

Hello, Colleagues:

It is great to see so many of you are going to Moscow next June. I even see some folks that I know already! And I look forward with pleasure to meeting the rest of you! We will have a wonderful time together at the ACEI World Conference in Moscow.

Please allow me to share my experience. I have been to Russia ten times from Minnesota, USA. I know the anxiety that we in North America have about the paperwork, but I have some experience with the timing of it all, at least for citizens of the USA. I do not know how this works in countries other than the USA.

There are two steps for us: getting the letter of invitation (which Manana and her committee are working on) and getting our visitor's visas so we can go in and out of Russia.

In my experience, the letter of invitation from our Russian host committee is the most important step. The letter of invitation is not just a letter (as we think of from an American point of view)... it is an important and legal document that has undergone rigorous scrutiny by Russian authorities in Russia.

The visa application process which happens in our home country is easier than getting the letter of invitation. In the Russian process, the letter of invitation is approved in advance, so the subsequent approval of the visa is easier. My other university colleagues in Russia tell me that it can take them about eight weeks to go through the internal process of getting letters of invitation, and that's if everything goes smoothly!

My plan, here in the US, for getting my Russian visa, is to use the services of GoToRussia Travel through their website, www.gotorussia.com<<http://www.gotorussia.com>>.

Check their website out. I will also be using GTR Travel for airplane reservations. And yes, I will have to make airplane reservations even before I am able to apply for my Russian visa. This also feels wrong, somehow, from the point of view of us in the USA, but it is how all my Russian travel arrangements have occurred.

When I send GoToRussia Travel my letter of invitation from the conference planners, they will take the letter and my completed visa application form (from their website) and my passport to the Russian consulate in San Francisco, CA.

Yes, I must send my actual, real, precious USA passport to GoToRussia Travel through the mail or FedEx. I know this is almost an anathema to Americans, but the Russian consulate will actually affix their visa into my US passport and then send it back to me. Yes, they will send it back (and you will have a great souvenir visa affixed to your passport!). I think the fastest visa processing time on gotorussia.com is only about four weeks, so it's almost pointless to try to start it any earlier. Sometimes, I do not get my visa until only a few days before I leave the US. For one of my earliest trips (when I did not work through GoToRussia Travel), my airplane was delayed and my visa arrived after my original flight was scheduled to leave. (I have always wondered if the Russian consulate knew something about that airplane schedule that I did not know!)

If you use GoToRussia Travel, keep in mind that their offices and the Russian embassy/consulate offices in the USA observe all US and Russian holidays, so those dates do not count as "business days" when you calculate the processing time for the visa. It will go faster when you already have a letter of invitation. (In fact, GoToRussia Travel could also get us letters of invitation, but we do not have to do that step here because the Moscow conference planning committee is working hard to get our letters of invitation from Russia).

I hope this has allayed your fears about the timeline. For a trip in June (and I'm leaving the US on June 4), I will not begin to worry about my letter of invitation until at least April 1. I know it takes our host committee time to process everything on our behalf. If we all are blessed, the letters will come sooner, but it is probably beyond the ability of the Moscow conference committee to hurry things up. Also, I'm fairly sure that they must wait and process everyone's applications for invitations at the same time. That means that if even a few of us have been late in sending our information, then the entire group must wait a little longer.

Please feel free to contact me if you have other questions about how things work from the USA.

Best wishes.

PS: By the way, this was an unrequested, unauthorized, personal endorsement of GoToRussia Travel. I have found them the most consistent and reliable of travel agents and visa processing agents for my almost-annual travel to Russia. However, I do not personally guarantee their arrangements and (read the fine print!), I am not responsible for the results of your doing business with them!