

Rail taste of Siberia

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Anis Ibrahim travels solo on the Trans-Siberian Railway from St Petersburg to Ulan-Ude, 250kms from the Mongolian border

TWO days in St Petersburg and three things have already happened:

1. I get caught in the rain, getting a massive headache as a result.
2. Complete strangers have come up to hug me, and
3. One of my toenails has blackened and is threatening to drop off any moment now.

Yes, I realise that talking about one's toenails isn't the best way to begin a travel piece, so I'll move on.

From the time I arrived, I had been walking every day for hours. Not that I mind. St Petersburg is one of Russia's most beautiful cities and lovely to see on foot. Tsar Peter the Great was ambitious and wanted St Petersburg to rival the best cities in Europe at the time. He was well-travelled and fluent in seven European languages and he was eager to create a new capital city to replace Moscow, of which he wasn't fond.

St Petersburg became the new capital in 1712, and what a marvel it

is. Traces of Europe lie in abundance in the St Petersburg of today. Parts of "St Petes" remind me of Vienna and Paris while the canals and bridges are reminiscent of those in Venice. The reason for this is simple — Italian and French architects were specially commissioned to design St Petersburg's buildings and layout under the tsar's order.

If there's one thing you cannot miss in St Petersburg, it is the Winter Palace, which houses the State Hermitage Museum. The Palace is a beautiful white-teal building by the Neva River which flows through the city. The Hermitage contains one of the world's biggest and most impressive collections of fine art, all of which at one time formed part of the collection of the Imperial family.

This collection includes works by masters such as Picasso, Matisse, Monet, Leonardo da Vinci and Rembrandt. I spend six hours in the Hermitage, wandering from room to room, enjoying the paintings and the lavish interiors, for the Winter Palace is also known for its beautiful chandeliers and marble halls.

Another of St Petersburg's highlights is its network of canals. St Petersburg was built on 42 islands and was once known as the Venice Of The North. A total of 342 bridges connect these islands, making a river cruise a great way to explore the city.

But St Petersburg isn't the only stop

on my journey. Moscow is next on my list of Russian cities along the Trans-Siberian Railway, a train ride which will take me as far as Ulan-Ude, 250km from the Mongolian border. This train journey is part of my plan to travel from Russia to Malaysia by land.

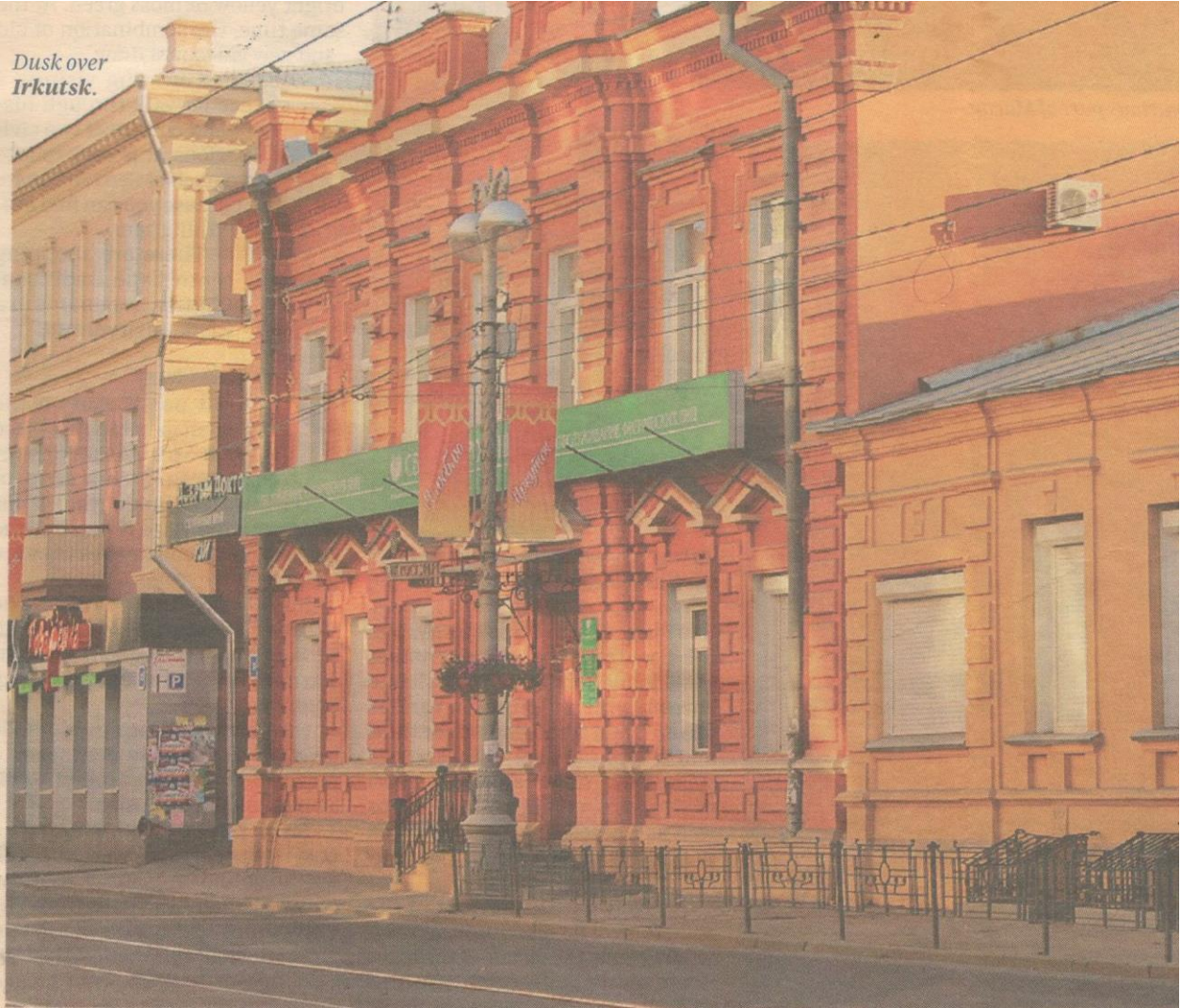
ST PETERSBURG TO MOSCOW

My train to Moscow is an overnight train which departs from St Petersburg's Moskovsky Station. There's a faster train which can take me to Moscow in a few hours but the tickets are much more expensive and besides, I enjoy sleeping on trains. There's nothing quite like the gentle sway of

This train runs from Moscow to Irkutsk.



*Dusk over
Irkutsk.*

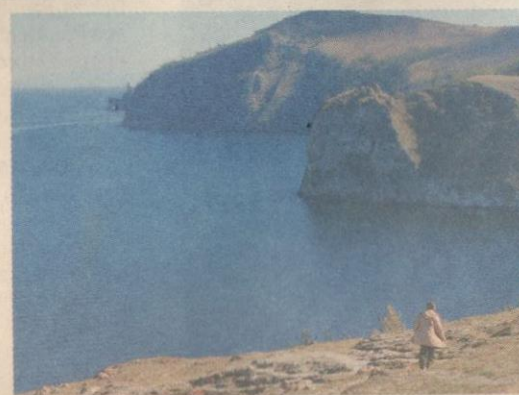




The Winter Palace in St Petersburg.

the carriages to put me to sleep.

I visited Moscow in 2007 but I'm glad to see it again. Unlike St Petersburg, which is distinctively European in nature, Moscow is a very "Russian" city — utilitarian and functional. That's not to say that it isn't an attractive city. Moscow is a very vibrant capital and has some wonderful land-



View of Lake Baikal from Olkhon Island.

beautiful glass-roofed building con-

marks.

Moscow regained its status as the nation's capital in 1918 after Soviet leader Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, better known as Lenin, transferred his government there following the 1917 Revolution. The wonderful thing about Moscow is that its major attractions are within walking distance. St Basil's Cathedral, one of the world's most noticeable and if I may add, most attractive buildings, is within sight of Red Square, the site of many processions and parades, which in turn is in front of the Kremlin, the centre of Russia's political power. St Basil's Cathedral, with its colourful onion domes, is Moscow's most striking symbol.

Across the Kremlin is another beautiful landmark — the Gum (pronounced goom in Russian) Building. Gum is the abbreviation for Glavnyi Universalnyi Magazin or Main Universal Store. It became an important trade centre after its completion in 1893, housing hundreds of stores for the public. The

beautiful glass-roofed building continued to be used as a department store after the Revolution until it was converted into office space by Joseph Stalin in 1928.

Today, Gum is a popular shopping centre with top international brands like Kenzo, Max Mara, Moschino and Christian Dior. Its appeal is in its combination of classic 19th Century architecture and 21st Century style.

I spend many days in Gum — not shopping, but people-watching in its cafes. I don't think Lenin or Stalin ever imagined that Russians would look like they do today or that they would ever be rich. The wealthy in Moscow and St Petersburg, dress to kill and drive luxury cars. I am fascinated by the women — many of whom wear expensive-looking fur coats and carry the most pricey handbags.

MOSCOW TO IRKUTSK

My next stop after Moscow is Irkutsk, in the heart of Siberia. The train ride to



Freshly baked bread on market day in Irkutsk.

PLAN YOUR ITINERARY

YOU have a choice of doing it easy such as joining a tour or going solo, which is the way for more adventurous travellers.

EASIEST BUT EXPENSIVE WAY

The easiest way to take the Trans-Siberian Railway or any of its branches is to go on a tour, such as those provided by companies like Russia Experience (www.trans-siberian.co.uk), Monkey Shrine (www.monkeyshrine.com) and Real Russia (www.realrussia.co.uk). These reputable companies have many years' experience in organising tours to include rail tickets, some meals and hotel stays where applicable. Based on the prices stated on their websites, a 15-day tour can cost up to US\$2,824 (RM8,810) so, although everything will be taken care of, you'll need to set aside a fair bit of money for this option.

HOW I DID IT

I'm not a fan of tours so I did my own planning. That included a lot of background work — researching the route and booking accommodation and train tickets. As a starting point, I would suggest the excellent Trans-Siberian Handbook by Bryn Thomas, Lonely Planet's Trans-Siberian Railway and the Real Russia website at realrussia.co.uk (www.realrussia.co.uk). If you do all the planning yourself, expect to pay around RM2,000 for transport alone from St Petersburg to Ulan-Ude.

GETTING DOWN FROM THE TRAIN

There were a few places I knew I wanted to spend a few days in: Moscow, Irkutsk, Olkhon Island and Ulan-Ude. There's no such thing as a hop-on, hop-off rail ticket in Russia, so separate tickets will have to be bought for each separate leg. For instance, St Petersburg-Moscow and Moscow-Irkutsk, and so on.

BOOKING/BUYING TRAIN TICKETS

For out of peak season (June-September), chances are you won't need to pre-book your tickets as they'll still be available if you buy them a few days before the departure date. I would, however, recommend that you at least buy the first tickets a few weeks in advance so that your earlier departures are guaranteed. Check train schedules to plan in advance. One website I return to again and again when planning train rides is The Man In Seat Sixty-One (www.seat61.com).

In my case, I bought tickets for the St Petersburg-Moscow and Moscow-Irkutsk rides in advance.

These routes are extremely popular and I didn't want to miss any train so early on. If you choose to buy beforehand, I would recommend buying them via Real Russia (www.realrussia.co.uk), which also has up-to-date train schedules.

BUDGET & COST

The size of your budget will depend on how much you're willing to spend and how you wish to travel. Russian trains have three classes:

- First Class: Known as *splavnyvagon*, first class carriages consist of two-berth carpeted compartments with window curtains and a little table between the berths. Some of the newer trains even have showers and a washbasin. Compartments have doors which can be locked from the inside. Ticket prices range from US\$394-US\$1,185 depending on distance.

- Second class: *Kupeyny* carriages have four-bunk compartments. Not as plush as *splavnyvagon* but comfortable enough for overnight and multi-day journeys. Tickets are normally half that in first class. Compartments have doors and can be locked. I travelled in *kupeyny* most of the time. Ticket prices range from US\$364-US\$1,016 depending on the distance.

- Third class: The least luxurious bunks are the ones in *platskartny* class. Think of third class as a dorm on wheels, with open-concept compartments. Many families, backpacker groups and women ride in *platskartny*, so if you're a solo female traveller, you may find this to be a safer option although you would probably need to have nerves of steel to spend more than three nights here. Third class will also give you plenty of opportunities to mix around with locals if you're hoping to do that. I travelled in *platskartny* from Irkutsk to Ulan-Ude. Tickets are half the price of second class tickets.

ACCOMMODATION

The only time you'll need to pay for accommodation is if you break your train journey and get down from the train. Look for affordable accommodation at Hostelbookers (www.hostelbookers.com), Hostelworld (www.hostelworld.com) and Agoda.com (www.agoda.com). Do compare reviews and prices before you buy.

Irkutsk is the longest leg of my journey — 87 hours, or four nights on a train. Before I leave Moscow, I stock up on food which I buy from a supermarket. I love getting ready for long train rides and this time, I go a little overboard and end with bread, cheese, instant noodles, powdered soups and cans of tuna to supplement the sambal daging which my grandmother gave me before I left home.

One reason I'm really looking forward to this ride is because of Lake Baikal. It's impossible to talk about Lake Baikal without mentioning a whole bunch of statistics: It measures 636km from north to south — just 100km shorter than Peninsular Malaysia (740km).

It is the world's oldest lake, formed almost 50 million years ago, the world's deepest freshwater lake with a depth of 1,637m at its western shore and because of that, it contains one-fifths of the world's fresh water — more than the entire volume of North America's five Great Lakes combined.

I've read that should the rest of the world's drinking water supply run out, Lake Baikal can supply water to the Earth's entire population for the next 40 years.

Irkutsk, which lies 64 kms away from Baikal, is the perfect stop to get to the lake.

I share my compartment on Train No. 340 with Liyana, a Russian woman in her early 50s, on her way to see her family in Kirov. She speaks some English and is good company on the journey, offering me biscuits and fruit juice that she has brought with her. She shakes her head when I tell her I'm from Malaysia and where I'm going. "You are so far from home, and I have never been to Irkutsk," she tells me.

My compartment turns out to be very comfortable, although I find the mattress a little too hard for my liking. A blanket, facecloth, slippers and a small pack of toiletries are provided for every passenger. There are four berths but I end up sharing with only one other person throughout my journey, even after Liyana gets off. The compartment is very pleasant and not at all cramped.

My train arrives in Irkutsk five days later on a clear and cold day. I decide to take a minivan that same day to Olkhon Island, an island in Lake Baikal itself. It's possible to enjoy the lake by staying in a guesthouse by the shore but I'm determined to make the most of my stay in Siberia and to me, that means going to the island.

Staying on Olkhon Island turns out



Staying on Olkhon Island turns out to be an excellent idea. From here, I can see how stunning Lake Baikal is. The water is a breathtaking, lovely blue shade, matched only by the clear blue sky above me. I feel completely at peace.

If you're staying on Olkhon Island — which I strongly recommend — chances are your guesthouse will be in a village called Khuzir. There's nothing exceptional about Khuzir so the best way to enjoy the island and Lake Baikal is to get out of town.

You can either join an excursion

organised by your guesthouse or if you prefer, you can rent a bike and explore the island by yourself. If you decide to do this, do bring a map so you won't get lost.

I'm reluctant to leave Lake Baikal and its extraordinary beauty but after spending two days exploring Olkhon Island, it's time to leave. After a ferry crossing and a bumpy ride on a minivan, I arrive at my hostel in Irkutsk.

I spend a few days in this city, regarded as the capital of Eastern Siberia. It's a pleasant city and makes

for a nice change from Khuzir's dusty roads, although I find myself missing Lake Baikal.

But despite its friendly people, I can't stay forever in Irkutsk. I have a train to catch. My next stop? Ulan-Ude, and after that, the wild steppes of Mongolia.

Next week: Entering Mongolia and riding the Trans-Mongolian Railway.

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