

Arctic Russia Travel Routes

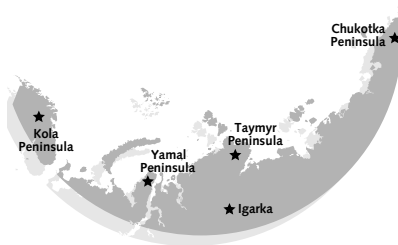


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HIGHLIGHTS

- Catching some of the world's biggest salmon on the **Kola Peninsula** (p275)
- Sledding across the **Yamal Peninsula** (p282) under a flaming aurora borealis to visit a Nenets sacred site
- Spotting whales and walrus on a boat tour of coastal **Chukotka** (p290)
- Marvelling at the survival of the inspiring little Permafrost Museum at **Igarka** (p287)
- Just being granted permission to travel independently in **Chukotka** (p290), **Taymyr** (p289) or **Yamal** (p279)



Many people associate Siberia with cold and jump to the misapprehension that most of Russia is somehow in the Arctic. In fact Vladivostok, the best-known city in Russia's far east, is around the same latitude as Monaco, and most of Siberia is sub-polar. In the genuinely Arctic region, accessible areas are often gruesomely despoiled by Soviet smokestacks and oil fields and their effects. Even some of the mysterious archipelagos off the Arctic coast have been used for nuclear testing or dumping. But there's still a vast area that remains unspoiled and pristine if you have the tenacity to get there. Post-USSR Russia's northern native populations have partially reclaimed some of their traditional culture, and the tundra is once again home to nomadic reindeer herders. There are several large protected areas.

This chapter gets you to main hub towns, but the really interesting part begins once you get beyond them. To do that you'll need to have contacts, make good local friends or join an (inevitably expensive) tailor-made tour. Be aware that Russia's tiresome visa and registration bureaucracy is compounded in several Arctic areas by requirements for very-tough-to-arrange permits. Some stoical visitors consider this hurdle part of the thrill: it certainly means you aren't likely to meet hordes of tourists. In some places you may be one of the first foreign visitors in generations.

GETTING AROUND Air

Each region tends to have its own 'baby-flot' airline. Since you rarely have a choice you're best not to ponder safety records, though actually the 'Yak' workhorses are very sturdily constructed. Ticket prices tend to be standard at any *aerokassa* (air-ticket office) in Russia, but in some cases you can only book a maximum of two weeks in advance. Seasonal demand can be strong: in early summer many people fly north and in late summer many are leaving. Online air-ticket agents such as www.biletplus.ru rarely handle smaller Arctic destinations.

Be aware that several Arctic airports are across gulfs or rivers from the town they serve, requiring a boat, bus or helicopter transfer according to the state of the ice.

Boat

River steamers are the classic way to cover vast Siberian distances in summer. Those on the Yenisey are the most frequent, but the much rarer service on the Ob offers a more useful chance of making an Arctic loop. Booking ahead is highly advisable but not easy in practice. First-class cabins generally have a private washbasin and only two beds. Third-class cabins have eight bunks. Deck

class is just that and rarely offers so much as a seat – tough on a week-long journey, though at least there are restaurants.

Hydrofoils known as *meteor* or *raketa* are much faster, whizzing along at up to 70km per hour. As they're fairly low-lying, though, the views from the windows are limited and often obscured by spray. Hydrofoils can feel somewhat claustrophobic, especially for longer trips.

For shorter local trips you'll probably need to rent motorboats or hitchhike on fishermen's skiffs. (Wooden-framed walrus-skin boats known in Chukotka as *baydar* or *angyaghpiik* are reminiscent of Greenlandic *umiiaq*, but they're very rarely used these days.)

Roads

Where there's no railway, travelling by land can be virtually impossible in Siberian summers. However, there are a limited number of winter roads where bumps, unbridged rivers and deep bogs become passable once frozen, snowed over and compacted. In winter there's also the possibility of driving along frozen rivers, lakes or even certain bays where routes are carved flat by bulldozers for the purpose. The few 'all-weather roads' are mostly within city limits.

TO THE NORTH POLE

Annual excursions to the top of the world start in April, typically from Khatanga (p289), with a 2½-hour flight to the military/scientific base at **Sredniy Island** (79.5°N), where there's a small museum. Another two hours' flight brings you to ironically named **Borneo Ice Camp** runway, rebuilt annually at around 89°N. From here you can ski or helicopter-hop the last 100km. Recently various alternative routes, notably via Vorkuta and Frans Josef Land, have also been tried.

North Pole Adventures (www.northpole.ru) runs weekend trips to the Pole from Moscow (€6000), with opportunities to attend the North Pole ballooning festival or ice-sculpture festival, or to ski for six days to reach the Pole.

A US\$3000 fly-in, fly-out trip from Krasnoyarsk booked through **Dyula Tur** (☎ 3912 591400; Hotel Krasnoyarsk, ul Uritskogo 94) is about the cheapest way to the Pole, but departures are less reliable.

Departing from Germany or Austria and skiing the last sector, you'll pay around US\$8000 for an 18-day 'Exnor' adventure with **DAV Summit Club** (☎ 089 642 400; www.dav-summit-club.de, in German), in alternate years. A similar trip starting in Moscow costs \$6900 with **Travel Pac** (☎ 095 933 0951; <http://old.pac.group.ru>).

If just getting to the Pole isn't enough, parachute onto it with **Polar World** (www.skypole.ru) or balloon over it with **Grinex** (www.ec-arctic.ru). Experienced dry-suit divers can even plunge beneath the polar ice with UK-based **Divercity Ltd** (☎ 1908 647300; www.divercityscuba.com), whose two-week expeditions cost around US\$12,500 ex Moscow.

It's increasingly popular to cruise to the North Pole by nuclear-powered icebreaker from Murmansk, generally stopping in dramatic Frans Josef Land on the way back. Many agencies sell this tour ex Scandinavia, including Helsinki–Murmansk flights, for US\$16,450 to US\$27,450. Contact **Quark Expeditions** (www.quarkexpeditions.com), **Journeys International** (www.journeys-intl.com) or **Aurora** (www.auroraexpeditions.com.au). Start in Moscow from US\$14,155 with **Condor** (www.condorjourneys-adventures.com).

Perhaps the ultimate icebreaker cruise takes you in 18 days from Murmansk to the North Pole and on through the Northeast Passage. You pass right along Russia's coast via Severnaya Zemlya, the Taymyr Peninsula, the Lena Delta, the New Siberian Islands and Wrangel Island, before arriving at Pevek, on Chukotka's north coast (see p293), to fly on to Alaska. The trip is sold by **Poseidon** (www.northpolevoyages.com) and **Victory** (www.victory-cruises.com) from around US\$23,000.

Taking such an icebreaker trip is ethically ambiguous. Some environmental groups are horrified at the potential for nuclear accidents, but a more mundane question surrounds the question of whether the ships' Murmansk-based operating company is obliged to return profits to the state who so expensively had the boats built – originally for strategic icebreaking.

For unsurfaced winter roads a minimum of four-wheel drive is wise; the UAZ minibuses ('Wazzik') are ubiquitous. Six-wheel-drive trucks or Ural buses are more reliable. There are also tank-like transporter vehicles with caterpillar tracks. Very few of the longer 'roads' actually have public transport per se. Arrange rides with local people or hitchhike with a truck driver.

Train

Russia is justifiably proud of its trains, which chug further north than those anywhere else. The wide gauge allows for comfortable sleeping compartments with plenty of legroom. Almost every long-distance ticket includes a numbered fold-down-bed berth

with clean sheets provided. Trains are also relatively safe from thieves, as every wagon has at least one *provodnik* (guard and ticket collector) keeping an eye on all who enter. Train rides are so long that they offer a great chance to socialise. Sharing food and the odd gallon of vodka helps to break the ice. In early summer especially you may be surprised to find that a fair proportion of fellow passengers are from the Turkic republics; they're generally seasonal workers earning money in the Arctic oil fields to send home to their families in Baku or Bishkek. These folks are even more effusively hospitable than the initially more guarded Russians.

For Russian railway timetables, www.time-table.tsi.ru is a fabulous resource, but using

it takes some learning. Notably it is very unforgiving with spellings, so it helps to know the seven-digit station code of your destination. Useful station codes include Moscow (Moskva) 2000000, Olenegorsk 2004722, Apatity 2004717, Labytnangi 2010180, Yekaterinburg (Sverdlovsk Pass) 2030000, Nyagan 2030528, Priobye 2030295 and Pyt-Yakh 2030607.

ITINERARY 1: THE KOLA PENINSULA

A leisurely wander through European Russia's most accessible Arctic areas, all handily close to Scandinavia.

This route starts off through some of the ugliest, most depressing cities in the Arctic, if not the whole galaxy. That alone has a certain ghoulish fascination and is educational in showing very graphically the effects of environmental carelessness. However, the trip is not intended to be an exercise in masochism, rather a link between various hopping-off points from which you can venture into the contrastingly untouched nature of the Kola's lake-dappled tundra and birch-forest *taiga*. Away from the monstrous mining cities lie some of the world's finest salmon rivers, a remarkable geology for mineral collectors, traditional Sami and Pomor cultures, and a few hidden gems such as the brilliant wooden church at Varzuga.



FAST FACTS

- **Access for independent travellers** Good for hub towns, expensive for remote fishing areas
- **Best time to travel** June to September for fishing, September to October for reduced midge annoyance, March for skiing
- **Difficulty level** Moderate (permits are less taxing to get here than elsewhere in Russia)
- **Don't forget** Phrasebooks, insect repellent, fishing rod, geological hammer, wads of cash for helicopter rides, mini Geiger counter
- **Don't miss** The bus out of Nikel
- **Gateway city** Murmansk (or Kirkenes, Norway)
- **Length of basic route** 730km
- **Modes of travel** Bus, train, helicopter to reach fishing areas
- **Recommended maps** Download 1:50,000, 1:200,000 and 1:500,000 scales (in Cyrillic) from <http://mapr35.narod.ru>; buy the (Russian-language) Pti Fyute guidebook for Murmansk Region
- **Time needed** At least a week; add a few days for skiing and two weeks for hiking, fishing or a North Pole icebreaker excursion
- **Time zone** Moscow time (GMT+3)

There's also the Unesco-protected Lapland Biosphere Reserve bordering Finland. In general the scenery improves as you progress southwards and eastwards.

NORWEGIAN BORDER TOWNS

In **Nikel** the land has been poisoned by emissions from metallurgical plants and, although it's often denied, nuclear detonations have been used in places to get at the ore. The result is memorably depressing, like a movie-set photo of post-nuclear apocalypse (see the photo on www.ngu.no/Kola/toc.html). Minerals and cross-border history feature in Nikel's small local museum, a bright-yellow building visible from the very simple **MPPZhKh Hotel** (☎ 81554-20466;

NICKEL-HEADED

The worst devastation in the Kola region (and around Norilsk; see p288) has been caused by the nickel industry pumping noxious emissions into the surrounding environment. In Soviet days the nickel had military uses, but post-USSR its main use is in catalytic converters. That's right – paradoxically, to reduce polluting emissions elsewhere!

Gvardeiskii pr 2; r with shared bath R322). **Zapolyarnye** is a similarly ugly nickel-mining town. Its claim to fame is the world's deepest hole. Some 12km deep but only about 14cm in diameter at its widest point, the hole started as a seismological experiment aiming to investigate conduction of sound waves at deep levels. Sceptical geologists are curious to see if drillers will make it as far as the earth's mantle (16km), which has never been reached. Nearby **Pechenga** has a newly reconstructed monastery and a bandstand-like bell tower.

Getting There & Away

Direct minibuses from Kirkenes (Norway) pass through Nikel and Zapolyarnye. The view from the window is probably enough. If you really want to visit it's possible to join a monthly guided trip from the Norwegian side with **Pasvik Tours** (www.pasviktourist.no). Public buses between Nikel and Murmansk (R140, three hours) are much faster than the train (R60, eight hours, six times weekly), but travelling independently to Nikel from the Norwegian border is complicated by the region's military-border status.

MURMANSK

☎ 8152 / pop 380,000

Halfway between Moscow and the North Pole, Murmansk is the world's largest Arctic city. Russia's main ice-free commercial port, it was founded in 1916 during WWI so that embattled Russia could receive supplies from Britain and France. However, the Bolshevik revolution turned that supportive Franco-British naval presence into a destabilising force. The 'Allies' aided the deposed White Russians and ran Murmansk along with Arkhangelsk as a separatist state until late 1919. Murmansk's strategic importance in WWII resulted in its utter

destruction by German bombers. Today it's home to Russia's nuclear icebreakers. The modern city spreads up surrounding *sopki* (hills) steep enough to make stairs as common as streets in some areas. City-centre façades are now brightly painted and there is a modest cultural life. Most citizens are Russian, but you might meet indigenous Sami during the Festival of the North in late March, when they come to compete in traditional sports.

Orientation

The city occupies three levels: the port, the centre, and the surrounding heights, crowned with dozens of uninspired housing blocks. Dominating the centre is ploshchad Sovietskoy Konstitutsii, also known as Five Corners. To the north of the centre lie Lake Semyonovskoe and a truly immense statue of a soldier, nicknamed Alyosha, who enjoys spectacular views of the city.

Information

There are ATMs and exchange booths in Hotels Polyarnye Zory and Arktika. **Intourist** (☎ 454386; Hotel Polyarnye Zory; ☎ 10am-5.30pm Mon-Thu, 10am-5pm Fri) Limited tourist information. Its local tours, cruises and snowmobile trips generally require minimum group numbers, which are rarely attained.

Kola-Tavs (☎ 235510; kolatavs@murmansk.rosmail.com; pr Lenina 19; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Thu, 9am-1pm & 2-5pm Fri) Sells bus, train and air tickets. Branch office in Hotel Polyarnye Zory lobby.

MKTI-Tour (☎ 540390) Organises snowmobiling trips from US\$22 to US\$106, depending on level of difficulty.

Murmanout (http://murmanout.ru) Very helpful site with copious detail and an interactive city map. See also http://2004.murman.ru for history and www.murman tourism.ru for web-address listings.

Murmansk Maps (http://murmansk.aspol.ru/maps/index.html, in Russian) Download city and bus maps.

Post and telephone office (behind Hotel Arktika)

Teknologi (ul Kolsky 22 & 126; Internet access per hr R16 plus R3 per Mb; ☎ 24 hrs) Internet also available, but more expensive, at Hotels Polyarnye Zory and Arktika.

Sights

The dizzyingly colossal unknown-soldier statue, **Alyosha**, towers above popular swimming place **Lake Semyonovskoe**, where the **Okeanarium** (☎ 315884; pr Geroyev-Severomortsev 4; adult/child R60/40) hosts seal shows. Take trolleybus No 3 up prospekt Lenina. Some 3km

further north is the hard-to-find **Military Museum of the Northern Fleet** (Voyenno-marskoy muzey severnogo flota; ☎ 221445; ul Tortseva 15; admission R50; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-4.30pm Thu-Mon). Many WWII exhibits are complemented by an interesting collection of more modern torpedoes, mines, model ships and chemical-warfare paraphernalia. Get off trolleybus No 4 at the last stop, cross the street, then take bus No 10 for four stops. Walk towards the smokestack and turn left at the shop.

The **Fine Arts Museum** (Khudozhestvenny muzey; ☎ 450385; ul Komintern 13; admission R10; ☎ 11am-6pm Wed-Sun) occupies Murmansk's oldest stone building, though the collection's only real highlights are prints by Boris Nepomnyashchy. The varied exhibits of the **Krayevyedchesky Museum** (☎ 422617; pr Lenina 90; admission R10, tours in English R450; ☎ 11am-6pm Sat-Wed, ticket office to 5pm) include good features on Sami and Pomor history and the Anglo-American occupation. There's a good souvenir shop, and museum guides can be hired for city tours in English. The **Regional Craft Centre** (City Administration Bldg, 2nd fl, ul Sofi Perovskoy 3; admission free; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Wed, 10am-5pm Sat & Sun) shows Kola Peninsula art including Apatity-style canvases 'painted' with mineral powders.

In front of the stadium is a **statue of Anatoly Bredov** (pr Lenina). Finding himself surrounded by Nazi troops, Anatoly detonated a grenade, blowing them and himself to bits. Had he been a Palestinian he'd have been called a terrorist, but as he was a Russian surrounded by WWII Germans he's now a national hero.

In summer you might see one of four **nuclear-powered icebreakers** at the dock, but avoid photography in the port area.

MINERAL EXPORT LICENCES

Getting a mineral export licence is a complex procedure. In Murmansk, first visit the **Sanitary and Epidemiology Inspector** (☎ 72672; ul Kommooni 7) for radioactivity tests. Then go to the **Museum of Local Lore** (☎ 22678; ul Lenina 90) for verification of your export list's accuracy. The **Museum of Arts** (☎ 50385; ul Komintern 13) will then issue the definitive certificate. Each document can cost around R3000 in fees. See also p276.

Festivals & Events

There's a carnival atmosphere during the 10-day **Festival of the North** (☎ late Mar or early Apr), but Murmansk hotels will be booked solid. Events include ski marathons, a biathlon, ice hockey, 'polar-bear' swimming and curious races in which a reindeer pulls a contestant on skis. Most are held at Dolina Uyuta, a 25-minute ride south of the train station on bus No 12.

Sleeping

69th Parallel Hotel (☎ 565645, 565330; Lyzhnyy proezd 14; s R400-600, d R640-900, ste R1600) The rooms here have phone and TV, and some have balcony and fridge. The attached nightclub is popular. The hotel is about 10 minutes out of the centre by trolleybus No 1 or 6.

Ogni Murmanska Hotel (☎ 490800; fax 491093; Sankt Peterburg Shosse; r US\$40-80) It's 8km out of town, but this place has luxurious rooms (some have two levels) with a private sauna and a great view.

Hotel Polyarnye Zory (☎ 289500, 450282; polar zor@dionis.mels.ru; ul Knipovicha 17; s R930-3565, d R426-4061, ste R4340-5146) This is the most popular choice for Westerners. Large, clean rooms have cable TV, deluxe rooms have sauna, and there's a big, complimentary breakfast buffet. Staff are friendly and speak some English, and there's an excellent *stolovaya* (canteen), a bar, and an upscale restaurant (mains R110 to R320).

Moryak (☎ 45 55 27; ul Knipovicha 23; s R170-750, d R620-1500) Next door to Hotel Polyarnye Zory, this place is simple but adequate.

Meridian (☎ 288600, 288650; www.meridian-hotel.ru; ul Vorovskovo 5/23; s/tw/ste incl breakfast R950-2000/2600/3800) The rooms have been pretty thoroughly renovated here, though pairs of cheaper singles share one bathroom.

Hotel Arktika (☎ 457988; www.hotel.an.ru; pr Lenina 82; standard s R890-1100, d R540-1900, business-class R1490-2200) This three-winged multistorey landmark has remodelled business-class accommodation that approximates Western standards.

Eating

Tsarskaya Okhota (☎ 563709, 255224; Kolsky pr 86; mains R145-250; ☎ noon-midnight) The good-value Russian cuisine here is highly rated by the locals. Furs and hunting trophies are features of the décor, and an angry stuffed bear guards the toilets.

Rvanye Parusa (☎ 478034; ul Egorova 13a; mains R200-350; ☎ noon-midnight Sun-Thu, noon-3am Fri & Sat) An appealing upmarket complex, this place has Italian, Russian and Japanese sub-restaurants and its own microbrewery (beers R70).

Venskiy Dvorik (☎ 449912; ul Burkova 17a; mains R75-190; ☎ noon-1am) This cosy pub has good-value Russian food and a R70 lunch menu before 3pm.

Mama-Mia (☎ 455736; ul Egorova 14; pizzas R130; open noon-1am) Popular and well reputed, this pizzeria has a homey, unpretentious interior.

Cyr (☎ 473580; pr Teatralniy 8; fondue R80-130; ☎ noon-1am) A pleasant if poorly maintained cheese-themed restaurant, Cyr serves sandwiches from R40 and set lunches for R100. There's annoying live music after 8pm.

Dnyom-I-Nochyu (Hotel Arktika; mains R30-60; ☎ 24hr) A good, cheap cafeteria with bar.

Entertainment

There's a decent **Philharmonic Concert Hall** (Kontsertnyy zal filharmonii; ul Sofi Perovskoy 3) and a **Puppet Theatre** (☎ 458178; ul Sofi Perovskoy 21A; admission R20-25; ☎ 11.30am & 2pm Sat & Sun Sep-Jun).

Getting There & Away

Several daily trains run to Apatity (4¼ to five hours) via Olenegorsk (2½ hours). You can buy train tickets online at www.rwza.kaz.ru (in Russian) for R120 commission or by phone on ☎ 532626 for R100 commission. Within Murmansk both commission costs include delivery. Daily buses connect with other Kola Peninsula towns, including Monchegorsk (R120, three hours), Nikel

(R140, three hours), Kirovsk (R59, four hours) and Zapolyarnye (R51, 2½ hours). The bus and train stations are next to each other. Both have long, slow ticket queues, so you may prefer to buy through **Kola-Tavs** (☎ 235510; kolatavs@murmansk.rosmail.com; pr Lenina 19; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Thu, 9am-1pm & 2-5pm Fri).

Getting Around

The city has a relatively efficient trolleybus system. For the airport, bus No 106 and express bus No 106E (R16, 30 minutes) run every 20 to 30 minutes. For Hotels Arktika and Meridian, get off at the train station; use the Detsky Mir stop for the Moryak. **Taxis** (☎ 237770, 262677, 237070) cost around R500 to the airport. In town you'll pay R40 per ride or R140 per hour.

Severomorsk

☎ 81537 / pop 54,000

Just 25km northeast of Murmansk, Severomorsk is the command centre for Russia's northern naval fleet and was the home town of the ill-fated *Kursk* submarine. Like Murmansk, it's overlooked by another immense Soviet statue, this time of a sailor. Severomorsk might be an intriguing place, but it is a completely closed city. Even more secretive is Shtyukozero, 8km beyond, which was the scene of a potential catastrophe in 1984 when a fire swept through silos bristling with nuclear-tipped missiles. Don't attempt to visit!

Lovozero

☎ 81538 / pop 2900

In the peninsula's centre, Lovozero is the concrete-block town to which Stalin forcibly moved many Sami nomads after 1929. This cultural disgrace resulted in the 1938 anticollectivisation rebellion, which was brutally suppressed by the Soviet army and followed by the execution of many Sami chiefs. These days the town has a **Sami history museum** featuring a particularly fine petroglyph. **Lovozero Adventure** organises helicopter trout-fishing trips on the Rova River, sold through www.fishingnorth.com. It can also organise river trips to stay in Sami reindeer camps. In winter the nomad *chum* (see p279) are as close as half an hour's drive from the town.

Hotel Virma (☎ 30169; fax 31094; dm/s/d R450/340/1160) is the only accommodation.

FISHING EXCURSIONS

The Kola Peninsula's wild rivers are teeming with huge salmon and trout. Sport fishers pay handsomely to brave the midges on organised week-long trips, which generally start from Murmansk. Each tour usually includes access by chartered helicopter, transfers to various fishing beats by boat and/or helicopter, and full-board accommodation in dedicated lodges or camps. All demand catch-and-release fishing.

Some consider the Yokanga River to have the world's finest Atlantic salmon runs. There's a real chance of bagging 13kg to 15kg fish. **Kola Co** (www.kolaco.co.uk) tours depart Murmansk on Saturday and include comfortable chalet hotel-style accommodation near the celebrated Lyliok Pool. The tours are sold exclusively through **Frontiers** (☎ UK 20 7493 0798, USA 800-245-1950; www.frontierstravel.com; tours 2200-5390/US\$3650-9150; ☎ Jun-mid-Aug), which also organises weeks of similarly world-class fishing on the Ponoï River from the **Ryabaga fishing camp** (www.shackletonint.com/ponoi; tours US\$4690-9990) and the new Brevyeni Camp.

You'll get a cheaper if more limited range of boat-access Ponoï beats through Swedish group **Fishing North** (☎ 928 10088; www.fishingnorth.com; tours from US\$2950) or **Loop Tackle** (www.looptackle.se/travel), whose **Acha Camp** (tours US\$3900-5500) is near tiny Kanyovka village (population 60).

A popular alternative – especially for brown-trout fishing – is **Varzina** (www.varzina.fi), where the owners claim fly fishers can virtually count on catches averaging over 45cm.

There are several daily buses (direct or requiring a change in Revda) from Olenegorsk, where the bus station is just 100m from its train station. Olenegorsk is 2½ hours by rail from Murmansk on the Moscow mainline. Some maps show a rail line to Revda, but this is freight only.

MONCHEGORSK

☎ 81536 / pop 75,000

Lying between three large lakes on what is virtually an island, Monchegorsk has some archetypal early-Soviet architecture, a glorious **Resurrection Cathedral** (1998), and a host of monuments, including a miner on an improbably tall plinth. Although Monchegorsk means 'beautiful tundra', for years it has suffered from the hellhole image created by the ugly nickel plant nearby that was its *raison d'être*. In recent years, however, the plant has made concerted efforts to clean up its act, and tree-planting schemes have made today's Monchegorsk a relatively green place. It looks best in the red-leafed blush of autumn. The main drag is prospekt Metallurgov.

Information

Galeriya Shopping Centre (Lenin Sq) Has an ATM.

Internet Svyaz-Servis (☎ 58700; ul Lesnaya 10; per hr R40; ☎ 10am-10pm) Take a taxi to find it.

Kola Travel (☎ 57099, mobile 912-287 1311; www.kolatravel.ru; ul Lenina 15/2) Dutch-run local tour agency.

Library (pr Metallurgov 27; ☎ noon-9pm Sat-Thu)

Internet access for R30 per hour.

Sberbank (pr Metallurgov 7; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat, closed 2-3pm) Close to the Sever Hotel. Has 24-hour MasterCard ATM.

Sleeping & Eating

Much nicer than the Sever (following), **Hotel Metallurgov** (☎ 74533, 72053; pr Metallurgov 45A; r incl breakfast R600-2400) is supposedly for guests of the nickel plant. It can accept foreign tourists but only those with reservations. The hotel's small restaurant has a good reputation.

The **Sever Hotel** (☎ 72655; pr Metallurgov 4; s/d R570/1140) is tolerable if you don't mind a cockroach or two.

Monchegorsk has an unusually wide variety of good dining alternatives, including Italian, European and Chinese options. **Volshebnitsa** (pr Metallurgov), facing the entrance to the attractive city park, is cosy but unpretentious; **Kofeynya Ani** (pr Metallurgov), handily close to the Sever Hotel, serves good coffee and light meals; and **Rodnichok** (Lenin Sq) is a usefully central restaurant specialising in shashlik (barbecued meat on skewers).

Getting There & Around

Buses run to Murmansk (R101, three hours, five daily) and Kirovsk (R61, 2½ hours, three daily) from a new, central **bus station** (ul Komsomolskaya), where there's also an office for air and rail tickets. The nearest train station is in Olenegorsk, served by regular bus shuttles.

ICEBREAKER CRUISES

Murmansk-based nuclear-powered icebreakers were constructed to keep northern Russia's shipping lanes clear but are now frequently used for tourist excursions. However, these can be hard to arrange locally, as most berths are pre sold through Western adventure-tour operators. Most popular are cruises to the North Pole (see p270), but it's arguably more interesting to head for Severnaya Zemlya (two weeks from US\$10,500) or Frans Josef Land (12 days from US\$6700) with a company such as **Arcturus** (www.arcturusexpeditions.co.uk).

AROUND MONCHEGORSK

Until the mid-1990s the region south of Monchegorsk suffered extensively from appalling levels of air pollution from the nickel works, which produced a black snow of soot. In addition, a catastrophic fire left much of the area's forests looking like skeletons in horribly blackened surroundings. Regrowth is just starting to hide the scars. However, further from town nature becomes much more appealing. Stretching north and west of Monchegorsk towards Norway and Finland is the 2784-sq-km, Unesco-listed **Lapland Biosphere Reserve** (Laplandsky zapovednik; ☎ 50080). It consists of virgin tundra, alpine grasslands, marshes, lakes, and five small mountain ranges, peaking at 1114m. Photos on www.sll.fi/mpe/laplandski give you the idea. Founded in 1930 to protect local herds, today it holds one of the most concentrated reindeer populations in Europe. Brown bears, elks, wolves and 30 other mammal species also make their home in the reserve. There are several waterfalls on the territory and even a German war plane, resting where it fell during WWII. However, visits to the park are mostly restricted to a few ecological trails around the handful of reasonably comfortable guest cottages at the reserve's main base on the quiet banks of Lake Chuna. You must arrange visits in advance, ideally directly or through travel agencies. The scenery is arguably nicer in the unrestricted areas around Lovozero or on the White Sea coast.

APATITY

☎ 81555 / pop 60,000

Only founded in 1966, Apatity is now the Kola's second-biggest town. It's the world's biggest source of apatite, an industrial source of fertiliser phosphates. Apatite (the name derives from the Greek for deception) is so called because it can be mistaken for much more valuable beryl or olivine. There are literally hundreds of other (rarer) minerals to be found in the nearby Khibiny Mountains, where you can also ski, hike, climb or even search for the Yeti, whose 42cm footprints have supposedly been spotted.

Apatity's main shopping streets are ulitsas Fersmana and Lenina. The train station lies southwest of the centre. Bus stops on ploshchad Lenina are for Monchegorsk and Murmansk, while those along ulitsa Fers-

mana serve Kirovsk. There's a disconnected Akademgorodok (Academic Town).

Information

Econord (☎ 79762; econord@inep.ksc.ru; ul Fersmana 40A; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri) Good source of information and can arrange trips to the Lapland Biosphere Reserve.

Hotel Ametist Has ATMs and sells regional maps.

Internet salon (pl Lenina; per hr R25; ☎ noon-7pm Mon-Fri, noon-4pm Sat). In the post office. Has a dodgy connection.

Kola-Tavs (ul Lenina 2A) Useful for procuring air, bus or train tickets.

Post office (pl Lenina; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 11am-4pm Sat-Sun)

Sberbank (cnr uls Moskovskaya & Kosmonavtov) Changes money.

South Kola Tours (Yug Kola; ☎ 74178; www.kolaklub.com; Hotel Ametist) Can arrange mineral-export licenses for rock collectors, and stays in Sami tepees, among other things. The company has a helpful Nevada office.

Sights

The 1970s **History Museum** (☎ 79255; admission R15-50; ☎ 2-5pm Mon-Fri) has exhibits on Russian Arctic expeditions, unique drawings of Novaya Zemlya and details of 5000-year-old Sami rock carvings. The user-friendly **Regional Geological Museum** (☎ 37274; ul Fersmana 16; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri) has fine exhibitions of local rocks and minerals plus some local crafts. Enter from the back. There's an **Open-Air Geological Museum** (ul Fersmana) further west, which is basically a few paths lined with local rock samples. The curious **library**

ACTIVITIES: MINERAL COLLECTING

The Khibiny-Lovozero pluton (a mass of igneous rock that forms underground when a volcano core that has never erupted eventually cools) around Apatity is the world's largest. With over 500 mineral types catalogued, the area is a dreamland for rock collectors. South Kola Tours (see p276) organises geological-based trips and can take care of the complex export-permit arrangements for you if you don't want to spend frustrating days in Murmansk doing them yourself (see the boxed text, p273). The very specialist **Eudialyte Homepage** (www.koeln.netsurf.de/~w.steffens/kola.htm) offers remarkable collated checklists of the samples so far discovered.

building (ul Lenina) resembles the pages of an open book, and hosts exhibitions.

Some Apatity artists 'paint' using coloured dust from crushed local minerals, a style that's catching on all over the Russian north. **Salma Art Salon** (ul Dzerzhinskovo 1; admission R3) is a private cooperative outlet for over 200 Kola Peninsula artists. Prices are low, and the management can arrange the paperwork to expedite customs procedures. **Gallery M** (Polyarnye Bldg, 2nd fl, pl Lenina; admission free; ☎ 2-6pm Mon-Sat) has changing local art exhibitions and a **bar** (☎ noon-midnight Mon-Fri, noon-7pm Sat).

Sleeping & Eating

If the following don't appeal, try one of the hotels in nearby Kirovsk.

Izovela (dom otdykha; ☎ 62666; www.kolaklub.com/izovela/; ul Pobedy 29A; s/d US\$19/20) At the eastern edge of town the Izovela sanatorium and spa-cure complex features a nice pool, a sauna/*banya*, a winter garden, massages and two restaurants. Top-end rooms cost US\$35. It also runs a **minihotel** (☎ 61452; r R200-700) at Imandra Lake, 13km from town. There are two other minihotels by the lake.

Hotel Ametist (☎ 74501; www.kolaklub.com/ametist/; ul Lenina 3; dm/s/tw/ste dm R190, s R520-650/tw R790, ste R1800) This place has clean if stylistically challenged 'renovated' rooms and cheaper three-bed dorms in a central, eight-storey concrete tower. There's a buffet-bar (mains R60) on the 2nd floor.

Eating options include **Restaurant Zapolyarnye** (ul Lenina 31A; mains R40-50; ☎ noon-midnight Mon-Thu, noon-1am Fri-Sun), which is handy for Izovela, and **Kulinaria** (ul Fersmana 20), which has tasty sweet and savoury pastries. Kiosks near the Open-Air Geological Museum sell snacks and fruit.

Getting There & Away

There are three weekly flights to Moscow Sheremetyevo 1 (R2184, 2¼ hours) on Arkhangelsk Airlines. Trains to Moscow (32 hours) stop in Kandalaksha (two hours). There are several daily trains (*platskart/kupe* R108/194, five to eight hours) and at least three buses (R230, four to five hours) to Murmansk. To Kirovsk it's a quick, 16km hop on bus No 101, 102 or 105 (R10) or by minibus.

Getting Around

Bus Nos 5, 8 and 13 (though not 13K) run between the train station and the town

centre. There's an hourly bus to Khibiny airport, between Apatity and Kirovsk.

KIROVSK

☎ 815231 / pop 40,000

Just half an hour from Apatity, Kirovsk is the Kola Peninsula's ski town. The triangular grid of three- and five-storey Soviet blocks is cupped in an appealing mountain setting that looks rather pretty in winter, when the lake freezes and the three-sided ring of rounded peaks is covered in snow.

Information

Internet Kafé Veчерnee (ul Khibinogorskaya 29; ☎ 2-9pm Mon-Sun, 2-11pm Fri & Sat, closed 5-6pm)

Menatep Bank (☎ 9am-1pm & 2-3pm) ATM and exchange booth next to Hotel Ekkos.

Post office (pr Lenina; ☎ 11am-7pm Mon-Fri, 11am-4pm Sat & Sun)

Sights

The fascinating, very decrepit **Kirovsk train station** is a monument to Soviet antilogic. Like many 'Potyomkin villages' it was hastily constructed to impress visiting officials but never finished. Locals joke that its first and last patron was Josef Stalin. It's fun to gingerly climb staircases that drop off into the garbage and ruins below. Don't trust the handrails.

The **Regional Museum** (☎ sporadic) is located in the Kirovsk-25 mikro-rayon (bus No 1, 12 or 105), within an awesome mountain gap. Some experts believe that the neat removal of literally half a mountain here can only have been achieved through a nuclear detonation. On the way you'll pass relatively close to the new orthodox **Kazan Church** (Kazanskaya tserkov) and some attractive **Botanical Gardens** (☎ 51646, 51436; ☎ 9.30am-3pm).

Activities

Kirovsk offers great summer hiking and a long **ski season** (☎ Nov-Jun, best Jan-Apr). Pistes are long and wide, with good gradient variation, some moguls and lots of open space for the less confident. Ski-lift passes cost R200/350/2000 per half day/full day/week. Ski and snowboard rentals (per hour/day R100/250) require your passport as deposit. Buses to the slopes (R5) leave from the post office twice an hour. There are parasailing and ski-jump facilities, too.

Twelve-day guided Khibiny mountain treks out of Kirovsk are organised by **Geographic Bureau** (www.geographicbureau.com; €590; ☎ Jul-Aug). Cooks make your food, but you'll need a sleeping bag and a backpack to carry the tent (its hire is included). The single supplement is €80.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Ekkos (☎ 32716; www.kolaklub.com/ekkos; pr Lenina 12a, 4th fl; s/d/tr R300/600/900) The seven neat rooms on the top floor of this red-turreted new building have TV, private shower and toilet. The place is friendly, but there's no lift.

Hotel Sport (☎ 92650, 91145; www.kolaklub.com/sport; ul Dzerzhinskovo 7A; s R240-390, d R300-450) Each pair of rooms here shares a shower and toilet. Guests get a 25% to 30% discount on ski-lift tickets and enjoy a special ski bus service. The sauna costs R250.

Khibiny Hotel (☎ 58902, 58901; ul Leningradskaya 25; s R425-550, d R780-980) Ideally placed for skiers 200m from the main ski-lift, this large *turbaza* (recreational complex) is about 1km from central Kirovsk. The rooms are merely functional, but they have private bathrooms.

Hotel Severnaya (☎ 54442; pr Lenina 11; s/d US\$80/160) This very central hotel has more-or-less Western standards, except for its tiny Russian beds. There's a lobby bar and restaurant (mains R20 to R200) with good food, loud music and cold service.

Eating options include **Kafé Zodiak** (pr Lenina 13; ☎ 11am-10pm Mon-Sat, 11am-8pm Sun), which has prepared foods and only one table, and **Internet Kafé Veчерnee** (ul Khibinogorskaya 29; ☎ 2-9pm Mon-Sun, 2-11pm Fri & Sat, closed 5-6pm). The **market** (pr Lenina; ☎ 11am-7pm), opposite the Lenin statue, has a few tables of produce.

Getting There & Away

Return to Apatity (p276) for train services to Kandalaksha. Buses to Murmansk (R240) take around four hours by way of Apatity and Monchegorsk (p275). Bus, train and plane tickets are sold on ulitsa Yubilenaya.

KANDALAKSHA

☎ 81533 / pop 37,200

Set in an area inhabited for millennia by the Sami, Kandalaksha is a White Sea port city that traded with Novgorod from the 11th century. Until it was abolished in 1742

the town's focus was a major monastery whose magical silver bell remains the centre of local legends. Repeatedly sacked by invaders, Kandalaksha was a battleground in the 1919 struggle between the Bolsheviks and British-backed White Russia. Although now noted for its giant aluminium smelter, the area is nonetheless attractively forested, and on the White Sea Islands southwest of town there's a large **sea-bird sanctuary** (permit required). There's a lovely new wooden **church** in the low-rise Nizhnaya Kandalaksha quarter, and the **triple-roofed train station** is rather quaint.

The two hotels in town are the **Spolkhi** (☎ 55768; Nabrechnaya 130) and the drab, seven-storey **Belo More** (☎ 93100; ul Pervomayskaya 31), behind the central tank monument. Dine at **Restaurant Kanda** (☎ 31418; ul Pervomayskaya 54).

From the **bus station** (☎ 95095), bus No 220 runs every afternoon to Monchegorsk, while No 222 runs to Uмба at 8.05am and 5.10pm daily.

Buses to Kemijärvi and thence Rovaniemi (both in Finland) run Monday and Thursday (€35, 4½ hours out, seven hours back) via the recently opened Salla border post. Regular trains run to Murmansk (*platskart/kupe* R130/235, six to seven hours) via Apatity (two hours). Heading towards Moscow (30 hours) or St Petersburg (23 hours), it's worth stopping at ugly Kem (six hours into the journey) for an excursion to the beautiful **Solovetski Islands** (take a boat from Rabocheostrovsk village). These islands became infamous as the location of Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*, but today they are a contrastingly idyllic archipelago of tranquillity with a splendid church-filled 17th-century Kremlin. Stop again at Petrozavodsk to visit the superb wooden multidomed churches, villages and fortress of **Kizhi Island** (<http://kizhi.karelia.ru/>). Both places are Unesco World Heritage sites. For full details, see Lonely Planet's *Russia & Belarus* guide.

AROUND KANDALAKSHA

Uмба

☎ 81559 / pop 5900

About 80km south of Kirovsk but accessed via Kandalaksha, Uмба has a small, attractive old-town area. Its **Museum of Pomor History** displays a traditional *kotch* (see the boxed text, opposite), and in the first week of June the **Pomor Regatta** is a major local boating fes-

POMORS

From a Russian word meaning 'beside the sea', Pomor is a cultural rather than ethnic term for descendants of the medieval Russian pioneers from the Novgorod principality who settled around the White Sea. They were mainly fishing folk who used distinctive timber *kotches* (rowable sailing boats that were designed for ice conditions). Classically, *kotches* were 'sewn' together with wooden grips, moss and tar rather than metal nails. Extensive Pomor trade with Scandinavia led to the development of a distinct Pomor dialect. The Pomor capital was Arkhangelsk, but you'll find a Pomor history museum in Uмба (see opposite).

tival. Pomor women put on shows for some tour groups and might dress visitors in rather stylised satin-and-shawl local costumes. **Hotel Zhek** (☎ 50240; ul Sovetskaya 7) is hidden in unit 50 of an apartment block and is unaccustomed to tourists. The **Russian Fishing Club** (☎ 095-916 9154; <http://fishing-russ.ru/kolsky/kolsky.htm>, in Russian) has a comfortable lodge near Uмба that costs around US\$100 per day, including three meals and sauna. The area is considered good for pike fishing.

Varzuga

The traditional ex-whaling village of Varzuga is around 140km west of Uмба through seemingly endless forest (115km of this is unpaved but driveable). Founded around 1490 by monks from the Solovetski Islands, many of Varzuga's houses are timber cottages with photogenic carved porches. Varzuga's highlight is the stunning **Uspensky Church** (built 1684), an all-wooden structure rising over 30m to a central bulbous spire. Beside it is the quaint **Afansevskaya church** (built 1854) and a delightful log-framed **bell tower**. The latter was built in 2001 but, being rather different in design to a long-lost 17th-century original, it has not been universally well received. Photos and super-detailed historical information (in Russian) are available on www.1553.ru/varzuga/index.htm. A **folklore festival** is held in early June.

Anglers consider the Varzuga River outstanding for Atlantic salmon, and various sport-fishing camps dot the river bank. The

camp are reached by speedboat transfers, which leave from beside the church (R50 to R100 per person). Catch-and-release **fishing licenses** (R160) are available at an inspector's hut in one of the camps and are regularly examined. Fishing packages are available through www.fishing-varzuga.com or all-in from the UK-based **Roxton Bailey Robinson** (☎ 1488 689 701; www.rbrwv.com). Other than anglers' lodges there's no hotel, but Apatity's **South Kola Tours** (Yug Kola; ☎ 74178; www.kolaklub.com; Hotel Ametist) offers tailor-made tours, including local homestays.

ITINERARY 2: YAMAL EXPLORER

This is the long, cold way to cross the Asia-Europe divide. Spot gulags (prison camps), oil fields and Nenets herders as you edge closer to the Yamal tundra, then bolt south again towards Moscow.

The rural Yamal region is interesting for its Nenets reindeer-herding culture, although it's well hidden behind a veil of Soviet oil and mining settlements. For independent travellers the basic loop offers an opportunity to explore the Russian Arctic without a lengthy backtrack. Start with multiday steamer or hydrofoil rides down the Ob River between petro-boom towns Khanty-Mansiysk and Salekhard (you could even start further south in delightful Tobolsk). Having visited as much of the Yamal Peninsula as permits



FAST FACTS

- Access for independent travellers**
 Good in summer
- Best time to travel** June to September for the river boats, winter to meet Nenets herders
- Difficulty level** High, due to permit requirements and linguistic challenges
- Don't forget** Phrasebook, midge repellent, permits (not needed for Salekhard but very much required for Nadym and the Yamal Peninsula), plenty of patience
- Don't miss** The attractive north Urals, even if only viewed from the train window
- Gateway city** Khanty-Mansiysk
- Length of basic route** 3350km to Moscow (4200km if starting in Tobolsk)
- Modes of travel** River ferry, plane, train, dogsled in the Yamal
- Recommended map** Yamal peninsula map downloadable from www.geocities.com/benselig/, Pti Fyute guide-books (in Russian) for Yugra, Komi and Nenets AO
- Time needed** Khanty-Mansiysk to Salekhard, two to three days once the boat finally arrives; Yamal Peninsula, as long as possible; Salekhard to Labytnangi, 1½ hours; Labytnangi to Vorkuta, 12 to 15 hours; Vorkuta to Moscow, two to 2½ days
- Time zones** Moscow time +2 (GMT +5) Khanty-Mansiysk to Salekhard, Moscow time (GMT +3) Vorkuta, Pechora and Naryan-Mar

and contacts allow, take the train from Labytnangi and wind picturesquely across the northern Urals. The gulag tragedy of Vorkuta makes a moving contrast to the optimism of Salekhard. Direct trains follow the main oil pipeline back to Moscow from both Labytnangi and Vorkuta. With more time you could try a rarely attempted side trip to Naryan-Mar, an alternative reindeer-herding area.

Although the route could be done in reverse, boat journeys are considerably quicker northbound thanks to the Ob Riv-

er's strong currents. Some photos of the loop appear on www.hansrossel.com/fotos/fotografie/rusland.

One obvious problem is that while river boats run only in summer, the Nenets herders are much easier to encounter in winter.

KHANTY-MANSIYSK

☎ 34671 / pop 57,500

Close to the meeting of the Ob and Irtysh Rivers, Khanty-Mansiysk was founded in 1637 as Samarovo, some 5km south of the present city centre. It was so isolated that news of the 1917 revolution passed its trapper population by altogether. Things changed greatly with the discovery of oil, and today it is a bustling city, and unusually pleasant for a modern petroleum town. It's capital of the Khanty-Mansiysk Autonomous Okrug, commonly known as Ugra (Yugra). Originally, Ugra was the ancestral homeland of the Finno-Ugric languages, so a tiny trickle of Hungarian, Finnish and Estonian tourists visit the region to investigate their roots. Today's indigenous inhabitants are the Khanty (formerly known as Ostiyak) and Mansi (formerly Vogul) people. Some are still subsistence hunters and fishers in the *taiga* forest, while some others are engaged in private reindeer herding. Since the 1990s they have been successfully securing land titles to their forest areas and gaining compensation for the extensive damage caused by Soviet-era oil-industry pollution.

Information

Useful websites include www.mubis.ru (indigenous people) and www.admhmao.ru (local affairs), and there's a Pti Fyute regional guide book. Try (Russian only) www.adhmansy.ru for practical info, www.ugra-tv.ru for news and **Ugra Tur-Servis** (☎ 31101; www.ugra-service.ru, in Russian; ul Komsomol 32) for group excursions.

Sights

The regional **museum** (☎ 32754; ul Mira 1) exhibits a mammoth's skeleton. The attached **National Artists' Gallery** features some local Mansi and Khanty exhibitions and an icon collection. The **Geology Museum** (☎ 32776; ul Chekhova 13) concentrates on the oil and gas industries. **Igosheva house-museum** (☎ 20400; Loparev ul 7; ☎ 10am-5pm Wed-Sun) is an eye-catching new building with stylised onion-lobed gable.

Out of town, **Torum-Maa** (☎ 22058; Sobianin ul; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-8pm) is an ethnographic museum showing the seasonal lodgings traditionally used by the local Khanty and Mansi peoples for whom the city is named. Groups are treated to various folkloric shows here. **Shapsha**, 28km northeast, is a 19th-century Old Believers' village. (The Old Believers were the descendants of those who disagreed with Patriarch Nikon's changes to the Russian Orthodox rite in 1653. Continuing to cross themselves with two fingers instead of three, they were oppressed and many fled to Siberia.)

Sleeping

The 'economic' three-star **Hotel Yugra** (☎ 955 54; Komsomolskaya 32; s/d/tw R1430/1800/2440) is well appointed and used by Russian tour groups. Built in 2003, the handily central, six-storey **Hotel Taray** (☎ 20019; ul Lenina 64; tw US\$105) is considered the best in town. **Na Syem Kholmakh** (☎ 55692; Sportivnaya 15; tw R1450) is a decent three-star hotel at the top of the city's ski slope. **Tobol Boatel** (dm R100, s R200-408), moored right at the port, is the town's cheapest option.

Getting There & Away

Four weekly flights go to Beryozovo (bookings ☎ 94544, R1065, 50 minutes). From June to September there are crowded but well-maintained Ob-Irtysh river steamers every eight days to Salekhard (first/third class R920/345, two days). The steamers stop at Prioby/Sergino, Beryozovo and the incredibly isolated Oktobrskaya market. Timetables vary every year; request details from **Rosrechflot** (☎ 3812-398521; Omsk). If you have a berth you'll find the boats comfortable; there are passable restaurants on board. Although the scenery is never really dramatic, the curious procession of days and the hypnotic endlessness of the wide river-scapes makes the trip a memorably meditative experience. Reservations are very highly advised. Although it may be possible to get a deck-passage ticket just before departure, there are virtually no seats, let alone anywhere comfortable to lie down.

It's easier to find space on daily mid-summer *meteor* to Beryozovo (bookings ☎ 36016, R545) and Prioby.

There's a Khanty-Mansiysk **rail ticket office** (ul Komsomolskaya 28; ☎ 8am-1pm & 2-7.30pm Mon-Sat,

to 5pm Sun), but no train station. **Buses** (☎ 334 13) run seven times daily to Pyt-Yakh (four hours) on the Surgut-Tobolsk-Tyumen railway line, and once daily to Surgut. A dramatic 1300m Irtysh bridge was completed in 2004, and buses now run to Nyagan (5½ hours), which is on the Yekaterinburg-Serov-Prioby railway line.

PRIOBYE & SERGINO

☎ 34678 / pop 6900

With little to see, these twin towns are simply an alternative place to join the Ob river boat, thanks to a handy rail connection from Yekaterinburg (train No 338, R480, 21 hours). There's a basic but survivable **hostel** (dm R175) at Sergino dock, which is 6km from the main Prioby train station but closer to Sergino's set-down and pick-up point. There are better hotels in Nyagan (below), 47km south.

AROUND PRIOBYE

Sokord Fortress & Sherkaly

Sizeable mounds on the right bank of the Ob are remnants of the once vast Sokord Fortress mentioned in writings of Ivan the Terrible (1557). Some traditional Khanty buildings here surround a small but informative **ethnographic museum**. The souvenir shop sells local Khanty craftwork. Access is by boat-taxi (R200) from Sherkaly village, which is accessible by ferry from Prioby (R140, 35 minutes, five daily). The fishing is great, but there's no hotel.

NYAGAN

☎ 34672 / pop 36,000

The redeeming feature of this crushingly dull new oil town is the **Nyagan Museum** (admission R50), displaying fascinating archaeological finds from **Emder** (www.hist.usu.ru/urc/english/expeditions.htm), which was the capital of a 12th- to 16th-century Ugrian principality on the Endyr River. Emders' site is 90km south-east of Nyagan, 7km by mud road off the new Nyagan to Khanty-Mansiysk highway. At the time of research archaeologists were still investigating; volunteers keen to join the three-week digs that start each August should contact **Andrey Shpintonkov** (☎ 343-350 7545; uniz@yandex.ru; US\$750). Note that, despite claims by some local tour agencies, the plans for a fortress reconstruction remain unattempted as yet.

In Nyagan **Bank Sibirkontakt** (ul Lenina 17) has a 24-hour ATM. Reasonable hotels include the **Sibir** (☎ 33030; ul Uralskaya 7; s/tw R650/1100) and its next-door neighbour **Kedr** (☎ 54674; Uralskaya 5; s R846).

In Yugorsk, 150km southwest of Nyagan on the Serov rail line, there's another fine museum and the surprisingly decent **Hotel Rossia** (☎ 34675-22549; ul Lenina 16; s/tw R950/1450).

BERYOZOVO

☎ 34674 / pop 7500

Beryozovo has a reputation for exile and lawlessness, midges and murder. Founded in 1593, this lonely *taiga* outpost is one of Siberia's oldest, but it never fully recovered from a catastrophic 1808 fire. It was at Beryozovo in 1907 that Trotsky gave his captors the slip while being marched to a Salekhard prison for his role in the 1905 revolution. Trotsky faked sciatica (nerve pains) then, while his guardians enjoyed some amateur dramatics, managed a phenomenal escape: 700km in winter on the back of a deer with a drunken local guide. Beryozovo was the first village in the region to strike oil (in 1953), but it failed to capitalise and it certainly hasn't become wealthy. If you're stuck here and are not afraid of drunken, gun-toting locals, seek out the surprisingly good log-hut **museum** (Sobyanina ul 43) and the **communal grave** of those who failed in a Soviet gulag revolt at Lake Num. At the riverside, in a former Mansi sacrifice site, is a Soviet-era **monument to Prince Aleksander Menshikov**. Menshikov rose from pie seller to confidante of Peter the Great, eventually becoming de facto ruler of all Russia, before being disgraced and exiled to Beryozovo, where he died in 1729.

The new **Grad Berezov** (☎ 21273, 21274, 21625; ul Sobyanina 40; s/d/ste R1300/1600/2400) is the best hotel and has a restaurant. The basic **Hotel Beryozka** (☎ 21800; ul Chkalova 45; dm/s/tw R150/220/350) is much cheaper, and there's also a seedy **dosshouse** (dm R140) at the **dock** (☎ 21332). Opposite the post office, on the main street running from the quay, **Perekryostok Store** (ul Lenina 24; ☎ 11am-10pm) has a café. **Kafé Tsiiryachka** (☎ 21988; ul Sobyanina 35) might have the local culinary delicacy *sosvinskoi* (freshwater herring). The surprisingly well-appointed **airport** (☎ 396171), 1km from the centre, has **Utair** (www.utair.ru) flights to Khanty-Mansiysk (50 minutes), Salekhard

and Moscow. *Meteor* hydrofoils go down the river to Salekhard (R480, eight to 10 hours) every second day.

SALEKHARD

☎ 34591 / pop 35,000

Salekhard is the prosperous capital of the Yamal-Neenets Autonomous Area. It was founded in 1595 after Tsar Fyodor's Cosacks grabbed the region from the Princes of Novgorod. The initial timber stockade-fortress, named Obdorsk, became a famous local fur market and a collection point for *iasak* (tribute tithes paid in animal skins by local hunters and herders). It remained small until the 1930s, when a string of slave-labour camps appeared throughout the region. The most brutal gulags were east of Salekhard along railway-construction project 501. Started in 1949, this was an impractical route that Stalin decided should be built to Igarka regardless of the human cost. It was never finished, though thousands died trying. After Stalin died in 1953 the work stopped, and the tracks have since been largely swallowed by permafrost. See www.yamal.org/501/doc/1_e.htm for much more detail.

Today Salekhard is booming thanks to major gas-field discoveries, and construction is rapidly changing the cityscape beyond recognition. Nonetheless, on clear days there are lovely views towards the Urals between the remaining wooden houses of the **old town**. In the modern Polyarnaya Shopping Mall there's an **internet café** (per hr R50) and two ATMs.

Sights

Salekhard is proud to be the only major town to lie exactly on the Arctic Circle. The **Arctic Circle monument** on the road to the airport is a popular place for sunset photographs. On the same road, the **locomotive-shaped monument** is a new memorial for the victims of the Route 501 gulags.

The oldest of Salekhard's historic **wooden houses** are around the 'gidroport', a former airport for sea-planes. Worth a visit, the main central **church** (*khraam*) was planned by a German architect in the early 20th century but was only completed after the USSR collapsed.

The former triangular-fronted wooden **museum** (ul Titova 5) was demolished in 2004,

but the brand-new **exhibition complex** has started well, with excellent installations offering detailed (Russian only) insights into Nenets history and the gulag horrors, and a fine collection of WWII propaganda posters. The building itself is an eye-catching if less than functional series of pastel-coloured curves located behind the new market.

Salekhard is the easiest starting point for adventures onto the Yamal Peninsula to meet Nenets herders. If you can't get the relevant permits you can still encounter Nenets and Komi families at Salekhard's outdoor market, especially in winter when some arrive by sled to sell handmade crafts, including reindeer-skin mittens and boots. In summer, market stalls sell essential *komarnik* (antimosquito head-nets).

Sleeping

Geolog (☎ 48442; ul Chapaeva, 22) Take bus No 1 from the airport. The Geolog is on the left, halfway to the city centre. Basic dormitory accommodation is available.

Hotel Sibir (☎ 74696; tw R350) The Sibir's acceptable budget rooms with air-conditioning and wash basin are smaller but newer than those at the Ob (following). It's a white building in a curve of the Labytnangi Hwy near the point where the airport access road turns off. Use the bus stop beside the big Salekhard monument.

Hotel Ob (☎ 74558; airport; dm/s/tw R334/501/868) This place has simple and tidy but over-priced rooms with shared bathrooms, bad mattresses and no curtains.

Hotel Yamal (☎ 46333; ul Respublika 100; tw R2000) The Hotel Yamal offers the most popular compromise between comfort and price.

Hotel Arktika (☎ 40777; ul Respublika 38; tw R3350) Attached to the Polaris shopping mall, this is the best and most central but also the most expensive hotel in town.

Eating

Deva Restaurant (Yamal Hotel, second fl) is reckoned to offer Salekhard's best-value dining. **Restaurant Paris** (river station) is actually a boat. **Piyat Pizz** (Casino bldg, second fl) has real Italian-style pizza. **Paradis** (SOK bldg) is a bar-restaurant in the sports complex, popular with the younger crowd. At the time of research, the restaurant within a glass palace on the new Shaitanka bridge behind the exhibition centre was nearing completion. It should offer diners fine

cross-river panoramas towards Labytnangi and the tundra.

The **Polaris shopping mall** (ul Respublika) has a Turkic bakery offering baklava and a fast-food outlet serving decent shashlik. At the open market seek out *muksun*, frozen white fish that's eaten while only partly thawed; dip in salt or hot mustard.

Getting There & Away

Salekhard's brand-new airport has flights to Moscow (R6000, 3½ hours), Novosibirsk, Nadyam, Omsk, St Petersburg, Tyumen and Yekaterinburg. Helicopters serve outlying Yamal villages but are often overcrowded (and you'll need permits; see the boxed text, p284).

Take bus No 1 or 3 to Salekhard's **river station** (rechnoi vokzal; ☎ 34622); from there the main Ob ferries take much longer south-bound than downriver. Every eight days in summer they go to Tobolsk (first/third class R1262/371, 4½ days) via Beryozovo (26½ hours) and Khanty-Mansiysk (2½ days). You could continue to Omsk (first/third class R1888/556, one week) via Tara. Occasionally the big ferries venture into the Ob Gulf, supplemented by less comfortable *omik* boats that serve Yar-Sale, Novi Port and beyond. You'll need travel permits for these destinations.

The nearest train station is at Labytnangi, across the Ob River from Salekhard (see p284).

Getting Around

The very handy bus No 1 shuttles between the airport, the Polaris Mall/city centre and the river station.

YAMAL PENINSULA

Yamal means 'end of the earth' in the Nenets language. Dotted with thousands of lakes, its big-sky openness along with the tundra's wealth of life in miniature is a great attraction to some. For others the landscape is simply empty and endlessly monotonous. Spread out across the vast region are 7500 Nenets reindeer herders, many of whom are nomads living in tepee-style *mya* tents (called *chum* in Russian). Their land is still held to be sacred. Key spots are marked with old sleds topped by a pile of reindeer antlers, sometimes surveyed by **totems** that are somewhat reminiscent

YAMAL PERMITS

Technically, you'll require a permit to venture into the Yamal Peninsula. Until 2003 several travellers managed a trip without one, but recently authorities have been much stricter, and some visitors have been arrested and deported from Russia for permit violations. Check carefully in Salekhard for the latest information before heading out. The strategic gas-production area Bovanyenkogo is especially sensitive.

of the Easter Island *Moai* heads, albeit in miniature wooden form. Other totems have seven notches, representing the seven levels of the Nenets cosmos. Examples are found near the Bovanyenkogo gas and oil fields, to which a remarkable 4000km pipeline from Western Europe is presently under construction.

The discovery of large natural-gas reserves has raised a lot of interest in the area. Anthropologists and archaeologists are regular visitors, often funded by the gas companies. See www.mnh.si.edu/arctic/html/yamal.htm for a trip report. Recent discoveries include some naturally mummified bodies.

Most Yamal access is from Salekhard by oil-company helicopter, though a new railway line and unsealed road are under construction from Obskaya towards Bovanyenko. By ferry you can sail up the Ob Gulf to Novi Port (22 hours, roughly weekly in summer). However you travel you'll need to be self-sufficient, with a tent, all food supplies, good local contacts, permits and loads of time.

Note that in summer most of the Nenets herders head far north towards the Kara Sea coast, where the cold winds reduce the mosquito annoyance. The Nenets come south in winter, and on Sunday from mid-March to early April they organise **winter games**. Notable examples are held in Yar-Sale (the Yamal Peninsula's administrative centre) and most famously in Nadym on the first Sunday in April.

SALEKHard TO VORKUTA

The nearest train station to Salekhard is in the town of **Labytnangi**, across the wide Ob River. Reaching Labytnangi from Sale-

khard starts with a 10km bus ride to the river ferry from the town centre, running via Hotel Sibir and the airport (R30, last at midnight). The ferry (R20 pedestrians, 15 minutes) runs hourly and leaves you a 3km taxi ride (R50) short of Labytnangi train station. Near Labytnangi the new Gornolyzhnyi Komplex (ski centre) operates a popular if somewhat unchallenging 400m downhill ski run in spring. Costs including equipment rental average R600 per day. In season direct minibuses run from beside Salekhard church.

Daily trains from Labytnangi run at 7am to Moscow (47 hours) and at 9.30am to Vorkuta (12 to 16 hours). Either journey takes you over the nominal **Asia-Europe boundary** after about five hours and is especially scenic through the lovely polar Ural mountains. Several stations en route (Poliarnaya, Sob and Kharp) make good starting points for attractive if challenging mountain walks. Former labour camp Kharp may be an architecturally bland concrete-factory town, but its mountain setting is most attractive and it is rebranding itself as a adventure-tourism centre, with various facilities under construction. From here you could walk or canoe the lovely **Sob River valley**, where there's some chance of meeting reindeer herders in spring or autumn.

At **Obskaya** station the new Yamal railway branches north, paralleled by a rough road. Unofficially, the freight-only trains carry local passengers by arrangement, though there are no stations per se. Some 200km up this line, then a dozen kilometres' sled-ride north, is the hamlet of **Laborovaya** (www.cinetrance.com/faktoria.htm). It's an isolated *faktoriya* (trading post) where lonely shop hunters can exchange their surplus fish and game for basic consumer commodities such as matches and tea. Laborovaya is famous as the home of Nenets activist and writer Anna Pavlovna Nerkagi, who runs a school teaching children the traditional arts of nomad survival.

VORKUTA

☎ 2151 / pop 80,000-116,000
Vorkuta, in the autonomous Komi Republic, is a fascinatingly ugly coal-mining city full of Stalinist buildings on pompously wide avenues. Perhaps the most poignantly interesting part of a visit is that many of

the older people you meet will have a personal story about the gulags, 12 of which once ringed the city. A helpful contact is **Georgi Mamulaishvili** (☎ 40933), whose father was president of the gulag victims' support group. The group has erected a **victims' monument** overlooking one former gulag near the river, walkably close to the Hotel Vorkuta. Around 15km out of town, sinking dejectedly into swampy tundra, is the lonely **German and Estonian graveyard** of another former gulag. Take bus No 103 or 104 and ask to be set down at Nemetsky Kladbish stop (R13). En route be awed by the extraordinary ugliness of the old Soviet factories and mines. Note that the city is part of an remarkable programme to very belatedly send 'home' thousands of former gulag victims, though its plans to cut the population by a whopping 36,000 are motivated by the urge to save on pensions as much as the desire to reunite long-shattered families.

The three-room **museum** (opposite ul Lenina 35) has ethnographic displays about the Komi and Nenets peoples, a gulag-history room, and a selection of postcards for sale, including some featuring attractive photos of reindeer herders. In December there's an **ice-carving festival**.

There's an **Internet Klub** (ul Gogolya) hidden on the bottom floor of an apartment block behind a little blue 'castle' building. To change money, find the tiny exchange window in the blue shopping centre beside Hotel Vorkuta (on the first floor, beside the flower shop). Its rates are good.

Polar Travel (☎ 73323; ul Lenina 45) can organise a city tour.

Sleeping & Eating

Lena Hostel (☎ 92670; dm R70) Close to the train station, this neat workers' guesthouse has hot showers and neat, warm rooms. Walk out of the station, then take the second right after a large red building. The hostel (it has no sign) is the second building on the left. It can't register foreigners, so staying more than three nights is not possible.

Hotel Vorkuta (☎ 40609; ul Tsentralnaya 5; dm/s/tw R206/366/412) This is a typical eight-storey Soviet hotel whose 'dorms' are simply one bed in a pot-luck shared twin.

Hotel Gornyak (☎ 70833; fax 34828; ul Mira 3B; s/tw R480/700) Newly renovated in a rather chintzy style, the Gornyak ('miner') is Vorkuta's best

available hotel. A couple of larger apartments cost R1500. Take bus No 5, 7 or 10 to Detsky Mir stop, then walk down ul Mira from pl Mira and you'll find it tucked behind the third and fourth buildings on your right.

The Shangri-la 'Georgian' Restaurant downstairs from the Hotel Vorkuta is reasonably priced, though the portions are small, and not much of the food is really Georgian. The hotel's Bochka pub serves beers. Take bus No 5 to VTVK stop.

Getting There & Away

Two trains daily run to Moscow's Yaroslavl'skaya Station: one around midday (No 375, 46 hours) and a faster, more comfortable service in the early evening (No 041; *kupe* R1300, 40½ hours). The daily train back to Labytnangi (*kupe* R260, 12 hours) leaves around 9.40am. There's also a train to Gorkiy (No 039, 40 hours) via Kotlas and Kirov, and every two or three days there's a direct but incredibly slow service to St Petersburg (No 387, 67 hours). A R4 shuttle bus runs the 3km from Vorkuta train station to central ulitsa Lenina.

PECHORA

☎ 82142 / pop 44,000

Pechora, on the Vorkuta-Moscow railway, is the gateway city for the **Yugud-Va National Park** (☎ 52507, 21263; www.sll.fi/mpe/yugudva; Sotsialisticheskaya ul 55). The park is one of the world's 10 largest and is part of the Unesco Komi Virgin Forest reserve, but its most beautiful feature is a spiky comb of mountains at the Urals' northern fringes. Pechora has a **hotel** (☎ 51136; s/tw R350/485) at the airport. Boats to Naryan-Mar run every few days if river levels are high enough. A spur of railway goes to **Usinsk**, which has an attractively renovated, gold-domed **church** (ul Komsomolskaya) and a **hotel** (ul 60let Oktyabrya 14). Plans to construct a new Pechora-Usinsk-Naryan-Mar road were announced in August 2003.

NARYAN-MAR

☎ 81853 / pop 26,000

Administrative centre of the Nenets reindeer herders' autonomous region, Naryan-Mar is now experiencing a mini oil boom. The town sits on the right bank of the Pechora River towards its northern mouth. The only buildings of architectural note are around central Lenin square: a striking new

church and the cutely spired wooden **post office**, which contains a two-computer **internet café** (per hr R40). Behind the wooden exhibition centre, the **museum** has erected a traditional Nenets *chum* showing traditional lifestyle innovations like the moss-bottomed cradles, which are reckoned more hygienic than modern nappies. For photos, see www.nao2000.narod.ru/gallery/G_3.htm. Download a city map from <http://narjan.narod.ru/karta.html>.

Sleeping & Eating

Three blocks west of Lenin Square, the **Hotel Pechora** (ul Lenina) has decent but expensive rooms aimed at oil businessmen. A cheaper veterinary dormitory is only for those with connections. The hotel has the best-value restaurant (mains R100), with good, cheap breakfasts and a wide menu, including excellent reindeer and wild-mushroom *zharkoye* (hot pot). Further from the centre, **Sibir Restaurant** (mains R140) is also recommended, with strings of Christmas lights on the walls, candles on the tables and some private booths. **Lakomka** is a no-frills café for sandwiches, salads and microwaved lunches. It's downstairs at the rear of the public auditorium next to the kitschy new Lukoil building. Its *kotlet Naryan-Marski* is a ground meat patty served with a dollop of mashed potato. There's a 24-hour supermarket around the corner from the hotel.

Getting There & Away

There are regular flights to Moscow (R5100, three hours) or via Arkhangelsk (70 minutes, twice daily) to many other cities. Helicopters serve outlying tundra districts but cost over €3000 per hour to charter. Cargo boats to Pechora run two or three times weekly when water levels allow. Buses No 4 and 4A run from the airport to the centre, the 4A continuing to the Hotel Pechora and the No 4 going to the river port.

ITINERARY 3: THE ARCTIC YENISEY

Were you permitted to use them, frequent Yenisey steamers would offer the easiest way to cruise a great Arctic river. The wild Taymyr Peninsula and Putorana Plateau are Arctic Russia's adventure

treasure troves, and Khatanga has flights almost as far as the North Pole. If only they'd drop those accursed permit regulations...

Summer river transport on the Yenisey runs more frequently than on any other Arctic river. The route described here starts in Igarka, the first ferry stop above the Arctic circle, though it's easy enough to get aboard the same elegant steamers in the old Cosack town of Turukhansk or ride all the way down from Krasnoyarsk (see Lonely Planet's *Russia & Belarus* guide). Indeed the southern section of the river is vastly easier for independent travellers. Those who want to travel the Arctic Yenisey are hamstrung by the fact that key hub cities Dudinka and gruesome Norilsk are officially closed to foreigners. Until you've found someone to get you a permit, this route will be out of bounds for you. Don't underestimate the months of bureaucracy involved in getting these permits. One way to arrange them is to take an expensive full-blown Yenisey cruise (around US\$1000 from Krasnoyarsk to Dudinka) with an officially sanctioned travel agency such as **Acris Tour** (☎ 3832 295331; www.acris.ru) or **VIP Tour** (☎ 4152-125444; <http://vip-tour.net>). The most interesting part of these river trips for many visitors is simply getting hypnotised by the blurring of time while gliding over the vast Yenisey, which can be over 15km wide in places. Read Colin Thubron's *In Siberia* to give you an idea of what happens if you get off alone at a small, random settlement en route.



FAST FACTS

- **Access for independent travellers** Good as far as Igarka; challenging beyond
- **Best time to travel** April for the Taymyr and Khatanga, July to September for river boats
- **Difficulty level** For the main route permits are the top problem, best trumped through expensive but comfortable river cruises. By contrast, exploring the Taymyr and Putorana will prove a physical and mental challenge for even the most hardened adventurer.
- **Don't forget** Permits (yes, again!), snowshoes and survival gear for the Taymyr, smog-mask for Norilsk, a back-up plan in case you can't proceed
- **Don't miss** Igarka's little Permafrost Museum
- **Gateway city** Igarka
- **Length of route** Igarka to Dudinka cruise approximately 350km, Dudinka to Norilsk by road 80km, flight to Khatanga 750km
- **Modes of travel** River boat, plane, helicopter charter, strenuous hiking to adventure areas
- **Recommended maps** The comprehensive 1:200,000 regional map sold in Krasnoyarsk, Le Pti Fyute's Taymyr guide (in Russian)
- **Time needed** One-way cruise to Dudinka, 12 hours from Igarka or around 4½ days from Krasnoyarsk (longer coming back); Taymyr Peninsula, two weeks
- **Time zone** Moscow time +4 (GMT+7)

If you do manage to get to Norilsk you could venture on towards the beautiful Putorana Plateau and the great Taymyr Peninsula. Both are dramatic total wilderness areas that require an adventurous spirit and a great deal of outdoors self-assurance. You could also fly on to Khatanga, the typical launching point for trips to the North Pole (see the boxed text, p270).

The railway between Norilsk and Dudinka was once touted as the world's most north-

erly and something of a speciality tourist attraction. However, currently the passenger service has ceased, and permit difficulties have stopped most visitors coming anyway.

IGARKA

☎ 39112 / pop 9000

The ragged timber port of Igarka sulks dejectedly at the Yenisey mouth of the frigid Protoka River, just north of the Arctic Circle. The picture of decay that greets you as you step off the river boat is humbly pitiful: there's no real port, just a dock hidden away behind a small square of mostly derelict buildings about 5km east of the Hotel Zapolyare. As Gulag 503, Igarka once housed up to 35,000 exiles labouring on a nonsensical, never-to-be-completed train line that Stalin had carelessly doodled across a map to Salekhard. With its dismal climate and hopeless employment prospects, the town appears to be dying. The freeze-thaw moods of the permafrost on which the town is built relentlessly undermine the foundations of those buildings that have survived being burnt down by alcoholics, many of whom have fallen catastrophically unconscious, cigarette in hand. Yet, incredibly, hidden amid the ruins is a museum that beat London's National Portrait Gallery for commendation as European Museum of the Year in 2002. The small but unforgettable **Permafrost Museum** (Vechnoy Merzloty muzey; ☎ 24110; www.museum.ru/M1405; ul Bolshoy Teatr 15A; admission R200; ☎ 9am-12.45pm & 2-5pm Sun-Fri) allows you to descend 10m through the frozen strata into a fairytale world of crystalline condensed breath. It has associated sub-museums (separate admission charges) including a gulag memorial and an art gallery displaying mostly the work of local schoolchildren.

Sleeping & Eating

The best accommodation option is a private room (around R400 including three meals) organised through the Permafrost Museum. **Hotel Morskoe Port** (LPK; ☎ 24312; ul Chkalova 3; dm R150), near the museum, is a reasonably cosy house with little rooms off a central heated sitting area. Around 4km away, amid crumbling concrete apartment blocks, the **Hotel Zapolyare** (☎ 21611; 1st Mikro-rayon 7A; s/tw from R425-531/638) is handier for the main shop. It's typical of smaller Soviet concrete hotels, but

its deluxe rooms are not bad and have showers attached. On the ground floor, a netting-draped bar-restaurant (open at sporadic hours Friday to Sunday) serves surprisingly passable food. Even in 24-hour midsummer light the town's streets seem deserted. Nonetheless, people materialise from nowhere to fill the minibuses that curl two routes around the town. Bus No 1 goes via the art gallery, and No 2 links the museum and both hotels.

Getting There & Away

Tickets for SIAT flights back to Krasnoyarsk (R3030, 3½ hours, three to four per week) are sold at the bank beside Hotel Zapolyare. The airport is on an island linked to town by boat in summer, bus in winter, and helicopter (R100 per person, five minutes) when the ice is unsuitable for either.

There are ferries (around 12 hours, every two or three days in summer) to Dudinka, but no flights. See the boxed text, p295, for more details.

DUDINKA

☎ 39111 / pop 33,000

Most summer steamers terminate at this closed town of dilapidated pastel-coloured apartment blocks. Cranes hover like rusty vultures over the **port** (☎ 56543; ul Sovetskaya 43), there's a brace of **war memorials** and the **museum** (☎ 24191; ul Shchorsa 13A; ☎ 10am-7pm Tue-Sun) focuses on the geology and natural history of the Taymyr region. Perhaps the most dramatic attraction comes in mid-June, when the Yenisey thaws and vast, car park-sized chunks of ice thrash downriver, making an extraordinary din. Permits for tourists are hard to arrange.

A reasonably priced hotel is the **Severnoe Siyaniye** (☎ 56079; ul Matrasova 14; s R300). Frequent buses run to Norilsk, 80km east.

The *Bliznyak* ferry continues up the Yenisey gulf to Ust Port (six hours) and Karaul (13 hours).

NORILSK

☎ 3919 / pop 290,000

Apocalyptic Norilsk is an improbably large metal-processing city where rivers run a vivid rainbow of evilly polluted colours. Huge nickel, copper and platinum mines make the city wealthy but are responsible for acid rain over a wide area of Siberian tundra.

Yet Norilsk is also the gateway to some of the Arctic's most beautiful wilderness scenery. Permits are required, and Norilsk is only open to foreign visitors who have been specifically invited by a local company. The paperwork can be organised by tour companies but will take at least a month.

The website <http://norilsk.net> is extensive and has many great photos, but at the time of research the English-language version was under construction. **Rodina Komputer** (Leninskiy pr 7; ☎ 10am-10pm) is one of many *internet clubs*. The city has a distinctive green **mosque** (built 1997) and a **museum** (☎ 460646; Leninskiy pr 14) with exhibits about the city's construction and gulag horrors. The good-value **Hotel Norilsk** (☎ 349930; ul Talnakhskaya 39A; s R280), off ulitsa Sovetskaya, examines permits and visas in minute detail. **Kavkaz Restaurant** (☎ 222815; ul Talnakhskaya 71; mains R80-100) serves inexpensive Georgian food.

Norilsk's Alykel airport is almost 50km west of the centre. It has twice-daily air connections with Krasnoyarsk (R4640), as well as frequent services to Moscow and several Urals cities. A weekly hop serves Khatanga (R4200).

PUTORANA PLATEAU

Starting some 75km east of Norilsk, the ultra-isolated, windswept Putorana Plateau rises magnificently, like a gigantic green-tinted dinosaur dripping with dramatic waterfalls. Russian adventure lovers nickname this the Lost World and rave about the purity of its untouched nature. Beneath lichen-covered rocks, brooks murmur hypnotically, foxberries remain edible beneath carpets of winter snows, and contorted larch trees give the forested areas a mysterious, fairytale atmosphere. Only the top three metres of the Putorana's mesmerising lakes ever thaws, and it's not uncommon to stumble across mammoth tusks. Cross-country skiing treks are best in April, when the lake surfaces are still conveniently frozen. There's a small ranger's hut on Lake Kutaramakan – it looks particularly beautiful ringed with frozen cascades. Wild reindeer herds migrate across it in spring. Kayaking and rafting adventures are possible in July and August. However, visits are only for hardy outdoors adventurers who are wealthy enough to afford the helicopter transfers.

TAYMYR PENINSULA

The gigantic Taymyr (Dolgan-Nenets) Autonomous District spreads north, glistening with lakes and swampy tundra, to mainland Russia's most northerly point at Cape Chelyuskin. The whole region is extremely sparsely populated by humans but is a rich breeding ground for great bird populations, notably Brent geese. There are muskoxen in the Byrranga mountains north of gorgeous Lake Taymyr. Access generally requires a full-scale expedition.

Getting There & Away

With plenty of notice Norilsk-based **Traveler's Club Taymyr** (☎ 423066; alextravel@norcom.ru; ul Ordzhonikidze 2-93) can help you sort out permits for the Taymyr Peninsula and Putorana Plateau, and can organise boats, helicopters, snowmobiling and the various guides that you'll need to explore this wild-est frontier of Arctic travel. Trips to the North Pole are also possible. For reliable, English-speaking help in organising trips to this region, contact the ever-obliging **K2** (☎ 3812-693075; www.adventuretravel.ru) in Omsk or **Stan Tours** (info@stantours.com) in Almaty. Although the latter is primarily a Central Asia specialist, the German owner has had some thrilling adventures in the Taymyr. K2 offers a 12-day Putorana trip with fishing, hiking, canyon-rafting and a visit to Lake Kutaramakan. The US\$1850 cost out of Norilsk includes helicopter transfers and permits.

KHATANGA

☎ 39176 / pop 5600

Surprisingly large for so isolated an outpost, Khatanga was founded in 1632 but remained little more than six houses and a church until the Soviet era. The local **museum** is well appointed and has an Igarka-style permafrost cave. The village comes alive in April, when locals celebrate a **reindeer festival**, and the town buzzes with an eclectic mix of geologists, explorers and daredevils from all over the globe. That's because flights to Sredniy Island scientific base and thence to the North Pole typically started from **Khatanga airport** (☎ 25417). Consequently, the five-storey **hotel** (s/tw R1200/1500-1900), just 50m from the runway, is comfortable. However, since the well-respected airport managers died in an air

crash a few years ago, organisation has become somewhat less reliable. Along with Khatanga's frequently inclement weather, this means that Arctic expeditions are increasingly looking for alternative routes. Khatanga remains the headquarters for the **Taymyr Reserve** (☎ 21097; taymyr@orc.ru), though the disconnected parcels of protected land are very distant.

For details of North Pole trips, see p270.

DIKSON

pop 2900

A few decaying villages are scattered along the ever-widening yawn of the Yenisey Gulf, with ethnic Russians overwhelmingly outnumbering the minuscule population of indigenous Dolgan and Nenets peoples. At the Yenisey's far northern mouth, the incredibly isolated settlement of Dikson was named by explorer Adolf Nordenskjöld for his sponsor, Oskar Dickson, during the 1878 traverse of the Northeast Passage. Dikson's dwindling population remains nervous about potential nuclear pollution from Soviet-era waste that was dumped off the Novaya Zemlya islands, some 500km to the north.

ITINERARY 4: THE ARCTIC LENA RIVER

Flummox even your best-travelled friends by admitting to being one of the first foreigners to cruise this vast yet little-known waterway right to its Arctic delta.

Yakutsk (☎ 41122; pop 200,000), a mineral-rich permafrost city, and the northern Lena River lie within the Sakha Republic (Yakutia). Technically, Yakutia imposes its own visa rules. Though the authors were not asked for special papers, you should check the latest regulations carefully before showing up. The best source of information is the reputable **Sakha Tourist Agency/Tour Service Centre** (☎ 41122-422652; www.yakutiatravel.com; ul Oktyabrskaya 5, Yakutsk), which arranges home-stays in villages right across Sakha. It also organises many excursions, including a two-week return Lena River cruise from Yakutsk to Tiksi via Sangar, Zhigansk (originally a 1632 Cossack fortress) and Kyusyur. The cruise includes a diversion to the famous

Lena pillar rock formations on the way back. For full details on Yakutsk, see Lonely Planet's *Russia & Belarus* guide.



FAST FACTS

- **Access for independent travellers** Difficult (Yakutsk is way off the railway network; going further will require money and tenacity)
- **Best time to travel** Midsummer for river boats
- **Difficulty level** Lack of tourism means you'll be eyed with some surprise if not suspicion; the trips themselves are easy
- **Don't forget** To make good contacts in Yakutsk well before you start, that Sakha has only two (very rough) long-distance 'roads' and that in winter Oimyakon (in Sakha) is the world's coldest spot
- **Don't miss** The Lena pillars (Sakha's greatest attraction, albeit outside the Arctic zone)
- **Gateway city** Yakutsk
- **Length of route** Each way approximately 2200km by boat, 1250km by air
- **Modes of travel** Riverboat, plane
- **Recommended maps** Sakha maps available at Globus bookshop in Yakutsk (pr Lenina 18)
- **Time zone** Moscow time +6 (GMT+9)

TIKSI

☎ 41267 / pop 6100

For years the collapsing settlement of Tiksi, on the Arctic coast east of the Lena delta, was a closed town, a strategic airport for the USSR's air force and nuclear defence. It remains a controlled zone, so all visitors require a border-zone permit. Nonetheless, intrepid foreign travellers who have managed to get such a permit have been allowed to take the weekly flights from Yakutsk (three hours). Some visitors come for *taimen* fishing (from around US\$1700 for seven days all in, including helicopter transfers, arranged via www.yakutiatravel.com). Otherwise, once in Tiksi you can stare at the ice cracking on the lugubrious yellow July sea, listen to maudlin tales of how much better life was in the Soviet era or watch scrap metal rust. Weather-ruined Tiksi-3 village nearby is a particularly shocking scene of desolation. Hotels **Moryak** (☎ 54031; tw R315) and **Zapolyare** (☎ 53072; ste R550) are reported to be unexpectedly pleasant.

ITINERARY 5: THE CHUKOTKA PENINSULA

Spot whales and walruses while cruising around Russia's easternmost point visiting ramshackle villages and bizarrely isolated cities en route.

At Asia's easternmost nose, Chukotka offers an end-of-the-world frisson and has a wealth of wild, undisturbed coastline to savour. Although the rather barren, scree-covered fjord-sides are not always dramatic, there are good chances to spot whales, walruses and distant coves that very few travellers have ever seen. The itinerary below follows approximately the route of icebreaker cruises like that organised by **Quark Expeditions** (☎ 203 656 0499; www.quarkexpeditions.com; cruises from US\$8050 incl flights from Alaska). More limited 12-day whale- and walrus-watching tours with **Circumpolar Expeditions** (☎ 907 272 9299; www.arctictravel.net/tourprov.htm; Suite 101, 3201 W31st Ave, Anchorage, Alaska 99517, USA) stop off at various villages around the coast and cost from US\$3495. The company can also help sort out your visa and permit nightmares and organise bed-and-breakfast accommodation.



FAST FACTS

- **Access for independent travellers** Almost hopeless – as yet almost solely for tours and cruises
- **Best time to travel** July and August
- **Difficulty level** Easy as a tour, very awkward independently
- **Don't forget** Permits, permits, permits
- **Don't miss** walrus-watching boat trips
- **Gateway city** Anadyr or Provideniya
- **Length of route** Approximately 2000km each way, excluding Pevek
- **Modes of travel** Air, cruise ship
- **Time needed** Two weeks for typical cruises
- **Time zone** Moscow time +9 (GMT+12)

Permit requirements make travelling independently awkward; even if you manage it, being on land means you'll miss much of the attraction.

Chukotka undulates between eroded mountains of permafrost rising as high as 1843m in the heart of the peninsula. Some 90% of the region's population is Russian, and there are also around 12,000 Chukchi, 1400 Evenki and Yup'ik, and 1000 Chuvantsi people. The native populations were forced into towns during the Soviet era as the region was exploited for tin, manganese, coal and

especially gold mining. However, in purely economic terms mining was never profitable. With the collapse of the Soviet system and its state subsidies, many enterprises became insolvent and roughly half of the population left. Many native people drifted back to their original village settlements, reverting to traditional hunting-based lifestyles. There are some rather folkloric attempts to revive shaman drum dancing. Despite appealing settings, even these settlements are rarely picturesque and they lack the colourful charm of their Greenlandic equivalents. The bigger towns are architecturally miserable.

The region's most prominent personality is Roman Abramovich, who's best known in the west for his free-spending approach to Chelsea Football Club. He has been pouring his money into Chukotka, too.

For a better idea of the region, consult www.chukotka.org and enjoy the excellent photos on www.connexion-dte.dk/mmedia.htm. For wildlife, see <http://dinets.travel.ru/chukotka.htm>.

ANADYR

☎ 42722 / pop 11,300

Chukotka's main city forms a tatty sprawl across a low-lying tongue of fairly flat land on Anadyr Bay. Functional three- and five-storey concrete blocks line the main thoroughfare, Otkelitsa, and the town's skyline is dominated by the chimney and cooling towers of the power station. The newly tapped Zapadno-Ozernoe gas field offers Anadyr hopes of economic salvation and has caused a small building boom, with new cinema and shopping complexes recently completed. Near the main post office, the uninspired four-room **regional museum** (☎ 22731; <http://museum.chukotnet.ru>, in Russian; ul Rul'tytegina 5; admission R10) has a few stuffed animals.

Of three new hotels, the new **Otel Chukotka** (☎ 22661; ul Rul'tytegina 2) is Anadyr's smartest, with tinkling chandeliers, pseudo-gilt picture frames, a sauna, a business centre and a billiard-bar. **Anadyr Hotel** (☎ 29201; Otkel ul 14) is a compact, relatively new grey-and-red building right in the city centre nicknamed Hotel Canada for its builders. Its Dolce Vita Restaurant serves supposedly Italian-style food. **Gostinitsa Chukotka** (☎ 22794; ul Energetikov 14) has acceptable but more cramped rooms hidden within a big yellow-fronted apartment complex.

RUSSIA TO ALASKA?

Many dreamers staring at world maps come up with the bright idea of a transcontinental odyssey: crossing between Russia and Alaska. After all, at their nearest points Asia and America are only 89km apart. However, this overlooks a very important detail. The nearest 'road', the Kolyma Hwy, is over 2000km to the southwest. From that road's end in Magadan you could fly to Anchorage, Alaska, with **MAVIAL** (Magadan Airlines; www.magadanair.us), or more complicatedly via Anadyr or Provideniya in Chukotka to Nome (also Alaska). However, there is no land route to the northeast and absolutely no passenger boat to North America. If you're determined to sail the Bering Strait, one option is to join an annual two-week cruise from Anchorage to Provideniya and back to Nome. **CruiseWest** (☎ 206 409 3611; www.cruisewest.com) offers such a trip from US\$7799. Sailing your own boat is not impossible, but customs problems are formidable, and you'll be inconveniently limited to entering and leaving Russia via Provideniya like South African adventurer Mike Horn (www.mikehorn.com). For a comprehensive lowdown on who else has crossed and how, see <http://members.aol.com/imershein/Page8.html> bering.

The **airport** (☎ 56569), across a wide gulf in Ugolnye Kopi, is undergoing a massive redevelopment, which locals hope will launch Anadyr as more of a tourist hub from 2006. Beluga whales often follow the ferry across.

EGVEKINOT

pop 1900

Low but strikingly abrupt mountains rise directly behind Egvekinot's standard concrete blocks, giving the town a relatively photogenic aspect (see www.egvekinot.ru/gallery for images). Neolithic archaeological finds displayed in the local **museum** suggest that the Kresta Gulf coast has been inhabited for over 5000 years. The first European to visit was Cossack explorer Kurban Ivanov in 1660, followed by Vitus Bering in 1726.

Egvekinot is probably the best starting point for exploring inland Chukotka, thanks to a reasonably serviceable cross-mountain road via the Chukchi settlement of **Amguema** and continuing all the way to the manganese mines at Iultin. The tundra en route houses former gulags as well as nomadic reindeer herders. Continuing overland to Vankarem or Mys Shmidta is only feasible in winter.

There's a reindeer-breeding centre at **Konergino**, across the Kresta Gulf.

Egvekinot has a 50-bed 1970s hotel. An occasional supply ship operates from Anadyr, but most of the very few foreign visitors come on summer tours, such as those offered by **Intourist Ecotours** (www.ecotours-intourist.ru).

PROVIDENIYA

☎ 42735 / pop 2300

On an attractive bay flanked by steep, balding hills, Provideniya is essentially five parallel ranks of decaying Soviet-era apartment blocks behind the deepwater docks. The population was once around 8000, with some 30,000 more housed in nearby military encampments defending the Soviet border. These days many buildings are deserted, giving the town a very eerie atmosphere. In a green 1950s building, the interesting **museum** (☎ 22620; nab Dezhneva 43; admission R10; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat) receives support from the Alaska national parks service. It displays local crafts, including curious wooden snow-goggles and a full-sized *chum*. The director speaks English.

Getting There & Away

Air access is from Anadyr (see p291) or by **Bering Air** (☎ 907-443 5620; info@beringair.com) charters from Nome, Alaska. Guided weekend trips are organised from Alaska by Seattle-based **Worldwise Ecotourism** (☎ 282 0824; www.traveleastrussia.com). The airport is not actually in Provideniya at all but a ferry ride across the bay in Ureliki village.

Novoe Chapalino (p293) can be accessed by UAZ 4WD minibus.

AROUND PROVIDENIYA

The main attraction is visiting the region's coastal waters to observe relatively undisturbed populations of whales, seals and walrus, plus cliffs alive with nesting sea birds. You'll need a boat, of course. If your language skills and permits are up to it

and you have no time constraints, there's a chance to hitch a ride from Provideniya to an outlying settlement.

The Chukchi and Yupik people's main occupation is reindeer herding in the gentler tundra valleys. The easiest place to visit them is in **Novoe Chapalino village**, which is connected to Provideniya by a rough road passing a big but deserted former military base. Novoe Chapalino is very pleasantly located on a bay backed by the usual barren valleys. Its anaesthetic box-grid of 1958 houses is being steadily replaced by comfy new stilt-founded homes funded by the omnipresent largesse of Roman Abramovich (p290). In spring locals still use dogsleds here. Local dances are performed when day-tripping tour groups arrive from Alaska. **Yanrakynnot** is a whale-hunting village with more attractive wooden houses on gentle grassy undulations. The famous whale graveyard has bones strewn for kilometres along the coast.

CAPE DEZHNEV AREA

The 1200-strong population of **Lavrentia** is roughly 85% Chukchi and Yupik, and traditional hunting is the economic mainstay. The nearby hot springs may soon be used for geothermal power generation. There's a weekly flight to Anadyr and a hotel, but you'll need a special permit to stay. Uninhabited Cape Dezhnev is Asia's easternmost tip. Look for the old Soviet telescopes, which were once used to watch for bourgeois capitalist incursions from Alaska. Now that this lookout station has been abandoned, the closest sizeable village is **Uelen** with its small **craft museum**. *Trekking in Russia & Central Asia*, by Frith Maier, describes a one-week hiking loop of this area, passing through the Valley of Death – very biblical! Further west, in Mys Shmidta, are the **Wrangel Island reserve headquarters** (ul Naberezhnaya 27).

PEVEK

pop 5400

Though the population has halved in the last decade, Pevek remains the main north-eastern coastal port and a secondary air hub for airline **Chukotavia** (☎ 22090). Gold mining and border sensitivities make police typically suspicious of visitors. There's a road of sorts to the closed gold-mining town of Bilibino with its nuclear-power station. Extraordinary Northeast Passage icebreaker cruises

from Murmansk disembark here (see the boxed text, p270), and guests are flown by charter flight to Anchorage, Alaska. A 6WD bus can make it to **Komsomolskiy** (population 550), where **Intourist** (www.ecotours-intourist.ru) offers helicopter excursions to the incredible 18km-diameter **Lake Elgygytyn**, a crater created by a huge meteorite impact 3.4 million years ago. **Tours to Russia** (☎ 095-921 8027; www.tourstorussia.com) runs 350km white-water rafting holidays from here to the Anadyr River.

WRANGEL ISLAND

Often fog- and ice-bound, this gently mountainous nature reserve is considered to have the greatest biodiversity of anywhere in the Arctic. In summer its mosaic of tundra types becomes a carpet of flowers. A Unesco site since 2004, it's a winter hideaway for polar bears. The rich coastal waters are feeding grounds for walrus and grey whales, and there are bird colonies of snow geese and phalarope. The landscape is predictably stark, but longer-term visitors might stumble across bones and tusks of mammoths, which survived here until relatively recent epochs.

The island was named by American whaler Thomas Long for explorer Ferdinand von Wrangel, who had sought but failed to find it in 1820–24. The famous Vilhjalmur Stefansson expedition, sent to claim the island for Britain in 1921, ended in confused disaster. (Sole survivor Ada Blackjack Johnson was rescued in 1923.) In 1926 the USSR created a settlement at Ushakovskoye to ensure its territorial claim. Today there's a scientific base with huts and a rough helipad. Visitors are only allowed by invitation. **Intourist** (www.ecotours-intourist.ru) organises helicopter visits from Pevek, and every year one or two icebreaker cruises visit from Alaska (see the boxed text, p292) and Anadyr or Provideniya. Various Western agencies, including **Footprint** (www.footprint-adventures.co.uk; cruises from 5750), bring their Chukotka icebreaker cruises here.

ESSENTIAL FACTS

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

In addition to the usual cautions required for Arctic travel, the main annoyances are bureaucratic, thanks to all the permit requirements. There's also considerable police

suspicion towards independent travellers in several of the areas covered. Some small outposts are disintegrating, and one may hear tales of alcohol-fuelled crime, though these are frequently exaggerated. Nonetheless it's wise to have contacts before you arrive.

FURTHER READING

Lonely Planet's *Russia & Belarus* is an essential accompaniment for travels in the rest of Russia and will ideally complement this volume. Regional Russian-language guides by **Le Pti Fyute** (www.petitfute.ru, in Russian) include *Chukotka*, *Komi* (for Vorkuta), *Nenets AO* (for Naryan Mar), *Murmansk Region* (Kola Peninsula), *Krasnoyarsky Kray* (Arctic Yenisey area) and *Taymyr*. Its *Yugra* is ideal for the Khanty-Mansiysk area (p280), and an English-language edition has supposedly been published, though it's exceedingly hard to find.

Frith Maier's *Trekking in Russia & Central Asia* is a somewhat ageing classic; it's ideal for planning expeditions, though you'll still need local maps. Only a tiny fraction deals with Arctic areas.

Fritdjof Nansen's two-volume *Farthest North* documents his *Fram* expedition from Siberia across the Arctic ice. It's a meticulously detailed yet somewhat tedious read. Much more exciting is *The Land of White Death*, by Valentin Albanov, whose ship attempted to repeat Nansen's exploits – with disastrous consequences. Albanov's truly thrilling escape story is written with pace and style and must rate as one of the greatest classics of Arctic literature.

MONEY

The Russian currency is the rouble abbreviated in this book as R, though in Cyrillic it looks like a P. One rouble equals 100 kopeks. Since the 1997 currency collapse, the rouble has been relatively stable and hovers at around R30 to the US dollar. That currently means R36 to the euro and R52 to the pound sterling. Travellers cheques offer security but generally prove a nightmare to cash. The best buy-sell rate split is always for US dollars (clean, new bills only), though euro rates are not too bad and euro acceptance is now relatively widespread in exchange booths. However, in the Arctic such booths are relatively rare. In many Russian cities ATMs breed like rabbits, but in the Arctic

region you can really only count on them in Salekhard and Murmansk. All in all, up north you'd be well advised to have a good stash of roubles about your person, backed up with greenbacks.

When entering Russia be very sure to fill in *and have stamped* a *deklaratsia* (customs declaration form) stating how much foreign currency you're carrying. At Moscow and St Petersburg you may be told that this is unnecessary, but persist (go through the red lane) if you are likely to leave Russia by a different exit point. Especially when exiting Russia into Mongolia by train, having unstamped or missing *deklaratsia* can result in all your money being confiscated!

TELEPHONE

Russia's country code is ☎7. Within Russia, to call any non-local number dial ☎8 then wait for a different tone. After that, for an international call tap in 10, the country code, the city code (minus the first zero) and the number. For a Russian intercity call, add the city code (zeros and all) and then the number. Except from call boxes, calling local numbers is generally free, even from hotels. By contrast, calling long distance or international from hotels can be very pricey. You'd be better off with a card phone or, where they don't exist, using a telephone office. Older phone offices still require you to give the number to a counter operator.

Emergency telephone codes:

Ambulance ☎03

Fire ☎01

Gas leaks ☎04

Police ☎02

Mobile phones

GSM mobile phones work in most populated areas of Russia using a variety of networks. However, at around US\$20 for a local SIM card, it's generally cheaper to buy a Russian telephone number from one of the many local cell-phone stores. As anywhere, the deal varies with the network you select. Inter-network roaming options are possible, but calls on other networks become more expensive. Thus when selecting the SIM card consider where you plan to use the phone – don't buy a SIM card for a Moscow-based network if you'll mostly be visiting eastern Siberia.

GATEWAY CITIES

Getting to Murmansk

Daily flights link Murmansk (p272) with Moscow (R2634, two to three hours), St Petersburg (R2860, two hours) and Arkhangelsk (R2444, two hours). **Arkhangelsk Airlines** (<http://avl.aero>, in Russian) flies from Tromsø in Norway (two hours, thrice weekly) and Luleå in Sweden (2¾ hours, twice weekly) via Rovaniemi in Finland (1¼ hours). From June to mid-September **Finnair** (www.finnair.com) flies directly from Helsinki, Finland.

Daily trains run from Moscow (*platskart/kupe* R767/1280, 36 hours), St Petersburg (R510/950, 26 to 28 hours), Petrozavodsk (R351/768, 20 hours) and indirectly from Arkhangelsk (R345/606, 30 hours).

Minivans or buses run from Kirkenes, Norway (7am and 8am Monday to Friday, noon Sunday) and Ivalo, Finland (8am Monday to Friday, 7½ hours) with connections to Rovaniemi. In Murmansk services leave from the Hotel Polyarnye Zory (see p273).

Getting to Khanty-Mansiysk

There are daily flights from Moscow (R5100), Tyumen (R3400) and several other cities. Summer steamers coming from Omsk via Tara and Tobolsk call at Khanty-Mansiysk (p280) en route to Salekhard every eight days. From Tobolsk midsummer **meteor** (info ☎34511-39467; R706) hydrofoils run once or twice a week. The nearest train station is Pyt-Yakh, which is located on the Surgut-Tobolsk-Tyumen line.

Getting to Igarka

All transport to Igarka (p287) is via the large, pleasant city of Krasnoyarsk, 60 hours east of Moscow along the Trans-Siberian Railway on train No 055 (60 hours). Krasnoyarsk-based airline **SIAT** (Sibaviatrans; www.siat.ru, in Russia; ul Vzlyotnaya 9; ☎8am-8pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm & 2-6pm Sat & Sun) serves the Yenisey area with several weekly flights to Igarka (R3030, 3½ hours), Turukhansk (R2900), Dudinka (R6200) and Norilsk (R4640).

Every couple of days from June to early October, elegant Dudinka-bound passenger ships with wood panelling and shiny brass fittings depart Krasnoyarsk's spired **river station** (☎3912-274446; ☎8am-7pm) for Yenisey River odysseys. The ride to Igarka (R1234 to R2974, 74 to 79 hours) includes short stops at Yeniseysk (17 hours) and Turukhansk (38 to 40 hours). There are three to four boats per week. Last-minute tickets are usually available. Note that returning southbound (ie upstream) journeys take about 50% longer.

Getting to Yakutsk

Yakutsk has several weekly air connections to Moscow (R9000), Irkutsk (R3400) and Khabarovsk (R4900), and a twice-monthly river ferry to Ust Kut on the BAM railway, where there are trains to Krasnoyarsk.

Getting to Chukotka

Anadyr (p291) is the main hub, with flights from as far afield as Moscow (Domodedovo) or Khabarovsk, mostly via Magadan on **Chukotavia** (☎42722 56569). Chukotka is sporadically accessible from Alaska thanks to charter flights from Anchorage to Anadyr and notably Nome to Provideniya on **Bering Air** (☎907-443 5620; info@beringair.com). If you come that way, remember that you'll cross the International Date Line: noon on Monday in Nome is 9am on Tuesday in Chukotka, a 21-hour difference.

Be aware that Chukotka counts as both a closed and a border zone, thus requiring two separate special permits. The exact list of regulations runs to several pages, apparently designed to dissuade any tourist from coming independently. Bering Air and various adventure-tour agencies can help their guests. Permits are notoriously hard to organise individually. At the time of research, a tourism plan due to coincide with the rebuilding of Anadyr airport in 2006 claimed it would simplify visa and permit rules, but don't hold your breath.

TIME

Russia stretches across a phenomenal 10 time zones. Almost all train timetables work on Moscow time (*Maskovski vremya*; GMT+3, GMT+4 in summer), but bus timetables are usually on local time. For air travel check very carefully which time is quoted. See also the World Time Zones chart on p334.

TOURIST INFORMATION

There isn't anything approaching a tourist office anywhere in the region. Local travel agencies might prove helpful. Otherwise, often your best hope for information is joining Internet chat groups (preferably in Russian) with people from the area you wish to visit. Such contacts are likely to give you more reliable information than any other source, but obviously it's very hit and miss.

VISAS

The biggest disincentive to visiting Russia is the miserably complex bureaucracy of visas, permits and registrations. Don't underestimate the cost or irritation involved. Almost all Western nationals require a visa. Application costs generally start at around US\$50, assuming you can wait two weeks or so for processing. This rises to \$100 or more for quicker service. However, before you can even apply you'll need an officially sanctioned 'invitation'. If you're on a tour the tour operator should provide this. If travelling independently, you'll need to find a 'visa support' company such as www.visatorussia.com to get an invitation. This service can cost tens or hundreds of US dollars, depending on the type and length of visa required and the number of entries. Long-stay and multi-entry visa support can

take weeks, and such visa applications may require you to take an HIV/AIDS test. Good visa support is a topic of endless, useful discussion on Lonely Planet's Thorn Tree site (<http://thorntree.lonelyplanet.com/>).

Visas come in various types. Independent travellers will find things easier if they can score a 'business visa', even if they have no business to conduct. That's because tourist visas technically limit you to a planned, booked itinerary. Business visas, by contrast, allow you more flexibility.

If money is no object, reputable visa agencies such as the London-based **Thames Consular** (☎ +44-20 8995 2492; www.thamesconsular.com) can organise everything from invitation to visa issuing in one package. For a double-entry business visa, expect to pay around £170 if you can wait a month and £350 to get it the same week. For a single-entry tourist visa, reckon on £120 (15 days' processing) or £210 (next-day service).

Whatever your visa you'll still need to 'register' within three days of arrival. Registration means officially informing the local aliens' bureau (PVU/OVIR) of your presence. If you stay in a better hotel this is generally done for you (keep the proof). If you're staying in budget accommodation you'll have to seek out OVIR yourself. This can be enormously tiresome, even for Russian speakers. You'll save lots of trouble and possibly even money by simply checking in to a good hotel for one night to get registered.

If all this doesn't seem complex enough, many of the Arctic regions are 'closed' or restricted 'border' zones. That means you'll require additional permits. These can be horrendously difficult to procure unless you join an officially sanctioned tour.