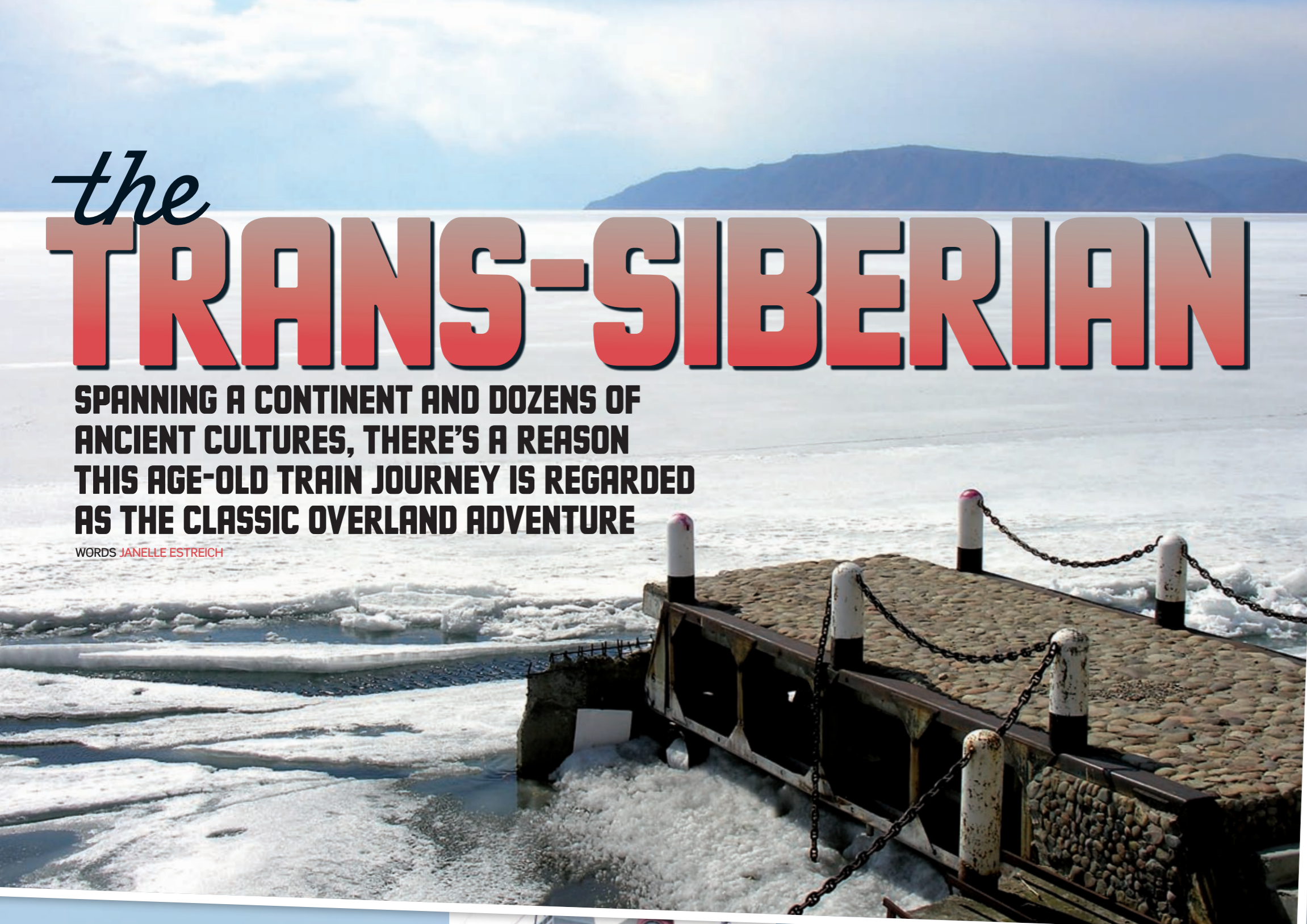


the TRANS-SIBERIAN

SPANNING A CONTINENT AND DOZENS OF ANCIENT CULTURES, THERE'S A REASON THIS AGE-OLD TRAIN JOURNEY IS REGARDED AS THE CLASSIC OVERLAND ADVENTURE

WORDS JANELLE ESTREICH



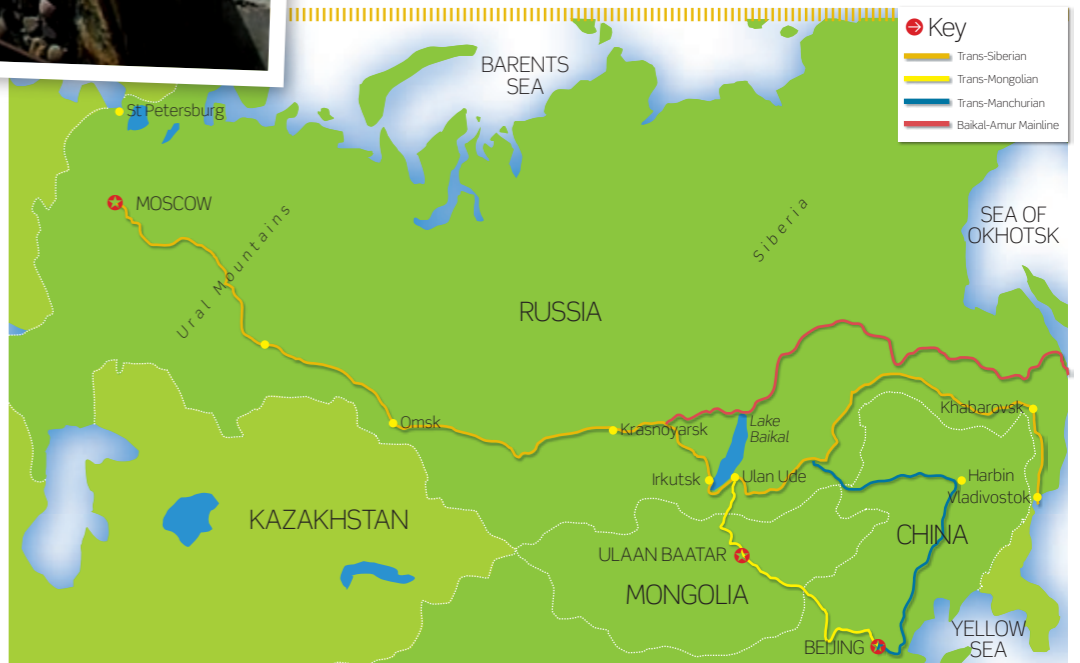
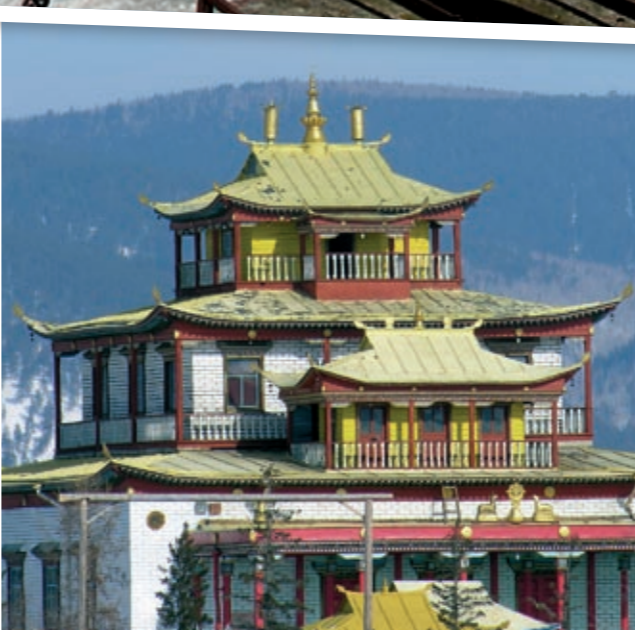
A smile, it's often said, is a universal language that serves as a way of breaking down barriers. The grinning tourist technique is not so useful in Russia, it seems. Having spent my first morning in Moscow learning how to elbow my way to a seat on the Metro at the insistence of a robust local guide and attempting to purchase tickets from steely-faced officials, by lunch I'm craving a friendly face and a stiff drink. As it turns out, a solution to both is within reach. "The only way to make friends with Russians is to drink vodka together," explains Kostya, my host for the afternoon. "It would be considered rude not to." Not wanting to be the cause of any further rudeness, I happily oblige.

As the starting point for the Trans-Siberian Railway journey, Russia's former communist capital makes a big first impression.

Moscow's must-see sites — Red Square and Lenin's Mausoleum, St Basil's Cathedral and the Kremlin — stand stoically alongside expensive department stores, flashy billboard advertisements and busy, smoke-filled restaurants frequented by a well-heeled breed of New Muscovites.

A few days in Moscow will see you ready to board the train for a change of scenery. There are three different routes from here, the Trans-Siberian, the Trans-Manchurian and the Trans-Mongolian. The latter, which starts in Moscow and finishes in Beijing, is the most popular with travellers.

There's an obvious buzz among the backpackers on the platform at Moscow's Yaroslavl station as we wait for the signal to board. The first stretch from Moscow to the southern Siberian capital of Irkutsk is the longest of our journey — 5153km; three days and four



hours) — and provides plenty of time to adjust to life on board.

Cabin fever quickly sets in on day one, which is spent exploring the train and interrogating cabin buddies, in my case a Kiwi lass travelling solo and a Russian tour guide whose bedside manner leaves a lot to be desired, tempered only by her bilingual abilities. With the get-to-know-you sessions (or in the case of the Russian, the silent don't-mess-with-me glare) out of the way, there are hours on end to spend staring out of the window, slurping on soups and tea, drinking beer in the dining cart (where the hours fly by), reading, sleeping and chatting to other passengers. This can also be a great chance to practise your sign language on native travellers on their way to visit family and friends.

Once you've adjusted to train life, the scheduled stops — which range from two to 23 minutes — are almost an annoyance. You can get off to stretch your legs and stock up on basics such as bottled water, soft drinks, beer and snacks at the

temporary markets which appear along the platform.

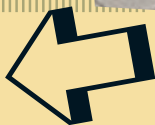
Longer stops are generally decided in advance as part of your tour, depending on how long you have and where you want to finish. Siberia's Lake Baikal is a truly magical place, while staying in a ger tent with a Mongolian family is a highlight for many.

Whichever route you take, the contrast of landscapes, people and cultures makes for fascinating travel, but it's the journey that makes it memorable. Forced out of your comfort zone so many times, what you're left with is an incredible sense of achievement at having gone the distance — and still be smiling at the end of it.

» Janelle Estreich did the 15-day Highway to China Trans-Siberian rail journey with On the Go (020-7371 1113; www.onthegotours.com). Trips range from 10-19 days, and prices start from £499



THE MAIN STOPS



MOSCOW, RUSSIA

The main sites are all conveniently located within walking distance of one another in the city centre. Spend a day or two before your train departs taking in the Kremlin, St Basil's Cathedral, Red Square and the ridiculously overpriced GUM Shopping Centre.

YERKATERINBURG, RUSSIA

Apart from being a good base for trips to the Ural Mountains, check out the beautiful new monastery and the Ganina Yama, where the remains of Tsar Nicholas II and his family were dumped after their execution.

IRKUTSK, RUSSIA

The city of Irkutsk mostly acts as a gateway to Lake Baikal, the world's largest freshwater lake and a stunning sight to behold. Walk on water (when it's frozen) or hike through Taiga forest along its shores then scorch your weary muscles in a traditional Russian banya (sauna).

ULAAN BAATAR, MONGOLIA

Full of character and manic most of the time, Mongolia's capital provides a jolt to the senses after so much quiet time on the train. Head for the Gobi Desert or the Gorkhi-Terelj National Park for more of that, but even in these parts the rate of development is a little scary. In Ulaan Baatar, check out the working Gandan Monastery, home to some 200 monks.

BEIJING, CHINA

For a city of 15 million, Beijing is a strikingly efficient and clean city. Preparations for the 2008 Olympics are well underway, with loads of yuan being pumped into the city. Allow at least a couple of days to explore, but if you're short on time it is possible to stroll through Tiananmen Square and the Forbidden City, climb the Great Wall of China, visit a traditional tea house, stop off at a silk factory and enjoy a plate of Peking duck in one day (trust me, I had the blisters to prove it). Temple of Heaven is an oasis worth escaping to for a few hours, too.



TRANS-SIB TIPS

- » One of the few holidays where trackie daks and slippers are socially acceptable attire — make the most of it, a catwalk this is not.
- » A wet wipes adventure all the way. Although you won't be exerting yourself, you'll be wanting to freshen up before the three-day stretch without a shower is up. Do it for the sake of your cabin mates, if nothing else.
- » Don't be relying on the dining cart as your main food supply. The menu is limited (and rarely in English), and service isn't exactly forthcoming. Good for beers and a break from your cabin.
- » Stock up on basics — such as water, soups, tea and noodles — before you get on board. You

- can supplement your diet along the way with such delicacies as pickled gherkins, beer, soft cheese, bread, vodka and fruit.
- » There's a vat of boiling water at the end of each carriage called a samovar. You can help yourself to water for hot drinks and soups.
- » The toilet is locked before each stop and not opened again until the train is moving. Learn to read the timetable or suffer in silence.
- » Bring plenty of books, games or an iPod for self-amusement.
- » This is a working train — you can't choose who you share your cabin with, although you can request the same berth as friends

- when booking. Female travellers can also ask to be moved to a berth with other females.
- » Train attendants known as provodnitsas (male provodniks are more common in China) keep each carriage in working order. Don't mess with them.
- » A basic linen package including a mattress cover, sheet, pillow slip and hand towel is provided by the provodnitsa when you board and must be returned before you disembark. You won't need a sleeping bag for the train.



NEED TO KNOW

WHEN TO GO July to September is peak Trans-Siberian season, when temps rise to 40°C offering warm sunny days but also some rain. For snow-covered vistas, winter's the go from November to March. Enjoy the best of both worlds without the crowds in spring (April-May) or autumn (September-October).

GETTING THERE Fly into Moscow and out of Beijing, or start your travels in St Petersburg and connect to Moscow by train. If you're keen to stick with the train theme, and have the time, why not travel from London to Moscow by train. See www.seat61.com/Russia.htm.

VISAS You need a visa for travel in Russia, Mongolia and China. Many tour companies will sort these for you for a fee, otherwise you will need to apply through the respective embassies. You'll need an invitation from a hotel or travel agency to apply for a Russia visa. Be aware that the cost for these can really add up: Russian visa £45 (takes 2-3 weeks to process); Mongolia visa £40 (1 week); Chinese visa £20 (1 week).

MONEY Russia Rubles, £1 = 51 RUB; Mongolia Tugriks, £1 = 2322 MNT; China Yuan, £1 = 15 CNY. If on an organised tour, budget for around £30 per day in cities, and £10-£15 per day on the train.

LANGUAGE Russian; Mongolian; in China Mandarin is most common, but there are several dialect groups spoken across the country

ACCOMMODATION When you're not tucked up on the train, homestays (similar to a B&B, and often including meals) are an affordable and authentic option in Russia. Camping in a traditional ger tent is a popular choice in Mongolia. Budget hotels are common in Beijing.

VITAL INFO The Trans-Siberian train journeys are not organised tours in themselves. If you want to be travelling in a group, best check with your tour company to ensure there are others booked in.

READING Eccentric Irish author Dervla Murphy gives great insight into Russia's less-travelled parts in *Through Siberia By Accident*, published by John Murray.

SEE TNT's free online guide to the Trans-Siberian at www.tntmagazine.com/guides.

➔ Lake Baikal, Siberia

It's fair to say that Aussies, at least, like to boast about big things — the Big Banana, the Big Prawn, the Big Pineapple — but they've got nothin' on Siberia's Lake Baikal.

The world's largest freshwater lake, Baikal measures an unfathomable 636km long, 80km wide and nearly a mile deep. We're talking 20 per cent of the world's fresh drinking water in one hole. At an estimated 25-30 million years old, it also holds the title of the world's oldest lake.

A couple of days spent near this magical body of water will see you captivated by its sheer size and beauty. When I visited in April the lake was still frozen; a plate of pure white as far as the eye could see (during winter the ice is so thick that the Trans-Siberian once travelled across its surface).

Over the week the lake began to thaw out, such that by the time we travelled back past on the train a few days later it had melted, acting as a mirror to the changing colours of the sky.

The lake is home to some interesting creatures — none more so than the transparent golomyanka, one of only a few viviparous fish in the world, and found in the lake's cold temperate zone. There are also nerpa — the world's only freshwater seal.



They live in a protected area of the lake off-limits to people, but there's a rather fat specimen in a tank at the Lake Baikal Museum. This quirky and informative attraction, found in Listvyanka, is well worth a visit but is best tackled with a local guide to explain the exhibits.

Most tours spend a couple of days at the lake, many of them based in the developing tourist town of Listvyanka. From here you can try dog-sledging, ice walking or hydrofoil across the ice in the winter or enjoy a swim, dive, boat tour or hiking in the summer.

Whenever you visit, there's no better way to finish your day than

with a traditional Russian banya (sauna). These small wooden structures will test your endurance for extreme temperatures — see how long you can sit in the 110 degrees banya before ducking out to toss freezing cold water over yourself, then head back in to do it all over again. Exhilarating.

NEXT WEEK SOUTH KOREA

Breakdancing in Seoul; what's on the menu; border control

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