

## Title:

Impressions of Siberia

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540

## Summary:

Mention the word "Siberia," and images of gulags, frozen tundra and wastelands may come to mind. While there is some truth to these, my impressions of Siberia included more.

## Keywords:

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## Article Body:

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Siberia comprises more than 75 percent of modern Russia. Unless you visit, there is simply no way to describe the total landmass of this much-maligned area of the world. To give you some perspective, consider the fact that Siberia is bigger than Canada, has more natural resources than any area of the world, spans nine time zones and contains the largest plain in the world.

One of the best ways to give you an impression of the size of Siberia is to discuss the infamous gulag system. When one thinks of a gulag or prison, visions of guards with guns, electrified fences and so on come to mind. In Siberia, most of the gulags did not have fences or any kind of barrier to keep people in. With freezing temperatures in the winter, huge rivers of mud and water in the summer, Siberia formed a natural gulag for many of the prisoners. If a prisoner escaped from a gulag, there was simply nowhere to go. The closest population center might be 1,000 miles away.

"Siberia" comes from the Mongolian word "sibir", which means "sleeping land." In the early 1700's, Siberia became a place of exile. It continued to be "the last stop" for criminals and political exiles throughout much of the 20th century. The city of Chita is in fact known as the "City of Exiles."

With the end of communism, Siberia has seen a voluntary migration of Russians who work on the Trans-Siberian Railway or in the massive natural resource

industries. Siberia is the home to tremendously large oil, gold, timber and diamond deposits. With the turn to capitalism, the country is making a major effort to take advantage of such resources. This has led to a population explosion in cities such as Irkutsk, Chita and Ulan Ude.

Siberia is always depicted as a land of freezing snow. Having lived there, I can tell you it does get "Oh, my god" cold in the winter. Temperatures can drop into the -40s. In the spring and summer, however, temperatures can reach as high as 110 degrees. With such a massive area, the climates and temperatures fall all over the map. Put another way, the United States could fit in Siberia, so you can see how temperatures might vary.

### Lake Baikal

Lake Baikal is the largest fresh water lake in the world. Fed by over 300 rivers, the lake is really an inland sea. The lake has over 30 islands. If you drained all of the water from lakes Superior, Erie, Huron, Michigan and Ontario, you still couldn't fill Lake Baikal. Standing on one shore, you cannot see the other side. It is simply huge.

Siberia is one of the few locations in the world still considered to be an untamed adventure travel destination. You can fish, hike, camp, hunt, drink vodka, ski, swim, take in a spa and do just about anything you like. The Siberians are universally friendly and can tell one heck of a story.

If you get a chance to visit Siberia, I highly recommend it. Heck, I stayed for a year!