

Stapleton's Stops



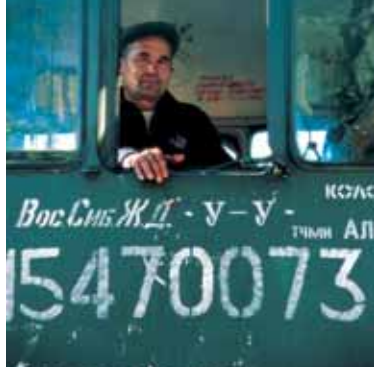
St. Basil's cathedral, Moscow



Mongolian wilderness

FACT FILE

A 17-day journey along the Trans-Mongolian railway, stopping at each of the destinations mentioned, costs from £2,195 per person, travelling in second-class compartments and staying in comfortable accommodation when away from the train. For details, please contact Tom on 01869 276 337.



One of the world's great journeys, the Trans-Mongolian railway, takes seven days to cross the great forested expanses of Siberia, from Moscow to Beijing. This is a long time to spend on a train, so to avoid 'cabin fever' we strongly recommend breaking your journey along the way. Tom Stapleton reveals his favourite stop-offs on the Trans-Mongolian.



The 'Trans-Mongolian' refers to the train that runs from St.Petersburg to Beijing (the southern-most rail line on the map)

Moscow

Both an ancient town and a modern metropolis, Moscow never fails to impress me with its grand scale and stark contrasts. Next to a beautiful 15th-century church you might find a neo-Gothic Stalinist apartment block, and over the road a gleaming glass office block reflecting Moscow's new found love of capitalism. A cruise on the river is a good way to take in some of these contrasts at a leisurely pace, while a stroll on Red Square and a visit to the Kremlin are a must. But no matter how many times I go back, there's almost always something new to see.

Yekaterinburg

Yekaterinburg, the capital of the Urals, is a pleasant city with a fascinating, if grisly, past. A relaxed place, full of history, it makes for an interesting break from the train. It was here that the Romanov family were murdered in cold blood by the Bolsheviks in 1918. Although the house where they met their untimely end has long gone, there is now a monument to them on the site as

well as a new church. Yekaterinburg also has some pleasant small museums which I enjoyed, especially the charming Museum of Photography.

Irkutsk

If you only stop once on the Trans-Mongolian, do it at Irkutsk. This is a beautiful city with an interesting past whose cultural significance is thanks mainly to a group of noblemen exiled here in 1725 for their part in an attempted coup.

A few hours from Irkutsk is pristine Lake Baikal. The world's deepest lake, it contains a fifth of the world's fresh water. The shoreside village of Listvyanka makes a pleasant base from which to take in some lakeland scenery, and I advise finding a quiet spot to admire the sublime surroundings while munching on delicious smoked omul fish, which is native to Baikal and not found anywhere else in the world.



Crossing the Mongolian border

Khustai National Park, Mongolia

Mongolia's modern capital, Ulaan Baatar, makes an interesting stop on the journey but for a true flavour of Mongolia you must take a trip out of town. Although only a two-hour drive from Ulaan Baatar, Khustai National Park feels like a different world, with only a small encampment of traditional Ger tents to be seen for miles around. The rolling grasslands of Khustai are home to the unique Takhi - an ancient breed of wild horse - as well as other wildlife. Staying in the warm, comfortable Ger tents also gives a taste of Mongolia's nomadic life.

Temple of Heaven, Beijing



Beijing

A beguiling mix of ancient and modern, Beijing is a self-confident city that is going places. The Forbidden City and Tiananmen Square are good introductions to China's ancient civilisation, and bring home just how old it is. I also enjoyed the Temple of Heaven, which has a relaxing air and is often full of old people playing cards, singing, or just having a natter. The Donghuamen night market is a great place to try Beijing cuisine, and if you have the time a day trip to the Great Wall at spectacular Jinshanling is highly recommended as a nice break from the bustle of the city.

Tom Stapleton

North & Central Asia Specialist

WEB PLUS

www.audley.co.uk/features/transmon

More images from the Trans-Mongolian journey

Mongolian herdsman



A cruise on Lake Baikal

