

Around the world in 16 days

July 2006

This trip, strangely enough, did not start with something I got in the mail. I was at a meeting of a group to which I belong, and met someone who also was quite well traveled. We started chatting about things we had done and places we had been, and happened to mention the Trans-Siberian Express. This is a fascinating train trip that starts in Moscow and ends in Vladivostok on the east coast of Asia.

I went on to the website of the company that was booking the trip, and selected a July trip. I quickly made my air reservation through British Airways. Much to my delight, since I was only going one way, they only wanted 32,500 miles instead of 65,000. The downside was I was going to have to overnight in London, which I will do at the airport. I got the ticket, and much to my dismay, they had booked me into St. Petersburg rather than Moscow! I had the reservation corrected, and sent the ticket in to be reissued, which it finally was, 4 months later.

I was on eBay, as I am wont to do, and found a copy of a National Geographic for sale that had a story on this trip. It was quite an extensive story, and had a map of the entire trip so I can keep track of our journey. I also bought a GPS receiver to help find our position. Also, on eBay, I bought a copy of a video of the trip which will further acquaint me with the route and the locations I am going to see.

In chatting with someone at work about the trip, I realized I would be going east the entire time, so I would be circling the globe. I subscribe to a travel magazine called "International Travel News", and they have a certificate for being in all 24 time zones. I have been in 20, and this trip will give me the other 4.

The flight from Los Angeles to London was uneventful, other than the fact that my bag had been checked through to Moscow! That meant that I did not have a change of clothes or my toilet kit with me. Fortunately, I have a small toilet kit in my backpack, and I ended up washing stuff out and using the blow dryer to dry them. I got up at 8 AM the next morning, which was the equivalent of midnight Los Angeles time to catch the bus back to the airport. It was at that point that disaster struck! Someone asked me if I had ever forgotten anything important on a trip and I said never. Never is a long time, and pride goeth before a fall. I left the folder with all the trip information in my room at the hotel, which included my return tickets home!

On the flight to Moscow, I sat next to a man who spoke Russian, helped me fill out the landing card, which was a great help. I cleared immigration and customs, and looked for a sign from the travel company. I spotted a man holding a sign with my name, and was glad to see him in the chaos in the terminal. He finally found his car, and when he went to use his card to get out of the parking lot, it did not work. After trying it a number of times, he left to go to the administration building and got some sort of paper to get us out.

We arrived at the hotel, and I told the tour manager of my problem, so they try to recover the folder with my tickets. I was the last person to arrive, and was given 5 minutes to clean up. I had not shaved in 2 days, and I looked for the razor socket in the bathroom, but could not find it! I ended up sitting on the floor and using a regular outlet and my little transformer to shave.

From that point on, I was in the hands of the tour manager, and everything went smoothly. We walked across Red Square and entered St. Basil's cathedral for a reception.



We were served .caviar and vodka, and were serenaded by a trio of folk singers.



From there we were taken to a restaurant named Yar, which was very famous and been around since the time of the Czar. We were treated to a very extravagant stage show, like a Las Vegas revue



. In one act a lady came out to sing a song that had the exact arrangement as the one on my Sarah Brightman CD-can you say lip sync?

The next morning, after finding the razor socket, which was behind a little trap door in the wall mounted blow dryer, I got cleaned up and walked out of the hotel. As a lark, I turned on my GPS receiver, and sure, enough, it said I WAS IN Moscow. I just sort of wandered a bit, looking at all the signs in Cyrillic, and said, "I am REALLY in Moscow".

We were taken on a private tour of part of the Kremlin called the Armoury, which had a fabulous collection of jewelry, clothing, and the Faberge eggs. These were fantastic, when each egg was opened, there was something inside. There was one that had a tiny 14 car train in it like the Trans Siberian Express. There was also a beautiful golden chalice.



There were just rooms full of treasures, but I had to buy the book because we were not allowed to take pictures. There was also a collection of royal coaches, as well as display cases with gifts given by foreign countries.



We then toured the rest of Red Square, including the Church of the Assumption, and saw a very large cannon.



After the tour we were taken to the train and unpacked. I was fortunate to have a room by myself, so I could use the other bed to put my stuff on.

There was an ingenious hanging bag that had shelves in it to put underwear etc. There was also an overhead slot to store my suitcase. It was very comfortable, and they had nicely left a small bottle of vodka in the room. I had packed a LARGE bottle of scotch, however, and it lasted 16 days.

We had a nice lunch in the dining car, and had our choice of red wine, white wine, or beer with both lunch and dinner. We left the main railway station and started on our journey east. On the Trans Siberian, distances are measured from Moscow, and all trackside signs give the distance in kilometers (about 0.63 miles). We will wind up in Vladivostok, some 9300 kilometers and 7 time zones from Moscow.

KAZAN

Our first stop was Kazan, in the Tatar republic, and we were taken to the Kremlin there. Apparently Kremlin is a word that means fortress, but to the West, there is only one-in Moscow.



We were then taken through the site, and then went to the Kul Sharif Mosque, which is the biggest in Europe. I fully expected to have to take my shoes off as I had in other mosques, but they handed everyone plastic booties to put over their shoes.



From there we were taken to the tower of Kazan, and were told the legend behind it about a maiden on the highest floor. It was also supposed to be a wishing tower, and I placed my hands on it and made a wish for a friend on mine. Right near it, behind a wrought iron gate, was the presidential palace. Fortunately, the gate had holes in it big enough through which I could put the lens of my camera.



We were also shown a secret gate in the Kremlin wall, with a right angle passage. That way if the first gate was breached with a battering ram, the invaders could not get enough room for the ram to work against the second gate. There was also the ubiquitous statue of Lenin.



One of the neat things they did on this trip was to have the guides use wireless microphones, and we were each given a receiver and earphone. That way we could all listen without crowding around. We then were taken on a two hour cruise on the Volga River, which was quite pleasant. One of the things we saw was a little village on an island and I wondered if it was one of the Potemkin Villages erected to fool Katherine the Great. Apparently Potemkin was a minister of the court, and after she passed the village, he took it apart and hauled it through the night and set it up again so it would appear there were more people living there than there actually were.



YEKATERINBURG

Our next stop was Yekatinburg, which was the Romanov's city of exile. When the White Russians (royalists) appeared to be closing in on the city it was feared that the Czar would be an inspiration to them. The entire family was taken to a cellar and shot, and their bodies disposed of in the forest. Years later, DNA evidence of the remains proved that the remains were of the Czar and his family. A cathedral was built on the execution site.



I went inside the cathedral, and there were a series of plaques on the wall. I can read Cyrillic well enough to see that there were plaques honoring each member of the royal family.

NOVOSIBIRSK

On our way to a museum, we were stopped at what looked like a checkpoint. The lady next to me panicked, because she did not have her passport. It turned out that the point was at the division of the continent between Europe and Asia. We were treated to champagne and chocolates. I saw a tree with ribbons on it, and asked what it was, and I was told it was a wishing tree. You tied a ribbon and made a wish. Hoping to reinforce the wish I made in Kazan, I tied a ribbon on and made the same wish. There was a monument there showing the division, so I had the obligatory picture taken of me with one foot on each side. I also purchased a miniature model of the monument for my curio cabinet.



Our first stop was at a mineralogical museum, and we had one of the professors give a lecture on the different minerals that were found in Siberia and their uses. They were selling cards with samples of some of the minerals and I picked out one for a friend in Canada that uses stones in healing. When I looked at it later, I discovered that each card was for a different sign of the Zodiac, and the card I selected was my sign! They had some huge masses of quartz crystals on display, and a replica of a cave with stalagmites and stalactites.



From the museum we went to the Opera House, which is one of the largest in the world. We were allowed to go backstage and into the scenery department. There were all manner of props there in what appeared to be a helter skelter fashion, but we were assured that the prop master knew exactly where everything was.



And then one of the highlights of the trip for the train buffs- the Railroad Museum. It was quite fascinating to see all the steam locomotives all painted and shiny.



There were also some unusual cars there, especially one that looked like a submarine. It turns out it was a molten iron retort for moving iron as it came out of the blast furnace. The car was filled from the top, moved to a sluice to pour the metal into molds, and the entire retort rotated to pour out the metal. There was also a fourth class coach. Heat was supplied by a stove in the corner, and baggage was stowed under the seats. Food was either brought on by the passengers or bought at various stops along the railway.



We were then shown some of the old wooden houses that were museums, which were built that way because wood was so plentiful. The problem was that there were some terrible fires that destroyed most of the city, and an edict went out banning wooden construction.



IRKUTSK

One of the people I met on this trip was a very interesting lady that owned a business that sold DVD's of steam locomotives to a niche market of enthusiasts. She was trying to get a ride on one of the engines; however they were unable to accommodate her. However, we did get up into the cab of the locomotive and I was able to take some pictures. They would not let us ride there, however, because of regulations.



We then went to visit another cathedral, but there had been a plane crash a few days before, and there was a memorial service going on. We did not think it was right to intrude on their sorrow. On the grounds there was also a statue of Alexander III, commemorating the construction of the Trans Siberian Railway.



From there we went to a large memorial for the people who got killed in World War II. There is an eternal flame there, and it is a tradition for people getting married to place flowers on the plaque next to the flame. We were fortunate to be there for two wedding parties to come by and perform this ritual.



From the memorial we were taken to the Gagarin Embankment, named after Yuri Gagarin, the first Cosmonaut. Tied up there was the Angara, which was an old icebreaker. The embankment was a popular place for sunbathers during the short summer here.



After lunch at a local restaurant, we were treated to what I considered one of the absolute highlights of the trip. We were taken to the former home of Prince Volkonsky, which has been turned into a museum. He was one of the nobles involved in the December Rebellion against Czar Nicholas I, and was exiled to Siberia. Even though his fortunes were forfeit, he had enough wealthy relatives to allow him to live in some sort of comfort. One of the most interesting rooms was his daughter's, which had a beautiful desk and a most unusual triangular piano



Since there was no facility in the town at the time for performances, the Prince had a parlor large enough to accommodate a large number of people. He invited artists from all over to perform for the local residents as this was of bringing culture to the town.

The parlor comfortably accommodated our group of about 60, and there was a 150 year old grand piano that was still in use. We were treated to a private concert with a pianist, to male soloists, and a female soloist. The impresario would speak in Russian, and our guide translated for us. There were a number piano solos and solos and duets by the performers. During the concert, two poems by Pushkin in English were read and I was asked to read one of them.

At the end of the performance, someone came up to me with a bouquet of roses, and asked me to give them to the soprano. Having seen this done before at concerts, I gave them to her with a little bow and said "Spaseba", which is thank you in Russian.

The impresario, then said he knew one word that everyone knew, and he said "champagne". At that point the door opened and a bewigged server came in with glasses of champagne for us. The soloists then broke into the aria "Libiamo" (drink) from Verdi's opera Tosca. As we were leaving, the impresario came up to me and gave me a copy of the poem I had read, which really touched me.



LAKE BAIKAL

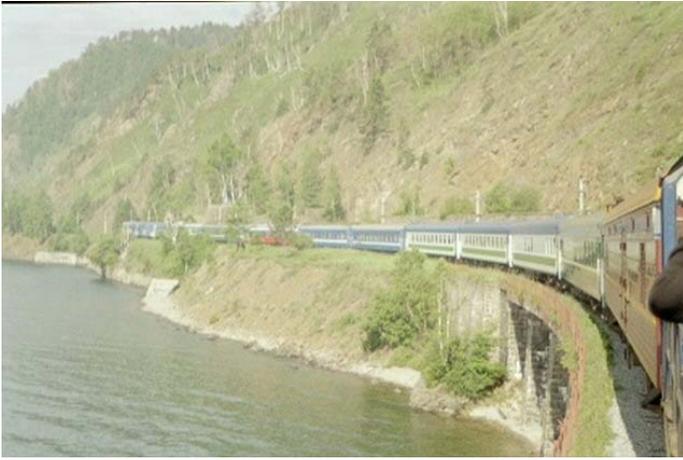
Another highlight of the trip was the side trip to Lake Baikal, which is the largest freshwater lake in the world. The train left the main line and took the old route to Port Baikal. Before the new route was blasted out, a railroad ferry had to be used to transport cars and people across the lake. In our daily program there was a notice that we could ride on the outside of the locomotive for a nominal fee. Needless to say, I was the first one there with my money, like in the panda enclosure in China.

It was a fantastic experience-I almost felt like a dog with its head out the window of a car! Well after the second group had gone, I decided to do it again. The ride this time was twice as long and I found the only thing better than riding the locomotive was to do it twice!



It was an absolutely gorgeous day, and there was a little cove with set up with a tent and BBQ and some small boats.





We were then taken by ferry to an open air wooden architecture museum, sort of like Skansen Park in Sweden. There were all manners of structures, and well as booths set up selling the usual stacking dolls and other local handicrafts.



After the wooden architecture museum, we went to the Limnological museum, which had displays about the lake, the animals and fish living in it and around it. It was quite interesting, but the exterior gave me a little pause. The grounds were surrounded by lilac bushes in full bloom, and they were beautiful. The only problem was they were the first flowers I gave my late wife, and would buy them for her every year when they were in season.

From the museum we traveled to Listvyana village and met a lady who lived there. She had a nice house, and because the growing season is so short, she had a greenhouse with tomatoes and other vegetables. Our last stop was at an outdoor BBQ by the lake, which was fun. I was glad I had put my DEET on, because as it started getting dark, and the mosquitoes came out.



We returned to Port Baikal and took the ferry back to the train. We then departed for the next stop which was Ulan Ude.

ULAN UDE

We were taken to a village of the "Old Believers" who had emigrated from Europe and established themselves here. We were greeted by some of them in their costumes, but the highlight was the wedding ceremony performed with a young couple from our train who were on their honeymoon.



The young lady was dressed in the traditional garb, a layer at a time, and when she was through, the young man came out in his costume. There were all manner of ceremonies, including a ritual beating of the bride and groom, then the groom beating the bride. At the end of the ceremony, a tray with vodka and pickle slices was passed to a few of the men. Well, as usual, I was one of the ones picked. I took a deep breath, and swallowed the vodka in one gulp without choking; then took a bite of pickle.



Later that evening, on the train, as we were heading to Mongolia, we had to go through first a Russian Border crossing then a Mongolian border crossing. One of the ladies who had no been outside Western Europe was a little freaked out by it, and I told her she had been watching too many "B" movies where the soldier comes in and says, "Your papers pliz". It went very smoothly, but we had to stay in our rooms until we cleared the Mongolian border.

ULAAN BAATAR

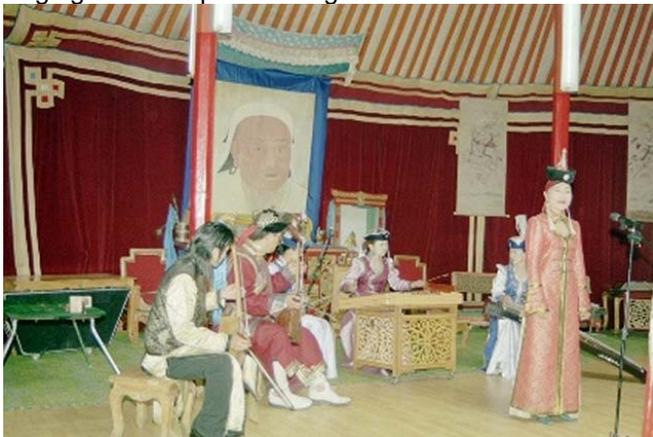
Our first stop was at a Buddhist temple complex that was restored after Stalin died and they were allowed more religious freedom. There was a ceremony going on while we were there, that I wish I could have understood more. There were drums and gongs and a priest taking something from a dish and wiping it on a circular disk. Many of the temples had prayer wheels on the outside for people to spin, which sent prayers to the gods.



From there we were taken to the main square which featured statues of one of the Mongolian heroes. There was a large statue of Genghis Khan on the other side of a fenced and covered area, but I found a hole that I could shoot through standing on my toes.



For lunch we were taken to a ger restaurant, which was shaped like the huts the nomads lived in out in the countryside. With lunch we were treated to a show of singing and acrobatics. Some of the singing called "throat singing" was unique to Mongolia.



After lunch we were taken to the center of town for a shopping trip, but I searched out an internet café. It was really inexpensive- less than \$1 an hour, but you get what you pay for. The letters were totally worn off some of the keys and they tried to fix it by writing the letters on the keys with whiteout! Anyhow, it was a little better than struggling with keyboards with Cyrillic characters on them.

There was a tour in the afternoon, but some of us did not want to face an hour ride each way, we were taken back to the railway station, but the train was parked out in the rail yard. It was kind of exciting to be walking

across active tracks and looking each way twice to make sure we did not get run over. When the rest of the group boarded the train, we left and headed back to Russia.

We had to repeat the same exercise with border guards in Mongolia and Russia, except it was 2 AM when we had to do this. We then made a brief stop at Ulan Ude to change locomotives, and we were off to our last stop of Vladivostok.

We had no scheduled sightseeing until Vladivostok, but an accomplished guitarist entertained us every night, and we did make brief stops during each day.

VLADIVOSTOK

Well we finally made it! 9288 kilometers from Moscow, The post I am standing by has the number of the final kilometer on it. The plaque is of the map of Russia showing the route from Moscow to Vladivostok.



Other than the post, the other welcome sight in the station was one of the tour managers holding my return airline ticket home (whew!). It only cost me \$65 to have the ticket reissued, but it was a small price to pay for the lessons learned about making copies of everything.

That night we were put up a nice hotel overnight with a REAL king size bed. It was a delight after sleeping on one that was 2 feet 6 inches wide! After we got settled, we were taken to a really nice restaurant for our farewell dinner. There was an appetizer that nobody could identify, but based on my philosophy that if it doesn't move I will try it once, I sampled it. It turned out to be scallops and calamari, which I happen to love! The rest of the dinner was nice, and we took some pictures of the people at tables as a memento.

The next afternoon we were taken to the airport and got checked in, which was a little hectic, but got on the plane and flew to Incheon International in Korea. There was a restaurant and sushi bar there, and I ordered a huge roll that came with a small bowl of miso soup, because I was worried about what I would be served on the plane.

The flight home was uneventful, as I slept most of the way with my Bose headset eliminating most noise.

It took me about a week to get rid of my jet lag, and I am home for 2 months until my next adventure. I will be taking a 7 day cruise of the Inner Hebrides of Scotland, then go to Wales to ride the narrow gauge trains, and then take the Chunnel to Paris to visit the Louvre.

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