

# Traveling By Train From Moscow To Beijing



The Zarengold train skirting the icy edge of Lake Baikal in mid-May

By Don Mankin

**I sat on the ground and listened, transfixed, to the vibrations emanating from deep in the throats and bellies of the two musicians. I was somewhere in the middle of the Gobi Desert with camels grazing in the background and an infinite expanse of sand stretching to the horizon. It was strange music in an even stranger setting but a welcome counterpoint to the traffic jams and construction cranes in Ulan Bator, the capitol of Mongolia, the day before.**

We were three quarters of the way through a 16-day adventure from Moscow to Beijing on a private version of the Trans Siberian Railroad, a journey through the past with a cast of characters and enough blood for an HBO series.

As we rolled from city to city, the present and a bit of the future peeked through the metaphorical mist that shrouds this rapidly changing region. Trying to get a handle on it, however, was like shooting at a moving target of surprises, ambiguity, contradictions and unlikely juxtapositions.

## Some Examples

In Moscow, at one end of a short pedestrian bridge lined with 19th Century style gas lamps lies Bolotny Island—a bohemian, artsy, hipster haven that is emerging from the crumbling architectural masterpieces being restored by oligarchs and foreign investors.

At the other end, is the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, originally built to commemorate Russia's victory over Napoleon in 1812, then torn down by Josef Stalin in 1931 and reconstructed in 1997. The Cathedral was also the site of the unscheduled and unwelcome protest concert by the

punk feminist rock band, Pussy Riot, a concert that landed them in jail for two years.

In Siberia, we go from one pleasant, attractive city to another. Open plazas, parks and promenades, obviously designed to take advantage of the brief Siberian summers, share space with statues of Marx and occasionally Lenin as well as modern department stores and shopping malls. Not exactly what I expected to find in Siberia, a name I usually associate with oppression and gloom.



On the bridge from Bolotny Island to the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour

**In Mongolia, the image of Genghis Khan** sweeping across the dusty steppes of Central Asia is a distant memory. Mongolia is booming, fueled in part by coal mining to feed the voracious industrial appetite of China, its neighbor to the south. Ulan Bator is no longer a dusty outpost in the middle of nowhere but a modern metropolis with all of the pluses and minuses that go along with that.

In Beijing—huge plazas, buildings, skyscrapers, freeways, Olympic stadiums and shopping malls rest on the figurative graves of the hutongs — old neighborhoods of narrow streets, alleyways, canals, small lakes and scrunched-together row houses.



Mongolian musicians serenading tourists and camels in the heart of the Gobi Desert

Some of these neighborhoods have been preserved and turned into tourist attractions that can be explored on foot, bicycle or in a rented rickshaw with a driver doing the work. I had one of the best meals of the entire trip in one of these hutongs. While strolling through a market lined with food stalls, I ate fluffy buns filled with chopped greens and garlic, juicy dumplings and a warm, moist Chinese pancake that draped over my fingers as I tore off pieces to eat.

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*“One of the highlights of the trip, was standing on the exposed catwalk along the side of the locomotive for 15 to 20 minutes while the train chugged slowly along the shore of Lake Baikal.”*

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Although the main attractions of the trip were the destinations, the train was an important element in the overall experience. One of the highlights of the trip, for example, was standing on the exposed catwalk along the side of the locomotive for 15 to 20 minutes while the train chugged slowly along the shore of Lake Baikal.

The train was also important in a more intrinsic, psychological sense. It would have been a very different trip if we had hopped on a plane every day to fly from one destination to the next. The train pulled all of the destinations together into a seamless, integrated whole, more like a movie than a sequence of discreet photos.

I felt immersed in the region as I watched it all unfold before me from the train. I think that this gradual unfolding and total immersion gave me a much better feel for the territory – its history, the interrelationships that shaped it and the vitality and dynamism on display as we passed through.

**What we saw from the train and in**

our daily excursions in cities along the way, hinted at what is happening here especially the profound changes in the social and economic fabric of the region and the emergence of Russia, China and Central Asia as critical players in the world.

The train helped me get a better idea of what is most interesting about this very large corner of the planet, how the various pieces fit together and what it all might mean for the future.

If this sounds more like a graduate seminar than a trip, I should note that it was a graduate seminar fueled by vodka. My wife Katherine summed it up best after a vodka tasting on the train accompanied by caviar, blinis, herring and pickles as we rumbled through eastern Siberia:

“When I drink a lot of vodka I achieve a level of clarity that does not correspond to reality,” she said, weaving unsteadily to our compartment for a nap before dinner.

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**Don and Katherine's trip was hosted by Lernidee Trains and Cruises, [www.lernidee.com](http://www.lernidee.com). For more information see the blog on Don's website, [www.adventuretransformations.com](http://www.adventuretransformations.com).**