



# THE 'BEST OF RUSSIA'S NATIONAL PARKS' EXPEDITION

**Продолжительность:** 16 дней

**Место начала / Завершения тура:** Moscow / Irkutsk

**Места показа:** Russia, Moscow Oblast, Karachayev-Cherkesiya, Stavropol Krai, Rostov Oblast, Republic of Kalmykia, Irkutsk Oblast, Moscow, Cherkessk, Mineralnye Vody, Rostov-on-Don, Элиста, Republic of Kalmykia, Irkutsk

**Допустимый возраст:** 0+

Цена от Под заказ

## Описание тура

The most fascinating places and ecosystems with which our country abounds: the Caucasus Mountains, Asian steppes, huge river deltas, Lake Baikal and many other things!

## Программа тура

### **День 1. Moscow**

Our entire day is dedicated to our arrivals at Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport. You can arrive from any direction in the world, on any possible flights – you will be greeted upon your arrival and transferred to our accommodation. You are also welcome to arrive a few days early to explore Moscow; we will help you to book your additional nights and help you design your sightseeing days. Our official program begins tonight at 7 PM at the small conference hall of our hotel, with a Welcome Orientation from your WANT Expeditions tour leader, followed by a traditional Russian Welcome Dinner at our hotel.

Accommodation: Comfortable, modern hotel near airport

### **День 2. Moscow/Caucasus Mountains**

After an early yet enjoyable breakfast at our hotel, we check out and drive the short distance back to the airport this morning, in order to catch our morning flight to Mineralnye Vody. Upon landing, we proceed for a light lunch in town, before departing on our afternoon drive to one of the most scenic areas of Russia: the Caucasus Mountains, just east of the Black Sea. Our destination is Teberda town, at the gate of the famous Teberdinsky Reserve, where we will arrive mid-afternoon. After a quick check in, we take off on a short walk into the surrounding forests for a nature walk, before we proceed for dinner at a local restaurant. After dinner, a national park biologist will meet us at our

accommodation and will give us a great presentation about the unique flora and fauna of the Caucasus Mountains.

Accommodation: forestry recreation center with private facilities

### **День 3. Caucasus Mountains**

This morning we need to prepare ourselves for a not-too-strenuous, yet long day on foot, the rewards of which will be plenty and absolutely unique. We dedicate our day to the exploration of the Teberdinsky Reserve, which preserves one of the planet's most diverse temperate ecosystems in its near pristine state. The protected area is situated along a vertical shift of 3,000 meters on the northern spurs of the Great Caucasus. Majestic mountains with sharp summits and toothed ridges shroud enormous amphitheatres of ice and snow. Below, emerald alpine meadows and dark green conifer forests teem with wildlife.

Two of our main target species will be the endemic West Caucasian Tur and the Caucasian Bison (both of which has their largest remaining populations in this park), but we also have a chance to see Caucasian Chamois, Caucasian Red Deer, Brown Bear and many other mammal and bird species. Not to mention the flowers, which are in their greatest bloom at this time of the year and every third of which are endemic to this mountain range! After a casual, slow walk slightly uphill for a couple of hours this morning (8 km), we find a great place for a picnic lunch in a meadow, before we continue for another hour or so to our destination of the day: Lake Tur. This small but beautiful lake lies right on the tree line, surrounded by snowcapped peaks, and is one of the best places to see the endemic and endangered West Caucasian Tur. We will spend several hours in the area resting; enjoying the scenery and watching out for wildlife, before we start our descent back to the reserve headquarters (10 km) and take a short drive back to our accommodation. Dinner will be deserved and much appreciated, followed by a traditional Russian drink, which will ensure our good sleep and night rest.

Accommodation: forestry recreation center with private facilities

### **День 4. Caucasus Mountains/Don Delta**

The first half of our day is dedicated to some further explorations in the Caucasus Mountains.

After a not-too-early breakfast, we drive back to the reserve headquarters and meet our lovely, slow and friendly horses – our companion and main transportation for the morning excursion. We are going to explore the remote Kisgich Canyon where the world's largest herd of the endangered Caucasian Bison lives. After an hour of casual ascent through lovely forests, we enter the canyon and spend about two hours in search of great photo opportunities of landscape, flowers and wildlife. Once back at the headquarters, we drive to a local restaurant for a well-deserved lunch, before we have to get back to our accommodation to check out of our rooms. Once we are all on our vehicle, we drive to the Bison captive breeding center and spend a few hours taking lovely images of not only Bison but many other species in the enclosures. Around mid-afternoon, we start driving back to Mineralnye Vody and go straight to the train station, to check in for our overnight train to Rostov. Once we are on board the train, we have a dinner in the restaurant car, before we all retire to our sleeping coaches and let the gentle rumble of the train rock us to sleep.

Accommodation: private sleeping coaches on train

### **День 5. Don Delta**

Dawn will have just broken when our train pulled up at Rostov train station. Once we have collected our luggage and organized ourselves on our vehicle, a short drive will take us to our accommodation, where we quickly refresh and proceed for a lovely breakfast. After our morning meal, we take our rooms and get ourselves ready for a long and nice boat cruise in the delta area of River Don. A short ride will take us across the bridge in the city, beyond which we have access to the pier, where our small boats will be awaiting us. What we are exploring and experiencing this morning is a huge wetland, an enormous marshy area of the mouth of River Don, as it reaches (after 2,000 km of cruising through Southwestern Russia) the Sea of Azov. Our trip takes us here at the very best time of the year, when all the aquatic birds are at their best, tending their colonies and looking sharpest and smartest for their mates. After a few hours of initial cruising and wildlife viewing, where a complete bush lunch with a traditional Russian soup and a couple other courses will be awaiting us. After the picnic, we continue our tour till mid-afternoon, when we

eventually pull back to the pier in Rostov and continue our program with city sightseeing. Once the fading lights force us back to our accommodation, we will take adequate time to refresh ourselves for yet another traditional Russian dinner at our hotel.

Accommodation: great city hotel with private facilities

### **День 6. Don Delta/Rostov Reserve**

We check out from our lovely hotel right after an early breakfast, and get back on the road to travel 300 km due east this morning. Our destination is the interesting Rostov Reserve, which has been created to protect some of the last virgin steppes on Earth - remnants of open grassland that have never been plowed and were at one time maintained by millions of Saiga Antelopes and Tarpan wild horses. Nestled in Manych Valley, the nature reserve safeguards islands and coastal habitats that are important nesting areas for rare birds such as spoonbills and demoiselle cranes. A herd of wild horses inhabits an island in the protected area, filling the hooves of now diminished or extinct large herbivores that used to maintain steppe ecosystems. Our first point of interest this morning is the island where the wild horses live. But first, we make a short stop at our accommodation in Orlovsky Village, before we continue on and reach the visitor center. A nice hot meal will be served for us at the center, accompanied by a short presentation by the park rangers, before we eventually get on the small boats and make it across to Tulip Island. Once on the island, we will be able to approach the Donskaya horses within photographic range, but will not be able to get too much closer - since they have not had any real contact with human beings for almost an entire century. If we are lucky, we shall see thousands of tulips blooming on the island - hence the name, Tulip Island. In fact, the tulips that are popular around the world originated from this area.

The flowers first traveled to Turkey in the 17th century, where they earned the name of the 'Turkish Tulip', then went on to conquer Europe and the world. Yet, the local flower (Shrenk's Tulip) is highly endangered in its place of origin - one more reason for us to come here and show support for this very important steppe reserve.

Once we left the island behind, we drive another 40 minutes to a conservation center, where endangered steppe species, like the famous Saiga Antelope, are bred in huge (several hectares) enclosures, while buffalo, yak and camel roaming free in the reserve. We will be able to enter the enclosures and take some amazing images, as well as enjoy the animals and learn a lot about them. After this photography and wildlife encounter, we drive back to our hotel again for a shower, recap and a nice example of the regional kitchen for dinner.

Accommodation: small hotel with private facilities

### **День 7. Rostov Reserve/Cherny Zemly Reserve**

After our not-too-early breakfast, we drive for a few minutes to another conservation project on the Rostov Reserve, where mainly endangered bird species are kept and studied, or being prepared for release and reintroduction. There is also a small herd of Saiga Antelopes in very photogenic enclosures. After visiting here for a few hours, we get back to our hotel, check out, proceed for lunch at an interesting local restaurant, and then get on our vehicle and start heading southwest, towards the Kalmykia region and the Caspian Sea. Around mid-afternoon, we are planning to reach Elista, the regional capital, and visit some of its interesting sites as soon as we have checked in at our local hotel. This small regional town had seen better days during the Soviet era, although its primarily Buddhist inhabitants are slowly making a turnaround and manage to attract businesses and new projects into their city's life. Our walk in the city center will encounter statues of Lenin and Buddha in the same amount, giving Elista a special atmosphere and allowing us to take interesting images. Once it is getting dark, we head back to our hotel for a nice shower and a dinner at the downstairs restaurant.

Accommodation: small hotel with private facilities

### **День 8. Cherny Zemly Reserve**

Our entire day is dedicated to safari in the extremely important Cherny Zemly Reserve. This remote steppe habitat is

still 2.5 hrs away from our hotel, so we shall rise very early in the morning, before the sun does, have breakfast at our hotel, and get on our vehicle as soon as we can. Once at the reserve, we enter the endless plains and spend most of our morning in search of one of the very last wild herds of the endangered Saiga Antelope. The nature reserve conserves valuable Saiga breeding and calving grounds - flat, semi-desert plains extending to the horizon in every direction with neither tree or bush to interrupt the endless vista.

Once the bottom of the Caspian Sea, now water is scarce on the barren plain, and every creature's survival is linked to finding a drop here or a puddle there. We will approach many of the known watering sites and hope to find these magicherds – a sight not many people in the world will ever see in the near future... if ever.

During the midday hours, we will hide under a canopy and have a traditional picnic lunch on the steppe, before we continue our afternoon drive, in search of additional wetland habitats and to areas where raptors nest and live, together with bustards, vultures and other interesting species. We will depart before sunset, in order to be able to drive all the way to Liman. After about 3 hrs on the road, we plan to arrive at Liman, where we check into our hotel for the night, refresh ourselves, enjoy a great dinner of the regional kitchen and save ourselves for a long day that is ahead of us.

Accommodation: small hotel with private facilities

### **День 9. Volga Delta**

Our entire day is dedicated to the exploration of the huge delta of River Volga. After our breakfast at the hotel and an hour on the road, we embark on our small privately chartered boats and sail into the delta area for the entire day. After twisting its way through northern Russia and gaining volume, the Volga River splits into a fan of more than 250 channels that flow through the arid steppes of southern Russia before spilling into the Caspian Sea. The Volga delta is one of the largest in the world, an intricate maze of streams and rivers that provide spawning grounds for many species of fish. These ecosystems are preserved by the Astrakhansky Reserve – an area that we are going to explore today on boat and partially on foot. Founded in 1919 to protect the rapidly disappearing delta ecosystems, the Reserve is now famous as a kingdom of birds, where trees and skies are ever filled with the noisy songs of eagles, swans, ducks, geese, cranes, and the rare Dalmatian pelicans. At lunchtime, we will pull up along a unique floating restaurant (an old, restored river boat) and have a nice midday break, before we get out into the channels again for the rest of the day. At sunset, we arrive back at the dock and drive an hour to our accommodation, for yet another regional/traditional dinner at the hotel's small restaurant.

Accommodation: small hotel with private facilities

### **День 10. Stepnoy Reserve**

Our entire day is dedicated to the exploration of yet another fantastic steppe ecosystem: Stepnoy Reserve. We will enter the reserve early in the morning and will carry out a driving safari all day long, with a nice, hot meal in the middle of the day, as well as a short siesta afterward. We return to our accommodation just after sunset, for dinner and a good night's rest.

Accommodation: small hotel with private facilities

### **День 11. Volga Delta/Lake Baikal**

This morning we take off and travel a long way, all across Russia to the Far East, to visit the largest body of freshwater on Earth: Lake Baikal. In order to get there, we have to drive this morning to Astrakhan right after breakfast, check in at the airport and fly to Moscow. After 5 hrs and an airport lunch at Moscow Sheremetyevo, we check in for our overnight flight to Irkutsk.

Accommodation: in the air

### **День 12. Lake Baikal**

Upon our early morning landing in Irkutsk, we collect our belongings and drive to a nearby restaurant where we can refresh ourselves a little bit and have a nice breakfast. Once we have regained our strength, we get on our vehicle

and start driving towards Lake Baikal, one of the most scenic and most unique wildlife destinations in all of Russia. For the first nearly 300 km, we will head primarily in a northeasterly direction, to the land of the Buryat people. After a few hours we will slowly leave the wheat fields behind and approach the beautiful Barguzinsky Range – a mountain range on the western shores of Lake Baikal. At the bottom of the range, we divert off into pristine boreal forest (taiga) on a forestry road, and will eventually end up on open highland steppe, just before reaching the lakeshore. Here we change to one of the speedboats of the national park that we charter for our group, and cruise across to scenic Olkhon Island. We go straight away to one of the most interesting villages on the island for a nice, special home-style lunch, after which we explore the village and some other parts of the island. From here, we get back on our boats and cruise further north, all the way to Pokoyny Cape, where we check in at the basic but clean and comfortable guesthouses of the Baikalo-Lensky Reserve. After check in, those fishermen can help the local staff to fish for our dinner in the lake, and others can help preparing the dinner or tend the bonfire. After dinner, we will all have a chance to experience the authentic Russian bathhouse, the 'banya'.

Accommodation: nice wooden guesthouses with joint facilities

### **День 13. Lake Baikal**

The national park ranger service has an interesting Brown Bear feeding station just a short boat ride from our accommodation, so those who are willing, will be able to get up this morning as early as 4 am and go for a great bear observation (in safe hides). This morning group will be back at our accommodation for breakfast by 7 am, after which we all get on our boat again and cruise an hour further north, exploring the west coast and admiring the snow-capped peaks of the Baikalsky Range. Soon we will disembark and take off on a walk towards the range, at the bottom of which some spectacular waterfalls will await us. Upon arrival, we take a well deserved and refreshing swim, have a lovely picnic lunch and a short siesta, and then start making our way back to the lakeshore, and eventually back to our accommodation. Dinner, and the unmissable 'banya' will put the crown to the end of the day.

Accommodation: nice wooden guesthouses with joint facilities

### **День 14. Lake Baikal**

Our adventurous bear-lovers will be up before the rising sun again this morning, in order to observe the bears on the platform, while others can choose to sneak upon another place where the majestic Siberian Stag males can be observed and photographed. Once back at the accommodation for a breakfast, and for reuniting our forces, we will board our vessel on the lake and cruise all across, to the eastern shores, where remote Ushkany Islands (4 small islands with rocky beaches) provide a perfect retreat for the world's only freshwater pinniped: the Baikal Seal. Our main goal today is to observe and photograph this endangered, elusive animal, but will also have a lovely picnic on shore and will spend some time exploring the endemic plant species of the archipelago, and to admire the thousands upon thousands of huge ant hills that are so unique to the forest on the islands. Once the end of daylight forces us to leave, we will cross the lake again while watching the magnificent sunset, reaching our accommodation just after dark. Dinner and the usual 'banya' will put the feeling and warmth back into our bones after the long day on the lake.

Accommodation: nice wooden guesthouses with joint facilities

### **День 15. Lake Baikal**

On our last full day in Russia, we make an attempt to move our legs (before our upcoming long international flights) and discover the source of the magnificent River Lena. The river originates in the mountain range just behind our accommodation, so once we have finished our early breakfast, we take the trails and start climbing to the Solntsepad Pass – a 1,240m pass in the mountain range, separating the lake from the valley where River Lena sources. Once on top of the pass, we will enjoy the magnificent views of Lake Baikal for a while, before we continue to a small mountain lake for a picnic lunch. After lunch, we descend down to the rapids of River Lena, and will turn around soon after and make our way back to our accommodation. Our Farewell Meeting and Dinner will take place under the star-filled Russia skies with traditional local meals and a huge bonfire.

Accommodation: nice wooden guesthouses with joint facilities

### **День 16. Lake Baikal/Irkutsk/departure**

We will rise with the morning sun once again, and start making our way back to Irkutsk right after breakfast. Upon arrival at the city, we drive directly to the airport and check in for our international flights back home. Thank you for joining us on the fascinating itinerary in Russia, have a safe flight home!

### Места сбора группы

#### **Moscow**

Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport