

Squiz the World goes to... Russia

Each fortnight, we give the world globe a spin, and see where we land. Then we take the kids of Australia on an audio excursion to visit that country and its people.

I'm Christie Kijurina, and today on Squiz the World we're visiting a place that is the largest country on Earth, is known for its rich and hearty peasant food, and lately, we've been hearing about it in the news almost every other week, so today, we're going to take a trek across the arctic tundra and fertile fields that form this far-flung country!

Can you guess where we're going? Strap yourselves into the Squiz Kids Super Fast Supersonic Jetliner as we take off and take a squiz at Russia.

JUST THE FACTS

The first thing to know about Russia is that it's BIG—huge, ginormous, enormous! In fact, Russia is the largest country on Earth. It covers more than 17 million square kilometers. To put that in perspective, Australia is less than half the size at 8.5 million square kilometers. Imagine this: Russia is so massive, it has more land area than the dwarf planet, Pluto!

Across Russia, there are... get this... 11 different time zones! That's more than any other country in the world. If you could fly across Russia, you'd see 14 different countries along its borders, including Lithuania, Norway, Belarus, Kazakhstan, China, Mongolia, North Korea, and of course Ukraine, just to name a few.

And it's not just Russia that's big. Russia is home to a lot of BIG things too. Did you know that the world's largest lake, Lake Baikal, is in Russia? It holds 20% of all the fresh, unfrozen water on the planet. That's a lot of water! Russia also boasts Europe's longest river, the Volga, and Europe's highest mountain, Mount Elbrus. Oh, and let's not forget the deepest hole ever dug by humans, the Kola Superdeep Borehole. It goes down 12 kilometers—yep, they dug it just to see how far they could go!

Because Russia is so huge, it needs a really big railroad to get around. Enter the Trans-Siberian Railroad, the longest in the world! This railroad runs from Moscow, the capital of Russia in the west, all the way to the port of Vladivostok on the East Coast of Asian Russia. That's 9,200 kilometers! If you took the journey non-stop, it would take you 152 hours and 27 minutes—that's more than six whole days!

As well as being the largest country, Russia also has the 9th largest population in the world, with 144 million people in 2024. With so much land and so many people, Russia is incredibly diverse

and whenever you travel, it's important to learn a few words in that country's language. It's a great way to show respect. So, let's....

LEARN THE LINGO

In Russia, there is just one official language and you guessed it...it's Russian, spoken by 85 percent of the population. But here's something cool: with 120 different ethnic groups scattered across this gigantic country, there are actually more than 100 languages spoken altogether!

The alphabet that Russian's use looks very different to the one that we use...That's right, there's more than one alphabet! Mind blown!

"The alphabet used in English is called the Latin or Roman alphabet, but the Russian alphabet is called the Cyrillic alphabet, named after Saint Cyril.

While our Latin alphabet has 26 letters, the Cyrillic alphabet has 33! And here's another fun fact: each letter in the Cyrillic alphabet usually represents just one single sound. Imagine how easy spelling might be if each letter only made one sound! If you're curious and want to see what the Cyrillic alphabet looks like, there's a link in the episode notes. Go check it out—it's pretty awesome"

Today, we're lucky enough to have Squiz Kid Alina here to teach us a thing or two in Russian

A huge THANKYOU to you, Alina!

Now that we can communicate a little bit, it's....

TIME FOR SCHOOL

Just like in Australia, school in Russia is compulsory. Kids start when they're about six years old and continue until they're 17 or 18. The school year kicks off on the first of September and, apart from a couple of short breaks, runs right through to the end of May. Then, students get three whole months of summer holidays—lucky them!

Russian school uniforms are pretty formal. Boys generally wear dark-colored suits, while girls wear skirts and blouses. In class, there's a strong focus on Russian language, history, and literature, as well as maths and science.

While you might bring a packed lunch to school, most Russian schools provide students with a hot lunch for a small fee. This lunch often includes meat, potatoes, other veggies, or a traditional Russian soup called borscht. Yum! We'll talk more about borscht later.

PE, or physical education, is a mandatory part of the curriculum in Russia. And given the chilly climate—winter temperatures can drop to minus 10 degrees Celsius—sports like ice hockey, figure skating, and skiing are super common. So, whether they're hitting the books or the ice, Russian students have a pretty cool school experience!

SPORT TIME

We've just been talking about sports, and with the Olympics coming up, you might be keeping an eye out for Russia in the Opening Ceremony. But, you'll be waiting a long time because you won't see the athletes marching under the Russian flag these days.

Here's why: Back in 2019, an organisation called WADA, the World Anti-Doping Agency, banned Russia from competing in all international sporting competitions. Why? Because the Russian government had been encouraging athletes to use performance-enhancing drugs to help them win. This is not only cheating but also dangerous to the athletes' health.

And now, after Russia declared war on Ukraine in 2022 the International Olympic Committee (the IOC) will not allow any Russian athletes to compete under their country's banner.

But it's not fair for the athletes to suffer for their government's decisions, so, this year, you'll see athletes from Russia competing as Individual Neutral Athletes which is abbreviated to (AIN) in French. And if they win, you'll hear an AIN anthem but their medals will not appear in the official nations medal tally. Keep an eye out for the AIN athletes this year—there will be about 55 of them who are from Russia.

Phew! I've learned a ton about Russia, and now I'm starving! I think it might be...

DINNER TIME

Food in Russia has a rich and diverse history. They got dumplings when the Mongols invaded in the 13th century, and fancy Russian monarchs from the 17th and 18th centuries, like Peter the Great and Catherine the Great, introduced European dishes from France and Germany. But for many centuries, a large proportion of Russia's population was made up of peasants—people who didn't have a lot and had to work really hard to survive. So, it's no surprise that simple yet hearty dishes made from readily available ingredients like grains, vegetables, and fish were commonly on the menu.

Pickled food are also common in Russia. Pickling is a way to make food last longer by soaking it in a mixture of vinegar, salt, and sometimes spices. This special mix helps keep the food from going bad. Pickling foods like meats and vegetables was a common way to keep it edible during the harsh winter months when nothing would grow.

One iconic Russian meal is called borscht—remember I mentioned it earlier? Borscht is a sour soup made with meat stock, beetroots, cabbage, and potatoes. It's delicious and very warming on a cold day. I've stuck a link to a recipe in your episode notes. I like mine with a big dollop of sour cream on top. Yum!

THE S'QUIZ

This is the part of the podcast where you get to test how well you've been listening.

Question 1 How many different countries share a border with Russia?
(14)

Question 2 What is the name of the alphabet used in Russia? (Cyrillic)

Question 3 Soaking food in a mixture of vinegar, salt and spices to stop it from going bad is called what? (Pickling)

That's all we have time for today. Thanks for staying curious about the world, and joining me on this incredible trip to Russia.

Now get out there, and have a most excellent day. Over and out.