

Irkutsk to Vladivostok

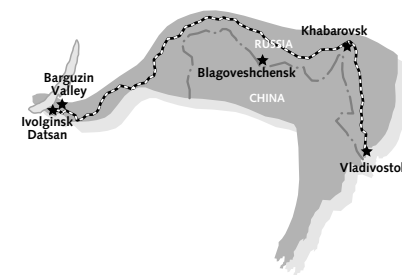
Just because you've made it to Baikal doesn't mean Russia is over. Almost hugging the Chinese border east of Baikal, the Trans-Siberian clamours along for another 4000km (almost doubling the Moscow-Irkutsk journey), going past untouched taiga and blue mountains and tiny towns of gingerbread houses. This is the heart of Russia's Far East, its own 'wild east' where Cossacks rode hoisting swords and in Soviet times Gulag-bound prisoners packed train carriages rattling towards grim new homes.

Looming near the tracks' end – and the irresistible destination for many – is Vladivostok, a closed-off naval town during the USSR days, with peaks sprinkled along the edge of snaking bays and rattling trams. But on the way are tempting stopoffs, too. Alive with Asian smiles, Ulan-Ude is the launching point for visiting eastern Baikal or for buses to Mongolia. Outside both Ulan-Ude and Chita, Buryat Buddhist monasteries are a major draw. South of the Trans-Siberian on the northern bank of the Amur River, Blagoveshchensk is an alternative exit point from Russia, where daily ferries of commerce-oriented Russians and Chinese cross national lines to the 'new' Chinese town of Heihe, which is quickly outsizeing its tsar-era Russian neighbour.

Outside Khabarovsk – itself the most cosmopolitan centre of the Russian Far East, with sushi bars overlooking the wide Amur River – is Birobidzhan and the Jewish Autonomous Region, where Jews relocated during the Soviet days, and a small local population maintains its cultural heritage. In Primorsky Territory (Kray), outside Vladivostok, you can day trip to tiger reserves and see birds on a massive lake that straddles the Chinese border.

HIGHLIGHTS

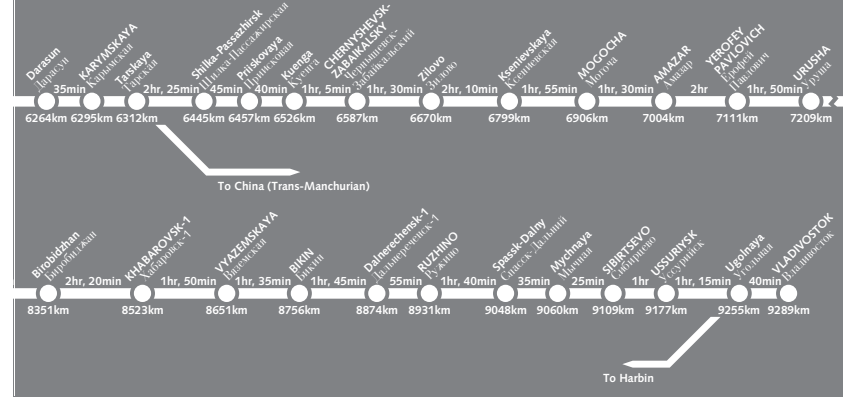
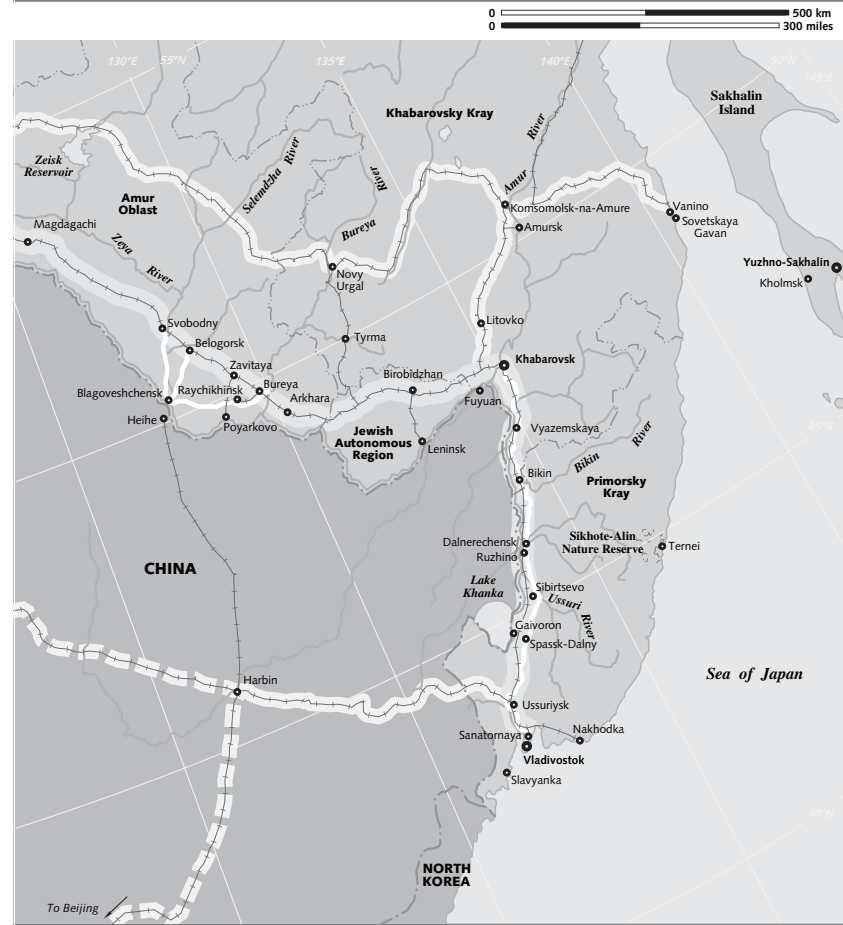
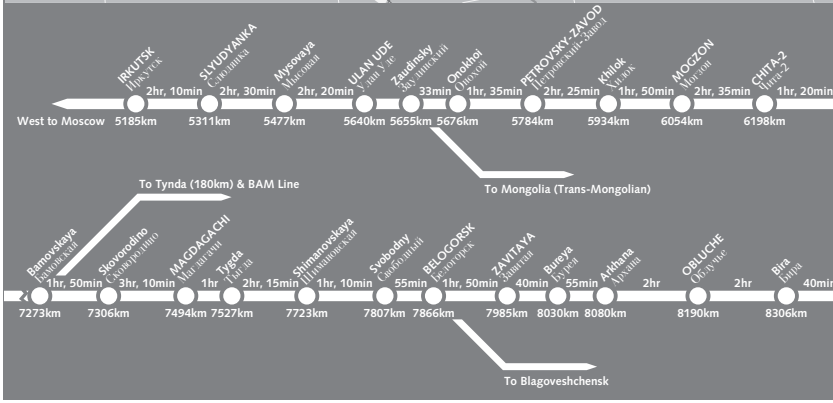
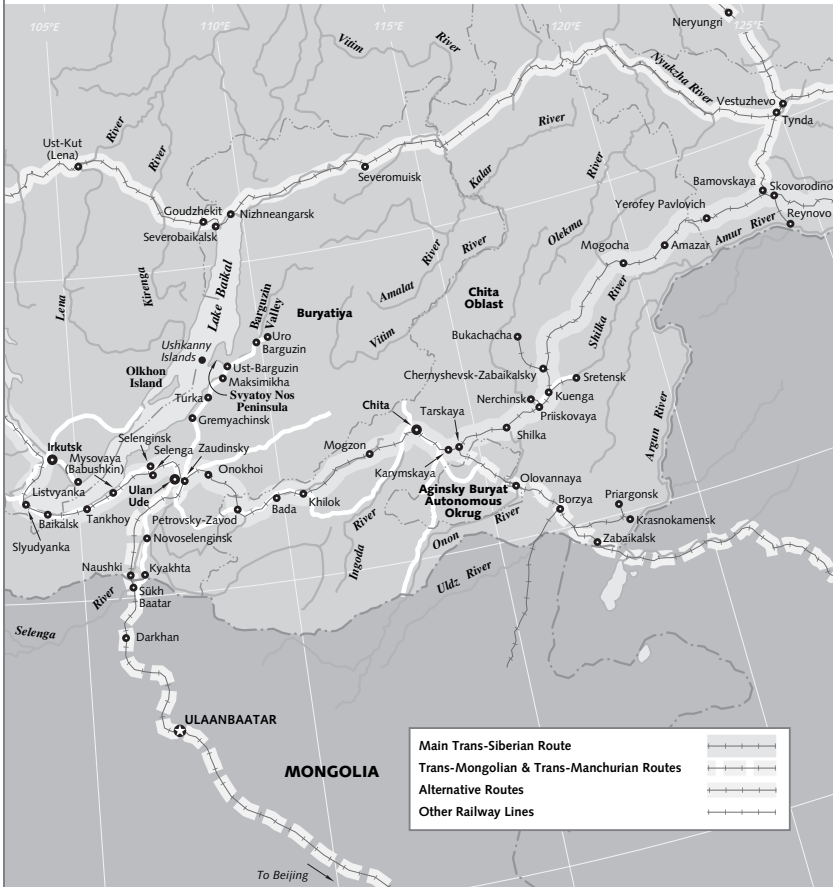
- Boat past naval ships in the picturesque harbour in **Vladivostok** (p230)
- Cross the Trans-Siberian's longest bridge over the Amur River at cosmopolitan **Khabarovsk** (p211)
- Explore Baikal's lesser-known eastern shore at the rarely visited **Barguzin Valley** (p218)
- Sense the resurgence of Buryat Buddhism at **Ivolginsk Datsan** (p217)
- Cross into China from the historical border town of **Blagoveshchensk** (p223)



■ ROUTE DISTANCE: 4104KM

■ DURATION: 73 HOURS

IRKUTSK TO VLADIVOSTOK



THE ROUTE

Irkutsk to Ulan-Ude

North of the line, at **528km**, a cheery Vladimir Ilych Lenin waves from the hill side well before the train approaches **Slyudyanka** (531km; p204). For 200km, the line now runs along the southern shore of **Lake Baikal** (5300km to 5500km), passing through a series of tunnels blasted into the cliffs along the water's edge. Many passengers are glued to the windows gawping at the shore and icy blue waters of the world's deepest lake. In fact the best views are probably in the section immediately after Slyudyanka, before reaching **Baikalsk** (5352km), where the air is soured by a huge, controversial pulp mill.

Around 5390km, the train crosses the river that marks the border of Buryatiya (Buryat Republic), one of Russia's semiautonomous ethnic republics. Closely related to the Mongols, the Buryats have been undergoing something of a Buddhist revival but have largely given up their former nomadic herding lifestyles.

The town of **Tankhoy** (5426km) lies in the centre of the Baikal Nature Reserve. Further along the shore, **Mysovaya** (5477km) is the port where the *Baikal* and *Angara* used to start (or finish) their journeys across the lake, ferrying train carriages and their passengers, before the south-bank railway was completed. The obelisk at Mysovaya *zheleznodorozhny vokzal* (train station) marks the spot where in 1906 tsarist forces shot revolutionary Ivan Babushkin, for whom the surrounding town is now renamed.

Directly below the present line one can clearly make out sections of older tracks. These were half-drowned after the construction of the Angara dam near Irkutsk raised the level of Lake Baikal.

If you are travelling west, keep a lookout for the lake from around **5507km**, when the train suddenly pulls out from between the forested hill sides and reveals a glorious view of Baikal's clear blue waters and the cliffs on the other side.

Just before reaching the train station of **Selenga** (5562km, for the town of Selenginsk) the train line hooks up with the Selenga River, which it will follow into Mongolia if you are on the Trans-Mongolian. Between here and Ulan-Ude, the river

valley provides ample photo opportunities, such as at 5630km, when the train crosses the river.

The train stops for about 15 minutes at **Ulan-Ude** (5640km), the capital of Buryatiya. Sadly, that's not long enough to dash to the centre of this relatively exotic city to see the world's biggest Lenin head. Instead, at the northwestern end of the platform you can admire the old steam locomotive that sits in front of the depot.

Ulan-Ude to Chita

The Trans-Mongolian line (p253) doubles back at **Zaudinsky** (5655km), which is virtually a suburb of Ulan-Ude. The mainline follows the wide Uda Valley. At an unmarked station about half an hour out of Ulan-Ude (before Onokhoi) you'll see a marshalling yard with a graveyard of rusting steam locos. The scenery here is pretty as the wide, flood-prone valleys continue, their rolling meadows backed distantly by trees on the north-facing slopes. Quaint log-cabin settlements are scattered with patches of attractive woodland. Upon entering Chitinskaya region (**5771km**), local time becomes Moscow time plus six hours.

The train stops for about 12 minutes at **Petrovsky-Zavod** (5784km), the station for the town of Petrovsk-Zabaikalsky. The station name (and the old name of the town) means 'Peter's Factory', so-called for the huge ironworks you can still see from the train. Decembrists (see p194) jailed here from 1830 to 1939 are commemorated in a large, photogenic mural at the station.

The railway now heads northeast following the Khilok Valley, with the **Yablonoy Mountains** (between 5800km and 6300km) forming blue shadows in the distance. At the small town of **Bada** (5884km), look for the MiG fighter monument and the cluster of old aircraft on the runway to the north.

Around **5925km**, the train slows as it leaves the valley and moves into the mountains, affording inspiring views of the winding river, and fields filled with wildflowers. It may pause briefly in **Khilok** (5934km), where there is a machine shop for repairing train engines. An old locomotive stands at the eastern end of the platform. There is another 15-minute stop at **Mogzon** (6054km), which is a good place to get some home-made grub from the babushkas on the platform.

The train halts for 20 minutes at **Chita-2** (6198km), the main station of Chita and an interesting point from which to see some intriguing Buddhist sites.

Chita to Mogocho

For the next 250km east, the Trans-Siberian route follows the Ingoda River, which is south of the train. There are good views of the river around **Darasun** (6264km) where the train pauses briefly.

In **Karymskaya** (6295km), the station for the industrial town of Karymskoye, there's a 20-minute stop, shortly before **Tarskaya** (6312km), the Trans-Manchurian junction; for details of this route, see p269.

The main Trans-Siberian route continues northeast through **Shilka-Passazhirsk** (6445km), where there's a five-minute halt. Look south to see piles of train wheels on leaving the station. The hills are pretty as the route follows Shilka River, marred by the derelict factories of Kolbon (there's no stop here).

There's a brief stop at **Priiskovaya** (6457km), where a 10km branch line heads north to the old silver-mining town of **Nerchinsk**. This is where the Treaty of Nerchinsk was signed in 1689, carving up Russian and Chinese spheres of influence in the Far East.

Around **6510km** keep an eye out for the lovely, picturesque church in the Byankino Valley, as well as a few other buildings on the flood plain across the Shilka River, south of the train.

At **Kuenga** (6526km) the Trans-Sib route turns sharply north, while a 52km branch line heads to Sretensk, the eastern terminus of the Trans-Baikal Railway (see p33). Until the Amur Railway was completed in 1916 Trans-Sib passengers used to disembark from the train here and climb aboard steamers to Khabarovsk.

There's an 18-minute stop at **Chernyshevsk-Zabaikalsky** (6587km), giving you some time to stock up from the food and drink sellers. It is named after the 19th-century exile Nikolai Chernyshevsky, whose silver-painted statue is on the platform.

Around **6660km** there are sweeping views to the north of the train across the Siberian plains. The next long stop (15 minutes) is at **Mogocho** (6906km), an ugly place scorched by summer sun and frozen solid during the long winter.

Mogocho to Khabarovsk

For about 700km, starting at around **7000km**, the train line runs only about 50km north of the Amur River, the border with China. At one time, strategic sensitivity meant that carriages containing foreigners had their window blinds fastened down during this stretch – there's still not a whole lot to see with the blinds up!

At **Amazar** (7004km) there's a graveyard of steam locomotives – you'll have 15 minutes here to explore. The terrain now gets so rugged that roads stop and don't resume again until across the border at **7075km** between the Chitinskaya and Amur Regions. This is also where Siberia officially ends and the Russian Far East begins.

Yerofey Pavlovich (7111km) was named in honour of the Siberian explorer Yerofey Pavlovich Khabarov (the remainder of his name went to the big city further down the line). There's a 20-minute halt here and another of 16 minutes at **Urusha** (7209km).

You'll be well into day six of your journey from Moscow by **Skovorodino** (7306km), on the Bolshoi Never River, where there's a five-minute pause. This is where you'll need to change trains to go north along the Baikalo-Amurskaya Magistral (Baikal-Amur Mainline, or BAM); the junction is back at **Bamovskaya** (7273km) – for more details see p239. If you're on the *Rossiya* or any other major eastbound service you'll have to get off at Skovorodino and catch a local train the 33km back to Bamovskaya.

At **Magdagachi** (7494km) there's an 18-minute stop, and then a series of short stops before arriving in **Belogorsk** (7866km). This is the place to change trains if you wish to head southwest to the border town of Blagoveshchensk, the administrative capital of Amur Region.

At **8184km**, the border between the Amur Region and the Yevreyskaya Avtonomnaya Oblast (Jewish Autonomous Region), local time becomes Moscow time plus seven hours. **Birobidzhan** (8351km) is the capital of the Jewish Autonomous Region – note the station name in Hebrew letters during the five-minute stop here. It's easy to make a day trip here from Khabarovsk, too. The Jewish Autonomous Region is also part of the 788,600-sq-km Khabarovsk Territory, rich in timber, minerals and oil, that stretches 2500km north along the Sea of Okhotsk.

Approaching **Khabarovsk** (8523km) from the west, the train crosses a 2.6km bridge over the 2824km-long Amur, the longest span on the whole line and the last stretch of the Trans-Siberian to be completed in 1916. The railway now runs across a new bridge, with a road along the top, completed in the 1990s. There's also a 7km tunnel under the Amur, secretly completed during WWII, and the longest such tunnel on the Trans-Sib route; it's now used only by freight trains.

From Khabarovsk you can take a train to connect with the BAM at Komsomolsk-na-Amure (p250) or go direct to the port at Vanino (p252) for a boat to Sakhalin Island. A statue of Khabarov stands in the square outside the station, which is undergoing a long reconstruction to mirror the fancy design of the old *duma* (parliament) in the city on ul Muravyova-Amurskogo. The *Ros-siya* stops here for a luxurious 33 minutes.

THE BURYATS

Numbering over 400,000, this Mongol people is the largest indigenous group in Russia, comprising around 30% of the population of the Buryatiya Republic and 65% of the Agin-Buryat Autonomous District southeast of Chita.

Culturally there are two main Buryat groups. In the 19th century, forest-dwelling Western Buryats retained their shamanic animist beliefs, while Eastern Buryats from the southern steppe-lands mostly converted to Tibetan-style Buddhism while maintaining a thick layer of local superstitions. Although virtually every Buryat *datsan* (Buddhist temple) was systematically wrecked during the Communists' antireligious mania in the 1930s, today Buryat Buddhism is rebounding. Many (mostly small) *datsans* have been rebuilt and seminaries for training Buddhist monks now operate at Ivolginsk (p217) and Aginskoe (p222).

In the Turkic Buryat language, 'hello' is *sainbena/sambaina*, 'thank you (very much)' is (*yikhe*) *bai yer la*. Buryatiya's trademark snack *pozi* (buuzi) are dangerously juicy lamb balls in ravioli-style pasta. They are widely available from *poznayas* (eateries serving Central Asian food) right across Eastern Siberia and beyond.

Khabarovsk to Vladivostok

This is day seven, and your last 13 hours on the train usually pass in the night. One reason for the cover of darkness is that the line, in places, comes within 10km of the sensitive Chinese border. From Khabarovsk south to Vladivostok the route shadows the Ussuri River, the border with China. At **8597km** you'll cross the Khor River.

At **Vyazemskaya** (8651km) there's a 16-minute stop; there'll be plenty of people selling food, including fresh salmon caviar. From here the forests are dominated by deciduous trees, such as maple and elm, which briefly blaze in a riot of autumn colours during September.

You'll probably be settling down to sleep by the time the train reaches **Bikin** (8756km), where there's a 24-minute halt – the line crosses the Bikin River here and follows it south to the border between Khabarovsk and Primorsky Territories. The southern forests of Primorsky Territory are the world's most northerly monsoon forests and home to black and brown bears, the rare Siberian tiger and the virtually extinct Amur leopard. The territory covers 165,900 sq km, has the Sikhote-Alin Range and runs 2000km from north to south.

There's a 15-minute stop in the dead of night at **Ruzhino** (8931km). Some 40km west of **Sibirtsevo** (9109km) – a 20-minute stop – is Lake Khanka (p237), covering 4000 sq km and famous for its 2m-wide lotus flowers.

At **Ussuriysk** (9177km), you have 10 minutes in which to contemplate changing to the branch line west to Harbin in China; the train goes only twice a week and is monotonously slow. Ussuriysk, formerly named Nikolskoe in honour of the tsarevich's 1891 visit, was once of greater size and importance than nearby Vladivostok. There's also a line from here south to Pyongyang in North Korea, which may open again for passengers in the future (see p41).

By dawn – and after a week of travel from Moscow – you'll have your first glimpse of the Pacific to the south of the train at around **9245km**. You'll now be travelling along the hilly peninsula that forms the eastern side of Amursky Gulf. Near **Sanatornaya** (9269km) are some of Vladivostok's forlorn beaches and an enclave of hotels.

The city rises in a series of concrete tower blocks on the hill sides; you'll pass older

buildings nearer the terminus, **Vladivostok** (9289km). Before leaving take a moment to admire the old locomotive on the platform beside the monument commemorating the completion of the great railroad you've just travelled along.

ULAN-UDE УЛАН-УДЭ

☎ 3012 / pop 380,000 / 📶 Moscow + 5hr Ulan means 'Red' in the local Buryat language, yet Ulan-Ude's setting is pleasantly green, cradled attractively in rolling hills. Despite an inevitable concrete suburban sprawl, it remains one of the most likable cities in Eastern Siberia. If you're coming from the west, the distinctively oriental Buryat faces make Ulan-Ude the first strikingly Asiatic city on the Trans-Siberian Railway.

Chartered as Verkhneudinsk in 1775, Ulan-Ude was a trading post on the wealthy tea-caravan route between China and Irkutsk. Soviet industrialisation brought a large locomotive works and secretive aircraft factory. Despite the vastly expanded population, severe Stalinist pressures and the all-seeing eyes of the world's biggest Lenin head, the Buryats clung to their language and faith.

Today the city is the ideal launching point for visits to eastern Baikal while easy quick flits to Ivolginsk allow a fascinating glimpse of the region's resurgent Mongol-Buddhist heritage (see opposite).

Orientation

The city's original axis is tree-lined ul Lenina, which slopes attractively south from central pl Sovetov. An alternative commercial centre is the Elevator area around Hotel Sagan Morin. Walking into town from the train station requires crossing a long footbridge to ul Borsoeva.

MAPS

Great maps are sold at **Knigi Bookshop** (ul Kuybysheva 28; 📶 10am-1pm & 2-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat).

Information

There are exchange bureaus in the Geser and Buryatiya hotels.

Buryat-Intour (☎ 219 207; tgombueva@yahoo.com; ul Erbanova 12, Hotel Baikal, Room 209) Well-organised tour agency with its own bus service to Ulaanbaatar. Air tickets sold.

MDM Bank (Sovetskaya ul 32A; 📶 9am-1pm & 2-4pm Mon-Fri) Rates for US dollars better than euro.

Naran Tur (☎ 215 097; baikalnartour@mail.ru; ul Kommunisticheskaya 47A, Hotel Buryatiya, Room 105) Director Sesegma (aka Svetlana) is infectiously passionate about Buryatiya. She organises horse-riding adventures, Ivolginsk tours and much more.

PhotoPlus (ul Kommunisticheskaya 16; 📶 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-5pm Sun) Three-minute passport photos for that Mongolian visa cost R70.

Post office (ul Lenina 61; Internet per hr R35; 📶 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-6pm Sat & Sun)

Telephone office (ul Borsoeva; Internet per hr R30; 📶 9am-9pm)

Sights

MERCHANTS' QUARTER

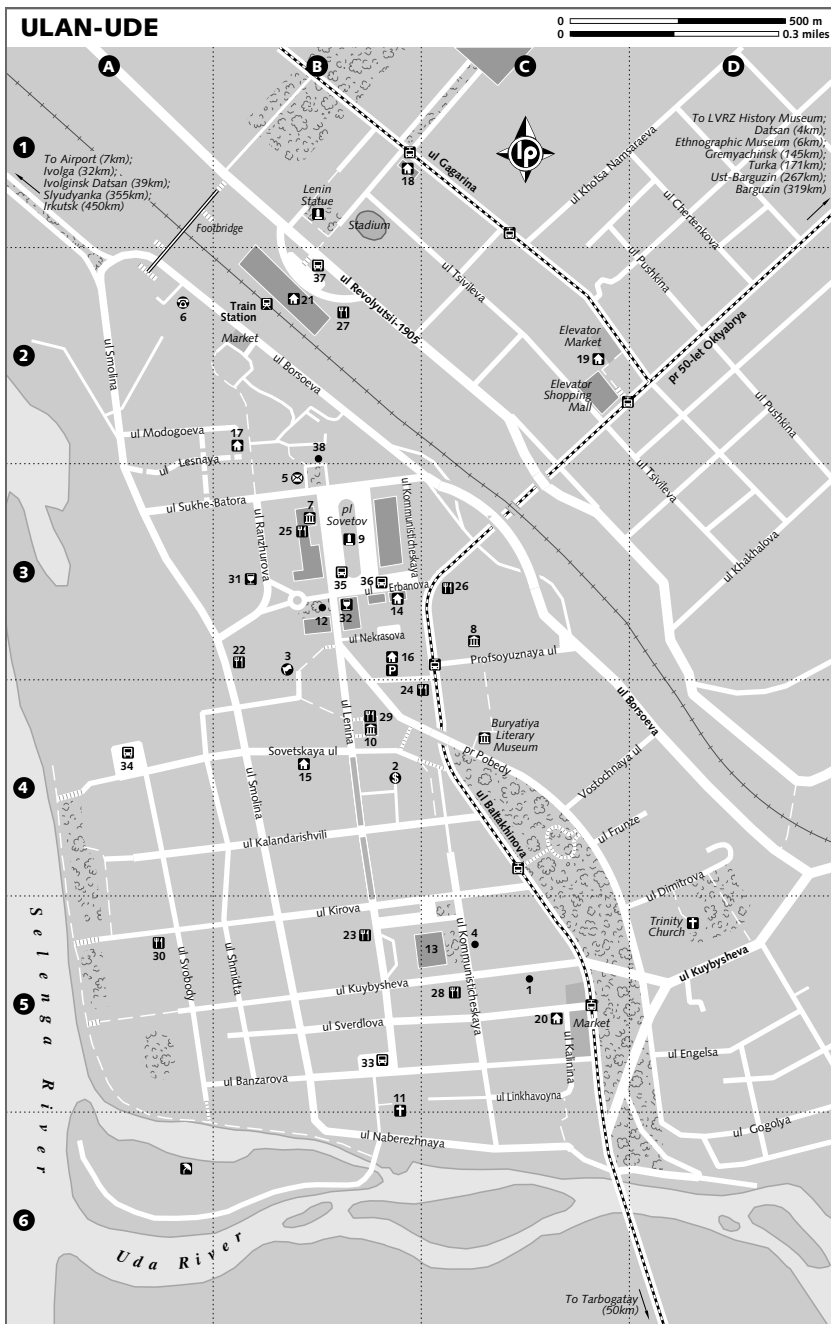
The town's partly pedestrianised, historical main artery is ul Lenina. Here the elegant 19th century architecture is gradually being renovated and boutiques already occupy the smartened-up 1838 **trading arcades**. Especially viewed from near the splendid **Opera House**, ul Lenina is given a photogenic focus by the gold-tipped spires of the attractive whitewashed **Odigitria Cathedral** (ul Lenina 2). Built between 1741 and 1785 the cathedral was rescued from near collapse in the late 1990s and commands an area of appealing if ramshackle old town. The carved wooden cottages extend as far as ul Kirova. The un-aesthetic **Nature Museum** (Muzey Prirody Buryatii; ☎ 214 833; ul Lenina 46; admission R30; 📶 10am-6pm Wed-Sun) has big stuffed animals and a scale model of Lake Baikal showing you just how deep it is.

PLOSHCHAD SOVETOV

The Stalinist main square, pl Sovetov, is a Soviet marching ground but manageably proportioned and awesomely dominated by the world's largest **Lenin head** – which looks less domineering than comically cross-eyed. The square hides a cute little **Geological Museum** (Geologichesky Muzey; ul Lenina 59; admission free; 📶 1-4pm Mon-Fri).

HISTORICAL MUSEUM

Somewhat naughtily, this **museum** (☎ 215 961; Profsoyuznaya ul 29; admission per fl R80; 📶 10am-5.30pm Tue-Sun) charges per single-room floor. Floor 3, Buddiyskoye Iskustvo, is by far the most interesting. Its *thangka* (Buddhist iconographic paintings), Buddhas and icons were salvaged from Buryatiya's monasteries



and temples before their Soviet destruction and were originally used for a museum of atheism.

ETHNOGRAPHIC MUSEUM

In a forest clearing 6km from central Ulan-Ude is the excellent **Ethnographic Museum** (Etnografichesky muzey; ☎ 443 210; adult/child/student R60/25/35, photo/video permits R60/120; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun) is an outdoor collection of local architecture plus some reconstructed burial mounds and the odd stone totem. It features occasional craft demonstrations and has a splendid wooden church and a whole strip of Old Believers' homesteads. **Marshrutka** (fixed-route minibus) 8 from pl Sovetov passes within 1km but on request it will detour to drop you at the door for no extra charge. En route you'll notice Ulan-Ude's attractive new pair of **datsans** (Buddhist temples; Barguzinsky trakt) backed by stupas and forests fluttering with prayer flags.

LVRZ HISTORY MUSEUM

The Locomotive Wagon Repair Factory (Lokomotivo Vagono Remontinii Zavod; LVRZ) has been building and repairing engines since 1932. Unfortunately, it's not possible visit the factory but its **LVRZ History Museum** (☎ 344 340; ul Komsomolskaya 23; admission free; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) on pl Slava traces the history of the factory with models of engines that were built and repaired there. To get here, take bus 37.

Festivals & Events

Buryatiya Folk Festival Celebrated at the hippodrome near the ethnographic museum in Ulan-Ude.
Maitreya Buddha Festival Held at Ivolginsk datsan (monastery) near Ulan-Ude.

Sleeping

BUDGET
Hotel Zolotoy Kolos (ul Sverdlova 43, top floors; dm R140, s R187-252, tw R304-804) Repainted, simple but sensibly priced, the best singles have private toilets. Showers cost R25 extra. This is a reasonable budget option though the area is slightly dubious late at night and there's an 11pm curfew.

Hotel Barguzin (☎ 215 746; Sovetskaya ul 28; s/tw/tr R600/820/990) Well positioned for the old town, the lacklustre Barguzin has faded corridors and a stuffed bear lurking in the foyer. Just two doubles have their own water heaters.

Hotel Odon (☎ 342 983; ul Gagarina 43; s R330-540, tw R650-890) Uninspiring and usually full of Chinese merchants but only five minutes' walk from the train station, the Odon has a popular if pricey Asian restaurant.

Resting rooms (komnaty otdykha; Ulan-Ude train station; dm R500) Acceptable dorms charge R270 for half-days, R150 for three hours and R60 extra for showers.

MIDRANGE

Hotel Sagaan Morin (White Horse; ☎/fax 443 647, 444 019; www.morintour.com/tours/acc_uu/index.php; ul

INFORMATION

- Buryat-Intour.....(see 14)
- Knigi Bookshop Книги.....1 C5
- MDM Bank MDM.....2 B4
- Mongolian Consulate
- Консульство Монголии.....3 B3
- Naran Tur.....(see 16)
- PhotoPlus ФотоПлюс.....4 C5
- Post Office Почтамт.....5 B3
- Telephone Office
- Телефон и Интернет.....6 A2

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

- Geological Museum
- Геологический Музей
- Бурятия.....7 B3
- Historical Museum
- Исторический Музей.....8 C3
- Lenin Head
- Голова Ленина.....9 B3
- Nature Museum
- Музей природы Бурятия.....10 B4
- Odigitria Cathedral.....11 B5
- Opera House Опер
- Оперы и Балета Бурятия.....12 B3

- Trading Arcades
- Гостинный Двор.....13 C5

SLEEPING

- Hotel Baikal
- Гостиница Байкал.....14 B3
- Hotel Barguzin
- Гостиница Баргузин.....15 B4
- Hotel Buryatiya
- Гостиница Бурятия.....16 B3
- Hotel Geser
- Гостиница Гэсэр.....17 B2
- Hotel Odon
- Гостиница Одон.....18 B1
- Hotel Sagaan Morin
- Отель Сагаан Морин.....19 C2
- Hotel Zolotoy Kolos
- Гостиница Золотой Колос.....20 C5
- Resting Rooms
- Комнаты Отдыха.....21 B2

EATING

- Drakon Дракон.....22 B3
- King's Burger Кингс Бургер.....23 B5
- Mir Igra Мир Игры.....24 C4
- Poznaya Позная.....25 B3

- Sputnik Supermarket
- Супермаркет Спутник.....26 C3
- Stolitsa Столица.....27 B2
- Stolovaya Столовая.....28 C5
- Ulger Ульгэр.....29 B4
- Zolotoy Drakon
- Золотой Дракон.....30 A5

DRINKING

- Zakusochnaya Studencheskaya
- Закусочная Студенческая.....31 B3
- Zakusochnaya
- Закусочная Реаль.....(see 27)
- Zeleny Zal Зеленый Зал.....32 B3

TRANSPORT

- Air Ticket Booth.....(see 16)
- Banzarova Bus Station
- Автостанция Банзарова.....33 B5
- Main Bus Station
- Центральный автовокзал.....34 A4
- Marshrutka 55 to Airport.....35 B3
- Marshrutka 8 to
- Ethnographic Museum.....36 B3
- Marshrutky to pl Sovetov.....37 B2
- Siberia Airlines.....38 B2

Gagarina 25; s/tw/tr R800/1700/1925) This perfectly appointed new three-star tower is so obviously the best hotel in town that you may need to book (by fax) months ahead for summer.

Hotel Buryatiya (☎ 211 835; ul Kommunisticheskaya 47A; s R725-860, tw R910-1100) A big Soviet tower with decent rooms but no hot water in summer. The English-speaking receptionists are friendly but watch out for the room-cleaners' trick of 'tidying away' items of your luggage into the back corners of wardrobes and drawers.

Hotel Geser (☎ /fax 216 151; hotel_geser@mail.ru; ul Ranzhurova 11; s/tw/ste R1850/2800/6000) Relatively cosy for a Soviet place, this former party hang-out has spacious rooms. Some are decently modernised but others retain clunky old toilets. Check carefully before paying. The semismart restaurant has a menu in English offering sensibly priced Siberian specialities including vegetarian options.

Hotel Baikal (☎ 213 718; ul Erbanova 12; s R650-700, tw R900-1000, tr R1200) Unreconstructed Soviet rooms but with water heaters in most attached bathrooms and a perfect position overlooking pl Sovetov.

Eating

When the weather warms up, *letnii sad* (summer gardens) appear around the Opera House (see p213) and on the banks of the river. They're great if you're after barbecued kebabs.

RESTAURANTS

Stolitsa (☎ 552 836; ul Revolyutsii-1905 31; meals R160-320; ☎ 11am-11pm) Perfectly situated for the train station, this surprisingly elegant upstairs restaurant has red, black and gold décor, modernist Buddhist-influenced art and old Ulan-Ude photos. There's a menu in English and a vastly cheaper *zakuschnaya* (pub/café; meals R40 to R70) around the side.

Mir Igray (ul Kommunisticheskaya 52; meals R90-220, beers R37-60; ☎ 10am-11pm) This casino complex has three great bar-restaurants each with its own atmosphere. It's popular with young professionals and a great place to strike up conversations over a shot or 10 of vodka. Food menus are appealing but the more intriguing Buryat options have limited availability.

Zolotoy Drakon (☎ 212 109; ul Kirova 8; meals R150-350; ☎ 11am-midnight; ☎) Redecorated in white-and-scarlet contemporary chinoiserie, Ulan-Ude's best Asian restaurant usefully offers choices of portion sizes plus several European options. One room has an open fire in winter.

Ulgër (☎ 218 066; ul Lenina 46; meals R140-350; ☎ 11am-11pm) Middle-class dining at the rear of the Natural History Museum. Pleasantly shaded summer terrace.

Drakon (☎ 215 283; ul Smolina 38; mains R25-50; ☎ 11am-1am) Enormous servings of great Chinese food in a castle-dungeon-effect chamber. Vegetarians might try the delicious *chi-san-tsi* (braised aubergines).

QUICK EATS & SELF-CATERING

King's Burger (ul Lenina 21; burgers R30-38, pizzas R90-110; ☎ 8am-10pm) is a tasteful fast-food emporium. **Poznaya** (ul Lenina 59; pozì R13.50; ☎ 10am-11pm) is ultrabasic, but inexpensive and very central, with R20 bliny.

Stolovaya (ul Kuybysheva 22; meals R25-45, teas R3; ☎ 10am-10pm) Cheaper and less daunting than it looks, Stolovaya is a perversely intriguing blast from the Soviet past.

Sputnik Supermarket (ul Kommunisticheskaya 48; ☎ 24hr) This is a handy central grocery.

Drinking

There are several more café-bars near the Elevator market.

Zeleny Zal (Green Room; pl Sovetov; beers R35-60, coffees R8-24; ☎ 11am-11pm) Stylish green-neon youth hang-out with Fashion TV and views of the main square masked by muslin drapes. To get here, enter via Progress Cinema from ul Lenina, go through the less interesting ground-floor café, and then make your way upstairs.

Zakuschnaya Studencheskaya (ul Ranzhurova 1; beers R25; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-11pm) Corrugated iron is used to surprising effect, creating a sense of street style in this supercheap student-dive pub.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Siberia Airlines (☎ 220 125; ul Sukhe-Batora 63; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat & Sun) flies to Novosibirsk and Vladivostok and offers deep discounts for early purchase tickets to Moscow (daily, R9980 full price, R3500 two-week advanced purchase). Buryatavia

has very scenic flights to Nizhneangarsk near Severobaikalsk (R1860, four per week), with tickets available through **Buryat-Intour** (☎ 219 207; tgomboboeva@yahoo.com; ul Erbanova 12, Hotel Baikal, Room 209).

BUS

Buses depart from various points. Use the **main avto vokzal** (bus station; Sovetskaya ul) for Lake Baikal's east coast, and for depart-when-full *marshrutky* to Kyakhta (R150) for the Mongolian border.

Use the Banzarova bus station for Ivolginsk *datsan*: bus 104 departs at 7am, noon or and 4.20pm or use frequent bus 130 to Ivolga and switch to a taxi.

Use the train station forecourt for *marshrutky* to Arshan (R350), Irkutsk or Chita, all overnight.

At 8am on Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday, Buryat-Intour runs buses from outside Hotel Baikal to Bayangol Hotel in Ulaanbaatar (R750, 12 hours) in Mongolia.

TRAIN

The *Rossiya* arrives from Moscow and Vladivostok every second day but there are cheaper alternatives. Beijing-bound trains pass through Ulan-Ude on Tuesday (via Chita) and Saturday (via Mongolia). Fast trains to Ulaanbaatar pass through the city on Sunday and Monday at 1.30am and waste vastly less time at the border than the daily 364 train, which takes 24 hours and costs R1350 *kupe* (*kupeyny*; compartmentalised carriage); there is no *platskart* (*platskartny*; open carriage). It departs at 6am from Ulan-Ude and returns at 6.40pm from Ulaanbaatar. Buy international tickets from the **servis tsentr** (☎ 282 696; ☎ 8am-1pm & 2-6.45pm) upstairs. For Chita, 340 (R535, 10¼ hours) is the handiest overnight train available. Towards Irkutsk (from R280 *platskart*, eight hours) most passengers prefer to take a day train for the Baikal views.

Getting Around

Various *marshrutky* bound for pl Sovetov stop outside the train station but tram 7 from ul Gagarina is usually faster for the market area. From pl Sovetov take *marshrutka* 55 (R10, 20 minutes) for the airport; take 37 for the train-carriage works, *datsans* and (by request) Ethnographic Museum.

AROUND ULAN-UDE

Ivolginsk Datsan Иволгинский Дацан This **monastery complex** (admission free, guided tour R60), under 40km from Ulan-Ude, was founded in 1946. While not as elaborate as Gandan Khiid in Ulaanbaatar or others around Chita, it is intriguing as the centre of Siberian Buddhism. The local Gelugpa (Yellow Hat) form of Buddhism differs slightly from that in Mongolia and Tibet, for example in allowing lamas to marry. When spinning prayer wheels or just walking around the temple grounds, it's polite to maintain a clockwise direction. Enter any temple building via the left door and don't use the central stairs unless you're a self-realised lama.

Viewed distantly across the grassy fields, morning sunlight glints from the gilded roof-wings of the 1972 **main temple building**. Closer, however, the exterior is less impressive – slapdash paintwork, naïve, tacky tiger guardian-statues and brick patterning painted onto the whitewashed walls. Some of the lovably basic prayer wheels are crafted from old tin cans. The main temple's interior (no photography please) is colourful and very atmospheric despite discordantly chuntering cash registers. Nearby notice the glassed-in **Bodhi Tree**, convolutedly descended from the Bodhi Gaya original beneath which the Buddha achieved enlightenment.

Nearing completion within the *datsan* complex is the beautiful, Korean-style wooden **Etigel Khambin Temple** honouring the 12th Khambo Lama whose body was recently exhumed. To general astonishment his flesh had not decomposed seven decades after his death. Some 'experts' have even attested that the corpse's hair is still growing, albeit extraordinarily slowly. The new temple plans to display the worshipful cadaver in a refrigerated display box that looks more suited to soft drinks.

The first direct bus from Ulan-Ude arrives well before the 9am *khural* (prayer service), allowing ample time to wander among the prayer flags of the mosquito-infested surrounding swamp. Returning buses leave at 1.30pm, 5.30pm and 8.30pm. Alternatively, share a taxi to uninteresting Ivolga (Ivolginsk town; R12 per seat, R35 per car), from where *marshrutka* 130 shuttles to Ulan-Ude several times hourly

(R20). Several Ulan-Ude tour agencies (see p213) offer small-group excursions combining visits to Ivolginsk, a local stupa and a hill-top *oova* (shrine) with lovely views and shamanistic overtones. The typical cost is US\$30 to US\$40 per person.

Novoselenginsk Новоселенгинск

☎ 30145 / pop 9500 / 📶 Moscow + 5hr
Worth a brief stop en route to Kyakhta, Stockades and wooden houses on broad dust-blown roads give this small, 19th-century town a memorable Wild West feel. Learn something of Novoselenginsk's interesting history at the **Decembrist Museum** (muzei Dekabristov; ☎ 96 716; ul Lenina 53; admission R10; 🕒 9am-5pm Wed-Sun), in a 200-year-old colonnaded house in the town's centre. Walk 2km east towards the river to see the ruins of the 18th-century **Spassky Church**, isolated on the grassy far bank (no bridge). That's all that remains of Staroselenginsk, the original settlement that was abandoned around 1800 due to frequent flooding. Kyakhta-bound *marshrutky* all pause in Novoselenginsk from Ulan-Ude (R100, 1½ hours, six or seven daily). There's no hotel.

Kyakhta Кяхта

☎ 30142 / pop 18,400 / 📶 Moscow + 5hr
Right at the Mongolian border, 100km south of Ulan-Ude, the intriguing if somewhat sad town of Kyakhta was formerly called Troitskosavsk. Kyakhta's fortunes boomed with the Chinese tea trade and by the mid-19th century up to 5000 cases of tea were arriving daily on a stream of horse or camel caravans. The caravans returned loaded with exported furs. This all came to an abrupt end with the completion of the Trans-Siberian Railway, after which Kyakhta withered into a remote border garrison town.

The town's centre is around ul Lenina where you'll find the bus terminus next to the 1853 **trading arches** (Ryady Gostinye) and the central park. Kyakhta's smaller Sloboda district, 4km south of the commercial centre (R50 by taxi), is where you'll find the border post.

The impressive shell of the **Trotsky Cathedral** (1817) lies at the heart of the overgrown central park. Northeast is the delightfully eccentric **museum** (ul Lenina 49; admission R40; 🕒 10am-6pm Tue-Sat), with its imaginative displays of treasures salvaged from Soviet-plundered

churches and *datsan*. Running parallel to ul Lenina is ul Krupskaya along which you'll find several attractive wooden buildings, including at No 37, where the first meeting of the Mongolian Revolutionary Party was held in 1921.

In Sloboda a dwarfish Lenin glares condescendingly at the extraordinarily grand but sadly ruined **Voskresenskaya Church** (1838) with its splendid Italianate cupola. Behind Lenin is the big but rather mutilated 1842 **Zdaniye Gostinogo Dvora** (Historic Customs Warehouse) with an appended communist-era spire. Directly behind is the frontier station for crossing into Mongolia.

Beside the Uspensky Church, **Hotel Druzhba** (☎ 91 321; ul Krupskaya 8; dm from R280, ste R560), about 10 minutes' walk south of Kyakhta's main centre, has good-value suites with hot water, sitting room and king-sized bed. Its restaurant-bar is one of the better places to eat in town, too. **Hotel Turist** (☎ 92 431; nr ul Lenina 21 & ul Sovetskaya; beds R135) has basic rooms with shared cold showers in a wooden house near the market.

Eating options are very limited. **Kafe Viola** (ul Lenina 40, upstairs; meals from R50; 🕒 10am-3am), near the market, is a reasonably pleasant place with booth seating and a decent menu. For a snack try **Buryatskaya Kukhnya** (ul Menina; pozi each 9R; 🕒 10am-1am), a small Buryat-style decorated room tucked between the trading arches and Sberbank.

Ulan-Ude-Kyakhta *marshrutky* (R150, 3½ hours) take a pleasantly scenic route with a meal break in Novoselenginsk. If you're heading to Mongolia see p256).

Eastern Lake Baikal

Sparsely scattered beach villages of old-fashioned log cottages dot the pretty East Baikal coast. A usefully practical Pribaikalsky booklet is available for free download from www.tahoebaikal.org. Further north is the dramatic Barguzin Valley, from where Chinggis (Ghengis) Khaan's mother, Oilun-Ehe, is said to have originated.

Access is across a forested pass from Ulan-Ude via tiny **Baturino** village with its elegantly renovated **Sretenskaya Church**. After about 2½ hours' drive, the road first meets Lake Baikal at pretty little **Gremyachinsk**, which has a wide and sandy but litter-strewn beach some 15 minutes' walk up ul Komsomolskaya.

The main road offers surprisingly few Baikal views until fishing port **Turka**, which has a small house **hotel** (r US\$35-60), cheaper homestays and a little museum. Bigger **Goryachinsk** is centred on a typically institutional hot-springs **kurort** (sanatorium complex; ☎ 55 135; beds from R220) with cheap cottage homestays in the surrounding village. Minibuses run to Ulan-Ude (R140, 3½ hours) at 8am and 4pm. Horse rental is possible on the beach around 3km away.

Picturesque Baikal beaches stretch northwest of quaint little **Maksimikha** fishing hamlet with several huts and *turbazy* (holiday camps) including **Svetlaya Polyana** (tw R1200-1800; 🕒 Apr-Oct). Perhaps the most dramatic views are from low-rise **Ust-Barguzin** (☎ 30 131) where main ul Lenina's blue-and-white carved wooden cottages culminate in a river ferry. Across the bay, the high-ridged peaks of the **Svyatoy Nos Peninsula** rise spectacularly sheer.

Experienced tour agent **Alexander Loginov** (☎ 91 591; ul Komsomolskaya 19, Ust Barguzin) speaks passable English, can arrange local homestay accommodation and offers tours of the peninsula and boat trips to see **nerpa seals**. Seals are particularly abundant around the **Ushkanny islands**; typical boat charters start from R3500 plus at least R1000 per person in park fees as the area is a reserve.

Barguzin (☎ 30 131) dates back to 1648 and has a few dilapidated historic buildings along ul Krasnoarmeyskaya and pl Lenina, where there's a run-down **hotel** (☎ 41 229; ul Lenina 25; s R225-335, tw R450). However, the old town is most useful as a base for visiting the timeless Barguzin Valley, which opens out into wide horse-grazed meadows, gloriously edged by a vast Toblerone of mountain peaks. Great views across the meandering river plain from **Uro** village are easily accessible thanks to four daily buses from Barguzin (R12, 35 minutes), though taxis allow much better exploration.

To return to Ulan-Ude (seven hours) there are buses departing 8am and 10.30am, with *marshrutky* leaving when full until around 10am. Book buses ahead.

ЧИТА ЧИТА

☎ 3022 / pop 370,000 / 📶 Moscow + 6hr
The golden domes of Chita's glorious new cathedral entice train travellers to hop off and explore this historic and patchily attrac-

tive city. Despite many architectural gems, each area is a little too diffuse to make a really memorable visual impact, but the friendly, go-ahead atmosphere makes Chita a pleasant place to spend a day or two.

Founded in 1653 Chita developed as a rough-and-tumble silver-mining town. More than 80 Decembrist gentlemen-rebels were exiled nearby, their wives setting up homes on what was known as ul Damskaya (women's street), now lost beneath the southern end of concrete-blighted ul Stolyanova.

As a gateway to the new East Chinese Railway (p253) Chita boomed in the early 20th century and was capital of the short-lived pro-Lenin Far Eastern Republic from 1920 till 1922 – the parliament building still stands at ul Anokhina 63. Although closed to foreigners during the Cold War and still home to a large military presence, today trade with China booms and the city is increasingly internationally minded.

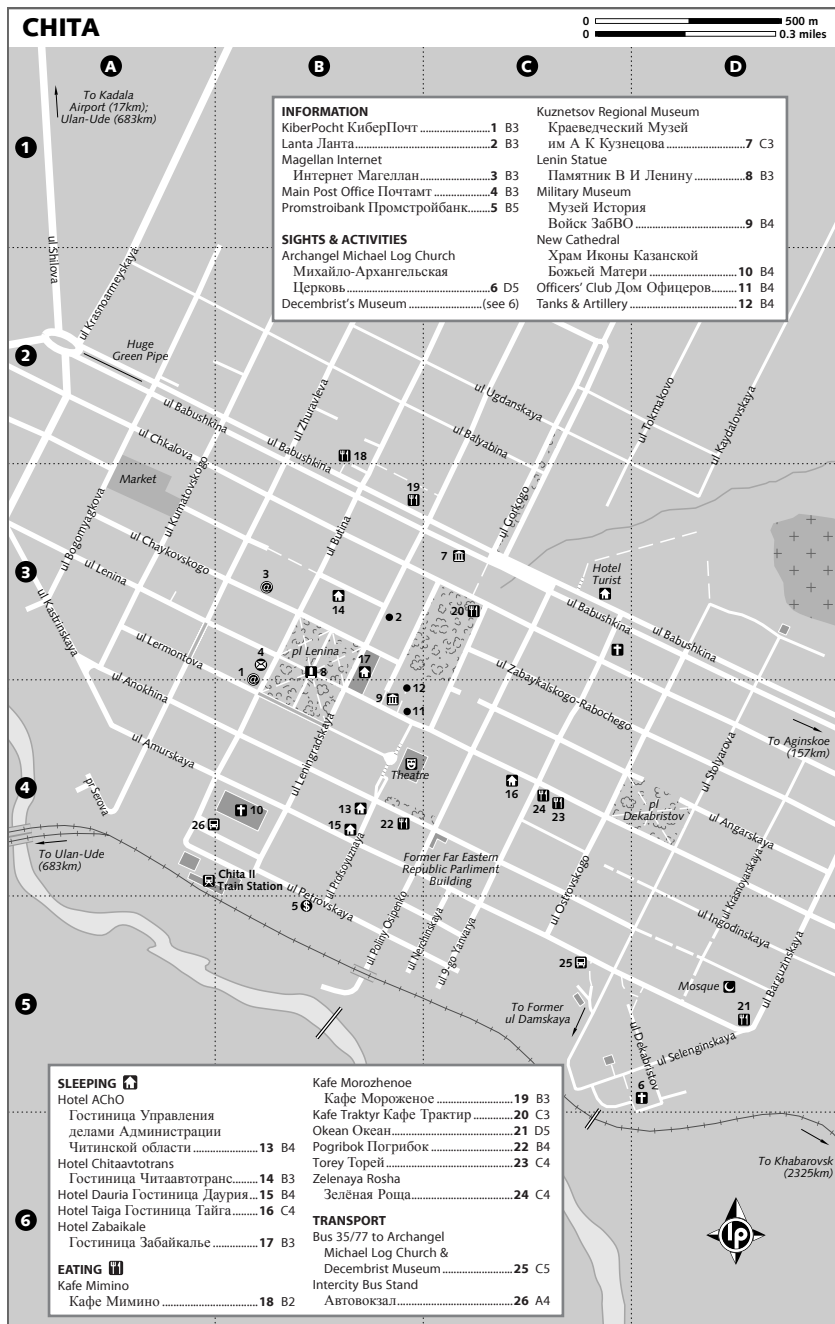
Orientation & Information

The city centre is pl Lenina with a constipated-looking pink Vladimir Ilych in the middle. It's three blocks northeast of the main (Chita II) train station, one stop using any trolleybus. Wide, boulevard-like ul Lenina emerges either side of the square as the city's main thoroughfare.

KiberPocht (ul Butina 35; per hr R25 plus per MB R4; 🕒 8am-9pm) Internet access and stamps.
Lanta (☎ 262 368; ul Leningradskaya 56; 🕒 9am-6pm Mon-Sat)
Magellan Internet (ul Chaykovskogo 24; per hr R50; 🕒 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat)
Main post office (ul Butina 37; 🕒 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 8am-6pm Sat & Sun) Quaintly spired wooden building on pl Lenina.
Promstroibank (ul Petrovskaya 41) Changes US dollars, euros and Chinese yuan. Directly east of the train station.

Sights

Plushchad Lenina has a certain grandeur while Chita's best century-old architecture lies southeast along uls Anokhina, Amurskaya and Lenina. The original historic centre is now mostly trampled by concrete towers, but the lovely 1771 **Archangel Michael log church** (ul Selenginskaya) survives and houses a small but interesting **Decembrist's Museum** (Muzei Dekabristov; ☎ 356 223; admission R20; 🕒 10am-6pm Tue-Sun). Take bus 35 or 77 east-bound on Amurskaya to get close.



Beyond a gratuitous stuffed elk, the excellent **Kuznetsov Regional Museum** (Krayevedchesky muzey; ☎ 226 709; ul Babushkina 113; admission R50; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) has interesting exhibits on the city's heritage and architectural renaissance.

The previously interesting **Military Museum** (Muзей istorii voysk ZaBVO; ul Lenina 86) was under reconstruction at the time of research. Its collection of tanks and artillery can still be seen by walking up the passage between the museum and the impressive **Officers' Club**.

Sleeping

Beware that cheap dorms can be uncomfortably male-dominated and off-putting for individual women travellers. The ragged station hotel only accepts those with rail tickets.

BUDGET

Hotel Dauria (☎ 262 350; Profsoyuznaya ul 12; s R600-800, dm/tw/tr R350/1200/1200) Big, unsophisticated old rooms are repainted and airy. Beds in a dormitory triple with attached toilet and bathrooms offer Chita's best backpacker option. It's above Kharbin Chinese Restaurant.

Hotel Taiga (☎ 262 332; ul Lenina 75, 4th fl; dm R190; ☎) Sheets in this survivable crash-pad are clean and guests are usually segregated by gender. You'll have a shared kitchen and shower. The front door is locked at midnight.

Hotel Chitaavtotrans (☎ 355 011; ul Kostyushko-Grigovicha 7; s/tw R550/1000) Cosmetically improved rooms retain wobbly old shower pans. Quiet yet central; one block north of pl Lenina.

MIDRANGE

Hotel AChO (Gostinitsa Upravleniya delami Administratsii Chitinskoi Oblasti; ☎ 351 966; Profsoyuznaya ul 19; tw R1400-2700) Fine 1906 brick mansion has fully rebuilt rooms with polished wooden floors, fridge and closable shower-booths. The wrought-ironwork retains hints of old-world style.

Hotel Zabaikale (☎ 359 819; Hotel-zabaikal@yandex.ru, zabaikalie@yandex.ru; ul Leningradskaya 36; s/tw R1450/2000; ☎) Unbeatably located overlooking pl Lenina with decently upgraded rooms offering Russian MTV. Showers are piping hot if poorly mounted. The 'complimentary' breakfast costs you R100!

Eating

Several dive bars fill basements on ul Amurskaya, two blocks north of the train station. Supercheap beers (R15) mean you'll meet many swaying but friendly local drunks.

Kafe Mimino (☎ 323 338; ul Babushkina 62A; meals R80-240; ☎ noon-2am, last food 11pm) Genuine if somewhat underspiced Georgian food is easy to choose from helpful picture menus.

Kafe Traktyr (☎ 352 229; ul Kchalova 93; meals R170-400; ☎ noon-2am) Traditional Russian 'home' cooking served at heavy wooden tables in a rebuilt wooden lace cottage with upmarket Siberian-retro atmosphere.

Kafe Morozhenoe (☎ 266 867; ul Babushkina 50; meals R30-70; ☎ noon-midnight; ☎) In primary blue and yellow colours this striking ice-cream parlour serves cheap meals, wine by the glass (from R20) and trendy terracotta pots of Chinese green tea.

Pogribok (☎ 265 919; ul Anokhina 67; meals R230-450; ☎ noon-2am) Despite the mirrored ceiling and sickly green walls, this neat cellar restaurant can be amusing when the local set of *Cheers* characters are perched at its little bar. Food is tasty and good value. Local Chitinskoe Klyuchi beers (R25) come in handsomely tall mugs.

Zelenaya Rosha (☎ 322 417; ul Lenina 53; meals R170-400; ☎ 10am-2am) Fake trees and a ceiling of plastic foliage form a curious if somewhat tacky forest around a trickling water feature and pavilion bar. When ordering beware that prices are per 100g not per dish.

Torey (ul Lenina 63; pozi R12; ☎ 10am-10pm) is a cheap *poznyaya*, dishing up *pozi* (lamb balls in ravioli-style pasta). **Okean** (ul Amurskaya 2; ☎ 9am-midnight) is a supermarket.

Getting There & Away

The main train station is Chita II, 6199km from Moscow and 3090km from Vladivostok. The *Rossiya* stops here alternate days but cheaper alternatives include the 349 to Moscow and 8 and 53 to Vladivostok.

For China the *Vostok* (020) runs to Beijing (R2950 *kupe*, 56½ hours) very early Wednesday morning. Trains to Manzhouli (R1100, 25 hours) depart on Thursday and Saturday evenings but it's usually quicker and cheaper to take the nightly service to the border town of Zabaikalsk (R660 to R940 *kupe*, 14 hours) then bus-hop across no-man's land into China.

Other useful destinations might include Ulan-Ude (R540, 9½ hours overnight), Blagoveshchensk (train 250; R1470, 34½ hours, odd days) and Tynda (train 078; R1250, 27 hours). For R72 commission, the helpful **Service Centre** (Chita II station; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-7.30pm) issues tickets while you relax on comfy settees.

From the intercity bus stand near Chita II train station *marshrutky* run to Aginskoe (R120, three hours) and Duldurga for Alkhanay (R150, three hours). Shared taxis (R200) are faster.

AROUND CHITA

South of Chita are some of Russia's greatest Buddhist sights. The most accessible is Aginskoe, which has the nation's oldest *datsan*, while Alkhanay offers a hike-through-nature alternative to temple-based spirituality.

Aginskoe АГИНСКОЕ

☎ 30289 / pop 15,000

For an intriguing trip from Chita, take a shared taxi (R180, two hours) to the dusty Buryat town of **Aginskoe**, capital of the Agin-Buryat Autonomous Okrug. Scenery en route transforms progressively from patchily forested hills via river valleys into rolling grassy steppe-land. The highlight is a pair of old Buddhist *datsans* 5.5km west of the centre by very rare minibus 14. The 1816 **Aginskoe Datsan** is a white-and-gold, two-storey Tibetan-style structure that is the hub of a Buddhist seminary. Directly to the east, with a big new gate and driveway under construction, is the more photogenic 1883 **Tsakchen Datsan** with grandly impressive upper wooden frontage, partly adorned with colourful Mongolian script motifs. Getting inside is hit and miss.

Return to central Aginskoe's central square where the **Tsybikova Museum** (☎ 34 462; ul Komsomolskaya 11; admission R30; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Fri) exhibits a shaman's *gabala* cup made from a human skull. Nearby is an attractive church. Take a taxi to have lunch at one of the three great restaurants of the comfortable **Hotel Sapsam** (☎ /fax 34 590; www.megalink.ru/sapsam; tw/d R1200/1500, meals R200-500). **Hotel Dali** (☎ 34 196; ul Komsomolskaya 79, 3rd fl; dm/d R400/600) offers cheaper, simpler accommodation with private bathrooms 2km north of the centre.

Alternatively it's easy enough to get a minibus back to Chita until midafternoon. Hourly minibuses run to Mogoytuy on the Chita-Zabaikalsk line but trains are poorly timed. There's a single daily bus from Aginskoe to Duldurga (90km) for Alkhanay. That road is terribly bumpy.

Alkhanay & Duldurga

Алханай и Дулдурга

☎ 30256 / pop 7000

A Buryat-run national park 130km south of Chita, **Alkhanay** is reckoned by the local Buddhists to be the religion's fifth-most important holy 'mountain'. In fact you'll see forested hills, not mountains, through which a devotional six- to seven-hour return trek takes pilgrims to a small stupa and a window rock. The latter is considered the Gate of Shambala, an entry to spiritual paradise. The beautiful flowers, pious pilgrims and bird-watching opportunities are as interesting as the scenery.

Alkhanay's entrance is 20km (R200 by taxi) from **Duldurga** village where there's a helpful **Alkhanay National Park Office** (☎ 21 458; alkhanaia@andex.ru; ul Gagarina 47) and two simple hotels. There's more accommodation in *turbazy* around the park entrance including a **yurt camp** (beds R500). July to September, Chita-based agency **Lanta** (☎ 3022-262 368; ul Leningradskaya 56; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) runs R1000 weekend tours, departing on Friday and including two nights' accommodation (see p219). No English is spoken. *Marshrutky* from Chita to Duldurga (R150, three hours) run several times daily.

NERCHINSK НЕРЧИНСК

☎ 30242 / pop 15,300 / ☎ Moscow + 6hr

Once one of Eastern Siberia's foremost towns, forgotten Nerchinsk is quietly intriguing and handily breaks up a long Chita-Blagoveshchensk journey. Venue for the immensely important 1689 border treaty with China, Nerchinsk boomed from the 1860s with discoveries of silver.

Mikhail Butin, the local silver baron, built himself an impressive crenellated palace that he furnished with what were then the world's largest mirrors, carried all the way from Paris. The mirrors form the centrepiece of the recently restored **Butin Palace Museum** (☎ 44 515; lit@rambler.ru; Sovetskaya ul 83; admission R50; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Tue-Sat), in

what remains of Butin's mansion. Nearby is the active 1825 **Voskresensky Cathedral** (ul Pogodaeva 85) and the imposing but somewhat dilapidated 1840 **Trading Arches** (Gostiny Dvor) hosting the town's one café.

Trains stop at an unmarked platform facing the pretty wooden-lace **children's music school** (ul Yaroslavskaia 24). The totally unmarked **Hotel PU** (☎ 41 745; ul Dostovalova 3; dm R150) is half a block west of the palace museum; camp beds share a kitchen and sitting room but there's no shower and toilets are outdoor longdrops.

From Chita, a single Nerchinsk-bound *platskart* carriage (R209, 10 hours) is attached conveniently to the overnight Yerey Pavlovich train 392. To continue east, taxi-hop back to Priiskovaya on the Trans-Siberian mainline, where the 1.20pm train to Blagoveshchensk and 8.55pm to Khabarovsk or the 6.11pm back towards Irkutsk all run on odd days only.

BLAGOVESHCHENSK

БЛАГОВЕЩЕНСК

☎ 4162 / pop 210,000 / ☎ Moscow + 6hr

About 110km south of the Trans-Siberian tracks, where Chinese and Russians rub shoulders, Blagoveshchensk sits across the wide Amur River from the Chinese town of Heihe. Its border position has meant an unsteady history. In 1900, Cossacks slaughtered thousands of Chinese here; during the Cultural Revolution, Chinese propaganda blasted 24/7 from across the river.

Since opening as a free trade zone in 1994, folks of either side swish-swash across the border. Blagoveshchensk (meaning 'good news') is less for tourism than business or gambling, but it's interesting to watch Chinese tourists posing in front of Tsar-era European buildings and statues of Lenin.

Orientation & Information

The train station is 4km north of the river. The main cross-town artery is north-south 50 Let Oktyabrya ul, which meets pl Lenina (and east-west ul Lenina) a block from the river.

Amur Tourist (☎ 53 005; ul Kuzhnechnaya 1; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm) Agency geared mostly for Chinese and Russian daytrippers, but can help with tickets.

Internet Access (☎ 391 276; ul Lenina 142, 2nd fl; per hr R36; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-8.30pm) About 1km west of pl Lenina.

Sights

Central **pl Lenina** – with Lenin's bronze self, fountains and promenade leading along the river in both directions – is a sort of beer-drinking focal point in good weather.

About 500m west on tree-lined ul Lenina, the large and well laid-out **Amur Regional Museum** (Amursky Oblastnoi Kraevedchesky muzey; ☎ 422 414; ul Lenina 165; admission R80; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) is in a smartly kept red building dating from the turn of the 20th century.

Just south, around the WWII-themed **plshchad Pobody** (a block south of ul Lenina), you can see several prerevolutionary buildings in their faded glory. Look for the **Anton Chekhov bust** on the red building on the square's south side – he stayed here in 1890 on his way to Sakhalin.

Sleeping

Druzhba Hotel (☎ 376 140, 534 789; www.hoteldruzhba.ru; ul Kuzhnechnaya 1; s R650, d R800-1000) About 600m east of pl Lenina, the riverside Druzhba is a Soviet survivor and the town's best, with friendly service and clean basic rooms.

Zeya Hotel (☎ 539 996; hotel_zeia@amur.ru; ul Lenina 122; r per person from R744) Grey high-rise with clean rooms, just west of pl Pobody.

Eating

Most restaurants – found along ul Lenina – double as casinos. **Russkaya Izba** (☎ 446 661; ul Lenina 48; meals around R250-350; ☎ 11am-11pm) is tiny (four tables) and like a dacha (country cottage), with samovars and engraved wood details. The homey Izba cooks up good Russian meals. It's about 800m east of Druzhba Hotel.

Getting There & Away

Blagoveshchensk is 110km off the Trans-Siberian, on a branch line from Belogorsk (where taxi vans also meet oncoming trains for the two-hour ride; R150).

From the Blagoveshchensk train station, daily trains 185/186 lead to/from Vladivostok, passing through Khabarovsk (R1090, 16 hours). On odd-numbered days, trains 249/250 connect Blagoveshchensk with Moscow, stopping in Irkutsk (R2500, 53 hours); and trains 81/82 go to/from Tynda (R1260, 20 hours).

The **Passazhirskeye Port Amurasso** (☎ 440 703, 555 754; ul Chaikovskovo 1), about 500m east of the Druzhba, sends four daily boats to Heihe,

China (R600, 15 minutes); five boats make the return trip. You'll need a Chinese visa (the nearest consulate is in Khabarovsk; for details see p304) and a multientry Russian one if you plan on coming back. Be sure to fill out a yellow form (for entry) or a blue form (for exit). If you're coming back to Russia, you may have to insist on a migration card. From Heihe, it's possible to connect back with the Trans-Manchurian route on a train through to Harbin (p273).

BIROBIDZHAN БИРОБИДЖАН

☎ 42162 / pop 90,000 / 📶 Moscow + 7hr

A couple of hours shy of Khabarovsk on the line (heading east), Birobidzhan is actually a more attractive town, with shady streets and a quiet pace. Most visit as a day trip from Khabarovsk. It's interesting mostly for its history, as the big Hebrew letters spelling out the station's name indicate.

Birobidzhan (named for the meeting space of the Bira and Bidzhan Rivers) is capital of the 36,000-sq-km Jewish Autonomous Region. It was opened to settlement in 1927, when the Soviet authorities conceived the idea of a homeland for Jews. Some 43,000 Jews made the trek. In the 1930s growing anti-Semitism led to a ban on the Hebrew language and the synagogue was closed.

Since 1991, diplomatic ties between Russia and Israel have opened an outward flood of Jews. Of the estimated 22,000 who lived here then, only 4800 remain – about 2.4% of the total Jewish population in the region.

For most visitors, an easy DIY day trip from Khabarovsk allows more than enough time. Everywhere is quite walkable. Parallel to the tracks to the south are the main streets ul Lenina, then ul Sholom-Aleykhema. The **Internet centre** (cnr uls Gorkogo & Lenina; per hr R40; 📶 8am-10pm) faces pl Pobedy.

Across from the train station, **ploshchad Pobedy** is devoted to WWII. Halfway along the square, west on ul Lenina, are the two main sights in town. **Freid** (☎ 27 708; ul Sholom-Aleykhema 14A), reached from ul Lenina (look for the giant menorah on your left), is Birobidzhan's Jewish culture centre. Ask to see if you can chat with the lively director or buy a souvenir *yarmulke* (skull cap). Next door is a new synagogue you can visit.

About 100m further west, the **Regional Museum** (Kraevedchesky muzey; ☎ 68 321; ul Lenina 25; admission R100; 📶 10am-1pm & 2-6pm Tue-Fri) has a

smattering of exhibits on local Jewish history, plus boars, bears and a bloody minidiorama of the Volochoevka civil war (below).

Hotel Vostok (☎ 65 330; ul Sholom-Aleykhema 1; s/d R850/1146), Birobidzhan's only hotel, has nice rooms next to a lively market. The hotel's restaurant serves meals, including filling R100 lunch specials.

Most Trans-Siberian trains make a stop in Birobidzhan. The easiest way here is the morning *elektrichka* (suburban train) from Khabarovsk (R120, 2¾ hours). It leaves Khabarovsk at 8am and returns around 6pm. You can also catch buses from the Khabarovsk train station.

KHABAROVSK ХАБАРОВСК

☎ 4212 / pop 620,000 / 📶 Moscow + 6hr

After dozens of hours of taiga and the isolated Soviet towns of Eastern Siberia, Khabarovsk can put a jolt in the most rail-weary. A booming river town, 25km from China, Khabarovsk gives off the air of a coastal, almost Mediterranean, resort with tree-lined streets, squares with fountains, 19th-century brick buildings, popular parks overlooking the wide Amur, and real-live Japanese sushi, imported here to serve the frequent Japanese business travellers.

Such business has brought hope and money to locals – and prices show it. One Khabarovsk resident us told us it's brought a 'baby boom', too.

If you stop for just a day, visit the Regional History Museum, the best in the Far East.

History

Khabarovsk was founded in 1858 as a military post by Eastern Siberia's governor general, Count Nikolai Muravyov (later Muravyov-Amursky), during his campaign to take back the Amur from the Manchus. It was named after the man who got the Russians into trouble with the Manchus in the first place, 17th-century Russian explorer Yerofey Khabarov.

The Trans-Siberian arrived from Vladivostok in 1897. During the civil war, it was occupied by Japanese troops for most of 1920. The final Bolshevik victory in the Far East was at Volochoevka, around 45km to the west.

In 1969 Soviet and Chinese soldiers fought a bloody hand-to-hand battle over

little Damansky Island in the Ussuri River. Since 1984, tensions have eased. Damansky and several other islands were handed back to the Chinese in 1991.

Khabarovskians are 80% native Russian-speakers. The only indigenous people here in any numbers are the Nanai, whose capital is Troitskoe, three hours north on the Amur.

Orientation

The train station is 3.5km northeast of the Amur waterfront at the head of broad Amursky bul; the airport is 9km east of the centre. Running more or less perpendicular to the river is the busiest street, ul Muravyova-Amurskogo, which becomes ul Karla Marksa east of pl Lenina.

Knizhny Mir (☎ 328 250; ul Karla Marksa 37; 📶 9am-8pm) stocks a good range of city and regional maps for the entire Russian Far East (city maps are about R50).

Information

For contact details of the Chinese consulate, see p304.

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet Mir (☎ 304 613; ul Muravyova-Amurskogo 28; per hr R40; 📶 8am-9pm Mon-Fri, 9am-7pm Sat & Sun) Web access, next to the post office.

P@RTY (☎ 308 350; ul Karla Marksa 52; per hr R30; 📶 10am-8pm) Rather un festive, actually.

MEDICAL SERVICES

City Hospital No 2 (☎ 306 585, 304 620; ul Muravyova-Amurskogo 54)

MONEY

Exchange offices and ATMs can be found across the city.

Exchange bureau (Amursky bul 2, Hotel Intourist; 📶 8.45am-11pm) Changes travellers cheques.

Sberbank (Amursky bul 66; 📶 8am-8pm Mon & Wed-Fri, 9am-8pm Tue, 9am-7pm Sat & Sun) With 24-hour ATM across from the train station.

POST

Main post office (ul Muravyova-Amurskogo 28; 📶 8am-9pm Mon-Fri, 9am-7pm Sat & Sun) You can also make calls from the centre just below.

TELEPHONE

Main telephone office (ul Pushkina 52; 📶 8.30am-10pm)

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Any of these can help book rail or plane tickets. Popular city tours feature Russian cuisine classes with dinner (about US\$60 per person) or beer-included peeks at the Baltika brewery (US\$40 per person).

Dalgeo Tours (☎ 318 829; www.dalgeotours.com; ul Turgenyeva 78; 📶 10am-7pm Mon-Fri) Very helpful English-speaking staff offer a range of local tours.

Intour-Khabarovsk (☎ 312 186; www.intour-khabarovsk.com; Amursky bul 2, Hotel Intourist; 📶 10am-6pm Mon-Fri) Friendly staff have plenty of experience with foreigners (mostly prebooked group tours).

Khabarovsk-Tourist (☎ 439 423; ul Sinel'nikova 9, Hotel Turist; 📶 9am-6pm Mon-Fri) Arranges China visas in a week for R2400, or in a day for R4500.

Sights

ULITSA MURAVYOVA-AMURSKOGO

Khabarovsk is the nicest city in the region to see by foot. Start along ul Muravyova-Amurskogo to admire the graceful **architecture** that survived the civil war. Start at **ploshchad Lenina**, where the pretty fountains are a magnet for locals relaxing in the evening. During January, the square hosts an ice sculpture fest.

The striking old parliament building, the **duma** (ul Muravyova-Amurskogo 17), became the House of Pioneers (Dom Pionerov) in Soviet times. It now houses a souvenir shop (see p229).

A statue of Mercury tops **Tsentralny Gastronom** (ul Muravyova-Amurskogo 9), a glamorous 1895 mint-green Style Moderne building with a decent café (see p228). The **Far Eastern State Research Library** (ul Muravyova-Amurskogo 1), with its intricate red-and-black brick façade, was built from 1900 to 1902.

At Komsomolskaya pl is the newly reconstructed Orthodox church **Khram Uspeniya Bozhei Materi**, a replica of one destroyed during communist times.

THE WATERFRONT

Steps from Komsomolskaya pl lead to the waterfront and a strip of beach that's very popular with sunbathers on hot days. South, there's a string of summertime food stalls and the landing stages for the suburban river boats. Further on, as you climb the steps back up to ul Lenina, you'll encounter Khabarovsk's bombastic **WWII memorial** and the new multidomed **Church of the Transfiguration**.

Khabarovsk

INFORMATION	Храм Успения Божией Матери 15 A5	Overtime.....37 D5	
Chinese Consulate	Military Museum	RUSSKY Restaurant	
Китайское Консульство.....1 A4	Военный Музей.....16 A5	Русский Ресторан.....38 A5	
City Hospital No 2	Museum of History of the Far Eastern Railway	Tsentrallyy Gastronom	
Городская Больница номер 2.....2 C5	Музей Истории Дальневосточной Железной Дороги.....17 D3	Центральный Гастроном.....39 B5	
Dalgeo Tours Далгео Тур.....3 A5	Regional History Museum	Unihabk.....(see 26)	
Exchange Bureau.....(see 26)	Краеведческий Музей.....18 A5	DRINKING ☑	
Internet Mir Интернет Мир.....(see 6)	Tower.....(see 35)	Open Air Cafés.....40 A5	
Intour-Khabarovsk	Tsentrallyy Gastronom	Rio.....41 C6	
Интур-Хабаровск.....(see 26)	Центральный Гастроном.....19 B5	ENTERTAINMENT ☑	
Japanese Consulate.....4 C5	WWII Memorial Памятник Второй Мировой Войны.....20 A6	Drama Theatre Театр Драмы.....42 B5	
Khabarovsk-Tourist	SLEEPING ☑	Sovkino СовКино.....43 B5	
Хабаровск-Турист.....(see 28)	Ali Hotel Гостиница Али.....21 D5	Theatre of Musical Comedy	
Клзхлыу Mir Книжный Мир.....5 C5	Ekspres Vostok Экспресс Восток.....22 A5	Театр Музыкальной Комедии 44 D4	
Main Post Office Главпочтамт.....6 B5	Gostinitsa Гостиница.....23 A6	SHOPPING ☑	
Main Telephone Office	Hotel Amethyst	Market Рынок.....45 C4	
Центральный Переговорный Пункт.....7 C5	Гостиница Амнеист.....24 C4	Taini Remesla Тайны Ремесла.....46 B5	
P@RTY.....8 D4	Hotel Amur Гостиница Амур.....25 C6	TRANSPORT	
Sberbank Сбербанк.....9 D3	Hotel Intourist	Boat Ticket Office.....47 A6	
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES	Гостиница Интурист.....26 A5	Train Ticket Office	
Archaeology Museum	Hotel Sapporo	Железнодорожные кассы.....48 D4	
Музей Археологии.....10 A5	Гостиница Саппоро.....27 A5	Transport Service Transit.....(see 33)	
Church of Christ's Birth	Hotel Turist Гостиница Турист.....28 D4		
Христорождественская Церковь.....11 D3	Hotel Zarya Гостиница Заря.....29 D4		
Church of the Transfiguration	Maly Hotel Restaurant.....(see 30)		
Преображенская церковь.....12 B6	Maly Hotel Гостиница Малая.....30 B5		
Count Nikolai Maravyov-Amursky Statue.....(see 35)	Parus Парус.....31 A5		
Duma Дума.....(see 46)	EATING ☑		
Far Eastern Art Museum	Chocolate Шоколад.....32 A5		
Дальневосточный Художественный Музей.....13 A5	Сити НК Supermarket.....33 D4		
Far Eastern State Research Library	Dalny Vostok Cafe		
Библиотека Дальне-Восточного Исследования.....14 A5	Далний Восток Кафе.....34 B5		
Khram Uspeniya Bozhey Materi	Kafe Utys Кафе Утёс.....35 A5		
	Metro Метро.....36 C5		

A pleasant **city park** stretches 1.5km down-river (northwards). On the promontory is a cliff-top **tower** in which a troupe of WWI Austro-Hungarian POW musicians was shot dead for refusing to play the Russian Imperial anthem. It now contains a café, Kafe Utys. Opposite the tower is a statue of **Count Nikolai Muravyov-Amursky**.

MUSEUMS

One of the Far East's best attractions, the **Regional History Museum** (Kraevedchesky muzey; ☎ 312 054; ul Shevchenko 11; admission R140, photo R100; ☹ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) earns its roubles with six well laid-out halls in an evocative 1894 red-brick building. Highlights are many, including a far better than average look into native cultures (including eerie bigger-than-life-sized spear-toting wooden figurines); stuffed animals featuring some English captions; a full-on panorama of the snowy 1922 civil war battle at Volochaevka; and a Soviet-fest room complete with medals, photos, stamps and banners.

The nearby **Military Museum** (Voenny muzey; ☎ 326 350; ul Shevchenko 20; admission R84; ☹ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) is a four-room frenzy of battle axes, guns, knives, and busts of moustached heroes of past conflicts. In the courtyard is a line of army vehicles including a luxury officers-only rail carriage dating from 1926.

The highlight of the **Archaeology Museum** (Muzey Arkheologii; ☎ 324 177; ul Turgeneva 86; admission R120; ☹ 10am-5.30pm Tue-Sun) is the reproductions and diagrams of the wide-eyed figures found at the ancient Sikachi-Alyan petroglyphs (p230). Lots of pot parts and spear heads – far dating back 30,000 years.

The **Far Eastern Art Museum** (Dalnevostochny Khudozhestvenny muzey; ☎ 328 338; ul Shevchenko 7; admission US\$4; ☹ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) has religious icons, Japanese porcelain and 19th-century Russian paintings.

Closed at research time (but apparently reopening) is the small **Museum of History of the Far Eastern Railway** (☎ 383 035; ul Vladivostokskaya 40; admission free; ☹ 8.30am-5.30pm Mon-Fri), which has plenty of photos and models.

CHURCH OF CHRIST'S BIRTH

Among the few churches that survived the Soviet years is the cute, red-blue-and-white **Church of Christ's Birth** (Khristorozhdestvenskaya tserkov; ul Leningradskaya 65). Two-hour services are held most days at 7am and 5pm.

Activities

For a short **river trip** along the Amur, various hydrofoils and boats set off from May to October on hour-long beer-soaked trips for R70; 90-minute evening cruises cost R130. There are no set schedules – just watch for one and jump on. Call **Amurrechturist** (☎ 398 269) for more information.

Dinamo Park, behind the Theatre of Musical Comedy, brims with sun- and shade-seekers in good weather; the ponds on the south side are popular swim-and-splash spots.

Sleeping

With advance notice, Dalgeo Tourist arranges homestays (from US\$35 including breakfast).

BUDGET

All rooms come with private bathroom, TV and refrigerator. The first two are not far from the train station.

Hotel Zarya (☎ 310 101; hotel_zarya@mail.ru; ul Kim Yu Chena 81/16; s/d with breakfast from R850/1600; ☹) A makeover of a drab building gives Zarya a 'boutique hotel' feel. Rooms are great – some have air-con. The staff are small – Internet is available 24 hours.

Hotel Turist (☎ 439 674; postmaster@khabturist.kht.ru; ul Karla Marksa 67; s/d from R1100/1320) Facing the busy street, the eight-storey Turist shows bits of its four decades, but its rooms are well kept up – the cheapies are frequently full.

Hotel Amur (☎ 221 223; fax 217 141; ul Lenina 29; s/d with breakfast from R1500/1600; ☹) Grand old building with 75 rooms (some with air-con) on the busy residential ul Lenina.

Ekspres Vostok (☎ 384 797; ul Komsomolskaya 67; s/d R1300/1800; ☹) New hotel geared to Russians – all 29 rooms are clean, with a writing desk and rather cheap vinyl floors.

At last pass, it was possible to bunk on a late-night disco cruise ship at the river-boat landing from June to September; it's simply called 'gostinitsa' (hotel; ☎ 398 980; s/d R400/800).

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Hotel Intourist (☎ 312 313; www.intour.khv.ru; Amursky bul 2; s/d from R2352/2604; ☹) This big bolshevik is another monster of the past, but it's quite good. The halls – with dark-wood doors and small, but clean rooms – look over the nearby Amur, and most of the package tourists who come seem to like it. Prices fall in winter.

Hotel Amethyst (☎ 420 766; amethyst@hotel.kht.ru; ul Lva Tolstogo 5A; s/d from R2600/3100; 🏠) A boutique-style hotel with just 16 spacious, nicely decorated rooms. The staff is great and there's a sauna. Breakfast is R200.

Maly Hotel (☎ 305 802; fax 305 939; ul Kalinina 83A; s/d US\$110/180; 🏠) Behind a bank, in a small, quiet brick courtyard, the Maly has just 11 rooms – the doubles are quite bigger than the singles.

Ali Hotel (☎ 217 888; fax 304 403; ul Mukhinu 17; s/d with breakfast US\$120/162; 🏠 📺 📺) Ali's 20 rooms are Khabarovsk's roomiest – with sparkling bathrooms – though the hotel's a bit stranded (between apartments and garages). Fitness centre with pool and sauna.

Hotel Sapporo (☎ 306 745; sapporo1@gin.ru; ul Kom-somolskaya 79; s/d R2983/3297; 🏠 📺) Just off the main crawl, the Sapporo's 20 rooms are geared to its many visitors from Japan; small, clean (but not particularly remarkable) rooms in a simple red-brick building. There's a good sauna on-site.

Parus (☎ /fax 649 510; guest@parus.vic.ru; ul Shevchenko 5; s/d with breakfast R3100/4400; 🏠 📺) Part of a century-old red-and-brick building near the water, the Parus seems more 'business centre' than hotel, though its spacious rooms are comfortable (all but four rooms are in a newer annexe).

Eating

Eating is easy in Khabarovsk: new spots open frequently on and off ul Muravyova-Amurskogo. Also you'll see – weather permitting – tonnes of street vendors selling pizza and the ever-present hot dog (R13).

RESTAURANTS

Russky Restaurant (☎ 306 587; Ussuriyskiy bul 9; meals R800-1200; 🕒 noon-1am) Slightly kitsch and cosy, Russky has four dacha-style cellar rooms decorated with balalaikas and stuffed owls – one room, with live traditional music at 8pm, which fills first. The food is very good. Sizzling sturgeon is the favourite, as is the breaded pork chop covered in dill.

Chocolate (☎ 420 097; ul Turgeneva 74; meals R400-700; 🕒 24hr) Stylish eatery where the cool folk go (and the air-con is cranking in summer) for international snacking (fajitas, burgers) and some superb desserts (the namesake brownie is R180).

Kafe Utyos (☎ 777 050; ul Shevchenko 15; meals R800-1500; 🕒 noon-midnight) In the tower in the

park overlooking the river, Utyos is one of Khab's swankier restaurants – mostly Russian and Japanese food.

Metro (ul Muravyova-Amurskogo 35; lunches R100-150, meals R400-700; 🕒 11am-5pm & 6pm-2am Mon-Fri, 11am-2am Sat & Sun) Below a university building, the Metro occupies (it's whispered) the spot where medical students once poked at cadavers. Now it's a flashy subterranean drink 'n' eat spot – best for the cheap lunch.

Maly Hotel Restaurant (☎ 305 802; ul Kalinina 83A; meals R600-1000; 🕒 9am-11pm) The hotel's small restaurant is known for the best Japanese in town (all imported) and rather slow service. Worth calling ahead.

Unikhab (☎ 312 315; Amurskiy bul 2, 11th fl; meals R600-1000; 🕒 noon-3pm & 6-11pm) The best of Hotel Intourist's three restaurants, the top-floor Japanese restaurant offers imported-from-Japan sushi with views.

Overtime (☎ 318 547; ul Dikopol'tseva 12, Platinum Arena; meals R600-1000; 🕒 noon-midnight) If you're here in hockey season, Overtime's primary red, white and blue décor overlooks the rink; photos of local hockey greats adorn walls all year.

CAFÉS & SELF-CATERING

Tsentralny Gastronom (ul Muravyova-Amurskogo 9; meals R150-300; 🕒 10am-10pm) In a 19th-century building, upstairs from a good 24-hour grocery, this cute modern-retro self-service café has a good selection of meals, beer on tap and a refrigerator full of desserts.

Dalny Vostok Cafe (ul Muravyova-Amurskogo 18; meals R150-300; 🕒 9am-midnight) Plump blue booths overlook the street action at this two-line cheapie fast-food pick-and-point stop (go past the doors in the front bar).

Citi HK Supermarket (ul Karl Marksa 76; 🕒 9am-11pm) Best grocery in town.

Drinking

Most drinking occurs at open-air cafés; good ones are along the river, north of the Intourist Hotel. On two levels, **Rio** (☎ 238 420; ul Lenina 49; cover R300; 🕒 9pm-4am or 5am Fri-Sun) is the city's largest club, where photos show what you can expect: topless women engaging in mud conflict.

Entertainment

Drama Theatre (Teatr Dramy; ☎ 310 809; ul Dzerzhinskogo 44) We bet you a kopeck that Chekhov's on here.

Theatre of Musical Comedy (Teatr Muzikalny komedy; ☎ 211 403; ul Karla Marksa 64; tickets R80-800) Has mostly talking and joking, though heavy-metal legend Dio started his 2005 tour here.

SovKino (☎ 324 065; ul Muravyova-Amurskogo 32) Shows dubbed Hollywood flicks.

Shopping

Taini Remesla (☎ 327 385; ul Muravyova-Amurskogo 17; 🕒 11am-6pm or 7pm) The best souvenir shop in town, located in the old House of Pioneers building.

Market (cnr Amurskiy bul & ul Tolstogo; 🕒 8am-7pm) This main market covers everything from plug adaptors and fishing gear to underwear and fresh produce.

Getting There & Away

AIR

The **airport** (☎ 393 758) offers domestic service to Irkutsk (R5800, three hours, daily), Magadan (R2630 to R3100, 2½ hours, four weekly), Moscow (R11,500, 8½ hours, daily), Nikolaevsk-na-Amure (R4100, 1½ hours, daily), Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy (R5975, 2½ hours, six weekly), Vladivostok (R2500, 1¼ hours, daily), Yakutsk (R6200, three hours, six weekly) and Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk (R4200, 1½ hours, two daily).

There are international flights to Harbin (US\$170) and Guau (US\$320) in China, Seoul (from US\$300) in Korea, and Niigata (US\$340) and (July to September) Aomori (US\$340) in Japan. All international flights are subject to a R800 departure tax, usually included in the ticket price.

The foreign airlines all have offices at the airport's international terminal (to the left of the new one). **Intour-Khabarovsk** (☎ 312 186; www.intour.khv.ru; Amurskiy bul 2, Hotel Intourist; 🕒 10am-6pm Mon-Fri) books tickets, as does **Transport Service Transit** (☎ 291 692; ul Karl Marksa 76; 🕒 10am-2pm & 3-8pm), in the HK Citi Mall.

BOAT & BUS

From Khabarovsk's river station, boats sail down the Amur to Fuyuan in northern China (see right). Between May and October hydrofoils run north on the Amur between Khabarovsk and Komsomolsk (R446, six hours) and Nikolaevsk-na-Amure (R2332, 17 hours). You'll save money taking the night bus from here to Komsomolsk-na-Amure (on the BAM line), then catching a

boat up. At research time, boats left here at 7am. The pink *rechnoy vokzal* (river station) houses the **boat ticket office** (☎ 398 654; 🕒 8am-10pm).

TRAIN

Heading west, apart from 1 *Rossiya*, which departs for Moscow (R8500, 130 hours) and Irkutsk (R5000, 60 hours) on even-numbered dates, there's also daily train 43 to Moscow (R5700) and Irkutsk (R3350) and train 7 to Novosibirsk (R4550, 91 hours). Heading east, Vladivostok is best reached on daily train 6 *Okean* service (R1500, 13 hours).

For details on getting to Birobidzhan, see p224.

Other daily services (all leaving in the evening) include the 226 to Tynda (R1351, 30 hours), and on to Neryungri; the 67 and 953 to Komsomolsk (R860, eight hours), the latter continuing to Sovetskaya Gavan and Port Vanino for the ferry across to Sakhalin; and the 385 to Blagoveshchensk (R1090, 16 hours).

Buy tickets at the station or the quieter (and nearby) **zheleznodorozhne-avia kassy** (train ticket office; ul Leningradskaya 56V; 🕒 9.30am-7.20pm), where you'll pay a R60 booking fee.

Getting Around

Trolleybus 1 (R9) runs regularly from the airport to ul Muravyova-Amurskogo, taking around 30 minutes to cover the 5km; minivans also do the journey (R10). A taxi to/from Hotel Intourist should cost no more than R250.

The easiest way to get into the city centre from the train station at the eastern end of Amurskiy bul is by way of trams 1, 2, 4 or 6 (R10), which cross ul Muravyova-Amurskogo along ul Sheronova. Bus 35 connects the airport and the train station.

Travel agencies can get you a car with driver for US\$15 per hour.

AROUND Khabarovsk Fuyuan (China)

From mid-May to mid-October, daily hydrofoils leave from Khabarovsk river station for Fuyuan (one-way/return R1400/2000, 1½ hours) at 8am and 10am, returning in the evening (with tonnes of shopping bags) from the small Chinese town on the Amur River. If you're planning to return to Russia,

you'll need a Chinese visa and a double-/multiple-entry Russian visa. There is a Chinese consulate in Khabarovsk (see p304 for details). From Fuyuan you can take a bus to Jiamusi and then on to Harbin.

Sikachi-Alyan Сикачи-Алян

The main attraction at Sikachi-Alyan, 40km north of Khabarovsk, are the enigmatic riverside stone carvings of strange graphic figures, dating from the 11th century BC. There are a couple of competing museums here – the Ecological Tourist Complex was made by Russians; the local museum by local Nanai.

An eight-hour tour (see Travel Agencies, p225) – with guide, lunch, transport and usually a look at how Nanai locals make crafts out of fish skin – costs about US\$130.

VLADIVOSTOK ВЛАДИВОСТОК

☎ 4232 / pop 650,000 / Moscow + 7hr

It has the reputation (everyone around the Far East seems to look up to it) and – once you get here – Vladivostok indeed is pretty good to be in for a couple of days. Some streets are a bit drab, but the setting is remarkable: a series of peaks and peninsulas curl around the Golden Horn Bay (bukhta Zolotoy Rog; named after Istanbul's similar-looking harbour), which is home to huge icebreakers and the Russian Pacific Fleet.

Quite the port-town bustler before communism (back when the Swiss family Brynner brought a bald Yul into the world here in 1920), Vladivostok's cosmopolitan urges have slowly returned after the long Soviet snooze. Vladivostok was firmly off limits to all foreigners (and most Russians) during the USSR days. Today you can (fairly freely) hop on ferries to far-off beaches on former navy-only islands; two century-old forts or a Soviet sub; and weave past (in summer) battalions of Chinese, Japanese and Korean tourists.

Summer is wet and foggy, and power outages plague winter. September and October, locals swear, is best.

History

Founded in 1860, Vladivostok (meaning 'Lord of the East') became a naval base in 1872. Tsarevitch Nicholas II turned up in 1891 to inaugurate the new Trans-Siberian

rail line. By the early 20th century, Vladivostok teemed with merchants, speculators and sailors of every nation in a manner more akin to Shanghai or Hong Kong than to Moscow. Korean and Chinese, many of whom had built the city, accounted for four out of every five of its citizens.

After Port Arthur (Dalian) fell in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05, Vladivostok took on an even more crucial strategic role, and when the Bolsheviks seized power in European Russia in 1917, Japanese, Americans, French and English poured ashore here to support the tsarist counterattack. Vladivostok held out until 25 October 1922, when Soviet forces finally marched in and took control.

Josef Stalin deported or shot most of the foreign population of the city. The northern suburb of Vtoraya Rechka became a transit centre for hundreds of thousands of prisoners waiting to be shipped up to the gold fields of Kolyma.

From 1958 to 1992 the city was closed.

Orientation

The heart of central Vladivostok is where Okeansky pr intersects with ul Svetlanskaya, the city's main waterfront axis. Most hotels are west of ul Aleutskaya (a block west of Okeansky pr), which runs past the train station. Ul Admirala Fokina, west of Okeansky pr, is an action-packed pedestrian mall, often called 'Arbat' by locals.

MAPS

City maps are available at stalls bookshops such as **Dom Knigi** (ul Svetlanskaya 43; ☎ 10am–7pm Mon–Sat, 10am–5pm Sun) and **Knigomir** (ul Aleutskaya 23; ☎ 10am–8pm), where you can also get some glossy regional books and postcards.

Information

See p304 for consulate information.

INTERNET ACCESS

Iguana Cafe (☎ 481 367; ul Svetlanskaya 23; per hr R60; ☎ 10am–midnight) Behind the indoor flower market. Beer and coffee handy.

Post office (ul Aleutskaya; per hr R50; ☎ 8am–8pm)

Lightning-fast connection.

MEDIA

Vladivostok News (vn.vladnews.ru) An online newspaper in English.

VLADIVOSTOK

0 200 m
0 0.1 miles

To Lucky Tour (150m); BSB (1.5km);
MUZ Hospital No 1 (2km); Bus Station (3km);
Fort No 7 (13km); Vlad Motor Inn (20km);
Venice Hotel (50km); Airport (50km)

To Japanese Consulate (2km);
Hotel Gavan (2km);
Chinese Consulate (2km)
Slavyanka

To Russky Island;
Popov Island;
Slavyanka

To US Consulate
(1km); British
Consulate (1km)

INFORMATION	Hotel Ekvator.....22 A2	DRINKING ☎
Dalintourist Далинтурист.....1 B2	Гостиница Экватор.....22 A2	Bezdonnaya Bochka
Dom Knigi Дом Книги.....2 C2	Hotel Hyundai.....23 C2	Бездонная Бочка.....45 A1
Iguana Cafe.....3 B2	Гостиница Хундай.....23 C2	Kafe 35mm.....(see 47)
Knigomir Книгомир.....4 B2	Hotel Moryak.....24 B3	Sky Bar.....(see 23)
Korean Consulate.....5 A1	Гостиница Морьяк.....24 B3	ENTERTAINMENT ☎
Post Office Почта.....6 B3	Hotel Primorye.....25 B3	Bowling Centre.....(see 52)
PVU.....7 A2	Гостиница Приморье.....25 B3	Gorky Theatre
Sberbank Сбербанк.....8 B2	Гостиница Версаль.....26 A2	Театр имени М Горького.....46 C2
VladDiscoveryTour.....(see 7)	Гостиница Версаль.....26 A2	Kino Okean Кино Океан.....47 A2
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES	Гостиница Визит.....(see 27)	Philharmonia Hall
Aquarium Аквариум.....9 A2	Hotel Vladivostok.....27 A3	Филармония.....48 B2
Arsenev Regional Museum	Гостиница Владивосток.....27 A3	Stadium Dinamo.....49 A2
Объединённый Краеведческий		Zabrizskie Point
Музей им Арсения.....10 B2	EATING ☎	Забрицкий Пойнт.....50 A3
Бруннер House (No 15)	Alli Baba Fast Food Али-Баба.....28 A2	SHOPPING ☎
Дом Бриннера.....11 B3	Cafe Montmartre.....29 B2	Antique Shop
Lenin Statue.....12 B3	Кафе Монмартр.....29 B2	Коллекционер.....51 B2
Monument to the Fighters for	Dva Gruzina Два Грузчика.....30 A2	ЕКР ИКИП.....52 A2
Soviet Power in the Far East	Edem Эдем.....31 B2	Flotsky Universmag
Памятник Борцам за Власть	Izbushka Избушка.....32 B2	Флотский Универмаг.....53 B2
Советов на Дальнем Востоке.....13 B2	Kafe Krishna Кафе Кришна.....33 B2	GUM ГУМ.....54 C2
Museum of the Battle Fame	Kopeika Копейка.....34 B3	Nostalgiya.....(see 38)
Музей Боевой Славы.....14 B2	Krestovyy Pereval.....35 D2	TRANSPORT
Primorsky Art Gallery Приморская	Мауро Джанвани.....36 B2	Бизнес Интур Сервис.....(see 57)
Картинная Галерея.....15 B3	Мауро Джанвани.....37 A2	Бизнес Интур Сервис.....55 B2
Pushkinsky Theatre	Nostalgiya Ностальгия.....38 A3	Bus Stand.....(see 57)
Пушкинский Театр.....16 D2	Pizza M Пицца М.....39 C2	Coastal Ferries Station
S-56 Submarine	Prestizh Престиж.....40 A2	Вокзал Прибрежных
Подводная Лодка С-56.....17 C3	Shaverna Stands.....41 A2	Морских Сообщений.....56 C3
Triumphal Arch	Stary Gorod.....42 B2	Dong Chun Ferry Company.....(see 57)
Триумфальная Арка.....18 C2	Старый Гоголь.....42 B2	Marine Terminal
Vladivostok Fortress Museum.....19 A1	Studio Coffee Студия Кофе.....43 B2	Морской Вокзал.....57 B3
White House Белый Дом.....20 B2	Zolotoi Vek Золотой Век.....44 C2	Primorskoye Aeroagentsvo
SLEEPING ☎	Гостиница Амурский Залив.....21 A3	Приморское Аэроагентаво.....58 B3
Hotel Amursky Zaliv		Vladivostok Air.....59 B2
Гостиница Амурский Залив.....21 A3		

MEDICAL SERVICES

MUZ Hospital No 1 (☎ 258 663; ul Sadovaya 22) Ambulances take patients here, 2km north of centre.

MONEY

There are currency-exchange desks and ATMs all over town.

Sberbank (ul Aleutskaya 12; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-5pm Sun) Accepts travellers cheques.

POST & TELEPHONE

You can make international calls downstairs at the post office.

Post office (ul Aleutskaya; ☎ 8am-8pm) Opposite the train station.

TOURIST INFORMATION

PVU (☎ 432 576; ul Pogranichnaya 6) Can help extend your visa for a day (for a fee, if it isn't for a good reason) so you can exit Russia. It's best to get help from a travel agent, though.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

The following agencies can arrange visas to China from the new consulate (at research time, it cost about US\$125 to receive in three days or a week – always a week for Americans), plus set you up with train tickets, homestays and tours.

Dalintourist (☎ 222 949; www.dalintourist.ru; ul Admirala Fokina 8; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat) Best all-round agency, with the cheapest homestays, most-dependable visa service, good side trips to Vityaz beach near Slavyanka (see p237) and the Arkhipovka Lodge (rooms including all meals cost R530), north of Vladivostok in the Sikhote Alin Mountains.

Lucky Tour (☎ 223 333; www.luckytour.com; ul Moskovskaya 1; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Fri) Helps organise Trans-Siberian and Kamchatka trips, and has many local trips on offer. It's on the east side of the park (just northeast of Okeansky pr).

Vizit Co (☎ 499 799; www.visitfareast.com; ul Svetlanskaya 147; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Fri) A friendly smaller-scale agency, good for homestays and registration, local tours and Trans-Siberian tips online.

VladDiscoveryTour (☎ 413 400; www.vdt.ru; ul Pogranichnaya 2; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat) New agency with staff that have experience helping backpackers and Trans-Siberian travellers.

Sights**WATERFRONT & CITY CENTRE**

Vladivostok train station, originally built in 1912 and smartly renovated since, is an exotic architectural concoction with bold

murals inside. Across the road stands an unusually animated, finger-pointing **Lenin**.

Ul Aleutskaya is lined with once-grand buildings. The yellow house at **No 15** was the home of actor Yul Brynner.

Plushchad Bortsov Revolutsii has the impressive **Monument to the Fighters for Soviet Power in the Far East** as its centrepiece. The square, a focal point for performers and protesters of all kinds, hosts a market every Friday. The monolithic slab at the square's western end is the **White House** (Bely dom), home to the regional administration.

Heading east from the square, and just below the reconstruction of a **triumphal arch** built originally for Tsar Nicholas II in 1902, you'll see the green-and-grey **S-56 submarine** (Memorialnoi Gvargeiskoi Podvodnoi Lodke S-56; ☎ 216 757; Korabelnaya nab; adult/child R50/25; ☎ 10am-8pm). Lots of original gear inside (plus photos), but best is just clambering around inside a WWII sub that sunk 10 enemy ships.

The bulk of local strolls, beer-drinking and ice cream-eating is back west along the **Sportivnaya Harbour**, where you'll find plenty of food stalls, an amusement park and a rather trashy small beach facing the Amursky Gulf. Just north is an **aquarium** (Okeanarium; ul Batareynaya 4; admission R80; ☎ 10am-8pm Tue-Sun, 11am-8pm Mon).

ARSENEV REGIONAL MUSEUM

Most intriguing in its unexpectedness, the **Arsenev Regional Museum** (Kraevedchesky muzey Arseneva; ☎ 413 977; ul Svetlanskaya 20; adult/child R70/35; ☎ 10am-7pm Tue-Sun) is named for a late-19th-century ethnographer. It features two floors of thematic rooms – some revel in mixing it up (water fountain and fake plants amid modern photographs, 'СССР' sign atop green-and-red candy cane, the warring embrace of a bear and Siberian tiger that looks a little like ballroom dancing).

MUSEUM OF THE BATTLE FAME

At the **museum** (Muзей boevoy slavy; ☎ 217 904; ul Semenovskaya 17-19; admission R20; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Tue-Sat, closed last Fri of month), in a fine old pillared building, a guy in a navy outfit will probably help you put shoe covers on for the carpeted floors of the three-floor exhibit. The museum is geared chiefly to border patrol history (despite its more marketable war-oriented name), with imaginative 'boat' and 'plane' doors to such-themed rooms.

PRIMORSKY ART GALLERY

This **art gallery** (Primorskaya kartinnaya galereya; ☎ 411 195; ul Aleutskaya 12; admission R100; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-6.30pm Tue-Sat, 11am-5pm Sun) was temporarily closed for renovation at research time. Its collection – a surprising range of 17-century Dutch works and excellent works by Russian artists Ilya Repin and VV Vereshchagin – should be back before you arrive.

FORTS

Vladivostok teems with sprawling subterranean forts built a century ago to repel potential Japanese attacks.

Vladivostok Fortress Museum (Muзей Vladivostokskaya Krepost; ☎ 400 896; ul Batareynaya 4A; admission R70; ☎ 10am-6pm) blasts a giant gun at noon daily (drawing huge crowds of Asian tourists). Inside the renovated fort you can see guns, bombs and fort models. The fort is best accessed from ul Zapadnaya.

Sixteen protective forts encircle Vladivostok. The best (but pricey) is the hill-top **Fort No 7**, 14km north of the centre. It has 1.5km of tunnels, pretty much untouched since its last 400 soldiers left. Visiting on your own is very difficult, as the fort doesn't keep regular hours and it's hard to find. Organise a visit through an agency (about US\$30 or US\$40 per person including guide, transport and admission).

FUNICULAR

Vladivostokniks' favourite attraction may just be the smoothest-running operation in the Far East: the freshly renovated **funicular railway** (funikulyor; R5; ☎ 7am-8pm), which every few minutes makes a fun 60-second ride up a 100m hill. At the top, go under ul Sukhanova via the slummy underpass to a great (but also slummy) lookout beside the buildings of DVGTU (Far Eastern State Technical University) – the best view of Vladivostok.

Activities**ISLANDS & BOAT TOURS**

To catch ferries to the nearby Russky and Popov Islands, part of the archipelago that stretches southwards from Vladivostok towards North Korea, go to the **coastal ferries station** (☎ 220 823), 100m east of the S-56 submarine. Locals will be going with you – bags of cucumbers and *kielbasa* (sausages) in tow – to offshore dachas.

There's still some question as to whether foreigners are technically allowed to visit once-closed Russky Island – at research time, we had no problem, but there's a chance you won't be able to leave the boat. There's no restriction on visiting the smaller Popov, where there is a better beach and guesthouses for an overnighter. Camping's possible on both.

At least three daily boats head to a couple of points on Russky (R40 return, 30 minutes) – around 7am, noon and 6.30pm – staying for 10 minutes, then returning to Vladivostok, making for any easy shoe-string bay cruise past the Russian Pacific Fleet and giant icebreakers. If you're planning to tour the island, boats stopping at *podnozhye* (past an island canal) are best. Only one daily boat heads to Popov (R60 return, 1½ hours), leaving at 1pm and returning at 3pm.

A 90-minute bay cruise with a travel agency runs a little high: anywhere from US\$100 to US\$225 depending on the size of the group.

SWIMMING

The pool at **Hotel Hyundai** (☎ 407 205; ul Semenovskaya 29; pool admission R130) is available for general use.

Sleeping

Vladivostok is poorly served by budget accommodation; if funds are tight it's best to arrange a homestay for around US\$20 to US\$30, including breakfast, with a travel agency (see opposite). The agency can usually offer registration for a fee of US\$25 or so. Cheaper hotels fill first during summer tour-group season. Breakfast isn't included at most hotels.

Note: in winter, Vladivostok routinely experiences energy shortages, which means hot water can be a rarity, and even cold water disappears on occasion. Check what the situation is and keep your bathtub full.

MIDRANGE

Hotel Primorye (☎ 411 422; admin@hbotel.primorye.ru; ul Posetskaya 20; s/d from R1000/1200) A favourite central place on a rather quiet street, this renovated five-floor hotel has half of its quite nice rooms facing the harbour. (Smaller) cheapies go first, so call ahead. The 4th-floor café offers a R180 breakfast.

Hotel Moryak (☎/fax 499 499; ul Posetskaya 38; s/d from R1000/1100) Cheapest rooms fill with tour groups first, but it's still a good backup to the Primorye with small (very) but bright rooms – many with a peek at the bay or Vladivostok hills. It's found at the crest of a hilly street, and there is no lift.

Hotel Vladivostok (☎ 412 808; www.vladhotel.vl.ru; ul Naberezhnaya 10; economy s/d R725/1450, standard s/d R1830/2330; 📺) This one-time flagship of the Soviet era has the best economy single deal in the city, while the standard's slight extra comfort hardly justifies the price hike. Half the rooms have great views over the Amursky Gulf.

Hotel Ekvator (☎ 412 060; www.hotelequator.ru; ul Naberezhnaya 20; s/d from R1300/1800) Rather seedy (fading dark-wood panelling, exposed wiring), but facing the water, the Ekvator is often nevertheless full with groups in summer. Rooms are OK.

Hotel Amursky Zaliv (☎ 225 520; fax 221 430; ul Naberezhnaya 9; s/d from R550/1100; 📺) An enigmatic rambling place dug into the cliff side right on the water (the top floor is at street level), this hotel is packed with Chinese and Russian tour groups from May to September. There are several price ranges – all were full when we last dropped by.

Hotel Gavan (☎ 495 363; www.gavan.ru; ul Krygina 3; economy s/d R2000/2400, standard s/d with breakfast R3600/4000; 📺) About 2km south of the city centre, the Gavan's harbour views are blocked by kept-real apartments, but rooms are nice enough. Economy rooms are nearly identical to standard ones, but don't get free use of the 25m indoor pool. Several buses get here from the centre, including 57 to 62.

TOP END

Hotel Hyundai (☎ 407 205; www.hotelhyundai.ru; ul Semenovskaya 29; s/d with breakfast R6000/6500; 📺) Probably the city's nicest hotel – with rooms offering excellent views on either side, plus an air ticket agency, casino, sauna, Korean restaurant and top-floor bar on hand.

Hotel Versailles (☎ 264 201; www.versailles.vl.ru; ul Svetlanskaya 10; s/d R4000/5000) Quite a regal place in the centre, with a bring-out-the-tsar dining room and 40 nice rooms that get frequently filled with upmarket tour groups. The buffet breakfast is R280.

Hotel Visit Vladivostok (☎ 413 453; www.vizit.vl.ru; ul Naberezhnaya 10; s/d with breakfast R2650/2950)

Occupying the 4th floor of the Hotel Vladivostok, these refurbished rooms come with maybe a few more comforts than in the main hotel and there is also a small bar handy.

Vlad Motor Inn (☎ 331 351; www.vlad-inn.ru; ul Vosmaya 11, Sanatornaya; r from US\$139) For a respite from Russia, this Canadian-Russian joint venture, 20km north of the centre in the leafy coastal suburb of Sanatornaya, is quiet, very comfortable and very Western. Rates include free airport transfers, and the restaurant is superb.

Venice Hotel (☎ 307 600; fax 307 602; ul Portovaya 39; s/d US\$76/94) Near the airport, the Venice is a fine place if you arrive late or leave early.

Eating

RESTAURANTS

Russian

Izbushka (☎ 510 269; ul Admirala Fokina 9; meals R250-500; 🕒 11am-11pm) Traditional Russian two-room eatery attracting local couples, most opting for the 'forest' room rather than the front dacha. The food's particularly good (start with a bread-covered bowl of *shchi* – soup of cabbage, potato and beef; R95). Mugs of Russian beer (not the usual costly imports) can be had here.

Kopeika (ul Aleutskaya; meals R100-200; 🕒 8am-midnight) Fast-food, pick-and-point cafeteria with Soviet-era posters and McDonald's-style seating in the modern pyramid across from the train station. The mezzanine café has good espressos for R20.

Nostalgiya (☎ 410 513; ul Pervaya Morskaya 6/25; meals R600-1000; 🕒 8am-11pm) This long-established upscale restaurant and café serves up fine, good-value traditional Russian cuisine, such as the chopped chicken filet stuffed with vegetables (R200). Those diners just off seven days of noodles from train samovars may faint at the tsarist elegance in the small restaurant – for the less-tender few, it's a little too plush.

Stary Gorod (☎ 205 294; ul Semenovskaya 1/10; meals from R600) Good Russian meals in a village-style interior, with stars shining above and waterfalls and fish tanks.

Georgian

Dva Gruzina (Two Georgians; ☎ 268 580; ul Nerchinskaya 10; meals R250-500; 🕒 10am-1am) Wagon-wheel benches and murals of Zapata-moustached men greet mostly local diners. The food

is very good – the lone daily soup is especially flavourful – but there's little but pork and beef (and no English menu). Beer is a merciful R50.

Krestovy Pereval (☎ 265 640; ul Lutsogo 12; meals R700-1000; 🕒 11am-late) Great two-storey restaurant designed like a rock-garden tree house. Plenty of fish dishes to add to faves like bowl-of-rabbit-and-potatoes (R350) or mutton stew (R360).

Italian

Mauro Gianvanni (☎ 220 782; ul Admirala Fokina 16; meals R400-800; 🕒 noon-midnight) Slick mirror-windowed Italian restaurant near the water, run by a big Italian guy. The thin-crust pizza (around R200) is easily the best east of the Urals. The café (Okeansky pr 9) is slightly cheaper (pasta and cocktails only; no pizza).

Pizza M (☎ 268 511; ul Svetlanskaya 51A; meals R350-700; 🕒 noon-midnight) Classier than its name might suggest, the M (near Gorky Theatre) serves pretty good pizza, and there are several pasta and meat or fish dishes (around R350 to R500).

Japanese

Edem (☎ 261 990; ul Admirala Fokina 22; meals R1200-1800; 🕒 11am-midnight Sun-Thu, 11am-2am Fri & Sat) Vladivostok's first and still best sushi bar is in an attractive cellar-like space with nooks in which to sit. Sushi and sashimi combos start at R1200. 'Sushi time' is 11am to 5pm and 6pm to 11pm only.

CAFÉS

Studio Coffee (☎ 552 222; ul Svetlanskaya 18; meals R300-500; 🕒 24hr) The cool folk of Vladivostok come to this indoor-outdoor café to enjoy a good range of drinks, excellent hamburgers (R190) and appealing salads (R100 to R250). A big set lunch is R300 (served from noon to 4pm).

Kafe Krishna (Okeansky pr 10/12; meals R100-200; 🕒 11am-7pm Mon-Sat) At press time this excellent, cheap lunch turf – with Indian, blissful all-veggie lunches and lots of local hare krishnas supping – was getting muscled out of its prime location. Hopefully it's still here, or at a new location.

Café Montmartre (☎ 412 789; ul Svetlanskaya 9/6; meals R300-600; 🕒 9am-3am) Down a small alley, the Montmartre offers good desserts, and set lunches for R180.

QUICK EATS

Ali Baba Fast Food (☎ 264 887; ul Pogranichnaya 6/3; 🕒 10am-midnight) Cheap Middle Eastern-style pita-bread sandwiches, soup and a Coke cost R70. There's ice cream and salads, too. Caravan-style décor and hangings block the fast-food line from view.

A juicy *shaverma* (kebab) at a stand by Sportivnaya Harbour costs R50.

SELF-CATERING

Prestizh (ul Svetlanskaya 1/2; 🕒 24hr) is a supermarket with a good bakery. **Zolotoi Vek** (ul Svetlanskaya 29; 🕒 8am-10pm) is another grocery. For fresh fruit and vegetables, there are daily **stalls** (ul Posetskaya) behind the post office.

Drinking

Cafés can be good for a quiet drink, but best are the outdoor beer gardens by Sportivnaya Harbour – for views and cheaper brews.

Bezdonnaya Bochka (Bottomless Barrel; ☎ 221 383; ul Fontannaya 2; 🕒 noon-4am Sun-Thu, noon-6am Fri & Sat) This cavern-like bar is Vlad's best beer-binging ground and is a pretty popular place, particularly on weekends, when you should book a table if you want a seat.

Kafe 35mm (ul Naberezhnaya 3; 🕒 11am-2am) is a spacious, laid-back bar upstairs at Kino Okean, while **Sky Bar** (ul Semenovskaya 29, Hotel Hyundai, 12th fl; 🕒 6pm-2am) has excellent bay views, but just a beer is R180 a pop.

Entertainment

Bowling Centre (☎ 400 728; ul Batareynaya 8; per game R50-100; 🕒 10am-2am) Very Soviet eight-laner upstairs in a sports complex (note the old athletic mosaics).

Stadium Dinamo (ul Pogranichnaya) The popular local football team, Luch-Energiya, plays games here from April to November. Many seats have bay views, too.

Kino Okean (☎ 406 406; ul Naberezhnaya 3) Multiplex cinema showing dubbed movies only.

Philharmonic Hall (Filarmoniya; ☎ 260 821; ul Svetlanskaya 15) Come here for classical music performances.

Gorky Theatre (Teatr Gorkogo; ☎ 260 520; ul Svetlanskaya 49) The city's main venue for drama.

BSB (☎ 456 250; Kransogo Znamenii pr 67; admission R100-300; 🕒 9pm-4am) This is the city's best club/disco, drawing young students. At weekends rock bands hit the stage at midnight.

Zabriskie Point (☎ 215 715; ul Naberezhnaya 9A; cover R300 Mon–Thu, R500 Fri–Sun; ☎ 8pm–4am) Attached to the back of Hotel Amursky Zaliv, Zabriskie is Vladivostok's main rock and jazz club. Live music at 11pm every night but Monday; DVD concerts fill in the gaps.

Shopping

There are plenty of souvenir stands selling *matryoshki* (nesting dolls), lacquered boxes and postcards. Here's the cream of the crop:

Flotsky Univermag (ul Svetlanskaya 11; ☎ 10am–7pm Mon–Fri, 10am–6pm Sat & Sun) Great army and navy supply store with those cute blue-and-white striped navy undershirts (R95) and flap-back shirts (R400), plus army ties, badges and hats.

Antique shop (ul Svetlanskaya 20; ☎ 9.30am–6pm) Small but interesting collection of yesteryear trinkets: medals, arts, flags, cameras, coins.

Nostalgija (ul Pervaya Morskaya 6/25; ☎ 10am–8pm) Has a nice range of traditional handicrafts, plus Vladivostok-themed artwork and Vladimir Putin refrigerator magnets.

GUM (ul Svetlanskaya 35; ☎ 10am–8pm Mon–Sat, 10am–7pm Sun) If you collect GUMs, this is the Far East's most Art Deco–elegant. There are some traditional souvenirs on the ground floor.

EKIP (☎ 400 914; ul Batareytnaya 8; ☎ 10am–7pm) Stocks sporting gear including sleeping bags, tents, windsurfing boards and bikes.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Direct flights go to Moscow (R16,700, nine hours, twice daily); flights via Novosibirsk are cheaper (R12,300). Other domestic services include Khabarovsk (R2500, 1½ hours, daily), Irkutsk (R6000, four hours, six weekly), Magadan (R5000, three hours, two weekly), Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky (from R7000, four hours, three weekly), Yakutsk (R8500, two weekly) and Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk (R4900 to R6500, 1¼ hours, daily).

Vladivostok Air flies to Harbin, China (R5900, two weekly) and Tianjin (R7300, one weekly). There are less-frequent flights to Dailin. To Japan, Vladivostok Air flies to Niigata (R10,500, two weekly), Toyama (R12,700, two weekly) and once weekly in August to Tokyo (R6900) and twice weekly in summer to Osaka (R15,000). Both Vladivostok Air and Korean Air fly direct six

times weekly to Seoul (R11,000) or Pusan (R11,000).

Ticketing agencies:

Primorskoye Aeroagentsvo (☎ 407 707; www.airagency.ru; ul Posyetskaya 17; ☎ 8am–7pm) A reliable chain for tickets, with offices around much of the Russian Far East.

Vladivostok Air (☎ 205 133; ul Svetlanskaya 22; ☎ 9am–7pm) Convenient location for the main carrier serving Vladivostok.

BOAT

The **Biznes Intur Servis** (☎ 497 391; www.bisintour.com; 1 Okeansky pr, Morskoi vokzal, 3rd fl; ☎ 10am–6pm Mon–Fri) sells tickets for the fairly regular ferries (it claims to offer them every Monday and Saturday, but check first) between Vladivostok and the Japanese port of Fushiki from late February to early January. The often rough trip takes 42 hours and the ship is rarely full. Four categories of berths range from US\$228 to US\$888 one way (meals included) – student discounts are also available.

Dong Chun Ferry Company (☎ 494 060; www.dongchunferry.co.kr; 1 Okeansky pr, Morskoi vokzal, 2nd fl; ☎ 10am–5.30pm Mon–Fri, 7–9am Sat) sells tickets for the weekly ferry service to Sokcho, Korea (US\$168 to US\$312 one way, 24 hours), generally leaving at 10.30am Saturday. In Sokcho, you can catch a bus to Seoul (W15,000, three hours) every couple of hours.

BUS

The **bus station** (☎ 323 378; ul Russkaya), 3km north of the centre, sends many buses around the Primorsky Territory. You can catch a bus every 30 or 40 minutes to Nakhodka (R180, four hours) or three times daily to Khabarovsk (R665, 15 hours). Some southbound destinations may be off limits to foreigners without a permit.

TRAIN

The 1 *Rossiya* service leaves the **train station** (☎ 491 005) for Moscow (R9100, 6½ days) on even-numbered days, passing through Irkutsk (R6300, 73 hours). A cheaper service, also on even-numbered days, is train 239 – it's R6300 for a Moscow *kupe* ticket. On odd-numbered days train 7 *Sibir* to Novosibirsk (R5150, four days) is a cheaper option for Irkutsk (R4200).

Other trains include the 5 *Okean* overnight to Khabarovsk (R1500, 13 hours, daily) and the 351 via Khabarovsk and Komsomolsk-na-Amure to Vanino (R1700, 41 hours, daily), where you can get ferry service to Sakhalin Island. The 53 service to Kharkiv, Ukraine, via Moscow goes on odd-numbered days.

Leaving (local time) at 2am on Tuesday and Friday, the 185 connects Vladivostok with Harbin, China (R1500, about 30 hours), from where there are daily connections to Beijing (with delays and border checks). The train crosses the border at the Chinese town of Suifenhe and stops at Mudanjiang.

Tickets for long-distance trains are sold in the office beside the main platform. You can also buy tickets at the **Service Centre** (☎ 210 404; ☎ 8am–6.45pm), at the southern end of the building, for a whopping commission of R104, plus R48 if you need information first. Travel agencies (see p232) will also get tickets for you for similar fees.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

No direct bus or train links the airport with the centre (50km south). From the centre, take a local train three stops to Vtoraya Rechka (near the bus station), or one of the buses (including bus 23) that goes from the stand at the corner of ul Aleutskaya and ul Semenovskaya (R7, 30 to 40 minutes).

From the bus station, 150m east of the railway, 'bus' (actually minivan) 101 goes to the airport (R50, one hour) about every hour from 6.30am to 6pm; call ☎ 322 751 for information. Coming from the airport it's the reverse procedure. The whole trip takes about two hours.

A taxi is far easier. A taxi to the airport is about R500 (45 minutes), while the airport taxi gang will try to charge triple (or more) going the other way. Look for minivan taxis heading to the centre.

PUBLIC TRANSPORT

Trolleybuses and trams cost R7 a ride; pay when exiting. From in front of the train station, trams 4 and 5 run north then swing east onto ul Svetlanskaya, to the head of the bay; tram 7 stays on ul Aleutskaya, running north past the market. The many buses are quicker.

For local ferry information, see p233.

AROUND PRIMORSKY TERRITORY

It's hard to explore or raft any of mountainous Primorsky Territory without the help of a travel agent (see p232). Prices vary: tiger trips to Gaivoron, for example, range from US\$50 to US\$150 per person.

Slavyanka Славянка

Locals enjoy making a day trip by ferry to the port of Slavyanka, 50km south towards the (off-limits) North Korean border. Nearby beaches are good, particularly **Vityaz**, reached by an hour-long 4WD drive south. Dalintourist (p232) in Vladivostok can help make arrangements.

From the coastal ferries station (p233) three daily boats leave for Slavyanka. At the time of research, lone hydrofoil left Vladivostok at noon (R300 return, one hour); a bigger boat left at 8.50am and 6.30pm (R300, 2½ hours).

Buses also go to Slavyanka from Vladivostok, but sometimes foreigners are not permitted to go by land.

Gaivoron & Lake Khanka

Га́йворон и О́зеро Ха́нка

About 235km north of Vladivostok, near the 4000-sq-metre Lake Khanka that spans the Chinese border, Gaivoron is the location of the Russian Academy of Sciences biological research reserve, and the chance for a close-up view of a couple of rare Amur tigers (see p275). **Dr Victor Yudin** (☎ 42352-74 249) keeps the duo behind an electrified high-wire fence in a two-hectare compound.

Nearby **Lake Khanka** is home to around 350 different species of birds every summer. The lake's shallow waters – 4m at the deepest – bloom with giant lotus flowers.

It is possible to organise an 11- or 12-hour day trip from Vladivostok to see the tigers (starting at US\$200 to US\$250 for four people), but it's worth tacking on a couple of hours to see the lake (for about US\$30 or US\$50 extra, at least). See p232.

Nakhodka Находка

If you want to take the train to the very end, the eastern terminus of the Trans-Siberian is a few hours further east, at the fishing-port town of Nakhodka. The main reason for heading out this way is to inspect the dramatic coastal rock formations near the city; there are several guesthouses in town.

A couple of daily trains leave Vladivostok for Nakhodka (R90, 3½ hours), and there are more-frequent buses (R180, four hours).

Sikhote-Alin Nature Reserve

СИХОТЕ-АЛИНСКИЙ ЗАПОВЕДНИК

This 344,000-hectare forested reserve is home to the Russian-American Siberian Tiger project. It's headquartered in the coastal town of Ternei and stretches from the Sikhote-Alin Range past clear salmon streams and a savannahlike oasis to the Pa-

cific coast and rocky beaches. The chances of seeing a tiger are slim, but the reserve is beautiful and worth a visit in its own right.

It is an 11- or 12-hour ride one way. You'll need permission to visit. Contact a Vladivostok agency, who can also sort out transport and accommodation. Dalintourist's five-night 'Tigerland' trip hits several points of the reserve; it costs about R10,000 per person if a group of four goes. You can also travel on your own to its lodge in the south of the reserve for far cheaper access to the area; see p232.