

BORDER BITES

“Digesting the world’s borders ...One bite at a time”

Tourists are one of the most numerous categories of Russian visitors to Japan. However, the number of Russian tourists visiting Japan annually is not very high, amounting just two or three dozens of thousands annually. Visa requirements are among the most serious barriers hindering the growth of this flow. The current memo examines particular ways in which the visa regime influences Russian tourism to Japan, informal practices employed by visitors in response, and the current prospects for Russian-Japanese talks on this issue. Apart from statistics and media sources I employ texts of the relevant online discussions in the Vinsky Forum (the largest and the best managed online travel community in Russia) and transcripts of interviews with seven managers of travel agencies from four selected Russian cities (Moscow, St. Petersburg, Vladivostok, and Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk) specializing in Japan as a tourist destination².



Russian Tourism to Japan: The Impact of the Visa Barrier¹

On the menu:

- Russian Tourism to Japan at a glance
- Visa Issues
- Trends and Prospects
- Conclusion

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Russian tourism to Japan at a glance

Generally, tourist is a vaguely-defined category: for example, according to the UN World Tourist Organization, it is “the activities of persons traveling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes.” In terms of immigration management, tourists are usually those who come to a destination country for sightseeing, recreation, shopping, watching cultural and sport events, and other similar purposes. The problems are that many trips are multipurpose (e.g. visiting relatives and sightseeing) and that governments usually have very limited capabilities to establish if holders of visas of certain kinds are really involved or not involved in tourist activities.

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According to official statistical information, Russia is not among primary source countries of foreign tourists coming to Japan: [the Japanese official statistical data shows](#) that between 2007 and 2014, Russia's position in the rankings of such countries fluctuated between 16th and 19th. For Russian tourists, Japan is an even less important destination: Japan has been between the 41st and 50th most popular tourist destination since the second half of the 2000s, [according to the Russian statistical data](#).

The absolute figures on the number of Russian tourists coming to Japan fluctuated from just several thousand in the first half of 1990s to 37,300 in 2014 according to Russian data and to 42,100 in 2008 according to Japanese data. The trend of rising annual numbers of Russian tourists that emerged in the 2000s proved to be unstable, as the figure dropped noticeably in 2009 (impact of the global economic crisis on Russia), 2011 (tourists worries about nuclear contamination after the incident with the Fukushima nuclear power station), and in 2015 (impact of the ongoing Russian economic crisis). The fact that Japanese figures are 10-30% more than Russian figures is quite understandable given that Russian exit statistics are quite imprecise and that many Russian tourists go to Japan via transit countries that are counted as final destinations.

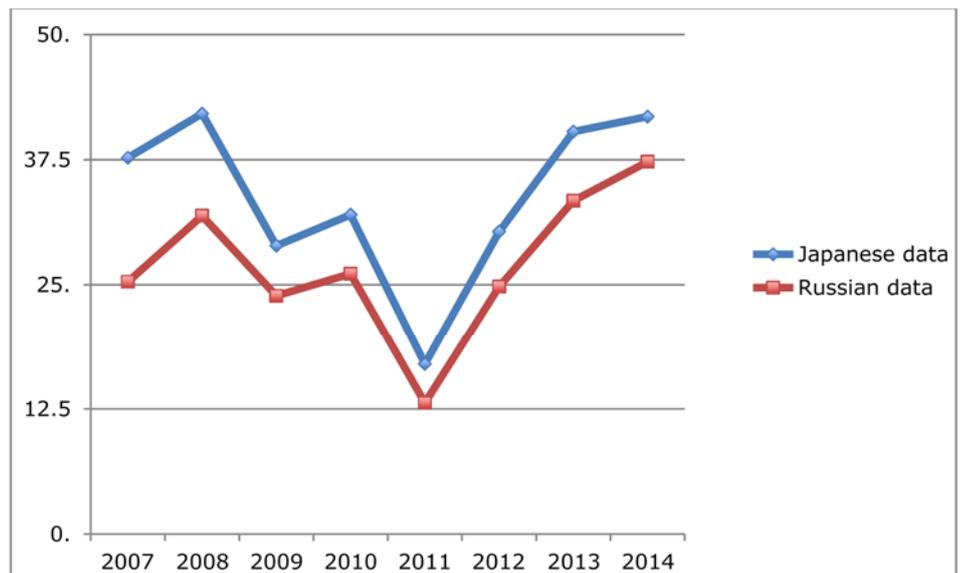


Figure 1 - Number of Russian tourists coming to Japan in 2007-2014 according to official Japanese and Russian statistical data

It is important that until the end of the 2000s tourists accounted for just a small share of Russian visitors to Japan. The overwhelming share of visits was provided by crew members (a pattern unlike that of Russian visits to any other major destination country), reaching a peak in 1996 (181,000 crew compared to just 6,300 tourists, according to the Russian official data). This phenomenon can be explained by several factors: 1) the import

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of used Japanese cars to Russia and illegal export of Russian marine bioresources to Japan were the main shadow economic activities carried out between the two countries by sea; 2) a large proportion of these crew members visited Japan several times a year, significantly increasing the overall number of visits counted; 3) many Russian visitors managed to register themselves as crew members in order to both get customs privileges for importing Japanese used cars to Russia and to be treated more favorably than 'official' tourists by the Japanese immigration authorities. Crew members visiting Japan were involved in typical tourist activities (such as shopping or attending restaurants and hot springs) among other things. The contribution of crew members to the overall number of Russian visits to Japan started to diminish steadily during the 2000s, as Russian authorities started to systematically suppress both the import of used cars and the illicit export of marine bioresources. [In particular, the number of Russian crew members visiting Japan has dropped dramatically since 2009](#), as the Russian government tightened its customs policy against the grey import of used Japanese cars. Since then the overall number of Russian visits to Japan has also dropped dramatically while tourists have become the most numerous category of visitors.

Currently, most Russian visitors come to Japan by air. The majority of direct flights from Russia (from Moscow, Khabarovsk, Vladivostok, and Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk) land in Tokyo Narita airport while Niigata Airport has two seasonal routes with Khabarovsk and Vladivostok, and Sapporo's New Chitose airport serves one route to Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk. It should be born in mind that many Russian visitors go to Japan through a range of transit routes (especially via China, South Korea, Finland, Qatar, Turkey, UAE, and Uzbekistan), which in many cases prove to be cheaper than non-stop routes. According to most of the interviewed representatives of travel agencies, an overwhelming proportion of the tourist flow from Russia is directed to just a few areas and cities inside Japan, especially to Tokyo, Kyoto, Nara, and Sapporo, while some also go to Okinawa.

Apart from flights, there is a ferry route Vladivostok-Sakaiminato (via the South Korean city of Donghae) but this route is designed for buyers of Japanese cars and is not particularly suitable for 'conventional' tourists. There was also a 160-kilometer ferry route between the cities of Korsakov (island of Sakhalin) and Wakkanai (island of Hokkaido) that transported 3-4 thousands of passengers both ways during the 2010s. This route was used not only by inhabitants of Sakhalin province but also by some visitors to Hokkaido from the European part of Russia as it could be combined with relatively cheap flights between Moscow and

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Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk (on the contrary, the flights between Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk and Sapporo have traditionally been overpriced).

Trying to utilize this route, authorities in the city of Wakkanai and the Soya subprefecture made significant efforts to turn the area into an important destination for Russian tourists, but despite these efforts the city largely remains a revolving door for visitors going to and from Sapporo. At the end of 2015, the Japanese company operating the Eins Soya ferry route suspended it as unprofitable, depriving nearby Russian and Japanese territories of a very important passenger route that was virtually the only viable alternative to airlines for short-term visitors not seeking to buy cars.

Visa issues

The vast majority of Russian citizens coming to Japan for tourism purposes must have valid visas (the small number of inhabitants of the disputed Kuril islands who can come to Japan visa-free as part of the Russian-Japanese exchange program do not need visas). Inside Russia it is possible to submit a visa application to a Japanese consulate in Moscow, St Petersburg, Khabarovsk, Vladivostok, or Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk. It is important that most residents of other provinces are not obliged to spend great money for travelling to a respective consulate: instead they can apply via the Pony Express courier mail service. However, residents of some Siberian and Far Eastern regions are deprived of this opportunity: e.g. residents of Magadan and Kamchatka provinces should travel more than 2000 km to the consulate in Vladivostok while residents of Irkutsk region – to the consulate in Khabarovsk.

The majority of representatives of the Russian travel agencies interviewed maintained that communication with Japanese consulates is not difficult, as Japanese visas are issued for free for Russian citizens, and as most of the Japanese consular officers are polite, kind, and ready to help applicants with correcting mistakes in their visa applications.

The interviewees said that cases of visa applications being refused were very rare: in one case a rejected applicant had committed an offence in Japan previously, while in another case an applicant raised suspicion because he was a fitness trainer who asked for a one-month visa and booked a very cheap hotel. One manager also mentioned a case when his agency barely managed to get its client's application accepted (the agency even had to use its Japanese foreign ministry connections) because a 'nitpicking' consular officer didn't like his frequent previous trips to Japan. Among other problems mentioned by travel agencies

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managers were the high eligible income requirements for visa applicants, Japanese Far Eastern consulates' reluctance to issue visas for residents from other regions of Russia for those seeking to travel onwards to Japan after visiting their relatives in the Far East, a suspicious attitude towards young females traveling alone, as well as a suspicion of applicants with apparently 'Muslim' surnames in a particular consulate. Yet, despite these problems, most of the interviewees maintained that the Japanese consulates were easy to deal with.

While Russian travel agencies are directly interested in the existence of visa barriers to at least some extent (one of the interviewees openly admitted this), the situation doesn't look so optimistic from the travelers' perspective. The main problem, highlighted by participants of the Vinsky Forum and others speaking from the tourists' perspective is that tourist visa applicants should find a guarantor among certified Japanese travel agencies who would take responsibility over a tourist during her or his visit to Japan. This guarantor service is usually expensive (up to several hundreds of U.S. dollars), especially for those travelling with their families, and many guarantor travel agencies also make applicants book hotels at inflated prices. Applicants should wait a long time until application support documents are prepared and delivered from Japan and also have to cover the Japanese agency's expenses for delivering documents by couriered mail. It is noteworthy that the requirement of a Japanese certified guarantor for a tourist visa application is currently applied by Japan to citizens of only a small number of countries: [i.e. to China, Philippines, and the Post-Soviet states](#). While many Russian observers argue that the preservation of this restriction can likely be explained by the negative memories of some dissolute Russian visitors of coming to Japan between the early 1990s and latter half of the 2000s (mafia members, prostitutes, debauching sailors), some believe that Japan is willing to keep this restriction as a bargaining chip in the Japanese-Russian territorial dispute.

Unsurprisingly, the question of how to take a tourist trip to Japan that bypasses the official requirement to have a Japanese travel agency as a guarantor is paid significant attention in Russian travel communities.

Some visitors try to get guest visas that require finding a guarantor among individuals residing in Japan. The problem is that arranging paperwork is a time consuming process for a Japanese individual guarantor and thus some Russian visitors try to find online such Japanese friends who would be interested in supporting their visit to Russia in return (it is worth mentioning that Russian tourist visa requirements for Japanese nationals are

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also rather cumbersome). Some Russian visitors try to use their connections to arrange business visas supported by Japanese companies as guarantors.

Others try to take advantage of the relaxed conditions for transit passengers going to third countries via Japan. Before 2014 transit travelers could obtain a shore pass granting the right to leave an airport and to stay in Japan visa-free for up to 72 hours, but since 2014 shore passes have been issued only in extraordinary circumstances. Now those Russian visitors who do not have valid Japanese visas normally can't stay overnight even in the transit zone of Narita Airport, as this zone is closed at nights. Still, obtaining single-entry or double-entry transit visa is considered to be a viable option as it gives a chance to visit Japan once or twice without finding a guarantor. [As some participants on the Vinsky forum argue](#), the Japanese authorities try to prevent sightseeing under the guise of transit, demanding that a traveler should leave Japan on the first reasonably priced flight available and that he or she should stay overnight in a hotel in the same where the airport is situated area (e.g. in Chiba prefecture for Narita).

Many of those Russian Far East residents who came to Japan both for commercial and tourist purposes in 1990s-2000s either obtained a cruise visa or illicitly acquired sailors' passports that gave them the right to both enter Japan visa-free and import a used car to Russia tax free. Both options gave a Russian visitor the right to stay in the port of arrival only for not more than 72 hours. As both the Japanese and Russian authorities have tightened their regulations significantly, these avenues are no longer open for ordinary Russian visitors.

Trends and Prospects

Japanese visa requirements for Russian tourists have proved to be onerous throughout the post-Soviet period: no significant relaxation can be discerned while requirements for some categories of business visitors and visitors for private purposes were [relaxed by the 2012 bilateral visa facilitation agreement](#). Instead, Russian tourists were affected by Japanese restriction campaigns such as the campaign against human trafficking launched in 2006, the 2012 Japanese MFA order allowing only certified travel agencies to be guarantors for visa application, and the previously-mentioned 2014 restrictions concerning the issuance of shore passes.

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Both federal and regional Russian authorities periodically propose either to facilitate the visa regime or to abolish it, at least for inhabitants of the entire Sakhalin province making short-term trips to Hokkaido (such initiatives of the Sakhalin provincial authorities which were [periodically supported](#) by their counterparts from Hokkaido). Russian diplomatic efforts have become especially active since 2014, following the conflict with the EU over Ukraine (that, among other things, has led to the freezing of EU-Russian talks on the abolishment of a visa regime) and Russia's subsequent 'turn to the East'. In December 2015 Russian Ambassador to Japan Yevgeny Afanasyev [made a widely-published statement](#) that Russia was negotiating with Japan over its visa regime and claiming that he didn't rule out the visa regime being abolished.

Despite Tokyo officially showing no evident interest in abolishing the visa regime, Russian aspirations partly resonate with the [Japanese government's plan to double the number of foreign tourists visiting the country](#) to 40 million by 2020, announced in March 2016. Moreover, during his May 2016 visit to Russia, [Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe informed Russian President Vladimir Putin](#) that Tokyo is considering facilitating the visa regime for tourists from some countries, including Russia, China, and India. Several days later, the governors of Sakhalin and Hokkaido [made a joint statement](#) calling for the facilitation of a visa regime both for tourists from their own regions and for those from other Russian provinces who come to Hokkaido via Sakhalin. It is not still clear, though, if such initiatives and proposals will materialize, if they will turn out to be yet another effort on Tokyo's part to strengthen its position in negotiations over the nation's territorial dispute, and consequently if Putin's government would take the risk of making significant concessions on this issue before the parliamentary and presidential elections.

Conclusion

Tourists remain one of the most marginal categories of Russian visitors to Japan: the requirement to have a Japanese-certified guarantor travel agency as a condition of visa application eligibility significantly increases both the cost of travel (especially for families) and the time required to prepare an application. Some tourists resort to semi-legal practices for visiting Japan without obtaining a guarantor's support, while the Japanese immigration authorities try to close these loopholes and in some cases try to prevent the unauthorized use of transit or business visas for sightseeing. Interestingly, all of this is nearly opposite to the policies of Schengen states where a transit visa is actually

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one of the most privileged kinds of Schengen visas, in the most of cases de facto allowing visits for most of purposes not related to employment or commerce.

Traditionally, Tokyo's approach towards facilitating a visa regime for tourists is rather conservative, while Moscow has tried to initiate visa facilitation talks, especially following its officially proclaimed 'turn to the East' policy. The recent Japanese official plan to double the number of foreign tourist gives Russia a chance to have its proposals met partially: while the prospects for complete visa regime abolishment don't appear realistic, the chances for a limited visa abolishment for short-term trips by borderland residents, and especially a more relaxed visa regime for tourists, look more plausible. However, the uncertain future of Russian-Japanese negotiations on the territorial issue makes facilitation of the visa regime far from a certainty.

Even if the visa regime is facilitated or abolished, a number of other serious barriers will likely continue to hinder Russian tourism to Japan. Transportation costs are very high not only for residents of Russia's European part but even for those who are living in the Far East, not excluding the inhabitants of Sakhalin province. Most of visitors do not know Japanese and thus have serious communication and orientation difficulties while visiting Japan. As some interviewed travel agencies' managers noticed, the exotic Japanese unfamiliarity can paradoxically play against Japan, as many Russian tourists find Japanese sightseeing 'too uniform' while being largely incomprehensible, and this 'monotonous incomprehensibility' discourages many from spending a lot of money to visit Japan more than once. While all of these material and mental barriers do not look insurmountable, they will require a lot of efforts to reduce them.

