

Taking the famous Trans Siberian EXPRESS across Asia

The dawn light slowly gathers strength as the train draws away from Beijing, leaving the bicycle-filled morning bustle of the city behind. For the moment every passenger's attention is turned inwards – the carriages are filled with the sound of people settling in to their compartments, getting comfortable for the distances that stretch out ahead into the far north. In half an hour all bags, boxes, and sacks of strange goods are stowed; things settle down to the low hum of conversation and the eternally romantic rhythm of wheels against the tracks. Then you look out – suddenly the urban sprawl has vanished, and the train is running alongside the Great Wall of China, with sunlight and cloud shadows on the slopes of forested mountains high above. The greatest possible rail journey has begun...



Slow train to

It was last year that I made my first Trans-Mongolian journey, taking the East to West route that runs from Beijing to Moscow, passing across the vast landscapes of Mongolia. This is just one of a number of variations that are collectively referred to as the Trans-Siberian Railroad. In the past many travellers spoke of the Trans-Siberian 'Express', which gives the impression of a single train. In fact this route is served by a number of trains and follows a number of paths across Europe and Asia, on a network of tracks that were first laid across the taiga forests in the late 1800's. The classic 'Trans-Siberian' journey takes the rails from Moscow to Vladivostok on the far east of Russia, covering seven time zones and a distance of 9,300 kilometres before it reaches the Pacific coast. I've travelled the alternative and more popular route, which links Moscow to Beijing. There is yet a third option, which bypasses Mongolia to reach Beijing via fascinating Manchuria. Between these, you have the choice of three journeys that cover a significant part of the earth's surface, taking in cultures that change from old European, through

shamanic Siberian or Mongol nomad, to Oriental or even proto-American Indian. And that's not even mentioning the landscape – the true virgin forests, grass steppe, Gobi Desert, Ural mountains; Moscow and Beijing.

All of these routes can be taken in reverse, and most travellers will break the journey up with stops at a number of places, possibly in addition to travel in Russia or China before and after the train. I found time on the train was an excellent experience in itself – the days on board were well-spent in the company of other travellers – I made good friends with a wandering Dane, an English family, and a young Buryat couple – native Siberians who had been on their honeymoon to Beijing. Rough communication came surprisingly easily in this cross-cultural mix, and we whiled away a couple of evenings in the train's dining car, eating Mongolian noodles and hearing Russian and Australian jokes – two distinctly different senses of humour!

Of many possible stops, I'd select three – Ekaterinburg, Ulaan Baatar, and Lake Baikal, as

being the finest for the shorter journey. Ekaterinburg for its history, as it was here that the last royal family of Russia met their end at the hands of the Bolsheviks – take a solemn visit to the site of their last moments in the forests at Ganina Yama. Ulaan Baatar, on the other hand, is anything but solemn. The capital of a nomadic nation, half of its suburbs consist of traditional felt tents, and the wilds are only a short drive out in Terej National Park. Finally, Lake Baikal, its incredible depths holding a gin-clear fifth of all fresh water on earth. My finest memory of this last journey is from Baikal in the evening, as the sun sets over the snowy peaks on the far side, and the men who sell delicious smoked omul salmon start to pack up their stalls in the lakeside village of Listvyanka. With the colour and throng of Beijing behind me, and the grandeur of Moscow ahead, there was little left to do but sit back and enjoy the scene before me.

David Bannister

Audley's Russia, Mongolia and China specialist



2



3



4

- 1 Lake Baikal
- 2 Chinese market
- 3 Train on shores of Lake Baikal
- 4 Mongol horseman

MOSCOW

FACT FILE

A classic 17-day Trans-Siberian journey such as David's commencing with a few days in Beijing, travelling in 2nd class compartments and making stopovers in Ulaan Baatar and Irkutsk to visit spectacular Lake Baikal, and finishing in Moscow costs from £1945. This includes economy class international flights with British Airways and mid-range accommodation when away from the train. Luxury journeys by private train are also available from £3295. For further details please call David on 01869 276 266.

