



Overview of Russian Visas

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The Russian visa process is somewhat more complex than that of other countries, and particularly for Americans and others for whom visas may not even be required for visits to most countries, it is far from intuitive. Here we will attempt to put the process in perspective, so that you can both understand what we are doing behind the scenes when we provide your visa, and so that you can understand the process better if you need to process a visa for yourself or others.

There are five important aspects to the Russian visa process:

1. Types of Russian visas
2. Application materials
3. Visa support – the “invitation”
4. Visa processing at the consulate
5. Visa registration

1. Types of Russian visas

Due to complexities surrounding the Russian visa process, it is not unusual for visitors to Russia to “cut corners” and arrive on a visa that is either more convenient, or easier or faster to process than the type that is technically required based on the purpose of visit. While in some cases this can’t be avoided, you will want to understand the nuances of the particular visa you do get.

If you will indeed be studying, then you will likely have a **student visa**. This is not only the correct visa type for you, but it has the advantage of being able to be extended in-country and being converted to a multiple-entry if you will study for more than three months. They are issued initially as single entry visas with a validity of up to three months, which means that at the time of consulate processing, an HIV test is not required. This type of visa is somewhat inflexible only in that you really must be studying and the overall validity of the visa will be tied to the paid period of study. In most cases, this is also the type of visa you must have in order to take advantage of inexpensive student housing at the university.

If you will visit Russia for less than 30 days, then a single- or double-entry **tourist visa** is generally the least expensive option. They are overall the quickest to process as well. They are issued on the basis of a tourist “voucher” which either is automatically issued to you if you purchase an actual tour or book a hotel, or you can purchase these vouchers from numerous sources.¹ These cannot be extended and so if you decided to stay longer, you would need to leave the country and reenter on a new visa. We do not recommend trying to use back-to-back tourist visas to stay in Russia as consulates have been known to refuse the second visa. If you are really intending to stay much longer, you will need to look at other visa types either right away or at least for your second visa.

Business visas are offered as single- or double-entry for one or three months, or as multi-entry for 6 or 12 month. These visas are supposed to be used by those coming to Russia for the purposes of negotiations and **not to work**². While the support (invitation) for such a visa is technically supposed to come from a

¹ When purchasing visa support of any kind, don’t blindly choose an organization. Ask people who travel regularly to Russia for references. SRAS works with a reliable Russian partner in issuing business and tourist visas when needed.

² Those who are working in Russia are issued a work visa, which is tied to a work permit.

Russian organization that is inviting you, there is again a business of selling business visa support. If you will opt for a 6- or 12-month multi-entry, you will need an HIV test at the time of application to the consulate. With visas of this duration you should be particularly concerned about visa registration (see below).

Personal visas can be obtained if you have family or friends in Russia, but these are highly discouraged. The Russian government and the government of your home state will likely want to perform lengthy background checks on you and your inviter, adding considerable time and trouble to obtaining your visa. If you are planning to stay with family or friends in Russia, make sure that they will be able to register you first! This will require an authorized statement from the owner of the apartment or house they live to be presented to the neighborhood police department, along with your visa and passport. If this is not done within 72 hours of your arrival in Russia, you will be subject to fines and possible deportation.

2. Application materials

At the time you start the process you need to supply **personal and passport information** and in the case of all but tourist vouchers, a scan of the **data page of your passport**. For most visas, your passport must be valid for 6 months beyond your planned exit date from Russia. However, in the case of a **student visa**, because it can be extended, this is increased to **18 months** beyond the initial exit date on your visa. If you need to obtain or renew a passport, do it sooner rather than later as this will add 4-6 weeks to the visa process. Unless you have several months lead time, we recommend just going with the express processing option. You can apply for a passport (in America) at any US post office. This is all you need to obtain the visa support (voucher or invitation).

At the time of actual visa processing at the consulate, you will need to submit the following:

- Passport
- One passport photo
- Completed application form (available from SRAS or the consulate)
- Payment for processing (amount varies based on processing time and nationality)
- Invitation/voucher (in the US a fax/scan is sufficient in most cases but in other countries an original may be required)
- HIV test results (if applying for a visa valid for more than three months)
- Self-addressed and pre-paid air bill (if you are applying by mail)

3. Visa support – the “invitation”

Visa support is the overall term that applies to the document on which basis the consulate will issue you the visa. It can be called an “invitation” or “voucher.” A voucher (tourist visas only) is a paper copy indicating that you have purchased tourist services from an agency. An invitation is much more official looking. In the case of some business visas, your support may not be a paper copy at all, but rather a note telexed to the consulate. In the case of telexed support, you will be given a reference number that you can note in your application.

In brief:

- Tourist vouchers are issued by tourist agencies and hotels
- Business invitations are issued by OVIR (government agency) based on application by a Russian business hosting you.
- Student visas are issued by OVIR based on application by the Russian university hosting you.
- Personal visas are issued by OVIR based on application by a Russian citizen.

There are fees related to all types of visas that the inviting party must pay and as such will bill you for it, directly or indirectly. The inviting party, according to the paper trail, is responsible for your being in the

country. When starting the visa process you should also tell the inviting party where you intend to process the visa itself – which Russian consulate.

Again, the tourist vouchers and business invitations are often sold. We strongly recommend that the provider selling this to you be based in your home country with an established relationship with a Russian travel agency. You should make sure to obtain the contact information for the Russian travel agency, as it will be through them that you will register your visa if you do not stay in a hotel. If you cannot obtain information for the Russian agency involved, do not use that company.

4. Visa processing at the consulate

See #2 above for the materials you will need to submit to the consulate. In general you should try to process the visa at the consulate you originally indicated. In the case of telex support, this is required. Americans generally do not have much problem with processing in consulates anywhere in the US or Europe if they have the original (not fax/scan) of the original, but other nationalities may find they are limited strictly to the consulate originally indicated.

Consulate processing can take anywhere from one day to two weeks and varies not only based on how much you pay but in many cases on each particular consulate. Some refuse to process same day or even next day. Some are not even open all days of the week. If you are not processing the visa in the US or in major consulates such as in London or Paris, definitely check details with them ahead of time.

5. Visa Registration

All visas must be registered within 72 hours after entering the country. Not doing so may result in fines or even deportation. This is called an “administrative violation” and if it happens more than once you could be banned from entering Russia in the future. These are the main registration scenarios:

1. Student visas are easily registered by the Russian host university.
2. If you have a tourist or business visa and will be staying in a hotel, the hotel will handle your registration.
3. If you have a tourist visa and will stay in a private apartment, your host should assist you with this, which involves paperwork and a trip to the local militia office.
4. If you have a business visa and will stay in a private apartment, your host or landlord will need to provide paperwork allowing you to stay there (he/she will also have had to pay a tax for this and if you are staying with someone without a lot of money you should offer to pay this) and then you should take this paperwork to the organization who has invited you and they are responsible for registration. **This is one very important reason why you need to know who is really issuing your visa support!** Note that even though you might have a 12-month multiple entry business visa, registration may only be done for 6 months at a time and you will need to leave the country (even if only for a day) and reenter (new entry stamp on passport) and do the registration process again.
5. If you arrive on a personal visa, your hosts will need to handle the registration in a manner similar to a tourist visa.

We hope this has served as a useful introduction to the Russian visa process so that no matter who you are working with in this regard you know the questions to ask and what to watch out for. We welcome any questions or comments.

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