

Trans-Siberian Trip 2008

We were met in St. Pete's after a long flight delay and taken straight to our hotel "Keralia" by Mick. The night sun made an eerie glow as it hadn't fully set even at 0130 hrs. Mick told we would be met at the slightly later time of 1000 hrs the following morning for our City Guide and tour of St. Pete's. Welcome news indeed!!

The Hotel Keralia is a clean and tidy functional hotel situated on the outskirts of St. Pete's in a residential district set alongside "soviet" style apartment blocks overlooking lovely parkland. The hotel runs a shuttle bus to and from the Central Station at the Southern end of the Nevsky Prospekt. Alternatively, as Sally and I tried, the No. 190 operates regularly from outside the hotel where it terminates to its other terminus just off the Neva River bank, for a fixed fee of 22 roubles. A very pleasant way to meet the locals and see the sights.

After navigating our way round the breakfast bar for a basic but adequate meal, we met our guide Olga. Again we had Mick to drive us. The traffic in St. Pete's is horrendous but after a 2 - 3 hour tour showing the landmark monuments Olga and Mick dropped us off at the St. Peter and Paul Fortress. Olga again in her professional capacity felt worried to leave us, so, joined the small queue with Sally and I at the entrance. It's a good job to as we wouldn't have been able to decipher which body was placed in which tomb. Also we saw where the remains of the Romanovs were finally interred. We finally persuaded Olga to leave us and walked to "Peter the Great's Cabin" Over the bridge and down through the "Mars Field". We walked along the Fontanka Canal, back to the Nevsky Prospekt and finally to the rail station for the shuttle to the Hotel.

Day two and Sally and I tried our luck at using the local bus service. I'm not saying that we looked like your typical tourist (I think we blended in quite well!!) but a couple of young Russian girls who had chatted to us on the bus, took it into their heads to tell the driver to make sure we got off at the right place. As it was, the traffic was so bad we decided to get off and walk the final third of the way along Nevsky Prospekt to The Hermitage Palace. We had bought our tickets online prior to departing England to avoid the queues, which fortunately weren't there, but advisable anyway. Olga had asked us if we needed a guide for the day but we said no. We had our guide book and knew what we wanted to see.

The Hermitage Palace is a "WOW" factor in its own right. The works of art and other treasures on display account for only about 15% of the total. It's amazing standing just a few metres from famous Monet's and Rembrandt's. Outside in the square we were offered tickets for the evening concert on a stage in its final stages of construction. Whilst inside the Hermitage Palace the foundations, walls and artefacts on display shook to the thunderous tones of the Pink Floyd number "MONEY!!!" Quite surreal!!

We declined "Pink Floyd" tickets because the St. Pete's crew had, at our request, bought tickets to The Mariinski Theatre's performance of Tosca. Perfect. Perfect. Perfect. Although be careful and ask the price of a glass of champagne before they pour as 1500 Roubles is a bit steep!!

Day 3 sees us on our own again. We tried to get to Peterhoff's Palace but as we skimmed along the water on the hydrofoil the Captain had to stop suddenly. The River Police had stopped all River traffic. So there we were bobbing up and down facing a hydrofoil coming in the opposite direction about 100metres apart for the best part of 1¹/₂ hours before the captain turned the craft round and back to the quayside. It didn't matter; it gave us a chance to get back into the Hermitage Palace to finish the tour.

Day 4 and our final day in St. Petes. We packed our bags and once again met up with Olga who had agreed to take us St Catherine's Palace and to a Folk dance show in the evening. We dropped our luggage in the Left Luggage at the Station and set off for a fascinating and

interesting day tour. The driver Sergio was very amusing but the star of this part of our trip was definitely Olga. We cannot recommend her highly enough. A very careful, professional guide who made sure we not only knew where we wanted to go but how and where to get buses taxis' etc and roughly the price to pay.

We board the overnight train to Moscow. This gave us an interesting fore taste to the bigger train journey.

We arrived at the hotel Vega. A bigger hotel, on the outskirts of Moscow, overlooking Izmailovski Park. A beautiful park used by the locals which (we found as we walked through) has a lake, upon which Peter the Great, as a child, learnt to sail and so grew his love of boats. Hence the formation of St. Petersburg and the Russian navy.

We dined at the breakfast table slept in our very comfortable room for a couple of hours, to catch up after the train journey, then went forth to find the Metro and in to Moscow. Admittedly we got lost but once again a kindly gentleman pointed us in the right direction and a 15 minute walk saw us approaching the Alexander Park just outside the Kremlin.

Moscow is under reconstruction at this time. However we had a quick tour of Red Square, and round to the Theatre district to find the Bolshoi Ballet Theatre, which is also closed and under reconstruction. The Tickets bought for us was for productions by the Bolshoi Ballet Company in the Little Bolshoi Theatre. Amazing, amazing. Fantastic.
Thank you St. Pete's crew.

The next morning and our guide for Moscow is Katia. A fascinating and interesting person who took us to the sights. Red Square. St Basils Cathedral, etc etc. The most interesting things she told about life during Soviet times made the trip so much more than you could have ever found in a guide book. Leaving us at the entrance to the Kremlin to do our own thing we said our goodbyes. We didn't have a lot of time left because we had to be back at the hotel to collect our Trans Siberian Rail Tickets at 1600 hrs.

This we found most frustrating. Why the manageress couldn't have either given the tickets to Katia or met us after breakfast on either day we don't know and maybe this could be addressed for future groups.

The following afternoon after a pleasant morning walking through the park feeding the red squirrels, sees us getting onto the Trans Siberian Railway carriage.

The first leg of the journey is a two night two day event. Soon we are sharing stories inviting fellow travellers in for biscuits always under the watchful eye of the Providnitsa, a very authoritative, but kind carriage attendant.

We arrived in Yekaterinberg at 2200 hrs and whisked away to our Home stay Hostess Larrissa. A very bubbly, kind person who has obviously worked very hard during her life. A splendid meal was given to us and then much laughter as we tried to communicate with each other using phrase books.

The next day Maria takes us out to the village of Koptolovo where the first settlers arrived and this village is now a living museum. We were shown where the first spring was located, and how the families lived together in the Log Cabins. Then a quick jaunt around the village in a pony and cart before being entertained by a "traditional Folk Display" Of course we joined in. You wouldn't expect anything less. The visit was topped off by a lovely meal before a hair-raising, knuckle-whitening drive back to Yekaterinberg. Even the guide commented!! The visit to the village was such that we were made to feel as if we were the only tourists there. Clever girl Maria and thanks for allowing us to see and stay, for as long as we could, the sites we visited.

The next day and we visit the Monastery founded at the site where the remains of the Romanov family and faithful servants were massacred. A beautiful peaceful site where the churches are still being built using traditional wooden building construction techniques. From here we made our way to the Euro - Asia border line. En route we stop at a memorial site to the millions of people either taken away to Eastern Siberia, or Shot where they stood during the time of Stalin. As it happened this day was a special day attended by prominent dignitaries and church figures, media and the press. What I found particularly touching was an elderly man who found the names of the people he was looking for. He placed a cap on his head saluted the name and then raised a glass. It's a crazy world we live in!!

Onto the Euro-Asia line and we join the queues of wedding parties waiting to have their pictures taken. It's a tradition in Russia that after the wedding ceremony the party has photos taken of themselves at as many famous sites in the area as they possibly can.

A late night departure and thank you Larrissa who waited up, with her nephew and his friend, to carry our luggage down to the car at midnight.

Back on the train again for the longest part of the journey. The usual routine eating sleeping drinking making friends sharing travelling tales and of course drinking vodka. An extremely pleasant pastime. If you like that kind of thing. (Which we do!!)

Time was also spent in the neighbours' compartment. 4 Russian soldiers from a Tank company moving base. They were giving their Kalashnikov rifles a going over and wondered if I might be interested in seeing one!! I don't I could have got it through customs!! So didn't buy one! Sally has some interesting shots (excuse the pun)

We arrived in Irkutsk and are taken onward to Valeria's apartment in Listvyanka, an interesting building with fantastic views overlooking Lake Baikal. A quick shower then on to breakfast before a trip to the local market and then to the local museum. Valeria arrived at about 1800 hrs to make supper. We then get taken to a local Banya for a sauna after which we had a lovely slow walk back to the apartment taking photos of the sunset over the lake. After a very chilly night sleep Valeria made breakfast then onto the ferry and across the water to Port Baikal. A walk past the little semi-alpine village and then down to the lakeside where Valeria makes an amazing picnic. Including a wild berry tea made from the lake water. Eat your heart out Ray Mears!! Another Banya followed that evening and again a walk back to the apartment stopping this time in a bar to try their light beer. Very good it was to.

Our guide for this part of the journey is Xenya. Again, a lovely young lady very keen that all our questions were answered. We are taken to our Home stay accommodation hostess of Tamarra and here we meet fellow travellers Pauline and Grant - brother and sister from Johannesburg.

The next morning and as Pauline and Grant were to travel to Lake Baikal at lunchtime we all decided to do a short sight seeing tour together. Just along from Tamarra's apartment was the memorial to the Unknown Soldier. Here a group of teenagers were "goose stepping" in the Russian military way, wearing a type of uniform and changing guard around the memorial every 15 minutes. We learnt later that these children were usually the brightest in their class at school and were given the privilege to perform this guard duty. We also witnessed a group of elderly veterans lay a wreath at the "eternal flame"

Saying goodbye to Pauline and Grant, Sally and I walked to the Volkonsky Museum. Situated in a preserved Decembrist house. Volkonsky was one of the Decembrist's who after being caught and found guilty was exiled to Eastern Siberia. His wife followed on behind as so many wives did, set up the community of Irkutsk.

We were collected and taken to the Railway station for the overnight train ride to Ulan Ude. Hooray!! We meet up with Therese! We are sharing the compartment with her and a Russian named Sasha. A friendly man, who liked beer, and kept telling us about his wonderful wife Tanya and her large "assets!!" His other passion was Omul. A smoked fish found in Lake Baikal.

The next station into which we were due to arrive at 23.30 had a number of vendors on the platform, which specialised in this fish. When the train stopped Sasha got off and we very quickly made our beds. Sasha arrived - quite disgruntled that we weren't going to eat some of his fish with him. He had bought 5 and they came with Heads, Tails, Eyeballs and an awful smell!!! He wondered off and apparently found a willing recipient. On some carriages you cannot open the compartment windows. On this train you could and when we got on board the window was open. At that time we were glad as it was very warm. The reason the window was open was it was broken and wouldn't close. It was freezing as we made our way around Lake Baikal through the night. We tried to sleep with the blankets wrapped around our heads, with minimal success. So at 0630 we dragged ourselves off the train and onward to our next Home stay and our hostess Marina.

Marina worked for the local government and was quite interested in hearing about how much we earned and the cost of living in England.

Arthur our guide met us later that morning to take us to the Buddhist monastery on the outskirts of Ulan Ude. He was a Buddhist himself and made the journey very interesting. Explaining about the prayer wheels and what they symbolised. There are 108 prayer - wheels placed around the monastery and each one contains a number of prayer dedications. Above the entrance to each holy building were the images of a wheel with a "stupor" on top. To either side to gazelles lie. These animals Arthur tells us were the first creatures the great Buddha spoke to. They are referred to as the "peaceful listeners"

After visiting the open air museum we return to Marina's for a nice meal, and we meet her son who's about to find a sport's bar to watch the Russia / Holland football match. The early alarm call from the jubilant young Russian fans, blaring their car horns and blowing trumpets tells us Russia won!!

Midday and we are collected from Marina's and taken to the station. Arthur tells us to wait in the car. It's raining as Arthur gets back in the car and the driver (who was the Ulan Ude regional wrestling champion and sported a front row of Gold teeth!) pulls along the concourse to where we will see the train pull into the station. Sally notices a train in the station and asks if this could be our train. Both Arthur and the driver smile and chuckle knowingly, bemused at Sally's anxiety. We will hear the announcement when the train arrives in the station, says Arthur patronisingly. 5 minutes before the train is due to depart and Sally and I insist we get out the car and go to the platform. Suddenly a blind panic ensues as Arthur and the Driver realise the train we were looking at from the comfort of our car, was our train all the time. Jumping off one platform crossing the rail tracks to get to the next the driver grabs both our cases and pushes past the providnitsa to get to our compartment indicating as he went that we had the tickets. This is the most stressful time on the journey. You have to board and stow the luggage whilst people are ganging up behind you trying to get to their compartments to do the same. We made it and we say our goodbyes to Arthur and the Driver waving as the train pulls out from Ulan Ude.

Therese shares our compartment and also a young girl from Mongolia. We make our way out from Russia and into Mongolia. We have to pass through Russian border control which was quite uneventful and onward then through no man's land toward Mongolia. This would have been quite an uneventful journey had it not been for the amount of luggage being hurriedly unpacked and repacked into every nook and cranny, in various compartments. Something out of a "carryon film"! We arrive at the Mongolian border where it takes 5 hours convince the immigration and customs officials that everything was in order. At least I assume that was the case unless the officials got fed up with the redistribution that was occurring each time they left the carriage!!

We cross a very bleak and wet country side of Mongolia and the Gobi desert. However the view of the Gobi desert interspersed with blocks of black clouds and torrential rain was dramatic.

"Dashbold" our driver and guide met us as our train pulled into Ulan Bataar, and drives out of the flooded roads of Ulan Bataar and into the country side to the Nerelji national Park, where our "Ger" tent was waiting. Talk about "Wow" factor. We got out from Dashbold's car (which he constantly apologised for as the Shock Absorber's had failed) and our luggage was whisked up to our tent. No sooner had we arrived when the stove was lit and in minutes we were as warm as toast. The next 2 nights and days were truly wonderful. The rain continued sporadically but the welcome from the camp hosts and the food they provided was fantastic. The night sky when the clouds cleared was horizon to horizon full of stars and distant galaxies. Dashbold arrived far too soon to take us back to an overnight stay in the hotel in Ulan Bataar then the next day to the station and onward to China.

We wonder if the same chaotic scenes would meet us with Mongolian and possibly Chinese people stashing produce and other such merchandise about the carriage. We weren't disappointed. We even found two Mannequin's propped up in a corner of one area of the carriage!! Again, crossing the border was slow but not a patch on the wheel changing procedure that was to take place.

The guide books tell you that you will be given a choice to either get off at a station or stay on and ride to the Bogie Changing sheds from where you could get off and walk back to the station. NOT TRUE!!! The train pulled in briefly to the station but the attendants absolutely forbid any one to leave the carriages. The engines pulling the carriages across Mongolia and into China are disconnected and the shunting engines are hitched up at the back of the train. The toilets were locked and the train made its way to the wheel changing sheds. These sheds allow only two carriages to be in line while the wheels are changed. The first two carriages are duly positioned, and uncoupled. The remaining carriages are pulled out and about 15 minutes later two more carriages appear alongside. This procedure continues until the shed is full. The carriages are then raised, one set of wheels and axles are removed and rolled out and the new set of wheels and axles are wheeled into position, the carriages are lowered, secured to the axles, and we are ready to roll. We now have to wait while the two engines gently join our carriages and with a lot of shunting procedures and blowing horns and whistles we are ready to proceed with our journey. This process lasted about 5 hours!! Fortunately the train did stop at the station and almost everyone made a dash for the toilets!!

The journey continues and we make our way gradually into China. We see our first "Coolie" hat and then paddy fields but then the scenery becomes misty and foggy. Some Chinese people tell us this is the pollution. I suppose the fact that it was also raining didn't help either.

We arrive at Beijing, our final destination. Hoorah!! Absolute chaos follows at the station. Fortunately our guide is there to meet us and we are ushered to the taxi rank, then eventually to our hotel. The guide tells us she would meet us in the morning and left us to do our own thing. We meet up with Pauline and Grant and we visit the "Temple of Heaven" just around the corner from the hotel. Later that evening we meet up also with Therese and we find a fantastic restaurant just around the corner from the hotel. We each chose a dish then had extra rice 3 litres of beer and 2 fruit juices for the equivalent of under 5 GBP's each.

The next morning and the guide that met us (Salina) couldn't be with us so Karen takes her place. What a brilliant guide who introduces us to our driver for the duration of our visit. His name is Hank and I cannot recommend this gentleman highly enough. Karen takes us through Tiananmen Square, The Forbidden City, took us to see the Hutongs in a rickshaw ride, we saw the traditional apartments and courtyards within the Hutongs. We then visit the "Fake Market" and have a lot of fun with Karen and the market vendors haggling over imitation goods. Karen then takes us to Peking duck dinner and finally back to the Hotel. Karen then tells us that Salina would be with us the following day we hug each other exchange email addresses and say goodbye. What a full day!!

Sunday morning. It's overcast. Salina meets and tells us our itinerary for the day. Hank drives first to a "Cloisanne" enamelware factory then takes us for lunch. We had only finished

breakfast 2 hours earlier. We then go on to visit the Ming tombs and then to the Great Wall. By this time the rain is coming down like stair rods. We suggest to Salina that today is probably not the best day to visit as you couldn't see the end of the bonnet let alone the Great Wall!! We ask if we might revisit on the Monday. It will incur an additional fee. Salina tells us. We agree to pay with the proviso that if it's still raining in the morning we wouldn't bother with the Great Wall just visit the Summer Palace and areas around Beijing. We had arranged through On The Go tickets for an Acrobatic show. This would take place on Sunday afternoon at about 1800 hrs. We make our way back the Beijing and stop to see the "Birds Nest" stadium. Again you could only just make it out through the fog and rain. Salina then tells Hank to drive us to the theatre where the show was being held. We arrived at about 16.30 and Salina bought the tickets from the kiosk and takes us through and into the foyer. The counterfoils were removed as they would be.

Salina then tells where Hank would meet us and left us to wait for the next hour. The theatre staff wouldn't let us out to walk around outside because they had taken the counterfoils!! The show was great and very exciting. We meet Hank at the arranged spot. Hank takes us back to the hotel where we revisit our little restaurant, for another great meal.

The next we get to see the Great Wall. Hank then takes us on to the Summer Palace. A fascinating series of gardens, set around a lake and included wonderful architecture. We took a boat ride to the island and back, then made our way back to the hotel. Salina had at our request purchased tickets for us visit a Chinese Opera. An unmissable experience.

We visit our favourite restaurant for the last time and leave with hugs and good wishes from the waitresses and owners.

We go down for breakfast and as we have come to expect from Hank, he has parked his car outside the hotel and is waiting white gloves at the ready. What a proud and very professional driver he is.

It's time to go home. We leave Beijing for the airport. What an experience. The cities with the individual architecture that stamps the individuality of that region. The countryside and how it changes as we travelled across it. More importantly the people we have met along the journey. Every person with their own reason for travelling. People of all ages on holiday from all around the world. Young families going back to Vladivostok after visiting Mums and Dads in Moscow. Soldiers rejoining military units deployed across the eastern areas of Russia. Irish, Danish, Swedish, American, South African, Russian, Mongolian and Chinese

Please pass our thanks to all the guides and hostesses we have met along our journey. In particular

St. Pete's: Olga and Nick the Driver

Moscow: Katia

Yekaterinburg: Hostess Larissa and guide Maria

Irkuskt: Xenya and our host Valerie at Lake Baikal
Xenya and our hostess Tamarra in Irkuskt

Ulan Ude: Marina and our guide Arthur. Also the driver with the pristine Gold Teeth

Ulan Bataar: Dasbold and the fantastic team at the National Park who made us so welcome

Beijing: Hank the Driver and to Karen who made our day with her so memorable

Sally and I would like to thank you Ryan for arranging and coordinating this holiday. Once again On the Go has excelled. We cannot recommend you all highly enough and we both hope our enthusiasm for holidaying with you is reflected with increasing bookings.

Once again

Thanks Ryan

James Patterson