



Country of the Saiga Wildlife and Cultures of the Southern Russian Steppe

An 11-day tour arranged by *Eastern Approaches*
on behalf of the Saiga Conservation Alliance
Thursday 19th - Sunday 29th August 2010

Limited to 15 places

The southern steppe-land of European Russia between the Don and the Volga Rivers – now largely situated in the autonomous Republic of Kalmykia – is one of the most unusual and diverse natural habitats in Europe. Ranging from the rich grasslands of the steppe to arid semi-desert towards the Caspian and lush subtropical wetlands of the Volga Delta, the region is home to a variety of flora and fauna. Chief them is the saiga antelope. This unique antelope is Critically Endangered, with their numbers falling by 95% in just 15 years. The Saiga Conservation Alliance (SCA) is committed to saving the saiga from extinction and supports a number of vital conservation projects in the region. This tour is a unique opportunity to see both the saiga themselves and the extraordinary environment where they are found. This is the only place in the world where saigas can easily be seen in relatively large numbers, and this is the only tour that allows you to go behind the scenes and meet the committed conservationists who are working to save this species and its habitats. The tour visits some of the projects supported by the SCA, in particular the Centre for Wild Animals in Kalmykia and the Stepnoi Reserve in the Astrakhan region. A portion of the tour price goes towards the SCA and its conservation work in the region.

The tour also visits the deltas of two of the largest rivers in Europe, the Don and the Volga. The Volga Delta is a unique micro-environment, a wonderland of lush vegetation – in particular the spectacular fields of lotus blossoms, which are in full bloom in August – and birdlife, such as the Caspian tern and red-footed falcon. Dominating the Delta is the historic city of Astrakhan, former capital of the Tatar Khanate of Astrakhan, heirs of the Golden Horde. Today a city of canals, embankments, historic merchants' quarters and wooden houses dominated by its impressive Kremlin, it still has a cosmopolitan population of Tatars and Russians.

But most of the tour is spent in the Republic of Kalmykia, a little known republic the existence of which few in Europe are even aware. Fewer still realise that it is the only state in Europe whose official religion is Tibetan Buddhist, and in its capital, Elista, lamaseries, stupas, prayer flags and pictures of the Dalai Lama predominate over churches and pictures of either patriarch or pope. The Kalmyks, arriving in the 18th century, were the last 'wave' of peoples who have been crossing the limitless grasslands of Eurasia since earliest times.

This tour therefore will be experiencing the history and life of the steppe to the fullest: its wildlife, history, culture, cities and peoples. It is fitting that it will end in the old capital of the last of the steppe people: Starocherkassk, capital of the Don Cossacks, now a sleepy but very picturesque village in the Don wetlands.



Eastern Approaches

5 Mill Road, Stow, Galashiels, TD1 2SD, Scotland UK.

Tel: 01578 730361 / Fax: 01578 730714 / Email: info@easternapproaches.co.uk



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DAY 1 – Fly London Heathrow to Rostov-on-Don on Lufthansa via Frankfurt, arriving in the afternoon

DAY 2 – Excursion to the Azov Regional Museum with its outstanding natural history and palaeontological collections, as well its extraordinary collection of Scythian and Sarmatian treasure. Continue to Orlovskiy

DAY 3 – Visit the Centre of Rare animals in Orlovskiy, situated in a typical Russian village. Continue by road across the steppe to Elista via the salt lakes on the Rostovskiy biosphere reserve and small horse farm which produces mare's milk.

DAY 4 – A fairly leisurely day in and around Elista, capital of the Republic of Kalmykia. Visit the huge Golden Temple in the centre of the city and the Geden Sheddup Choikorling Monastery outside, as well as the Museum of Natural History and Memorial to the Deportations

DAY 5 – Most of the day in the Yashkul saiga breeding centre on the main road to Astrakhan, which has the best saiga herd in captivity, as well as a lake a short distance away on the steppes noted for its birdlife. Continue to Astrakhan

DAY 6 – Morning visiting the former capital of the Khanate of Astrakhan. Visit the impressive Kremlin remains with the Cathedral of the Assumption and other buildings inside, as well as the old merchants' quarter and merchants' houses, the Tatar quarter and mosques, and some of the museums. After lunch an excursion to the village of Rechnoye on the Volga to visit the old Kalmyk temple

DAY 7 – Travel to Liman at the eastern end of the delta to visit the Stepnoy Nature Reserve, site of some of the most important conservation work on the saiga antelopes

DAY 8 – Full day exploring the Volga Delta, sailing as far as the Caspian shore to view the lotus blossoms and rich bird life

DAY 9 – Return to Elista via Yashkul, with a stop for lunch and a concert of traditional music and dancing by local children from the Saiga club at Yashkul school

DAY 10 – Return to Rostov-on-Don via Kazinka lake for birdwatching: about 400 pelicans, many cormorants and ducks there in August

DAY 11 – Most of the day on a leisurely visit to Starocherkassk, the old Don Cossack capital in the Don wetlands. Now a lovely sleepy little village with a good museum depicting Cossack life and picturesque old houses. Continue to the airport for the evening flight on Lufthansa back to London via Frankfurt



PRACTICAL INFORMATION

Tour Price: £3535 (full board).

Deposit £350

Single supplement: £196

COST: The cost includes: visa authorisation & procurement; current airport taxes; all airfares from London; all transfers; full board; all travel and stated excursions; all site and museum entries; all tips, including tips to drivers and guides; the services of an English speaking guide and a manager from the UK; detailed practical notes.

Not included: alcoholic beverages, laundry, incidentals

ACCOMMODATION: Good quality 2-4 star standard throughout. All hotels are new and/or recently reconditioned and quite comfortable, and all have standard amenities with private facilities

TRAVEL: Air-conditioned coach throughout

LOCAL CONDITIONS: This tour is not overly strenuous. There are however some huge distances to be covered, but most overnight stays are two nights or more. Some walking around city centres is involved. The coach takes you to all sites. Main roads are asphalt, although some of these are fairly bumpy, and some of the roads into the reserves are just dirt tracks. Weather is expected to be warm to hot and could range from 25 - 45 degrees Centigrade.

Note that tourism in this part of Russia is very new so one simply cannot expect the same level of tourism services as one would expect in western Europe or even in Moscow and St Petersburg. Accordingly, disruptions can occur and the unexpected simply has to be expected - this, of course, can be part of the attraction!

BOOKING: For a booking form please print off the one attached or download from www.easternapproaches.co.uk or contact Eastern Approaches at the address overleaf. Complete the booking form and send it with your deposit to Eastern Approaches. Detailed Practical Information, together with a detailed itinerary, will be sent on booking. A 2-week 'cooling off' period is allowed after confirmation of booking.

Eastern Approaches is an experienced tour operator specialising in escorted tours to the Middle East and former Soviet Union. Operating since 1994, Eastern Approaches is recognised for its unique and in-depth approach.