FOREWORD

Hello; we are an accredited travel agency based in Melbourne and we have been specialising in the trans-Siberian railway for almost 20 years. If you are planning a trip on this iconic journey then you might already know that many high street travel agents are hazy at best on this destination, and at worst completely ignorant about it, so we book passengers onto this trip from all over Australia, New Zealand and beyond.

We decided to write this guide to fill this knowledge gap and dispel some of the many myths and mis-understandings about the trip. These are all the answers to the questions that we have been asked over the years plus some useful feedback from past travellers. If you have more questions that are not answered here then by all means call us on 1300 654 861 for a chat. You’ll find full details on how to book on pages 30 of this guide.
“Without a doubt the journey was exciting and went as planned. All the arrangements in so far as being met and placed on the next leg was carried out without a problem. It was a wonderful journey and I enjoyed every bit of it except if I never see another birch tree in my life it will still be too early. Thank you very much for putting it all together especially given the time frame I gave you to work with. Please be assured if I can refer people on to you for this experience I will.”

Ray Ward
Perth

What is the Trans-Siberian Railway?

As you have made the effort to download this article then presumably you know this but some people do not, so it may be worth repeating: the Trans-Siberian is not a train; it is a railway line. Not just any railway line mind. At 9286km, the Moscow to Vladivostok route remains the longest rail journey in the world, taking 8 days to complete, and running through 11 time-zones. The line was built at the end of the 19th Century to link the Russian capital of St Petersburg with the city of Vladivostok - its most isolated outpost.
The more popular trip, the Trans-Mongolian route via Ulaanbaatar, opened as one of the first Five-Year-Plan projects of the new USSR, in 1927. This reduced the Moscow-Beijing distance from 9001km to 7865km, and trimmed nearly 36 hours off the previous journey-time.

So it’s incorrect to talk about the “Trans-Siberian” as if it’s one train – it’s not. There are multiple trains which run along these routes – some part of the way, some all the way. By combining them it’s possible to make up routes that enable you to stop and see things along the way.

This guide is for people who wish to travel on the normal trains operated by the national rail companies of Russia, Mongolia and China.

Private Trans-Siberian trains:

In the last five years at least three foreign companies have established tailor made itineraries using private trains. The most well known of these is the Golden Eagle. These trains offer a ‘cruise on wheels’ itinerary between Moscow and Vladivostok and Moscow and Ulaanbaatar (with onward connections to Beijing). A much more luxurious option with cabins that offer far more facilities than the normal trains including, en suite bathrooms. If you would like to know more about these trains then you can check out our website for:

The Golden Eagle private train and the Tzars Gold Private train.
In WW2 Stalin had an idea to invade Japan – by tunnel. He gave orders to build tunnels for troop-trains from the Russian mainland, via Sakhalin Island, to Japan. It’s estimated over 30,000 men – mostly convict labour – died on the project, which never got further than 8km. On the day Stalin died the workers killed their guards and escaped.

Where does the trans-Siberian go?

For rail purists the trans-Siberian railway is between Moscow and Vladivostok but that route misses out Mongolia, which for many people is a must see. Actually Russian Railways (and they should know) defines the trans-Siberian route as the track between the cities of Ekaterinburg and Ulan Uday. The bulk of our itineraries cover the trans-Mongolian route between Beijing and Moscow and St Petersburg.

Even if you don’t stop at all, it takes a week to complete the route – the train never halts for longer than 20 minutes en-route (except at the Chinese border to adjust the wheels to Chinese-gauge rails). But of course – you will want to stop. Especially because the train-route takes you through astounding destinations that are almost entirely unserved by any international flights.
BEIJING

The starting point (or finishing point if you start in the west of course) for the trans-Mongolian adventure. Beijing, is to be frank, not to everyone’s taste; “very hot, 40 deg. smog, noise, 20 million people, no trees/shade/breeze/ seats” is an example of some feedback received lately from a client. Highlights include Tiananmen Square, the Forbidden City, Mao’s mausoleum (why not visit this at the start of your trip and complete your ‘stuffed communist dictator tour’ Lenin in Moscow?), the Hutong district, the Great Hall of the People, the summer palace and, of course, the great wall (we recommend the Mutianyu section of the wall over the more touristic Badaling part).

The train to Ulaanbaatar departs Beijing central station early (usually 7.30am or thereabouts). Our standard itineraries include the night before in the Howard Johnson Paragon Hotel which is walking distance from the station. It is at this hotel that your tickets will be delivered to you (after you have checked in). We can of course book extra nights for a longer stay in Beijing. Note that this first section of the trip from Beijing to Mongolia is particularly attractive.

MONGOLIA AND ULAANBAATAR

Mongolia was once the centre of the largest land empire in history under the leadership of Ghengis Khan. Nowadays Mongolia is a very poor landlocked country sandwiched between two super powers. Relations with China, whilst better than they used to be, are always affected by China's suppression of the Mongolians in inner (i.e. Chinese) Mongolia and this may account for the absurdly inadequate rail schedule between Beijing and Ulaanbaatar. But it has to be said that Ulaanbaatar is not a pretty city with its main attraction being the Gandan Monastery. The real highlight of our Mongolian stopovers is the Ger camp experience.
Ulaanbaatar is an interesting example of what the Soviet Union did for and to its neighbours – but it’s not the the real Mongolia. And no city or town would ever be the “real Mongolia”, because towns and cities are alien to Mongolian culture anyhow.

Elstei is a tour-lodge that offers the chance to spend some time in the Mongolian countryside, go riding with some nomads (earning extra cash by teaching their traditional skills as instructors), go walking in the huge open countryside, and live in a Mongolian ger tent whilst still having a civilized toilet and shower facility available in a special block a minute or two’s walk away. (When we mention that an authentic nomad stay would mean no kind of toilets or showers at all, this compromise miraculously doesn’t seem so terrible after all). The tour-lodge is entirely Mongolian run and provides fairly-salaried employment for quite a number of local people. The meals on offer are cooked by local staff, and always include a traditional Mongolian dish – but keep in mind that this would usually be mutton in some shape or form, because that’s what Mongolians like to eat. In parallel with the Mongolian food, there is always a “European-type” meal on offer, OR a meal from another cuisine in Asia (often Indian, since an expat Indian chef sometimes works at the kitchens when he is available). There is a small but friendly bar offering a variety of drinks – Mongolian local beer, or European wines, beers or other drinks too. There are frequent evening performances after supper – often of Mongolian traditional music, song or dance, or sometimes Mongolian contortionists (a long-established Mongolian tradition that goes back many centuries).

In a world where travel is increasingly packaged-up sets of clichés, Elstei defies this kind of cliché by offering the interests and pastimes of a complete society, without any “highlights”, or “boxes to tick”. Sometimes we find it hard to explain why we think it is so good, but we hope you’ll see roughly what we are offering here. Yes, it is a “softened-off” version of life on the Steppes – that’s why it is called a Ger Lodge, and no-one is pretending it is exactly as nomads live (we do offer an option that’s much closer to the real life of nomads, if you prefer to take it) – but Elstei offers many things which are authentically Mongolian (riding, walking, music and dance) within an infrastructure that’s not hard to tolerate, and remains fun and pleasant.
The railway tracks of the Trans Siberian route cut right across the vastness of Russia to Mongolia and almost at the border is the city of Ulan-Uday. Again, not a conventional holiday destination, but a fascinating glimpse of a unique community that falls somewhere between Russian and Mongolian. In fact Ulan Uday is the capital of the semi-independent republic of Buryatia with the inhabitants having much more in common with Mongolia than Russia. Highlights of this stay include visiting the Old Believers, a religious sect that split from the main Russian Orthodox Church in the 17th century over doctrinal differences. They can be called “Russia’s Amish”, and many of them likewise don’t seek contact with those outside their communities.

Buddhism has historically been the main religion in Buryatia – the Ivolginsk Lamasery is regarded as the most learned of teaching centres in Russia, and monks come from abroad to study. The Atsagatsky Monastery produced Buryatia’s most famous son – Atsav Dorjiev, the man who might have made Russia a Buddhist nation, had not Communism come along at the identical moment. The monasteries, and trips to Baikal are the main attraction – the city is largely grimy, but you shouldn’t miss the Largest Head Of Lenin In The World!
IRKUTSK AND LAKE BAIKAL

Main city of eastern Siberia, Irkutsk is where virtually all trans-Siberian travellers stop off for a few days. The city itself is interesting enough with a small old town area and a significance in 19th century history most notably as the exile destination for the aristocrats who rebelled against the Tsar in 1825 - the "decemberists". But the main reason to stop is the proximity to Lake Baikal, the world’s largest freshwater lake. Our set itineraries include 2 nights at Listvyanka village the nearest Baikal-side community to Irkutsk – now only an hour away along a good road (it used to take two hours when we first went, just 17 years ago). Originally a C19th fishing village, Listyanka has moved-on to become a visitor centre for “townies” visiting Lake Baikal (although a small amount of commercial fishing and salvage still operates here). A large number of the traditional wooden izba village houses still survive in the village (which is really almost a town now) – there are now some modern-style shops and a rather incongruous modern glass atrium at the quayside.

We offer a range of free choice activities here including snow mobiles and dog sleds in the winter and hiking and lake activities in the summer.
**EKATERINBURG**

**Ekaterinburg** has become one of our most popular stops (see our trip the Super Trans-Siberian featuring stops in Beijing, Ulaanbaatar, Irkutsk/Lake Baikal, Ekaterinburg, Moscow and St Petersburg). One reason for its popularity is logistical. Many trans-Siberian itineraries involve a long (4 nights) trip between Irkutsk and Moscow but Ekaterinburg sits virtually in the middle ensuring an even spacing out of the long distance train journeys. But that is by no means its only virtue. Ekaterinburg has a rich history as the gateway city to Siberia. Essentially it sits on the border of Europe and Asia and indeed you can visit the official marker and personally straddle two continents if that’s your thing (see picture right). We offer a range of free choice activities at Ekaterinburg including skiing, ice fishing and dog sledding in the winter and hiking in the summer. Or if you prefer you can visit the Romanov graves any time of the year as Ekaterinburg was the location where the Tsar’s family were murdered after the revolution.

*In 1976 the Soviet government became concerned that the Apatiev House in Ekaterinburg, scene of the murder of the Tsar and his family, had become a focus of pro-royalist dissent. They ordered the local communist mayor to have the house bulldozed and he loyally obliged. His name was Boris Yeltsin and his loyalty to the communists led to his promotion to head of the party in Moscow.*
The city of Moscow gradually grew around the Moscow Kremlin, beginning in the 14th century. It was the capital of Great Russia, also known as Muscovy, from 1340 to 1712, the capital of the Soviet Union from 1922 to 1991, and since 1991 of the Russian Federation. Of course it was displaced by Peter's capital to the north for just over 200 years until 1918 when for strategic reasons during world war One it was shifted to Moscow.

Moscow has remained Russia's capital ever since (rather to the annoyance of St Petersburgers, with whom there is an ongoing good-natured rivalry on this matter. And in fact on most other matters too, from “where the purest form of Russian is spoken” through to football). Russia's famous president Vladimir Putin is from St Petersburg and there have been occasional hints that he would like to move the capital once again to St Petersburg.

Highlights for tourists in Moscow include (of course) Red Square, the Kremlin, Lenin's Mausoleum, St Basils cathedral, the markets at Arbat Street and Izmailovsky Park, the opera, ballet, Pushkin museum.....and much more more. Even getting around Moscow is a treat as many of the metro stations are ornate 'palaces of the people'. Oh and you can go to Gorky Park if you want but most Russians have never heard of the film and think its a bit strange that you would want to go although it has a rather pleasant amusement ground.
St Petersburg was originally known as Petrograd was built from 1703 as Europe’s first purpose built capital. It was the brainchild of Peter the Great (hence the city’s name) and for 200 years was the capital of an empire that spanned two continents. In fact it was the challenge of communicating with this vast empire that led to the building of the original trans-Siberian rail line from St Petersburg to Vladivostok at the end of the 19th century.

Of course for 70 years St Petersburg was known as Leningrad (and its airport code is still LED) but with the fall of communism in 1990 the inhabitants quickly voted for the restoration of its traditional name. Your ‘must sees’ here include the Winter Palace, the Hermitage museum (free admission on first Thursday of every month), the Peter and Paul fortress, the Decemberist Square, Nevsky Prospekt etc.

Tsarina Catherine The Great was Russia’s most famous female ruler. But her title was “Tsaritsa”, not “tsarina” (a long-running mistake in English) and she wasn’t Russian, she was German and her name wasn’t Catherine, but Sophie. Apart from that it’s right.
When to go?

The trains operate all year round. As they are normal rail services aimed at the local population their timetables are unrelated to the weather. So you can travel at anytime. It’s important to note that summer in Siberia and Mongolia can be very hot indeed. Siberia is very hot during its summer (June – September). Temperatures recently have reached 38°C and forest fires are becoming a regular problem. In the summer of 2010 Russia was wracked by an intense heat-wave and over 30 000 died from heat related accidents - mainly alcohol affected drownings! In contrast the winter (November-March) temperatures can get down to -40°C!

As far as tourists go the most popular time to travel is during the northern summer and you will find more westerners on the train during those months than any other time.

But we also get many bookings from people who travel in the winter and for Australians needing to travel during our summer holidays travelling in December and January is the only option. Don’t be put off by the Russian weather; we think this is a great time to travel also. Trains and hotels in Russia are heated and the snow laden countryside is nice to look at from a warm train carriage or whilst rugged up. And winter provides the opportunity for snowmobile trips, ice fishing and dog sledding (see picture from one of our recent passengers below) that will stand out.
As a quick rule of thumb here is a chart showing the average weather for Irkutsk, main city of eastern Siberia and an almost obligatory stopover point for any trans-Siberian traveller.

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"We survived the Trans Mongolian in winter! What a great experience! Thanks for all your help. Actually winter was a fascinating time to travel and it didn’t matter about the cold and snow. “

Andrew Kay
Melbourne.

How safe is it?

These destinations overall are reasonably safe. Petty theft will be your major danger in Russia, Mongolia and China. If you leave your wallet, camera or other valuables unattended on any train in Australia you would anticipate a high likelihood of it being stolen and of course the same applies on the trans-Siberian. If you leave your compartment unattended we recommend you take your money, passport and valuables with you. Train stations in particular attract thieves and pickpockets all over the world. And be careful not to leave your baggage unattended. As well risking theft you might also cause a bomb scare in Putin’s Russia.

Russia definitely has a serious problem with organised crime; the Russian Mafia, but they will be completely uninterested in the comings and goings of ordinary tourists and the only contact you might have with them is to watch the expensive German cars with tinted windows zoom through the streets of Moscow and St Petersburg.

As regards street crime the same rules apply as for any other destination – avoid unlit streets at night and in fact try to avoid much walking at night apart from busy central areas. And don’t play the natural victim by counting out all your money in public or being flashy with your money.
It is amazing how many people behave in a way that they wouldn’t dream of at home.

Women will not find travelling alone any more challenging than men. Many women and families travel on trains especially in Russia. Women are generally treated with a great deal of respect in Russia and it is usual for men to give up seats on the train or hold doors open for women. Local women may expect this of western male travellers as well. In fact it is more likely that single male travellers will occasionally find themselves the attention of unwanted advances from assertive ‘professional’ ladies. Beware the occasional ‘wouldn’t you like to treat your waitress to a little drink...You are a very handsome man...’ scam in which you find that in order for her to sit with you, the boss has to be bought a drink to buy him off and then once the bill arrives it appears you have bought many, many drinks for many, many people!
Past passenger tip:

*Oh and on a side note, dodgy Russian cops operate on the train as well, asking you for your passport when there is no need for it. You can definitely tell them a part from the real ones, considering when they hit us up we had already gone through Russian customs etc on the train (which was extensive). Their clothes are sloppy with no ID etc. The Canadian couple and us all showed our photo copies, once they realised they weren’t going to get anything out of us the moved on.*

Celene Wii
Perth

Author’s note: *We have only ever heard of this scam once in Russia (it used to be a standard one in Egypt) but Celene’s advice is spot on. Keep photocopies of your passports to show them on such an occasion.*

**Petty theft and petty scams will be the main dangers for the trans-Siberian traveller; much the same as in the rest of the world frankly.**

All Australian travellers overseas should refer to:


For up to date travel advice from the Department of foreign Affairs and Trade.

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**How do we get Visas?**

Australian travellers all need visas to visit Russia, Mongolia and China. The Russian visa is the most restrictive of the three as it can only be issued against a letter of invitation issued by an approved Russian travel organisation (or by a personal invitation by an individual Russian citizen). This letter must indicate the cities in Russia that you intend to visit and is date specific. In other words if your invitation says that you will enter Russia on 18 July and depart on 3 August then those will be the dates endorsed on the visa in your passport. You will not be allowed to enter Russia prior to that date and serious consequences will be incurred in you try to leave after the official departure date (although you can leave earlier without issue).

The maximum stay allowed on a tourist visa is 30 days, even if you have a double entry visa (you still have to leave Russia no more than 30 days from your first arrival). For Australian passport holders a Russian visa is currently $110 and $190 for a double entry. Processing times at either the embassy at Canberra or the Consulate in Sydney is about 9 working days. Oh, and please don’t blame us for the rather onerous nature of the Russian visa form! We will send you a detailed list of answers to the questions that are asked on this form.
Important Note about Russian Visas

Tourist visas for Russia will not be issued to Australian passport holders by Russian consulates outside of Australia unless you are resident in the country of application (i.e. hold a visa valid for longer than 90 days). This is very important as it usually means that you cannot obtain a Russian visa whilst travelling as a tourist overseas. The good news is that the Russian embassy/consulate in Australia will issue visas up to 6 months in advance but for travellers on a very long trip around the world for example this is occasionally an issue. There are rumours that the Russian Embassy in Kuala Lumpur or the Consulate in Shanghai are more flexible on this issue but it would not be wise to rely on this.

Incidentally this rule applies for all nationalities. So if you are a European tourist in Australia on a normal 90 day tourist visa you will not be able to obtain a Russian visa in Australia.

Standard Mongolian tourist visas cost $100 and are very straight-forward to obtain from the Mongolian Embassy in Canberra or at embassies overseas. A copy of your itinerary is required when making the application. We have never had a problem with obtaining Mongolian visas but don’t get them too early as they have a validity of 90 days from date of issue.

Chinese visas are usually straight-forward to obtain although this is not the case during periods of political sensitivity (e.g. the Beijing Olympics, the 50th anniversary of the Chinese Revolution etc) when the rules are significantly tightened. Chinese embassies are also not supposed to issue visas to Australians outside of Australia. We have heard of many instances where this has not been a problem but the Chinese embassies in the European Union seem to enforce this rule with reasonable strictness.
Our Visa Guarantee

Unlike other companies that merely offer to provide the paperwork for you to apply for your Russian and Mongolian visas we go further. We can organise your visas for you and we guarantee that we will obtain them for you or we’ll refund your money. We don’t mean we’ll refund the visa fees – we mean all your money that you have paid us.

Many of our clients prefer to go onwards from Russia overland, usually by train. We salute the intention but, at the risk of being spoil sports, we have to point out that the direct services between St Petersburg/Moscow and Berlin travel through the former Soviet country of Belarus (frequently described as the last dictatorship in Europe).

Belarus insists on a transit visa and this cannot be obtained at the border no matter what the internet says. The complication for Australian travellers is that Belarus has no consular representation in Australia so such a visa has to be obtained en route. In practice this is reasonably straight-forward to obtain in Beijing or Moscow or St Petersburg but it can take a few days and we can offer no guarantees.

*** Stop Press **
Belarus Embassy opened in 2015 in Canberra so this option is more realistic now – ask for details

A much simpler option is to catch the twice daily rail service to Helsinki or one of the many buses to Tallinn. Both Finland and Estonia are in the European Union and therefore do not require visas.

“Thank you for your help: we found you very good to deal with and you provided all the necessary information and visa documentation that was required, a pleasure dealing with you and if you need any recommendations please contact us”.

Keith and Lydia Evans
Adelaide.
What are the trains like?

There seems to be many misconceptions about the trains in the trans-Siberian. The simple truth is that they are basic and comfortable.

During the winter the carriages are heated (maybe a little too much in our opinion) so passengers tend to be in tee shirts and trackies for most of the journey although you’ll brave -20 and -30 temperatures, for a few seconds, when walking between carriages. During the summer there is an effective jet air cooling system that operates when the train is moving (but there is not air conditioning).
The compartments

In simple terms Russian long distance trains are divided into 4 berth and 2 berth compartments. You might see these described as second class and first class but we tend to avoid that description as it implies that there are differences in cabin facilities between the classes. In essence this is not true and the only real difference is the number of people in each cabin.

In particular the two berth and four berth cabins do not have private bathroom/toilets. Such luxuries are confined to the private trains that offer a completely different service.
A typical 2 berth cabin (featured below). The seats become the beds at night with a light sheet provided (at a small fee) by your attendant. Quite comfortable to sleep in but, as you can see, nothing fancy.

Standard 4-berth wagons have four comfortable berths per cabin, with 36 people in each carriage. In 2-berth wagons there are just two berths per cabin and only 18 beds in each carriage, the toilet facilities are the same. Berths are full-length with a spring base. On top of the base is a mattress-pad. There is a large pillow and a blanket. You hire a sealed fresh-laundry pack which includes two sheets (or sometimes a sheet and a duvet-cover – inside which you put the blanket) a pillowcase, a facecloth and a hand-towel. (cost approx. $3 per day). There’s a reading light with an individual switch.

There are no electric sockets in compartments. There is one mid-wagon in the corridor which is really for the vacuum when they clean – you can try standing there if you want, they don’t usually mind. You can also ask them to do it for you in the Service Wagon they have a little room where you can leave it under lock and key, and collect it (for a small fee) once charged. (“Vee MO-zhete zaRYAdit’ etot, pa-ZHALsta?”).

The two lower berths lift-up and there is space for two large suitcases under each one. There is an even larger luggage-bay at ceiling level with enough space for 4-5 large suitcases. Your berth has a small fold-out shelf big enough for small handbags, and some hooks to hang things on. There are hooks for large coats etc too.
(Make friends with your train attendant)

Each carriage on the train has an attendant whose job is to keep the carriage clean (including the bathrooms) and generally keep order. For most of the time they are dressed plainly but at each stop they put on their smart uniforms and usually stand proudly by their carriage on the platforms.

If you have the opportunity of making friends with your attendant (who it has to be said will almost definitely not speak English) then try and do so. Having their goodwill is useful especially for long journeys. It has been known for example for an attendant to keep one of the bathrooms on the carriage (the one next to their quarters usually) locked and claim it is out of order. In fact they are keeping it for themselves and perhaps some of their favourite passengers!
Taking Money

The situation with carrying your money gets easier every year in Russia (especially the big cities) but is still a challenge at times. For cash, any major foreign currency – can be easily exchanged either at the airport, your hotel, or local bank. To be frank you really should have either US Dollars or Euros as these are far and away the most easily exchanged currencies. Foreign currency (i.e. USD or Euro) is accepted at some places but not at all and generally you will pay a much higher exchange rate when using them. The Russian Rouble exchange rate is approximately 30 roubles to the Aussie dollar. A 500 rouble note is therefore approximately AU$16

ATM/Cash machines are appearing virtually everywhere and can be found quite easily although never rely just on ATMs anywhere in the world. Credit cards such as Visa, MasterCard and American Express are becoming widely accepted

Money for shopping is completely up to you; some art shops accept credit cards while bazaars only accept cash. Please note that hotel reception desks cannot exchange money. All the major hotels have a bank and if you are changing cash in notes you may still have to have to provide your passport as identification.

Past Passenger tip:

“One scam was changing money when crossing over from Mongolia into Russia. At this stage I had no Roubles and wasn’t aware of the exchange rate for $US into Roubles. A man came through the train not long after arriving at the last station in Mongolia for completion of formalities before going into Russia offering to change currencies. I changed some of my $US and it was only later that I found I had been scammed. Do not exchange any large amounts of money at this point. You will not need a great deal until you get to Irkutsk where you will have an opportunity to obtain Roubles at the right rate. Maximum in my opinion would be $20 if you are requiring any Roubles at this juncture.”

David Chin
Sydney
Past Passenger Tip:

“Another point to make is when at the Mongolian, Russian border but still on the Mongolian side and you are invited to use the toilet station keep back a small amount of Mongolian money so you can pay the attendant for the use of the toilet otherwise it may cost you more than is necessary.”

Ray Ward
Perth

Crossing borders

The border crossing involved, effectively, being trapped in an airless sauna for 5 hours with a 20 minute window to use a bathroom. Plus 30 degree day outside, god knows how hot inside. The passport checking process in Sukhbaatar followed immediately after the same process on the Russian side in Naushky. No one was allowed off the train (or even to stand by the open door where some air could be found!) and the train toilets were locked and Airconditioning off as we were stationary most of the time. It was an ordeal (hence my rather tense previous email to you) Or were they giving us tourists’ the complete Stalinist experience?

“The Mongolian border was not anything like the first border crossing, passports disappear for an hour to be processed, not allowed off the train and sit quietly until the due process is followed. We amused ourselves with another epic 500 game and waited. Easy really and no scurrying around of the locals to hide anything. Smooth - over we go to the Chinese border. Toilets locked at the Mongolian border were not unlocked until after the Chinese border was cleared 4 hours later!!! Desperation on some parts I can assure you. We sat in our cabin and were shunted back and forward and along the tracks and then into a big shed where they hydraulically lifted us up and changed the bogeys under the carriages. There was a train going North that was in the massive shed beside us so we could watch them having this same operation performed, Toilets still locked at this stage!! Then back to shunting ad shunting and going about 2km in total whilst they did what?? Toilets still locked. Then we finally made it into the station and a mad rush for the toilet blocks that were disgusting but open!”

Lisa Whittle
Melbourne
The gauge of the rail tracks in Russian and Mongolia is 10cm wider than the tracks in China. This requires the bogeys (wheel bearings) of all trains to be changed at the border crossing – a process that takes about two hours or so. Russian railways were deliberately built this way to hinder a train borne invasion in the 19th Century.

What about food on board?

There is a general international agreement on all long distance rail trips in this region that restaurant car services are provided by the country you are in. In other words restaurant cars don’t cross borders. The Trans-Siberian follows this rule and you can expect the national railways of each country to be providing the food services on board even if the rest of the rolling stock is provided by a different country. The restaurant car is usually located in the middle of the train. The prices are quite steep but the food is OK with a limited menu. Bar prices are pretty high and most Russians won’t pay them and instead will bring their own. This is completely acceptable by the way.

The great pot-noodle debate.

Somewhere in the 1980’s someone had the idea of taking pot-noodles on Russian trains – probably the availability of boiling water sparked this flash of genius? Since then, a kind of cult has developed, and guidebooks repeat the advice to take pot-noodles, almost as though you would be mad not to do so? In fact there are many ways of ingesting palatable calories on Trans-Siberian and other long-distance trains in Russia without resorting to pot-noodles (see “The Longest Meal In The World” for details of how and what to eat on board). But, for dedicated purists who like to take everything with them (kitchen sink optional) then yes, you CAN take pot-noodles if you really insist on doing so. Heaven help your fellow-passengers is all we can say....
Traditionally Russian food is hearty and makes use of simple, locally grown ingredients. It is a common misconception that the only dishes available are meat, potatoes and cabbage although these are certainly on most menus!

Russia is not an easy place for vegetarians though there are usually a few dishes without meat available such as mushrooms in cream sauce, salads, buckwheat, potatoes and dumplings, pancakes, eggplant dishes, and omelettes. Vegetarians might want to bring some extra supplies (our former colleague who lives in Russia full-time is a veggie himself, so it can be done), especially for train-journeys where the outlook is a bit bleak, and outside our control as a travel-company to influence. (Each railway restaurant-car is a privately-owned franchise these days, and they can serve and price things however they want). Cheese, yoghurts, kefir (mmm!! Like drinking-yoghurt) are easily and cheaply available in any food store in Russia – so are soft cheese-spreads like Valio which are boring but easy to carry. Vegemite is a favourite to bring but definitely not sold in Russia – so bring your own if you want it. The outlook for vegans is really not good at all, though – you should bring as much as you can because there’s practically nothing here. Dried soya-chunks can be found in a few shops, but that’s about “it”. Peanut butter, soy-sausage substitute, yeast-spread are all handy items that are fairly successfully portable too – so bring these with you if you want them as they’re not available en-route.. There are some extra suggestions for ordering veggie/vegan food in restaurants/cafes, and shopping locally for veggie-friendly food items in the FOOD section of our info-pack.

Traditional Russian tea is served strong and black and can be taken with a spoonful of sweet jam. If you like your coffee then it might be worth taking your own as the local stuff is pretty ordinary.

Beer is treated as a virtual soft drink in Russia.
Toilets and showers

At the end of each carriage are toilets equipped with sinks and cold water. The toilets are of the western *sit down* variety. These bathrooms are maintained by your carriage attendant. Some are conscientious and efficient at their chores and some, sadly, are not. By the way don’t pull the flush whilst you are on the toilet. In the winter you’ll get a rush of sub arctic air whooshing up your nether regions.

Toilets are often unavailable for long stretches of time at border points especially Mongolia/China. Prepare as best you can!

Long distance Russian trains (not Mongolian or Chinese trains) usually have shower cars. These are found adjacent to the restaurant car in the service wagon. There is a small fee payable and you’ll need to pre-book your slot and bring back your own towel, soap, shampoo etc. Oh, and wear thongs!
“Each standard carriage has 9 sleepers with 2 upper and 2 lower beds. There is storage space under the lower beds and above the door. We managed to fit in 3 backpacks and daypacks in the storage areas so we were not tripping over them. At the each end of the carriage is a toilet with a washbasin. They are kept relatively clean by the two attendants who are there for your every need (well sort of; be nice to them. On the train they are very important). A boiler will keep you in supply of hot water for your cups of tea or coffee or pot noodles. If you are a coffee fiend then take your own - trust me, take your own!”

Fiona Elilott
Melbourne

Who are we and what do we do?

We are an independent travel agency based in Melbourne. In conjunction with our overseas suppliers we put together a range of semi-independent itineraries that incorporate train travel through Russia, Mongolia and China. You will see a comprehensive list of our itineraries on our website.
What do we mean by semi-independent?

Our trips are not group departures. They are pre-arranged independent trips. You won’t have an escort on board the train (you don’t need one to be frank and we find our clients tend not to want one) but on arrival into each, unfamiliar city you’ll be met by one of our local suppliers with your name on a board. They will transfer you to your accommodation and provide you with any local activities that you may have pre-booked. And they will make sure you have your tickets for the next destination and will put you on the train to your next destination.

Most of our clients book our standard itineraries. The feedback that we have received over many years is that the stopover duration on each of our trips is about right and overall the combination of independent and pre-arranged is about right. You are never made to feel part of a group** and the emphasis (especially in Moscow and St Petersburg) is on independent exploration. For example our buddy guides in Moscow and St Petersburg will show you the local ropes like how to use the metro for example so that you can spend the bulk of the trip seeing those cities yourself.

You’ll find a full list of our itineraries at http://trans-siberian.com.au/trans-siberian-trips.html (or click on the link from our home page). To make a booking we will require your passport details (or if you are currently renewing a passport at least your name as per your passport and your date of birth). A non-refundable deposit of $850 per person will be required at time of booking. Final payment is due no later than 60 days prior to departure or at time of visa processing if earlier.

** Whilst you are not part of a group you may share transfers and occasionally local tours with other travellers booked on a similar itinerary.

Past passenger tip:

“Book the Hermitage tickets online to avoid the crowds – and this was priceless as the queues are ridiculously long during July and August. “

http://www.hermitagemuseum.org/html_En/index.html

Jeanene Kennedy
Canberra

We can of course customise your itinerary within the confines of the rail schedules but we believe that our itineraries offer a good overview of Russia and Siberia.

Please note that we do not just book rail tickets.

By the way if you would prefer a group departure then there are still options for you. We work with a number of associate companies that offer these. Also the private train trips operated as a group departure with scheduled tour dates.

“I am very very happy with the smooth operation And coordination particularly as we are such a small group. I am very glad we did not choose intrepid or the like, after seeing the size of their groups, and the freedom we had in many destinations. Thank you for what we have done up to this point, and we shall contact you on our return to Melbourne. “

Louise Walsh
Melbourne
Why book your trans-Siberian trip with us?

A. We are a fully accredited Australian travel agency and full member of the Australian Federation of Travel Agents (AFTA) and a founding member of their accreditation scheme – ATAS – which sets the benchmark of quality in the Australian travel industry.

A. Great value for money. We offer some of the cheapest trans-Siberian rail itineraries of any Australian travel agency.

A Our visa guarantee. If you take up our low visa processing service (just $75 per visa plus consular fee) we will organise your Russian and Mongolian visas for you. Our visa service usually involves a courier collection to ensure your passports are secure throughout the process. And we’ll get the paperwork right. If we fail to obtain your visas prior to your trip we will refund your money. Not just the money for your visas but all the money that you have paid us for your trip.

A Detailed “trans-Siberian info pack: with every booking. Full of useful hints, tips, tricks, guide to pubs, clubs, restaurants, metro maps, reading lists and detailed history. It’s an invaluable guide and an enjoyable read.

“In my opinion a lot to do with the success of a holiday is non-hassle preparation particularly with regard to the bookings, both for the tour and airline, support with required visas and contact regarding both ”up-to-date” booking status and the financial aspect is essential. You ticked all the boxes in this regard and I would have no hesitation in using your services again and recommending them to any prospective travellers looking for a conscientious and personable travel agency who does their job extremely well.”

June Cahill
Melbourne

Reading List:

• Trans Siberian Handbook by Bryn Thomas
• Short Stories by Anton Chekhov
• Among the Russians by Colin Thubron
• A History of Russia by Nicholas Riasanovsky.
• The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Empire by Stephen Dalziel
• War and Peace by Leo Tolstoy
• The Government Inspector by Nikolai Gogol
• Quiet Flows the Don by Mikhail Sholokhov
• One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich by Alexander Solzhenitsyn
• Cancer Ward by Alexander Solzhenitsyn
• The Spirit Wrestlers by Colin Marsden
• Dr Zhivago by Boris Pasternak
• Crime and Punishment by Fyodor Dostoevsky
• Last Disco in Mongolia by Nick Middleton
• In Siberia by Colin Thubron
• Natasha’s Dance: A Cultural History of Russia by Orlando Figes
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