

Lake Supreme

Seven days on Olkhon Island in Lake Baikal, Russia

By Jack Fisher

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Let's get one thing straight: the water in Lake Baikal is cold. It's late afternoon in the middle of July, the sun is beating down and the thermometer is touching thirty. Perfect for a dip in the water, right? Wrong. It's freezing. But there is an old saying in these parts that touching the Baikal waters will add five years to your life, while swimming in them adds 25. So, inch by inch, I insert my reluctant body into the icy waters. I just hope the longevity is worth it...

Deep in the wilds of Siberia near the Mongolian border lies Lake Baikal, one of the planet's most impressive natural wonders. The deepest lake in the world, it holds nearly a quarter of all the fresh water on earth. Surrounded by wild mountains and Siberian taiga forest, Baikal has long been a national treasure for the Russian people. But recently more and more foreigners are being drawn to its natural beauty – including me.

Base-camp for my Baikal trip was Irkutsk, once known as the 'Paris of Siberia'. Irkutsk is a popular stop on the Trans-Siberian railway and this is how most foreign visitors find themselves at the lake – typically spending a day or two at the lakeside town of Listvyanka, an hour or so away by train. But I didn't fancy fighting over the deckchairs. I wanted to find the real Baikal. So when I heard of an island in the middle of the lake with no running water, barely any electricity, and a mere seven hours away by bus, my bags were packed and I was on my way. Welcome to Olkhon Island, one of the most unspoilt places on earth.

The island, roughly 10 miles wide and 25 miles from end to end, can only be reached by boat. For many islanders a trip to the mainland involves joining the tailback of vehicles queuing for the tiny car ferry. Fortunately the bus to and from Irkutsk is allowed to jump the queue and after a long day I finally reached Khuzir, the largest settlement on the island. There is a variety of places to stay in Khuzir - homesteads, bed & breakfasts, beach camps – but I was heading straight to Nikita's Village.

Seventeen years ago Nikita Bencharov, tired of beating all-comers as Russian national table tennis champion, came to the island to visit a friend for a month. He's still here. After noticing the increasing number of visitors attracted to Olkhon's natural beauty, he hung up his bat for good and set about building small but functional wooden cabins which he could offer to tourists short of a place to stay. Today, this eclectic collection has evolved into a thriving community. For 550 Roubles (roughly £11), you get a night in comfortable, if basic, accommodation and three home cooked meals a day.

Your stay on Olkhon can be as independent or organised as you like. I spent most of my time exploring the island on foot, admiring the views from its dramatic cliffs and pristine beaches. But to get the most out of your stay it's worth taking advantage of the different excursions that Nikita's offer. I signed up for a one-day jeep tour of the island but there are several different activities on offer, from fishing trips to tours of the lake by boat.

I was joined on the tour by four other guests and our guide for the day, a local named Gregori. Having lived there all his life Gregori knew every inch of the island, so I sat back in his jeep – an essential vehicle on an island where roads are scarce – as we headed north, to the tip of the island. Throughout the day we stopped at various points of interest and Gregori gave us a feel for the island and its culture and history.

One strange (and recurring) sight was monuments surrounded by mounds of broken bottles. Gregori explained that these were shamanistic ceremonial grounds. The region around Baikal, particularly around the eastern shore, is home to the shamanism-practising Buryat people. Shamans are believed to be able to commune with the spiritual worlds, and to aid their transitions they often imbibe alcohol or hallucinogenic substances during ceremonies. The drink of choice is usually vodka, and afterwards the empty bottles are smashed and offered up to the gods.

At the northern-most tip we disembarked and headed for the cliffs. It was there I got a real sense of the immensity of the lake – water as far as the eye could see, in all directions. While we were taking in the views Gregori prepared lunch – barbecued Omul fish, unique to Baikal. In fact, Baikal is altogether an ecologist's paradise. Remote and relatively untouched by modern civilisation, 80% of its marine species are found nowhere else on the planet.

My seven days on Olkhon flew by. Whether it's exploring the island, lazing on the beach, braving the Baikal waters or practising your table tennis, there's never a shortage of things to do. There are easier ways to see Baikal – hop on any eastbound train from Irkutsk and you'll get a view from the window – but to really experience this charming place requires escaping from distractions and immersing yourself in nature. And there is no better place for that than Olkhon Island.

Getting There

Irkutsk is a major stop on the Trans-Siberian (Moscow-Vladivostok) and Trans-Mongolian (Moscow-Beijing) trains. Alternatively it can be reached by plane from Moscow (£200-300 return), Beijing (approx. £200 return) and all major Russian cities. There are several buses per day from Irkutsk to Olkhon.

Being There

Nikita's Homestead offers a variety of accommodation from 550 Roubles (£11) per person per day, including meals. See www.olkhon.info for more information.

When To Go

July to September is the best time to visit temperature-wise, although you may have to watch out for ticks in any wooded areas. The lake freezes over between January and May, when temperatures can reach -35°C .