

The Three Capitals of Russia: An unforgettable bicycle tour

Moscow ▪ Velikii Novgorod ▪ St. Petersburg

Review of the 2009 Tour (July 25-August 4) sponsored by the Russian Cycle Touring Club

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Some may wonder why anyone would come to Russia to do a bike tour, but that was not the case for the 18 adventurous men and women who participated in the Russian Cycle Touring Club's "Three Capitals of Russia" tour in late July, 2009. The cyclists came from around the world: the United States, Canada, Australia, England, Germany, and even Hong Kong. Their ages ranged from a mid-20-year-old graduate student to an 80-year-old WWII veteran, and their professional backgrounds and political orientations were similarly diverse.

Despite their differences, the participants shared a compelling interest: they wanted to explore Russia, a country rich in both extraordinary natural beauty and a fascinating, millennia-old culture. Enthusiastic cyclists all, the group members knew that the very best way to explore would be by bicycle, and most of them chose to rent comfortable (and very affordable) bikes from RCTC, although a few brought their own bikes with them. The Three Capitals of Russia bike tour is nothing like the typical tour that most visitors experience in Russia, which tend to be large "canned" bus or boat tours. No, RCTC offers something entirely different: a chance to get off the beaten path, to step outside of the insulated "tourist bubble" while travelling with a small group at one's own pace, with the guidance of experienced Russian cyclists and tour organizers.

Upon arrival in Moscow, the participants enjoyed a guided walking tour of the city, which also allowed time for individuals to explore sites that held special interest for them, like visiting the tomb of a favorite composer. And, of course, the group also had the opportunity to taste authentic, traditional Russian cuisine for the first time (but certainly not the last!) during the walking tour. By the time we left Moscow, each participant had gained a genuine sense of the unique spirit of this dynamic city, which is nearly 900 years old.

The biking itself started in the city of Tver, an hour's train ride from Moscow (the bikes were transported by a sag wagon). Local riders from the Tver cycling club met our guest cyclists and led the group on a marvelous bike tour around their town. They then guided us to a favorite local picnic spot and later to a little-known forest camping site. The first day of riding concluded as we pitched tents (this was our only night with a campfire and tents), mingled, and swapped stories with our local cycling hosts who spent the night with us. This kind of welcoming local hospitality was encountered several times along our 470-mile route to St. Petersburg.

Over our ten day journey, everybody was free to ride at his or her own pace. Even when a person wanted to skip some of the highlighted tour sites (if he or she preferred riding above all else) s/he was able to do so with a guide. The RCTC guides were fluent in English and they were all committed to making sure that everyone felt comfortable and enjoyed their Russian cycling vacation fully. The RCTC guides were also proficient bicycle mechanics, so the participants never had to worry about flat tires or any other mechanical problems. The escort truck carried the group's luggage and had plenty of space for riders (plus bikes) who wanted to shorten a day's cycling distance which ranged from 40-70 miles. The sag wagon also carried lots of refreshments, and there were ample food stops along the way. Russian hospitality is legendary, and there was an almost unlimited supply of tea, juice, water, bread, cheese,

peanut butter, jam, fresh fruit and vegetables, Russian sweets, and other delectable treats. The group ate most of the main meals in cafes, restaurants, and hotels, but some were cooked by the guides, and these were particularly interesting for our international guests.

Every day offered stunning impressions and experiences, and the varied sights along the route delighted our guests: quaint villages, beautiful forests, pastoral fields, monasteries, museums, and on and on. Many of the buildings we saw were built 500, 600, 700+ years ago, but the true architectural and cultural jewels of the tour were found in the three historical capital cities we visited: Moscow, Velikii Novgorod, and St. Petersburg. Each of these great cities seemed to engrave its unique image into the minds of the visiting cyclists. Unfortunately, it's impossible to fully describe even a single day's adventures due to lack of space, and the full ten-day tour simply overflowed with unforgettable memories.

At the end of the tour, several of the participants said they wanted to return to Russia to do more biking. And for three of the cyclists, this was not their first bike tour with RCTC, and it surely won't be their last. The only sadness expressed was at the very end when the cyclists had to say good bye to their new friends. A genuine bond had been forged between these cycling partners, and there was also a profound sense of accomplishment, because the riding had not always been easy. The cyclists came looking for adventure and they found it, along with the opportunity to gain insight into the fascinating and complex Russian culture.

The 2009 Three Capitals Tour was met with such enthusiasm that it is now an annual RCTC event. For many cyclists this tour is not just a ride, but a quest to embrace the Russian spirit itself. Come see for yourself! For more information, visit: www.rctc.ru.



The Moscow river and the Kremlin



The cyclists enjoyed riding on beautiful country roads with very little traffic.



Inside a Russian orthodox church



St. Petersburg city view



Marvelous scenery provided ample rewards for the cyclists all along the 470-mile route.



Saint Sophia Cathedral in Novgorod