

VISA REGULATION PREVENTS TOURISTS FROM VISITING RUSSIA



A significant drop in the number of incoming tourists in Russia has been recorded. Last year, the number of tourists from Europe declined by 10 to 30 percent. Unfortunately, it is likely the situation will get worse. It is possible that the number of tourists visiting Russia this year will decrease by 50%.

While it is true that Russian officials made a number of speeches on the importance of developing the tourism industry, **there is a sharp decline in the number of tourists from developed European countries entering Russia.**

Tour operators claim that there has been a decline in the number of French tourists of 8%, of Spanish tourists of 30%, of Estonian and Italian tourists of 10%, of Finnish tourists of 10 to 15 %, and a decline in the number of German tourists of 15%. These declines have had a significant negative impact on the Russian tourism industry.

The prevailing view is that the main reason for the drop in incoming tourists is the fact that it is now much more difficult for tourists to apply for Russian visas. Beginning in mid-2012, new rules were introduced that complicated the visa application process significantly.

One example is the rule put in place by the Russian consulate in France that all tourists must apply for a visa via faxed documents. Scanned documents are no longer accepted. There has also been an increase in the length of time tourists are required to wait for the visa application process to be completed.

The situation is even worse in Germany. The Russian Visa Application Center in Germany now only accepts visa applications submitted in electronic form. In addition, group visa applications are no longer accepted. All visa applications must be done individually. This makes completing the visa application process so tedious for a number of individuals that they no longer believe visiting Russia is worth it.

The Deputy General Director of Academservice Company, Alexander Kurnosov, has been quoted saying, "**Group invitations are no longer accepted. Tourists refuse to travel as soon as they learn details of obtaining Russian visas.**"

Complicating the visa application process further, the Russian Visa Application Center in Germany refuses to accept all German citizens' passports, limiting the number of German tourists willing to visit Russia still further. It also requires that German tourists disclose their income when applying for a visa. Germans are very sensitive about disclosing their income, and as a result, some of them are discouraged from completing visa applications.

As if all this were not bad enough, visa fees in Germany have increased to 60 euros, making short trips to Russia too expensive to be worth the troubles. German tourists thus consider other options for holidays besides Russia.

The current situation today is that the Russian Foreign Ministry actively inhibits tourism due to its

introduction of new visa centers and cumbersome visa application procedures. According to Sergei Voitovich, director general of Svoi TT, the result of these changes is that, "Russia will welcome not 10 to 30 million tourists annually, as some successful countries, but only two to three million, like it happens in Honduras and Mongolia.

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