

SIBERIA: CRUISING DOWN THE LENA RIVER



Discover Siberia and its wilderness on a boat. Join a cruise ship and meet local Yakuts.

The Lena River is over 2,000 miles long. Among the 10 largest rivers in the world, it is the only one to freeze over its entire length each winter. Only in July the ice is clear enough that tourists can start their expedition.

The trip along the Lena River is a voyage through a forgotten land. **The great Russian taiga, the largest forest in the world, stretches on for miles.** The Soviet Union tried to conquer it, sending a wave after wave of settlers into the wilderness. Nonetheless, most of the few villages and homesteads along the banks are now abandoned.

The empty, abandoned countryside contrasts with the vibrancy of the company on the boats that people use to cross large distances. There are few stores in northern Siberia and the boat is littered with boxes of produce, furniture, floor tiles, and every other conceivable manner of merchandise which the chattering passengers are bringing home.

Every port is a flurry with passengers lowering their goods and themselves into waiting canoes. Between stops the passengers and crew drink, talk, and play cards, watching the Lena's great vistas drift past.

Most of the Siberians are Yakuts, distant cousins of Mongols, as can be seen in their love of fermented mare's milk. They live a life far removed from anything that can be imagined. **In the winter the ice turns the rivers into highways on which they drive. During the brief summer, they leave the villages to hunt and fish.**

There are a few tourist attractions along the river. There is the Lena Pillars, stunning rock formations carved on the bank by rain over the millennia. Yakutsk has some of Russia's best museums. Then there is the Arctic Ocean itself.

The Lena River flows from south to north; the southernmost port is Ust'-Kut, a small city on the Baikal-Amur Mainline railroad (the northern branch of the Trans-Siberian). The fast route to Ust'-Kut is to fly from Moscow to Irkutsk, and then either fly from Irkutsk to Severobaikalsk or take the hydrofoil (safer, more fun, and less likely to be canceled). From Severobaikalsk it is a few hours by train to Ust'-Kut.

The scenic route is to take the Trans-Siberian directly from Moscow, which takes about three days. The train is cheap, but even the flights are cheap by U.S. standards.

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