

# Trans-Siberian Railway

Once hailed as 'the fairest jewel in the crown of the Tsars', the Trans-Siberian Railway remains one of life's great travel experiences. Spanning seven time zones and some of Russia's most geographically challenging, yet resource rich and scenically splendid regions, the railroad represents a triumph of man over nature. But, together with its Trans-Mongolian and Trans-Manchurian tributaries into neighbouring China and Mongolia, travelling the Trans-Siberian is achievable by anyone with some time, a little money and a sense of adventure.

The classic journey links Moscow – Russia's awe-inspiring capital of the Kremlin and Red Square, Stalinist skyscrapers, and oil billionaires and their entourages – with the dynamic, physically stunning port of Vladivostok on the edge of the Pacific, 9288km away. The ever-popular Trans-Mongolian option joins up the dots between China's imperial capital of Běijīng, basking in its post-Olympic glory; Ulaanbaatar, the pulsating capital of Mongolia with access to exhilarating open spaces; and any number of fascinating destinations in Russia, including an essential pause at the sapphire dazzler that is Lake Baikal. Connoisseurs of the off-beat will gravitate towards the Baikal-Amur Mainline (Baikalo-Amurskaya Magistral, or BAM), an alternative Trans-Siberian route through some of the most remote and beautiful parts of Siberia.

With an average speed of around 60km/h, these Trans-Siberian services are not for travellers in a hurry. Nor, with a few exceptions, are these working trains particularly glamorous. Nonetheless, a Trans-Siberian trip is never dull, not least because of the chance you'll have to interact with your fellow passengers over several days of travel. Whether you experience the Trans-Siberian route nonstop, savouring the slowly evolving landscapes, or – as we'd strongly advise – hop off and on the train at the dozens of fascinating places en route, one thing is for sure: this will be a journey to remember.

## Russia

In the past decade, Russia has evolved from an economically jittery, inefficient and disorganised basket case to a relatively slick petrodollar mover and shaker, and the world's No 1 luxury-goods market. Off the back of oil and gas, the world's biggest energy exporter has paid off its debts and stashed away reserves of R3.84 trillion (US\$162.5 billion). With the economy growing at 7% per year, the Russian statistics agency reported that the average monthly salary rose by 27% in 2007 to R13,500 (US\$550) and that unemployment was down to 6%. According to *Forbes* magazine, in 2007 19 of the 100 richest people in the world were Russians, while the country's tally of 87 US-dollar billionaires made it second only to the USA. Lenin is surely spinning in his mausoleum!

The global financial turmoil of late 2008 may have put a significant dent in their bank balances but it remains true that the *lux* life enjoyed by the likes of aluminium mogul Oleg Deripaska or Chelsea-owner Roman Abramovich might as well be on an entirely different planet to that of the 20 million or so Russians who subsist on less than R4500 a month. Luxury is hardly common either among the growing Russian middle class, who nevertheless enjoy lives undreamt of by the vast majority of Soviet citizens less than two decades ago. Under such circumstances they have supported Putin and continue to support his successor Dmitry Medvedev, at the same time as gritting their teeth and tightening their purses to deal with steadily rising inflation, counted at 15% in the year to May 2008.

## FAST FACTS

### Russia

Population: 141.4 million

Surface area: 17 million sq km

Time zones: 11

National symbol: double-headed eagle

Extent of the Russian rail network: 87,000km

Gazprom profits in 2007: R658 billion (US\$27.8 billion)

Rate of income tax: 13% flat

Number of deaths per year from alcoholic poisoning: 40,000

Number of languages spoken (other than Russian): more than 100

Number of Nobel Prize winners: 20

With no credible opponent, Medvedev's election to president in March 2008 was never in doubt, the only intangibles being how big his majority might be (71.3%) and how many Russians would bother to vote at all (73.7 million or 64% of potential voters). Non-Russian observers worried about how democratic this outcome really was, fretted even more in August of the same year when Russia came to blows with Georgia over the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. While the controversy inevitably stirred up extreme reactions, more sober analysis would have that Russia – however heavy handed – is fumbling to find a way to deal with its sense of encirclement by newly NATO-leaning neighbours, such as Georgia, Ukraine and the Baltic States, who were once part of its 'sphere of influence' and whose borders continue to harbour many Russian nationals. While claiming to not want to defy the international community, Medvedev has said 'We are not afraid of anything, including the prospect of a new Cold War'.

Under such circumstances you may be wary about visiting Russia. We're not going to kid you that travel here is all plain sailing. On the contrary, for all the welcome that its people will show you once you're there, Russia's initial face can be frosty. Tolerating bureaucracy, an insidious level of petty corruption and some discomfort, particularly away from the booming urban centres, remains an integral part of the whole Russian travel experience. However, a small degree of perseverance will be amply rewarded. Russia remains its own unique, fascinating creation, that everyone should see for themselves.

## China

A journey on the Trans-Mongolian or Trans-Manchurian routes will bring you to the nation currently on everyone's lips. The Asian and Western media are littered with images of China 'taking centre stage' and assuming its mantle as the 'powerhouse of the East'. Sitting on the world's largest foreign-exchange reserves, China grabbed the largest gold-medal tally at the 2008 Olympic Games, an achievement that could only assure the international respect China so craves.

When it runs out of superlatives, China simply generates a few more. The world's fastest intercity train started running in 2008 between Beijing and Tianjin, but even that will be eclipsed in speed within a few years by the Beijing-Shanghai high-speed rail link. China also recently overtook the USA as the world's largest broadband market. Lunar missions are a possibility as China's space program races through the gears.

China also finds itself at the heart of an apparent shift of world power from the West to the East. And despite downsizing, the country has the world's largest standing army (which could sponge up the world's largest number of permanent bachelors, a by-product of the country's one-child policy). The Olympics bequeathed Beijing with a massively expanded metro system and extraordinary examples of modern architecture, making it a truly global city.

Impressive as these achievements are, any seasoned China traveller will tell you these success stories are not particularly useful yardsticks for quantifying this nation of 1.3 billion. You only have to wander a few kilometres from Beijing for an immediate reminder that China remains a largely agricultural nation; its economy – measured by per capita wealth – is roughly in the same league as Morocco. As many as 500 million rural Chinese do not have access to clean drinking water. Even modest trips around the nation reveal China as a gigantic work in progress, caught somewhere between the 1950s and the early 21st century.

The fruits of the economic boom are tangible and easy to assess, but on other development indicators – take democracy, human rights, adequate education and healthcare, the rule of law, intellectual property rights and

### FAST FACTS

#### China

Population: 1.3 billion

Surface area: 9.6 million sq km

Life expectancy male/female: 71/75 years

GDP growth: 10.8%

Extent of Chinese rail network: 78,000km

Literacy rate: 86%

Head of state: President Hu Jintao

Number of gold medals at 2008 Olympics: 51

Internet users: 134 million

Length of the Great Wall: 7200km

environmental degradation, to name a few – China is either making negligible or slow progress (or is indeed stationary or going backwards). See p71 for details on some of the indicators where China is making progress.

Despite the rebellious paroxysms of the 20th century, the Chinese are still a deeply pragmatic people. They are respectful and fearful of authority, so you won't see any antigovernment graffiti. You won't hear speakers standing on soap boxes to vent their political views (unless they chime with government opinion). Political debate is stifled and most Chinese keep their heads down and work hard for a living. This continues to create a country that is increasingly wealthy, for sure, but one that is intellectually muzzled.

## Mongolia

Caught between two giants of the contemporary geopolitical landscape, Mongolia is a titan from the past, striving to make its mark in the present. Since the fall of communism nearly two decades ago, this remote, land-locked country has done just about everything in its power to open itself up to the world. While the old traditions of nomadic herding survive and its wild nature is still mostly intact, Mongolia has also reached out to Western countries for economic and cultural ties. It's not uncommon to meet Mongolians with degrees from universities in the USA, Europe or Australia. Everyone seems to have at least one relative working overseas.

Along with Japan and South Korea, Mongolia is one of the only legitimate democracies in the whole of Asia. A constant parade of street protests have forced policy change on everything from mining laws to bus fares. Elections have largely proven to be free and fair. However, the perceived irregularities in the June 2008 election sparked riots in the capital Ulaanbaatar leaving five dead and 300 injured. President Nambaryn Enkhbayar was forced to call a four-day state emergency.

This troubling development aside, democracy has given foreign investors enough confidence to stick with Mongolia during hard times. Attractive investment laws have lured some of the big boys of the mining world – the major target of Mongolia's economic reformers. The economy grows at a robust 7.5% per year – thanks mainly to China's insatiable appetite for Mongolia's raw materials. Even so, Mongolia still faces enormous economic and social challenges; it remains one of the poorest countries in Asia, with typical salaries at less than US\$200 a month.

Tourism, along with mining and cashmere, has become a key feature of the economy. The limitations of poor infrastructure and a short travel season have kept receipts small, but Mongolia does have a growing network of ger (yurt) camps that cater to intrepid travellers seeking ecotourism adventures. Without fences or private property to restrict movement, Mongolia is a perfect destination for horse trekking, long-distance cycling or hiking. There is also plenty of scope for more leisurely activities such as fly-fishing, yak carting or just camping out under a sprawling mass of stars.

If this description perpetuates your belief in an untouched country of aimlessly wandering nomads, then you also need the scoop on the new Mongolia. Add to the above internet cafes in the middle of nowhere, herders chatting to one another on mobile phones and, in Ulaanbaatar, Manhattan-style cocktail bars and vegetarian cafes.

Most travellers come for Naadam, the two-day summer sports festival that brings Ulaanbaatar to a standstill. But Mongolia's unique charm will always lie in the countryside where, rather than being a spectator to the wrestling, you may find yourself making up the numbers! Outside the villages it's easy to meet nomad families whose relentless sense of hospitality can at times be nothing short of overwhelming.

### FAST FACTS

#### Mongolia

Population: 3 million

GDP: US\$3200 per capita

Leading 2008 exports:  
copper, wool, gold,  
cashmere, leather

Average life expectancy:  
64 years

Literacy rate: 98%

Voter turnout: often  
over 75%

Horse-to-human ratio:  
13 to 1

Annual economic aid  
received: about US\$159  
million

Telephone usage: 156,000  
landlines; over 800,000  
mobile phones

Proportion of people  
living below the poverty  
line: 33%

Head of livestock: 41  
million

# Getting Started

See Climate Charts (p328) for more information.

Given the number of options – which route to take, when to go, where to break the journey (if at all), whether to DIY or use the services of a tour operator, how to travel more responsibly – a Trans-Siberian trip requires some forethought. This chapter will help you sort your priorities, plan ahead and whet your appetite for the travelling pleasures to come.

## WHEN TO GO

The main Trans-Siberian Railway tourist season runs from May to the end of September, with mid-July to early September being the busiest time for foreign visitors, as well as Russians taking their annual holidays. Tickets for all trains during this time should be booked well ahead, although note that Russian Railways sells tickets only up to 45 days in advance. The Moscow–Běijing route is especially popular over the summer, with tickets for it selling very fast – you may find that to get the dates you want you'll be forced to deal with an agency or tour group.

Although July and August are the warmest months in Siberia (with temperatures rising as high as 40°C), they are often the dampest months in parts of European Russia, with as many as one rainy day in three. During these months the climate in Běijing can also be murder with soaring humidity – the total opposite from Mongolia, where clear skies make the sunlight intense. Conditions are less extreme during May and June or September and the first half of October, when autumn brings stunning colours as the leaves turn, particularly in Russia's Far East.

Winter nights are long and freezing, but if you're prepared for it this time of year can also be fantastic. The theatres open, the furs and vodka come out, and the snow makes everything picturesque. In addition, Russian train tickets are sold at a discount in winter (particularly in November and most of December and January to April). The best winter month to visit Siberia is March, after the deep freeze of December to February, although note that March in St Petersburg and Moscow can be particularly grim.

Least liked everywhere are the first snows beginning in late October (but sometimes earlier) and the spring thaw (April), which turn everything to mud and slush.

Keep in mind major public holidays; for example manoeuvring around China with 1.3 billion others during Chinese New Year can be daunting. See p331 for details on the main festivals and events, and p333 for details on holidays.

## WHAT KIND OF TRIP?

### Independent Travel vs Group Tour

Independent travel in Russia, China and Mongolia can be a lot of fun, but don't expect it to be necessarily cheap or easy to organise. Away from the major cities your odds of meeting anyone who speaks English are slim; if you can speak and read some Russian and, on the Trans-Mongolian and Trans-Manchurian routes, Chinese and Mongolian, it will improve your trip no end. With limited language skills, everything you attempt will possibly be more costly and more difficult. However, it's far from impossible and if you really want to meet locals and have a flexible itinerary, this is the way to go.

To smooth the way somewhat, it's a good idea to consider using a specialist travel agency to arrange your visas, and make some of your train

## HOW MUCH?

### Russia

Midrange double room  
R1500-4000 (R3000-  
10,000 Moscow and  
St Petersburg)

1hr online R50-100

Meal and drink in a  
midrange restaurant  
R600-1000

Short taxi ride R200

1L of petrol R23-29

1L of bottled water R25

Bottle of local beer R70

Blin R50

Metro ticket R20

### China

Midrange double room  
Y240

1hr online Y2-4

Meal and drink in a mid-  
range restaurant Y40

Short taxi ride Y10

1L of petrol Y6.2

1L of bottled water Y4

Bottle of local beer Y3

Souvenir T-shirt Y25

Large lamb kebab Y1

Metro ticket Y3

**DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...**

- Getting your visas – for details, see p342.
- Very warm clothes and a long, windproof coat, if you're visiting during winter.
- Learning Cyrillic and packing a phrasebook or mini dictionary – having a handle on the Russian language will improve your visit immeasurably. Ditto knowing a few simple Chinese phrases and being able to recognise a handful of Chinese characters, if China is on your itinerary.
- Slip-on footwear, such as thongs (flip-flops) or Chinese cloth sandals, and loose, comfortable clothes, such as a tracksuit for wearing on the train.
- Thick-soled, waterproof and comfortable walking shoes.
- Strong insect repellent for summer.
- A plug for a bathroom basin.
- Cards, books and photos of your family and home for breaking the ice with your cabin mates.
- A stash of painkillers or other decent hangover cures.
- A sense of humour.

and accommodation bookings. Most travel agencies will be happy to work on any itinerary. It's also possible to arrange guides and transfers through an agency, and the prices can sometimes be better than you'd be able to negotiate yourself with or without language skills. Note, though, that if you use an agency *just* to book train tickets, you will certainly pay more (sometimes far more) than what you'd pay for the same tickets if you buy them yourself once in Russia, China or Mongolia. For more on booking tickets, see p27.

On organised group tours everything is taken care of and all you need do is pay and turn up. Tours can cater to special interests and range from backpacker basics to full-on tsarist luxury, such as on the private Golden Eagle train (p360). You'll seldom be alone – which can be a curse as well as a blessing depending on the company. This will also cut down on your chances of interacting with locals: on some trips whole carriages of the train are filled with foreign tourists. Opportunities to head off the beaten track or alter the itinerary are also very limited, if not impossible. For a list of some overseas tour groups, see p352. Some local volunteer groups offer tours groups as well; see p31. Other local tour companies and travel agencies offering tours are mentioned in the destination chapters.

**Staying on the Train vs Getting On & Off**

Aficionados of going nonstop from Moscow to Vladivostok or Běijing – both are journeys of seven days – often compare it to being on a sea voyage or having a beach holiday indoors. It's a chance to sleep and read, perhaps sharpen up your card-playing and chess skills with fellow passengers, while the landscape unreels in cinematic slow motion outside. Approached in this manner, the trip can be a relaxing, languorous experience, not to mention a chance to form some memorable relationships.

The aim, however, of this guide is to tempt you off the train and get you exploring the fascinating countries it passes through. At the very least we'd recommend breaking your journey once – the most obvious point being in Irkutsk (p211) to visit Lake Baikal. On the Trans-Mongolian route consider a stop in Ulaanbaatar (p280), while on the Trans-Manchurian route a pause in Hāěrbin (Harbin; p299) is a possibility. See p24, p35 and the chapter highlights and route-planner boxes at the start of many destination

**HOW MUCH?****Mongolia**

Midrange double room  
T45,000-90,000

1hr online T700

Guanz (canteen) lunch  
T2000

Short taxi ride T3000

1L of petrol T820-1020

1L of bottled water T500

Can of Chinggis beer  
R1000

Local newspaper T500

Shashlyk T1800

Best seat at the Naadam  
opening T30,000

Outside of Russia's busy June to August travel period and over a few key holidays such as Easter, buying tickets yourself in the country shouldn't be too problematic.

# TOP 10



## Best Railway Stations

Many of the historic stations along the Trans-Siberian route are worth visiting in their own right. From St Petersburg, the following are ordered from west to east.

- 1 Vitebsk, St Petersburg (p113) Russia's Moderne delight and starting point of Russia's first public railway to Tsarskoe Selo.
- 2 Yaroslavl, Moscow (p148) A fitting start or finish to the Trans-Siberian is this 1902 stylised reproduction of a traditional Russian fort.
- 3 Novosibirsk (p196) Siberia's largest station is a temple to the Trans-Siberian.
- 4 Krasnoyarsk (p206) Big, grand and self-consciously spired, with a great mural of Lenin and comrades.
- 5 Irkutsk (p211) Admire the well-proportioned classicism of this station.
- 6 Severobaikalsk (p265) Le Corbusier-style station on the BAM line.
- 7 Slyudyanka 1 (p225) Built entirely of marble in 1904 to commemorate the construction of the technically challenging Circumbaikal line.
- 8 Tynda (p270) Futuristic Brezhnev meets *The Jetsons* structure, by far the city's most impressive architecture.
- 9 Birobidzhan (p244) The station's name is written in Hebrew; there's a star of David on the front of it, too, and a Jewish statue.
- 10 Vladivostok (p250) Restored old beauty, with detailed ceiling murals.

## Our Favourite Festivals & Events

Many travellers schedule their journey to coincide with the events that take place during the year.

- 1 Ice Lantern Festival, Hãerbin (Harbin; 5 January to 15 February; p302)
- 2 Chinese New Year/Spring Festival, Běijīng and Hãerbin (January/February; p332)
- 3 Camel Polo Winter Festival, Ulaanbaatar (mid-March; p332)
- 4 Easter (Paskha), across Russia (March/April; p332)
- 5 Victory Day, across Russia (9 May; p332)
- 6 Sabantuy, Kazan (mid-June; p169)
- 7 White Nights Arts Festival, St Petersburg (mid-June; p115)
- 8 Naadam, Ulaanbaatar (11 and 12 July; p288)
- 9 Mid-Autumn/Moon Festival, across China (September/October; p332)
- 10 December Nights Festival, Moscow (December; p140)

## Trans-Siberian Trivial Pursuit

These 'Did you knows' come courtesy of the Trans-Siberian Railway Web Encyclopaedia.

- 1 The real distance – Russian Railways calculates its Moscow–Vladivostok fare based on 9298km but the actual distance is 9288.2km.
- 2 The coldest place – between Mogocha (6906km) and Skovorodino (7306km), where temperatures can plummet to  $-62^{\circ}\text{C}$ .
- 3 The highest point (1040m) – the Yablonovy Mountain pass (6110km) between Yablono-vaya and Turgutui.
- 4 The lowest point – between Amursky Zaliv (9252km) and Ugol'naya (9253km) when the route skirts the Pacific Ocean.
- 5 The steepest descent – between Adrian-ovskaya and Slyudyanka-2 (5305km) when the railroad drops 400m.
- 6 The longest bridge – the 2616m Amur Bridge (8512km).
- 7 The longest tunnel – the 7km tunnel beneath the Amur built between 1937 and 1942 for strategic reasons and now used only by freight trains.
- 8 The longest tunnel used by passenger trains – Tarmanchukan tunnel (2km), built in 1915 and located between Arkhara (8080km) and Obluche (8190km).
- 9 The largest station – Novosibirsk built in 1939 to 1940.
- 10 Most expensive section – the 260km Circumbaikal line, which cost over R2 million per km.

chapters for other ideas of where to leave the train and how long to spend in each place.

Bear in mind that there's no such thing as a hop-on, hop-off Trans-Siberian ticket – every time you break your journey you'll have to buy a new onward ticket. Russian Railway's rules do allow passengers to break their journey once (for not more than 10 days) on any route, but the bureaucracy involved is off-putting, even to those who speak good Russian and have plenty of time on their hands.

Hence, if you are travelling from say from Moscow to Vladivostok, and plan on spending a night or two in Nizhny Novgorod and Irkutsk, you'll need three separate tickets: Moscow–Nizhny Novgorod, Nizhny Novgorod–Irkutsk, and Irkutsk–Vladivostok. The tickets will all be for a specific berth on a specific train on a specified day and can all be arranged in advance either online or via travel agencies or, once you're in Russia, at train station booking centres – see p27.

Also consider the direction in which you might travel. If you want to meet Russians, starting at Vladivostok and heading west is recommended, since far fewer foreign travellers take this route than the popular eastbound services from Moscow or westbound from Běijīng.

## THE MAIN ROUTES

For full details of the routes covered here see the route descriptions at the start of many destination chapters. For the first four days' travel from Moscow, the main Trans-Siberian, Trans-Manchurian and Trans-Mongolian services all follow the same route through the Urals and into western Siberia, over the Yenisey River and on to Irkutsk in eastern Siberia.

On the fifth day, after rounding the southern tip of Lake Baikal, the Trans-Mongolian train branches off, heading south for the Mongolian border 250km away. The Trans-Manchurian stays with the main line for 12 hours past Lake Baikal, before it also peels off, heading southeast for Zabaikalsk on the Chinese border, some 368km away.

For information on the types of trains and carriages travelling these routes, see p357. For hints on reading a Russian train timetable, see p358.

### Moscow to Vladivostok

The 1/2 *Rossiya* train is the top Moscow–Vladivostok service. If you're planning to stop off at Irkutsk, also consider using the 9/10 *Baikal*, reputed to be one of the best trains in Russia in terms of carriage standards and service.

Other good services that can be usefully included in a Moscow to Vladivostok itinerary include the 15/16 *Ural* between Moscow and Yekaterinburg; 25/26 *Sibiryak* between Moscow and Novosibirsk; 7/8 *Sibir* between Novosibirsk and Vladivostok; 55/56 *Yenisey* between Moscow and Krasnoyarsk; and 5/6 *Okean* between Khabarovsk and Vladivostok.

If you'd prefer to skip Moscow in favour of St Petersburg as the start or finish of a Trans-Siberian journey, the 71/72 *Demidovsky* between St Petersburg and Yekaterinburg is a recommended option.

If you're planning to frequently hop on and off trains and want to save some money along the way, it's a good idea to avoid the premium trains and go for the regular services, which offer *platskart* (*platskartny*; open carriage; see p359). Most of these services are perfectly acceptable and take pretty much the same travelling time point to point as the premium trains.

Russian Prolife ([www.russiaprofile.org](http://www.russiaprofile.org)) provides expert analysis of Russian politics, economics, society and culture that promises to unwrap 'the mystery inside the enigma'.

*Black Earth: A Journey Through Russia after the Fall*, by Andrew Meier, is acutely observed and elegiac. In dispatches from Chechnya, Moscow, Norilsk, Sakhalin and St Petersburg, he paints a bleak picture of the country.



**TRANS-SIBERIAN, THE MOVIE** *Simon Richmond & Mara Vorhees*

The speeding carriages of a train, packed with intriguing strangers, are an ideal environment for generating suspense. This said, it's taken a while for movie-makers to get around to featuring one of the most famous trains of all – the Trans-Siberian – in a movie. Horror-movie fans can point to the 1973 cult classic *Horror Express*, directed by Eugenio Martin and starring Peter Cushing, Christopher Lee and Telly Savalas. However, this shlocky low-budget flick, which has an alien-inhabited prehistoric fossil turning Trans-Sib passengers into zombies, was actually filmed in Madrid and features only fake railway carriages and a model train that had previously served duty in the movie *Pancho Villa*.

Brad Anderson's far superior *Trans-Siberian*, released in 2008, used real Russian rolling stock but mostly had Lithuania stand in for Russia, and Vilnius Station was dressed up to resemble the one at Irkutsk. The entertaining and exciting thriller stars Woody Harrelson and Emily Mortimer as a likeable American couple, Roy and Jessie, travelling from Běijīng to Moscow by train. Along the way, they meet up with a charming but dangerous drug-running duo and a duplicitous narcotics detective (Ben Kingsley), thus entangling themselves in a very messy drug transaction.

The suspense-filled storyline unravels at the end. The *New York Times* review claims that 'it gets sidetracked' but we'll take it a step further and call the ending a train wreck – in more ways than one. In the movie's favour, the cinematography is spectacular, giving a wonderful sense of the vastness of the landscape and the emptiness of the countryside. It is also a pretty accurate depiction of life on the train – the close quarters in the cabins, the sometimes raucous atmosphere in the dining car, the less-than-tantalising toilet. If you've ever wondered what it's like to ride the Trans-Siberian railroad, this film will give you a good idea (minus the danger, death and destruction, most likely).

Actually, there is no guarantee that you won't be embroiled in some sort of intrigue. Part of the film takes place in the tiny Siberian town of Ilansky – the very same place where Simon Richmond – co-author of this guide – once was arrested for taking photos of the old locomotive and water tower at the station.

One recurring theme in the film is the unflinching nastiness of the *provodnitsa*, the train version of a flight attendant. In this film, the *provodnitsa* ignores the Americans' simple requests (no matter how loudly they are yelled at her in English); she pounds on doors and scowls at the camera; and she always, always yells. Relax. In all our years of riding trains in Russia, most of these ladies have been patient, pleasant and particularly attentive to foreigners on their carriage. Even the cranky ones are much more passive in their aggression.

The biggest thrill of this thriller? Not to toot our horn, but Roy and Jessie use Lonely Planet! A copy of the previous edition of this guide is prominently featured, lying enticingly on the bunk in the train cabin, while the action takes place in the background. Maybe we're not in the movies yet but our book is!

**Moscow to Ulaanbaatar & Běijīng**

The more popular of the two options running directly between Moscow and Běijīng is the 3/4 Trans-Mongolian service, a Chinese train that travels via Ulaanbaatar and the only one to offer deluxe carriages (see p358) with showers.

If you're planning to stop off in Irkutsk, there's also the less fancy daily 264/263 service to/from Ulaanbaatar.

The weekly 19/20 Trans-Manchurian service is a Russian train and takes half a day longer to reach Běijīng, but in doing so it avoids the need for a Mongolian visa.

**TRAIN TICKET COSTS**

In this book we typically quote *kupeyny* (*kupe*; compartmentalised carriage) fares. Expect SV (1st-class) fares to be double this amount and *platskartny* (*platskart*; open carriage) about 40% less. Children under five travel free if



they share a berth with an adult, otherwise children under 10 pay half-fare for their own berth. On the Trans-Mongolian and Trans-Manchurian routes, kids under four travel free if they share a berth, while those under 12 pay around 75% of the full fare for their own berth.

Complicating matters is Russian Railways' policy of varying all fares according to seasons. In peak travelling seasons, for example early July to early August and around key holidays such as Easter and New Year, fares can be between 12% to 16% higher than the regular fare. During slack times of the year, such as early January to March, there are discounts on fares. On *skory poezd* (fast trains) and *firmennye poezdy* (premium trains) it's also possible to have two grades of *kupe* fare: with or without meals. We advise self-catering to putting your trust in what Russian Railways serves up.

Fares quoted in this book were collected between March and August 2008 and should be taken as a general guide only. The following table shows the cost for a *kupe* ticket:

### SAMPLE KUPE TICKET PRICES

From	To Irkutsk	To Ulaanbaatar	To Běijing	To Vladivostok
Moscow	R10,800	R12,600	R14,000	R16,000
Irkutsk	-	R4000	R10,100	R11,900
Ulaanbaatar	R4000	-	R6635	R10,400

For comparison, the following table shows the individual ticket costs and totals for those considering hopping on and off trains:

#### Itinerary 1: The Trans-Siberian route

Moscow-Vladimir	R240 <i>platskart</i>
Vladimir-Nizhny Novgorod	R400 <i>platskart</i>
Nizhny Novgorod-Yekaterinburg	R2827
Yekaterinburg-Krasnoyarsk	R3491
Krasnoyarsk-Irkutsk	R2040 <i>platskart</i>
Irkutsk-Ulan-Ude	R500 <i>platskart</i>
Ulan-Ude-Chita	R1470
Chita-Khabarovsk	R6900
Khabarovsk-Vladivostok	R2700

#### Itinerary 2: Trans-Mongolian route

Moscow-Nizhny Novgorod	R390
Nizhny Novgorod-Perm	R3570
Perm-Yekaterinburg	R1300
Yekaterinburg-Tyumen	R1068
Tyumen-Tobolsk	R710
Tobolsk-Omsk	R2145
Omsk-Tomsk	R1350
Tomsk-Krasnoyarsk	R1911
Krasnoyarsk-Irkutsk	R2040
Irkutsk-Ulaanbaatar	R4000
Ulaanbaatar-Běijing	R1382/6635 (for hard sleeper/ <i>kupe</i> )
<b>Total</b>	<b>R20,568</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>R19,866</b>

## BOOKING TICKETS

Before setting off for your Trans-Sib journey you can buy tickets online (p28) and either have the ticket delivered to your home or hotel, or pick it up at an agency or from a courier at the train station.

Bookings cannot be made any earlier than 45 days before the date of departure – if you need to book for specific dates even further out than this your only option is to secure the services of an agency or tour company – the larger ones can almost always guarantee tickets for the dates you require for which you'll pay a premium.

You'd be wise to buy well in advance over the busy summer months and holiday periods such as New Year and early May, when securing berths at short notice on certain trains can be difficult. Tickets for key trains on the busy Moscow-St Petersburg route can also be difficult to come by, although those with flexible options should be able to find something.

As you chug towards Yekaterinburg from Moscow look out the window for the Europe-Asia obelisk at the 1777km marker.

Mongolian Matters ([www.mongolianmatters.com](http://www.mongolianmatters.com)) is a blog by an Ulaanbaatar expat, commenting on important news stories in Mongolia.

At most large Russian train stations you'll be confronted by several ticket windows. All will have different operating hours and generally unhelpful, non-English-speaking staff.

The sensible option, especially if there are horrendous queues, is to avail yourself of the *servis tsentr* (service centre) found at most major stations. At these air-conditioned centres – a godsend in summer – you'll generally encounter helpful, sometimes English-speaking staff who, for a small fee (typically around R200), can book your ticket. In big cities and towns it's also usually possible to buy tickets at special offices and some travel agencies away from the station – individual chapters provide details.

Even if you're told a particular service is sold out, it still may be possible to get on the train by speaking with the chief *provodnitsa* (female carriage attendant; see p361). Tell her your destination, offer the face ticket price first, and move slowly upwards from there. You can usually come to some sort of agreement.

Tickets for suburban trains are often sold at separate windows or from an *avtomat* (automatic ticket machine). A table beside the machine tells you which price zone your destination is in.

## COSTS & MONEY

### Russia

Avoid the major cities and use the *platskartny* ('hard' class, or 3rd class) carriages of overnight trains as an alternative to hotels and it's possible – just! – to get by on US\$50 per day. However, if you visit the main cities, eat meals in restaurants and travel on *kupeyny* (2nd class) trains, US\$150 to US\$200 per day is a more realistic figure. Prices drop away from the metropolises, but not significantly, while in remote areas, such as the Russian Far East, everything can cost considerably more.

Dual pricing for sights and activities is also an issue (see the boxed text, p30). As a foreigner you'll sometimes be charged more at hotels, too, although not in Moscow or St Petersburg where hotel prices are the same for everyone. It's often fair game for taxi drivers and sometimes market sellers to try to charge foreigners more – check with locals for prices, but don't expect that knowledge to be much use unless you can bargain in Russian. You'll rarely be short-changed by staff in restaurants, cafes and bars, though.

At Russian stations some ticket windows are reserved exclusively for use by the elderly or infirm, heroes of the Great Patriotic War or members of the armed forces. Check before queuing!

### BUYING TRAIN TICKETS ONLINE

There are several websites you can go to book train tickets online including that of **RZD** ([www.rzd.ru](http://www.rzd.ru), in Russian), which has plans to launch an English-language booking service. Other Russian-language websites include **UFS** ([www.ufs-online.ru/rzhd/getNitParams.aspx](http://www.ufs-online.ru/rzhd/getNitParams.aspx)) and **Tutu** ([www.tutu.ru](http://www.tutu.ru)), which enables you to look up all train times, including those of *elektrichka* (local or suburban services) and to book airline tickets.

Sites in English, all with offices in Moscow, include the following:

- **Bilet.ru** (☎ 495-925 7571; [www.bilet.ru/eng/](http://www.bilet.ru/eng/)) Partners with **Your Train** ([www.poezda.net/en/](http://www.poezda.net/en/)), the CIS railway timetable search system.
- **Russian Rails** (☎ 916-202 6070; [www.russianrails.com](http://www.russianrails.com))
- **Trains Russia.com** (☎ in the USA 1888-263 0023, in Moscow 495-225 5012; [www.trainsrussia.com/en/travels/](http://www.trainsrussia.com/en/travels/)) This is the authorised US agent for RZD. Tickets are issued in their Moscow office and can be picked up there or delivered to any address in Moscow for US\$15, to any Moscow airport or train station for US\$30 or sent via international DHL delivery to your home address.
- **VisitRussia.com** (☎ 1800-755 3080; [www.visitrussia.com](http://www.visitrussia.com))

## HOW TO BUY & READ YOUR TICKET

When buying a ticket in Russia, you can speed up the process immeasurably by arriving at the station or travel agent prepared. If you don't speak Russian, have someone who does write down on a piece of paper the following information in Cyrillic:

- How many tickets you require
- Where to
- What class of ticket
- The preferred date of travel and time of day for departure. Use ordinary (Arabic) numerals for the day of the month and Roman numerals for the month.

Also bring your passport as you'll be asked for it so that its number and your name can be printed on your ticket. The ticket and passport will be matched up by the *provodnitsa* (female carriage attendant) before you're allowed on the train – so make sure the ticket-seller gets these details correct.

Tickets are printed by computer and come with a duplicate. Shortly after you've boarded the train the *provodnitsa* will come around and collect the tickets: sometimes she will take both copies and give you one back just before your final destination; sometimes she will leave you with the copy. It will have been ripped slightly to show it's been used. It's a good idea to hang on to this ticket, especially if you're hopping on and off trains, since it provides evidence of how long you've been in a particular place if you are stopped by police.

Sometimes tickets are also sold with separate chits for insurance in the event of a fatal accident (this is a small payment, usually less than R30); for linen; and for some or all meals. The following is a guide for deciphering the rest of what your Russian train ticket is about.

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 Train number – the lower the number, the higher the standard and the price; the best trains are under 100. Odd-numbered trains head towards Moscow; even ones head east away from the capital.</li> <li>2 Train type</li> <li>3 Departure date – day and month</li> <li>4 Departure time – always in Moscow time</li> <li>5 Carriage number and class: Л = two-bed SV, М = four-bed SV, К = <i>kupe</i>, П = <i>platskartny</i>, О = <i>obshchiy</i></li> <li>6 Supplement for class of ticket above <i>platskartny</i></li> <li>7 Cost for <i>platskartny</i> ticket</li> <li>8 Number of people travelling on ticket</li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>9 Type of passenger: полный (<i>polny</i>, adult); детский (<i>detsky</i>, child); студенческий (<i>studentchesky</i>, student)</li> <li>10 From/to</li> <li>11 Bed number – if this is blank, the <i>provodnitsa</i> will allocate a bed on boarding</li> <li>12 Passport number and name of passenger</li> <li>13 Total cost of ticket</li> <li>14 Tax and service fee</li> <li>15 Arrival date</li> <li>16 Arrival time – always Moscow time for long-distance trains</li> </ol> |
|--|--|



### ABOUT MUSEUMS (AND OTHER TOURIST ATTRACTIONS)

Much may have changed in Russia since Soviet times, but one thing remains the same: foreigners typically being charged up to 10 times more than locals at museums and other tourist attractions. With the rouble strong, the economy booming and prices soaring, this practice is a Soviet hangover we'd prefer to see scrapped.

We understand that higher foreigner fees go towards preserving works of art and cultural treasures that might otherwise receive minimal state funding. The rub is that, Moscow and St Petersburg apart, non-Russian labels, guides or catalogues in museums are fairly uncommon. In our reviews we mention if there is good English labelling at a museum. Otherwise assume that you'll need a dictionary to work out the precise details of what you're seeing, or be prepared to pay even more for a guided tour – particularly if you wish that tour to be in a language you understand.

Some major Moscow attractions, such as the Kremlin, State History Museum and St Basil's have ditched foreigner prices. All adults pay whatever the foreigners' price used to be; all students, children and pensioners pay the low price. However, in St Petersburg foreigner prices rule, even at the Mariinsky Theatre, so awash with funds that it can afford to build not one but two brand new auditoria.

A few more working practices of Russian museums to keep in mind are as follows:

- Admittance typically stops one hour before the official closing time.
- If you wish to take photos or film a video there will be a separate fee for this, typically an extra R100 for a still camera and R200 for video camera.
- Once a month many places close for a 'sanitary day', in theory to allow the place to be thoroughly cleaned; if you specially want to see a museum, call ahead to check it's open.

## China

The days are long gone when China was fantastically cheap; now costs can vary widely depending on the level of comfort expected. Living frugally by staying in dorms, travelling by bus, train or bicycle, eating from street stalls or small restaurants and refraining from buying anything means it is possible to live on less than US\$20 (Y140) per day.

Food costs remain reasonable throughout China, and it's possible to eat for as little as US\$5 to US\$10 (Y35 to Y70) a day. Transport costs can be kept low by travelling hard seat on the train or by bus, but bus ticket prices have begun to rapidly increase in line with oil price hikes. Even travel by hard-seat sleeper is very good value and doubles as a good-value hotel.

Midrange hotel doubles start at around US\$35 (Y240) and you can eat in midrange restaurants from around US\$5 (Y35). Midrange comfort can be bought in China for around US\$70 (Y480) a day.

Top-end travel in China? Five-star hotel double-room rack rates can reach US\$300 (Y2000) a night in the big cities and you can expect to pay upwards of US\$115 (Y800) for a meal at one of Běijīng's best restaurants.

## Mongolia

Accommodation and food can cost as little as US\$10 per day in Ulaanbaatar, but allow up to US\$20 per day for better accommodation options, some tastier, Western-style meals, and trips to the theatre and museums.

Elsewhere within Mongolia, travellers on organised tours spend around US\$100 per day (more for extra luxuries). Independent travellers can see the same sights and stay in midrange accommodation for around US\$80 per day. If you share the cost of a private jeep or minivan and camp

*In the Empire of Genghis Khan*, by Stanley Stewart, is a mildly entertaining and brutally honest introduction to Mongolia by an Englishman who travelled 1000 miles on horseback across Central Asia and Mongolia.

rather than stay in more expensive ger (yurt) camps, you can bring this down to about US\$25 to US\$40 per day. If you're hitching and using public transport around the countryside, allow about US\$10 to US\$15 per day.

## TRAVELLING RESPONSIBLY

By using the train to get across the largest country in the world you're already doing your bit for the environment. In the Getting to the Railheads chapter (p39) we also provide some suggestions for reaching either Russia or China with minimal use of flights.

Once in the region you'll not fail to notice that as closely as some locals live with nature, they don't always respect it. Responsible travellers will be appalled by the mess left in parts of the countryside and at how readily rubbish is chucked out of train windows. Accept that you're not going to change how people live, but that you might be able to make a small impression by your own thoughtful behaviour.

It's obvious to not litter yourself, but also try to minimise waste by avoiding excess packaging. Rather than relying on bottled water, consider using purification tablets or iodine in tap water. Otherwise, use boiled water.

Also avoid buying items made from endangered species, such as exotic furs and caviar that isn't from legal sources. Poaching is a major problem in both Russia and China; there are laws against it – punishing both the poachers and the purchasers of their goods – so always check carefully the provenance of what you plan to buy and, in doubt, don't.

In China try to avoid simply tipping – the official line usually discourages this anyway. Instead, consider donating something that national park staff, or your tour guide or driver, would appreciate, especially if you feel they have a natural interest or talent. (For example, if you're about to leave the country you could leave behind your well-thumbed bird book.) Such gifts are way beyond the procurement power of most tour guides and will help further their interest in providing a sustainable tour experience.

Support local enterprises, environmental groups and charities that are trying to improve Russia, Mongolia and China's environmental and social scorecard. A good example is the Great Baikal Trail project helping to construct a hiking trail around Lake Baikal (see p224). Other possibilities include these:

**Cross Cultural Solutions** ([www.crossculturalsolutions.org](http://www.crossculturalsolutions.org)) Runs volunteer programs in a range of social services out of Yaroslavl.

**Dersu Uzala Ecotours** ([www.ecotours.ru/english/](http://www.ecotours.ru/english/)) Works in conjunction with several major nature reserves across Russia on tours and projects.

**EcoSiberia** ([www.ecosiberia.org](http://www.ecosiberia.org)) Has information on eco-attractions, projects and tours in Siberia.

**Ger to Ger** (☎ 011-313 336; [www.gertoger.org](http://www.gertoger.org)) Mongolia's most innovative tourism concept combines hiking, sports, Mongolian language learning and visits with local families for cultural immersion.

**International Youth Cultural Exchange** ([www.icye.org](http://www.icye.org)) Offers a variety of volunteer projects, mostly in Samara.

**Language Link Russia** ([www.jobs.languagelink.ru/](http://www.jobs.languagelink.ru/)) Volunteer to work at language centres in Moscow, St Petersburg, Volgograd and Samara

**Rinky Dink Travel Mongolia** (☎ 9974 4162; [www.rinkydinktravel.com](http://www.rinkydinktravel.com)) Small Ulaanbaatar-based tour company involved in social development programs in poor neighbourhoods and which invites tourists to volunteer for its projects.

**World 4U** ([www.world4u.ru/english.html](http://www.world4u.ru/english.html)) Russian volunteer association promoting cultural, social and political awareness.

WildChina ([www.wildchina.com](http://www.wildchina.com)) organises far-flung treks around China, organised within China; it has a monthly email newsletter.

## OTHER LONELY PLANET RESOURCES

Consult [www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com) for features and blogs, plus the Thorn Tree bulletin board.

For detailed information on each of the three countries covered by this guide see *Russia*, *China* and *Mongolia*. The *Beijing*, *Moscow* and *St Petersburg* city guides are recommended for those staying in these cities for a while. The *Central Asia* guide is essential for travellers branching out along the Turkestan-Siberian route, while *Greenland & the Arctic* has the lowdown for those planning excursions in Russia's far, far north.

Incredibly handy, especially if you're travelling independently and don't speak the languages of the countries, are Lonely Planet's *Mandarin* phrasebook, *Mongolian* phrasebook and *Russian* phrasebook.

## TRAVEL LITERATURE

### Trans-Siberian

*The Big Red Train Ride*, by Eric Newby, is a classic, hilarious account of hopping on and off the *Rossiya* between Moscow and Nakhodka – it's as much a snapshot of the Soviet era as it is of life on a train.

*Through Siberia by Accident* and *Silverland*, by Dervla Murphy, are affectionate, opinionated discourses on the forgotten towns along Siberia's BAM rail route by one of the world's best travel writers.

*Journey Into the Mind's Eye*, by Lesley Blanch, is a semiautobiographical tale about the author's romantic obsession with Russia and the Trans-Siberian Railway.

*Wall to Wall: From Beijing to Berlin by Rail*, by Mary Morris, relates her personal experiences – which are not always positive – during a pre-Glasnost journey on the Trans-Mongolian route.

*The Great Railway Bazaar*, *Riding the Iron Rooster* and *Ghost Train to the Eastern Star*, all by Paul Theroux, include sections in which this erudite, opinionated traveller hauls his bags aboard the Trans-Siberian – each time he hardly seems to relish the experience.

### Russia

*Russia: A Journey to Heart of a Land and its People*, by Jonathan Dimbleby – the hefty side product of a 16,000km journey the British journalist made for a BBC documentary across the country in 2007 – is a revealing snapshot of a multifaceted country and includes large sections on the Trans-Sib route.

*Lost Cosmonaut* and *Strange Telescopes*, by Daniel Kalder, are both blackly comic and serious explorations of some of Russia's quirkiest and least-visited locations. In the former the 'antitourist' author puts Kalmykia, Tatarstan, Mary-El and Udmurtia under the microscope. In the latter Kalder goes underground in Moscow, hangs out with an exorcist and extends his travels into Siberia to meet with the religious prophet Vissarion.

*In Siberia*, by Colin Thubron, is a fascinating, frequently sombre account of the author's journey from the Urals to Magadan during post-Soviet times; it's worth comparing with his *Among the Russians*, about a journey taken in 1981 from St Petersburg to the Caucasus.

### China

*China Road*, by Rob Gifford, follows the National Public Radio correspondent as he travels Route 312 across the country from Shànghǎi to the border with Kazakhstan, expertly taking China's pulse as he goes.

*River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze*, by Peter Hessler, is full of poignant and telling episodes that occurred during the author's posting as an English teacher in the town of Fúling on the Yangzi River. Hessler perfectly

*Foreign Babes in Beijing*, by Rachel DeWoskin, is an expat view of life in modern Běijīng in which the author dishes the dirt on her life in the capital during the 1990s when she became a soap-opera star.

captures the experience of being a foreigner in today's China in his observations of the local people.

*Fried Eggs with Chopsticks*, by Polly Evans, an occasionally hilarious account of travel around this huge country, is a good companion for those long, long train or bus journeys.

## Mongolia

*Dateline Mongolia: An American Journalist in Nomads Land*, by Michael Kohn, is a memoir and travelogue written by a co-author of this guidebook. It recounts his memorable three years working as a reporter for the *Mongol Messenger*.

*Lost Country: Mongolia Revealed*, by Jasper Becker, describes the author's travels in Mongolia in the early 1990s and his attempts to uncover the secrets of the purge years that plagued Mongolia in the 1930s.

*Wild East*, by Jill Lawless, is a tightly written, very funny account of the author's experience in Mongolia, during which she spent two years editing the *UB Post*. This lightning-fast book serves as a good armchair read before visiting Mongolia.

## INTERNET RESOURCES

### Trans-Siberian Railway

**Australian Broadcasting Corporation** ([www.abc.net.au/news/specials/transsiberia/default.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/news/specials/transsiberia/default.htm)) Slickly produced blog by the ABC's Russia correspondent Emma Griffiths about her 2005 Trans-Siberian journey.

**Circumbaikal Railway** (<http://kbzd.irk.ru/Eng/index.htm>) Best website for background on the historic Circumbaikal line.

**Edrail.com** (<http://inbedwithjackanded.co.uk/edrail/table.html>) Follow Ed Grieg's 2008 rail journey from Portugal to Vietnam in words, pictures and sound. Also see p40.

**A Journey on the Trans-Siberian** ([www.trans-siberian-railway.co.uk](http://www.trans-siberian-railway.co.uk)) Clive Sampson's rail trip from the UK to China in 2006 with has plenty of inspiring photos and passion for the route.

**Man in Seat 61** ([www.seat61.com](http://www.seat61.com)) Mark Smith's amazingly comprehensive website is one of the travel information wonders of the Web. It has great up-to-date sections on the Trans-Siberian routes, plus practically any other rail service that you might need.

**Trans-Siberia.com** ([www.trans-siberia.com](http://www.trans-siberia.com)) John Pannell has some good personal accounts of the journey, photos of his Trans-Siberian trips and links to other useful sources of information.

**Trans-Siberian Railway Web Encyclopaedia** ([www.transsib.ru](http://www.transsib.ru)) It's not been fully updated for several years, but this site still has tons of useful information and a huge photo library. (There's also a German-language version at [www.trans-sib.de](http://www.trans-sib.de).)

## Russia

**CIA World Factbook** ([www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/rs.html](http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/rs.html)) Read what the US spooks have on the Russkis.

**English Russia** ([www.englishrussia.com](http://www.englishrussia.com)) Daily entertainment blog that exists, as its strap line says, 'just because something cool happens daily on 1/6th of the world's surface'.

**Moscow Times** ([www.moscowtimes.ru](http://www.moscowtimes.ru)) All the latest breaking national news, plus links to the sister paper *St Petersburg Times* and a good travel-guide section.

**Russia!** ([www.readrussia.com](http://www.readrussia.com)) There's more to Russia than ballet, Leo Tolstoy, or Maria Sharamova, as the website of this groovy quarterly magazine sets out to prove with its hip features on contemporary Russian culture.

**Russian Beyond the Headlines** ([www.rbth.ru](http://www.rbth.ru)) Wide-ranging online magazine, with interesting features, sponsored by the daily paper *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*.

## China

**China Culture Center** ([www.chinaculturecenter.org](http://www.chinaculturecenter.org)) Beijing-based outfit with tours around the capital and China plus China-related lectures and background info.

Way to Russia ([www.waytorussia.net](http://www.waytorussia.net)), written and maintained by Russian backpackers, is highly informative and on the ball. However, note that we've received complaints about buying train tickets through third parties associated with the site.



**China Daily** ([www.chinadaily.com.cn](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn)) Get with the party line at the online mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

**China National Tourist Office** ([www.cnto.org/aboutchina.asp](http://www.cnto.org/aboutchina.asp)) US site for the country's official tourism body.

**China.org.cn** ([www.china.org.cn](http://www.china.org.cn)) Sanitised info on all aspects of China and up-to-the-minute news in 10 languages, including Esperanto.

**CIA World Factbook** (<http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ch.html>) What the US intelligence service publicly knows about China.

**Human Rights in China** ([www.hrichina.org](http://www.hrichina.org)) Organisation set up in 1989 to promote human rights in China, with useful links.

**Learn Chinese with the BBC** ([www.bbc.co.uk/languages/chinese/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/languages/chinese/)) A very useful introduction to learning Mandarin Chinese, with video.

**Zhongwen: Chinese Characters and Culture** ([www.zhongwen.com](http://www.zhongwen.com)) Includes a Pinyin chat room and an online dictionary of Chinese characters.

UN in Mongolia ([www.un-mongolia.mn](http://www.un-mongolia.mn)) gives development news and has links to UN agencies.

## Mongolia

**Living in Mongolia** ([www.living-in-mongolia.com](http://www.living-in-mongolia.com)) News and information site geared towards expats living in Mongolia.

**Mongolia Expat** ([www.mongoliaexpat.com](http://www.mongoliaexpat.com)) Up-to-date website with sights and activities in contemporary Mongolia.

**Mongolia National Tourism Centre** ([www.mongoliatourism.gov.mn](http://www.mongoliatourism.gov.mn)) Includes lists of hotels, ger camps and travel agencies.

**The Mongol Society** ([www.mongoliasociety.org](http://www.mongoliasociety.org)) An excellent resource on news and events, with lots of links.

**Mongolia Today** ([www.mongoliatoday.com](http://www.mongoliatoday.com)) A colourful online magazine covering all aspects of Mongolian culture.

**Mongoluls.net** ([www.mongoluls.net](http://www.mongoluls.net)) Cultural articles, links and handy language tutorial.

**Shaggy Yak** ([www.shaggyyak.com](http://www.shaggyyak.com)) A great starting point, with handy tips on visas, planning and logistics for a trip to Mongolia.

# Itineraries

## CLASSIC ROUTES

### THE TRANS-SIBERIAN ROUTE **One to Four Weeks / Vladivostok to Moscow**

Although this route can be done in either direction, we suggest going against the general flow by starting in **Vladivostok** (p250), at the far eastern end of Russia, so you can finish up with a grand party in either **Moscow** (p121) or, better yet, **St Petersburg** (p102).

Vladivostok, situated on a stunning natural harbour, merits a couple of days, and it's also worth taking a break at **Khabarovsk** (p245), a lively city on the banks of the Amur River that's an overnight hop to the west. Save a couple of days for **Ulan-Ude** (p234), a fascinating city where Russian and Buryat cultures mingle, and from where you can venture into the steppes to visit Russia's principal Buddhist monastery, **Ivolginsky Datsan** (p238). Just west of Ulan-Ude the railway hugs the southern shores of magnificent **Lake Baikal** (p219). Allow at least four days to see the lake, visit the equally lovely **Olkhon Island** (p223) and spend time in **Irkutsk** (p211), one of the Trans-Siberian's most important rail junctions.

**Krasnoyarsk** (p206), on the Yenisey River, affords the opportunity for scenic cruises along one of Siberia's most pleasant waterways. Crossing the Urals into European Russia, schedule a stop in **Yekaterinburg** (p179), a bustling historic city stocked with interesting museums and sites connected to the murder of the last tsar and his family. Finally, pause in the tranquil Golden Ring towns of **Vladimir** (p158) and/or **Suzdal** (p160), both packed with onion-domed churches, and a million miles away from the pace of the megacities to come.



This 9288km journey can be done nonstop in a week, but we recommend hopping on and off the train and making more of an adventure of it. Spend time seeing the sights in St Petersburg, Moscow and along the route, and you could stretch this trip to a month.

**THE TRANS-MONGOLIAN ROUTE****One Week / Moscow to Běijing**

This highly popular journey between **Moscow** (p121) and **Běijing** (p304) goes via the Mongolian capital of **Ulaanbaatar** (p280), allowing you to compare and contrast the three countries' cultures and people.

Get creative by breaking away from the regular Trans-Mongolian route. Take a boat from **Nizhny Novgorod** (p163) along the mighty Volga River to the charming artists' town of **Gorodets** (p168). From Nizhny Novgorod, there's a choice of ways to go: either the regular route to the industrial hub of **Perm** (p172) from where it's possible to take a trip to see the remains of a Gulag camp or an ice cave; or the southern route via the Tatarstan capital of **Kazan** (p168), with its World Heritage-listed kremlin.

Branch off from pleasant **Tyumen** (p186) in favour of the atmospheric old Siberian town of **Tobolsk** (p189), then return to the Trans-Sib route at the appealing city of **Omsk** (p192). A direct train from here will allow you to bypass Novosibirsk and head straight to **Tomsk** (p199), a Siberian gem packed with gorgeous wooden architecture. **Krasnoyarsk** (p206) with river cruises and fine theatres is the next logical overnight stop, from where you can push on to Irkutsk and Lake Baikal. Stop in either the southern lakeside town of **Port Baikal** (p223) or **Slyudyanka** (p225), both of which offer a trip along the **Circumbaikal Railway** (p226).

Crossing into Mongolia will seem to take forever. Reward yourself by alighting at Ulaanbaatar and taking time to explore the beautiful surrounding countryside, perhaps staying at a ger (yurt) camp in the **Gorkhi-Terelj National Park** (p292). Two more nights on the train and you'll finally reach China's fascinating capital.

**Trains linking Moscow and Běijing run just once a week, taking just under seven days for the total 7865km journey. By hopping on and off other trains you can make up your own itinerary, and so fully explore the three countries this route passes through.**



## ROUTES LESS TRAVELLED

### OFF THE BEATEN SIBERIAN TRACK

One Week

The 3400km Baikal-Amur Mainline (Baikalo-Amurskaya Magistral, or BAM) travels through some of the most rugged and unforgiving Siberian landscapes. The line officially starts in the drab town of **Tayshet** (p260), but the closest big city, **Krasnoyarsk** (p206), has an airport if you wish to skip all points further west.

At **Bratsk** (p261) the train crosses a 1km-long dam. The town also has an excellent open-air ethnographic museum where you can see many of the traditional Siberian buildings rescued when the dam was built. Pleasant **Ust-Kut** (p264) can be used as a base for hydrofoil trips up and down the Lena River. If you're short on time, push on to **Severobaikalsk** (p265), on the northern tip of Lake Baikal. This is the best base for exploring this relatively unvisited end of the lake and it also has a small BAM museum.

The most technically difficult section of the BAM to construct comes en route to **Tynda** (p270), where the line climbs over and burrows through mountains, the longest tunnel being 15.34km at **Severomuysk** (p260). Home of the BAM construction company's headquarters, Tynda is a must-stop for its BAM museum and good *banya* (hot bath). Having cleaned up, continue working your way east to the St Petersburg-styled **Komsomolsk-na-Amure** (p271), the largest and most pleasant city on the line and a great place to ponder the sacrifices and achievements made by hardy Soviet pioneers. Some 500km further east the BAM terminates at the naval base of **Sovetskaya Gavan** (p273), from where you can pick up a train that doubles back along the line to bring you to **Vladivostok** (p250).

Rail enthusiasts and adventurous travellers will not want to miss this alternative Trans-Siberian journey which, from Krasnoyarsk to Vladivostok, covers 5500km and takes at least six days without overnight stops. Begin in Moscow and you'll add on an extra 4098km and four days on the train.



## THE BĚIJĪNG LOOP

One to Four Weeks / Běijīng to Běijīng

You will want to schedule plenty of time in historic, dynamic **Běijīng** (p304) either at the start or end of the trip. A day each is needed to tick off the Forbidden City and Tiananmen Square, the Great Wall and the Summer Palace.

An excellent overnight service connects the capital with **Hǎerbīn** (Harbin; p299), famous for its ice sculptures during its midwinter Ice Lantern Festival. Russians came here at the end of the 19th century to build the railway and handsome architectural evidence of their stay lies at the city's heart close to the Songhua River. Take a couple of days to enjoy Hǎerbīn's cosmopolitan atmosphere and visit the nearby **Siberian Tiger Park** (p300).

The Chinese–Russian border lies an overnight train ride away at **Mǎnzhōulǐ** (p297); if you're not on one of the weekly Trans-Manchurian services through to Moscow, it's a simple process of hopping on a bus across to **Zabaikalsk** (p295) on the Russian side where you can reconnect with trains through to **Chita** (p239). That pleasant city is a great base for exploring a relatively unvisited area of Siberia where you'll discover a couple of beautiful Buddhist monasteries and a holy mountain at **Alkhanay** (p243). From **Ulan-Ude** (p234) you could immediately branch down towards Mongolia, but since you've come this far it would be a great shame not to first venture further west to see **Lake Baikal** (p219). Apart from Ulan-Ude, possible bases for exploring the lake include **Slyudyanka** (p225), **Irkutsk** (p211), **Listvyanka** (p220) and **Olkhon Island** (p223).

**Ulaanbaatar** (p280) is certainly worth at least a couple of days. Its highlight is the lively and colourful Gandan Khiid monastery. From Ulaanbaatar, it's a two-night journey back to Běijīng through the Gobi Desert.

Arrange your Russian visa at home before starting out and also get a double-entry visa for China. The 6148km journey can be done in a week, but you'll want to schedule up to a month to get the most out of the trip.



# Getting to the Railheads

Green was the last word on anyone's lips when, a century and a half ago, dreams of building a railroad across Siberia began to coalesce into reality. And yet today, the Trans-Siberian Railway and its various tributaries are an integral option for travellers seeking to reduce the environmental impact of a journey between Europe and Asia or vice versa. As well as enjoy one of travel's most fascinating experiences.

Rather than flying to Moscow or Běijīng to start your journey, pause to consider the benefits of overland travel to the railheads. Sure, it takes more time and costs more money, but it does give you the chance to check out many interesting places en route and interact with locals – all up, far more fun than being squashed up for hours on a cheapo flight. International trains and buses (see p350) are plentiful, and as the carbon emissions comparison table shows (see below) it's possible in some cases to make more than a 50% cut in your environmental footprint by using them.

The following suggested routes can all be combined with a Trans-Siberian, Trans-Mongolian or Trans-Manchurian rail journey. It's time to get off the plane and get on the train!

## THE UK & CONTINENTAL EUROPE

There are no direct trains from the UK to Russia. The most straightforward route you can take is on the **Eurostar** ([www.eurostar.com](http://www.eurostar.com)) to Brussels, and then a two-night direct train to Moscow via Berlin, Warsaw and Minsk (Belarus). The total cost can be as low as UK£150 one way.

There are many possible routes through Central Europe and Northern Europe, including Scandinavia. For example, from Moscow and St Petersburg there are regular services to Amsterdam, Berlin, Budapest, Helsinki, Paris, Prague, Vienna, Vilnius and Warsaw; see p148 for Moscow, and p120 for St Petersburg details.

Crossing the Poland-Belarus border at Brest takes several tedious hours while the wheels are changed for the broader Russian track. All foreigners visiting Belarus need a visa, including those transiting by train – sort this out before arriving in Belarus. To avoid this hassle consider taking the train to St Petersburg from Vilnius in Lithuania, which runs several times a week via Latvia. There are daily connections between Warsaw and Vilnius.

Read up on Marc and Patricia's *Around The World Overland Adventure*, including a Trans-Siberian leg, at their blog on [www.travelpod.com/travel-blog/marc-patty/marc\\_patty/tpod.html](http://www.travelpod.com/travel-blog/marc-patty/marc_patty/tpod.html).

### CARBON EMISSIONS COMPARISON TABLE

Journey	Transport	Carbon emissions (tonnes)	Travel time
London–St Petersburg (2315km)	Train	0.139	2 days
	Flight	0.3	3½hr
London–Moscow (3097km)	Train	0.186	2 days
	Flight	0.359	3½hr
London–Irkutsk (8282km)	Train	0.499	5½ days
	Flight	0.75	8½hr
London–Vladivostok (12,386km)	Train	0.773	8½ days
	Flight	0.983	10½hr

Calculations made on [www.carbonfootprint.com](http://www.carbonfootprint.com).

**AN UNEXPECTED JOURNEY ON THE LOVE TRAIN** *Ed Greig*

In 2004 somewhere between Běijīng and Moscow, a small paragraph in my Lonely Planet caught my eye. It revealed that while the Trans-Mongolian, my temporary home, was undoubtedly a long train journey, the longest of them all stretched from Portugal to Vietnam, covering a total of 17,852km. The idea of adding 10,000km either side of my current odyssey seemed ridiculous, and I laughed heartily at the thought that there would be anyone out there foolish enough to attempt it.

Four years later I was standing on the platform of a small station in the town of Villa Real de Santa Antonio, in southern Portugal. My goal, after crossing 13 countries, was Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam, which I explained to the station master, using expansive gestures and my phrasebook Portuguese. He let out a familiar hearty laugh. To add to the complications of three months of train travel, I planned to interview as many of my fellow passengers as possible, to chart my journey from some other perspectives. On the first train, which I was certain would be empty, I was lucky enough to find Elders Nelson and Croshaw, Mormon missionaries spreading the word of the Prophet to the Algarve. With one interview safely on tape I continued up through Europe, spending one or two nights in each city until I reached Warsaw.

From Poland I took a detour to St Petersburg, through Vilnius, avoiding Belarus. Up to this point I had recorded my journey in a professional and objective manner, but then the love train pulled, unscheduled, into life's station, in the form of the lovely Natasha. She came with me as far as Moscow but we vowed to stay in touch. On through Russia, stopping this time at all those places that I'd only glimpsed on the previous trip, finally getting to take a dip in the icy waters of Baikal. Then wild horses, a Bird's Nest, an Oriental Pearl, a Dragon's Bay and the stories of many passengers carried me finally to the platform at Ho Chi Minh City Station.

As I hadn't taken the most direct route, my total distance covered was 21,477km) over a period of three months on 42 different trains for around UK£500 in train tickets, half of which was for a 22-day Eurail pass. Such a journey might not be for everyone and requires a fair amount of planning. However, if you are tempted to follow in my tracks, my best advice is don't rush from sight to sight: leave room for the unexpected because, as I found in St Petersburg, this might well be the best bit.

For European rail timetables check [www.railfaneurope.net](http://www.railfaneurope.net), which provides a central link to all of Europe's national railways. Also see [www.seat61.com/Russia.htm](http://www.seat61.com/Russia.htm), an excellent resource for planning a Europe to Russia train journey, as well as **Way To Russia** ([www.waytorussia.net/Transport/International/Bus.html](http://www.waytorussia.net/Transport/International/Bus.html)), which includes ideas on using the inter-Europe bus routes of **Eurolines** ([www.eurolines.com](http://www.eurolines.com)).

**ASIA**

Ferries from Japan and Korea to Vladivostok (see p250) make an overland journey from the Russian Far East to Europe a sinch (albeit a lengthy sinch). Likewise there are several regular ferry connections between Japan or Korea with various ports in China, including Shànghǎi and Tiānjīn, from where you can make the fastest intercity rail journey in the world to Běijīng, the start or terminus of the Trans-Manchurian and Trans-Mongolian routes.

Běijīng is connected with Hong Kong every second day and with Hanoi, Vietnam by two weekly trains. From Hanoi there are many trains onwards to Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon). A rail journey from London to Saigon will take you around two weeks; again, for details, of how to do it, consult the **Man in Seat 61** ([www.seat61.com/Vietnam.htm](http://www.seat61.com/Vietnam.htm)).

Alternative overland approaches to and from Russia and China through Asia are numerous since the continent is threaded with rail networks. Where these peter out, there's almost always bus connections – the route

The emissions that would be generated by taking a (nonexistent) bus from London to Vladivostok (1.104 tonnes) are actually more polluting than a flight – take note, Trans-Siberian drivers!



you take is pretty much only limited by your time, budget and occasional security concerns.

## THE USA & AUSTRALIA

If travelling from the USA, unless you find a berth on a yacht (cruise ships can be as polluting as aircraft) you'll need to fly to Europe or Asia and travel overland from there. To minimise your environmental impact, consider taking a train to the east or west coast before flying out.

As for Australia, Tony and Maureen Wheeler hitched a ride on a yacht between Timor and Darwin in 1972, thus capping off their London to Australia overland journey. Sadly, due to unrest in East Timor, this trans-continental hop is currently pretty much dead in the water.

Consider overlanding to Darwin from where it's possible to make a 1¼-hour flight on **Air North** ([www.airnorth.com.au](http://www.airnorth.com.au)) to Dili, East Timor. From there, hopping by boat and bus through Indonesia to the Asian mainland is a tried-and-true route.

For more options from Australia, see [www.seat61.com/Australia-overland.htm](http://www.seat61.com/Australia-overland.htm).

For a story of travelling overland from London to Thailand, using the Trans-Mongolian route, see [www.guardian.co.uk/travel/2006/oct/25/travelnews.travelsevironmentalimpact.environment](http://www.guardian.co.uk/travel/2006/oct/25/travelnews.travelsevironmentalimpact.environment)

# The Authors



## SIMON RICHMOND

**Coordinating Author, St Petersburg**

After studying Russian history and politics at university, Simon's first visit to the country was in 1994 when he wandered goggle eyed around St Petersburg, and peeked at Lenin's mummified corpse in Red Square. He's since traversed the country on the Trans-Siberian, Trans-Mongolian and Trans-Manchurian lines as well as parts of the BAM and Turk-Sib lines. An award-winning writer and photographer, Simon has written about Russia for several publications including the Russian edition of *Newsweek*. He's the co-author of both past editions of Lonely Planet's *Trans-Siberian Railway* as well as the last three editions of *Russia*. Catch him online at [www.simonrichmond.com](http://www.simonrichmond.com).



## MARC BENNETTS

**Yekaterinburg to Krasnoyarsk**

Initially enticed to St Petersburg by the works of Gogol and Dostoevsky, Marc later moved to Moscow, where he has lived since 1998. During that time he has followed the fortunes of Russian football, and in 2008 his book *Football Dynamo – Modern Russia and the People's Game* – was released. He has also written about Russia for a number of guides and magazines. Marc currently works for a Russian news agency and is researching his second book – to be either a vampire novel set in Siberia or a look at modern Russian–British relations.



## MARC DI DUCA **Krasnoyarsk to Lake Baikal, Lake Baikal to Vladivostok, Tayshet to Sovetskaya Gavan via BAM**

Born a mile from the Stockton-to-Darlington Railway (the first in the world), Marc has a natural affinity with ribbons of steel. He's been riding the ex-USSR's rails since the late-1990s when a trip from Kiev to Crimea took him through the endless sunflower fields of Ukraine. Thousands of miles later, Marc still loves the ceremony of Russian Railways – buying food for the trip, the *provodnitsa* – and keeps returning for more. Marc has worked on several Ukraine and Russia-related titles, most recently Lonely Planet's *Russia*. He can usually be found in Sandwich, Kent, where he lives with his Kievite wife, Tanya.

### LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

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## MICHAEL KOHN

### Ulan-Ude to Běijing via Mongolia, Chita to Běijing via Hāěrbin, Běijing

Michael first experienced the Trans-Sib in 1997 when he took the train from Běijing to Ulaanbaatar in the dead of winter where he had a three-year stint as the editor of the *Mongol Messenger*. Over the years since, he has travelled to every corner of the country and even made the very random train journey from Choibalsan to the Russian border. Michael has also worked for a variety of news outlets in Mongolia, including the BBC, Associated Press and the *New York Times*. He has worked on a dozen other Lonely Planet titles, including *China*, *Mongolia* and *Russia*. Michael is online at [www.michaelkohn.us](http://www.michaelkohn.us).



## LEONID RAGOZIN

### Moscow to Yekaterinburg, Yekaterinburg to Krasnoyarsk

Leonid devoted himself to beach dynamics when he studied geology at Moscow State University. For want of nice beaches in Russia, he helped gold prospectors in Siberia and sold InterRail tickets and Lonely Planet books to Russians before embarking on a journalist career. After eight years with the BBC, he was poached by Russian *Newsweek*. He has coerced his superiors into sending him to far-flung destinations. If you see a Russian boarding a Bolivian Air Force 1 plane, searching for Circassians in Kosovo or celebrating St Patrick's Day in Belfast with ex-militants, it's probably him.



## ROBERT REID

### Lake Baikal to Vladivostok, Tayshet to Sovetskaya Gavan via BAM

Raised in Oklahoma, Robert ([www.reidonttravel.com](http://www.reidonttravel.com)) eventually turned from *Richie Rich* comics to Dostoevsky and his subsequent Russian studies got him to spend the 'first summer of Russia' (1992) in Moscow and St Petersburg. His favourite parts of Russia tend to be further east, though – the little forgotten towns found on the BAM and way east of Lake Baikal. He lives in Brooklyn, New York.



## MARA VORHEES

### Moscow, Moscow to Yekaterinburg

Mara has been travelling to Russia since the days of the Cold War. She spent the first half of the 1990s learning Russian before working on a foreign-aid project in the Urals. She has ridden the Trans-Siberian, cruised the Volga River, circled the Golden Ring and mastered the Moscow metro. Her stories about Moscow have appeared in *National Geographic Traveler*, among others. She is the author of Lonely Planet's *Moscow* and *St Petersburg* city guides. When not in Russia, she lives in Somerville, Massachusetts with her husband and cat. Check out her adventures on [www.maravorhees.com](http://www.maravorhees.com).

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