

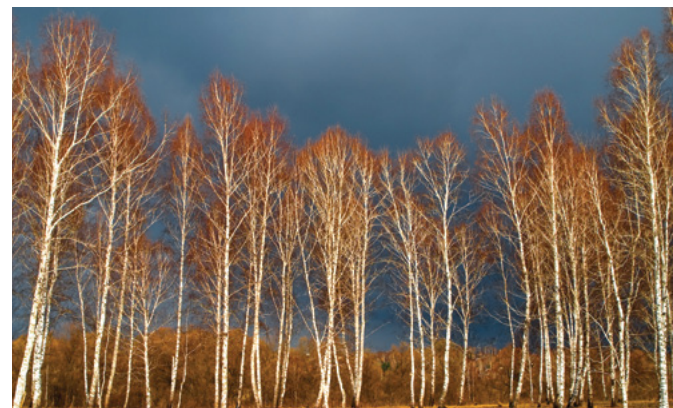


MAKING TRACKS

THE TRANS-SIBERIAN EXPRESS AND TRANS-MONGOLIAN EXPRESS ARE TWO OF THE WORLD'S GREAT TRAIN JOURNEYS, TAKING PASSENGERS ALL THE WAY FROM MOSCOW, THROUGH MONGOLIA TO BEIJING. HOP ABOARD

WORDS | FARHAT JAH

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
A locomotive steams out of a tunnel on the Circum-Baikal line; birch trees dot the Russian landscape; the Rossiya; Siberian countryside.



Standing at the edge of the platform as I wait for my train to arrive, I peer between the silver birch trees and out over the Kremlin wall. Moscow is grey and brown, shafts of light punching through the clouds like theatre spotlights illuminating the best of the Stalinist architecture and the worst of Brezhnev's tower blocks.

Tall factory towers billow white smoke over soviet Art Deco. The sun catches the smoke and it all looks very ethereal. I keep thinking of those 1950s sci-fi films I watched as a kid. It's like I've wandered onto one of the sets.

The ribbed train groans to halt at the marble platform, with the atomic clock over the tunnel mouth telling us that it has pulled in exactly one minute and 54 seconds after the previous one. The doors open with a blaring horn, I board, the doors close, and with a lurch we thunder off into the tunnel, heading towards Moscow's Yaroslavsky station, and the waiting Trans-Siberian Express.

Together with my wife Cisca and our friend Sam, I am beginning a journey that will take us across two continents and deposit us at the edge of Pacific Ocean. And it all starts here. ➔



“Like everything else the Russians are proud of, the train is a showpiece and has been painted in Russia’s national colours.”

We arrive at the Yaroslavsky station early; too early and need to eat. The train station has a cafe, run by an Uzbek who is busy slicing beef and grilling lamb, which he serves with thick bread called *nan*. Washed down with bubbly water and thick, sweet Turkish coffee, we are refreshed. Through the cafe’s window, we can see “The Rossiya” waiting.

This is the real Trans-Siberian Express. Moscow to Vladivostok all the way through. Like everything else the Russians are proud of, the train is a showpiece and has been painted in Russia’s national colours.

Stood at the doors, the chief ticket inspector looks like the dictator of a small Balkan nation in his peaked cap and bushy moustache, but he is nothing if not efficient. In just a few minutes our tickets have been inspected, and we’ve been grunted on board the train.

The Rossiya is not so much a train, as a living moving being. It has numerous kitchens, washrooms, bars, a security office, a restaurant and, of course, a locomotive.

It will be transporting us through the middle of nowhere in the middle of the night so it has to be self-sufficient. To that end, our cabins have a plethora of lights, a TV bolted to the wall, two very comfortable beds and huge mirrors. An Eastern-looking carpet covers the floor and the curtains are pure chintz.

Just as we’re admiring all this, there is a bang of clanking coaches and we set off into the night; the passengers settling down.

Sometime the next day, the train halts at a large station, passengers disembark and the *provodniks* (cabin attendants) chat amongst themselves as an army of workers scurry around the large sturdy steel carriages.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
Lake Baikal is truly beautiful;
horse riding on the Mongolian
Steppe; the Gobi desert is one
of the world’s great vistas.

Locomotives are changed, food replenished, rubbish carried away and water hoses connected. The sensible Russian passengers take the opportunity to re-provision their bread, sausage and dried fish. I snap a few photos.

After much whistling, loudspeaker warnings in Russian and prodding of the foreigners to hurry up and get inside, the train pulls out of the station. We settle down in the restaurant car, with its velvet curtains and cut flowers.

The menu is not overly long, but reasonably priced. We have a set meal of soup, fresh salad and beef stew, which is delicious. My friend Sam insists on ordering Russian sparkling wine. Sam’s favourite place is always the train restaurant car, where he sits imperiously, watching the world go by as he keeps an eye on his three watches.

“Moscow time, local time, and London time,” he says in his clipped English accent. “I want to know what time it is on the train, what time it is outside and when not to disturb someone with an ill-timed message.”

As we travel, Sam makes notes, reads Russian literature and takes the occasional photo. He is, in many ways, the perfect companion for this type of journey.

Over the next few hours, the Rossiya rattles ponderously around bend after bend, chugging past forests of silver birch trees

shedding their leaves. We climb and the air becomes cooler, the forest giving way to fields of brown grass, burned by the summer sun.

I look out of the window and can see nothing but brown: brown trees, brown grass, brown light and the occasional brown hut. No road or other human habitation can be seen. It isn’t until the next morning that we see our first real contours, as the Rossiya tackles valleys and climbs up long inclines, before plummeting into deep, dense forests, and over wide frozen rivers.

Four days have passed and tomorrow morning, after 5,000 kilometres, we will have to get off. I am sad to be leaving the Rossiya. Our next train will be Chinese, and I get this sudden urge to continue to Vladivostok, to stay with the train team until the end of the line.

The atmosphere on the train has been special, a team effort by the passengers and crew to keep the train rolling, spotless and polite. But sense (and my itinerary) prevail. At 5am local time, I find myself stumbling off the train for the last time at Irkutsk station.

Irkutsk, in Siberia, is to be my last stop in Russia. This clean and pretty town lies in a bend of the River Angara and while it’s a world away from Moscow, the architecture is a magnificent melange of wood, stone grandeur and concrete.

Built by Russia’s elite after they were exiled in the Tsarist era, the main street is a curious mixture of their native St Petersburg and traditional wooden Siberian houses, sitting in odd positions and often the strangest of angles. We stroll by the river in the cool afternoon, knowing that tomorrow we will board the Trans-Mongolian express to the Mongolian capital, Ulan Batar.

White smoke pours out of the old diesels as we hammer slowly and noisily through the Gobi desert



“Look, look, Lake Baikal”, shouts my wife Cisca, waking me up. “The lake looks so pretty in the morning.”

After days of train travel, I’ve learned the benefit of late nights and later mornings, so it takes some effort to roll me from bed. Still, when I finally do get up I can see that she is not wrong; the train track is mounted twelve yards from the lakeshore and we’re rumbling over small cliffs and beaches.

After crossing a few rivers, and a re-fuelling stop at Ulan ⇒



The Great Wall of China

The Trans-Mongolian has the most superb restaurant car I've ever been on

Ude we hit the Russian border. After a thorough search of the train's cavities by the authorities and two hours spent stamping passports, we roll past some razor wire into Mongolia.

The Mongolian border post's commanding officer is a woman dressed in a Soviet-style officer's cap and a black leather coat that reaches her ankles. She salutes us and smiles, while her men look in our bags, stamp our passports and send the train on to Ulan Bator and the Mongolian Steppe. After two days in a yurt, riding horses around the hills, our timetable brings us unrelentingly back to the railway.

With a clang in the early morning we set off for Beijing. White smoke pours out of the old diesels as we hammer slowly and noisily through the Gobi desert.

The Trans-Mongolian has the most superb restaurant car I've ever been on, and every night it fills up with Chinese, Mongolians and tourists who gorge themselves with lamb, chicken and vegetables served with Korean beer. This is where we are when the train finally rolls through the dark into China.

Erlan station has Chinese classical music blaring from loudspeakers and is lit with fairy lights. We're instructed to stay on board, as officials board our carriage. A plethora of forms is collected by the plethora of officials while the music squeaks in the background.

Russia and China have different sized railway tracks, meaning that every carriage doing this journey has to be lifted off its wheels ("bogies" to use the language of trains) and dropped onto a new set. I chuckle as incredulous passengers look out of the window as the entire train is lifted

into the air. Bogies are removed and new ones slid in. It takes just an hour to complete and by the time it's finished our passports have been stamped, allowing us official access to China.

Looking out of the window I can see villages consisting of small brown huts, one central building and a red flag. At this altitude, the villagers wear thick jackets and hats, and shovel straw onto horse-drawn carriages. The only vehicles that I can see are a truck and small motorbikes.

As always, Sam is sitting in the restaurant car, ordering Sichuan delicacies such as fish in chillies and mixed fried green beans. He makes notes in his journal as I stare out of the window. Looking up at the line of brown craggy hills some miles away I see a cut that goes along the ridge. I keep looking and then see a watchtower. A very brown but quite distinctive wall appears. I call Cisca over to the window. "The Great Wall of China," I whisper to her as we both stand in awe.

Before long, we descend into a series of mountain tunnels running along a river. Without doubt, this is the most dramatic part of the journey thus far, and sadly, the last.

The train soon enters the outskirts of Beijing, moving reluctantly among the high rises. With a sudden screech and a jolt we stop and the train falls silent. The Chinese surge off, leaving the foreigners and the crew. It's all over. Moscow to Beijing in eighteen days with a few stops. Hoisting my bag onto my shoulder, I descend the steps, wishing I could turn around and travel all the way back. 🌍

EXPERIENCE THE TRANS-SIBERIAN

FOR SLEEPING: HILTON HOTEL LENINGRADSKAYA

Nothing in Moscow is cheap, so I suggest a blow out with the Hilton Hotel Leningradskaya. Built into one of Stalin's Seven Sisters, this hotel combines international standards and service with Soviet decor.

WWW.HILTON.COM

FOR EATING: FEI TENG YU XIANG

Hidden in the Sanlitun region is one of Beijing's most impressive Sichuan restaurants: Fei Teng Yu Xiang. After a few days of Russian train food, this is a wonderful respite. Their chicken with peppercorns (*ladaji*) is divine.

FOR TRAINS: HEAD EAST

Buying a train ticket on the world's longest train journey is surprisingly difficult. Tickets are often booked up months in advance on both Russian and Chinese railways. Many agents offer packages that include Russia, China and the arid Mongolian Steppe. I used Head East.

WWW.HEADSEAST.COM

FOR SIGHTSEEING: LAKE BAIKAL

No Trans-Siberian journey is complete without a visit to Lake Baikal. And to explain it all, see the Limnographic institute at Listvyanka. With aquariums, live fish displays, interactive guides, videos and a selection of Soviet-era photos; this place is unforgettable.

WITH ETIHAD

Experience Russia with Etihad Airways. The airline operates flights from its home base in Abu Dhabi to Moscow Domodedovo Airport. For more information visit www.etihadairways.com.