

# LAKE BAIKAL: THE DEEPEST AND THE OLDEST



Lake Baikal in southern Siberia, Russia, is the largest freshwater basin in Eurasia. It is also the deepest continental body of water on Earth, containing one-fifth of the freshwater on Earth's surface.

More than 330 rivers and streams flow into the gem of Russia's natural treasure - Lake Baikal. In the East, it receives the Barguzin and Selenga rivers, and most of its outflow is through the Angara at the northern end. The island of Olkhon is in its centre. Plant and animal life is rich and various; at least 1,500 species of flora and fauna are unique to the Lake's ecosystem.

**In 1996 the Lake Baikal Coastal Protection Zone has designated a UNESCO World Heritage site.** Today many tourists have attracted to the region thanks to the fact that **Lake Baikal is the deepest and oldest lake in the world.** What fewer people realize, however, is that Baikal's majestic expanse is situated in a region of surpassing beauty, its forested shores surmounted by the jagged, snow-clad peaks of the Barguzin Mountains. In the winter Baikal freezes over, with ice so thick that the Trans-Siberian Railway was briefly run over its surface.

At this time of year, the lake provides an unsurpassed venue for the pleasures of a tour by sleigh. In the summer, its crystalline blue waters are transparent to the depth of forty meters, and its shores are ringed with brilliant colors of seasonal wildflowers. **Boat tours offered during the warm months are one of the best ways to get familiar with the Lake, as is hiking in the forests, streams, and waterfalls of Baikal's parks.** The lake region is home to an enormous variety of plants and animals, most of which - like nerpas, the lake's freshwater seals, and its trademark delicacy, the omul salmon - are found nowhere else in the world. Bears, elk, lynx, and sables abound in the surrounding forests.

Lake Baikal long ago became famous for the purity of its waters and surrounding shores, a pristine state that had been seriously threatened by planned industrial development in recent years. Luckily, Baikal was one of the first regions to benefit from the new Russian government's reversal of decades of anti-environmental industrial policies.

Since 1992 Lake Baikal and the entire surrounding area have been designated as a national park, and **Baikal is today a naturalist's paradise and an idyllic holiday destination.** With fine beaches, excellent hiking, birdwatching, and pleasure boating, Baikal is well-positioned to become one of the most attractive vacation spots in Asia.

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