

NENETS



Siberia's hardy nomadic Nenets strive to maintain their traditional reindeer herding lifestyle in one of the most extreme environments on earth: the frozen world of the Arctic Circle. Step into their shoes on the Yamal Peninsula to taste tundra life at the edge of human endurance and be part of the wildlife migration of a lifetime.

Aim

The aim of this culturally immersive expedition is to live and travel with Siberia's Nenets nomads and join them on their epic reindeer migration within the Arctic Circle. This journey offers cultural immersion of the highest calibre. Teammates will totally embed themselves with their hosts, wearing what the Nenets wear, eating what they eat and sleeping in their conical reindeer-hide tents called chums (pronounced 'chooms'). This is a rare opportunity to experience the unstaged reality of nomadic life out on the remote, freezing and unforgiving Yamal Peninsula.

Nenets live nomadically and usually migrate (move their camps) every few days to access fresh pasture for their reindeer. Twice a year the Nenets of the Yamal Peninsula also migrate their reindeer for 60km across the frozen Gulf of Ob, a bay of the Arctic Ocean. Conditions allowing, our expedition is timed to coincide with this event. This intense migration can take up to 24 hours, with the team keeping pace in all-terrain vehicles and sledges. With no pasture along the way it's a race to get to the other side before the reindeer become too weak from a lack of food. There will be no breaks for the herders, the vehicles, the animals or for you. The crossing of the Gulf is a feat of human and animal endurance which requires exacting conditions for the attempt. Should weather, migration patterns or other circumstances prevent the team from joining an Ob crossing, day-to-day Nenets life remains an awe-inspiring experience. The expedition culminates at the annual Reindeer Herding Festival in Yar Sale. The festival is a highlight in the Nenets calendar, offering the chance for different families to come together and for our team the opportunity to witness extraordinary events such as reindeer racing and traditional sports.

Please note the dates of this expedition are guided by this festival, and so we ask team mates to be flexible with their dates until the time of the reindeer festival is confirmed.

Highlights

- Cross a frozen gulf on an epic reindeer migration.
- Immerse yourself in the Nenets nomads' unique way of life.

- Sleep in reindeer hide chums.
- Wear traditional herders' coats and boots.
- Experience the annual Reindeer Herding Festival.
- Travel by sledge, snowmobile and all-terrain vehicle.
- Look out for unusual Arctic flora and fauna.

What our teams say

"There are so many travel companies out there doing the same old trips to the same old boring destinations. Not Secret Compass. The Siberian Migration is a one-of-a-kind experience that feels as authentic as group travel can get. I'm not a group travel person, but the compromise of traveling en masse was well worth the opportunity to witness this far-out community and place. This is my second trip with Secret Compass, and I'm again impressed with the company's ability to open bits of the world that would otherwise be basically inaccessible." – Aaron Gulley, 2017 teammate.

Why go

Nenets culture

The Nenets have an extraordinarily rich and well-preserved culture. They are the guardians of a style of reindeer herding that is the last of its kind. The Nenets dress in furs and traditional hand-sewn clothes, live in reindeer-hide tents called chums and travel by reindeer-drawn and motorised sledges. The Nenets are famed for being Arctic Russia's best reindeer herders with the biggest herds, the longest migration routes and the best preserved culture, religious beliefs and language. This expedition offers a real opportunity to experience this unique culture first-hand. Further information and cultural advice will be sent out to teammates upon booking.

The Yamal Peninsula

The Yamal Peninsula is one of the least known, but most important, regions of the Russian Federation. In the language of the indigenous Nenets, Yamal means 'the end of the world'. With a territory around 1.5 times the size of France, the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous District (YNAO) is located in the north of West Siberia, just northeast of the geographic border between Europe and Asia above the Arctic Circle. Today more than 10,000 nomads herd 300,000 domestic reindeer on the pastures of the Arctic tundra. Under those pastures are huge gas deposits holding almost a quarter of the world's known reserves. Increased interest in mining these deposits is one of the growing threats to the Nenets' way of life.

Reindeer migrations

Over the course of a yearly migration of a thousand kilometres, the Nenets move gigantic herds of reindeer from their summer pastures in the north to winter pastures just south of the Arctic Circle. No-one knows for certain who is leading who – the reindeer or the people – but whoever is in charge, they have to battle one of the world's harshest environments.

Reindeer herding festival

After the migration, there is the opportunity to get involved in the annual Reindeer Herding Festival. Herders from many different camps gather in Yar Sale village to take part in traditional sports including reindeer sledge racing, Nenets wrestling, sledge jumping, lassoing and many more. For families living in camps whose migration routes don't cross, this is the one annual chance to meet up and young people often look for potential spouses. It is the celebratory event of the year and is certainly not to be missed. Spirits will be very high!

Testimonial from previous teammate

Aaron said, “There are so many travel companies out there doing the same old trips to the same old boring destinations. Not Secret Compass. The Siberian Migration is a one-of-a-kind experience that feels as authentic as group travel can get. I’m not a group travel person, but the compromise of traveling en masse was well worth the opportunity to witness this far-out community and place. This is my second trip with Secret Compass, and I’m again impressed with the company’s ability to open bits of the world that would otherwise be basically inaccessible.”

The Plan

Secret Compass runs expeditions with framework itineraries, rather than guided tours with set daily plans. Read more about Our Approach here. The following is the outline plan for this culturally immersive journey with Siberia’s Nenets nomads – it’s the ‘substance’ rather than the specifics. A fuller itinerary is provided in the Nenets Expedition Handbook which is available on request or upon application to join the team.

Teammates arrive

All teammates arrive into Moscow. Your Secret Compass expedition leader will meet you at a hotel local to Moscow Domodedovo Airport to we recommend your fly into this airport for convenience. The expedition officially begins at 1700 that evening, with an arrival brief and introductory team meal at the hotel. Get some sleep before a 0300 internal flight to Salekhard, organised by Secret Compass. Day two involves a seven-hour drive out of Salekhard in all-terrain vehicles along the frozen river Ob to reach Yar Sale for dinner and to spend the night. In the morning, the team gets kitted out in Nenets clothing and sets off in wooden box sledges pulled by snowmobiles to locate and join the Nenets encampment in the middle of the tundra.

On expedition

For nine days, the team will live, work, eat and rest with the Nenets, a few teammates per chum (the Nenets’ teepee-styled, reindeer-hide tents). Take part in the daily routine of life among the reindeer herders.

Usually, the Nenets dismantle the chums, pack the sledges and round up the reindeer to move on to fresh pastures every few days as the Nenets have done for generations. Sometimes, severe weather patterns prevent this happening with dire consequences for the reindeer herds. In order to reach summer pastures, when conditions allow, the extended family of nomads will aim to make the full crossing of the frozen Gulf of Ob – a carefully calculated risk. This must be done in one go as there is no forage for the reindeer on the frozen surface. Depending on the weather conditions and terrain, this crossing has been known to take up to 24 hours but can be much quicker. As with much of the travel between camps, this will be done with the Nenets and the teammates being pulled in box sledges or on snowmobiles.

Goal achieved

Returning to Yar Sale after the migration and an unforgettable foray into the frozen wilds of Siberia, the team will have the unique opportunity to attend the Nenet’s Reindeer Herding Festival. Herders from across the region take part in reindeer sledge racing and jumping, wrestling, lassoing and other traditional games. Depending on timings you’ll have one or two days in Yar Sale to explore and enjoy the festival.

After your time at the festival it’s back on the all-terrain vehicles to return to Salekhard, home to museums, Obdursk fortress and a market square full of crafts and furs. There may be a chance to enjoy a traditional Russian sauna. A contingency day is scheduled here (following the migration stage of the expedition), in case bad weather prevents the return journey from Yar Sale to Salekhard. On your final day, the internal flight lands in Moscow by approx. 1100, to meet outbound flights arranged for any time from 1500 earliest or 1600 onwards preferably. This allows a sensible amount of time to collect luggage from the internal flight terminal and to transfer to and recheck in at the international terminal at Domodedovo Airport.

Fitness

Secret Compass expeditions are achievable by anyone with a healthy lifestyle and a good level of general fitness. The biggest challenge on this culturally immersive expedition will be dealing with the Arctic weather conditions, the unusual and limited diet and the totally different lifestyle. There will be long days of travel in sometimes cramped and uncomfortable wooden box sledges. Though teammates will help set up camps and around the camp, there'll also be down time between migrations.

Teammates who arrive without meeting the agreed minimum fitness requirements can jeopardise themselves and the expedition's goal so do take training seriously, prepare as appropriate and arrive fit and ready to go.

Teammates must be comfortable with the following.

Minimum fitness requirements

- Trek: short distances around camps and to collect wood. Although distances are short, deep snow can make this tiring.
- Strength: help carry water, chop wood, push sledges, put up chums.
- Terrain: icy tundra, snow, frozen lakes.
- Snowshoe: there may be chances to snowshoe around camp.
- Climate: deal with temps down to -35°C with howling Arctic winds.
- Age: 21+

Included

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- Professional Russian-speaking Secret Compass leader with full communications and medical kits.
- In-country support.
- Accommodation throughout, in reindeer-hide tents (chums) on migration.
- All standard meals (taken with the Nenets families) and soft drinks.
- Internal transport as outlined in itinerary.
- Internal flights Moscow to Salekhard.
- Special permits and permissions within Russian.

Not included

- International flights/ travel to and from Moscow and to/from the team hotel.
- Travel insurance (obligatory).
- Russian visa if required.
- Tips to local guides (discretionary).
- Alcohol unless provided by hosts with meals.
- Personal equipment (full kit list in the Handbook). Due to the potentially very severe weather conditions on this immersive expedition, teammates should consider their kit in good time in case buying, hiring or shipping is required.

Exped FAQ

On application to join this culturally immersive expedition to Siberia's Yamal Peninsula, potential teammates will receive a detailed Expedition Handbook. Here are some expedition-specific questions and our [general FAQ](#) will answer many other questions. Get in touch if your question remains unanswered.

I'm vegetarian. Can I join?

Teammates with dietary requirements are welcome to apply for this expedition and should state their specific

requirements when applying. Those unable or unwilling to eat as the Nenets eat may be required to bring their own suitable alternative, and please be aware that most main meals will include meat.

Can I ski alongside the reindeer?

While skiing is part of the Nenets' culture – the men sometimes use traditional wooden skis with leather bindings to hunt or to get around the forest – teammates skiing alongside the caravan is not possible. While a given family may have the odd pair of skis that can be tried out, skiing is not a part of this expedition. Snowshoes will be provided for short excursions around the camp.

Will I have to eat raw reindeer?

Teammates do not have to eat raw reindeer as the Nenets will, though it is an integral part of their culture. Previous expedition teammates have surprised themselves with even vegetarians becoming so immersed in the experience that they ate (and drank) from freshly killed raw reindeer along with everyone else. As long as cultural sensitivity prevails, teammates can join in or not though it should be remembered that this is intended as a culturally immersive expedition, with everything that entails.

Will there be telephone signal?

There will be phone signal while in Moscow, at Salekhard and at Yar Sale. Once on migration, expect no reception and if some does fleetingly appear, treat that as a plus. Being happy to escape 'the outside world' to become fully immersed in this expedition is a great approach.

Can I arrive a day late?

As The Plan outlines, there is a complex chain of transport to get teammates out to the Nenets and so start and end dates are not flexible.

Can I charge all my electricals?

This will be very challenging with limited access to power. Please ensure that you are self-sufficient in terms of charging your appliances by bringing things like spare batteries or power packs to avoid frustration.

Will my camera work in the cold?

Battery life is a challenge in very cold climates such as Siberia's Arctic Circle! If camera or phone battery life is of paramount importance, research the best ways to protect and keep your batteries warm and come equipped accordingly.

Can I hire some kit items in country?

It is challenging to hire kit in country. All teammates are advised to procure all necessary kit prior to arrival in Moscow. Secret Compass can advise teammates on hire options but cannot bring kit out to Moscow for teammates.

It's Russia. Will there be vodka?

At the end of a hard day's work around camp or on migration, some Nenets families indulge in that classic Russian activity – vodka drinking. Teammates are welcome to partake or abstain – indeed the toasts might even be in their honour. As in any community, such activity is family dependant and so two teammates staying with different families on the same expedition might have different experiences. This is honest nomadic life after all with all the variations found in any extended family unit or small community.