

## The Trans-Siberian Rail, Gold Tsar Luxury Train

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I'm becoming a bit of a serial "fancy train" passenger. There are certainly worse addictions. I rode the rails on the Canadian Rocky Mountaineer in July, 2011 and then the sinfully opulent Orient Express in Dec., later that same year.

I'd lived in Beijing from 1997 – 2002 and had always wanted to take the Trans-Siberian Railway, as many of my friends and colleagues had, but in those days, my mom wasn't well so I was returning home to Canada every summer. That was, really, the only practical time the trip could be undertaken. For that journey, you needed four – six passengers per cabin. I remember hearing tales of making sure there was someone "on call" at all times, on "possessions watch", to prevent thefts. And how, on approaching the Mongolian/Russian border, smugglers appeared with bundles of contraband jeans, chenille dressing gowns, leather jackets and more, offloading their loot into cabins, toilets and even unscrewing ceiling and floor panels for hiding spots. These goods, which had been purchased at the Russian Market in Ulan Bator, were heading for the Chinese Market in Irkutsk. Money changed hands at both the Russian and Mongolian sides of the border, amidst much complaining. But once the train moved, the party started up, as the traders, ultimately, had done better than anticipated. Apparently, the officials and train workers were as drunk as the bandits! It sounded like a page from the Wild West.

My trip, which I finally embarked on sixteen years after leaving Beijing, was to be a very different beast! I had a significant birthday approaching and decided that I deserved a splurge, not just the Trans-Siberian, but the Gold Tsar version.

I flew into Beijing on July 8<sup>th</sup> and was met at the airport and taken to Tiantan Hotel, near the West Lake. I was extremely excited. My group was at the Forbidden City and I was to be picked up to meet them later for dinner. I knew Beijing had changed significantly, as I'd returned briefly a few times, but this hotel was like stepping back into the Beijing of the 90's. I went up to the bar. The girl didn't speak any English and my Mandarin was a tad hazy but I was keen to try. No white wine, "mayo", the first word I'd ever learned on my inaugural day in Beijing. No Margaritas, no Pina Coladas (all on the bar menu). That's when I realized that the waitress had no idea how to make a cocktail. So I decided to settle for a 'rum and skinny' (Diet Coke). But they were on two different pages of the menu so that wasn't easy either. The young lady had opened a cupboard full of alcohol so I went behind the bar and showed her how to make my beverage. As soon as I'd finished it, my guide arrived in a taxi, as though on cue. Gone were the tiny red cabs of my day, where the driver seemed to be confined in a cage.

Most of the dinner, local, help yourself style on the ubiquitous Lazy Susan table, was gone when I got there but I had a bit of food and some beer from the large shared bottles. There were 18 in our party so I met all of them, at two

large tables. Ours was the White Group, which I did wonder about initially but it was, indeed, just a name, nothing more. There were 180 of us on the train, so we were divided up for bus excursions and restaurant cars, for meals. Mine consisted of Australians, Kiwis, Dutch, an Indian man and an American father and son. The bus took us to a spot which was a bit of a trek to the station. Hank, a lovely Dutch man, who ended up being my neighbor on the train and Marg, also Dutch, equally lovely and a travel agent, both helped me with my bags. Once we got on the Chinese train, we were taken to our cabins for the night. We'd be meeting up with the Gold Tsar further north, near the Mongolian border. After dumping my gear, I invited Marg and Hank to the bar car so I could reward their assistance with a cold beverage.

I retired at 11:30 and, despite waking a few times, I slept very well. It had been many years since I'd overnighted on a train but I love that gentle lulling and rocking to dreamland. Breakfast was at 9 and was fine – fried eggs, sausage and coffee. At 12:50, exactly on schedule, we arrived in Eriian, a city on the border of Inner Mongolia, an autonomous region of northern China, and Mongolia. It's also known as Erenhot. We stopped for lunch there, also Chinese, family style, with beer. We ate, got back on the bus, went through Chinese Immigration and entered Mongolia, country number 66 for me and my first new one in two years. Russia would be number 67. I need to speed up if I'm going to reach my goal! The bus delivered us to our train. Mongolian Customs took our passports and we were instructed to wait in our cabins – and

not walk around the train – until we got them back. Not a pair of jeans or dressing gown to be seen! There was meant to be entertainment on the platform – musicians with horsehair instruments and Mongolian throat singers but since it was raining, that was redirected to our restaurant cars during dinner (D car for the White Group). My cabin was delightful and resplendent with welcome gifts: biscuits, water, a chocolate bar, a Matryoshka stacking doll keychain, a map of Russia and Mongolia and what I thought was more water, but it turned out to be vodka.

Finally, after a lengthy wait, passport returned and stashed in my cabin, I was off to explore my new home for the next twelve days. Wow! I was duly impressed by the four extremely flamboyant, lavishly ostentatious restaurants and bars. I met Andrey and Radislav, the two charming and very handsome bartenders. I introduced myself and offered my hand to shake, but instead, each, in turn, lifted and kissed it. Yep, they know where their bread will be buttered, I thought, with a grin. I met some more of my train mates in the bar and over dinner, which was delicious. I ended up sitting with different people for each meal so I got to know everyone in our section fairly well. They were an interesting, entertaining and varied troupe.

I was up early in the morning for a scrumptious breakfast and a shower. There were two, quite posh, toilets in our car and a shower, in a large room with counter top and toiletries. It was equipped with a sign up sheet but I never had to wait to use it. We arrived in Ulan Bator at 9:00 a.m.

It was the first day of the Naadam Festival, which celebrates wrestling, archery and horseriding. We lucked in, by chance, to the opening ceremony, across from our hotel, The Blue Sail. We had front row seats to the parade. Our group regularly happened upon special experiences that none of the others were privy to. We had our own mini Nadaam Festival at Gorkhi-Terelj National Park, which was an amazing experience.

The next eleven days were fabulous. The Trans-Siberian Railway is considered to be the longest in the world. We travelled 9,259 km. (5,753 miles) through seven time zones. Most nights, we set our clocks back one or two hours. I loved the decadence of witnessing the changing landscape, from the vast Mongolian steppes and magnificent Selenga River Valley, to the shores of Lake Baikal, through the Urals and right across the mountains, rivers, slopes and classic wooden cottages of Siberia, to Moscow, whilst sipping on a beverage, reading, writing and snoozing in my luxurious cabin or venturing into the bar car for a chat with some of my new friends.

We had varied programmes every day and stopped in Ulan Bator, Ulan Ude (our first Russian city), Port Baikal, Irkutsk, Novosibirsk, Yekaterinburg and Kazan, before our final stop in Moscow. We usually slept on the train but had three nights in very comfortable five star hotels (Ulan Bator, Irkutsk and Moscow). I loved every city we stopped in. So much history, culture, fabulously rich architecture and friendly locals. My Grade 13 Russian History all came

back to me in the voice of Mr. Turner, one of my favourite teachers. The Nicholas/es, the Alexander/s, Katherine the Great, Rasputin...

There were so many highlights. We were the only group who were lucky enough to visit the spectacular Genghis Khan, 131 foot tall Equestrian Statue, seemingly in the middle of nowhere, but on the bank of the Tuul River, where Genghis (pronounced Ghinkhus, in those parts), had, according to legend, found a gold whip. You could climb right up inside through the chest and neck of the horse, to the head, for a panoramic view of 200 yurts. I'd recently seen it on the Joanna Lumley segment of the Trans-Siberian documentary and was keen to visit. It did not disappoint!

We spent a day chugging along the shores of Lake Baikal, the world's deepest fresh water lake, known as the Pearl of Siberia. Earlier that day, we stopped at Port Baikal, where we were treated to a pleasant four hour cruise on the lake. It was Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>, and, while I'm not overly superstitious, I do have a rather dubious history on the water so I asked my companions to watch my bag for a minute, while I made my way to the upper deck to find out if there would be a safety briefing. I talked to one of the German guides and via a tourist translator, I got this answer. "No, but there's a bar." I did laugh. It was 10 a.m. Later, that evening, we had a barbeque, for the entire train, with local entertainment on the shores of the lake. It was a great evening.

Irkutsk was a real buzz as, up until my arrival, it had only been a city to conquer in the game of Risk. My nine siblings and I used to play over Christmas

and other holidays, one marathon game with two boards, which regularly lasted into the wee hours. Of course, I had to send all of them postcards from there.

And, little known fact, Rudolf Nureyev was born in a cabin on the Trans-Siberian railway, near Irkutsk, also known as the Paris of Siberia.

Only one day, we didn't exit the train, whilst crossing Siberia. But there was plenty of entertainment on board, lectures on the Trans-Siberian Railway, the turbulent history of the Tatars, Cossacks and Russians and the Gulags, Russian language lessons, Siberian Tea Specialties and, my personal favourite, vodka and caviar tasting.

We arrived at the Cathedral-on-the-Blood, built on the site of the notorious Ipatiev House in Yekaterinburg, on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the assassination of the last Russian Emperor, Nicholas II, and his family. No longer considered villains, the family had been pardoned and now, apparently revered. The anniversary was a huge occasion and many pilgrims had walked nine hours from a monastery to be there for the special day. It was an exciting time to share. Yekaterinburg is also the capital of the Urals and where Asia and Europe meet.

I'd never even heard of Kazan but it had a great vibe. It's the beautiful capital of the Republic of Tatarstan and the center of Tatar culture in Russia. Tolstoy lived there during his university years and, we were told, wrote both War and Peace and Anna Karenina in the city. Kazan is also home to an impressive white walled Kremlin, which just means a citadel in a Russian city.

And, of course, Moscow was well worth the wait! The Kremlin, an evening City of Lights Tour, Red Square, a trip on the metro to take in the Socialist art, mingling with statues, frescoes and mosaics, the colourful St. Basil's Cathedral and a enjoyable farewell dinner in our very comfortable Marriott Hotel. I spent an extra couple of nights in Moscow after saying good bye to my companions and then flew to St. Petersburg where I spent four nights.

Other high points of the itinerary included: five private performances in remarkable theatres, (consisting of folk arts and national dancing of Mongolia and different ethnic areas of Russia, throat singing, horse headed fiddle playing, famous Russian composers across the years at a piano recital, nicely paired with champagne); several welcomes at train stations, one with a Bread and Salt Ceremony, in Novosibirsk; dinner outside of Irkutsk at a summer dacha, (second home), out in the countryside with a local family; and countless impressive museums, temples and cathedrals.

The meals were amazing, the company entertaining and the service exemplary. I felt truly spoiled. It was definitely the trip of a lifetime.

I've got several other posh train trips on my bucket list. The Palace on Wheels in India, The Blue Train in South Africa and the Ghan, in Australia are a few of them. But, I have a feeling that the Trans-Siberian Gold Tsar is going to be hard to beat.

