

Sea of Azov

Sea of Azov, Russian **Azovskoye More**, or **Azovskoe More**, inland sea situated off the southern shores of Ukraine and Russia. It forms a northern extension of the Black Sea, to which it is linked on the south by the Kerch Strait. The Sea of Azov is about 210 miles (340 km) long and 85 miles (135 km) wide and has an area of about 14,500 square miles (37,600 square km). Into the Sea of Azov flow the great Don and Kuban rivers and many lesser ones such as the Mius, the Berda, the Obitochnaya, and the Yeya. In the sea's western part lies the Arabat Spit, a 70-mile- (113-kilometre-) long sandbar that separates it from the Syvash, a system of marshy inlets that divides the Crimean Peninsula from the Ukrainian mainland.



Azov, Sea of

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Sergey Sorokin

With a maximum depth of only about 46 feet (14 m), the Azov is the world's shallowest sea. Vast quantities of silt are brought down by the Don and Kuban rivers, so that in the Taganrog Gulf in the northeast, the sea's depth is 3 feet (1 m) or less. The discharge of these rivers ensures that the sea's waters are low in salinity, being almost fresh in the Taganrog Gulf. The Syvash is highly saline, however. The Sea of Azov's north, east, and west shorelines are low and have long sandspits and shallow gulfs and lagoons in various stages of silting up. Its southern shore is mainly high and jagged, however. The topography of the sea's floor is generally level.

The climate of the Sea of Azov's basin is continental and temperate. Heavy frosts alternate with thaws, and there are frequent fogs. There is normally stationary ice along the sea's northern coasts from late December to early March. The currents in the sea flow in a counterclockwise rotation along the coasts. The mean water level of the sea varies as much as 13 inches (33 cm) from year to year, according to the river influx. Tidal oscillations of the water level may reach 18 feet (5.5 m).

The Sea of Azov is rich in marine life as a result of its shallowness, the excellent mixing and even warming of the water, and the input of great quantities of nutrient material by the rivers. The sea's fauna includes more than 300 species of invertebrates and about 80 species of fish, including sturgeon, perch, bream, herring, sea-roach, gray mullet, minnow, shemaja, and bullheads. Sardines and anchovies are particularly abundant.

The Sea of Azov handles much freight and passenger traffic, although the progress of heavy oceangoing craft is hampered by shallowness at some points. Icebreakers assist in winter navigation. Principal ports are Taganrog, Mariupol, Yeysk, and Berdyansk.

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