

Mount Elbrus Information Pack

In a Nutshell

The highest peak in the Caucasus and in Europe, with an elevation of 18,481', Mt Elbrus is a fine ascent which requires basic mountaineering skills, although high altitude and unpredictable weather make for a challenging and adventurous trip. Mount Elbrus stands between the great masses of Europe and Asia, dynamic in both region and terrain. It presents both a strenuous and rewarding climb, but also includes the full experience of Russian culture, history and character.

Overview

Our journey takes us into areas which have undergone a period of great change and transformation following the break up of the USSR; the new independent states we pass through will provide a chance to see first hand some of the Turkish and Georgian influences on the people and the land as we fly due south from Moscow to the wild and beautiful Caucasus Mountains in the new state of Kabardino Balkyrie.

The expedition begins in Moscow, the commercial and political focus of life in Russia, with optional time to visit the Red Square, the Kremlin and the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts when you return. There is also a chance for souvenir hunting and hopefully a visit to the famous Moscow State Circus or the Bolshoi ballet. Due to individual preference regarding places to visit and the option of a 13 day or 15 day expedition we include, in the 15 day trip two days after the climb in the capital. The accommodation is included in the 15 day expedition fee and Andrey our Russian coordinator is on hand to organise your tour.

This is a guided expedition with one of Russia's finest guides and writers on the history of Russian culture; with emphasis not just on the mountain but also the magnificent country we are visiting. Adventure Alternative has a sister organisation in Moscow called Russian Adventures which is managed by permanent staff. We have our own tour operator's license which ensures a hassle-free expedition to any area of the Federation, and security for all internal logistics.

The Caucas Range

This range of mountains links the Caspian Sea to the Black Sea and creates a natural boundary between the steppes of Russia and the southern states of Azerbaydzan, Georgia and Armenia. Caucasus translates as 'more than mountains'. Elbrus was first climbed in 1874 by Akia Sottaev who was 86 at the time! Huge areas of the Caucasus remain unexplored and the wildness of the region is evident in the small hamlets, remote passes and wildlife such as mountain chamois and golden eagles. There is little western influence here and our programme will reflect the wonderful way of life in the Caucasus region, starting with the traditional foods!

The Caucasus rise between the great plains of Russia and the mountainous territories of Transcaucasian. They extend for 1,200 km from East to West and are covered with pine and deciduous trees, flowers and wildlife, the Caucasus region has long valleys that fan out below and gradually narrow as they move towards the snow-capped peaks.. The mountain system includes dozens of peaks over 4,000 meters high and about 2,000 glaciers. Some of these glaciers, such as the Bezengi, are over ten kilometers long!

The central Caucas is the heart of the Caucasus, the highest, most fascinating part of the entire mountain system and the one with the most difficult access. Closed off to the west by Mt. Elbrus and to the east by Mt. Kazbek, the divide is quite articulate and complex and branches off to the north and south into a series of buttresses. Here lie the most famous rock faces in the Caucasus system scattered over the regions of Mt.Elbrus, Mt. Bezengi, Svanetia and, in the easternmost part of the central Caucasus, of Digoria, Karaugorn and Tsey.

Prielbrusie or the area around Mt. Elbrus is the most frequented area in the Central Caucasus. Many lateral valleys converge in the main valley, where the Baksan river flows, and lead to the most famous and beautiful mountains in the Caucasus range, such as Mt. Donguz-Orun (4,468 m), Mt. Shkhelda (4,320 m), Mt. Chatin (4,368 m), legendary Mt. Ushba (4,710 m), and, naturally, Mt. Elbrus itself (5,642 m), the highest peak in Europe. The Prielbrusie area is easily reached from Mineralnye Vody.

Mt Elbrus dominates the countryside of the Central Caucasus like a two-headed icy giant. In fact it has two peaks that correspond to two different volcano vents: the western peak (Zapadnaya) is the tallest one, while the eastern peak (Vostochnaya), 5,621 meters high, still has a gigantic crater 250 meters in diameter. The entire mountain is covered by an immense sheet of ice that takes up 145 square kilometers and in some zones is 400 meters thick. From the col that divides the two peaks the white slopes of the mountain descend gently, splitting up into tongues of ice and crevasses lying in the many striking valleys that radiate from the mountain.

The ascent of Elbrus by the normal route, which is the most popular in the Caucasus, is a long climb over a moderate incline that requires good acclimatization but has no technical difficulties. However, despite the apparent simplicity of this route, it can be dangerous. The altitude, variable weather, frequent violent storms and low temperature transform the ascent into the real higher altitude adventure!

The average time on summit day is from eight to ten hours for the ascent and about four hours for the descent. Crampons and ski poles are necessary for this climb. In autumn, winter and spring the face between the Pastukhov rocks and the col is covered with ice. April, May and June are the best months for the climb with skis, as you can go up with skis as far as the col and will be treated with a splendid descent back to the refuge.

Staff

Adventure Alternative has a sister organisation Russian Adventures which is headed up by Andrey Panin who will look after all the bureaucratic details to ensure a problem-free trip.

Russian mountain guide and rafting champion Sasha Lebedev is our chief guide and interpreter. Sasha is a unique man in that his knowledge of the region, the history and the culture is unparalleled; he has even written books on such regions as the Altai. His English is excellent and he is an experienced and safe guide for Mt Elbrus. Over the past years in Russia with Adventure

Alternative, Sasha and Gavin Bate, Director of Adventure Alternative, have achieved a 100% safety track record on the mountain, largely due to the careful acclimatization programme which allows for several days to summit and time to work on ice axe braking procedures and familiarisation with being on the snow and ice.

Accommodation

In Moscow we use a number of three star hotels, slightly outside the city but next to the huge Izmailovo Market, which is a trove for souvenir hunters.

In Terskol we stay in a local Hotel in double rooms with showers and a cafe. Generally we can eat either in the hotel or other local cafes which often offer better options for a menu. For the first few days hiking in the Terskol region, we have a choice of either going on day hikes and coming back to the hotel in the evening, or camping out under the stars. We will provide the tents for this and cooking will be over an open fire.

It is easy to sleep in the huts on the way up the mountain. At the end of the last chair lift is the famous Bochka Camp, large comfortable 'barrels' with six beds in each and a kitchen area. Occasionally, if the Priut Hut is completely booked up or local bureaucracy interferes then we can in fact summit from the Bochka Camp. Priut Hut is only a few hundred metres higher than Bochka and has dormitory-style accommodation with tables and a cooker for preparing food. Gear can either be carried or we can use a snow machine to carry bags up. Here the rooms are quite comfortable with large mattresses and a communal atmosphere. From here we spend some days working with ice axes and crampons alongside acclimatizing for summit day.

Walking plan and logistics on the mountain

Prior to climbing Elbrus we will take in a day or two of local hiking in the surrounding valleys around Terskol. Because of the unpredictable weather we have also incorporated plenty of acclimatization and spare days to this trip. In the event of an ascent without any delays, there is opportunity afterwards and before to explore Terskol Valley, trekking up to the observatory and climbing on Cheget Mountain, and even right up to the Georgian border. Here you will find wild chamois, golden eagles and beautiful plants and flowers. If we choose to use Terskol as our base for day hikes we can stay in the hotel and any gear can safely be left in lock-ups. Otherwise we take tents and cooking equipment for the ultimate wilderness experience in the valleys.

We can either walk or take the cable car up the initial slopes. We ascend in keeping with the 'climb high, sleep low' philosophy; we tend to reach an overnight point and then take a hike up to the next point and come back down. This continues all the way up to Priut Hut where we spend several nights before attempting the summit. Flexibility is built into our programme to allow for bad weather so we have several summit days in hand. If we summit on the first of these then we can come down and do more hiking in the valley, or we stay up in the Priut Hut to wait until conditions are just right for going to the top.

Generally you will be carrying daysacks but at times it may be necessary to carry more which is why it is useful to have both a daysack and a larger rucksack. For instance if we decide to camp overnight a daysack will be too small to carry all overnight equipment. On Elbrus itself it is necessary to carry all equipment including food from Bochka to Priut Hut; sometimes this can be done with a snow machine but cannot be guaranteed. Often it is necessary to carry the gear on our backs. On Summit day we carry our gear in daysacks.

Food

The food is all Russian local or Georgian, extremely tasty and plentiful. In the hotel and cafes you can sample traditional soups and stews like Borsch (meat or vegetable) or Salyanka, home made breads or hichiny (cheese bread), salads, and delicacies such as shashlyk (skewered lamb roasted on a charcoal fire), fried sturgeon, bliny (pancakes made with national different fillings), fruit and vegetables. It is very wholesome and accompanied of course with vodka, local Georgian wines, beer or soft drinks. When on our hikes and on the mountain we will carry our food with us and cook on either open fire or mountain stoves. You can help with the preparation if you like ! Tinned meat is best and we prepare stews, salads, potatoes, vegetables, fruit, bread, hot drinks, porridge (kasha), eggs, dried meats like salami and dried fruits with sweets, fresh milk, juice and local produce.

On our last night in Terskol we can have a celebration dinner, combining the best of all the foods from this region of Kabardino-Balkyrie and we have connections with the finest local dancers to entertain us. You will of course have to take part in some Georgian dancing !

In Moscow you will find the hotel provides a superb spread for breakfasts and you will find plenty of restaurants and local eateries for dinner and lunch. Restaurants can be expensive, about \$50 for a good meal, but there are many cafes for around \$10 such as Yolky-Palky.

There is so much to see and do in Moscow, and we are very keen for you to experience the best of the city. We can provide visits to the Kremlin and the major destinations but if there is somewhere in particular that takes your fancy then just let us know in advance. During your two days in Moscow the hotel and breakfast is covered in the expedition fee and Andrey will organise all of your visits so you only pay for the places which you wish to see or experience.

Experience and Route

Elbrus is not technically difficult but there is the danger of weather and exposure, making it cold and committing; therefore it is necessary to keep the teams mobile. It is necessary to have crampons, warm clothing including down jackets, good boots (preferably plastic or four season capable of taking a crampon - plastics are available to hire in Terskol at \$7/day) and an axe. Crampons and axe's are available for hire from Adventure Alternative, at \$15/trip. The axes and crampons are collected in Moscow. Please let us know in advance if you would like to hire any kit, including boots. If hiring plastics you will also need to bring a low level boot. Ropes are not necessary on the standard route. Up to the Bochka Huts is just standard walking and from there to the Pruit Hut is normally the first part of the ascent on snow where you may need to wear crampons.

From the Pruit Hut to the summit is done in one day but there will be an acclimatisation trek up as far as the Pastukhov Rocks which is around 16,500'. This is not difficult climbing, it is a very broad slope which ascends steadily over easy ground. Here will be a chance to try out the crampons and do some practise with an ice axe. Sticks or trek poles are very much recommended.

Having done an acclimatization hike up to Pastukhov Rocks some people opt to take a snowcat to that point on the summit morning at about 5am. This is quite possible and the machine costs \$240 per group, this is a group decision hence not included in the expedition fee.

From the Pastukhov Rocks at around 16,000', the route ascends and trends slightly left, contouring the west peak quite easily but over a period of some two hours to eventually reach the col between the two peaks. It can be very windy and cold here and it is not uncommon to find whiteout conditions. It is not a problem to turn back if necessary and we will be taking a nice slow pace.

From the col the route follows a more or less direct path up the now steeper ground to the summit of the main peak of Elbrus. It is further than it looks. The steeper, more icy ground requires concentration. A final short section when you're gasping a bit will be the best indication of the height and leads onto a large summit plateau from which the small summit itself is still a good hike away. It is very easy to get lost here so good navigation is important. There are some wands in the ground and it is quite exposed so expect windchill to add to the overall coldness.

We will provide training with the use of crampons and ice axes. These are basic winter mountaineering skills and Elbrus is a good mountain to test them out on since it is not a precipitous climb. If you would like to prepare yourself in advance then feeling comfortable on crampons and ice axe braking are the main features of the climb.

Summit day can be long and demanding, taking anything from 7 to 10 hours. Stamina is required and the climb starts in the early hours, normally around 3 or 4am. You will have two or three opportunities to summit the mountain if weather is bad and depending of course on acclimatization and the group itself. You will need to be fit for this expedition so we do recommend a good programme prior to going.

In short, a very achievable challenge which requires cold weather clothing and basic mountaineering skills which can be developed during the trip. Adventure Alternative has a 85% success rate which we are very proud of, and we put it down to taking proper time in preparation and acclimatization. Unfortunately we see many groups allowing only one night to summit and we consider this to be too short.

Itinerary

Note: this itinerary is subject to change which may be outside our control, such as weather and local situations on the mountain with the huts. In the past this has never been a problem but the possibility exists. Sometimes our time on the mountain can be altered to suit the group, and we are happy to accommodate people's wishes so that everyone feels part of the expedition, as long as acclimatization and safety is not compromised. Hikes in the valley can be altered slightly and we like to explore different areas.

Organising logistics in Russia is not so easy and Sasha will be working to ensure all our programme is perfect but please be patient and understanding. You may hear us say "It's Russia !" and it is important that everyone is aware of potential difficulties. With Sasha though you will find a man who is highly respected in the region and someone who can pull strings to make things happen.

Please note it is possible to alter the number of days of your trip if necessary by reducing sightseeing days in Moscow, thus fitting your whole trip inside two weeks. Please contact us directly if you would like to do this. This reduction in days also drops the price. For the latest price please refer to the website at www.adventurealternative.com or the inserted info sheet.

The basic options are below:

15 Day - Full trip including two days in Moscow after the expedition

13 Day - Full expedition but no Moscow add on.

When arriving in Moscow there is an internal flight to Mineralnye Vody. We can buy this flight for you however it is cheaper to include this with your international flight. Please see the flight section below.

Expedition Fee

For full details on the latest pricing, inclusions and exclusions please refer to the website at www.adventurealternative.com or the Cost and Itinerary Sheet which we can send you.

Notes on payments:

- Non-refundable deposit of £250.00 sterling or 350 Euro to accompany the application form.
Payments can now be made online through our website or you can pay by cheque (sterling or euro) or bank transfer
- Cheques or drafts must be made payable to 'Adventure Alternative Ltd'
- A system of instalments following the deposit is allowable providing the final payment is made at least eight weeks prior to departure.
- Adventure Alternative reserves the right to cancel a trip due to bureaucratic problems, low numbers or for reasons outside of our control, offering either another expedition in lieu of Elbrus or a refund of monies paid excluding the deposit.
- Dollars and Euro are accepted in most places, but dollars are best. The rate is around 30 roubles to the dollar. Sterling is not accepted in all banks or bureaux de change.

Cost Guideline for Moscow sightseeing

Visits:

Outer Kremlin excursion - \$30 for 2hrs.

Inner Kremlin incl. armoury and cathedral - \$40 for 5 hrs

Light lunch in cafe near Kremlin - self paying, estimate \$10

Pushkin Fine Art Museum - \$8

Russian Orthodox Church Cathedral - Cathedral of Christ the Saviour. Free

Other places to visit - University Hill, War Memorial, Novodevichy Convent, Gorky Park, Peter the First Memorial - all these require hired vehicle to reach.

Izhmailovo Market for souvenirs - needs at least half a day, can reach by Metro.

Evening shows:

Bolshoi Theatre - \$40, depending on type of seats and availability

Moscow Circus - \$15, well worth it!

Visas and Flights

We need to know your passport and flight details.

We must have these well in advance. The passport information needs to be filled in on the application form and please email us or Andrey with your flight details and make sure to detail which trip you are on.

We try to make sure that everyone arrives on the same flight. Please call us beforehand to ensure that all expeditioners arrival coincide. Generally the easiest flight to take and the most convenient is:

Day 1 of trip - Aeroflot 1330 London to Moscow

Day 2 of trip - Aeroflot 0910 Moscow to min Vody

Day 12 of trip - Aeroflot 1250 Min Vody to Moscow

Day 13 or Day 15 of trip - Aeroflot 1115 Moscow to London depending if you are staying in Moscow for sightseeing after the expedition.

It is cheaper for you to book your flight all the way through to Mineralnye Vody. If doing so, you can call Shamela on 0208 5989798 or from Ireland 0044 208 5989798. Shamela is the UK Aeroflot agent and is based at Unique Tours and Travels in Essex. She has all our dates and preferred flight numbers for forthcoming expeditions. It is possible both on the way in and out of Russia to have a few days in Moscow and stagger your flight from Moscow to Mineralnye Vody by a day or two. All dates must be stipulated on your Visa and are not extendable once the Visa is issued.

If you want to spend several additional days exploring different parts of Russia, maybe a trip to St Petersburg, then do inform us at the earliest possible opportunity. All information must be put on your visa letter before you go, again it is not possible to change or extend your visa once you arrive in Russia.

When your Russian visa papers are ready you will receive TWO papers via email - a voucher and a confirmation. Print them off. Now add two passport size photographs of your own. Find the nearest Russian Consulate to you and apply for your visa as normal.

Visa application form information.

Some questions need to be answered on the form which we can help you with:

Name of department - Kabardino Balykrie

You are applying for a normal tourist holiday visa

Name of tourist company is Star Travel, index number can be found on the Voucher you receive from us.

Answer 'yes' to having official insurance policy

Make sure the dates for entry into the country on your visa form conform exactly to the dates that you can see on your voucher and confirmation slip. Make sure you fill in all details about work, position, work address etc

Arriving in Russia

On the plane you will be given a migration card to fill out, with normal personal details to be filled in for your arrival. You will fly into Sheremetevo Airport and it is a simple matter to hand over your passport and migration card there for stamping.

Addresses of Russian Consulates

Russian Consulate in Ireland

186, Orwell Road,
Rathgar,
Dublin 14, Ireland
Phone: +353 492-3492, Fax: +353 1 492-6938

Russian Consulate in England

The Embassy of The Russian Federation,
Consular Section,
5 Kensington Palace Gardens,
London W8 4QS
Tel: 0207 229 8027, Fax: 0207 229 3215

Edinburgh Consulate

Consulate General of the Russian Federation in Edinburgh
58 Melville Street,
Edinburgh EH3 7HL
Telephone: 0131 225 7098, Fax: 0131 225 9587

If you are abroad and wish to find your nearest Consulate or would like more information on all Consulates please visit: www.russianembassy.net

Visa Services

You may wish to use a visa services company to take the time out of queuing. Simply give them the papers and a fee to do it for you! You can find these companies in the Yellow Pages or on the internet.

FAQ's on travel to Russia

1) What's the difference between a visa and a visa invitation?

Both are necessary if you wish to travel to Russia. You need the invitation to apply for the visa itself. The visa is a document provided by a Russian Consulate, permitting your stay in Russia for a specific period of time, listing entry/exit dates and passport details. It is an exit permit as well as an entry permit: You cannot stay longer than permitted by your visa.

2) What happens if there is a mistake in my visa invitation?

If we make a mistake in your visa application, we will correct it free of charge. Irish citizens note that the letter should use exactly the lettering in Irish if necessary that is on your passport.

3) What is a migration card?

This is a form that you will be given at the Russian border. The form should be filled in before passport control, and will be stamped along with your visa by the immigration officer.

4) Will I need an HIV test to enter Russia? Or vaccinations?

An HIV test is not necessary when staying for less than 3 months in Russia. No vaccinations are necessary to enter the Russian Federation.

6) Will I need medical insurance?

It is advisable to have medical insurance coverage valid in Russia. Check your medical plan and request such coverage if you do not have it. Some Russian embassies may demand that you submit proof of valid travel insurance with your visa application.

7) How much money can I take with me?

There is no limitation on the amount of foreign currency to be taken to Russia. Just mention in your customs declaration all your currency over \$500 and other valuables, including objects of art, which you take into the country. Keep your customs declaration to present it upon departure.

8) Are traveller cheques accepted in Russia?

It is better to take cash and credit cards rather than traveller's cheques. While cash machines (ATMs) are found throughout major Russian cities, traveller's cheques can be hard to cash, and are often subject to expensive fees. Take dollars in cash, which is better than sterling or Euro in more remote areas of Russia. Note that you are better to exchange your currency before you arrive or in the airport in Moscow.

Contact

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