Article Side

What to see and do in Astrakhan by Sean Burke

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Astrakhan is a melting pot of Christian, Muslim and Buddhist faiths and lies in the valley of the Volga River, with half of its one million populace occupying Astrakhan City. Cold winters and very hot summers are the norm, and Astrakhan lays claim to being one of the driest cities in Europe.

The bustling city centre is just 5 miles from Narimanovo airport, where 8 airlines are currently in operation; offering non-stop flights to 7 international cities and 49 flights to domestic destinations.

Trains run directly from Moscow from May to September in the summer, and numerous Russian cruise ships from Moscow to Astrakhan offering a unique travel experience. These usually take 10 days along the Volga River.

Begin to soak up the historical ambiance as you imagine this Russian enclave trading with Indian, Armenian and Persian merchants all those years ago, resulting in a meshing of cultures and traditions. Take a trip to the Tatar-Bazar and sample the gorgeous watermelons and other treasures on offer.

With numerous theatres and museums all paying homage to the local lore and traditions, it wonâ€™t be long before you are immersed in this â€˜city of bridgesâ€™, as it is sometimes called (the city is comprised of 11 neighbouring islands). Russia claims 25-30% of the fishing and hunting market and as such, the gourmet tourist will find every type of smoked, dried (vyalenaya) and other fish at very affordable prices; in particular, Astrakhan delicacies such as smoked sturgeon and Balyk from the beluga.

A highlight of your visit will be the Astrakhan State Reserve. This can be found in the Volga River Delta. Founded in 1919, you can spot Dalmatian pelicans, mute swan, pheasant, sturgeon and others. One also cannot fail to notice the lotus flower thriving in this eastern gem, with fields of lotus taking up 5000 hectares.

Visit one of the coffee houses and then go and gaze in wonder at the Kremlin, a fine example of sixteenth century fortification. It is spiritually supported by the Uspensky Cathedral, erected around 1698. For the thirstier traveller, discover The Beer Academy and sample the ales unique to the region.

After becoming saturated with all the sights and sounds, take the weight off your feet by resting up in your hotel in Astrakhan. A variety of restaurants await your eager palate within the hotels as well as street-side venues. The famous Anri Barbusa Street is conveniently located close to train and bus terminals. You will be happy if you choose somewhere in the city centre, as you wonâ€™t have to go far to admire the qualities of this historical city, its buildings adorned with skilfully-crafted wooden decor.

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