



Silver Birch Trees and Freight Trains.

*A journey on the Trans-Siberia Express in
2007.*

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**Dedicated to Cousin Pete, our
family's greatest traveller.**

Acknowledgments

I'd like to take the opportunity to thank all the members of the family that supported us before and during the trip. On a train on the other side of the world, you can get pretty lonely and in those darkest moments, thoughts of the people back home keep you going. Not that we faced much adversity, but a strange land with a completely different language presents its problems and the trip was a reminder of something mentioned to me many times – it's not the journey you undertake that's important, it's the way in which you make the journey that is.

Special mention should be made of our travel agent Yvonne who made all the arrangements for us and Intourist of Russia who made the trip work so well.

Thanks must go to David Orton and Nigel Cabbage who have helped with the proof reading and corrections and have given me much encouragement in getting this to publication of a sort.

Also to the various people who shown interest to write this edition and publish it.

Part I: A Travellers Diary 2007

Introduction

This is an account of a trip I made with my Cousin Peter in May and June 2007. It was a trip we had long planned and dreamed about, mainly when we posed the question “What would you do if you won the National Lottery?” over a glass of whiskey many Christmas Day dinners long ago during the 1990’s.

John Gunther was the American Correspondent of the Chicago Daily News who visited Russia a number of times and described the “Concept of Siberia” as “automatically suggests coldness, loneliness, immensity and exile”. This description was very much in mind during our discussions, the Cold War not long being over and the Berlin Wall not long dismantled and sold for souvenirs. We grew up in this era and the threat of nuclear war with the Russians was ever present until the rise of Gorbachev. In some ways, it was a step into the dark history and suspicion of Russia. In other ways it was an adventure of a lifetime.

Interestingly, Gunther mused about the Russians conquering the world which he thought unlikely unless there was a war. However, since the breakdown of Communism, Russia has learned a new place in the world as a energy super-power and this possibly makes them more dangerous than ever as we in the West are increasingly dependent upon the natural resources sold by the new oligarchies. This economic power is evident on the railway.

Russia is a very large place covering one eighth of the earth’s land area, as a cursory look at an atlas will reveal. Our trip would take us nearly half way around the world crossing eleven timezones. Cousin Pete and me had already been, on separate journeys, to the eastern shores of Pacific, at Vancouver in British Columbia.

This would mean for both of us we would only have to cross the Pacific to circumnavigate the globe – not bad for two ordinary blokes from The Black Country!

After fifteen years (and without a lottery win), we finally managed to save up the money and after six months planning, we boarded the train at Wolverhampton, the start of the dream.

This is the account of that trip.

I have also included a short essay about the history of its construction. This is by no means exhaustive but highlights the vastness of the project and the human suffering involved. There aren't many English books on the subject to be had, but a look on that modern marvel the Internet can yield more information. Many sources of information probably exist in the Russian state archives and await translation. If this book inspires someone to write a detailed history of the construction of the Trans-Siberia then the effort in writing this one will have been worth it.

Chapter One

Day Two - Poland

It's quite hard to write about how I feel about this trip. At the moment we are crossing Poland in pouring rain. Hardly the best to keep your spirits up. My stomach feels all of a churn I don't know whether it's because I'm homesick, missing the girlfriend or anxious about this trip. I certainly felt bad in Berlin, where we left earlier today on the 15:16 from Berlin-Zoogarten to Moscow. I really did have the butterflies. However, having phoned my partner Karen, I did feel better, and as we settled into our cabin, a bit small and cramped, we were off, leaving the familiarity of Berlin behind us. Berlin had been our base for 24 hours and I had been there previously with my good mate Dave.

This train is a curious link between east and west, and interface between two different cultures: the culture of capitalism in Germany and the West, and the legacy of Communism in the East. What would we find? It was a burning question in my mind.

We had left the hotel earlier onto the Kurfurstendamn and made out way to the busy intersection to the Zoogarten station, a typical Berlin station of arched steel and glass. We made our way under the platforms to the far end of the platforms and ascended the stairway to the platform where the smart blue and red train stood expectantly at the platform, the attendants nearby welcoming you on board. I can only remember one occasion when there were attendants on the platform and that was on a special Pullman trip for the Universities when I stayed in Manchester some years ago. Quite an occasion as I've that was

real 1950's opulence brought back to life. This was clinical and definitely 2007.

The attendants were smartly dressed in dark blue uniforms waiting to guide us to our compartment. The carriages were of the old corridor configuration as used in Britain up to the late 1980's, but very clean and uncluttered.

We found our compartment and stowed our bags. It was quite plush but a little cramped as it was basically a three seat sofa in light green crushed velvet with a small table in the corner that served as the wash basin. The spare bed was folded above our heads, and was pulled into position overnight by the attendant. Neat.

I thought, as we pulled out of the station on time, of how many people had travelled this line before – in the old days, diplomats used the service. In 1935, Britain's Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, made the same journey to meet Stalin in Moscow.

The train crawled to the next station, Wilhemstrasse, and loaded some more passengers. Quite an international station is this as there are also trains going westbound to Hamburg and Brussels.

We picked up speed as we got the outskirts of Berlin – the furthest East I had ever travelled. In no time at all, we were stopping at Frankfurt am Oder – the last part of modern Germany before we entered Poland.

And now as we were watching the Polish countryside swish past it was very green, but we were travelling in the summer; Eden described the Polish Landscape as “flat, dreary and poor” but he made his trip in early spring so it perhaps it was grey and misty when he went. How different from today! Poland looks like it has benefited from its membership of the EU as all of its stations have been refurbished and the track is nice and smooth. It seems

to be throwing off the yoke of communist oppression and reviving once more.

This countryside is largely flat with many trees and forests. That's all you can see; occasionally, the scenery is punctuated by the occasional town or village. Is it going to be like this all the way to Moscow we wonder?

Time zones are going to be a problem on this trip. I don't normally wear a watch as they don't agree with my "magnetism" so it's up to Pete to sort out the timetable and where we are. This train is running on German time but it's a couple of timezones until we reach Moscow. We'll have to watch out for the zone shifts as there isn't a clock on the train either to tell you what the local time actually is.

The train speeds ever eastward and I think back to our start some 36 hours earlier. Having said our farewells to the family the previous evening, and explaining the trip to the niece and nephew, I was awoken at 7:50 am by a call off my Dad wishing us good luck. Karen drove me to Wolverhampton Station where we met Cousin Pete. We wished each other a tearful farewell; our forthcoming holiday in Kent the thing that would keep us together - a dreamy archetypal English cottage with sunshine, wine and good food, lazy days spent wandering the countryside in search of some elusive nirvana - a far cry from our cramped cabin, our home for the next 21 hours.

Looking back to our trip so far, we had taken three cramped British trains, a plane and one bus to get us here. It had taken us 12 hours to do the 1065 kilometres to Berlin; not bad. The only problem was travelling “cattle” class on the Virgin train down to Reading. The train was packed. Virgin doesn’t seem to have got the point about putting on more carriages to expand capacity. Quite a problem at this point in the history of our country at the moment. I’m hoping that this will be sorted out in the near future by the action of some practical politician. We live in hope.

We exchanged trains at Reading for the jaunt into Heathrow. Here, we had to endure the misery of three Youths, dressed “Chav” style. In other words, T-Shirts, baggy jeans pulled down past their waist, thick gold chains around their necks, studded earrings and baseball caps in a checked Burberry fashion. Oh dear! Is the best that Blair’s Britain can produce?

We get off the train, take the Tube to Heathrow and find our way to Terminal Four. Heathrow is always packed but our transition through departures to the Berlin plane is as smooth as we can expect. The flight is very smooth and comfortable. I compliment Cousin Pete on his choice of British Airways for the flight. I thought this would have cost a lot more than it did. Cousin Pete remarks that it’s the only way to travel. I suppose after so many plane journeys, he has confidence in those who have served him well and he has developed a tried and trusted method of travelling agencies. British Airways is clearly one of those.

We landed at Berlin Tegel airport. I’ve been to Berlin myself a number of times but I’ve always landed at the Schonenfeld in the old east, so this was something new to me a bit disorientating. We had collected our baggage and went through customs and immigration checks.

As we entered the foyer of the airport I noticed the German police looking at some photographs and they proceeded to follow a man in an anorak. Didn't look suspicious but they evidently wanted him for something.

We took the bus into the centre and found our hotel, having got off at the Zoogarten, where we will catch our Moscow train, and walk onto the Kurfurstendamn. I do like travelling by public transport in Germany – they do it so well.

The hotel in Berlin was on the Kurfurstendamn and was comfortable and had the legendary German courteous efficiency. We did get a good look around the Kurfurstendamn and found an Italian restaurant I know for dinner. Afterwards, we walked around looking for a bar and having found one, drank some beers with the fans of VB Stuttgart, who had just won the German Cup Final at the nearby Olympic Stadium. Although the beer is reasonably strong, I didn't sleep that well, missing my girlfriend, parents and family already.

The Kurfurstendamn is the German equivalent of Oxford Street in London or Fifth Avenue in New York. The shops are expensive and look expensive. It is pleasantly tree lined and has relatively few cars invading the space and generally has a spacious feel about it. Personally, I find it much more comfortable than the equivalents in England or the USA. And everybody takes their time over things – it's not as frantic as the others.

Earlier in the morning, after breakfast, I took Cousin Pete on a tour of Berlin, as amazingly, he'd never visited it before. How very slack of him!

We boarded the U-Bahn and took in the Unter dem Linden for tea, The Reichstag where we took photographs, and down the Soviet war memorial - a vast place erected by the Russians after World War II and well worth looking at, even if the guy on top looks like he's doing the "Macarena"! I always get a sense of history when I'm outside the Reichstag as I've looked at many old historical photographs with such figures as Bismarck, Hitler and the conquering Soviet soldiers on its steps. Berlin has always struck me as the crossroads of Europe for the past two hundred years.

We pass another Polish station at speed and I'm jolted back to reality. It's different travelling with another member of the family. Cousin Pete is by far the most travelled member of the family, having been most places by train, even Peru! He is one of a small band of people in the world that likes to travel everywhere by train and count the track mileage. To these people, its where you've been by train that's important. To hear him wax lyrically about some of his adventures leaves me in amazement, considering he has largely done this by himself, having no spouse and no siblings to go with him. I'm the only one of our family to do this, and I feel honoured to do so, in spite of feeling incredibly homesick. More of Cousin Pete later in the book.

Anyway, we are about to have our first Russian tea, as we are on a Russian train. Russian Tea is like normal Indian "Black" tea as we are fond of in England, but doesn't have milk added and is served hot in a glass that is held in a metal holder. Very posh it looks too! The hot water is served from a heated urn in the corner of the carriage called a "samovar".

After this, we'll have our first sleep on the train and wake up in Byelorussia. I've never deliberately slept on a train before – like the rest of train travellers, I've dozed off a few times between Birmingham and Wolverhampton – not bad considering it's only a 20 minute journey!



Chapter Two

Just Outside Minsk

I'm kind of getting used to how big this trip is - just.

Last night we made up the beds and tried to get some sleep as was a slow crawl through Poland as far as Poznan and then a race to catch up time. This involved the attendant pulling down the spare bed above our heads and handing out sheets, pillows and duvets.

The Train "went to bed" around 10 PM (CET) and we were finally awoken at 4.30 AM by the immigration check for Byelorussia. The guards were efficient and polite whilst we filled in the immigration and custom forms. They wore Army style camouflaged uniforms and boots laced up at the ankle. They looked at us carefully as we handed over our passports, but the magic of being British paid off and a smile from the guard and we were in! First time in the old Soviet Union!

After clearing the formalities, we then had the unique experience of changing the bogies of the carriages from "Standard Gauge" to "Russian Gauge". The gauge is the width between the rails. Unlike the rest of Europe which uses 4 foot 8 and a half inches, the Russian railways are run on the standard of 5 ft. This means bigger trains and much more capacity.

We watched with interest as a team of mechanics and engineers fussed about changing the bogies over. This involved shunting the coaches into a shed; unbolting the bogies; raising the carriages and some screw jacks; shunting the standard bogies out; shunting the broad gauge bogies in place; lowering the carriages and finally bolting the bogies to the carriages. We were then gathered up into a new train formation and off we set for our first experience of modern Byelorussia. Memories of the old Soviet Republic were



very much in mind especially with the Military hanging around, armed with Kalashnikov's of course.

Changing the bogies on the border

After all this, I was much too tired to take much notice of what went on. However, I finally roused myself to take a

ham slice and a cup of tea for breakfast - bit steep at \$15 I thought. Back to sleep whilst we counted down the kilometres to Minsk, the capital of Byelorussia.

If this is a precursor to the actual Trans-Siberia, it's going to be a real mental battle to cope with the trip: the confinement; the motion of the train; the isolation of being unable to communicate effectively with the other passengers. Of course, the people on the train have a purpose when they reach Moscow; some to see loved ones, others to conduct business, none of them really making their way to the other side of the world as we are. This is very much about the business of getting to Moscow and not much else. There aren't very many tourists on the train, or we haven't found them and people eye us suspiciously.

Cousin Pete of course has found his purpose on this trip. Armed with train maps, he sits there ticking off the mileage on the map. This is his nirvana, his reason to be. Me; I want to get to Vladivostok as quickly as possible and go home.

As I think of the enormity of the journey; its nine days on the train to get to Vladivostok whereas to get back we will do it in just 12 hours. The march of technology eh?

Actually, the figures are something like:

Berlin to Moscow = 1889 KMS

Moscow to Vladivostok = 11,258 KMS

Total = 11,147 KMS or 6,937 miles

At this moment, that's an awful long way!!

It's just got to be done though. All I'm thinking of is my garden full of the family and friends. That's all that's keeping me going at the moment. Next stop is Minsk - let's hope we get a good break and some photos.

Minsk

The stop at Minsk gave us about ten minutes and we didn't dare get off for fear of getting left behind! Minsk is the largest transport hub in Belarus and is the crossroads of the country sitting astride the main rail routes. It's the centre of the main industry in the area. Our stop was all too brief, allowing us a restricted view of the grand Stalin type station.

One strange incident occurred here that did nothing to assuage my uneasiness: A bright red and yellow train pulled in alongside us in the platform and through one of the windows was a man eating something with a small knife. I waved and pointed my camera at him at which point he smiled, waved back and then adopted a most threatening pose. As if he was saying “Come over here son and you’ll get this”. Before anything worse happened, the train moved off and resumed its journey. However, I can’t help feeling that we had to watch our step in these lands very carefully.



Nice chap with a knife....

Smolensk

After Minsk, we stopped briefly at Smolensk, which looked as good as other writers had said it is. We are in Russia proper now and the trackside buildings are painted in two-tone green - as if the place isn't green enough! I suspect that Cousin Pete is having a hard time with the Silver Birch trees that constantly line the track. There seem millions of them!

Smolensk gave us the opportunity to get off the train for the first time – a stop of about 20 minutes. The station was immaculate with no litter anywhere and the station smartly painted in the ubiquitous two-tone green. On the station is a massive old steam locomotive painted bright apple green. Cousin Pete explains that they are referred to as “Plinths” – there not only for decoration but also as the strategic reserve in case something bad happens and their electric locomotives don't work. It's very impressive and much bigger than our steam equivalents.

After Smolensk, we settle down to counting down the miles to Moscow. A brief interlude arises when a German family travelling in a compartment nearby engage in a blazing row between mother and daughter. The daughter stormed off pursued by Vater. Mater broods in the compartment and the boyfriend looks a little bemused. Sometime later they reappear some time later but there is much tension in the air.

The girl sits in the corridor crying somewhat comforted by her “Vater” and boyfriend. You could feel the tension in the air as the mother quietly simmered in the compartment, waiting to have another go later.

Moscow

We arrive on the outskirts of Moscow and to my amazement it seems like Berlin back in 2001 - one big building yard. There are tall cranes dotted everywhere on the skyline. It is also very very hot. Some 38° in fact.

The train creeps through the various loops that surround Moscow. We watch the rows on faceless apartment blocks as we eventually we reach the terminus around eight o'clock in the evening. We grab our luggage and leave the compartment. In the vestibule area Cousin Pete gives the attendant \$10 and a Wolverhampton Wanderers Football Club biro - should have been \$20 I thought for having to keep the pen!

We descend onto the platform following those in more of a hurry than us and just along the platform is a guy with Cousin Pete's surname written on it. This is the taxi man and he leads us out of the station to a black Ford Focus taxi, where he deposits our luggage in the boot. Outside of the station is absolute chaos. People are running everywhere, cars don't seem to have any direction to go and mingle together in a most disconcerting way. We set off heading towards the ring road. The driving here reminds me of Kingston Jamaica - everybody driving anywhere and everywhere they like, blaring horns, raised fists and masses of traffic, no nice structured driving as in England. And the Ring Road is so so busy, even this late at night. Everywhere is a building site and skyscrapers are rising into the sky, the ones that are finished are lit up in the most garish lights. It was like a scene out of Blade Runner - Los Angeles 2033.

We reach the Hotel Cosmos, a huge and impersonal palace from the Soviet era. As its night, it's lit up in the Las Vegas style neon lights, trying to emulate Time Square in New York or Piccadilly in London. It's also very full with the big lobby packed with tourists from around the world.

We check in and are directed to the sixth floor. Time for a hot, refreshing shower and a shave - what joy! The room is quite comfortable with clean beds and linen, and a television. We turn it on in the hope of finding the BBC World Service but no joy. Not even any football! The local station makes no sense at all - usually, in Western Europe, you can follow the local language, but this might as well be in Klingon, let alone only 2000 kilometres away! Oh well, we'll just have to muddle through in typical British style.

We descend to find a bar near the huge lobby and are charged an outrageous \$23 for two German wheat beers. In 2007, this is outrageously expensive. We discuss the plans for the next day and decided to have another couple of beers but this time we paid in Euros and found the exchange rate more in our favour. Feeling tired but glad to be in some sort of safety we ascend the lift and its time for bed.

Overall, I can't say that I'm impressed with Moscow so far. It's very busy, very garish, the people look at you with suspicion and you've no idea what they are saying. My spirits are low and I really felt like going home. But after a talk with Cousin Pete and a few encouraging messages from home via the mobile phone, I go to bed with a lot of reservations, waiting tomorrow with some trepidation.

Chapter Three

Day Four - The Kremlin

I get up in much better spirits. This is a big, vast country and the forthcoming distances seem foreboding and overwhelming. For some other reason, the prospect of stepping outside of the relative sanctuary of the hotel strikes fear inside me. And I don't know why. These people aren't any worse than the Arabs of Tunisia and they aren't generally trying to sell me something all of the time. No perhaps it's something else, like they all look like they are going to mug you or something. They all look like they are sleeping off a hangover and their choice of dress; black leather jackets and black trousers seem to reinforce the image of the shady side of Russia. Maybe it's the memory of the guy with the knife back in Minsk.

I receive a reply from a text from my sister who tells me the seven year old nephew Tom is enthralled with our trip and is following our progress on a big map in the loft whilst playing with his train set. This gives me a much needed boost, as I remember describing our projected trip on my atlas to him only last Friday. We must not let him down now. Fancy being inspired by a seven year old! I think for a while about how my Grandfathers must have felt whilst they were abroad in France or North Africa fighting for their kith and kin. A long way away from their loved ones and only a second away from death at most times. It must have been hellishly difficult to live with. Not knowing what's happening back home whilst you are in constant danger. You've got to admit it takes a special courage to join the Armed Forces and more so when you are called up.

We find our way to the dining area and I stand back –the place is huge! Breakfast is chaotic: people everywhere absolutely packed not a seat to be had. All of the bacon and eggs disappear within a few minutes so I settle for eggs and pineapple with coffee and juice. We find a place on a large circular table with a couple of people eating their eggs and cheese. They don't even acknowledge us as we sit down.

After this ruck, we collect our bags and put them in left luggage for the day whilst we go and change some money, purchase postcards and stamps and then time to get our Trans-Siberia tickets.

Collecting our tickets proves to be rather a protracted effort as we go to the first Intourist office on the left of reception, who promptly send us to the one on the right of reception which we can't find. Upstairs is another Intourist office where we explain as best we can what we want. We are dealt with by four different women who always leave us with the phrase “we will be with you in exactly three minutes”. And they were! Why three minutes I don't know. Maybe they've tried to emulate their German counterparts. After much to-ing and fro-ing we found our way to the office on the right of reception and there are our tickets! Oh Joy! Cousin Pete is mightily relieved! So am I.

Cousin Pete reckons they were in the system however it eventually transpired that they were in the original office which was the collections office, not the train and air tickets sales office. Work that one out then.

Having accomplished that task, a test of a westerner in a Russian system, it's off to have a gander at Cosmonauts Park over the road from the hotel. We descend the steps outside the hotel into another hot Moscow day. As we pass the entrance, there is a huge statue of French General de Gaulle! What's he doing here?! I can't remember the Russians liking him that much?

It's quite warm as we go down the roadway to a dodgy looking subway to view the old Soviet architecture amid a pleasure park. This contained a "Wild Mouse" rollercoaster - the same one as used to be at Blackpool Pleasure Beach, so beloved of my sister when she was younger.

Having perused the park for a while, Cousin Pete is anxious to get some track mileage in, not being on a train for some 12 hours now. He is one of a small band of people in this country known as "Grislers" or Track Bashers; their sole aim in life is to travel as much train track as possible and this they end up in some very obscure parts of the world.

So part of this trip is for Cousin Pete to do some "extra" mileage and so we head off to the nearest metro line which is going to take us to its junction with "Line 9" of the underground system.

After obtaining two tickets relatively easily, we board the train for central Moscow. The train is still packed and everybody looks a little bleary eyed. I can't work out whether it's because they've just got up (late?) or are still drunk from the night before as they have a stench of alcohol about them. And everybody wears these black leather jackets and looks as if they have a pistol or knife inside. Vary scary. Anyway, we end up in Moscow's much vaunted Underground system, very ornate stations but hot and very crowded, even though we aren't in the rush hour peak.

We arrive at our destination station "Alexandrovsky Sad" and look out for The Kremlin, which proves a little difficult as we go round in circles for a while.

I have always wanted to see The Kremlin. It's one of the places in history that was always on the Television News when I was a boy, along with Pad 39a at Cape Canaveral where the moonshots always took off from. Today, Vladimir Putin, the Russian President at the time, is expecting visitors from Portugal as there are Portuguese flags everywhere along with a heavy Police and secret service presence.

Next to The Kremlin is a really nice and well kept park which we walk through as it affords us some shade from the sun. The locals are a mixture of school kids and young people relaxing. We walk around to Red Square and I'm impressed. It's just like it is on the Television.



The Kremlin

Having taken some photos of Lenin's mausoleum and the surrounding buildings, we naturally gravitate to St. Basil's cathedral - this is the one with the famous onion tops. It's got so much Russian heritage associated with it even the Soviets didn't pull it down.

Inside its cool and quite dark with stalls with guides strategically placed in case you wanted some souvenir or two. We didn't as we wanted these from the prize - Vladivostok! We wandered around the rooms full of ornate and gilded icons and walls and I wondered how much this little lot cost. Priceless these days of course but why?

Having had another walk around the outer walls of the Kremlin, and nearly found ourselves on camera, we decide that a visit inside the citadel is in order, for the sum of 300 roubles or about £ 6. Bargain really. This was a real eye opener as inside The Kremlin is bigger than the outside, a sort of Tardis.

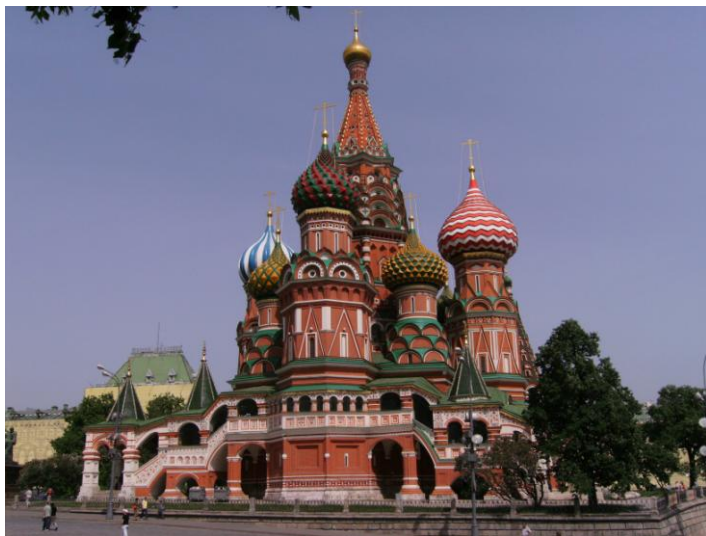
Our first sight was a rather good collection of old cannon, most of which bore the famous "N" of Napoleon, which I'm sure are booty from the Campaigns in the early nineteenth century. My good friend Dave Orton would well approve! Also, there is a new bit which looks like a West End theatre. We aren't sure what that is as the place is crawling with guards. Also, there many Japanese and Chinese tourists crammed into the photo stops made it difficult to linger long at each place.

There are six churches inside, all built by different Tsars. Ivan the Terrible built one with a massive bell tower (!) which outside had a huge bell that was broken with a large chunk taken out of it. What the significance of this eluded us at the time as our paper guide was very limited.

I found out later that this was the Tsar Bell and is the largest Bell in the world weighing some 216 tons. The slab, which cracked off after a fire in 1737 whilst the bell was in the casting pit, has never been rung.

We toured the churches in turn, welcome of the break in the searing sun to be in the cool. In each church though, we followed the same choir who always had their latest CD available for purchase! Perhaps they aren't so different from the Tunisians after all!

The tour took us a good five hours and included a stop in a very nice Italian style garden. These are kept in fine and sharp shape although I was surprised to find this in the seat of all Russian authority.



St Basils in Red Square

Having finished the tour, because the place was closing, we left for our one last look at Red Square and some more photos. We then found our way back to the Metro Track 6 back to the Hotel Cosmos. This was accomplished not without difficulty as Track 6 is marked in Orange and was hidden by another service colour. Eventually we worked it out and managed to translate back the stations as we needed them. If you do go to Moscow dear reader, take careful note of the name of the station as it's usually in Cyrillic and not English type letters. We needed "Vdrikh" which used the same track as the "Blue line".



General de Galle outside the Hotel Cosmos – why?

Having reached the hotel, I fired up the phone to receive some much need encouragement from the family and girlfriend back in the UK. We then retrieved our luggage, sat in reception and wrote our postcards and waited for our taxi to the station which would mean the start of our journey on the Trans-Siberia and a mere 6,000 mile or 9,288 kilometres!

Chapter Five

Boarding the Trans-Siberia Express

Our taxi duly turned up on time. The Russians seem to be really good at this punctuality thing. So far, every connection has worked out like clockwork, and this short trip is no exception.

Our taxi navigates the crowded ring road again and drops us to the two stations at Yaroslavsky Rail Terminal which are quite close together. Here we are met by a guide who navigates us to the right station and the right platform. He then describes the procedure we need for when the train will arrive:

"The train is Number Two and will come into Platform 4, 3 or 2, which is round the corner. The track will be shown on that board over there" - he points to a rather antiquated board with some 1970's electronic typeface on it. "Once again, here are the tracks and there is the board. You need train No 2".

"Okay! We get it!"

We had to wait about an hour for the train to show up and it was still very hot. We got ourselves some drinks and a sandwich from a café that rather resembled an English baker's that sells sandwiches and pasties and then we waited by the indicator board. Whilst there, waiting amongst other travellers waiting for their connections, we were entertained by some scaffolders who were dismantling some rickety looking rig, just where some passengers were due to board a train. Also, they seemed oblivious to two colleagues stranded on the flat roof.

Eventually, our train "Poccha" (or "Rossiya" in English) reversed in and we strode up the platform to find our coach and home for the next nine days. It will be hauled by a large electric locomotive and the coaches look very smart, painted blue and red as they were on the Berlin-Moscow leg. We were showed into our cabin, rather more spacious than the Berlin train, and stowed our bags. The cabin is again a type of crushed velvet but had gaudy curtains and a swag of tasselled red and white silk like material adorning the window. The cabin as a brownish red this time as opposed to light green as before – a sign this is Russia's most prestigious train and one they are most proud of. Maybe something we have forgotten in Britain?

I got out my camera and started to take some photos and then some martial music started playing over the tannoy and we were off! Only a mere 6,000 miles to go! I took a video clip of the departure whilst we watched Moscow retreat into the distance, the sun disappearing somewhere over Smolensk. After an hour, we found a couple of beers that we liked - American Miller of all things but brewed in Moscow - and we settled down to watch the fading light and talk over family reminiscences. And then, our first stop which we thought was Gorky but in actual fact is Vladimir! Some 210 kilometres done already!

I descended off the train and got talking to Professor Yevgeny Mogilevkin of the Vladivostok Institute of Social Studies. We chatted about academic life and how the toilet system worked on the train - no chemical toilet here, just straight onto the track - so the toilets are locked whilst we are in or approaching a station. Planning your toilet trips is a must as there is no where to go for twenty or so minutes whilst the train is in the station. Cousin Pete thinks these will be chemical toilets in the near future to comply with International standards.

After returning to our cabin, I dropped off to sleep fairly easily, the first test of sleeping on someone's sofa whilst travelling at around 70 - 80 mph!



Waiting for the train

Chapter Six

Day Five - Crossing into Asia

I awoke around 9.30 feeling much refreshed. I was alone in the cabin and the first order of business was to sort out the dirty clothes. I usually have a system whereby the clothes are placed in a black bin bag as they are used, thus saving much packing time later on in the trip. A little more difficult to achieve in the confinement of the railway cabin but none the less I managed to establish a similar system. Hopeful, this would keep the odour of stinking clothes down as well!

Next, I went to get my first wash in the carriage compartment. This was the first time I had suffered a "sink-wash" since yachting in The English Channel five years previous in a very rough force 7 gale! And the experience wasn't much different apart from the absence of sea sickness.

I found Cousin Pete enjoying breakfast so I joined him for eggs and coffee. The coffee had a sludge element to it, no doubt unfiltered and so retained a rather unrefined taste to it. Also, our problems with the language are persisting but we are persevering with our Collins phrasebook. The Russians are slowly getting used to us, and we to them.

Next stop is "Krov" some 911 kilometres outwards. We get out and watch the engines being changed. These are very large locomotives - must be twice the size of ours at least. They stand a good twenty feet off the ground but as we are near the trackbed rather than a platform, they seem more imposing.

Krov smells like Bilston did 30 years ago when the steelworks were still manufacturing. These stops are pretty much the highlight of the day, apart from eating and washing.

Whilst we wait at Krov, the Chinese run Moscow-Beijing express (the Trans-Manchuria) follows us into the station and comes to rest in the platform opposite us. Painted dark green, they are the same design of carriage as ours; where they are manufactured I don't know but it does seem an interested example of Russo-Chinese co-operation. Also of interest is the perceived standoff between the Blue coated Russian attendants who eye warily the opposing Chinese attendants, dressed in a military style uniform. Amongst this scene of Cold War like tension, the locals are running around trying to sell fruit, huge soft toys and any amount of old tat! This scene is to be repeated a number of times down the line.

We reboard the train and we're off again. By this time, only two days into the actual trip, Cousin Pete is getting fed up with the proliferation of Silver Birch Trees as the space between villages is filled with little else. Russian must have as much timber as Brazil - I'll have to ask my mate Greenpeace Gav when I return.

And so to lunch which was a rather nice Chicken noodle soup with black bread, which retained its vinegary taste, and tea with milk! How English is that! Over lunch we discuss the trip as tonight we'll be crossing over into Asia, which will be a new continent for both me and Cousin Pete.

After lunch, we cross the Volga and stop at Perm to restock the train. As Perm is near the Ural Mountains the temperature has dropped quite a bit. I needed my sweatshirt for the first time when we got onto the platform. Also, I got a dose of "train-leg"

as when I stepped off the train, my legs went really wobbly and I retained the swaying motion of the train! Not a good sign! Oddly, there are no locals selling on the platform here - the station has all small shops instead. Obviously, all of Perm's one million inhabitants have some form of occupation that keeps them away from the station or they are occupied with something more rewarding. I found out later that Perm was the centre of Russian tank production during World War II.

We've made the acquaintance of a middle-aged German couple from Nurnberg who are travelling in the cabin three down. They are travelling to Beijing the easy way - a guided tour run on typical German practise, with two nights in Ulaan Baator in Mongolia, and four in Beijing itself. They looked at us in amazement when we said that we were doing the whole trip in 7 nights!

Asia

Having digested a really good pork dinner, we settled down to a couple of Russian brewed Millers in the cabin. As the sunset dwindled into darkness, we flashed past the obelisk that marks the division between Europe and Asia. Not much to look at and gone in the blink of an eye. So, we are now officially in Asia - cause for a celebration I think!

I've never been in Asia before so I'm quite pleased that I have made it, having read about and poured over maps for so long. To actually be here is quite a thrill.

Yekaterinburg

Our next stop was Yekaterinburg, the first city in the Urals. So far, these mountains have been nothing more than a series of low hills and small lakes which has been rather disappointing as we were expecting something more spectacular. However, we did pass some mountain streams and some "young" river systems that reminded me of the Severn Valley.

Yekaterinburg was called "Sverdlovsk" in Soviet times and is mainly involved in the metals industries. It's a main radial point on the railway, serving all parts of the Ural region. Gunther described it as the "Pittsburgh of the Urals" and it certainly smelled that way. In the Cold War, this city was off limits to westerners so it's relatively unknown in the West, apart from the fact that Boris Yeltsin was from around here. This place has a note of notoriety about it too as it was the place where the Bolsheviks murdered the last Tsar and his family in 1918.

Once at Yekaterinburg, we descended once more onto the platform and experienced again "train-leg". It was much colder here, probably as we were much higher than we had been in Europe. . We took a quick look at the city which seemed most interesting but not enough time to do more than look out of the station. Twenty minutes later we were due to leave.

On the platform the German duo were there and two guys from the Russian Army, one of them claiming to be a Captain, but looking rather more like a young lieutenant. We talked with them and having taken some group photos and discussed Blair and Bush, it was time to board the train again and we were off. You don't get much chance on the platforms for chatter.

We set up the cabin for sleep by putting our blankets out, getting our pillows plumped up and nodded off but were awoken a few times during the night by the severe rolling of the train as the driver evidently wanted to get a crack on! In fact the train was going so fast it felt as if it was going to leave the track! I can't imagine what it must have been like at the tail of the train where the sway must have been more pronounced.



Our friend Mikhail and his party

Chapter Seven

Day Six - Restaurant Rituals

I awoke early today as the sun was shining brightly. Also, we are expected at Tyumen at 08.06 and as you settle into the routine of this train journey, the stations are big markers in the daily routine as they break up the monotonous view of Silver Birch, dachas and villages and the odd freight yard. Indeed, there is so much Silver Birch Cousin Pete is most fed up! However, as we progress through Siberia, the trees are receding and are replaced by a more open plain.

Tyumen was a quick stop to top up on supplies and water; every stop, there are railway workers who connect each carriage to hose pipes and fill the toilet tanks with fresh water. It's just like fuelling some sort of mythical beast whose thirst much be quenched at each opportunity.

Off we go again and I joined Cousin Pete and the large German party in the restaurant for coffee and today, appropriately, large German Sausages.

We gradually start to get on with the catering staff, especially as I've started to use the phrase book a bit more and are more adventurous with basic phrases such as ""spa-si-ba" (thank you). Also, we are trying to learn a new Russian word each day, and the large Russian waitress is responding..... slowly. Anyway, the food is quite tasty even if it is prepared by the chef who must have been descended from a Tartar, his huge belly and handlebar moustache certainly lend credence to our theory. His demeanour

appears more akin to tackling Bison than the delicacies of chopping Parsley for our evening garnishes. Parsley is in most meals whatever appears on the menu, but I've not tasted it in the coffee. - Yet.



The train's chef takes a breather from the parsley

The waitress is a large lady with blonde hair and kindly eyes. She is smartly dressed in the blue uniform that adorns the train staff. Generally, they are quite relaxed and laid back, except when the Germans appear in force. These are quite a group and I always greet them with "guten morgen" or "guten abend" to get them going and force them to respond. This seems to upset the strict tour guide who keeps a tight rein on his charges - a little too strict for our German middle aged schoolteachers, who appear to have

taken something from the British school of resistance and are rebelling against the rigid nature of the tours timetable, namely:

- 0730 hrs - Breakfast
- 200 hrs - lunch
- 1900 hrs - dinner

Ha! Ha! Perhaps the Germans don't deserve the reputation we English like to label them with, but then again, when they are in the restaurant, they do hog the resources and the Russians won't deal with us until they are out of the way. Also, the younger Germans seem to hog the toilet resources - today they managed an hour between them! This alarmed the Russian Stewardess so much, they forced the door! As it happened, it was a case of too much vodka and they were most unwell from a session of drinking overnight!

Whilst waiting for the bathroom, we noticed some track maintenance going on. Large parts of the track are continuously welded and only the points make the train sway wildly. The track is extremely well maintained and should be as the railway is the backbone of the country. The freight traffic alone is considerable with the triple headed coal trains having a length of up to half a mile or so. And there are a lot of them.

As we proceed to our next destination, we are now in an area where there are fewer trees and more swamps and habitation is fewer and further between. However, there is considerable money going into this country most of it quite well spent. And Russia has a lot of natural resources as we have witnessed on the track, endless coal, and oil and wood trains flowing west.

We also greeted our Russian Army friends - Mikhail and his girlfriend; his mate who reminded me of Mutley and another girl, presumably Mutley's spouse. They were loaded with beer for the afternoon so I doubted whether we would see them later! The Russians so enjoy their beer and the military was no exception.

Earlier, we had enjoined ourselves to the train staff by assisting in rolling up napkins whilst we enjoyed tea. The bossman of the restaurant had sold us a "Poccha" train badge which we proudly showed to the Germans and made out that we had joined the crew! This seemed to go down rather well with the Germans.

At lunch, Cousin Pete submitted to the inevitable and ordered "the Borsch". Yuk. A mixture of beetroot and cabbage (yuk, yuk) with left over's such as chicken stock thrown in as well. To top it all, it had some floating double cream swirling menacingly on the surface. It rather reminded me of something concocted for Dr. Who by the special effects department - akin to a primordial soup where Daleks come from.

I settled for "kuritza" which is chicken. This reminded me of the scene from 2010 when John Lithgow is crossing to the Discovery spacecraft and his Russian cosmonaut companion is teaching him how to say the word, as Lithgow is petrified of spacewalking and needs to focus on something other than spacewalking.. And who wouldn't be - with raging Io beneath them! My kuritza was good, despite the fact it had been flattened in the freezer and had a rather two-dimensional aspect to it.

Novosibirsk

It's getting much colder now as the next stop, Novosibirsk, proved as we needed coats and hats. Here we are a third of the

way through this leg and about half way in our overall journey from Berlin to Vladivostok. Four more days on the train to go. We've regained the Silver Birch trees but not lost the freight trains who rumble back and forth incessantly.

We arrive at Novobirisk in rather a state of confusion. You see, all 16 Germans went for dinner at 5:00 PM. Why? It's most unlike the Germans to be early. It transpired that we hadn't been keeping up with the timezone shifts. So when the Germans went for dinner it was really 8:00 PM and when we rocked up an hour later the chef was nearly all packed up! We should have been wise to it as it was getting dark a lot earlier. Bit of a clue there as we were ostensibly following the same latitude, which we worked out over a dinner of Pork (me) and Kuritza (Pete).

Over dinner we had quite a chat about working in Britain over the past thirty years. Both of us have experienced unemployment at some stage in our working lives, thanks to a combination of Governments under Mrs Thatcher or unscrupulous bosses who think of the money, not the people working for them. This conversation is so intensive we nearly missed our next stop! Can't miss our highlights can we?

On the platform we once again we ran into Yevgeny who put us right about the timezones and after this chat we decided that two clocks were required; one for Moscow time for the train and one for local time for the timezones - and the restaurant! Another thing was the fact that today we only had 21 hours in it! How weird is that?!

Overnight we shifted another timezone one of the 12 that Russia spans. Time for a beer and another blanket whilst we contemplate that. It's still quite cold, so cold in fact that I wake up in the night and Cousin Pete has to lend me a Benny hat to stop me from freezing my head! And there is no train heating on! Brrh!

Cousin Pete takes on The Borsch!



Chapter Eight

Day Seven - Krasnoyarsk - Halfway and The General

After a cold night, I awoke to bright sunshine and peered out of the cabin window which revealed some different scenery for once! Almost Alpine in fact! The Silver Birch was still in abundance though – still loads of it. Having sorted out ablutions, I join Cousin Pete for breakfast, the usual eggs, orange juice and coffee. I know we have this timezone shifting sorted now as he actually beat the Germans to the restaurant car!

Having sat for quite a while in the restaurant, we came back to the cabin and had a long chat with Frau Smidt - the elderly teacher and got around to comparing visas. They are going on to Beijing via Mongolia as you will recollect and so they needed three visas, one each for Russia, Mongolia and China. The Visa are highly coloured and embossed into your passport and take up a whole page! You don't need many trips here to require a new passport and £ 74 a go, it's not cheap anymore. Whilst we are on about expenses, the visas cost some £60 and we needed two. One for Byelorussia and one for Russia proper.

The Germans seem to have got a good deal being in a party as for their £ 2000, they have hotel stops in Irkutsk, Ulaan Baator and Beijing, plus the flights back. And accompanied by a guide! However, I think we have done better with our first class travel everywhere! Cousin Pete and Yvonne the travel agent have done a good job!

As we approach Krasnoyarsk, I notice that it must be really cold for the Russians too as the train heating has finally come on. What a country! 40° in Moscow and hovering around freezing half way across to the East! Krasnoyarsk is on the Yenisei River and historically has been an important junction for the railway.

There are quite a few parties on board now, as we seem to have been joined by the French as well. We are getting along pretty well with the Germans and I'll be sad to see them leave the train at Irkutsk.

Well Krasnoyarsk, was a good stop for a variety of reasons, not least because we acquired the company of a 3-star General - a real one - as a travelling companion, complete with wife and flowers. He was given quite a send off on the platform by small family party and presumably some colleagues. He occupied one of the vacant cabins in our coach and was accompanied by an aide-de-camp. In reality, this was a drinking partner, as we found out later.

His wife was suitably “buffoned” and expensively dressed in an ostentatious black dress lined in gold. She wore black stiletto shoes and carried armfuls of flowers as well as her luggage – of which there were lots.

The General was of course bedecked in rows of medals and a smart green uniform lined in red, as was his aide. Afterwards, they changed into something more casual, but you couldn't mistake the man as you could sense his presence. He was a big man with a shaven head and wide shoulders and a big smile. His features were more eastern than pure Russian, as you'd expect if he was based out here in Siberia.

Krasnoyarsk is on the Yenisei River and has lots of industry. We got off onto the platform and the air was cold; cold like you get in high mountainous places - you could almost smell the snow. What wind there was bit into your face like a razor.

The General has caused quite consternation with our attendant, Mariana, as she has had to make up the cabin with fresh linen for him and clean it out. This has added to her hassles as the German loads have had a skinful of vodka last night and consequently have another bad hangover necessitating long periods in the toilet, much to Mariana's disgust. She is quite expressive, even though we can barely converse in either Russian or English. Here facial expressions speak a thousand words.

Lunch was also a chaotic affair as The General and his party hogged our usual table (jolly bad form old chap) for two hours so we had to share with a French couple in waiting for the 16 Germans to finish up until we could be accommodated. It transpired that "le homme" was "un docteur" and la femme another retired teacher!). Our portly waitress was well run off her feet! We eventually sat down, having endured a great deal of smoke and steam from the kitchen, Cheffie also under pressure to produce something extra spicy with just more parsley as ingredients. We explained "le systeme" to the French. The system being: The Russian school party first, then the Germans, us and finally, another large party of French. I hope, dear reader, you are keeping up with the compliment of our fellow travellers?

Having so many nationalities on board is stretching my limited linguistic skills to the absolute maximum as I have to keep swapping around between four languages, and not a Spaniard in sight! This would have been more useful to me as I could have brushed up on my Spanish classes I attend on a Wednesday

evening. Good job there were no Serbians or Croatians either as I had real difficulty with anything remotely Slavic – as my friend Salty knows all about having shared a holiday in Croatia many moons ago before the Bosnian war. I am amazed at how much French I have been able to use though considering the last time I used it was in Dunkerque in 2002!

I was struck to by the differences here between our Western attitudes to the environment and our Russian counterparts. I had some batteries to dispose of from my digital camera and whilst looking out of the carriage window, I swapped them out and held them in my hand for a while. Mariana was passing and we moved off to the restaurant car for some tea with her. She took the batteries from me and promptly threw them on the track! Apparently, everything is thrown on the track. I wasn't impressed. I looked at Cousin Pete who shrugged his shoulders as if to say "this is Russia!" Discussing it later, we wondered with the industry in Russia, India and China going up, how much damage this is doing to the planet. You couldn't see any evidence of it whilst we were on the train but from the plane home, vast tracts of land looked like they were being ripped up for the sake of a roubles more. Also, the pollution in Moscow and the other towns was acrid and choking.

Chapter Nine

Day 8 - Irkutsk - The Big Sleep

We had the alarm clock set for 6 am so we could say "auf weidersehn" to the Germans - both the 16 elders and the "Toilet Hoggers" which we duly did. It was raining in Irkutsk, still quite cold but not enough to form snow. Having said our farewells to the Germans, this didn't leave us much time on the platform, especially as The General was also getting off here. This caused us an odd a problem as "The General" and his entourage required the assistance of us Westerners. You see, The General had accumulated so many bouquets his wife was really struggling with them, and she couldn't carry her case. So in we stepped to her aid, much to The General's approval. His aide looked most relieved as he had most of the rest of the luggage!



Irkutsk Station

Having done all this, I'm afraid it was all downhill from this point on for this day as I went back to sleep and woke up some five and half hours later at 1:15 PM, missing Lake Baikal, a feature of the trip and, according to Cousin Pete, the snow. However, he added that he didn't see too much else as the weather was so bad and the snow obscured the view in places. Looking out of the window, he was right. Condensation obscured the view outside the rain was driving at us, accentuated by the speed of the train of course.

Our next stop was Ulan Ude, where the French couple - our friends in the luncheon queue you'll remember - got off. It looks most likely that they'll have a miserable few days as the scenery and weather are similar to a wet bank holiday in Wales.

There is a lot more industry in this area, and overall, the scenery is a lot more interesting as the track twists and turns around the hills and river valleys. There is of course, plenty of wood to see, and the Silver Birch hasn't left us. The villages or dachas we pass are constructed of wooden single storey huts. It doesn't look squalid, but the dacha generally lack tarmac roads and have a scruffy appearance about them, you know, everything thrown around everywhere, no neatness anywhere. However, they all seem to have their own quaint rural charm and certainly don't lack modern equipment such as satellite dishes, of which there are many and they are quite large by British practise. Whether this extends to other "white" goods on the inside is difficult to tell. There aren't many piles of them around outside.



Having finished "brunch" (in my case) the train heating comes on and we settle down to the afternoon routine of writing this journal, bit of reading - a biography of Stalin - some tea of course with chocolate marshmallows such as you had a school (a Cousin Pete treat!) and if the Silver Birch and weather permits it, a look at the scenery.

Our next stop is Chita. The scenery has changed somewhat here as we are now following the Ingoda River valley and the track is winding up the valley side. The weather is still foul, too wet to get off at Chita, but an interesting stop none the less as the city has a famous Jewish synagogue granted by the Tsar in 1836 and allowed to live there. It's also unusual in that it has a grid type system as used by American cities for its layout. It was a closed

city under the Soviet system and housed Japanese Prisoners of war in World War II.

Along this part of the railway, we've seen the technological dichotomy of farmers on horseback and an Air Base with lots of modern MiG's sheeted up against the weather along the runway. What a country of contrasts this Russia is!

The valleys are wide and punctuated by copses on interminable Silver Birch; have you got the impression that we're a bit fed up with that type of tree now? The hill tops have some Fir (hurrah for biodiversity!) and the roads leading around them are mere mud tracks, the population scarce. The track though is looking very well maintained, with new Continuous Welded Track, new concrete sleepers , new pantograph posts that support the electric cable and occasionally, locomotive and carriage works. And there is always, always, always the continuous rolling of the long freight trains in the opposite direction. It's quite a joke between us that every time we want to take an interesting photo, there's a Freight train in the way! Ha! Foiled again as we try and take another photo for the collection.



And that was the end of that day. Another beer, a talk with Cousin Pete after dinner and try to get some sleep as best you can - not easy as the driver has the hammer down and the train rolls around and sways everytime it's going over the points. And it's getting the feel very much of "another night on the sofa" - all that training on the floors of the Halls of Residence at University are paying off now, but I don't remember one of our parties lasting a week!



The train takes a bend

Chapter Ten

Day 9 - Our Friends the Russians

As you've probably guessed by now, the Journal entries are getting shorter, due in part to less activity on the train. Our friends, the Germans and the French are gone and are replaced largely by Russians. And the scenery is demanding more attention as it much more interesting at this time. There are plenty of stops too; fourteen today out of seventy-two on the whole trip, so quite a proportion and the journey has become more stop-start.

The wide flood plains are well behind us now and the rivers are getting "younger". The closer the river it is to its source, the more it cuts into the rock, and thus you get more impact to your eye; more gorges and steeper valleys. It's all a question of energy balancing as we were told in Geomorphology lectures back at University. The hills are of course still covered in the ubiquitous Silver Birch and something different - Firs, which makes a nice change.

Last night was a bad night for sleep. The timezones caught up and I didn't drop off until past 4 am local time, but that would be about 10 PM GMT back home in Blighty. The train really bucks about in these tight curves and points. In truth, the railway here has some real rough parts and only when you get a decent stretch of Continuous Welded Track do you get the chance to be gently rocked to sleep. It was also warmer last night with Cousin Pete snoring his head off. Only thing left was to reach for the portable CD player and listen to Marillion's "Clutching at Straws", and album from the 1980's, before finally dropping off into slumber.

This album is not necessarily soporific, but I play it a lot when I'm far away from home as Fish's lyric's about Milwaukee and Jack Kerouac reflect this mood so well. It's a sort of comfort for me when I'm a long way from home.

We had stopped twice in the night for about 20 minutes each. Each time these stops are punctuated by train checks and this is often accompanied by the exhaust of air brakes and the clink-clang of the wheel-tappers listening for wheel defects and hot axle boxes, vital on a trip of this length. In the UK, we've replaced all this type of equipment with Ultra Sonic or X-Ray technology - I'm not sure which - but the Russians still prefer to rely on that precision instrument - the human ear, coupled with skill and experience. Also, there is usually the de-dum de-dum of a large freight train creeping into the sidings of the station or passing on the opposite track through the station. Last night, there was a particularly long container one full of stuff from South Korea, presumably shipped to a Russian port as I can't imagine North Korea having so much English advertising written on the sides of the containers.

When I wake up I find Cousin Pete in his usual position by the window in the corridor. He finds the scenery much more enthralling as the train passes over girder bridges and through gorges. He is more patient than I am and absorbs the scenery as a Blue Whale would sift the water for plankton.

The daily ritual of washing in cold water, pack up the bedding, a few stretching exercises and then breakfast has been punctuated this morning by our presentation of some small gifts to our attendants, Mariana and Tanya. A good laugh is Mariana. She reminds me much of Mrs. Slocombe of "Are you being Served" a BBC sitcom of the 1970's and she is really expressive facially. You



don't need to know Russian to know she is happy or flustered. She has a way of conveying her disgust or delight by her facial expressions.

Mariana and her mate

This part of the journey passes many timber yards, which must be the main industry in this area. The coal and oil industry have largely disappeared now. Railway works still punctuate the line as you would expect. The part we are travelling through at present reminds me so much of lowland Scotland, the bit by Lockerbie. Low rolling hills covered by grass with a few copses of trees and delightful streams everywhere. It made me think about the British Scenery and how it arrived, being something of an ex-Geographer. Perhaps the diversity of the British Scenery can be put down to the fact that maybe it was used a palette by Slartibartfast of the Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy fame. Do you get the idea? Try it out on a small scale before you do the rest of the planet? He won an award for Norway you know? Or maybe Britain was all his best bits put together for an exhibition or sales pitch or something similar? A Universal catalogue for those who wanted their own specially designed planet? I digress!

Back to the train and the hills now remind me of those painted in Chinese paintings and pottery; you'd expect this as we are quite close to the Chinese border, which reminds me, at Chita last night, there was some gauge changing equipment, similar to the ones at Brest in Byelorussia, so that must have been the start of the Trans-Manchuria.

Well, the 7,000 kilometre marker was passed and missed but at nearly 6.30 PM local time, we're drawing near to the last full day on the train and we have been joined by some uniformed staff we think are connected with the railway authorities as they are in light-blue uniforms. We are still in the gorge and still heading east. When we reach Khabarovsk, we should turn South and hugging the Chinese border, beginning our 800 Kilometre run into Vladivostok.

Making friends with the Russian Military

An extraordinary episode happened last night. At the last stop, Mikhail, our Russian Army "Kaptain" mate, bought us some local cheese which we reciprocated with some souvenirs of England, such as pens and cards. This went down very well. Later, in the restaurant car, we encountered Vladimir, a young "Kaptain" of the Russian Navy, who promptly bought us some beer. Being English, we returned the round and of course, this carried on until we had consumed some four tins and felt quite drunk and Vladimir had descended into some drivel in Russian - his English was quite good up to beer number three, but I expect he had had more than that before we arrived. We had quite a few toasts to M. Putin - the Russians like toasting - and the Russian Navy, not forgetting our own Royal Navy of course!

At the start of the session, we had quite a good discussion on the best Russian beer – the tins from St. Petersburg were the best

according to Vladimir and we agreed, having tried most of them.



Our friends on the trip: The Russians are to my left, the German lads are either side of Cousin Pete.

Stumbling back to our cabin, we dropped immediately to sleep, but we still had the cheese to eat in the morning!

Chapter Eleven

Day 10 - Khabarovsk and more drunken Russians

Another uncomfortable night's sleep thanks to the points and aggressive driving of the train. However, we did manage a six hours in the end. This morning its really raining hard and we wake up in the middle of a thunderstorm. Lightning was flashing everywhere along with the muffled sound of thunder in the distance. The rain poured down outside.

The cabin smells like something out of Das Boote; as if we've been on patrol in the North Atlantic in some submarine for a few months. I don't know what it must have smelt like after three months; imagine that if your dare! No proper shower, no hot water and the smell of 40 odd sweaty bodies locked up in a steel cabin. You must have something very special to do that. We were just on a train for 8 days and it was getting bad, so fumigation of the cabin was priority number one today. We sought out our towels and hung them on the rail in the carriage for air for a while, and opened the windows as much as we could. We also packed up our dirty clothes into some plastic bags as much as we could, and put these in our luggage.

We are also crossing our last timezone and should be in the last and most easterly province of Russia and the furthest east I'll have ever been. Just 16 stops to go before we reach Vladivostok. The scenery has changed too; wide open plains with thankfully few trees and big wide rivers. A wonderful vista to look at for a change.

Cousin Pete

Cousin Pete is amazing really. He is older than I am and has spent a lifetime travelling the world – by train.

Given his job as a plasma cutter in Bilston, West Midlands, he's not married and his only real love is track mileage. Being on this trip is a real privilege as he never ever complained about me being a moaning old so and so; he looked after me in my darkest moments and has shared what we all want from travel really - to experience life as seen through the others in this world.

When we reach Vladivostok he will have nearly circumnavigated the world - by train. From Vancouver on the western shores of Canada to Halifax, through Ireland and Europe to the eastern shores of Russia. All by train. No planes, just trains. Just comprehend that for a moment; forget your Michael Palin's and Bill Bryson's, an ordinary steel worker travelling around the world by train and paid for out of his own pocket. Amazing isn't it?

Cousin Pete's working environment isn't much different from the towns we've passed through on this trip – however in the last thirty years, heavy industry has largely disappeared from the West Midlands. No blast furnaces or large foundries producing the goods that England once relied upon and exported all over the world. Economics have shifted this to this side of the world, China especially. In 2007, Bilston is a ghost of its former self, factories replaced by brilliantly painted warehouses of clothes or decorating products. No longer the “workshop of the world”, more like the warehouse of Western Europe, Bilston is symptomatic of modern accounting and commerce lost in a capitalist dream. How sad.

We ruminated on this state of affairs a lot on the train. Pete's environment is largely still the world of steel and big machines, dirt and grime, cold and damp. However, they do make impressive things like storage tanks for the dry parts of the world easing the drought in some far off African country.

Cousin Pete is actually my Mom's Cousin and we get to see him usually once per year on Christmas Day. Usually he's off to some part of Europe the rest of the festive holiday until New Year. Our Christmas Days' usually have some time set aside to go through his photographs from his adventures through the year. It's a bit like an old "Magic Lantern" show of years gone by – a relative who has been to a strange and dark Continent and comes back with tales of survival, only the survival bit is dealing with a global community in the early twenty-first century.

The guy is so affable he gets along with absolutely everybody from the elder Germans to the drunken Russian Captain. His foreign languages are absolutely minimal, but somehow he gets his point over - even in Russian!

Not bad considering during the train he admitted that he's not the best with words, but give him a railway timetable and a map and he'll get you anywhere in the world! I was grateful of this aptitude when we nearly got lost on the Moscow Underground!

It's been good for me to share this trip with this special member of our family.

Last Evening on the train

8104 - 8203 - we're counting down the kilometres. It's still raining even though it's now well into the afternoon. I've managed one

book on this trip and Joseph Stalin is going ever so slowly. I look out of the window and see very little due to the rain - I hope it stops before we get to our destination.

Our next major stop is Khabarovsk which will be the signal for our turn south along the Chinese border which will be interesting if we can make it out. I'll be glad to get to the hotel and a hot shower and most of all, a hot shave!

The last evening drew to a close with yet another drinking session, this time with a businessman called Alexandreyev. He was dressed in a 1970's style shirt open to the first few buttons, and lots of designer gold and a big fake watch with black trousers and a big leather belt with "D & K" on it. He imported spare parts for Japanese cars, of which there are increasingly many to be seen. The Russians complained endlessly about it! He was based in Tokyo and bought over about 40 containers at a time, so it was quite a business he was running! He seemed to spend a lot of time between the two countries and his English wasn't bad. He was kind enough to buy us a drink - or two - but bored us to tears about US President G W Bush putting some missiles in Poland; bit like the Cuban missile crisis I suppose. He wanted us to "have a word" - as if we could tell George W what to do! Get real man! He had a point and most of the Russians we spoke to were equally upset about this. Old Vladimir Putin was speaking about it today apparently which we didn't know about this and shows how out of touch we had become! Could have been WWII and we might have been stuck with the enemy and interned in a Gulag. I suppose though with our heavy Black Country accents we could have passed for Rumanians! "Don't tell them your name Petel!"

Anyway, “Alexandreyev” was grabbed by his mates and marched off to the restaurant car and we breathed a sigh of relief as he was getting more aggressive with each tin and we were getting quite nervous as he wouldn't leave, despite us doing things like yawning a lot and looking bored. Like most drunken Russians, he was getting quite unintelligible as well, even in his own language I suspect! We locked the door for the only time after this as we suspected he would crash in on us and we turned in - with one ear on the corridor in case he came back....



A stop near the end of the journey

Chapter Twelve

Day 11 - Vladivostok

The last uncomfortable night on the train. You know, you really do yearn for a bed and some proper sheets after a week without them. And the "sofa" is quite uncomfortable after all this time. The sheets and blanket get all disorganised and confused and your feet get wrapped up like being mummified - and then you get thrown off the couch as the train swings about whilst crossing the points. The Russians use the "buckeye" systems of interlinking their coaches, based on the US system and this system means that any abruptness in the locomotive gets transmitted by down the train, bit like a Newton's Cradle and much the same principle. The European system is much better and comfortable. Perhaps we know trains better?

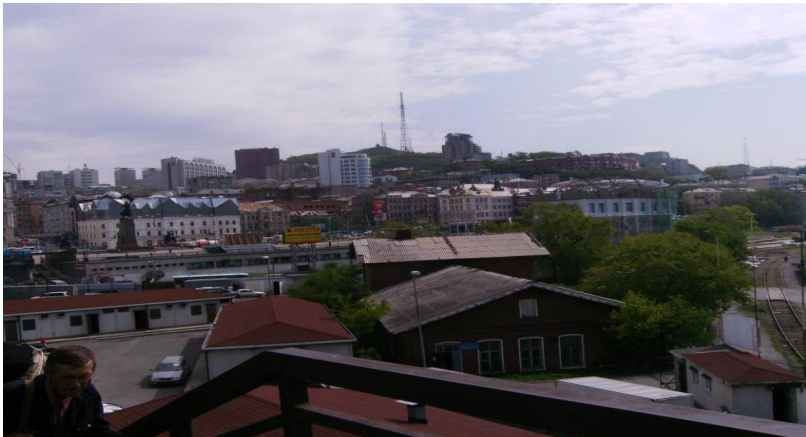
The train now enters the outskirts of Vladivostok and we can see the Golden Horn Bay to our right as the train slides down the peninsula. Vladivostok looks cold and foreboding. The buildings have an angular appearance to them and of steel and mainly concrete. We wind our way carefully into the terminus and the train halts for the last time. Wow! We've done it!

Anyway, we pack up our bags and things, load the dirty washing into the holdall, put on our coats and we're ready for the entrance into Vladivostok. The rain is pouring down and the cabin is misty with condensation. Not much time to say goodbye to Mariana and Tatiana as we run into the platform at Kilometre post 9288. The taxi driver picks us up and drives us through the grey mist to

the nearby Hotel Gavan where a hot shower and shave awaited us!

The Hotel Gavan was an oasis in a concrete jungle. Built amongst some old Navy apartments near the container port so a good mile out of the centre and on a small peninsular. We recognised the apartments as having something to do with the navy as they had some large anchors on the sides built in blue brick.

The hotel itself was very clean and smart with that eastern European feel of a lot of veneered wood used in the lobby and the bar. The reception staff were very efficient and polite. We signed in and were given old style steel keys and told to use the lift to the fifth floor which afforded us a limited view over the bay.



Shower, shave and a really nice breakfast taken and much enjoyed we're off to look at the grim delights of Vladivostok, not that it looks like it has much to offer, but The Russian Pacific Fleet with its dark grey warships looks interesting as does the busy harbour.

It is filled with all kinds of vessels moored stern on – a Russian thing apparently. Small boats ply between the ships and the around the bay.

Our tour around Vladivostok was a real eye opener. The city is so busy. Traffic and pollution everywhere choking the streets with vehicles and fumes. We caught a dirty number 59 bus into the train station in the rain and made our way back to the platform and the end of the line marker - 9288. We didn't have time to get this important photograph - and evidence that we had done the trip - on the way down as the taxi driver made us rush somewhat.

We returned back to the station and looked at the wet souls waiting around the station - military waiting to board the trains for their next assignment or going home; taxi drivers waiting for a fare; street sellers waiting for the elusive passer-by; station officials going about their business. We espied a monument to Lenin over the road and risked life and limbs crossing the main road to get to see it. We took some photos and decided that as it was still pouring, we would better find a cafe and have a cup of tea.



Monument marking the end of the line

After this, we walked across the main square to find the Submarine museum and see some more monuments. All the time, the incessant traffic rumbled on, choking the air. Indeed the air was positively acrid. If so called global warming and pollution in general is to be tackled, its places such as Vladivostok that needs to smarten up their act. It's got to be affecting the health of the locals. However, with so much vodka being consumed, the locals hardly notice.

The Submarine Museum was easy enough to find as it was this big grey thing on a plinth by the harbour - an old converted boat of the Soviet Navy. Walking past four Krivak class Frigates trying

to look uninterested was difficult - some Cold War habits linger on - especially as they are smartly painted and are looking to ready themselves for sea. There is a lot of activity on board, but not much in the way of engine activity, so maybe they aren't planning a trip just yet.

The Submarine Museum was very good. It's located in a converted diesel-electric boat, as submarines are called. The aft half, where the engines once were, housed the museum itself, whilst the forward section retained its control room and torpedo tubes. In the museum part, there were trinkets and souvenirs that had been collected by the service since the war including uniforms of high-ranking officers and trophies of various sizes. Interestingly, there was a chart of the patrol route of a ballistic missile submarine which of course was off the western seaboard of the United States. What price would have been paid for such information by the secret services during the Cold War? Imagines of Harry Palmer in Berlin flashed through my mind more than once along with spies being interrogated by the opposition. How exciting was this place?

When leaving the museum, we were accosted by a badge seller and I bought some of Vladivostok for the junior members of the family swapping my Charles Wells Bombadier English Ale badge given to me by the landlord of The Duke of Cambridge in Short Heath for a Red Star with Lenin on it. The guy seemed quite pleased with this trade. I'm not surprised! It took me a quite a few pints to get that off the landlord! But old Ronald Hines was generous on occasions and this was one of his better moments.

Next we found the Pacific Fleet Museum which although closed (it was a Monday), gave us the opportunity to have a look around some antique artillery in the garden. We found some pieces from

the Russo-Japanese war of 1905 complete with shell holes. Also, there were some WWII 122mm and 75mm field pieces. I wonder what action they saw? I could imagine myself on the deck of a cruiser in 1905 swinging the gun to a Japanese target and pulling the trigger. However, I expect I would have been killed as the Japanese annihilated the Russian Fleet at T'shushima, losing eight battleships, smaller ships and around 5,000 men. A huge butcher's bill for a sea battle and a big moment in history as it established the Japanese as a force to be reckoned with.

The traffic was fairly mad and Pete wanted to do his vernacular railway so we found a route evading the worst of it and ascended the hill. This afforded us a great view of the city, harbour and surroundings. We took a long look noting the orange pall of pollution over the city and some other youths with nothing better to do than drink alcohol out of some tins. Having done this and avoiding the youths, we decided that afternoon tea was called for, so we sought a cafe. The weather had improved somewhat in the last hour and was quite warm, adding to our thirst. We descended through the subway under the road and back along the main road to the city centre and found the café bar in a department store that reminded me of the ones back home in England, smart and elegant with a sense of opulence from the Tsars time, how the Soviets would have frowned on this scene.

Inside we found a number of the smarter set of Russian also enjoying coffee or tea. We had another rather stumbling conversation with the waitress but remarkably, we did get our refreshments easily – more easily than the post office.

After tea, we strolled to the beach and whilst enjoying a refreshing cold drink, we found a spot whereby we could study the locals more closely as they relaxed after the day's work.

The beach was sandy and afforded us a great view across the Golden Horn Bay. The sea gently lapped the sand and the sea was flat calm. A few speed boats were to be seen with a sharp white wake and trawlers plodded along returning from a Pacific fishing trip.

These Russians are definitely of the middle-class school of posing. Lenin must be turning in his grave. In essence, your average Russian of 2007 dresses in designer-labelled clothes, dripping in gold jewellery, always talking on their mobile phone in one hand and a bottle of alcohol in the other whilst walking or "promenading" in front of the opposite sex. Not much different from Walsall on a Saturday afternoon then.

Mobile Phones: I've learnt on this trip that whatever language or culture you are in, mobile phone behaviour is the same: loud speaking, staring gormlessly into a tiny screen and showing the latest version to all and sundry. How desperate have we become as a human race?

Time to go back to the sanctuary of the Gavan Hotel via the overcrowded Number 62 bus, which took a bit of finding as this part of Russia doesn't have bus stops, it has "faith stops"; you believe that the bus will stop here, but there no actual signs or poles with numbers on them. Another import from sunny Walsall?

Despite its pricey looking appearance, the Gavan was excellent value for money; the food was first rate and the service was great - even with a smile! Having eaten very well and downed a few beers in the lounge, we crept to our beds - England a day closer.

Chapter Thirteen

Day 12 – Vladivostok: The Second Day

After a very restful night's sleep and a good "American" breakfast of scrambled eggs, bacon, coffee and orange juice, we set off once more into the maelstrom of the traffic that sums up Vladivostok. Our Intentions were very clear today:

- Pacific Fleet Museum
- Eastern Cultural Museum
- T-Shirts and souvenirs

So, once more on the Number 59 bus dear friends and a quick hoof down to the harbour front as this misses most of the traffic and onto the museum.



The museum was most interesting; lots of pre-Soviet history as well as stuff from the Cold War and Soviet era. We spent a good hour in here and had the place mostly to ourselves, despite a cock up with the entrance fee. Money, it seems, knows no international language barriers either!

After the museum, we braved the traffic again to find the department store cafe. There is a good technique we developed for crossing the road: it involves waiting for a girl with good looking legs to come along, not difficult in this city, and as the traffic stops abruptly, you cross with her! Works every time!

Tea breaks over we proceeded to find some Vladivostok T-Shirts from the expensive designer shops in the malls. So expensive in fact and no tacky logo splashed on them, we gave up and went onto the Eastern Cultural museum instead.

This was most interesting despite the odd requirement of having to wear covers for our shoes just to walk on some tatty old carpet. The museum gave you a good insight into Russian Culture though and included the table where Lenin signed the notorious peace agreement with Germany in 1917.

After this, we were ready for a sit down and we retired once more to the beach to soak up some sun and write some more postcards before our impending scramble across Russia and home!

The postcards reminded me of the episode in the Vladivostok post office! 45 minutes to explain we wanted those cards and we wanted to send them to "Anglia". Not East Anglia, but all of it. And I look back and wonder where the time went in this city. Most of it was stuttering and pointing and passing the phrase book backwards and forwards trying to elicit the goods. Phew! The same occurred in the bank when Cousin Pete wanted some more money. But the bank was equipped for that as they had an English speaker as they must deal with tourists more often.

Anyway, I digress. The trip back from the beach took us around the headland. I noticed that some of the local businesses had

employed military clad security men complete with side arms and batons, dressed in blue and black marine uniforms.

Time for a last look at the Golden Horn Bay and off to find the crowded 62 bus back to the hotel. I was glad this was the last trip in this rush hour crush. I'm sure there were too many people on



the bus and some people had difficulty getting off in time, nearly including us. The bus was dirty inside and out and had very basic seats or benches.

More card writing whilst we

prepared for dinner and then down to the restaurant which was interrupted by some rather loud Americans. They had the most appalling manners I must say. There were four of them and the lady of the group didn't even eat. Instead she was typing up a record of their trip onto a laptop computer whilst giving us a running commentary in a loud voice. We knew exactly what they had been doing blow by blow. The big bloke was expunging his distorted view on the world on us as well not that we were interested. No wonder Americans have such a bad reputation abroad!

We retreated to the bar for a Russian beer and reflected on the day and the trip. Some football was playing on the television which we gazed at occasionally before climbing the stairs once again and our final night on Russian soil. Tomorrow, my biggest ever trip across nearly a third of the globe in one day - One taxi, two planes, one bus and three trains - all in 24 or would it be 36 hours? The timezones were still influencing us and would have a profound impact on us.



View of Vladivostok from the Hotel Gavan

Chapter Fourteen

Homeward Bound!

...In the words of Simon and Garfunkel. Having eaten and packed promptly, we vacated the hotel early so the taxi driver could weave his way through the interminable traffic of Vladivostok in good time to reach the airport. This was rather akin to flying a Star Wars Tie fighter through the battlestar defences, to give you an idea. Of course, if you have never seen Star Wars, that icon of Hollywood science fiction films, you'll have no idea of this so another analogy would be running a ball through a team of determined "stoppers", such as you'd find in Rugby, American Football or that old school ground favourite, British Bulldog. Also, there were periods where we came to a complete stop - just like the M25 there then - no Radio Travel reporter to tell you where not to go, not that we had much choice as there was one road off the peninsular to the airport which was some twenty odd miles away. We reached the airport in good time and I was so impressed with our Anatoly Skywalkerov that I gave him \$10, which went down rather well and changed his face from a dour scowl to almost a smile.

We walked into the airport's entrance, found the check-in desk and booked in. Having quickly deposited our luggage, we had two hours to kill. Time to see what Vladivostok's airport shops had to offer. Ascending the stairs to the right of the check-in area we found a shop and there were some T-Shirts and other souvenirs. Just the job! Our minds were relieved at this small victory for tourism.

After this we queued up for the security ritual - I was relieved to find Russian airport security as good as ours - everybody was very serious and dour - and very efficient. We were driven in the airside bus to the Aeroflot plane on the airport apron, which I was relieved to say was a Boeing 767 wide bodied jet. I didn't fancy the Tupelov 134 next to it as it looked a bit dated and tired. Recently, Russian planes have a bad habit of falling out of the sky due to bad maintenance and I'm not the greatest flyer, despite having been across the pond five times and on a plane countless times. They didn't have the adage "Aeroflop" for nothing but seemed to have smartened up of late. I wasn't looking forward to this flight though as it reminded me of a trip to Yugoslavia made with a good mate of mine, Salty, on JAT airlines on an old Boeing 727 which was also very tired looking. That was when we flew in row 13 and smoking was separated from non-smoking by the aisle in the middle!

My fears weren't much assuaged on take-off either - something I quite like on a flight - as the airport used to be an old fighter station up to the 1990's and the runway hadn't been resurfaced since. The plane shook so much that the "EXIT" sign over the door fell off. Also, the plane was so heavy that we seemed to be on the runway for a long time before finally the plane "rotated" and we were in some smooth air lumbering northwards.

Once in the air, the flight was pleasant enough. The staff were smartly dressed and were curtly courteous enough, even though I suffered a nose bleed just after takeoff and had to request medical aid to stop it. They weren't in a great hurry to help me out but the large male steward eventually found some tissue for me.

The flight was about seven hours and passed pleasantly enough. We did the usual aeroplane things: read a book (more Stalin),

listened to some music, watched the Russian dubbed movies of which there were three, had some not bad food and plenty of drinks. One Russian film was subtitled in English and was quite amusing - a story of a man and a woman who swapped bodies as I recall. Don't ask me to tell you what it was called, but it was based around Moscow as I recognised some of the places.

The flight took us over the salt mines of Siberia, well to the north of the Trans-Siberia Railway, so we had a view which looked more like Mars than the Earth. A very different view from 38,000 feet up.

The landing was well dodgy though as the plane hit a small air pocket just as we approached the runway and dropped a few feet which meant we could have been a bit short of the runway and dropped onto the highway underneath. Scary stuff and to compensate, the pilot put on some extra power which meant we were carrying a lot of momentum as he touched down and so braking was especially hard to hit the taxiway; so much so I ended up with my head in the brace position in the seat in front. Phew! I was well relieved to reach the stand and that would be my one and only trip on Dodgy Airlines Inc.

Now came the difficult bit: we had five hours to get across Moscow to the other airport. We had arrived at Moscow - Sheremetyevo (SVO) and British Airways flies from Moscow-Domodevo (DME) which is 50 miles to the south.

Our first task was to retrieve our bags and find the bus service to the underground which we did in about half an hour. The bags were behind a security screen and we had to point them out to an attendant who brought them over off the baggage belt. Not sure

that's the most efficient method of baggage collection as a result, the place was crammed full of sweaty heaving bodies.

Outside the airport there were quite a lot of dodgy looking taxi drivers looking to pick up a fare, but we were insistent upon getting the bus and one guy eventually receded and told us where to go. Dodging more taxi drivers we found the 158 bus which took us to Rechnoy Vokzal where we would connect with the metro. Not without incident though as the bus nearly collided with a four wheel drive just after we started off and some of the passengers fell on the floor of the bus.

At Rechnoy Vokzal we found the metro service to Paveletskaya where we ascended to the street level to find the station. Here we eventually found the right platform to find the airport link to Domodevo, which was a very smart train and with an hour to spare, we checked in at the British Airways desk. We used our spare time to buy some more gifts and have a look at the planes around the apron whilst enjoying a relaxing cup of coffee for once. Through the very tight security and we were aboard another 767 this time with all things British on it, such as a Times newspaper - something I hadn't seen for two weeks and the BBC! And the sound of another English speaker who didn't have a heavy Russian lilt was a sheer delight! Even the Americans were polite! The one sitting next to me shared his newspaper. Almost home!



Domodedovo Airport Apron

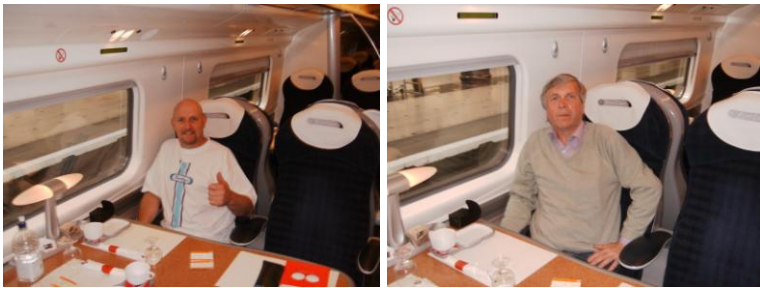
Another three and a half hour flight was taken up with more newspaper reading, watching some English TV undubbed movies, a few more pages of Stalin and finally we reached Heathrow and landed just about perfectly despite the usual strong cross wind. We collected our baggage, cleared Customs and found our way to the Tube to locate the Jury's Hotel and arrived there at 10:30 PM, 12 hours from setting out from Vladivostok? Not quite, you forgot the 10 timezones! It's taken us nearly 24 hours to do this leg of the trip!

Having checked in we headed for the bar and a beer. Whilst we were consuming these, I phoned the family and then settled down to the cricket on the TV in the bar. How great to be back! Cricket! How English! How great to be back!

Chapter Fifteen

The Last Leg

Having had a great English Breakfast of bacon, eggs, sausage, tea and orange juice, we collected our bags for the last time and checked out. We returned to the tube and headed off to Euston Station where we waited for a short while in the First Class lounge and enjoyed some coffee and muffins while our train was being prepared. Special treatment? Yes it was. You see, today was a special day as it was not only our last day of the trip, but was also my 47th birthday, so we were going First Class back to Wolverhampton, complete with waitress service all the way and on CWT - you remember! Continuous Welded Track! Oh Joy! And the whole carriage to ourselves!



Ab! First Class on a Virgin Pendolino

Nearly two hours later Wolverhampton was reached without incident at 13:38. Cousin Pete and me said our farewells as we were met by my Dad. Pete took the bus back to his house to complete his journey whilst Dad took me home to the awaiting girlfriend, the last part of a journey to the other side of the world;

Three planes, six trains, seven metro trains and four taxis and 12,000 kilometres in 14 days. An adventure rather than a holiday but well worth doing on reflection? Absolutely! And as I reminded myself, it was making the journey that was important, not the getting there.



We made it!

Summary

Wolverhampton to London	130 Miles	2 Trains
London to Berlin	935 Miles	1 plane
Berlin to Moscow	573 miles	1 Train
Moscow to Vladivostok	6996 Miles	1 Train and 2 taxis
Total including return trip	15630 Miles	2 Planes, 1 bus, 2 metros and 2 trains

Part II: A Short History of the Trans-Siberian Railway

Introduction

7,500 miles of track built across some of the most hostile environments on the planet, from Western Russia on the Baltic Sea to the Pacific Ocean at Vladivostok, and all done in a mere 12 years, is some testament to the engineering and political determination required to build the Trans-Siberian Railway. It was the most expensive project in modern history to that point, bigger even than France and America's attempt to build the Panama Canal.

In the nineteenth century, railways represented the technological advances of a modern state. The Trans-Siberian Railway was the most ambitious venture of Imperial Russia representing the unification of territories in the east and the economic development of the country. It helped to colonise and settle the vast empty territory in Siberia and was supposed to help Russia to solve a number of problems in the Far East and China in particular. The Russian Government's objective was to control its border territories through centralization and "Russification", practise evident since the days of Catherine II.

Symbolizing the reign of Alexander III, it was built primarily for military-political reasons, not strictly commercial ones. The prime motive for this immense project was the preservation of Russian influence over its industry and agriculture, and the development of control of its territories in the East.

The forgotten parts of the history of this project were the politics, personalities and hard economics, as well as the domination of one man – Sergei Witte, the Russian Finance Minister during the reign of Alexander.

The following is intended a short resume of the singular points of this remarkable feat of human endeavour and engineering. Hopefully, this will encourage you to find out more about it, either through another feat of human engineering – the Internet, or maybe the old fashioned way, through books and libraries.

Beginnings

Russia required a Trans-continental railway to compete with the other powers such as USA, Canada and most of industrialised Europe.

The Construction History of the Railway can be traced back to 1857 and the Governor-General, N.N. Murav'yov-Amurskiy who instructed the Russian Military in the form of D. Romanov to research the project. However, despite many attempts at developing projects for this, the scheme never had the support of the Russian Government. Only the intervention of Tsar Alexander III pushed things forward, writing in 1886 *“I have read so many reports from the Siberian governors that now I can admit with sadness that government did almost nothing to satisfy the needs of this rich, but neglected region. It is time to correct this mistake”*.

Three expeditions were sent during 1887 to find the best routes for the railway and completed their work in the early 1890's. In 1891, the Siberian Railway Construction Committee was formed. It declared that "Siberian railway construction is a great national event; it should be built by Russian people with Russian materials". The project was overseen by the Finance Minister, Sergei Witte of whom we will discuss his part later. In February 1891, the Committee found it possible to start Great Siberian Way from two directions: Vladivostok and Chelyabinsk and the Tsar duly gave it his blessing.

The first stone was laid in the presence of the Cesarevitch on the 31st May 1891 at 10:00 am. A prayer was held in the special

pavilion not far from the city and the Cesarevitch laid the first stone and a silver plate in the railway station.

The costs of the project were high, estimated at 350 million gold roubles. The Western sections were therefore made using a cheaper technical construction method, such as lighter rails, thinner ballast and less sleepers. Further economies appear to have been necessary as stations were positioned further apart and bridges were built of wood rather than steel. However, this book hasn't the room to deal with the intricacies of Russian Politics of the 19th and early 20th century.

Politics and Historical Background

Russia's trade position in the Far East was much weaker than its rivals. Britain, Germany and the United States all had interests in the area which dominated the Pacific Rim. The proximity of Japan and China squeezed the Russians out of most of the markets.

A strong position in the Pacific was the goal of Russia to counterbalance its weak position and maintain its rivalry with Great Britain. This was especially the case after The Crimean War of 1857. Both Britain and France used naval power in the Pacific to pressure the Russians. Blockade was one of the traditional British weapons utilised during the period 1850-1890 and the British used it against Vladivostok. Using their alliances with Japan and China, Britain could exert immense pressure. In those days, coal was the prime fuel for the Royal Navy and bases were required worldwide and at regular intervals to keep the fleet at sea and the hungry warships replenished.

Conversely, Britain feared Russian intervention against India through Afghanistan. British and Afghan troops fought against the Russians spasmodically during the 1880's. The British were aided in their response they could make against the Russians when the Canadian-Pacific Railway was completed, should the British need to blockade Vladivostok again.

However, the real push for a Siberian railway came through changes in China that occurred during the Kuldja crisis. This was a British sponsored Muslim uprising against the Russians that hoped to reunite Turkistan with the Sinkiang Emirate declared by Yakub Beg. The Russians moved in to seize the area from the Chinese, the area only returning to the Chinese in 1884 after lengthy negotiations.

This crisis highlighted the vulnerability of Vladivostok and the pacific coast to Chinese attack. Further settlement of Manchuria by the Chinese exacerbated Russian concerns, being outnumbered some 100 to 1 in population terms. Improved Chinese forces and a naval force were organised but the Chinese needed a port onto the Pacific – would Vladivostok be the target?

Opponents of the railway favoured a bigger pacific Navy based in Vladivostok. A lack of railway transported supplies in the Russo-Turkish War of 1877 had hindered operations and Russian experience in Afghanistan with railways favoured this option above the naval one. It was repeated by the military and politicians of the time that Vladivostok would be as exposed as Sevastopol had been in the Crimean War should War break out again. Therefore, the military favoured a rail solution to defend the region.

Climate and Agriculture

Siberia is dominated by continental weather patterns which produce hot summers, very cold winters and dry autumns and springs.

The climate wreaks havoc on agriculture, monsoons and heavy rains spoiling crops.

These factors limited economic development as local produce could not support the colonists. Normal harvests produced barely 75% of the requirements for the population.

The obvious solution was to import the goods from other parts of Russian, but even the quickest route from Odessa in the Crimea took 65 days. Added to this, most of the supply was undertaken by foreign traders, especially the Chinese. Manchuria was the main grain producing area and imports from this area were high. In the event of a conflict with China, the inability to feed the army, a vital requirement in the time of war, Russia would be compromised. This was something of an anathema to the Tsar, and he looked to remedy this situation by building the railway.

A Railway engineer called Luibimov reported that the economy of Vladivostok would have been greater had the "...conditions of life been somewhat different". Vladivostok lacked a beneficial climate, was high cost and shortages of commodities were commonplace. The dark side of humanity reigned with the general populace seeking only to drown their sorrows in drink

from morning until late at night, ending up insane or suicidal.”
Not a lot has changed then.

Luibimov reported that “there was no butter to be had in Vladivostok...the meat was bad...and to make up for it all, there is an abundance of drinking houses, taverns and houses of pleasure.”

Siberia had long been the refuge of the criminal element. 20,000 roamed across the land living from hand to mouth in poverty, unwilling or unable to work and living a life of an inland pirate – drunken, debauched and reduced to crime.

Cossacks

The Governor General of Siberia, Mura'ev, had ordered the formation of the Transbaikal Cossacks in 1851.

The Cossacks were a military force that had headed the exploration of Siberia and acted as a defence force. They were vital to the early colonisation of the area, making up some 30% of the total population by 1897.

In the end, the use of Cossacks for this dual role was a failure, as they could not perform a single role well enough. The Cossacks failed at farming as they did not have enough time to devote to it, expected as they were to perform military and postal duties; they were ill equipped for this latter role. With concerns about the Chinese during the Ili crisis of 1879-1881, the Cossacks greatest role was in dealing with the Manchurian Bandits.

Equally, the Cossacks were unsuited to the harsh climate of Siberia and required large sums of State funding to maintain the settlements that had sprung up. In many case, they descended into indolence and crime, aided by the criminals already there.

Existing Transport

The conditions of the roads in Siberia were the primary hindrance to any progress in the region. The principal highway was from Moscow to Lake Baikal. One fifth of the population was engaged in servicing the route and the term road was something of a loose term – at points it was only 21 feet wide and deeply rutted in seas of mud or clouds of choking dust. Added to this was the danger of attack from convicts.

Temporary bridges often collapsed in the summer due to the rain and ferries were the only other means of navigating across the wider rivers.

River travel was provided by 73 steamships which served a small proportion of the available river system.

East of the Lake Baikal, things were worse. The Lake itself was un-navigable for four months of the year due to freezing. Violent storms and ice in the equinoxes often interrupted matters.

The arduous terrain and awful weather made use of the post road problematic.

To sum up the difficulties faced in the Region, the Far East was by and large cut off during the winter from the rest of Russia. Even the telegraph service was unreliable as repairs in flooded areas were difficult if not impossible.

Sergei Witte

No history of the Trans-Siberia can ever be written without reference to the primary driver of the project, Sergei Witte.

Witte was appointed Finance Minister for Tsar Alexander III in 1892 and was able to overcome the difficulties raised by the Finance Ministry in the highly fractious government that existed at that time. Witte courted the Tsars favour and was able to push through the popular project and duly received the Tsars backing. In the course of construction, he would need all his energy and devotion to it. He held this ministry until 1903 and was able to encourage the rapid growth of Russian industry.

Fate inevitably bound Witte to the Trans-Siberia. He was born in [Tiflis](#) and lived in the [Caucasus](#). He graduated from [Novorossiysk University](#) in [Odessa](#) with a degree in [mathematics](#) and then spent the greater part of the [1870s](#) and [1880s](#) involved in private enterprises, rising to executive director in the service of the Odessa State Railway.

Witte then served as [Russia's](#) Director of Railway Affairs within the Finance Ministry from [1889](#) – [1891](#), before acceding to the job that was to make the Trans-Siberian Railway a reality.

To Witte, the Trans-Siberia was the cornerstone of his economic policy. He promoted it as the answer to Russia's desire to access International trade and to attract foreign investment, as well as to impress on Europe that Russia could stand with the best.

Witte attracted a lot of foreign investment into the project, which helped to stimulate Russian industry as well as provide funds for the Railway.

Witte worked closely alongside the new Tsarevitch, Nicholas who, after a lengthy trip to Asia in 1891-2, had become intensely interested in the project and was appointed chair of the Committee of the Siberian railroad, a move initiated by Witte.

To the young Tsarevitch, the Trans-Siberia was the vanguard of the move to “civilize” Asia, the roots of this thought emanating from the imperialist ideology of the West during this time.

Initially, Witte and the Tsarevitch worked well together but, as time passed, the railway became an expression of the two personalities, and they inevitably drifted apart. Steven Marks, in his book “*Road to Power*”, comments that the relationship between Witte and Nicholas “paralleled that of Bismarck with Kaisers Wilhelm I and II. Nicholas felt he was a spectator at Witte’s performance.....where the minister’s powerful presence seemed to thwart the Nicolas’ own ambitions.”

Witte was relieved of office on August 16th, 1903 and the committee staggered on without him until 1905 when it was abolished as part of the October Manifesto reforms.

Witte was eventually recalled by the Tsar to negotiate the peace treaty for the end of the 1905 Russo-Japanese War, travelling to the United States to do so.

Always an advocate of limiting autocratic power, Witte served in the Duma and proposed a bill of rights which intended to answer the problems created by the October Revolution of 1905. Despite

many of the reforms being adopted, this failed to end the unrest and Witte was forced from the Duma in the first elected Russian Parliament. He died shortly after the outbreak of World War I, having urged Russia to stay out of the conflict, which eventually saw the demise of the Russian Aristocracy and the installation of Communism under Lenin.

Project Management

The central management of the project was done by the Tsar and his ministers who micro managed it to an absurd degree. Real power lay in St. Petersburg and the Committee of the Siberian Railway and the Ministry of Transport and its departments. This produced an unwieldy structure with an inefficient management. Local decisions were difficult to obtain as they required authorization from the centre. Punishments existed for failure to follow the system. This caused corruption and a resulting overspend was only offset by the pressure to complete the project due to the Boxer Rebellion breaking out.

The railway was eventually completed with the financial problems brushed aside. Book and record keeping were not of the highest priority for Russia, perhaps reflecting the state of the nation in the days prior to the Revolution of 1917.

Further down the scale, the railway was initially organised into four separate sections; the Western Siberian, Central Siberian, Transbaikal and the Ussuri. Gradually, they were unified into the “Siberian Railway” with its headquarters at Tomsk.

As the railway was so big, administration was difficult and such procedures as inspections were only carried out periodically. Thus many problems were overlooked and maintenance lapsed.

Construction

The Trans-Siberia followed the practise of the USA in that construction was started from both ends. It was constructed in the most difficult of conditions, as a casual investigation of the climate and geography of the region will reveal.

Most of the track was laid through low populated areas with dense forests, across many rivers, lakes, swampy and permafrost areas. The most difficult section for the construction team was the section around the Baikal Lake. Here they had to blast rocks, to make tunnels and to build additional structures on the rivers that go into Baikal.

Construction was almost entirely by hand, undertaken mainly by convicts soldiers and peasants. 30,000 navvies were recruited in the first year for earthworks alone and 50,000 skilled and unskilled labourers were required for the other tasks. Difficulties were faced when the line stretched out into the Steppe proper, as labour and food were in short supply. This required most of the labour to be imported from elsewhere. During the Boxer Rebellion of November 1899 to [September 7, 1901](#) some 3,000 troops were drafted to finish the Transbaikal Section. Elsewhere, 9,000 prisoners and 5,000 exiles were used to provide a more permanent workforce.

The work was hard. Twelve hours per day, six days a week, only heavy rain causing the work to be halted temporarily.

To reduce costs, the track was built to a lighter specification than was preferred and this was typical of the initial methodology of the project. Surveys were initially done in a limited way if at all, requiring expensive revisions to be undertaken later. Indeed, the pressure to complete the project meant that many shortcuts were taken; lighter rails, shallower ballast and so on. This caused endless problems when the full effect of the weather was unleashed upon the track, causing slides and sinkages.

Sharp curves caused unnecessary wear and tear on the wheels of the trains and this in turn caused the rail joints to weaken further. Derailments were numerous.

However, most of the bridges were of a sturdy construction and many were still standing in the 1960's.

The Western section from Chelyabinsk to Ob' was the easiest to build, albeit it with the problems of permafrost during the winter. Across the bogs of the Steppe, the low level of the trackbed caused drainage problems. As a solution, ponds were dug alongside the track which were promptly occupied by mosquitoes and gnats which in turn menaced the workers.

As the railway progressed eastwards, between Ob' and Lake Baikal, the work became more difficult. The foothills of the Saian Mountains provide a landscape which varies from bogs and marshes to high hills with steep forested slopes. Added to this, the permafrost remained frozen until mid-July and, once thawed, quickly became a morass.

To obviate the expense of tunnelling in the approaches to Lake Baikal, engineers relied heavily on cuttings, sharp curves and steeper gradients. They also had to build some fifty wooden

bridges and a steel bridge across the Yenisei around half a mile long.

However, it was Lake Baikal that was the most challenging environment. The lake is surrounded by steep rugged mountains and temporary arrangements were made to provide a steamer service between the two ends of the railway. Events around the Boxer Rising eventually forced the construction of what was known as the Circumbaikal section, taking some five years to complete on its own.

This fearsome section, takes in the densely forested Iablonovyi Mountains and the Khilok, Ingoda and Shilka rivers. The curves were steep and gradients severe causing the use of heavy earthworks. Permafrost had to be dynamited and the inexperience of the engineers in this area caused the trackbed to be poorly laid, resulting in sinkages.

Natural hazards also complicated the construction. In 1897, a flash flood washed away a 200 mile section of track near Sretensk, and periodic droughts caused hardship to animals and humans alike, especially the prevalence of the painful “Siberian Boils”.

The most Eastern section of the Ussuri Railway was linked to the Transbaikal by the Amur Railway, which stretched from Khabarovsk to Vladivostok. Political reasons led to this only being completed until 1916, as the Trans-Manchuria was completed first.

The Ussuri River was something of an unknown quantity to the young engineers and its annual rising of some thirty five feet caused the existing track to be re-laid at a higher level. It's many

tributaries resulted in the requirement for numerous bridges to be built. Added to this, heavy rains, bandits and cholera all contributed to the construction window of a mere fifty five days per year.

The Iman River was also quite an engineering challenge to overcome as it's annual swells extend to a width of three miles!

Electrification was begun in 1929 and finally completed in 2002.

Cost

The costs associated with building the Railway were of an unprecedented order. Bad financial management due to political and military pressures meant that costs were roughly doubled. It is doubtful if any accurate figure actually exists of the total cost of the project, but Steven Marks guesses that “...the costs overrun at this time amounted to almost 150 percent”.

The state originally estimated the costs at 334,000,000 roubles or some 46-79,000 roubles per verst. By early 1901, the costs including the Chinese Eastern Railway were put at some 856,000,000 roubles, or 9 around 94,000 roubles per verst.

What is certain is that this was the most expensive railway system built in Russia. The total cost of Railways under Witte stood at nearly two million roubles of which the Trans-Siberia claimed a large proportion. It is estimated that the project accounted for some 9 percent of the state debt, not an insignificant proportion considering the other demands upon the State purse.

The beneficial effect on the benefits to the economy of Siberia is hard to gauge; some writers see this as limited as Siberia contributed a mere 90 million roubles worth of production in return for the railway investment. Siberian industry remained under-developed for years. Towns along the route were merely distribution points for Siberian raw materials rather than integrating fully into industry.

However, agriculture increased by 122% during the period up to World War I, including wheat harvests of some 3.2 million tons and Rye up to 800,000. More agriculture machinery was required.

Towns expanded too. Novonikolaesk grew to some 16,000 inhabitants by 1900; Sretensk from 1,700 to 8,000 by 1897. Inter-regional trade also grew as well as trade to and from Moscow, as small traders at last had cheap transport costs. The pattern of grain east and coal westward was gradually established.

Not all regions benefited though. Irkutsk and Yenisei found themselves worse off as shipping costs to the west were higher than in the east.

Operation

The result of financial mismanagement, poor surveys, cut down engineering and cheap construction led to the railway massively under performing. Only three pairs of trains in each direction could be handled, well short of its target of twelve required for military operations.

Indeed the first locomotive to drive the line ended up in the river and some 93 people perished in 924 accidents in 1901 alone. Trains were limited to about twenty five versts per hour. Initially, to traverse the section from Moscow to Vladivostok, (which took us eight days), took twenty eight in the summer and nearly forty days or more in the winter.

After the Sino-Japanese of 1894-5, efforts were made to upgrade the track by using heavier 24 lbs rails and thicker ballast. New rolling stock was introduced but in 1989 a backlog of 7,000 wagon loads was reported.

Electrification eventually allowed trains of 6,000 tons to be used.

Development of the line is to include running freight between Hamburg in Germany and Japan and Korea of which an agreement was recently reached in January 2008.

Conclusions

Russia embraced economic modernization as Japan and Prussia had done not only to maintain its rank amongst the Great Powers but also to shore up autocracy at home.

The Railway represented the chauvinistic and centralisation proclivity of the last two Tsars to rule Russia. During its construction, it is obvious that a lurch towards state intervention in the economy was evident, something the Bolsheviks found and used when they took over the state apparatus in 1917. It could be argued that Russia has always operated in this way.

The Railway was enormously expensive and questions can be raised even today about the value the country got for its rouble. The cost in terms of materials and human effort is truly remarkable.

That aside, it stands as a testament to the determination of Sergei Witte and the Russian government to push the project through. Along the way, it exposed the deficiencies financial control, project planning and engineering done to save cost.

We should also remember the railway was largely constructed by hand, carved out of the landscape by hand using tools often found in the everyday garden: Shovels, spades, picks and so on.

Russian Railways promotes its services today as:

“The Trans-Siberian is a major freight artery offering a fully developed container service across Eurasia from Berlin to

Beijing, with links to major cities in Europe, including Helsinki, Kaliningrad, Warsaw, Minsk, Kiev, St-Petersburg, Smolensk and Yekaterinburg. And in addition to Russian stations in Siberia itself, the Trans-Sib also has connections to Astana in Kazakhstan, Ulaanbaatar in Mongolia, Beijing in China, Pyongyang in North Korea and Seoul and Pusan in South Korea”

It is evident that the Trans-Siberia is still vitally important to Russia today and its development continues.

Despite its problems one thing is certain though: it is the world’s longest railway line and is likely to remain so as long as there are railways.

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