history of the monastery and its interactions with the royal family. Pilgrims are welcome to stay at the simple **hostel** (☎ 219-21826; three nights free of charge) that is on the monastery grounds.

Trains run from Yekaterinburg to the nearby town of Karpinsk. Alternatively, take the bus (R216, five hours, daily).

CHELYABINSK ЧЕЛЯБИНСК

☎ 3512 / pop 1.08 million / ☹ Moscow + 2hr Chelyabinsk, 200km south of Yekaterinburg, is another city of contrasts – a sprawling industrial town set amid the gentle hills and inviting lakes of the Urals.

Founded in 1736, Chelyabinsk prospered as a tea trading city and expanded after 1892 with the completion of the railway from Moscow. Eventually the trans-Siberian main line was to bypass the city. But expansion continued as its arms factories turned out Katyusha rockets and legendary, WWII-winning T-34s, for which it was nicknamed 'Tank City'.

Despite a heavy mantle of industrial sprawl, Chelyabinsk retains odd hints of

architectural appeal and is a useful transport hub for excursions into the southern Urals.

Orientation

The centre of this amorphous sprawl is pl Revolyutsii on pr Lenina, where a harried-looking Vladimir Ilych heads resolutely 'forward to communism'. North of here, the streets lie in a navigable grid pattern, with the pleasant pedestrian ul Kirova heading north to the Miass River. The bus and train stations are side by side on ul Svobody, 2km south of pl Revolyutsii.

Information

Alfa Bank (☎ 665 101; ul Kirova 108; ☹ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri)

AlfaNet.ru (☎ 642 430; pr Lenina 49; per hr R10-12 plus R4 per Mb; ☹ 24hr) Small café with Internet access.

Book World (☎ 632 359; ul Kirova 90; ☹ 10am-8pm) One of many bookshops around the city centre.

Sights

The highlight of Chelyabinsk is strolling down ul Kirova, paved with cobblestones and closed to car traffic. Life-sized bronze statues of local personages dot the street, which is lined with boutiques and cafés. An outdoor **book market** crowds the corners at ul Karla Marksa. The surrounding streets are worth a wander to discover some late-19th- and early-20th-century mansions. Some of the best are at ul Karla Marksa 68, ul Vasenko 41, ul Pushkina 1, and ul Tsvillinga 15.

At the northern end of ul Kirova, the **Fine Arts Gallery** (☎ 630 934; ul Truda 92; admission R30; ☹ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) has a permanent collection of European and Russian paintings and china, as well as rotating exhibits that usually feature local artists. The **Geology Museum** (ul Truda 98; ☹ 10am-3pm Tue-Sun) is housed in an attractive brick building nearby.

Active religious buildings include an early-20th-century **synagogue** (ul Pushkina 6a) and the 1899 **mosque** (ul Yelkina 20), its lighthouse of a minaret topped with a golden spire. The 1883 **St Simeon Cathedral** (Kyshtymyskaya ul 32) has a curious exterior featuring lion and dragon ceramics and a lovely interior. It's beside the north bus station; take tram 6 to ul Kalinina then walk a block east, then south.

Sleeping

Meridian (☎ 750 000; www.hotel-meridian.ru; pr Lenina 21; s/d with breakfast R2300/2900; ☹) The latest



addition to travellers' Chelyabinsk is this shiny glass and marble skyscraper, just over 1km east of pl Revolyutsii. Rooms are plain, modern and new. It's not much for atmosphere but the location is convenient.

Hotel Malakhit (☎ 630 948; ul Truda 153; s/d from R900/1400) This typical Soviet block is pretty dreary, from the cavernous lobby to the cramped rooms. The completely renovated rooms (with breakfast R1500/2000), located in a separate wing, offer an escape.

Victoria (☎ 989 820; www.victoria.ru; ul Molodogvardeyevsk 34; s/ste with breakfast from R3240/4680; 🚗 🚗) The town's original business hotel is a smaller, more personable affair, 4km northwest of the centre. Guests can enjoy a gourmet restaurant and a happening nightclub, as well as modern, tastefully decorated rooms and suites.

Eating & Drinking

Vremya Est (☎ 637 852; ul Kirova 82; buffet R140-250, meals R200-400; 🍷 11am-2am) A trendy café with modern, industrial décor and a spacious dance floor. The menu features a vast smorgasbord (in Russian *Shvedsky stol*, literally

'Swedish table'), as well as other Russian standards. Live music plays nightly.

Fox & Goose (☎ 643 790; ul Kirova 177; business lunch R145, meals R300-500; 🍷 11am-midnight) Another town, another amiable Irish pub. This one features a dark wood bar and forest green complements, creating an appropriately cosy atmosphere. It's an ideal place to meet travellers, business people and other friendly folk.

White Sun (☎ 630 744; pr Lenina 63; meals R300-400; 🍷 11am-midnight) This pseudo-desert 'outpost' serves Central Asian cuisine – spicy soups, shashlyk and *plov*. Servers and staff are appropriately costumed, adding to the exotic ambience.

Entertainment

The majestic building at the end of ul Kirova, which fronts pl Yaroslav, is the **Glinka Opera & Ballet Theatre** (☎ 638 763; pl Yaroslavskogo 1; tickets R30-150). Russian classics show most nights.

Getting There & Away

Trains go daily to Moscow (R3100, 33 hours). Slow trains wind their way through the mountains north to Yekaterinburg (R300, 5½

hours), and south to Ufa (R510, 9½ hours) and further to Samara (R930, 18 hours). Heading east, most trains cut through Kazakhstan (visa required). You'll have a much greater choice out of Yekaterinburg.

The most efficient way to reach Yekaterinburg is by bus (R160, three hours, 10 daily). The bus is also more useful for Magnitogorsk (R285, five to six hours, 10 daily) and Miass (R90, two hours, 14 daily).

Getting Around

The bus and train stations are side by side on ul Svobody, 1.5km south of the centre. Bus 18 runs up ul Svobody to pr Lenina, then continues north on ul Tsvillinga. Trams 17, 30 and 40 ply the same route.

AROUND CHELYABINSK

Lakes District Край Озёр

Locals rave (somewhat overenthusiastically) about the pleasant lakes around Chelyabinsk and Miass, notably Ilmenskoe and Turgoyak. Crowded with *turbazy* (holiday camps) and sanatoriums, which serve as bases for travellers wishing to escape the city, the region is ideal for boating, swimming, skiing and otherwise exploring the Urals countryside.

On the shores of Lake Turgoyak, known locally as the 'Blue Pearl', the resort **Golden Beach** (☎ 3513-560 093; www.goldenbeach.ru in Russian; Miass; r R1800-2300) receives rave reviews. Nicely renovated rooms are in two-storey *izby*. The highlight is the floating *banya* (a hot sauna-like bath), allowing steamers to cool off with a dip in the lake's clear waters.

Shiny lake Yelovoe is 80km southwest of Chelyabinsk on the road to Ufa. At **Uralskye Zori** (☎ 35168-782 170, 654 987; Chebarkul) you can rent equipment for winter sports like skiing, skating and snowmobiling, while summer activities include swimming, surfing and lake lounging.

Taganay National Park Таганай Национальный Парк

Descriptions of Taganay as the 'Russian Switzerland' are – again – a bit exaggerated, but the park's forested mountains and rocky protrusions are nonetheless splendid (see p431). The most convenient starting point for walking in Taganay is the steel town **Zlatoust**. If you need to stay in town, the lakeside **Hotel Taganay** (☎ 3513-651 225; pr 30 let Pobedy 7; r R700-900; 🚗 🚗) is accessible by bus 14.

The national park is dangerous to explore without a guide, as it is not well marked. Ural Expeditions & Tours (p438) offers English-language guided hiking trips in the park, ranging from one day to one week. Otherwise, contact the **park rangers' office** (☎ 3153-637 688) in advance.

MAGNITOGORSK МАГНИТОГОРСК

☎ 3511 / pop 439,000 / 🌐 Moscow + 2hr

Like Frankenstein's monster, memorable Magnitogorsk is a city brought back from the dead, with pr Lenina as its reanimated Stalinist spine. Across the Ural River, the steel mills of the Ordzhonikidze district are magnificently ugly, with snarling, densely packed gangs of chimneys belching dense curtains of smoke in fearfully multifarious colours. This is most photogenically viewed from Park Pobedy, behind the gigantic, 83-tonne, square-jawed colossus of the **Tyl Frontu** memorial. Over 15m tall, this pair of Soviet archetypes hold aloft an enormous sword, symbolic of the city's industrial support for the WWII patriotic effort.

The new gold-domed **Ascension Cathedral** and the gold-spired **mosque** are anomalies on the otherwise industrial skyline.

Magnitogorsk is a fascinating stop, but it's best to keep it brief. If you find yourself stuck here for a night, the **Hotel Valentino** (☎ 376 766; ul Gryaznova 24; d/tw incl breakfast R1760/1960) is an acceptable new business hotel just southwest of pl Mira.

Getting There & Around

Besides the daily train to Moscow, there's an overnight service to Ufa (R560, 10 hours) via Abzakovo (one hour). Buses are more practical for journeys to Chelyabinsk (R285, six hours, 10 daily).

The bus and train stations are both located at the north end of ul Lenina. Bus 21 runs down ul Lenina past the Tyl Frontu memorial all the way to the Ascension Cathedral. Bus 7 and tram 17 go down the parallel pr Karla Marksa past Hotel Valentina.

AROUND MAGNITOGORSK

Abzakovo АБЗАКОВО

In an attractive spot in the wooded mountains between Magnitogorsk and Beloretsk, this quaint village is best known for the **Abzakovo Resort** (☎ 3519-259 300; www.abzakovo.ru in Russian), where President Vladimir Putin

comes to ski. (You can thank him for the wide new road from Magnitogorsk.)

As a downhill ski destination, it is among the best in Russia, with 15km of trails ranging from bunny slopes to black diamonds. Lift tickets are R350 to R500 per day or R50 to R60 per ride, and decent equipment is available for rental. The ski season usually runs from November to April.

In summer, the resort is open for horse riding (per hour R250) and cycling (per hour R40), as well as tennis, basketball and other sports. The giant indoor aqua park (two hours R70 to R90) and the small, sad zoo (admission R30) are also open year-round.

SLEEPING & EATING

Abzakovo Resort (☎ 3519-259 300; www.abzakovo.ru; s/d from R750/1400 Mon-Thu, R1200/2200 Sat & Sun; 🍴) The bulk of the lodgings – as well as restaurants, aqua park and other facilities – is at the hotel complex 2km from the mountain (accessible by shuttle bus). Rates vary widely, depending on the season and standard of rooms. There are also five cottages right on the mountain, but they are not as convenient for the rest of the resort's facilities.

Tautash (☎ 3519-259 267; www.tautash.ru; r R1300 Mon-Thu, R900 Fri-Sun; 🍴 🚿) On the road from the train station to the ski resort, this new hotel is a good alternative to the resort itself. Facilities include a restaurant, nightclub and sauna. The expensive, exotic 'VIP' rooms are reminiscent of the honeymoon suite at a cheesy motel, with themes such as 'Old Castle' and 'Egypt'. Rates quoted are for summer months and are likely to rise sharply during the ski season.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

To reach the resort, get off the bus or train at the Novoabzakovo station (where the Magnitogorsk-Ufa train stops) and stroll 15 minutes towards the mountains, keeping straight ahead after the river bridge.

УФА УФА

☎ 3472 / pop 1.04 million / 🕒 Moscow +2hr
Ufa is capital of the self-consciously autonomous Bashkortostan Republic. Although the Muslim, Turkic Bashkir people now make up barely one-third of Bashkortostan's population of four million, you will hear their lispy language spoken

widely in rural areas and on many city radio programmes, along with their curious style of singing. Written Bashkir requires nine extra Cyrillic letters that are absent from standard Russian. 'Hello' in Bashkir is *hau-ma*; 'thank you very much' is *zur rakhmat*.

Orientation

Ufa fills a 20km-long dumbbell-shaped area of land between the Belaya and Ufa Rivers. The southern lobe contains the city's dynamic centre. Ufa's main thoroughfare is ul Lenina, which runs from the centre north to the river station. The train station is at the northern end of ul Karla Marksa, which runs parallel to ul Lenina two blocks west.

Information

Alfa Bank (☎ 765 696; ul Lenina 32; 🕒 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat) Changes money and has an ATM.
Poligon (☎ 230 354; Sovetskaya ul 11; per hr R30; 🕒 24hr) Convenient Internet facilities.
Post office (ul Lenina 28) Near Alfa bank.

Sights

The focus of appealing ul Lenina is the 19th-century **Trading Arcade**, set on a fountain-cooled piazza. Behind the renovated façade is a luxuriously marble-lined shopping mall full of boutiques, cafés and carts selling freshly squeezed orange juice.

The **National Museum** (☎ 221 250; Sovetskaya ul 14; admission R150; 🕒 10am-6pm Tue-Sat) is housed in a fantastically renovated Art Nouveau building. Despite the fancy name, most of the exhibits are standard Soviet history and stuffed animals, typical of a regional museum. The interesting exhibits on Bashkir history and current events are the exception.

The **Nesterov Art Gallery** (☎ 234 236; ul Gogolya 27; admission R50; 🕒 10am-4pm Tue-Sun), also recently renovated, contains a fabulous collection of artwork by namesake (and Ufa native) Mikhail Nesterov, as well as many other Russian artists. Avant-garde and futurism are also well represented.

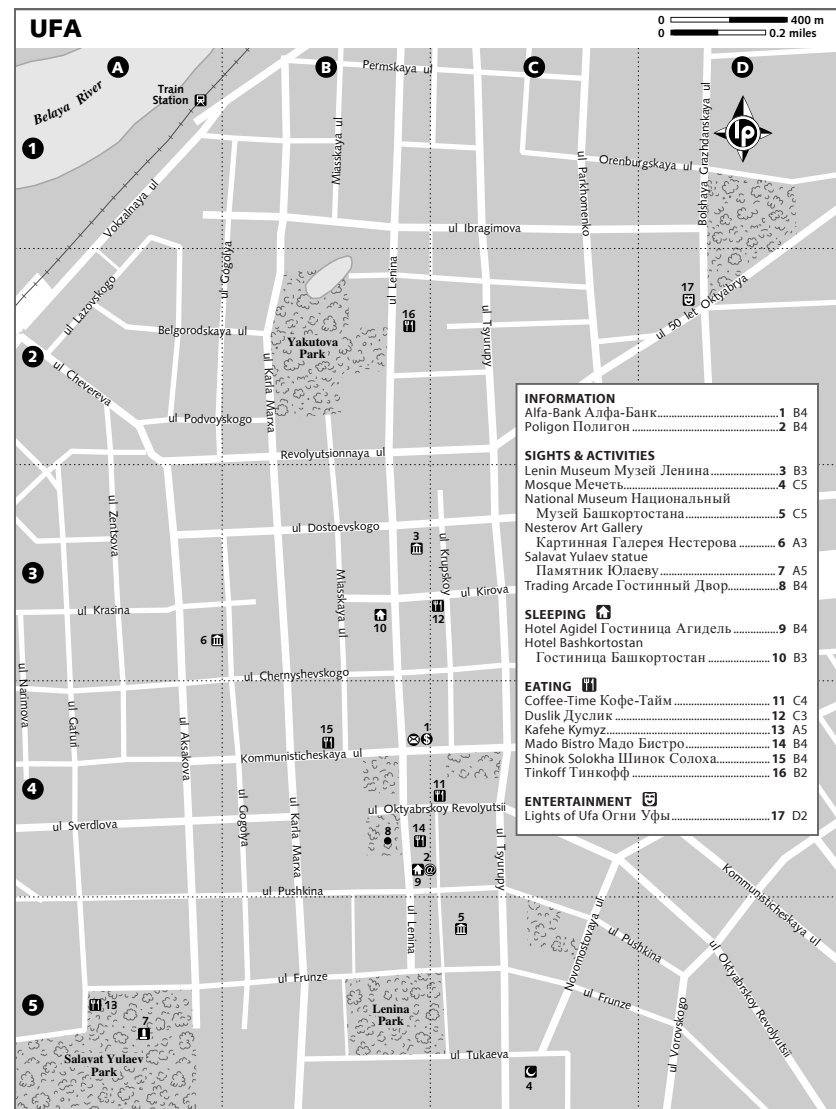
Ul Krupskoy is named for Lenin's wife Nadezhda Krupskaya, who lived here for several years while Vladimir Ilych was abroad. Only one house remains from that period: it is the grey, clapboard cottage where Lenin stayed for three weeks in 1900 awaiting a boat to Pskov. The cot-

tage is now a small **Lenin Museum** (☎ 232 439; Krupskoy ul 45; admission R10; 🕒 10am-6pm Tue-Sat). It contains many depictions of Lenin and Krupskaya during their time in Ufa, including an unusually human statue of Vladimir Ilych holding hands with his wife.

Ufa's most photogenic spot is the equestrian **statue** of 18th-century Bashkir hero Sal-

avat Yulaev, who appears ready to leap the wide Belaya river into the forest beyond.

From here, a mostly downhill stroll takes you via the imposing university buildings, past the giant Bashkortostan drama theatre and through remnant wooden cottages of ul Salavata Yulaeva for the best available view of the city's historic **mosque** (ul Tukaeva 52).



Sleeping

Hotel Agidel (☎ 225 680; ul Lenina 14; r per person with breakfast from R700) The selling point here is the superbly central location opposite the trading arcades. The cheapest rooms do not include a shower (R15), so the upgraded rooms (from R950) are worth the extra cash.

Hotel Bashkortostan (☎ 790 000; gkbashkiria@ufacom.ru; ul Lenina 25-29; s/d 2600/4540; 🚰 📺 🚿) This modern complex offers all the facilities you would expect from a business hotel, including bar, restaurant and fitness centre, not to mention the efficient service. Considering this, the small single rooms (R1900) offer excellent value.

Eating & Drinking

Coffee-Time (☎ 220 435; ul Oktyabrskoy Revolyutsii 3; breakfast R100; ☎ 24hr) One of Ufa's most popular spots for a coffee break. Jazz music, B&W photos and a menu featuring crepes instead of bliny give this place a European flair. In the evening, the café is often crowded with couples on dates and other fashionable young folk.

Shinok Solokha (☎ 225 333; Kommunisticheskaya ul 47; meals R200-300; ☎ noon-11pm) A homey Ukrainian cottage, complete with curtains on the windows and servers in traditional garb. The menu features Ukrainian specialities like borsch and *vareniki* (boiled filled dumplings). One in a row of themed restaurants, including a Czech beer pub.

Duslik (☎ 502 280; ul Krupskoy 9; meals R500-800) Ufa meets Samarkand in this elaborate Uzbek palace. The interior, over the top by some estimates, re-creates a sumptuous terrace, complete with bamboo ceiling, greenery and flowing fountain. It is a popular spot with businesspeople, especially for the tasty *plov*.

Tinkoff (☎ 231 909; ul Lenina 100; ½L beer R120; ☎ noon-2am) The newest outlet of this national microbrewery has the same industrial style and delicious draughts as the other outlets. The extensive menu complements the beer, as does the occasional live music or DJ act.

Kafehe Kymyz (Salavat Yulaev park; meals R100-200; ☎ 11am-10pm) Located in the park near the Yulaev horseman statue, this café has outdoor seating – a perfect place in summer to sample some classic Bashkir snacks. Try *vak-belyash* (a delicious pastry filled with ground beef and potato) or *lulya* kebab (minced-meat sausage cooked on an open

flame and served in a pita). Wash down with some kumiss (fermented mares' milk).

Mado Bistro (☎ 227 030; ul Lenina 16; meals R100; ☎ 9am-9pm) This bustling cafeteria is conveniently located opposite the trading arcades. It is always busy with students and families filling up on Russian classics and not-so-classics like burgers and pasta.

Entertainment

Lights of Ufa (☎ 908 690; ul 50 let Oktyabrya 19; ☎ 11am-2am) This shiny modern building includes a host of entertainment options, including a concert hall and your traditional disco. The microbrewery Brau Haus is the most fun, featuring live jazz, dancing and fresh-brewed lager. From ul Lenina, take any bus north to 'Dom Pechati'.

Getting There & Away

The train station is 2km north of the centre at the end of ul Karla Marksa. Overnight trains serve Samara (R580, nine hours), Ulyanovsk (R900, 14 hours), Chelyabinsk (R510, 8½ hours) and Magnitogorsk (R560, 10 hours) via Abzakovo (nine hours). There are several daily services to Moscow (at least 30 hours), as well as a daily train to Astana (R1540, 32 hours), in Kazakhstan.

Getting Around

The handy if convoluted bus 101 route snakes between the train station and the airport, via the main bus station and ul Lenina. Bus 2 links the Salavat Yulaev monument and the north bus station via ul Lenina.

AROUND UFA

Asha Аша

☎ 35139 / pop 37,000 / ☎ Moscow + 2hr

This small, drab mineralogical factory town seems an odd place to visit, but it attracts ski bunnies from November to April. The downhill ski centre **Adzhigardak** (☎ 3512-322 499 in Chelyabinsk; lift tickets per day R400-550, per ride R60) is a 10-minute taxi ride out of town – an anomaly in this otherwise depressing place. The 10 ski runs are not as extensive as at Abzakovo, but still respectable. And the birch trees, blue skies and other mountain scenery are equally revitalising. *Elektrichki* make the trip from Ufa (R65, 2½ hours, four daily) often enough to make this an easy day trip, but check the schedule before you hit the slopes.

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