

HISTORICAL HOLIDAYS: GUIDEBOOKS FROM THE PAST

ASTRAKHAN

1747

Bijan Omrani recommends a trip to Russia's leading trade centre, where corruption is rife but goods are cheap

ILLUSTRATION BY JONTY CLARK



WHEN TO GO

It's best to travel to Astrakhan between March and June when the Volga is swollen with spring flood waters, and boats sailing to the city can avoid the river's treacherous sandbanks. Summer temperatures are near 40°C, but in the winter below -30°C. Some particularly intrepid travellers are tempted to make the journey by sledge along the frozen river in December, but beware: a number have reported losing horses through sudden cracks in the ice.

WHAT TO TAKE WITH YOU

Situated in the marshy delta of the Volga, Astrakhan suffers from insect infestation. Mosquitoes and gnats can bother the traveller all day long, and even society dinners in the city's Kremlin are made a misery by swarms of flies. A fly-whisk and insect repellent

will save much irritation. For those on excursions on the river out of the city centre, beware of pirate attacks from the neighbouring Kalmyk nomads. John Cook, a Scottish doctor attached to the city's Admiralty, was recently cornered in this way. He advises a few rounds from a good blunderbuss as the best remedy.

COSTS AND MONEY

The rouble, as for the rest of the Russian empire, is Astrakhan's official currency. At present, one silver rouble is worth just under four shillings. Money goes a long way here, so remember to take plenty of small change. The equivalent of one penny will buy enough crayfish to feed six men. Beware, however, of endemic corruption among customs officers. They are not after money but gifts for their women. Bribes of French brandy, hats, stockings and ribbons will please them the most, so keep plenty of these about your person.

SIGHTS AND ACTIVITIES

As the premier trading depot between Russia and the east,

shopping is one of the city's main pastimes. Forget the boutiques of Paris. In the caravanserais (rest houses) and rows of shops outside the Kremlin you can buy any luxury item: silk sashes woven with gold, satins, velvets, brocades, cotton cloths, jewels and Persian opium. Recent disturbances in central Asia have stopped the supply of the fine lambskin hats, but it is hoped that this will soon resume.

As a frontier town, Astrakhan is perfect for outdoor pursuits. Antelope hunting is a favourite activity. There are dozens of unknown species still to be discovered by birdwatchers on the nearby marshes. Those wanting to make a serious contribution to science might join the crowds of German plant-hunters looking for the fabled Tartarskey Barashka: a half-animal half-plant native to the region, with the body of a sheep that grows on a stalk. A specimen recently presented to the Royal Society was found to be no more than a fleece stuffed with sawdust on a stick, but scientists are confident a real example will soon be found.

ACCOMMODATION

Astrakhan is not set up for the casual tourist used to luxury. Its main visitors are merchants who are ready to put up with budget conditions in pursuit of profit. The easiest places to stay are the caravanserais outside the Kremlin. These offer little more than a roof over your head, but they have the benefit of local colour. Visitors come from all over the east - Armenia, Bokhara and Multan - and the caravanserais are the perfect vantage points to see modern multicultural society in action.

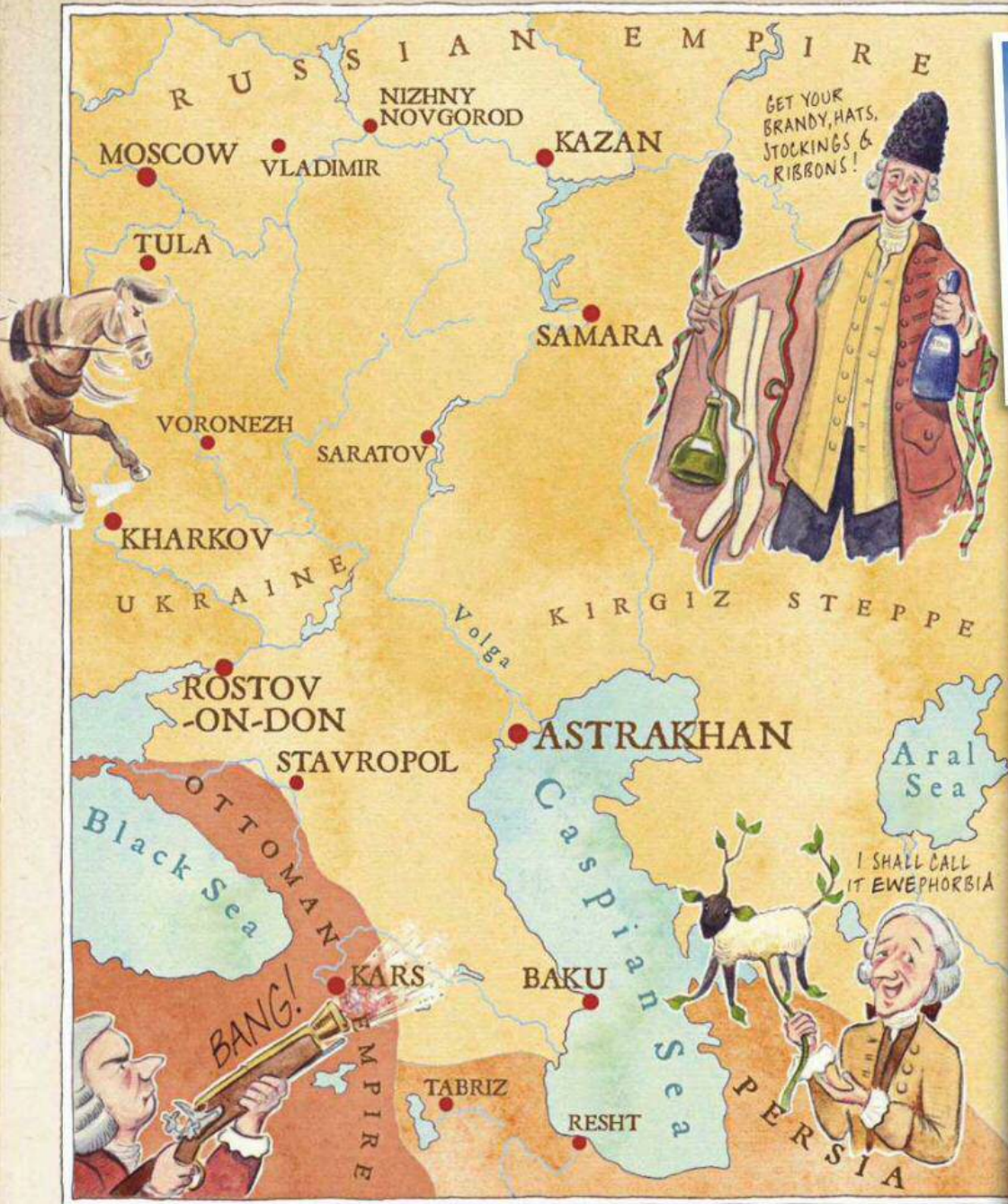
EATING AND DRINKING

Astrakhan is a foodie's paradise. Gardens abound with grapes from Persia and watermelons reputedly better than those from India. But avoid overindulgence: dysentery is the usual result. The Volga provides an endless variety of fish all year round. Sturgeon and salmon can be got for a song, as well as fresh caviar, rather than the disappointing version prepared for export.

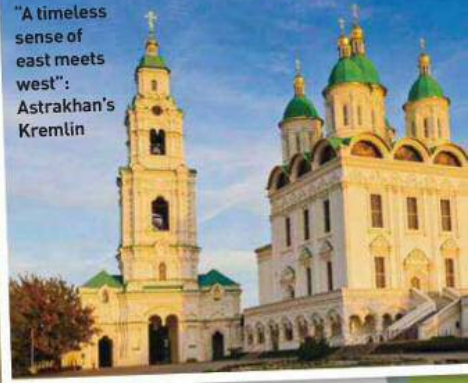
For those who prefer turf to surf, wild horse steak is a local speciality; better, says

A new law prevents Kalmyk tribes leaving their dead relatives out to be devoured by feral dogs

Astrakhan today



"A timeless sense of east meets west": Astrakhan's Kremlin



DOGS WITH A TASTE for dead humans aren't really part of the experience of visiting Astrakhan today, which will be most familiar to visitors as the end point for **Volga cruises** from Moscow.

Despite its featuring in these increasingly popular river itineraries – and having one of the most evocative names in world travel – the city is not well known. So, for those who do make it here, what is there to see? Firstly, a timeless sense of **east-meets-west**, especially in the characterful **Tatar and Persian suburbs** to the south of the city. Astrakhan's **Kremlin** is an oasis of green even at the height of summer – and summer still has the heights it had in 1747.

More than anything, though, Astrakhan is the starting point for journeys into the **Volga Delta**, a spectacular wetland that gets more astonishing the deeper you penetrate its mysterious channels – especially in high summer when the famed **lotus flower blossoms**. It's also a border zone (close to Kazakhstan), so permits are required to visit. Brave the heat and flies and you'll find one of Europe's great wildlife areas.

All this adds up to offering a different side to Russia to the one many visitors see – no longer the great trading hub of centuries past but still rewarding those who make the long journey.

If you like this...

Another Russian city with history and strategic significance is **Vladivostok**, in the distant east of the country. If you're keen on river cruises, explore the **Danube** from **Vienna to Budapest** and beyond.

Tom Hall, editor, lonelyplanet.com. You can read more of Tom's articles at the website



Dr Cook, than any English beef. You can wash this down with the local vintage, but connoisseurs are undecided on its merits. Best to stick to the Persian wines imported from Esfahan and Shiraz.

DANGERS AND ANNOYANCES

The assassination this year of Nadir Shah, the Turcoman

warlord who seized the Persian empire in a coup d'état, has lifted the threat of an invasion. Residents are now thinking about their domestic quality of life.

A new law has just been announced to prevent Kalmyk tribes from leaving their dead relatives in the suburban streets to be devoured by feral dogs. Whether this will

have any effect remains to be seen. Nevertheless, when getting about, make sure you take some dog treats in case you are cornered, and that you look where you tread. ■

Bijan Omrani is the author of *Asia Overland: Tales of Travel on the Trans-Siberian and Silk Road* (Odyssey, 2010)