

Riding the Rails

The Chinese train stewardesses standing outside the wagons wear navy suits, polished-to-perfection shoes and their hair tied back in a chignon. They add a composed, almost orderly vibe, which is a drastic change compared to the chaotic madness upstairs on the train station's main floor.

One hundred and seventy of us folks are ready to ride the rails from Beijing to Moscow travelling through China, Mongolia, Siberia and central Russia: a mere seven thousand and eighty-four kilometres.

A good part of our journey will be along the Trans-Siberian Railway, the longest and most famous rail line in the world. It is a track full of historic brutality, innovative engineering and real stories from the past, present and no doubt future. It is a track that keeps remote places in Russia alive and let me tell you, it is a really busy track.

Many Siberian towns and villages bordering the track seem bleak and isolated. Perhaps there is a reason why Russians drink vodka, particularly those who live in harsh and difficult environments. Life does not seem fun in these parts and it shows its painful face on more than a few occasions, most notably when witnessing men passed out in the middle of the day, laying down wherever they may be the moment alcohol reaches its maximum, no more lucid, capacity.

For the first eight hundred and fifty-four kilometres, we travel overnight on a Chinese train from Beijing to Mongolia.

When I awake at dawn, the view outside my window is breathtakingly beautiful. We are in the Gobi Desert and the harmonizing of silky sand and small dunes create a velvety ripple effect. With the rising of the sun and a vista of just sand, the colour palette is a muted canvas of laid-back beauty.

I open the wagon window and stick out my head. A warm flow of air crosses my face. Behind me, the train wagons roll along the meandering track similar in style to that of a snake slithering across the sand – the track being the only man-made contraption in this organic no-man's land.

We cross the Mongolian border and arrive in Erlain. It is here we change to a Russian train for the journey to Moscow. The train consists of three restaurant wagons – two in historic Russian-style, one bar car, a few supply/luggage/staff wagons and compartment wagons for passengers.

My compartment is decorated in nostalgic motif replicating a communist-era style. Guests on the train during that period included Brezhnev, Gorbachev, dignitaries and Kim Young-sam. It is rather small though. There is a day sofa that turns into a single bed at night, a small table just under the window and a velvet chair. A top bunk comes down in the evening making the compartment a twin.

Between every two compartments are washing rooms with a sink and handheld shower. Communal toilets are located at each end of the wagon.

“More *wodka!*” my German dinner companions and I say a number of times the first night on the train. One cannot have a true Russian experience without drinking vodka. It is part of the journey. Bottle in hand, our Russian waiter extends his arm high and free pours into our glasses. The chilled liquor is smooth and luscious as it makes its way down the throat.

Someone is banging on my compartment door. Before I can get out of bed, the stewardess opens my door and yells “Get up.” It was a boozy vodka night some hours earlier and I am a little disoriented. We are arriving Ulaanbaatar in ten minutes and I have to pack an overnight bag as we are staying at a hotel this evening.

With a large portion of the population being young, Ulaanbaatar’s dynamic is youthful and urban. Like many Asian cities though, it is chaotic and elements of poverty seep through. We drive into Mongolia’s titanic countryside and steppes. I have been looking forward to this part of the trip because the impressions of Mongolia’s steppes seem endless and freeing, and I want to visit a nomad community.

Living year round in gers, nomads experience temperatures in winter as low as negative forty Celsius and in summer as high as plus forty Celsius. Their diet consists of food produced by their livestock and their transportation is generally by horse. However, some nomads do not live as pastoral or authentically. Those living close to a town, take advantage of urban living including sending their children to school.

Either way there is something wonderful about nomadic life, being joined to the land and open space. There is a sense of community, which is comforting as is the coziness of each family’s one-room ger but some part of me thinks, surely, in such close quarters they must at times get on each other’s nerves.

Departing Mongolia, we cross the Russian border into eastern Siberia. The name Siberia comes from the Mongolian word *sibir*, which means, “sleeping land”. In early seventeenth century, Siberia became a place of exile and until the twentieth century, it was “the last stop” for criminals and political extremists.

Our first stop is Ulan-Ude. It is here our train changes direction and joins the main route of the present-day Trans-Siberian Railway. Ulan-Ude is famous for its ballet troupe and I feel privileged when we attend a ballet-operetta. It is magnificent, graceful and utterly eloquent. The ballet dancers captivate me and my mind begins to wander.

There were times during the communist era when ballet dancers defected from Russia by asking for refuge in a country they were performing in. Mikhail Baryshnikov, one of Russia’s most famous dancers, comes to mind. He defected to Canada in 1974. I think of this as I watch the performance and wonder if any dancers who performed on this stage during that time, defected.

We leave the main track and travel alongside Lake Baikal on a track that was originally part of the Trans Siberian Railway. A UNESCO World Heritage Site, Lake Baikal is the world's largest and deepest freshwater lake.

It is said those hardy enough to go into the lake will emerge feeling and looking ten years younger. I am up for the challenge because the vain part of me thinks, *do it*. I dunk in the ice-cold four degree Celsius water, check in the mirror and sigh. I do not look younger although I do feel rejuvenated.

On the shore of Lake Baikal, under the pale blue sky with the sun lowering its loveliness into oblivion, we have a barbecue, drink beer and what else? – Vodka. Everything about this evening is Russian-magic.

Irkutsk, one of the largest cities in Siberia, houses reminders of the Soviet era. There are streets named after Lenin and Karl Marx, and a tall statue of Lenin presides over a park. We will spend the night in a hotel here and that makes me quite happy.

I am finding it difficult to sleep on the train. My nightly routine goes something like this: alternate between upper and lower bunks – both narrow and uncomfortable; jolt from the constant stopping and starting of the train; shake from rattling each time a train passes in the opposite direction, which seems about five thousand times; listen to passengers snore.

And in the morning: get hot water from stewardess for my spoonful of instant Nescafé; curse wagon mates who slept like babies; be envious of couple who tipped stewardess sixty Euros when they boarded so that she would provide good service, which includes delivering each morning, loose-leaf tea served in a fancy pewter and glass jar with pewter glasses.

We visit Irkutsk's main attractions and spend a beautiful afternoon sailing on Lake Baikal. After, I walk the dirt paths of a tiny Siberian village where families live off of the land. Wooden houses are small, women wear scarves on their head and they must have strong faith because there is a little church squeezed between two houses.

For Siberia's rural inhabitants, life is difficult. Most homes are wooden shacks or apartments in cement block-style buildings, and forms of transportation include decrepit Ladas, rusty motorcycles with sidecars, bicycles and foot. Money is limited, cities are industrial and winters are severe. Towns are not vibrant, rather, on the side of dullness.

Many buildings look like prisons and oftentimes, people's faces are etched with difficulty. Yet there is a beauty in the people and when they smile, which is not often, it is genuine. They are proud regardless of hardships.

We arrive in Yekaterinburg, a city where the last Russian tsar, Nicolai II, his wife, four daughters and son were executed by the Bolsheviks who came into power during the October Revolution phase of the Russian Revolution.

A small room in The Church on the Blood tells the story of this horrific execution, which took place in the early hours of July 17, 1918. I enter The Church on the Blood and *feel* a strong presence in the room that displays photos, books and mementos. I am not familiar with the story of Tsar Nicolai II and the atrocity evoked upon him and his family.

I come upon a black and white photograph of the family. I am drawn to one of the daughters. It is *her* I say to myself. Her spirit is here in the room. Later I find out her name is Anastasia and others have also sensed her presence.

Travelling east, Russia's wealth and capitalism becomes more apparent. Cities are clean, gussied up and vibrant. Many of the buildings are architecturally stunning and exceptionally gorgeous. With this though, costs to buy items and food are expensive and wealth versus poverty is evident.

Insanely expensive, Moscow houses some really dazzling buildings and magnificent museums and sites. One cannot help but have their breath taken away when first laying eyes upon Red Square and Saint Basil's Cathedral.

It is my last night and I sit on the rooftop bar of a luxury hotel overlooking Red Square, the Kremlin and Bolshoi Theatre. I order a ridiculously expensive glass of not expensive wine. The comings-and-goings of the young, wealthy and beautiful Muscovites fascinates me as they prance about the bar and order bottles of fine wine and champagne. It is a striking, even a bit disturbing, contrast to what I saw a few days ago in Siberia.

I mean, sure, Russia definitely has its problems. But it is a bold country, captivating and fascinating. It can catch you off-guard when you least expect it and spellbound you with a snap-of-its-fingers.