

BLOG: Oh Those Russians!:

My experiences with Russian bureaucracy and visa applications.

The plan was simple. I would stay four nights at the Ibis **Moscow** Centre Bakhrushina, four nights on the Trans-Siberian, and three nights at the Ibis **Irkutsk** Center. What could possibly go wrong?

I had the invitation letters for the two hotels, but nothing for the train. The Russian Embassy outsources its visa interviews and applications, here in the UK, through a Visa centre company called



VFS Global. Their nearest office was in Edinburgh, 54 miles away. I emailed them about the 'missing' four nights on the train, as their website said you needed invitation letters for all 'hotels' booked.

Although Russian visas could be arranged six months in advance, I wouldn't be able to book the train until 90 days

before. With a Mongolian and Chinese visa also to be arranged, I wanted as much time as possible to get the Russian visa out of the way. Although they invite email queries through their website, my question about the missing four nights on the train was obviously too difficult for them to answer, as no one ever travels on the Trans-Siberian. After a week of silence, I emailed again, and got the same response.

I decided to email two other companies who also arranged Russian visas, and without admitting I was arranging my own, asked what I should do about the train, Both replied quickly and both advised only hotel invitation letters were required. The train was fine without a letter.

I made an early start to Edinburgh, daring them to find a problem in my application form. Everything had been double-checked. On an earlier journey two years before, I had been issued a hotel voucher with my middle name missing, which caused a delay. Voucher details must match your passport details exactly. This time one hotel had me listed as gender "U" which was neither male or female! That would have caused a problem with my visa application. This was blamed on a typo (!) and was corrected with an apology offered. TIP: Always, always double check EVERYTHING when applying for a Russian visa!

"You will need a voucher for the four nights on the train" said the girl behind the desk. I explained I had checked this, and it wasn't required if in transit. She went away and checked with an unseen



colleague behind a wall, and came back to confirm a letter would be required for those four nights. I explained I wouldn't be able to book the train for three months, so would an iVisa letter be OK. "Yes", she said, "either train ticket or iVisa letter".

After spending 1½ hours getting to Edinburgh, my application was shot down in flames in two minutes

flat. I had planned in the back of my mind what the worst case scenario was, and that was it. So, with no train booking on the horizon for three months, I tried Plan B.

I randomly booked a refundable rate at the Ibis St Petersburg and then requested an invitation letter. This facility was free of charge for guests (good news!). Unfortunately if I cancel my reservation after the invitation letter is issued, or I no-show for my stay, there would be a charge of RUB3,000. They kindly attached a credit card form to the email, so they would have my details should I dare cancel.

I visited the iVisa website, and purchased an invitation letter for RUB1,200, and kept the printed St Petersburg hotel confirmation to show the iVisa and hotel dates corresponded. At last all nights were accounted for. Once the visa was issued, I would cancel the Ibis St Petersburg, and book the four nights on the train when I was able to do so. Easy.

At this point can I mention I am not paid to endorse iVisa, but this website is the official site at **www.ivisa.ru**, and this is the site used by hotels. Click on the little flags for other languages. There are a number of companies who will issue invitation letters with similar sounding names, but these online companies will charge a booking fee. My advice is to stick with the official iVisa website at **www.ivisa.ru**. I could have set up an affiliation with some of these other companies, and earned a little revenue through this website, but my principals are to give accurate advice over making

commissions! Your invitation letter is sent to you by email as a PDF almost instantly.



I travelled to Edinburgh again, and this time the application was accepted without question. After becoming £118.50 lighter (the visa cost included courier return of the passport), I returned home, comfortably

confident. My passport arrived safely after a few weeks with a Russian visa included.

INVITATION LETTERS - PLEASE READ

Worth mentioning are the varying charges for these invitation letters. The Ibis Moscow Centre Bakhrushina provided this service free of charge, even when I booked a refundable room rate. The Ibis Irkutsk Center charged me RUB3,000 and then promptly ordered a voucher directly from **iVisa**. **iVisa** charges RUB1,200 for a voucher, so the difference went into the till of the Ibis in Irkutsk - how very naughty. You do the maths. Unless you can get your letter free from your hotel, consider using **iVisa** if it's substantially cheaper.

I've used iVisa, so their documents are accepted by the Russian Embassy without question. Document requests through iVisa are produced immediately after payment is received. You could in theory book any hotel in Russia and the document will still be issued. This bureaucracy is in place for the sake of having bureaucracy.

On a previous visit to St Petersburg, I had stayed at the Hotel Oktiabrskaya, which is part of the Best Western hotel chain. They charged RUB1,500 for the invitation voucher, and also kindly charged me around RUB300 on arrival as an 'administration fee' for the hassle of scanning my passport and stamping paperwork which their Government required them to do.

The 'missing link' was the train from Moscow to Irkutsk. I have used Real Russia in the past, and can't recommend them enough. When you request your train, and the departure date is well in advance, you will receive this reply: *"Please be advised that this ticket will become available for sale 90 days before. However we can send our reservation request already now if you pay £50.00 deposit per person (non-refundable in case of cancellation) and you will pay the outstanding balance 105 days before the actual departure of your train. As soon as the deposit is with us we will be able to supply you with a letter of invitation and so-called Consulate Itinerary (at no extra cost), which is an official confirmation/proof of your train travel for your visa purposes and even before the actual tickets are issued. Moreover, we will make the booking request active and put it on our waiting list under control."* So, that's where the official invitation letter comes from to match your missing document nights on the train!

I paid my £50.00 and got a very kind reply. The reply told me the ticket which would be emailed to me. I was later told I would need a paper ticket, and I would have to visit their Moscow office to collect it (open Mon-Fri only). Fortunately I had two weekdays before my departure. If I had been there for a Sunday only, there would have been problems.

I requested my train invitation letter even though I had my visa issued. It was included in the cost of my train ticket, and it matched my travels exactly, so it wouldn't hurt to have it with me just in case. I had paid a non-refundable deposit of £50.00 after all. Worth noting is that Real Russia normally charges £15.30 for an invitation letter.

The whole process is daunting, but having dealt with the Russians on two separate occasions, things do fall into place. I just can't help thinking the process could be much more streamlined.

удачи!

Scott

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