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The rush to Russia begins

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This is certainly good news for Global Holidays Sdn Bhd, which has specialised in travel to Russia since 1988. The company is also a preferred sales agent for Russian airline Aeroflot.

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According to the company's executive director, Azmi Ahmad, the good relations between the two governments and the increase in Russia-Malaysia business connections have resulted in more Malaysians visiting the former Soviet republic. 'We see growth every year. Last year, for example, we sent about 20 per cent more travellers to Russia than we had the previous year,' he says.

This is a stark contrast to how it was when Global Holidays first offered holidays to the then Soviet Union. 'Back then, nobody thought about vacationing in Russia,' Azmi recalls.

Now that Russia is a market economy, it is warming up to the idea that a healthy tourism industry will help it achieve economic success. And it has much to offer. Given its vastness, Russia has no shortage of tourist attractions, both natural and man-made. Its rich history and culture add to its appeal as a holiday destination.

'Russia is truly unique. It's totally different from any other country. It has its own identity and the people cling fiercely to this identity,' Azmi explains. 'There's so much culture and history to take in.'

Global Holidays' most popular tour package to Russia is an eight-day trip to Moscow and St Petersburg (Azmi's favourite Russian city). Tour highlights include visits to the Kremlin, the Red Square and the State Hermitage Museum. The tourists also get to sample Russian cuisine.

Global Holidays is owned and managed by a team of entrepreneurs. 'We are sensitive to the everchanging trends in the travel industry,' says Azmi. 'A personal and caring approach, and our decisiveness are hallmarks of our service.'