

Rail journeys

How to do the Trans-Siberian Railway for £1,000

The iconic 5,625 mile journey from Moscow to Beijing doesn't have to break the bank, says Tom Chesshyre

Midnight at Moscow's Yaroslavsky station and all is activity. The number 20 train to Beijing has arrived and a scrum of passengers is making for the long snaking line of gleaming carriages.

I've collected my luggage from a storage room, where a sign says passengers should step aside in the presence of any "Full Cavaliers of the Order of Glory", "Heroes of Socialist Labour" or "Persons suffered from the radiation as a consequence of the catastrophe at Chernobyl". Such travellers would take precedence in the queue; there is a pecking order listing no fewer than 18 categories of priority passengers.

Yeleyana and Margarita, the two female *provodnistas* (attendants) assigned to my carriage for the journey of 5,625 miles to China's capital have, with stony faces, inspected my ticket — and I am on board, drinking *seeks-ty roo-bull* tea (56p a cup) offered with a grunt by Yeleyana.

In my second-class cabin I find John, a 27-year-old former "project manager for online assessment" from Kingston in southwest London. In remarkably quick time, he tells me about the break-up with his girlfriend, quitting his job and how the dating app Tinder had been working "very well indeed" for him in St Petersburg until he decided to head onwards to China in his gap year. He will be my travel companion for the next five days until he changes trains to go to Mongolia; although there are two pairs of bunks in the cabin, it's just the two of us, so we have plenty of room.

With a series of hoots, the train pulls off and rattles through Moscow's darkened suburbs. We are on our way.

The Trans-Siberian Railway... this is the big one, or as the travel writer Eric Newby put it: "The Big Red Train". If you don't count a little-travelled route from Ukraine to Russia's far east, this is the world's longest train journey. The service, slightly confusingly, forks in three directions: each route starts in Moscow and travels many miles along the same line. However, one service takes you to Beijing via Manchuria (my route), another to Beijing via Mongolia (4,915 miles), or you can go straight across the continent to

Vladivostok in Russia, the classic route (5,752 miles). Each is considered to be the Trans-Siberian Railway.

I had long been under the impression that this epic ride would eat up an inordinate amount of time and cost an arm and a leg. How wrong I was. While there are extremely expensive services — such as the Golden Eagle (£24,300 for a 15-day "imperial suite" trip) — going second-class on the Trans-Siberian is dirt cheap: £515 for eight days (or £64 a day).

Add to that my £69 London to Helsinki flight, a Helsinki-Moscow sleeper service known as the "Tolstoy Night Train" (£102), plus my flight home from Beijing for £300, and the total bill comes to £986, plus spending cash, with just nine days away. You can do the Trans-Siberian on the cheap-and-quick. You don't have to blow a great chunk of annual leave, take a career break, or quit your job, à la John.

So on the Trans-Siberian's 100th anniversary, I hopped on board — part of the research for my book on the love of trains, *Ticket to Ride*, that took me on 49 journeys across America and Australia, and through India and Sri Lanka. I visited countries such as Iran and North Korea, as well as places closer to home, including France, the Swiss Alps, and the Scottish Highlands. In total, I went to 22 countries from Poland to Peru, covering 22,000 miles by rail.

My mission was simple. I wanted to know: "Why do people, just about everywhere, seem to like trains so much?"

On Russia's Trans-Siberian Railway you quickly discover the answer for yourself — and it's the sounds, the smells and sheer sensation of movement, with a vast continent ahead, that hit you straight away. Brakes squeal, wheels judder and horns wail. Air howls as if a gale is blowing. Coat hangers jiggle against a wall (John and I later take these down). Distant firecrackers seem to emanate from near the *provodnistas'* berths, as does occasional clanking reminiscent of scaffolding being dropped into a lorry (I have no idea what makes these noises). When a freight train passes it's as though a sonic boom has struck. Close your eyes and the sounds of the Trans-Siberian Railway fuse in a cacophonous symphony with many a peak and trough. Yet despite the occasional jolt from a passing freight loco, I always get a good night's sleep.

Days soon fall into patterns. While great pine forests disappear into the distance and we pull in at exotic-sounding spots such as Zaoyornay, Nizhneudinsk, Chita and Omsk — with their grim estates of Soviet-era blocks and women on platforms in pink aprons selling pretzels — life on board is built around routine.



Lake Baikal in Russia, from the tracks of the Trans-Siberian Railway



St Basil's Cathedral, Moscow

Mornings start with tea, drunk beside the samovar near the *provodnistas'* berths. The smell of stewed tea, coffee and noodles fills the carriage's narrow passageways and, as cloying as it may sound, soon becomes almost reassuring. Cuppas from Yeleyana and Margarita, whose chilliness thaws after day three, create a homely feel as we thunder along.

John is never up before mid-afternoon. After tea, my days revolve around the dining car, which is like a little principality, with faux-leather seats and simple tables. Proceedings are overseen by a pot-bellied, bald man with a piratical countenance, who sits at a table with an accounts book and a calculator, at which he pecks almost constantly as though attempting to solve a complicated mathematical equation. When not involved in such business affairs, he reads dog-eared romantic novels with cover pictures of voluptuous blondes. From time to time, he stands to perform head swivels and energetic knee-bending exercises.

The pot-bellied man is assisted by a waiter named Igor, who indulges me when I attempt a few Russian words: *pahmee-dor* (tomato), *veet-chee-nah* (ham), *koh-fyeh* (coffee), *chai* (tea), *pah-zhal-stah* ("please" or "you're welcome"). These are the phonetics as I know them, though Igor usually asks me to repeat. Igor has a soft spot for one of the *provodnistas* — a blonde woman with a Princess Leia-style haircut. He's often seen hanging around her carriage (such secrets do not last long on the Trans-Siberian Railway).

The dining-car trio is completed by the smiley wife of the bald calculator controller. She is always in a good mood, and regularly makes trips for a smoke between the carriages; the tell-tale smell follows her back whenever she returns.

From this principality, with John snoring back in the compartment, I gaze out as buzzards hover above wide muddy rivers, rusty bridges come and go and silver-birch

forests spread out to the horizon (there is a lot of silver-birch forest). Towns notable only for machinegun factories and tractor production during Soviet days appear, lines divide off towards former gulags, and pink and yellow flowers blaze prettily by sidings.

It is in the dining carriage — over bowls of delicious, steaming *borscht* (a purple-hued dish consisting of beef and red cabbage), chicken stew or ham and chips — that I meet the other tourists. All are train lovers; there is a strong feeling of "railway pilgrimage" on board. There are a fair few Brits. "It's the romance of the name: the Trans-Siberian Railway," says Jane, a housing-association director from East Anglia, who is travelling with her husband Tony, a French teacher. "We're trundlers," she says, explaining what they like most about train travel as we pass through the city of Ianskaya. This was where Vitus Bering, the explorer after whom the Bering Strait is named, established a town in 1734. He had been surveying Siberia on the way to Russia's east coast. We are, I'm staggered to discover, precisely 2,718 miles from Moscow. The Urals, crossed during one of the nights, are well behind us.

"It's the scenery, greenery," says Tony, gazing out as we enter yet another forest. "A glimpse of the mountains," says Jane, looking starry-eyed.

Meanwhile Ryan, a retired teacher from the Midlands, who has a penchant for golf shirts and gold chains, has travelled by train from London's St Pancras. He seems amazed at the ease with which he gets around the world by rail. "Just get on the internet! Book it!" Overhearing him, Julie, a Mancunian university lecturer travelling with her teenage daughter, says she hates planes. She tries to put her finger on why she enjoys railways so much: "I am now moving at a speed that my brain can deal with. Looking out of the window, the language, the sounds: it's lovely."

On board, there is ample time to delve into Russian train history as the Trans-Siberian celebrates its centenary. Russia's first railway was built in 1837, a 15-mile line



from St Petersburg to Tsarskoye Selo, location of the tsar's summer residence. The first long-distance railway, spanning 400 miles between St Petersburg and Moscow, was completed in 1851. In the 1860s the Moscow-St Petersburg line was extended to Helsinki, yet it was not until 1916, under Nicholas II, that the Trans-Siberian track from Moscow to Vladivostok on the Pacific Ocean opened, a distance of 5,752 miles.

The main reason for this delay was the high price tag. Eventually, however, the logic for building the line won through: a transcontinental track would hold together the giant nation (Moscow feared "yellow peril") and allow easier access to coal in the Urals. There was, finally, a jealousy factor: America's transcontinental railway opened in 1869, while Canada's began in 1885. The tsar wanted one, too.

Yet the Trans-Siberian's early days came with a twist. The track was seen by many as far too expensive at a time when the country was racked by poverty. What was the point? Why was Nicholas II bothering with such an expensive folly? The line seemed to symbolise the gulf between the aristocracy and the public at large, who often didn't have two roubles to rub together. For these reasons, some historians believe that the Trans-Siberian Railway contributed to political instability in the run-up to the 1917 uprising.

The 100th anniversary of the service brings up many old stories. It is also by far the best way to see the vast nation, occasionally talking politics with Russian passengers. "I like Putin. Yes, yes, Putin good. Big Russia! Lift! Lift! He brings people work. Business! Lift! Lift!" says Alexandr, a para-

medic from Krasnoyarsk in Siberia, whose outlook is typical of the locals I meet.

John and the other Brits disembark at Ulan-Ude; most are off to Mongolia. I continue with the cabin to myself through mind-blowingly empty stretches of Siberia with lakes, forests... and not much else. We reach China. At the sleepy border town of Zabaykalsk, the train's undercarriages (bogies) are changed to match the width of Chinese tracks. A new dining carriage is attached, serving excellent diced chicken with green pepper and not very excellent (in fact, awful) Great Wall of China wine.

We judder along, and after a day or so reach Beijing station, pulling up near sleek, eel-like bullet trains. A Chinese trainspotter is there as we arrive. "Just a very little number of Chinese like trains as I do. But China has many people, so there are many train fans in China," he says, before rushing off to take a picture of the Z157 express from Taizhou.

All the way across Russia, and a bit of China too, and back, for less than £1,000. It has to be one of the world's best travel bargains... and a train-lover's dream, too.



Real Russia (realrussia.co.uk) has second-class Moscow-Beijing sleeper tickets from £532. EasyJet (easyjet.com) flies to Moscow from £103. Flyuia.com flies from Beijing to Heathrow from £250. Voyages-sncf.com has Helsinki-Moscow sleeper tickets from £102. Norwegian.com flies to Helsinki from £49. Meals on board are about £5. Read *Trans-Siberian Handbook* by Bryn Thomas (14.99), and check out seat61.com.

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