

Topic Page: [Volga River \(Russia\)](#)

Summary Article: **Volga**

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(vŏl'gə, Rus. vŏl'gə), river, c.2,300 mi (3,700 km) long, central and E European Russia. It is the longest river of Europe and the principal waterway of Russia, being navigable (with locks bypassing the dams) almost throughout its course. Its basin forms about one third of European Russia. The Volga has played an important part in the life of the Russian people, and it is characteristically named in Russian folklore "Mother Volga." For centuries it has served as the chief thoroughfare of Russia and as the lifeline of Russian colonization to the east. It carries one half of the total river freight of Russia and irrigates the vast steppes of the lower Volga region. Grain, building materials, salt, fish, and caviar (from the Volga delta and the Caspian Sea) are shipped upstream; lumber is the main commodity shipped downstream.

Course and Navigation

Rising at an altitude of only 742 ft (226 m) in the Valday Hills, it winds E past Rzhev and Tver, through the Rybinsk Reservoir, and past Shcherbakov, Yaroslavl, Kostroma, and Nizhny Novgorod (formerly Gorky) to Kazan, where it turns south and continues its broad, majestic course past Ulyanovsk, Samara, Saratov, and Volgograd. From Volgograd (c.300 mi/480 km upstream) the Volga River flows in a course below sea level through the Caspian lowland. The Volga enters the Caspian Sea through a wide delta below Astrakhan.

The Volga's chief tributaries are the Oka, Sura, Vetluga, Kama, and Samara rivers. The chief ports are Tver, Nizhny Novgorod, Kazan, Samara, Volgograd, Astrakhan, Saratov, Yaroslavl, and Rybinsk. The Volga-Baltic Waterway links the Volga with the Baltic Sea and with the Baltic–White Sea Canal; the Volga-Don Canal links the Volga with the Azov and Black Seas; the Moscow Canal connects it directly with Moscow.

In its upper course the Volga traverses numerous lakes. Below Nizhny Novgorod it broadens considerably and is lined on its right (western) bank by the bluffs of the Volga Hills, which contrast sharply with the steppe that extends from the left bank. The Zhiguli Mts. cause the river to make a sharp bend (the Samara Bend), which reaches its easternmost point at Samara. The Volga is navigable from late April to late November at Shcherbakov and from early March to mid-December at Astrakhan. A tranquil, regular stream, it has a flood stage in May and June and a low-water stage in the late summer, when shoals and sandbars impede navigation.

Dams and Hydroelectric Stations

Numerous dams and reservoirs have been constructed in the Volga basin for flood control, improved navigation, irrigation, and hydroelectric power. There are many important hydroelectric stations, notably at Uglich, at Shcherbakov, and at Ivankovo, all along the upper Volga. At Ivankovo, NW of Moscow, a dam creates the vast Volga Reservoir or Moscow Sea, covering an area of c.125 sq mi (320 sq km); this is connected with the Moskva River by the Moscow Canal. Large hydroelectric stations have been built at Nizhny Novgorod, Samara, Kama, Volgograd, and Votkinsk.

History

The Volga was known to the ancient Greeks as the Rha, but little was known about the river until the early Middle Ages, when Slavic tribes settled along its upper course, the Bulgars (see Bulgars, Eastern)

along its middle course, and the Khazars in the south. Its importance as a trade route dates from that time. The Russians soon extended their control as far as Nizhny Novgorod, founded in 1221. The Mongol invasion of the 13th cent. resulted in the direct control by the Golden Horde of the Volga below Nizhny Novgorod and in the creation (15th cent.) of the Tatar khanates of Kazan and Astrakhan, which fell to Moscow only in the 16th cent. Sarai, on the Volga River near modern Volgograd, was the capital of the empire of the Golden Horde. The conquest of these territories was largely the work of the Cossacks, who used the Volga and its tributaries for their epic forays into Siberia (under Yermak in the 16th cent.) and into the Caspian Sea (under Stenka Razin, in the 17th cent.). Many of the Finnic and Turko-Tatar nationalities still live in the middle and lower Volga regions, notably in the Chuvash, Mari El, Mordovian, Tatar, and Udmurt republics. The Kalmyrs settled in the lower Volga region in the early 17th cent. The lower Volga was the center of the great peasant rebellions under Stenka Razin and Pugachev. After their suppression Catherine II settled many German colonists in the region around Saratov.

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