

All Aboard: A myth-shattering journey on the Trans-Mongolian railway

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The Trans-Siberian railway is probably the most well-known rail journey in the world. It is also perhaps the most misunderstood. The most common misconception stems from the name itself. Many's the traveller who has started out with the idea of 'doing the Trans-Siberian' - and ended up doing something rather different. The actual Trans-Siberian railway stretches 5000km from Moscow to Vladivostok, on the east coast of Russia. Approximately three-quarters along the way, just after the Siberian city of Irkutsk, a line branches off to the south, crosses Mongolia, enters northern China and arrives in Beijing. This is the journey most tourists take, and is more accurately known by a different name: the Trans-Mongolian.

There are three main reasons why the Trans-Mongolian route is more popular than the Trans-Siberian: (a) there's a heck of a lot more to do in Beijing than in Vladivostok, (b) the possibilities of onward travel from Vladivostok – basically the ferry to Japan or an about-turn - are somewhat limited, and (c) it passes through Mongolia, one of the world's most fascinating countries.

The standard direction of travel is to start in Moscow and head east, but we – my partner Christiane and I - began our Trans-Mongolian journey in Beijing. As we were ticketless (misconception no. 2: many tourists buy their tickets well in advance through a travel agency, when it is actually much cheaper - and reasonably straightforward - to buy tickets on the spot) our first port of call was the Chinese state travel agency, CITS. In ten minutes we had parted with 1200 RMB (roughly £120) each in exchange for a ticket for the first leg of our journey: to Ulaan Baatar, the capital of Mongolia.

(Misconception no. 3: there is no Trans-Mongolian train service - or Trans-Siberian for that matter, despite holiday brochures advertising the 'Trans-Siberian Express'. It is simply a stretch of railway, and there are hundreds of different trains which travel on it. Attempting to buy a ticket for the Trans-Mongolian to Ulaan Baatar would be akin to going to London Euston and asking for the Trans-Britain Express to Milton Keynes).

So, armed with our tickets, backpacks and a bag stuffed with provisions, we boarded the train. The first task - locating our cabin - was achieved without too much trouble. The second was to acquaint ourselves with our cabin-mates. We'd booked second-class tickets which meant sharing our cabin with two others, and as we'd be spending the next 30 hours together I thought it would be nice if we got on. They could speak no English, but their friendly smiles and attempts at communication boded well.

So far so good. Except for one thing: the heat. I was sweating profusely, and this was 7 in the morning. It soon became apparent that the air conditioning was out of service. To the Mongolians, the answer to this problem was simple: to remove all possible layers of clothing. Thus we were treated to the surreal sight of gangs of Mongolian men roaming up and down the train in their underpants. Unfortunately modesty prevented me from joining in which, given that it was mid-summer and the

washing facilities can only be described as basic, was not a good thing - for me or my cabin-mates.

(Misconception no. 4: a journey on the Trans-Mongolian - or Trans-Siberian – railway is no luxury trip. Holiday brochures tend to paint it as a close cousin to the Orient Express. In fact it is much more prosaic. Having said that, the cabins are fairly roomy, clean sheets are provided and the corridors are cleaned daily. The biggest problem is the lack of showering facilities – any attempt at an all-over wash requires incredible feats of contortion in the washroom cubicle.)

My first Trans-Mongolian day came and went in a flash (misconception no. 5: some people are put off by the prospect of going stir crazy with boredom. In fact, most passengers find that time passes surprisingly quickly – although obviously a good book or two can help) and I was soon ready for an early night. So it was with somewhat imperfect timing that we arrived at the Mongolian border. Border procedures are, to put it mildly, a tedious affair. There are forms to be filled, passports to be checked, the whole train has to be searched for contraband or stowaways, and to top it all off, the whole procedure has to be carried out twice – at both sides of the border.

Day 2, and by mid-afternoon we arrived at our first stop: Ulaan Baatar. I said goodbye to my cabin-mates and hello to a new country – and a whole new world. Mongolia (misconception no. 6: there is no Outer Mongolia. Mongolia was annexed by China in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. While the northern half of Mongolia managed to gain independence in 1911, the southern half remained in China and became the province known as Inner Mongolia. The Chinese then took to referring to the independent state of Mongolia as Outer Mongolia) has to be one of the most intriguing countries on Earth. The capital itself, while possessing a certain unpolished charm, is nothing to write home about. The countryside is the attraction, and after a couple of days in Ulaan Baatar we had arranged ourselves a 12-day jeep tour. With two other tourists and a local driver/guide, we were off to explore ‘the land with no fences’.

(At this stage I must confess a misconception of my own. I had assumed that Mongolian nomadic culture was a thing of the past – something kept up in small rural pockets, perhaps, but nothing more. In fact, outside of the capital nomads are the rule rather than the exception. There is no land ownership, few roads, and even fewer buildings – just swathes and swathes of beautiful countryside dotted with nomadic families and their herds of animals.)

Our tour took in ancient Buddhist monasteries, rolling sand dunes, volcanic mountains, alpine lakes with water so clear you can see for yards and yards, traditional throat singers, horse riding, and much, much more. We stayed in nomad families’ gers, the traditional round white tents that are packed up and reassembled when the families move on to new land every six months or so, and revelled in the hospitality of these warm, friendly people. After 12 rewarding days we returned to

Ulaan Baatar and made preparations for the second leg of our journey - to the Siberian city of Irkutsk.

This was undoubtedly the slowest of all our Trans-Mongolian journeys, lasting almost two days. Much of the time was taken up at the Russian border, which made the Mongolian-Chinese border procedures seem like a model of efficiency. It didn't help that entire train had to be raised while the bogies were changed, as Russian railways operate on different gauges from those in China and Mongolia.

Irkutsk was once known as the Paris of Siberia. While it's plain that the simile was coined in a previous age, it still has a certain appeal. A relaxed city, with tree-lined boulevards and plenty of wooden houses remaining, it can occupy two or three days of anybody's time. Ideally a longer stay should be planned, one which allows a side-trip to one of the world's natural wonders: Lake Baikal.

Lake Baikal is the deepest lake in the world and an ecologist's paradise, remote and relatively untouched by modern civilisation. There are a couple of lakeside towns not far from Irkutsk, but I chose enchanting Olkhon Island, seven hours away by bus. With no electricity or running water there was little to distract me from the natural beauty of the crystal-clear waters, pristine beaches, and stunning cliffs. After seven days of relaxing and communing with nature, my batteries were well and truly recharged and we headed back to Irkutsk to prepare for the next leg of our journey. Although there is no real unmissable highlight in the Russian interior between Irkutsk and Moscow it seemed a shame to cover all that distance without stopping off and sampling the local way of life, and we were planning on a stopover every 24 hours or so.

(Misconception no. 7: some think the only proper way to do the Trans-Mongolian is non-stop. That's five days - seven on the Trans-Siberian - without a shower, and no open space bar the stations. On the last leg of my journey we encountered some rather bedraggled tourists on day 5 of their non-stop trip - which they certainly wouldn't be repeating).

Back in Irkutsk, and we had a tough task ahead: a visit to the station booking office. Buying train tickets in Russia is a tad less straightforward than in Beijing or Ulaan Baatar. However, having written our requirements down in Cyrillic beforehand, and armed with a phrasebook and copious supplies of patience - the Russian penchant for queuing is unfortunately not a misconception - I managed to purloin second-class tickets to Krasnoyarsk, approximately 18 hours east.

(Misconception no. 8: most all-inclusive tour prices include first class tickets. In fact, except for having two berths per cabin instead of four there is not a great deal of difference between first class (SV) and second (Kupe). As Kupe prices are roughly half those of SV, second class is easily the best value. Besides, whilst having a cabin to yourself might seem an attractive proposition, one of the highlights of the Trans-Mongolian is the different characters you meet along the way.)

Krasnoyarsk can be considered a microcosm of the huge changes which have taken place since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Closed to foreigners in Soviet times, it now attracts significant inward investment. Sharp-suited western businessmen mingled around us as we checked into the Hotel Krasnoyarsk. A pleasant city on a relaxing scale, we spent one night and day here before a 20 hour journey to our next stop, Yekaterinburg.

Slightly larger than Krasnoyarsk, Yekaterinburg is known mainly for two reasons: the murder of the Romanovs, Russia's last ruling family, as they hid after fleeing Moscow; and the place where Boris Yeltsin cut his political teeth as mayor in the 1960's (and where he was responsible for covering up the discovery of the Romanovs' remains). In more recent times it has also been known as being a hotbed of mafia activity, but - aside from being frisked with a metal detector as I entered an Italian restaurant - I saw only a confident and peaceful city in our short stay.

After Yekaterinburg we had one more stop before Moscow, at the Golden Ring town of Vladimir. The Golden Ring encompasses the towns and cities around Moscow which have held positions of power at various points in history. Vladimir is one of the best examples, and we spent two nights exploring it and the neighbouring town of Suzdal, a World Heritage Site in its entirety. Here, as in all our stopovers, we found a hotel room on the spot. However, some might prefer to book ahead as decent accommodation in Russia is generally in short supply. It's not especially cheap either: in the interior an en-suite double will set you back 1500-2000 Roubles (£30-£40), while prices in Moscow & St Petersburg are on a par with Western capitals.

(Misconception no. 9: contrary to some expectations, Russia is generally not a cheap country to travel in. Our hotel room in Krasnoyarsk cost four times that in Beijing. As the hotel manager pointed out to me in brusque fashion after I queried the price, it's a former world superpower - not a third world country.).

Finally we arrived in Moscow, and with some sadness disembarked for the final time. In four weeks we'd travelled 6000km and spent 130 hours on the railway. We'd shared food, drink and tales with people of many nations, and watched the scenery change from the Great Wall of China, through the sandstorms of the Gobi desert, Siberian taiga forest, the foothills of the Urals, and finally the churches and cathedrals of the Golden Ring. And we still had Moscow, scene of so much history, ahead of me.

### Getting There

One-way flights between London and Moscow are available for around £200, and between London and Beijing for around £300. Alternatively, the rail journey can be extended at either end. Moscow can be reached from the UK via a number of different routes ([www.seat61.com](http://www.seat61.com) is a useful resource), and the Chinese rail system is fast and efficient. A common variation is to extend the route at least as far as St Petersburg, an 8 hour train journey from Moscow.

### Being There

A number of companies, such as [www.sundownerstravel.com](http://www.sundownerstravel.com), [www.justgorussia.co.uk](http://www.justgorussia.co.uk) and [www.responsibletravel.com](http://www.responsibletravel.com), offer all-inclusive 2-3 week Trans-Mongolian trips. Prices range between £900-£1400 (excluding flights). Planning the trip yourself is significantly cheaper and allows you to plan the stopovers. The tickets for the various legs of our Beijing-Moscow journey, in high season, came to a total of £200. Accommodation is cheap and plentiful in China, cheap but more limited in Mongolia, and scarcer and dearer in Russia.

### Visas

Visas are needed for all three countries. Mongolian and Chinese visas are reasonably straightforward. 30 day tourist visas can be obtained from the embassies in the UK for £35 (Mongolia) and £30 (China). Russian visas are a little more complicated. Firstly a letter of invitation is needed. This can be provided by companies such as [www.waytorussia.net](http://www.waytorussia.net) and [www.visatorussia.com](http://www.visatorussia.com) for around £20. Once the letter has been received the visa can be applied for; the cost from the Russian embassy in the UK is £30. It should also be noted that visas must be registered every time you stay more than 72 hours in a Russian city (your hotel or hostel will usually do this).