

The Trans-Siberian Railway – a bucket list experience

Dave and Vicki Bieler

Last year my wife and I did the Trans-Siberian Train trip through Sundowner Tours with a group of seven friends. This trip was not a dedicated train but used public trains from Beijing to St Petersburg travelling on China Rail, Mongolian Rail and the Siberian Rail.

Organisation for the trip started early as visas were needed for China, Mongolia and Russia. In Russia's case you need to apply for a letter of invitation before applying for a visa and the application form asked intriguing questions such as "Are you a terrorist?"

Beijing

In Beijing we met Lidia who was to be our guide throughout the entire trip. We also had a local guide in each of the places we stayed.

While we had a bus for half a day, most of our touring was done on foot, the local subways and the occasional taxi. This is a trip that entails a lot of walking which you need to be relatively fit to enjoy.

The main attractions were:

The Forbidden City which covers 72 hectares and over 980 buildings. While we allowed over three hours we only saw about one quarter of the site.



Lidia our guide and The Forbidden City

The Great Wall was one of the highlights of Beijing, but you need to be prepared for large numbers of tourists. The wall is an amazing structure which follows the ridges and the top of the wall is very steep in many places. Thankfully there was a chairlift which saved an enormous climb. After spending some time walking along the wall, we found a café perched on the side of the wall. A unique experience of drinking a beer perched on a platform some 40 metres above the ground secured only with bamboo to the wall. The trip down off the wall used a steel toboggan track (again much faster than walking).



The Great Wall



Cultural Show

There are a number of **local cultural shows** run by the local community that rival any performance by professional groups. The show was spectacular.

In addition there was **Tiananmen Square**, **The Temple of Heaven**, the **Pearl Markets** and of course dining on **Peking Duck**.

Travelling by taxi can be a bit risky as eight of us got into a six-seater van and the driver passed back two wooden boxes for the last two to sit on (no seat belts in the taxi and I had one of the boxes).



Cabins on the train

In the afternoon of our last day in Beijing we boarded the train for a two night trip to Mongolia. The cabins had four bunks and you could be placed with locals. My suggestion (and what we actually did) is to pay for all four bunks, which was much more comfortable as there was little space for luggage. In addition, while there is a dining car the food was not the best and it was expensive. We all stocked up on two-minute noodles as hot water is supplied in each carriage. Also you need to pack a bowl, mug and some eating utensils (preferably all plastic).

Mongolia

The train crosses the border at 3 a.m. and as the rail gauge changes, the carriage boogies also need to be changed. You must remain on the train while this is done, so there is no chance of sleeping through it. While the wheels are changed your passports are collected by both Chinese and then Mongolian customs officers, but they were all very friendly and many spoke English very well. The whole process took about five hours. Most of the trains only have drop toilets so they are locked 15 minutes before any station. This can lead to leg crossing at some of the stations where there is a long stop.



Mongolian Customs Officer

The scenery changes from rugged mountains in China to vast treeless plains in Mongolia. In addition, the temperature changes from 30°+ in China to below zero in Mongolia.



A Yurt camp where we stayed

Arriving at **Ulaanbaatar**, the capital, we settled into our hotel where it was slightly disturbing to see a bullet hole in our window. Before travelling to a Tourist Yurt Camp we explored the Genghis Khan Museum and their main Buddhist Temple. Meals in Mongolia are mainly meat (including horse) with very few vegetables.

The next day we travelled and stayed in a Tourist Yurt for two nights where we visited a local herdsman, practised archery and rode horses. Mongolian horses are much smaller than ours and their saddles are very different with a metal hoop located in the most

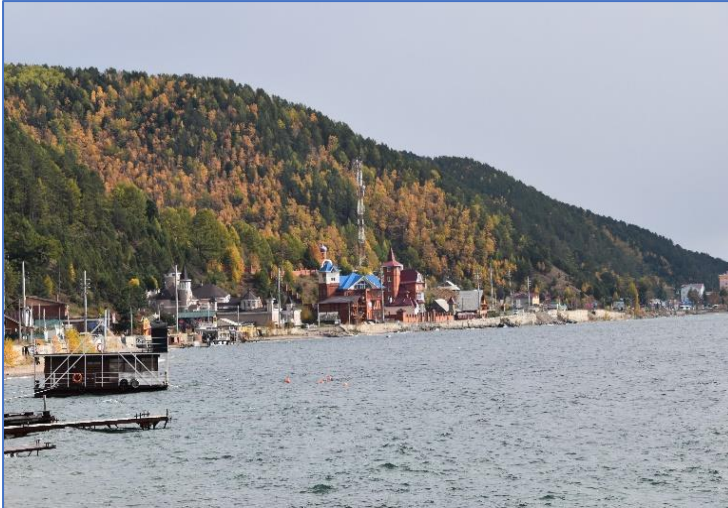
uncomfortable position at crutch level. Men beware. The horses seemed to have their own idea on where to go and rarely responded to the reins – an interesting ride.

We visited the 8-storey high statue of Genghis Khan complete with a pet eagle, and the cashmere factory. The cashmere items are not cheap but far better quality than anything we see at home. It was then back to the train for a two night trip into Russia.



Genghis Khan Memorial

Russia



Lake Baikal foreshores

Lake Baikal

On arriving at Irkutsk we proceeded by minibus to Lake Baikal, one of the largest and deepest fresh water lakes in the world. We stayed there for two nights. The temperature dropped and we awoke to a snow-covered valley.

Among the highlights was a visit to a museum showing the traditional wooden buildings of the region. Being truly in Siberia, their history was one of hardship and Kasack soldiers sent to control criminals and others.

In addition, a visit to the marine institute provided lots of information about their research dives on Lake Baikal, including a simulated dive in their research submersible. Lidia our guide took my wife and me to a banya, a Russian bath or sauna. The sauna was hotter than any I have been in previously and you beat each other with birch branches. I can now say I have been beaten up by a semi-naked Russian girl while my wife watched on. It is an experience not to be missed. Back in Irkutsk we had the chance to visit their markets where the range of warm clothing was amazing and much cheaper than anything in Australia.



Any excuse to play



A seal only found at Lake Baikal

After a night in Irkutsk we again boarded the train for our longest trip, three nights, to Kazan. A beautiful city where by law there is equal numbers of mosques and Christian churches.



Our group outside a wedding chapel



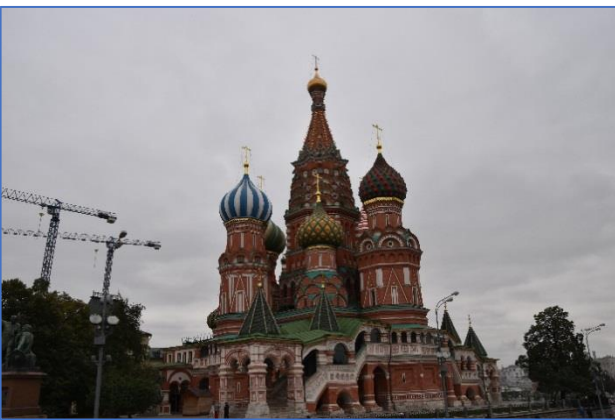
Part of Kazan's Kremlin

Moscow



Moscow subways

Another day and night on the train saw us arrive in Moscow. Not content with the Trans-Siberian Railway we explored Moscow on their subways which Stalin constructed and called the People's Palaces. The highlight of Moscow was visiting the **Kremlin** and **St Basil's**. President Putin was in residence so there were more soldiers than usual. In the grounds was the largest cannon ever cast in the time of the Czars, however it has never been fired as the engineers were frightened it would explode. Moscow provided surprises at each turn including the old KGB building, which is the tallest in Russia – you can see Siberia from the basement.



St Basil's

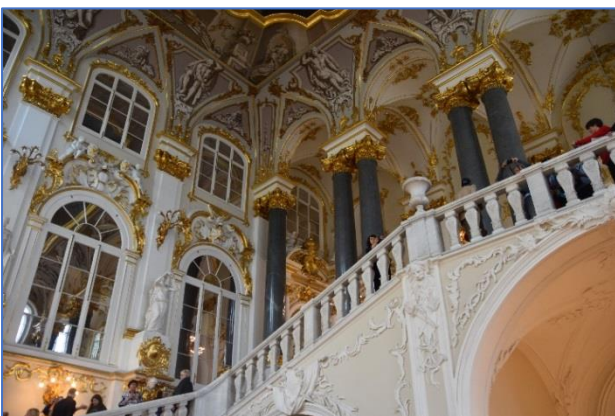


St Basil's

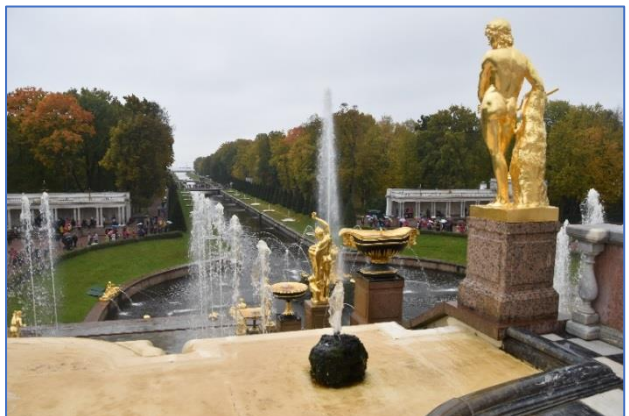
St Petersburg

The train to St Petersburg was the most luxurious we had travelled on with dinner and breakfast served in the cabin, beds made up for us and TV (be it Russian).

St Petersburg is the most beautiful city in Russia according to our guide. She may have been a bit biased as this is where she lives. Described as the Venice of the North, St Petersburg did not disappoint with its magnificent churches and architecture and it being home to the **Hermitage Museum** where the art collection and opulence of the building was amazing. We were lucky enough to purchase seats for the ballet which is a must-do, but it spoils you for any other ballet. The other must see is **Peterhoff**, Peter the Great's Summer Palace. The palace, art and the gardens with a multitude of fountains beg belief.



Inside the Hermitage Museum



The main canal at Peterhoff



Trains to St Petersburg



Inside a famous shop in St Petersburg



Fairy tale figures at a fort



The Summer Palace, Peterhoff

In conclusion

The Trans-Siberian Rail trip was a bucket list experience and while you can travel independently we chose to use a travel company called Sundowners. They supplied our tour guide (Lidia) who stayed with us for the entire trip, and it was her knowledge that enabled us to experience as much of the countries as we did. She knew the best restaurants with the local specialties which were not expensive, and took us to places many other tours do not. At each stop the company also supplied a local guide with in-depth local knowledge.

Here are a few tips:

Pack light as you need to carry and lift your luggage on and off the train. Often the station platform is at ground level and you need to climb up to the train.

Take a good set of plastic cutlery, cup and bowl as you will buy food to take on the train during the longer parts of the trip. There is a hot water urn in each carriage for tea and noodles. There are restaurant cars but these can be very expensive.

The temperature varied for us from 35° in Beijing to below zero in Mongolia and Siberia to 9° in St Petersburg. You need to pack for a number of climates and it is quite hot on the train.

Be prepared to drink Vodka, a better quality and range than we have.

The image I had of Russia and China before we left was that of strict authoritarian countries where officials would be stern and intimidating but this was not the case. The Russian people are incredibly friendly and the officials, while efficient, were courteous and, in some cases, wanting to talk and joke with us. This is a trip I would recommend to everyone.

Contributor details

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Dave was Principal at Bundarra Central School from 2015 to 2017. He has a keen interest in travel both overseas and Australia. Recently he has had additions of two sets of twins to make seven grandchildren. Dave is an active member of the Cairns Men's Shed and does some casual teaching in Cairns.