

Getting Started

Given the number of options – which route to take, when to go, where to break the journey (if at all), whether to DIY or use the services of a tour operator – a Trans-Siberian trip requires some forethought. This chapter will help you sort your priorities, plan ahead and whet your appetite for the travelling pleasures to come.

WHEN TO GO

The main Trans-Siberian Railway tourist season runs from May to the end of September, with mid-July to early September being the busiest time for foreign visitors, as well as Russians coming and going on their annual holidays. Tickets for all trains during this time should be booked well ahead if at all possible, particularly for the Moscow–Beijing routes.

Although July and August are the warmest months in Siberia (with temperatures rising as high as 40°C), they are often the dampest months in parts of European Russia, with as many as one rainy day in three. In these months the climate in Beijing can also be murder with soaring humidity – the total opposite to Mongolia, where clear skies make the sunlight intense. You may find May and June preferable or September and the first half of October, when autumn brings stunning colours as the leaves turn, particularly in Russia's Far East.

Winter nights are long and freezing, but if you're prepared for it this time of the year can also be fantastic. The theatres open, the furs and vodka come out, and the snow makes everything picturesque. In addition, Russian train tickets are sold at a discount in winter (particularly in November and most of December and January through April). The best winter month to visit is March, after the deep freeze of December to February.

Least liked everywhere are the first snows beginning in late October (but sometimes earlier) and the spring thaw (April), which turn everything to mud and slush.

See p305 for details on festivals and events, and p306 for details on holidays.

See Climate Charts (p300) for more information.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Getting your visas – we'll guide you through the paperwork (p315).
- Very warm clothes and a long, windproof coat, if you're visiting during winter.
- Slip-on footwear, like thongs (flip-flops) or Chinese cloth sandals, and loose, comfortable clothes, such as a tracksuit for wearing on the train.
- Thick-soled, waterproof and comfortable walking shoes.
- Strong insect repellent for summer.
- A plug for a bathroom basin.
- Cards, phrasebooks, pocket dictionaries, and photos of family and your home for breaking the ice with your cabin mates.
- A stash of painkillers or other decent hangover cures.
- A sense of humour.

WHAT KIND OF TRIP? Independent vs Group Tour

Independent travel in Russia, China and Mongolia can be a lot of fun, but don't expect it to be necessarily cheap or easy to organise. Away from the major cities your odds of meeting anyone who speaks English are slim; if you can speak and read some Russian and, on the Trans-Mongolian and Trans-Manchurian routes, Chinese and Mongolian, it will improve your trip no end. With limited language skills, everything you attempt will possibly be more costly and more difficult. However, it's far from impossible and if you really want to meet locals and have a flexible itinerary, this is the way to go.

To smooth the way somewhat, it's a good idea to consider using a specialist travel agency to arrange your visas, and make some of your train and accommodation bookings. Most will be happy to work on your itinerary to create your own individual package tour. It's also possible to arrange guides and transfers through an agency, and the prices can sometimes be better than you'd be able to negotiate yourself with or without language skills. Note, though, that if you use an agency *just* to book train tickets, you will certainly pay more (sometimes far more) than what you'd pay for the same tickets if you buy them yourself once in Russia, China or Mongolia. Outside of the busy June to August travel period and over a few key holidays, such as Easter, buying tickets yourself shouldn't be too much of a problem.

On group tours everything is taken care of and all you need do is pay and turn up. Tours can cater to special interests and range from backpacker basics to full-on tsarist luxury. You'll seldom be alone – which can be a curse as well as a blessing depending on the company. This will also cut down on your chances of interacting with locals: on some trips whole carriages of the train are filled with foreign tourists. Opportunities to head off the beaten track or alter the itinerary are also very limited, if not impossible.

Staying on the Train vs Getting On & Off

Aficionados of going nonstop from Moscow to Vladivostok or Beijing – both are journeys of seven days – often compare it to being on a sea voyage or having a beach holiday indoors. It's a chance to sleep and read, perhaps sharpen up your card-playing and chess skills with fellow passengers, while the landscape unreels in cinematic slow motion outside. Approached in this manner, the trip can be a relaxing, languorous experience, not to mention a chance to form some memorable relationships (see below).

IN PRAISE OF THE NONSTOP JOURNEY *Steve Noble*

After travelling the Trans-Siberian/Mongolian route several times, my favourite journey was non-stop from St Petersburg to Beijing (changing trains in Moscow). Boarding the train, I only spoke a few Russian words, but disembarked in Beijing fluent in vodka-speak Russian and able to communicate. During the eight-night journey, I met babushkas with offerings of tasty food, children who wanted to play, soldiers with copious amounts of vodka, students who taught me Russian and two sweetheart *provodnitsas* (carriage attendants), who helped me organise showers, among other things. Besides two Poles and three Romanians, I was the only foreigner onboard. With goodbye hugs and kisses at many stations en route, I had made many friends. Everyone wanted to know the foreigner. Russian curiosity and hospitality is truly amazing. If I could've stayed aboard that same train when it returned to Moscow that evening, I would've in a heartbeat.

TOP TENS

Best Railway Stations

Many of the historic stations along the Trans-Siberian route are worth visiting in their own right. From St Petersburg, the following stations are in order of appearance from west to east:

- Vitebsk (p88) – Style Moderne delight and starting point of Russia's first public railway to Tsarskoe Selo.
- Yaroslavl (p122) – fitting start or finish to the Trans-Siberian is this 1902 stylised reproduction of a traditional Russian fort.
- Novosibirsk (p165) – Siberia's largest station is a temple to the Trans-Siberian.
- Krasnoyarsk (p185) – big, grand and self-consciously spired, with a great mural of Lenin and comrades.
- Irkutsk (p189) – admire the well-proportioned classicism of this station.
- Severobaikalsk (p244) – Le Corbusier-style station on the BAM.
- Olovyannaya (p271) – a *stolovaya* (canteen) now occupies the pretty, if dishevelled original 1898 wooden station building.
- Tynda (p249) – futuristic Brezhnev meets *The Jetsons* structure, by far the city's most impressive architecture.
- Birobidzhan (p224) – the station's name is written in Hebrew; there's a star of David on the front of it, too, and a Jewish statue.
- Vladivostok (p230) – restored old beauty, with detailed ceiling murals.

Our Favourite Festivals & Events

Many travellers schedule their train journey to coincide with the events that take place throughout the year. There are plenty to choose from – peruse the following date-organised list:

- Ice Lantern Festival (Harbin), 5 January to 15 February (p276)
- Chinese New Year/Spring Festival (Beijing and Harbin), January/February (p305)
- Ice Festival (Khövsgöl Lake, Mongolia), 19 to 20 February (p305)
- Winteriada: International Baikal Nordic Games Festival (Irkutsk), February/March (p305)
- Easter (Russia), March/April (p305)
- Victory Day (Russia), 9 May
- White Nights Arts Festival (St Petersburg), June (p90)
- Roaring Hoofs International Live Music Festival (Ulaanbaatar), June/July (p305)
- Naadam (Ulaanbaatar), 11 and 12 July (p262)
- Mid-Autumn/Moon Festival (China), September/October (p306)

Tips for Blending in on the Train

Contributing author Robert Reid offers his sage, and sometimes satirical, advice on making like a local on the Trans-Siberian.

- Get yourself sporty – everyone dresses up as if they're headed to a parallel bars rally in Nikolaevsk-na-Amure! Think track pants, preferably striped. Adidas is a bonus.
- Men: clean-cut haircuts, please (something betwixt George Clooney and *Chariots of Fire*). If you're in a large group, ensure 10% to 20% of you have a moustache.
- Women: hair dye is happily received (bleaches, strawberries, root-beer cranberries for older gals, streaks of yellow) but NOT mandated.
- By all means wear coloured socks with your sandals!
- Drink beer on platforms at stops; drink vodka in wagons.
- Don't smile at strangers – only smile if something amuses you or you see someone you know.
- Loose cotton T-shirts are good to wear, nothing fancy, preferably labelled in English ('Russia', or my favourite: 'No Limits').
- Carry clear bags advertising your makeshift lunches: too many tomatoes, too many cucumbers and at least one full of *kolbasa* (sausage).
- Smoke – a lot (but not in the cabin; go between carriages for that).
- It'd help if you look Russian and speak the thing.

The aim, however, of this guide is to tempt you off the train and get you exploring the fascinating countries it passes through. At the very least we'd recommend breaking your journey once – the most obvious point being in Irkutsk (p189) to visit Lake Baikal. On the Trans-Mongolian route consider a stop in Ulaanbaatar (p257) en route to Beijing, while on the Trans-Manchurian route a pause in Harbin (p273) is a possibility. See p15, p21 and the highlights appearing at the start of individual destination chapters for other ideas of where to leave the train.

Bear in mind that there's no such thing as a hop-on, hop-off Trans-Siberian ticket – every time you disembark you'll have to buy a new onward ticket. This can all be arranged in advance with agents, and in the bigger cities along the route it's pretty simple to do it yourself; see each chapter for hints on where to buy tickets. Also consider the direction in which you might travel. If you want to meet Russians, starting at Vladivostok and heading west is recommended, since far fewer foreign travellers take this route than the popular eastbound services from Moscow or westbound from Beijing.

TRAIN BOOKINGS

For full details of the routes covered here see the route descriptions at the start of each of the destination chapters. For the first four days' travel from Moscow, the main Trans-Siberian, Trans-Manchurian and Trans-Mongolian services all follow the same route through the Urals and into western Siberia, over the Yenisey River and on to Irkutsk in eastern Siberia.

On the fifth day, after rounding the southern tip of Lake Baikal, the Trans-Mongolian train branches off, heading south for the Mongolian border 250km away. The Trans-Manchurian stays with the main line for 12 hours past Lake Baikal, before it also peels off, heading southeast for Zabaikalsk on the Chinese border, some 368km away.

For information on the types of trains and carriages travelling these routes, see p331.

Moscow to Vladivostok

The 1/2 *Rossiya* train is the top Moscow–Vladivostok service. If you're planning to stop off at Irkutsk, also consider using the 9/10 *Baikal*, reputed to be one of the best trains in Russia in terms of carriage standards and service.

Other good services that can be usefully included in a Moscow to Vladivostok itinerary include: the 15/16 *Ural* between Moscow and Yekaterinburg; 25/25 *Sibiryak* between Moscow and Novosibirsk; 7/8 *Sibir* between Novosibirsk and Vladivostok; 55/56 *Yenisey* between Moscow and Krasnoyarsk; and 5/6 *Okean* between Khabarovsk and Vladivostok.

If you're planning to frequently hop on and off trains and want to save some money along the way, it's a good idea to avoid the premium trains and go for the regular services, which will almost always be *platskart* (*platskartny*; open carriage; see p334). Most of these services are perfectly acceptable and take pretty much the same travelling time point to point as the premium trains.

Moscow to Ulaanbaatar & Beijing

The more popular of the two options running directly between Moscow and Beijing is the 3/4 Trans-Mongolian service, a Chinese train that travels via Ulaanbaatar and the only one to offer deluxe carriages (see p333) with showers.

If you're planning to stop off in Irkutsk, there's also the less fancy daily 264/263 service to/from Ulaanbaatar.

The weekly 19/20 Trans-Manchurian service is a Russian train and takes half a day longer to reach Beijing, but in doing so it avoids the need for a Mongolian visa.

COSTS & MONEY

Russia

Avoid the major cities and use the *platskart* carriages of overnight trains as an alternative to hotels and it's possible to live on US\$30 per day. However, if you visit the main cities, eat Western-style meals in restaurants and travel on *kupe* (*kupeyny*; compartmentalised carriage) trains, US\$80 per day is a more realistic figure. Prices drop away from the metropolises, but not significantly, and in remote areas, such as the Russian Far East, everything can cost considerably more.

Dual pricing is another issue. As a foreigner you'll find yourself paying more than a local pretty much always as far as admission to museums and tourist sites is concerned and sometimes at hotels, too (although not in Moscow or St Petersburg, where hotel prices are the same for everyone). It's not unusual for a foreigner to be charged 10 times the amount Russians are charged to enter museums – not entirely unfair given the vast disparity between average Western and Russian incomes. Remember your extra money is desperately needed to protect the very works of art and artefacts you've come to see. It's often fair game for taxi drivers and sometimes market sellers, who may think they can charge foreigners more – check with locals for prices, but don't expect that knowledge to be much use unless you can bargain in Russian. You'll rarely be short-changed by staff in restaurants, cafés and bars, though.

China

Costs in Beijing vary widely depending on the level of comfort expected. Once in Beijing, thrifty travellers can survive on as little as US\$30 per

LONELY PLANET INDEX

Russia

Litre of petrol R15 to R20
Litre of bottled water R12
Bottle of local beer R70
Souvenir *matryoshka* doll R150 to R300
Take-away *bliny* R30

China

Litre of petrol Y3.5
Litre of bottled water Y4
Bottle of local beer Y3
Souvenir T-shirt Y25
Large lamb kebab Y2

Mongolia

Litre of petrol T780
Litre of bottled water T500
Bottle of local beer T1000
Souvenir T-shirt T15,000
Shashlyk T2500

TRAIN TICKET COSTS

In this book we typically quote *kupeyny* (*kupe*; compartmentalised carriage) fares. Expect SV (1st-class) fares to be double this amount and *platskartny* (*platskart*; open carriage) about 40% less. Children under five travel free if they share a berth with an adult, otherwise children under 10 pay half-fare for their own berth. On the Trans-Mongolian and Trans-Manchurian routes, kids under four travel free if they share a berth, while those under 12 pay around 75% of the full fare for their own berth.

Complicating matters is Russian Railways' policy of varying all fares according to seasons. In peak travelling seasons, for example early July to early August and around key holidays such as Easter and New Year, fares can be between 12% to 16% higher than the regular fare. The inverse happens at slack times of the year, such as early January to March, when there are discounts on fares. On *skory poezd* (fast trains) and *firmennye poezdy* (premium trains) it's also possible to have two grades of *kupe* fare: with or without meals.

Fares quoted in this book were collected at the time of writing and should be taken as a general guide only. The following table shows the cost for a *kupe* ticket:

	Irkutsk	Ulaanbaatar	Beijing	Vladivostok
Moscow to	R5400	R3800	R6413	R8000
Irkutsk to	–	R1600	–	R3840
Ulaanbaatar to	–	–	R6635	–

'The aim of this guide is to tempt you off the train and get you exploring the fascinating countries it passes through'

day by staying in youth hostels, travelling by bicycle or bus, and eating from street stalls and cafés. Less-austere travellers can expect to spend US\$60 to US\$80 per day for a decent hotel room, moderately priced meals and an occasional taxi ride. The range, of course, goes all the way up the scale to US\$300 for a five-star luxury hotel and accompanying fancy meals.

In other major cities, such as Shanghai and Hong Kong, you can expect costs to be similar to Beijing, but in more rural parts of the country your budget will certainly go much further. Food costs remain reasonable throughout China, and the frugal can eat for as little as US\$5 a day. Transport costs can be kept to a minimum by travelling by hard-seat on the train, or by bus.

HOW MUCH?

Russia

3-star double room
R3500 to R4000

1 hour of Internet
access R50

2-course meal plus drink
in a decent restaurant
R600 to R1000

Short taxi ride R100

Metro ticket R10

China

3-star double
room Y250

One hour of Internet
access Y2

2-course meal plus drink
in a decent restaurant
Y50 to Y100

Short taxi ride Y10

Metro ticket Y6

Mongolia

Double room in budget
guesthouse T14,000

One hour of Internet
access T800

2-course meal in a decent
restaurant T10,000

Short taxi ride T1000

Best seat at the Naadam
opening T30,000

Mongolia

Accommodation and food can cost as little as US\$10 per day in Ulaanbaatar, but allow up to US\$20 per day for better accommodation, some tastier, Western-style meals, and trips to the theatre and museums.

Elsewhere within Mongolia, travellers on organised tours spend around US\$100 per day (more for extra luxuries). Independent travellers can see the same sights and stay in midrange accommodation for around US\$80 per day. If you share the cost of a private jeep or minivan and camp rather than stay in more expensive *ger* (yurt) camps, you can bring this down to about US\$25 to US\$40 per day. If you're hitching and using public transport around the countryside, allow about US\$10 to US\$15 per day.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

Although you may think you have time on a Trans-Siberian journey to polish off *War and Peace* and several other Russian classics, the truth is that you may well be too busy getting to know your fellow passengers en route. Instead, read up before your trip on how the journey and cultures along the Trans-Siberian routes have been experienced in the past in the following, mainly nonfiction books.

The Trans-Siberian railway has been a rich source of inspiration for many writers. One of the best reads is Colin Thubron's *In Siberia*, where in addition to travelling along the railway, Thubron takes detours to places like the Entsy village of Potalovo near the Arctic Ocean and Magadan on the Sea of Okhotsk. Also appropriate reading for a Trans-Siberian journey are Thubron's earlier works *Among the Russians*, about travelling in European Russia during the 1970s, and *Behind the Wall*, describing his travels in China.

Eric Newby's classic *The Big Red Train Ride* is a hilarious account of hopping on and off the *Rossiya* between Moscow and Nakhodka – it's as much a snapshot of the Soviet era as it is of life on a train. Much more recently, the legendary Dervla Murphy hobbled through Siberia on a crook leg in *Through Siberia By Accident*, characteristically taking the less glamorous Baikal-Amur Mainline (Baikal-Amurskaya Magistral; BAM) route to Tynda. Paul Theroux covers the journey, caustically as usual, in *The Great Railway Bazaar* and, a decade later, *Riding the Iron Rooster*.

In *Siberian Dawn: A Journey Across the New Russia*, Jeffrey Tayler paints an evocative but bleak picture of Siberia. The Russian-speaking author makes his way from the Russian Far East outpost of Magadan to Poland by bus and train, through some pretty hair-raising situations. More romantic (sometimes overly so) is Lesley Blanch's semiautobiographical *Journey Into the Mind's Eye*, which details the author's obsession with

OTHER LONELY PLANET RESOURCES

Several other Lonely Planet books may be useful, especially for anybody spending a significant amount of time in areas away from the railway routes.

For detailed information on each of the three countries covered by this guide see *Russia & Belarus*, *China and Mongolia*. The guides to Beijing, Moscow and St Petersburg are recommended for those staying in these cities for a while. The *Central Asia* guide is good for any travellers branching out along the Turk-Siberian route, while *Greenland & the Arctic* has the lowdown for those planning excursions in Russia's far, far north.

Incredibly handy, especially if you're travelling independently and don't speak the languages of the countries, are Lonely Planet's *Mandarin Phrasebook*, *Mongolian Phrasebook* and *Russian Phrasebook*.

Russia and the Trans-Siberian railway. In *Wall to Wall: From Beijing to Berlin by Rail*, Mary Morris relates her personal experiences – which are not always positive – during a pre-Glasnost journey on the Trans-Mongolian route.

The best cycling-across-Siberia book is *Between the Hammer and the Sickle* by Simon Vickers, although you'll have to hunt around for it as it's out of print.

Fully fictional, but fine reading for its chapters on the Trans-Mongolian route and St Petersburg, is David Mitchell's dazzling debut *Ghostwritten*. James Meek's *The People's Act of Love* is also an imaginative fictional work set in Siberia in 1919, with its plot revolving around the Czech army legion which, in that tumultuous Civil War period, took control of the Trans-Siberian railway.

For more general books on Russia, start with Andrew Meier's acutely observed and elegiac *Black Earth: A Journey Through Russia After the Fall*. In dispatches from Chechnya, Norilsk, Sakhalin and St Petersburg, as well as Moscow, he sums up Russia's current situation superbly. Mark Taplin's *Open Lands – Travels through Russia's Once Forbidden Places* is an engrossing read, covering some of Russia's once off-limits cities, including Vladivostok and Nizhny Novgorod.

For an expat view of life in modern Beijing, dip into Rachel DeWoskin's *Foreign Babes in Beijing*, in which the author dishes the dirt on her life in the capital during the 1990s when she became a soap-opera star. For an insight into rural China, read Peter Hessler's *River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze*, full of poignant and telling episodes during the author's posting as an English teacher in the town of Fuling on the Yangzi River.

Lost Country: Mongolia Revealed, by Jasper Becker, is the strongest piece of contemporary travel writing about Mongolia, detailing what occurred during the darkest years of communism. *Wild East*, by Jill Lawless, is a tightly written, very funny account of the author's experience during the two years she spent editing the *UB Post*. Stanley Stewart's *In the Empire of Genghis Khan* is a mildly entertaining and brutally honest introduction to Mongolia by an Englishman who travelled 1000 miles by horseback across Central Asia and Mongolia.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Trans-Siberian Railway

Australian Broadcasting Company (<http://abc.net.au/news/specials/transsiberia/default.htm>) Slickly produced blog by the ABC's Russia correspondent Emma Griffiths about her 2005 Trans-Siberian journey.

Circumbaikal Railway (<http://kbzd.irk.ru>) Best website for background on the historic Circumbaikal railway.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com/journeys) Read blogs from the authors of this guide about their various Trans-Siberian journeys during 2005.

Man in Seat 61 (www.seat61.com) Mark Smith's amazingly comprehensive website is one of the travel information wonders of the Web. It has great up-to-date sections on the Trans-Siberian routes, plus practically any other rail service that you might need.

Trans-Siberia.com (www.trans-siberia.com) John Pannell's website has some good personal accounts of the journey, photos of his Trans-Siberian trips and links to other useful sources of information.

Trans-Siberian Railway Web Encyclopaedia (www.trans-sib.ru) The best Trans-Siberian website, regularly updated with tonnes of useful information and a huge photo library (there's also a German-language version at www.trans-sib.de).

Russia

CIA World Factbook (www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/rs.html) Read what the US Intelligence has on the Russkies.

Moscow Times (www.moscowtimes.ru) All the latest breaking national news, plus links to the sister paper *St Petersburg Times* and a good travel guide section.

Tourism Department of Russian Federation (www.russiatourism.ru/eng/) The official tourist website has a few useful bits of information.

Way to Russia (www.waytorussia.net) One of the most useful travel websites written and maintained by Russian backpackers. Lots of cool information, including details on arranging visas.

Your Train (www.poezda.net/en/) Invaluable website for planning train journeys to, from and inside Russia.

China

China Daily (www.chinadaily.com.cn) Get with the party line at the online mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

Human Rights in China (www.hrichina.org) Organisation set up in 1989 to promote human rights in China, with useful links.

Muzi China (<http://china.muzi.com>) General and travel information and news about China.

WildChina (www.wildchina.com) Far-flung treks around China, organised within China. Monthly email newsletter.

Zhongwen: Chinese Characters and Culture (www.zhongwen.com) Includes a pinyin chat room and an online dictionary of Chinese characters.

Mongolia

Mongolia National Tourism Centre (www.mongoliatourism.gov.mn) Includes lists of hotels, *ger* camps and travel agencies.

Mongolia Online (www.mol.mn) Has an arts calendar and covers news, currency-exchange rates, and weather in Ulaanbaatar.

Mongolia Today (www.mongoliatoday.com) A colourful online magazine covering all aspects of Mongolian culture.

Mongolia WWW Virtual Library (www.indiana.edu/~mongsoc) An excellent resource with lots of links.

UN in Mongolia (www.un-mongolia.mn) Offers lots of information, especially on the UN's Eastern Steppe Diversity project; check out the cultural magazine *Ger*.

'Way to Russia (www.waytorussia.net) is written and maintained by Russian backpackers'

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

THE TRANS-SIBERIAN ROUTE

**One to Four Weeks /
Vladivostok to Moscow**

Although this classic route can be done in either direction, we suggest going against the general flow by starting in **Vladivostok** (p230), at the far eastern end of Russia, so you can finish up with a grand party in either **Moscow** (p98) or, better yet, **St Petersburg** (p79).

Vladivostok, situated on a stunning natural harbour, merits a couple of days of your time, and it's also worth taking a break at **Khabarovsk** (p224), a lively city on the banks of the Amur River, an overnight hop to the west. Save a couple of days for **Ulan-Ude** (p213), a fascinating city where Russian and Buryat cultures mingle, and from where you can venture into the steppes to visit Russia's principal Buddhist monastery, **Ivolginsk Datsan** (p217). Just west of Ulan-Ude the railway hugs the southern shores of magnificent **Lake Baikal** (p198). Allow at least four days to see the lake, visit the equally lovely **Olkhon Island** (p203) and spend time in **Irkutsk** (p189), one of the Trans-Siberian's most important rail junctions.

Krasnoyarsk (p185), on the Yenisey River, affords the opportunity for scenic cruises along one of Siberia's most pleasant waterways. Crossing the Urals into European Russia, schedule a stop in **Yekaterinburg** (p150), a bustling historic city stocked with interesting museums and sites connected to the murder of the last tsar and his family. Also worth a break before Moscow and St Petersburg are the Golden Ring towns of **Vladimir** (p130) or **Suzdal** (p132), both packed with onion-domed churches, and a million miles away from the pace of the megacities to come.

This 9289km journey can be done nonstop in a week, but we recommend hopping on and off the train and making more of an adventure of it. Spend time seeing the sights in St Petersburg, Moscow and along the route, and you could easily stretch this trip to a month.



THE TRANS-MONGOLIAN ROUTE

One Week / Moscow to Beijing

This highly popular journey between **Moscow** (p98) and **Beijing** (p279) goes via the Mongolian capital of **Ulaanbaatar** (p257), allowing you to compare and contrast the three countries' cultures and people.

The 3/4 trains linking Moscow and Beijing run just once a week, taking just under seven days for the total 7865km journey. By hopping on and off other trains you can make up your own itinerary, and so fully explore the three countries this classic route passes through.

Get creative by breaking away from the regular Trans-Mongolian route. Take a boat from **Nizhny Novgorod** (p134) along the mighty Volga River to the fairy-tale-like **Makariyev Monastery** (p139). From Nizhny Novgorod you can reach **Yekaterinburg** (p150) either via the industrial hub of **Perm** (p139) – from where it's possible to take a trip to see the remains of a Gulag camp or an ice cave – or the old Tatar capital of **Kazan** (p142), with its World Heritage-listed kremlin.

Branch off from **Tyumen** (p156) to the atmospheric old Siberian town of **Tobolsk** (p159), then return by direct train to the appealing city of **Omsk** (p162). A direct train from here will allow you to bypass **Novosibirsk** (p165) and head straight to **Tomsk** (p178), a Siberian gem packed with gorgeous wooden architecture. **Krasnoyarsk** (p185) is the next logical overnight stop, from where you can push on to Irkutsk and Lake Baikal. Stop in either the southern lakeside town of **Port Baikal** (p202) or **Slyudyanka** (p204), from both of which you can make a trip along the **Circumbaikal Railway** (p205).

Crossing into Mongolia will seem to take forever. Reward yourself by alighting at Ulaanbaatar and taking time to explore the beautiful surrounding countryside, perhaps staying at a *ger* (yurt) camp in the **Gorkhi-Terelj National Park** (p268). Two more nights on the train and you'll finally be in Beijing with a fascinating city plus the whole of China waiting to be explored.



ROUTES LESS TRAVELLED

OFF THE BEATEN SIBERIAN TRACK

The 3400km Baikal-Amurskaya Magistral (Baikal-Amur Mainline, or BAM) travels through some of the most rugged and unforgiving of Siberian landscapes. The line officially starts in the drab town of **Tayshet** (p242), but the closest big city, **Krasnoyarsk** (p185), has international flight connections if you wish to skip all points further west.

At **Bratsk** (p243) the train crosses a 1km-long dam. The town also has an excellent open-air ethnographic museum where you can see many of the traditional Siberian buildings rescued when the dam was built. Pleasant **Ust-Kut** (p244) can be used as a base for hydrofoil trips up and down the Lena River. If you're short on time, push on to **Severobaikalsk** (p244), beside Lake Baikal. This is the best base for exploring the relatively unvisited northern end of the lake and also has a small BAM museum.

The most technically difficult section of the BAM to construct comes en route to **Tynda** (p249), where the line climbs over and burrows through mountains, the longest tunnel being 15.34km at **Severomuysk** (p242). Home of the BAM construction company's headquarters, Tynda is a must-stop for its BAM museum and good *banya* (hot bath). From here you could detour along the unfinished Amuro-Yakutskaya Magistral (AYaM) railroad to its current terminus in **Neryungri** (p250), home to an enormous open-cut coal mine. Alternatively continue along the BAM route to **Komsomolsk-na-Amure** (p250), the largest city on the line and a great place to ponder the sacrifices and achievements made by hardy Soviet pioneers. Some 500km further east the BAM terminates at the naval base of **Sovetskaya Gavan** (p242), from where you can pick up a train that doubles back along the line before heading to **Vladivostok** (p230).

Rail enthusiasts and more adventurous travellers will not want to miss this alternative Trans-Siberian journey which, from Krasnoyarsk to Vladivostok, covers 5500km and takes at least six days without overnight stops. Begin in Moscow and you'll add on an extra 4098km and four straight days on the train.



THE BEIJING LOOP

You will want to schedule plenty of time in the fascinating city of **Beijing** (p279) either at the start or end of the trip. A day each is needed to tick off the Forbidden City and Tiananmen Sq, the Great Wall and the Summer Palace.

An excellent overnight service connects the capital with **Harbin** (p273), famous for its midwinter ice sculpture festival. Russians came here at the end of the 19th century to build the railway and handsome architectural evidence of their residence lies at the city's heart close to the Songhua River. Take a couple of days to enjoy Harbin's cosmopolitan atmosphere and visit the nearby **Siberian Tiger Park** (p275).

The Chinese-Russian border lies an overnight train ride away at **Manzhouli**; if you're not on one of the weekly Trans-Manchurian services through to Moscow, it's a simple process of hopping on a bus across to **Zabaikalsk** on the Russian side where you can reconnect with trains through to **Chita** (p219). That pleasant city is a great base for exploring a relatively unvisited area of Siberia where you'll discover a couple of beautiful Buddhist monasteries and a holy mountain at **Alkhanay** (p222). From **Ulan-Ude** (p213) you could branch down towards Mongolia, but since you've come this far it would be a great shame not to venture further west first to see **Lake Baikal**. Apart from Ulan-Ude possible bases for exploring the lake include **Slyudyanka** (p204), **Irkutsk** (p189), **Listvyanka** (p198) and **Olkhon Island** (p203).

Ulaanbaatar (p257) is certainly worth at least a couple of days. Its highlight is the lively and colourful Gandantegchinlen Khiid monastery. From Ulaanbaatar, it's two nights' journey back to Beijing through the Gobi Desert.

Arrange your Russian visa at home before starting out and also get a double-entry visa for China. The 6148km journey can be done in a minimum of a week, but you'll want to schedule around a month to get the most out of the trip.



Snapshot

RUSSIA

Coasting along on a wave of petrodollar profits, Russia is in far better economic shape than at any time in recent memory. Growth is running at over 7% per annum. Inflation is under control, with a consequent stabilisation of the rouble. Three-quarters of state enterprises have either fully or partly been privatised. In all the major cities you'll notice a burgeoning middle class with the commercial trappings that go with it.

Despite these improvements, Russia's economy still has a way to go before it can be said to have fully capitalised on its astonishing natural resources. The boom and bust period of the late 1990s, as well as the abandonment of the social safety net provided by communism, has left many people worse off. According to World Bank figures published in 2004, 20% of Russians live below the poverty line, defined as a monthly income of R1000 (less than €30, or US\$38). At least 5.5 million people are unemployed, although many others considered 'employed' have jobs with little work and less pay. Corruption is practically endemic.

In the December 2003 elections the pro-presidential party United Russia took firm control of Russia's parliament, while in the subsequent presidential election Putin comfortably romped home for a second (and, unless he doesn't change the rules, final) term of office, but few people would say that either of these victories reflected Russians' true political opinions. A substantial part of the public's growing cynicism with the Kremlin owes to its increased control of media and local government, and the politicisation of the law enforcement system. In 2005 the US-based organisation Freedom House classified Russia as 'not free' for the first time since the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991. The KGB might be history, but ordinary Russians now look over their shoulders for Putin's shadowy force of *siloviki* (power people), an unholy alliance of authoritarian law enforcers and bureaucrats who many believe really run the country.

Putin has been accused of exploiting the recent wave of terrorist attacks, such as the 2004 hostage crisis in Beslan and bombing of Moscow's metro, to further curb civil liberties. Even so the international fight against terrorism has brought Russia well and truly out of the diplomatic cold. Relations with the US and both Trans-Siberian neighbours China and Mongolia might now be more cordial than in the past but Russia still has a way to go before it's fully trusted in the region again. Having seen popular revolutions recently sweep away the old guard in Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, there is understandably a certain nervousness in the Kremlin that similar events could happen in Russia in the run-up to the 2008 presidential election.

CHINA

The Communist Party remains solidly entrenched and unchallenged in China. In 2003 a new president (Hu Jintao) and premier (Wen Jiabao) took charge, but any illusions that this would herald a move towards political liberalisation were dashed when the National People's Congress (NPC) denied Hong Kong the hope of choosing its next leader, flying in the face of the Chinese-British deal. State censorship of everything from Shakespeare to Rolling Stones lyrics continues and Internet access remains rigorously monitored, with a firewall 'protecting' China's citizens from BBC news in Chinese and other foreign pollutants.

FAST FACTS

Russia

Population: 143.4 million

Surface area:

17 million sq km

Life expectancy male/
female: 60.4/74 years

GDP per capita: US\$9800

Extent of the Russian rail
network: 87,000km

State pension: about
R2000 per month

Net worth of the 27
richest Russians:
US\$90.6 billion

Per capita consumption of
alcohol: 15.1L per year

Number of Nobel Prize
winners: 20

Time zones: 11

Livestock-to-person ratio:
13 to 1

Population below poverty
line: 36.1%

FAST FACTS**China**

Population: 1.3 billion
 Surface area:
 9.5 million sq km
 Life expectancy male/
 female: 70.65/74.09 years
 GDP per capita: US\$5600
 Extent of Chinese rail
 network: 52,000km
 Number of bicycles/cars
 in Beijing: 10 million/
 2 million
 Literacy rate: 91%
 Internet users: 94 million
 Number of Chinese
 characters: over 56,000
 Length of the Great Wall:
 7200km

In Beijing a heavy police presence saw the 15th anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen massacre pass with little incident, apart from the arrest of at least 16 people in and around the square. Menaced into silence, Falun Gong (an outlawed spiritual movement) rarely makes it to the newspapers. The authorities may have successfully stamped out all dissent in the mainland, but they still have other problems to contend with. According to their own analysts, China has the largest disparity between urban rich and rural poor in the world. Considering the 750-million-strong peasantry perhaps it is no surprise that illegal Chinese immigrants still turn up on European shores. China's GDP may be growing at an annual rate of over 9%, but the banking system is teetering on the edge of crisis.

Nonetheless, big changes are afoot. The monks at the Shaolin Temple plan to register the Shaolin brand as a trademark in over 80 countries, while elite British private schools have decided that opening franchises in Communist China makes perfect sense. You can rocket from Shanghai's Pudong Airport into town at 430km/h on China's first Maglev train (although your hair can turn grey waiting for your rush hour bus to move on Beijing's congested streets). The authorities are aiming to transform the country into a top cricketing nation within two decades, while Manchester United signed Chinese striker Dong Fangzhuo in 2004. And let's not forget the upcoming 2008 Olympics – you certainly won't be able to while visiting Beijing!

MONGOLIA

In stark contrast to Russia and China, Mongolia has developed into a paragon of democracy since the end of communism in 1990. Free and fair elections have become the norm here, with voters overturning the ruling party three times in succession since 1996 – a fact that has made Mongolia a darling among international lenders and the donor community. In 2005 a 'grand coalition government', including ministers from both sides of the political divide, was in power (although political pundits felt sure it couldn't last). The country's president is former prime minister Nambaryn Enkhbayar.

Mongolia's reversal of fortune is most evident on the streets of downtown Ulaanbaatar, where Korean taxis and Land Cruisers have all but erased the Russian Lada, and where fashion boutiques and elegant restaurants have made 'dollar shops' a distant memory. It's here that a burgeoning middle class is forging Mongolia's future, utilising the growing mining and tourism sectors.

Despite all this only half of Mongolians have access to clean drinking water and one-third still live under the poverty line. Infrastructure across the country is rudimentary and important economic sectors such as livestock husbandry have proven susceptible to natural disasters – some 11 million heads of livestock were killed between 1999 and 2002 in the wake of bad winter storms. The urban and rural poor grumble about ongoing corruption, and the environment suffers from new legislation that favours mining and business.

Increasingly Mongolia has turned to countries such as Japan, Korea, Germany, the US and the UK for assistance in redevelopment. Despite obvious challenges ahead there is hope that Mongolia can be a model for other developing countries. Its efforts to meet international expectations were rewarded in 2004 with admission to the 'Millennium Challenge Account', the US's multibillion-dollar foreign-aid programme designed to spur growth in low-income countries that display democracy and good governance.

FAST FACTS**Mongolia**

Population: 2.8 million
 Surface area:
 1.56 million sq km
 Life expectancy male/
 female: 62.3/66.9 years
 GDP per capita: US\$1840
 Extent of Mongolian rail
 network: 1810km
 Number of mobile phone
 users: 404,400
 Literacy rate: 98%
 Inflation: about 6%
 Livestock-to-person ratio:
 13 to 1
 Population below poverty
 line: 36.1%

The Authors



SIMON RICHMOND

Coordinating Author, St Petersburg, Ulan-Ude to Beijing via Mongolia, Chita to Beijing via Manchuria, Beijing

Simon clocked up his first Trans-Siberian trip from Vladivostok in 1997, during which he was attacked by dogs, robbed on the train and got plastered on vodka at Lake Baikal. All this just whetted the award-winning travel writer's appetite and in 2001 he returned to Russia to coauthor the first edition of this book, hopping on and off the train from St Petersburg to the Pacific. The following year he was back in Russia and discovering the BAM as part of his research for *Russia & Belarus*, the new edition of which he has also coauthored. For this book, Simon scored the hat trick by travelling across the Trans-Siberian, Trans-Mongolian and Trans-Manchurian routes.

My Favourite Trip

I'll never forget the research trip I made for the first edition of this book, most likely because I got arrested, almost losing all my bags (including computer and notes) and money in the process. The day was saved by the wonderful Russian people who pulled together to reunite me with all my belongings. Either side of this pivotal event, I took time to further explore previously visited Russian cities such as St Petersburg (p79), Moscow (p98) and Irkutsk (p189), as well as discover gems such as Krasnoyarsk (p185), Tobolsk (p159) and Tomsk (p178). After 10 weeks on and off the rails you'd have thought I'd have had enough, but what I remember most was the lump in my throat as I stepped on that final train from Khabarovsk (p224) to Vladivostok (p230).



MARK ELLIOTT

Yekaterinburg to Krasnoyarsk, Krasnoyarsk to Lake Baikal, Irkutsk to Vladivostok

Mark has been riding ex-Soviet trains for over a decade, having first crossed Central Asia in 1994 as a cheap way home from Japan. He's returned to the former USSR a dozen times since, fascinated to see the reality behind the misinformed Cold War propaganda that still influences many Western attitudes towards today's Russia. Beneath a gruff, deadpan exterior, it's the great humanity and warmth of the Russian soul that keeps drawing Mark back to Siberia. Mark has written a dozen guidebooks for diverse destinations from Azerbaijan to Greenland. He now lives in Belgium with the lovely Danielle, whom he met while jamming blues harmonica in a Turkmenistan club.

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ROBERT REID

Irkutsk to Vladivostok, Tayshet to Sovetskaya Gavan via BAM

Prompted by rebellion and the library's air-con on hot Oklahoma days, Robert picked up old copies of *Soviet Life* as a kid, then Dostoevsky paperbacks as a college kid. He studied Russian and spent his 'first summer of Russia' (1992) in St Petersburg and Moscow, where he also volunteered at Echo Moscow radio. He's travelled around Eastern Europe loads, updating the Bulgaria chapter for Lonely Planet's *Eastern Europe* guide. While updating sections of the Trans-Siberian route in Russia's Far East he counted 151 moustaches on Russian sidewalks, railways and boats. He lives barefaced in Brooklyn, New York.



MARA VORHEES

Moscow, Moscow to Yekaterinburg, Yekaterinburg to Krasnoyarsk

Mara has been travelling to Russia since the days of Cold Wars and communism. After the Soviet collapse, she lived for two years in Yekaterinburg, where she worked on a foreign aid project. In her adventures as a travel writer, she has spent two months riding the Trans-Siberian railroad, four weeks cruising the Volga River, two weeks circling the Golden Ring and seven seconds swimming in Lake Baikal. She is the author of Lonely Planet's guide to *Moscow* and coauthor of *Russia & Belarus*.