

Rijumati's Travels, part 4: Central Asia, and beyond...



28th May 2008

Dear Friends, here is a taste of life in Central Asia. It continues to be exciting and challenging and I still don't know how I'm going to get the Russian visa!

Love Rijumati

Arriving in Almaty was a shock, an almighty dose of culture shock. For some bizarre reason though both India and Kazakhstan are on the same longitude and have almost the same time zone, my flight was scheduled to arrive at the uncharitable hour of 3.20am. The in-flight service on Air Astana (Kazakhstan's national airline) was surprisingly good, but even a decent airline vegetarian meal is a bit weird when eaten at 1am! The night flight also meant that there was no possibility to see the Pamir mountains as we flew over northern Pakistan and Afghanistan. Why can't they schedule the flight for a sensible time? (Answer: no doubt the airport taxes are cheaper for late night departures).

So at that time in the morning, under slept, it was always going to be a challenge arriving in a new country. It turned out to be a bigger challenge than I bargained for. The first hurdle was immigration. I was turned back by the young Kazakh immigration officer who just waved me away and said "Please wait!" in a tone that indicated our conversation was over. Wait for what, where? I eventually found a window called Consular Services where I assumed that I could arrange the transit visa to Kyrgyzstan. There is no direct flight from India to Kyrgyzstan so travellers between the two countries have to fly to Almaty in Kazakhstan and get a transit to Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, which is a couple of hours drive away. My first shock was that the 1-day transit visa cost me \$25, whereas my month long Kazakh visa from their embassy in Delhi had only cost me \$15! And they wanted payment in US\$, which of course I had none. I generally carry little cash, relying on ATMs worldwide and what cash I have is in Euros. However, helpfully there was an ATM this side of the immigration control which dispensed US\$ and Kazakh Tenge. I imagine that in the bad old Soviet days there would have been no ATM available and had one arrived at the Almaty immigration without enough US\$ one would have been trapped in a Kafka-esque nightmare of not being able to get through immigration through lack of currency and not being able to get currency through lack of immigration! I was however spared this and the Consular services even accepted payment in Kazakh Tenge which saved me the irony of having to draw US\$ to get into an ex-Soviet republic.

Having negotiated immigration I went to collect my luggage. However as I tried to leave the baggage collection hall two rough looking guys in uniform started demanding something from me in Russian. For all I knew they could have been mafia men demanding protection money! Eventually it became clear that they wanted the counterfoil to the baggage sticker that was attached to my bag. I have never been asked for this usually insignificant barcode sticker in many years of air travel, and I would have been quite capable of jettisoning it as rubbish before getting to that point in the airport. Fortunately I was able to produce the relevant sticker, and as it matched the one stuck on my bag the "airport official" gave a satisfied grunt and waved me through. What happens to unsuspecting travellers who lose their baggage sticker I dread to think, perhaps another Kafka-esque episode awaits them.

It was now about 4am, but the fun was just beginning. The next obstacle was the barrage of men offering me a taxi. Almost to a man they were unshaven, wearing black leather jackets and with the fag end of a cigarette in the mouth. Once again I immediately thought I'd met the Kazakh mafia. However I had enough presence of mind to refuse their petitions. It was still dark and I would go and sit in a café until it was light and I'd figured out what to do next.

"Tourist information!" I thought, they'll help me to work out how to get to Bishkek. A small, plump lady grimaced at me as I asked how to get a bus to Bishkek. She spoke no English and I no Russian - as Tourist Information desks go this one failed at the first hurdle! Just to avoid the assault of the taxi mafia I took the up-escalator to the Departure lounge. Fortunately I noticed that there was another Tourist Information desk on that level. This time the lady spoke a little English. When I explained that I wanted to go to Bishkek she said with complete self-assurance "no flight to Bishkek from here!" "I want to go by bus," "I don't know anything about bus!" "Can you help me find out?" With a withering look and a sigh that said "why don't you go away and stop causing me trouble" she scribbled "Sairan - 106 or taxi" on a piece of paper. This turned out to be the name of the long distance bus station and the number of the bus that goes there. I tried to ask her how much a taxi should be but this was clearly beyond the call of duty or our mutual lack of a common language. Anyway feeling grateful for what info I had received I beat a retreat - though I was only able to make sense of what she'd given me by double-checking in my guide book that "Sayran" is the name of the long-distance bus station.

Outside was still dark, and waiting in the bus station of a new city at night didn't seem like a good idea, so I headed for the only available café. I sat down at a table and asked for "tea" from one of the smartly dressed waiters. He looked me in the eye and then walked off, which I took as confirmation of my order. However after about 5 or 10 minutes another waiter came to me and gesticulated that I needed to make my order at the cash desk a few metres away. Why they couldn't do that for you is beyond me. The tea came as a cup of fairly hot water and a tea-bag on the side, guaranteed not to brew properly, but I wasn't going to try my luck by sending it back. The next shock was that this tepid brown drink was going to cost 300KZT, or the equivalent of £1.50, which being used to paying 5 rupees (8p) for tea or chai in India was a rude awakening to the brave new world of developed economies. "Never mind," I thought, "it's the airport, it's bound to be over-priced."

So I sat there making the most of my brown cup of water, waiting for dawn and observing the people of this new world. There were those who were clearly Slavs, presumably mainly of Russian origin, many of the men were portly and of the vodka drinking set, though there weren't as many leather jackets as I might have expected. Some elegant mini-skirted tsarinas were walking arm-in-arm with their guys. And then there were the tartar features of the native Kazakh people, strikingly different from the Slavs, generally a little thinner faced.

Just as the sun was coming up there was a big commotion, two policemen in improbably over-sized caps came running into the café shouting, looking at us all as if we were mad. I had no idea what they were saying. No one seemed to take much notice of them - a local response to the police that I've noted on several occasions here - but in an unhurried manner people started getting their coats on and starting to go. The policemen shouted more insistently and I joined the throng. I even heard the word "bomba" bandied about.

The Sting

People started streaming out of the airport, all chaos was let loose, no one seemed to know what was going on. I just headed for the first taxi I could find. I asked for "Sayran avto-buss" in my best Russian accent. I tried to ask for the price, but the taxi driver grabbed my bag, put it in the boot and with police and confusion everywhere I just got in and off we went. "This is a reasonable country I guess the price will be fair" I thought as I relaxed and enjoyed the view of the city. How wrong can you be!

Almaty is set against the curve of the northern Tian-Shan mountains, and leaving the airport we had a spectacular dawn view of these mighty peaks. It was breath-taking and a far cry from the baking plains of New Delhi. The great boulevards were lined with tall healthy looking trees and there was not a soul in sight! After 6 months of living in South Asia this was a very strange experience. There is never a time of day in an Indian city where you won't see people. In Kolkata, perhaps the most densely populated of all cities, every niche is home to someone or other. Even in the affluent suburbs of New Delhi one will find the labourers and rickshaw wallahs around at almost any time of day and night. But Almaty was absolutely empty, though admittedly it was only 5.30am. Next shock was the speed of my taxi, on the well-made Kazakh roads he was getting up to over 100kmph between traffic lights, and at some of those he didn't stop (at least there is that in common with India)!

After about 15 minutes zig-zaging across town we arrived at the bus station. A posse of guys descended on the taxi as I alighted, obviously sensing a business opportunity. But there was a small problem to address, the fare. When he demanded 4000KZT (about £20) my jaw dropped. I wouldn't even expect to pay that for a 15 minute journey that in London, let alone in Kazakhstan! I said "No way," we were at stalemate. A strange 3-way negotiation started between me and the taxi driver - we had no common language - and the other taxi drivers who were wanting to take me to Bishkek. I couldn't figure out what price was related to what, it's got to be one of the most confusing moments I can remember! Finally a guy called Viktor who spoke english, wore a black leather jacket, was unshaven and holding a cigarette (and perhaps was part of the local mafia), asked me what I wanted. "I want to go to Bishkek, and I'm not paying 4000KZT for the ride from the airport, that's robbery!" He laughed a big hearty laugh, "yes it's robbery, we never use those airport taxis!" He turned out to be a taxi driver - surprise! - and started trying to arrange a taxi for me to make the 250km journey to Bishkek, which he assured me would only cost 2000KZT - half of what the other driver was demanding for a 10km journey. The other driver started making threats about the police, I suppose if I had been a bit more slept I would have called his bluff, but as it was I decided to try and negotiate, he pushed me up to 3000KZT (about £15), I knew I was being cheated and felt bad about that, but at that moment it was worth £15 to me just to get rid of him, which is, I guess, how he makes his living.

Making new friends

So I was dazed, confused and still surrounded by a throng of taxi drivers assuring me that the bus to Bishkek took 5 hours, didn't leave for ages and their taxi would get me there in 2 hours. I started to head for the bus station but Viktor somehow managed to persuade me that it really was a good deal and in my best interest to go by taxi. And the price in this case was reasonable, £10 for a 250km trip. My bag was taken and put in the boot, but suddenly I got cold feet, the car had no markings, was this just another scam or worse? I demanded some proof of identity. He produced a business card, "Riju, don't worry, this guy works for me, you can relax!" Why I believed him I'll never know, but as it happened he was right!

I had wound up joining a share taxi, which in India was one of my favourite modes of travel. An efficient and cheap way to get where you're going. There was the driver and a Kyrgyz featured woman in the front seat. I immediately thought, "well it's going to be a bit of a wait to fill this taxi." "How many people do you take?" I asked and was surprised when he said "four" in India the same car would take 6 or 8 plus the driver, all crammed four to a seat. I was amazed when a few minutes later just one other passenger arrived and we set off. The "four" included the driver!

Our driver turned out to be a warm-hearted and friendly Kyrgyz called Nassa. He drove on the inexorably straight roads at about 120kmph until we got to a police checking point when he would slow down to 40kmph and drag the unlocked seatbelt over his body - once again a cat and mouse game with the police. All the while he was either chewing sunflower seeds or smoking, occasionally also using the mobile phone. My fellow backseat passenger, a friendly Almatyian called Birshan, tried out his english on me, but it was just about as rudimentary as my Russian and we both gave up after a while.

Kazakhstan has a truly striking and alien landscape, the Steppe. Mile after mile of almost featureless grasslands; occasionally one sees a herd of cows or sheep tended by a rider, a small conurbation or even a lone-standing sculpture of a goat or wolf. The vastness and emptiness of the spaces is awesome especially after the relentless over-crowding of South Asia.

As we got to the Kazakh-Kyrgyz border I made another mistake. Nassa, being too helpful, was very concerned that I change some money which left me thinking that we had already passed into Kyrgyzstan - "perhaps", I thought, "the border is really wide open." I went to an ATM to get out 10000 KGSom only to discover that I just got more KZTenge - my second drawing in a couple of hours! I was now rolling in Kazakh currency and about to leave the country!

The steady flow of local people through Kazakh-Kyrgyz immigration was stemmed by the unusual appearance of an englishman with his visas, in fact I created a long tailback. My two Kazakh visas caused a bit of confusion (one of them was only a one day transit visa) and the immigration official

politely said "Sorry, I go now" obviously wanting to hand me onto his relief officer. However the border crossing was relatively straightforward, Birshan kindly waited with me to make sure I got through okay. On the other side Nassa was waiting for us, waving warmly.

Once over the border it is only about 20km to Bishkek, but the confusion was yet to deepen further before being alleviated. We arrived in what looked like the salvaging yard for dead containers, though there were lots of taxis parked there too - clearly this was not central Bishkek, capital of the Kyrgyz Republic! I gathered that this was a market of some sort and that it was the end of the road for my taxi ride. I said I wanted to go to a particular budget hotel, recommended by my very out of date Lonely Planet guide, and a great gathering of round faced Kyrgyz men surrounded Nassa and my map giving voluble and contradictory advice on how to get there. Eventually one of their number, a short and friendly faced guy called Aziz, peeled off and put my bags into his taxi. We even managed to arrange that I would pay him in KZTenge since I hadn't yet found a Kyrgyz ATM - in fact Nassa seemed rather confused by the notion of ATMs. Nassa and I parted warmly, how many taxi-drivers have you hugged after the journey!

How (not) to find a hotel in Bishkek

Aziz and I spent an hour and half together. He obviously didn't know central Bishkek much, if at all. We did eventually find the Business Management Hotel in what looked like a spanking new civil service building. On the fourth floor there is indeed a hotel for Business customers offering rooms at \$60/night. I had a moments panic "what if Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan are going to be really expensive?" I asked Aziz to take me to the Tourist Information, which was marked nearby on my map. After 20 minutes driving around in circles we still hadn't located it - in fact no one seemed to have heard of such a thing as "Tourist Information." In a wonderful example of "can't help you" thinking, I later found out that on the second floor of one of the buildings we tried there is an office that gives tourist information but it is called something else and the staff didn't think to direct us to that office! Aziz, in a fit of unbearable helpfulness charged off walking across the centre of town following up every suggestion that was proffered, many of them mutually contradictory. I was tired and running out of patience but since my bag was locked in the boot of his car I could do nothing but trail after him. On two occasions I tried to stop him and just accept that I be stranded in the centre of town to fend for myself, but he would none of it. As our last lead petered out he happened to petition a man who spoke good english and I managed to convey that I wanted a budget hotel and information on walking in the Tian-Shan mountains. Sergei, as he was called, immediately phoned a friend and within 15 minutes I was checked in at a lovely little guest house for 17EUR/night with Alexander and Aziz#2 who run adventure tours! It's not where you go but who you know that counts in Bishkek! And so the day unfolded, it was still only 10am.

It's fair to say that the first day in Kyrgyzstan was the most confusing, things have been getting easier in leaps and bounds as the friendliness of the people and familiarity with the language do their magic.

Kyrgyzstan is a staggeringly beautiful country. Apparently 94% of the land is mountains (who on earth collates these statistics?) so as soon as one heads away from the fertile plains around Bishkek one starts climbing into the awesome wilderness of the Tian-Shan, one of Central Asia's greatest mountain ranges. Lake Issyk-Kul is the most obvious first destination, situated at over 1600m, surrounded entirely by snow-capped mountains, mostly over 4000m, it has the honour of being the world's second highest lake. It is in fact a natural marvel since though the winter temperatures here plummet to -20°C the lake never freezes because it is slightly saline and heated by underwater hot springs. The name Issyk-Kul is Kyrgyz for "warm lake." This however is a relative use of the word "warm" since after a preliminary test I realised that swimming was not a viable option even in late May. Issyk-Kul is an intense deep blue when the sun shines, which makes it seem all the more magical.

I arrived in the lakeside town of Tamga after 5 hours crammed into a Mercedes-Benz minibus. As usual the Kyrgyz people on the bus had been very friendly, and on this occasion I'd met a pretty young Kyrgyz woman called Kunduz who spoke excellent English. The bus was carrying on to the ex-Russian military town of Karakol and I was the only passenger getting off at Tamga. The driver pulled up in what looked like the middle of nowhere and indicated that I should get out. There was a bus shelter but no sign of a town. I said "dasvadanya, spassiba" and wondered "Where on earth has he dropped me?" To the left the immaculate blue waters, to the right hills rising steeply to snowy peaks,

forward and back just the road passing through a kind of mountainous desert. However there was a road leading away from the lake, and I gathered that this was the way I should go.

Sasha, owner of the Tamga guest house, is a huge hulk of a Russian, the kind of man you imagine single-handedly uprooting tree stumps and building mother Russia. Around Issyk-Kul, which in Soviet times was a thriving Russian tourist resort, there are equal numbers of Russians and Kyrgyz living in the towns and villages. It isn't hard to see why the Russians stayed when Kyrgyzstan got its independence. As Sasha said to me "Tamga is a very beautiful place." I immediately liked Sasha for his huge but gentle presence, his generous trusting hospitality - this is the first guest house in many months where I haven't had to present my passport on arrival - and his unerring enthusiasm to make me acquainted with the delights of his town. Tamga, it must be said, is not a major metropolis. It owes its existence to the decaying military sanatorium, which now seems to have become a run-down housing estate. Like most towns here it is laid out on a grid with vast boulevards that one can never imagine will ever be remotely needed in what amounts to little more than a two horse town. However it is the setting of Tamga that makes it special, caught between the lake and the mountains.

The next day, taking Sasha's hand drawn map I set out to explore the Tamga gorge. As one leaves the town behind it is like walking into a ruined landscape, but it is natural rather than man made. Collapsed sedimentary cliffs, piles of stones and sand have all been washed down by the infrequent rains. The land is very dry, most of the rivers have been diverted into a vast network of irrigation channels that mean the town and surrounding fields are green and productive, whilst the river beds are dry as dust. I walked along the "road", little more than a dirt track, that leads up the Tamga valley. Passing several large and well watered orchards I passed three local men, perhaps in their 20s. They were rough and ready, one of them had very bloodshot eyes, I guessed from the excesses of vodka. They looked at me with rather more interest than I cared for, but after a brief interaction I walked on without further ado.

My next meeting was with a Kyrgyz man driving a horse drawn cart, even with his 4 large tyres the "road" was a bumpy ride as he rose and fell over rocks and potholes. I greeted the driver, but his gaze was rather blank. As he passed I realised that in his cart were the carcasses of a freshly dead calf and sheep. The blue eyes of the calf were all misty, as if its gaze were upward; I felt myself recoil from the harsh realities of animal husbandry.

I walked for several hours - there are no fences or boundaries one just goes wherever one pleases. Sasha had told me there was a large stone with Tibetan writing on it from 1500 years ago (rather hard to believe since I understand that writing only came to Tibet in the 8th century), but amongst the many rocks I say that day I couldn't find one that remotely looked like it was written on. In fact given the prevalence of lichens on the rocks I would expect any old writing to be covered up by now. But it didn't matter, the views of Lake Issyk-Kul and the mountains were superb. My only regrets are that I didn't have longer walking the Tamga hills and that I wasn't more careful with the sunscreen. The cold air and the cloud cover misled me until it was too late - my face is now a beetroot striped picture!

And so I'm back in Bishkek all too soon in the attempt to get my Russian visa. The indications are that this won't be easy or quick. I've had to wait 5 days to even start the application since the visa department of the Russian embassy is only open twice a week for a couple of hours. It certainly isn't a case of service orientation!

26th June 2008

Dear friends,

I made it to Siberia where - just in case you were getting jealous of my adventures - the weather is making the Welsh hills look like the Gobi desert. It is REALLY WET!!! Many of the roads around Baikal are not tarmac so they are beginning to turn into mud baths. I'm glad I got the bus back from Olkhon Island to Irkutsk today (see more about my Olkhon adventures below), since tomorrow the road may be impassable. Tomorrow I continue east to Ulan Ude, the capital of Russia's Buddhist republic Buryatia. I am meeting a friend of a friend there and hope to spend a week checking out the Buddhist scene. After that I travel east again and aim for the ferry to Japan.

Below are two short pieces and some photos to give a sense of my time here, hope you enjoy them, love rijumati

The Peddling Provodnitsa



The Kazakh steppe and Kapshagay Lake

Perhaps no means of transport can quite compare with a slow train across the Steppe. The journey from Almaty to Irkutsk takes about 65 hours (including a change in Novosibirsk) and covers 3500km. The train progresses at a leisurely 60km/hour. It is said that the soul travels at the speed of a camel, but mine had no trouble keeping up with Train 302 to Novosibirsk.

Once the Tian Shan and Lake Kapshagay are left behind, the immense expanse of the Steppe grassland opens up into a featureless monotony, punctuated occasionally by a decaying industrial town. In the crushing summer heat, with parched grasses clinging to barren soils, it is hard to imagine how anything but a few hardy grazers makes a living here. However decaying concrete

towns there are, with crumbling factories, sprawling bungalows in various states of disrepair, railway sheds and sidings, and occasionally one sees a railway official holding what looks suspiciously like a ping-pong bat. Once we crossed the mighty Irtysh river at Semey, the nearest city to the old Soviet Union's notorious nuclear test site - the Polygon - the land becomes flatter but the greenness increases. Huge collective farm era fields stretch away as far as the eye can see, lined with tidy rows of poplar and willow.

Of course train life has its own rules, and the queen of this transient empire is the *provodnitsa*. In carriage #1 on the 302 to Novosibirsk our queen was a short plump Kazakh woman with an eager manner - eager to make some extra Tenge from her temporary subjects. Her first minister was a casually dressed chubby Kazakh man with bloodshot eyes - another vodka drinker? - who doled out the sheets and pillow cases for our *plaskart* beds. Apart from receiving sheets from him our only real attempt at communication was when he stopped me on the way to the toilet and said something suspiciously like "baksheesh." I played the dumb foreigner "ni panimayu" ("I don't understand") and eventually he gave up. Our *provonitsa* was more direct in her approach. After taking down my passport details her main interest seemed to be my monthly salary in US\$. At the best of times it is hard for me as a homeless itinerant Buddhist to give a meaningful statement of my financial status, but in this case her motives seemed all too transparent. Once again I was the dumb foreigner saying in english "it is hard for me to explain." She seemed to pick up that I was being evasive and beckoned me to her small "throne room" the compartment from which the empire of carriage #1 was run. Here she displayed her collection of chinese made goods - bags, T-shirts, shoes - as well as vodka, beer and cognac. She seemed completely convinced that I needed to buy one of her bags. I explained in english that I had two rucksacks already and that was quite enough, but she clearly didn't understand, and with some frustration she repeated "ni panimayu, ni panimayu" as if to say "you're just pretending not to understand." I wondered if my failure to purchase would have any adverse effect on my status as a temporary subject of carriage #1, but life seemed to continue as cordially as before - though I later really put my foot in it at the Russian customs! My Russian co-passenger, Viktor, and I despite having no common language, were able to have a good laugh at our eager peddling provodnitsa.

"Plaskart", technically 3rd class, is actually a good deal more comfortable than my favourite mode of Indian train travel *Sleeper class*. The open compartment, rather like a big dormitory, only packs in 4 beds per berth whereas the Indian train has 6, and one is given a mattress, pillow, sheets and towel, whereas in *Sleeper Class* you fend for yourself. However the atmosphere of "we're all in this together" is the same, and it's a great way to become "part of the family."



My first family was 9 year old Clas, a sweet Kazakh boy, and his parents. Almost as soon as we left Almaty Clas was keen to try me out at cards. Although we played a dozen games, some of which I won, I never quite figured the rules to which we were playing, but Clas was happily amused, and the smile with which he would put down his winning cards was worth losing for! I really felt like one of the family since when Clas and his parents ate I was generously included in their meal, sharing salad, bread, apples - but declining the sausage - with a "ya vegetariants" which surprisingly got a simple understanding nod.

Clas' father, Kanat, had a strong, deeply furrowed face. He silently sat drinking his beer, taking in his son's exploits in an unconcerned way. Clas' mother was plump and short, always with a warm smile and kindly eyes as she played my card hands - whilst I "learnt" the game - or offered me things to eat. They all got off the next morning at Ishigay, halfway to the Russian border, where Kanat was attending a 20 year school reunion.

Next I met Viktor, a single Russian aged 47, en route to Barnaul in Siberia and two young Kazakh girls. Once again we had no common language but soon Viktor and I were sharing tea, biscuits, bread and cheese. The girls seemed very shy and spent the midday heat dozing on their bunks, though one of them kept looking at me furtively and when they got off a few hours later she gave me a beamingly warm smile and friendly wave.

My final travelling companions were a smoochy young Russian couple from Novosibirsk. The man, looking rather brutish in a Wayne Rooney sort of way, growled at me when he got on. Even taking into account the Russian habit of shouting things in normal conversation I thought he was being rather gruff. He asked me to open the luggage locker under the seat and seemed very put out when it was full with Viktor's and my stuff. Amazingly he later apologised for his rudeness, through the medium of his english speaking girlfriend, it seems he thought that I was occupying his seat.

Crossing the Kazak-Russian border by train is a slow process. Firstly one spends two hours hanging around while the Kazakh police, immigration and soldiers check everything *very* thoroughly - my passport was checked by three different officials over the course of two hours. One to check the luggage, one to stamp the passport and one to scan the passport into a portable computer. One feels that perhaps the Kazakh immigration is a little over-staffed! Then one spends two hours at the Russian border while even more thorough checks proceed, though mercifully my passport was only checked twice.

And so when the Russian customs came through to check our bags I wisely but unwittingly dropped our provodnitsa in it. Without my understanding what was going on she had stashed her "illegal" goods for sale in the luggage box with Viktor's and my belongings. I suppose she expected me to claim it as my own, but for all I knew it could be drugs or firearms and in front of several Russian officials I emotively declaimed that these were not my belongings. Later the provodnitsa was to chastise me for making her look guilty, but if the truth be told I would do the same again - the very last thing you want to do on the Kazakh-Russian border is smuggle somebody else's unknown package into the country!

Still, she got her own back. I asked to change some money from Tenge to Roubles - since apparently one can't change Kazakh Tenge in Novosibirsk - and although I gave her a generous rate (to butter her up) she greedily still wanted more, to which I eventually assented. She even short changed me from the agreed amount, saying that she would give me the balance later. In the event she never did, and mysteriously mine alone among all the passenger towels disappeared in the night, so I had to return my linen incomplete. I guessed that this was her insurance should I complain about the short change. All in all she cheated me out of 80 roubles (about €2) so it wasn't really grand larceny! And this is how train life continued into the night, as the first Siberian mosquitos began to drink my sweet European blood!

At Novosibirsk I joined the greatest of all trains, the Moscow to Vladivostok on the Trans-Siberian railway. The carriages were much newer, tidier and unfriendlier than their Kazakh equivalent. After stumbling through a few pleasantries and greetings it was clear that verbal communication with me

was going to be impossible, and most of my Russian co-passengers just ignored my presence. Our provodnitsa was a young Russian devushka - she looked like she was still in her teens - wearing a short mini-skirt and fishnet tights. She had a very moany voice as she complained about me wearing my boots in her carriage - though they were clean after recently taking a dousing in a mountain river. It seems all the Russians had brought slippers to wear and she wanted to sell me a rubbish pair of chinese slippers for 200 roubles. I dangerously declined her offer, and she threw up her arms in exasperation. Later I made a huge tactical error with her when she again tried to sell me her wares, some of her chocolates. Not feeling hungry I once again declined. From then on it was outright hostilities. When I tried to charge my phone I got a curt "niet!" - though I later discovered that a guy from our carriage was charging his phone in her compartment. In the evening as I gazed at the rising moon from an open window I was abruptly moved on from her mopping trail with a sharp "da, da!" I was rather relieved when her relief took over, also a teeny provodnitsa with a mini-skirt, fishnet tights and face studs. This time I made a point of buying some biscuits and even was able to partially charge my phone. Never get on the wrong side of the provodnitsa - especially if you're travelling 3rd class and don't speak much russian!

Our stop in Mariinsk precipitated a sort of platform party. Sandwiched between the Moscow to Vladivostock and the Chita to Moscow, platform 3 became a sea of Siberian Slavs all out for a smoke or to see what their cash could buy - which wasn't much. Mariinsk is an almost forgettable small Siberian industrial town, perhaps its only claim to fame is that it shares its name with the greatest ballet theatre in Russia, the Mariinsky in St. Petersburg. Amongst the wares being peddled on platform 3, to my great surprise, were a variety of large and small lobsters sold "raw" - here in the middle of Siberia, 1000s km from the ocean. Was one supposed to somehow cook them in hot water from the samovar - the essential resource of every carriage with an endless supply of hot water? I later realised that these must be fresh water lobsters from the "nearby" Lake Baikal (only 1200km from Mariinsk), famous for its unusual ecology in which the crustaceans are the recyclers of dead matter. Whether anyone bought a lobster on that balmy platform I couldn't say. The Russian passengers seemed more interested in cigarettes and ice creams - and who could blame them?

Like the Kazakh steppe, the Siberian taiga is unfathomably vast. Hour after hour seemingly identical vistas of birch, spruce and pine roll past the window. Occasionally these are punctuated by large open fields, above which one can glimpse the enormity of the forest as far as the horizon. But otherwise the railway is enveloped by a tunnel of trees, a lonely voyager through this immense tract of nature. Few and far between one arrives at a small town, the first indications of "civilisation" being the ramshackle wooden dachas surrounded by vegetable patches and all manner of scrap - from rusting bus chassis to heaps of used timber. And then one arrives at the railway station, more often than not a single functional building with a few crumbling concrete platforms. Somehow the simplicity of these minor stations was refreshing and re-assuring.

So arriving at a major city is a real event in the life of the Trans-Siberian train traveller. Irkutsk in particular does not disappoint. The marks of the city, huge factories and sprawling housing estates, start several km before one arrives. Crossing the broad and crystal clear Angara river is truly arresting. One of Siberia's many great rivers, the Angara flows northwards from Irkutsk, undisturbed by human life for the next 300km until it reaches the town of Bratsk. The vastness of nearly everything in Siberia is awe-inspiring - I love it here!

A Day at the Baikal Banya

It was a glorious sunny morning at Irkutsk's Raketa ferry port. I sat with coiled anticipation as the Russians gathered in clumps, the universal greeting "zdrastvitse" resounded amidst the clasping of hands and generous embraces. We were all looking forward to our journey along Baikal, the worlds greatest lake! We set off 40 minutes later than the scheduled time on my ticket but I didn't mind a bit, it was just wonderful to be taking a cruise up the Angara river and onwards to Olkhon Island. Olkhon is halfway up Baikal, about 300km north of the Angara estuary, and is regarded as one of the main centres of shamanic energy in Siberia. I was planning to be there for the summer solstice and also to rendezvous with a delightful swiss woman called Denise whom I'd met in



Lenin at Irkutsk

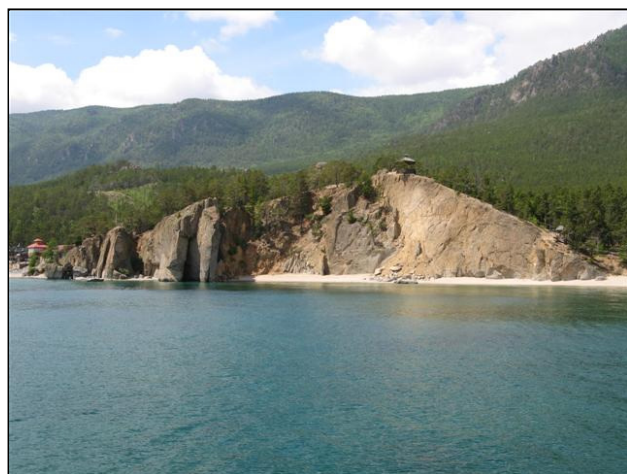
Irkutsk. The river passage, the lake, shamans and a rendezvous were all guaranteed to put a spring in the step. But more than this the awareness of Baikal's ecological uniqueness and its vastness inspire feelings of great awe. A long time dream to visit this natural wonder was about to be fulfilled.

The Angara river is broad as it flows the 70km from Baikal to Irkutsk. The huge 1950's hydroelectric dam at Irkutsk has utterly changed the contours, flooding the valley and sandwiching the river between distant hills on opposite banks. Yet the final passage to the mouth of the river is dramatic, weaving through steep hills that close in on the deepening river. As the ferry navigated the turns we passed rusting hulls driven up onto the gravelly banks.

At Port Baikal, our first stop, I was missing a crucial piece of information, I needed to change boat here to get to my destination. With hindsight I have sought long and hard for any clues that might have alerted me to this vital knowledge. The cashier who sold the ticket said nothing, the ticket itself - though giving time and destination - makes no note of a change, at Raketa port I saw no timetable, nor on the ferry itself, my guide book made no mention and the *provodnitsa* who checked my ticket onto the ferry said nothing. There was a brief announcement in Russian just as the ferry left Raketa, and I listened hard for the magic word "Olkhon", but since it wasn't named I assumed the announcement didn't relate to my itinerary. In short there was virtually no way for me to discover the information I so vitally needed excepting some good luck, like meeting a Russian who spoke English and knew the ropes. On this occasion my luck was out so I stayed on the wrong boat at Port Baikal.

However I enjoyed 3 hours of blissful ignorance as we headed north up the lake, marvelling at the cliffs, forests, the limpidity and sheer expanse of fresh water. When we arrived at our final destination, which clearly wasn't Olkhon Island there was a kerfuffle between the *provodnitsa*, the gangway boy and I. They were insistent that I disembark with all the remaining passengers. The place we'd arrived was barely a one horse village, little more than a dozen buildings wedged between the beach and the steep forested hills. It was a beautiful little bay, caught between two granite outcrops, really lovely but for all I could see not even connected to the rest of Russia by a road. Many of the small settlements on Baikal are only reachable by boat in summer or across the ice in winter. I declined to disembark and be stranded there, showing my ticket clearly marked "Olkhon" which was perhaps another 150km up the lake. There followed a rather heated exchange with the *provodnitsa* as she insisted that we weren't going to Olkhon, and as she kept repeating something in Russian the truth dawned on me "I should have changed boat at Port Baikal." The amazing thing is that the meaning became clear in the intensity of the communication even though the words still didn't make sense to me.

At this point our jovial Captain intervened, mollifying the *provodnitsa* so that I wasn't castaway 100km from anywhere on the edge of the Great Lake. Rather I was allowed to remain on board as the crew took a 2 hour break before the scheduled return to Irkutsk. I relaxed a little, though things were still a bit tense between *provodnitsa* and I, but our Captain's warm eyes, broad grin, jovial manner and bulbous moustache seemed to say to all of us "don't worry, everything will work out okay." I even got a smile from *provodnitsa* as she said in English "lunch!"



Baikal beach

Gliding like a swam, our ferry backed out of the bay, rounded the next headland and beached on an even more secluded and lovely spot. Down went the gangway onto the sand, and off went the uniforms, all the crew changing into casual dress. Somewhat forlorn I plodded down the beach with my lunch bag, surveying the world's greatest lake on a gorgeous day, yet staring disappointment in the face and surveying my options. Could I get transport from here to Olkhon? Answer: no, there was no road. Could I get another boat to take me 150km up the lake? Answer: not without paying \$100s. Should I just make the best of where I'd ended up? Answer: no, since Denise, shamans, solstice celebrations and a hostel

reservation were waiting for me at Olkhon. Hence solution - I have to go back to Irkutsk with the ferry and try again tomorrow. Simple really, except emotions don't work like that! Disappointment, frustration, joy, awe - what a confusing incompatibility of feelings.

Having been lost in my inner experience for a while I began to become aware of the vast number of flying ants which were plaguing the poor cows (strange to see them drinking from a beach and decorating the sand with cowpats!), and beginning to get very interested in me and my lunch. As ever nature's beauty comes at a price - it was time to retreat to the boat. As I climbed the gangway I was surprised to see our Captain (whose name was Mikhail) and able-seaman Maxim stripped bare to the waist, wearing pyjama bottoms and carrying towels. With his broad grin the Captain said the magic word "banya?" and the other members of the crew directed my gaze to a small wooden shack with a smoking chimney. They were offering to introduce me to the Russian equivalent of the sauna, though the word "sauna" hardly begins to describe what was to follow.

Disappointment immediately washed away, like rain soaking into sand. An opportunity for an authentic rural banya on the very banks of Baikal was a good consolation prize. I grabbed my towel and fully dressed ran after Mikhail and Maxim to the general smiles of provodnitsa and the other stewardess.

The ante-chamber of the banya had me instantly sweating, itself almost as hot as any sauna I'd been in. I hesitated to leave my camera, phone and watch there lest the heat fry their electronics. Naked I entered the banya proper, the heat was like hammer on anvil. The Captain and Maxim were wearing trunks. "Die Frau!" said Mikhail emphatically - we'd discovered that we could partially communicate in German - so I put on my briefs; rather a shame in that liberating setting. And so we three sat together in the heat, as the Captain dowsed himself and then the furnace with water, creating a searing cloud of steam. Within minutes we were drenched in sweat. Suddenly Maxim was off, running out the door and down to the beach where he plunged head first into Baikal's waters. I didn't need any encouragement to follow. Ice cold is the only way to describe those waters, and as my body took the heat shock the thought flashed through my mind "how many Russians die of a heart attack doing this?" I suppose at least it would be quick and your body would be nice and clean!

We repeated this cycle several times, the banya was sometimes so hot that I had to crouch as low as possible on the floor with my hands covering my stinging face to make it bearable. The Captain laughed and gestured that I should join him and Maxim on the top bench - like a real man! On the fourth occasion I returned to find Maxim lying face down on the top bench. The Captain proceeded to brush him gently with a bundle of hot-soaked birch twigs. And then the thrashing started, all over the back, thighs and calves - Maxim loved it. Next it was the Captain's turn. As the thrashing proceeded his back became ever more intense shades of red and he seemed to both congratulate and castigate Maxim for the vigour of his lashes.

After the next plunge Maxim asked me in Russian if I would like the birch treatment - there was no mistaking his meaning. As I sat catching my breath from the last plunge he said with a smile "Let's go!" in English. The bench was almost too hot for my skin, so Maxim kindly dowsed it with water. He shook the excess water out of the twigs and started to brush my back and thighs gently with them, but with steadily stronger strokes. And then with a sudden shock the lashes began, he continued to the point where I thought my skin would be flayed, just as the pain goes over the bearable threshold - I groaned and rolled over. Maxim immediately drenched my back with soothing cool water and the whole process began again. Twice was enough for me! Clearly Maxim was doing me a great kindness (at least in his eyes) by administering this torture so I thanked him profusely in Russian as I fled from the banya and plunged, once again contemplating sudden heart failure, into icy Baikal. Wow! Is this crazy ritual one of the reasons that the Russians have remained unconquered by the greatest armies that Europe could muster - Napoleon's and Hitler's? Certainly it must breed fortitude into these tall Slavs with their hint of Tatar genes. I suspect that Maxim was an acknowledged master in administering the birch, so I feel greatly privileged to have suffered at his hand.

And so my journey to Olkhon became a day out at the Baikal banya. Perhaps a rather expensive way to experience this quintessential Russian rite of passage, via a 12 hour round-trip on a boat, but nonetheless indisputably a taste of the real thing. And as I wondered at the ferocity of the Russian sauna and if the red blotches on my skin would be gone by the morning, I also contemplated the complete lack of information that a poor English tourist faces in such a situation. Perhaps this is

another source of great strength in the Russian people - the need for self reliance and good preparation. You better know what you're doing before you embark on it, because sure as hell the bureaucracy and public services won't help you!

14th July 2008

Dear Friends,

Attached are two pieces about my visits to the Buddhist temples in Buryatia around Ulan Ude (the capital) and my onward journey to Japan which was very dramatic at times. There are also a few pictures to whet your appetite.

I`m getting used to being in Japan, it is another blast of culture shock, from cabbage, buckwheat and fading soviet blocks to the glitz and distraction of first world living. I am in Sapporo, capital of the northern island of Hokkaido, and plan to visit some volcanoes before getting the ferry to northern Honshu. There are some interesting Buddhist temples and holy mountains there I want to see before heading for the classical sites of Kyoto, Nara and Kamakura. It`s great being in Japan, but hard on the pocket and being vegetarian is just as tough as Russia!

Lots of love rijumati

It was raining hard, in a uniquely Siberian torrent, as train 240 from Novosibirsk approached Ulan Ude. I felt the by now familiar mix of excitement and anxiety that assails me on every new Russian destination. My poor abilities in Russian and unfamiliarity with the culture means that there is always the possibility some completely basic need will become an insurmountable problem. Will I find somewhere affordable to stay, will I meet anyone with whom I can communicate, will I find some decent vegetarian food, will I figure out how to get about using the public transport system? These seemingly trivial tasks loom like Sisyphian obstacles, to be overcome again and again.

For instance it took me 3 days in Ulan Ude to do some laundry. My first attempt was to ask at my hotel, so I prepared my vocabulary meticulously writing down the words for laundry, cool wash, no tumble dry. But I was staying at the Hotel Barguzin, cheapest of the cheap, and after my virtuous performance for the floor babushka in halting Russian I was given the key to a room with an ironing board. Returning with my laundry in hand I tried to explain to her that I needed washing not ironing but I got the familiar "can't help you" blank stare. She seemed much more interested in what was on TV. After that I gave up even trying to ask her for a bucket!

My next idea was to find a laundrette - have you ever seen one in Russia? From the outset this idea seemed even more doomed than trying to do laundry at the hotel.

By now most of my clothes had been slept in, covered in Siberian mud and sweated through for at least 2 weeks. In short they were beginning to walk of their own accord. So when a couple of days later I moved into Ulan Ude's women's datsan (the nearest thing to a Buddhist nunnery - now there is another story) I thought I was in with a chance to do some hand-washing. I went to the supermarket to look for hand-washing liquid or powder. Russians obviously delight in economies of scale for most of the packets I could find were 2kg or 5kg bags, not very appealing to a round the world traveller! The smallest I could find was a 500ml bottle of what looked like liquid soap. I attempted to ask one of the supermarket assistants if it was for washing clothes, by using a combination of mime (pretending to wash my T-shirt whilst wearing it), a few Russian words and the appropriate english words. She obviously enjoyed the performance and gave me a confident "da" - "yes". So to my great relief I picked up the fluid and headed for the checkout.

The only problem was when I finally managed to borrow a bucket at the datsan - which in itself took some miming and mangled Russian - and soak my clothes there was no lather and no suds, in fact this magic fluid seemed to just disappear into the water leaving no trace but a faint synthetic perfume. At last Zorigma, my Buddhist hostess, who speaks basic english, turned up and I explained the problem to which she burst out laughing - "you buy anti-static!" Fortunately she actually needed some anti-static and had some hand-washing powder to give me. Sometimes after all the trials and

tribulations you're get really desperate for a lucky break!

But there is the other side to travelling in Russia. Every day is a new challenge and my time here feels very much like a child's time where each day is immensely long; I can barely connect with what I was doing a week ago. There is something about the complete unfamiliarity of the simplest things that turns one inside out. I both love and dread this aspect of being in Russia. I love it because it feels so alive and fresh, I dread it because there is no place to hide from the uncertainties and confusions.

Each city has it's own quirks which take a while to learn, and in the inevitable moving on of the traveller one is always leaving behind the known, moving into the great Unknown. And that is why arriving at a new destination in Russia is guaranteed to fill me with excitement and anxiety. Yet somehow things always seems to work out okay, though often in the most unexpected ways.

Zorigma arrived at Hotel Barguzin rather flustered, she was 40 minutes after the agreed time and I'd all but given up hope of meeting her. In fact Zorigma is often flustered, it just seems to be one of her natural modes of existence. She is a warm and generous single mother, with two lovely young daughters, a big smile and an air of busyness. She effectively runs the Zungond Darshay women's datsan (Buddhist temple) in Ulan Ude, hence my invitation to stay there.

The Zungond Darshay datsan isn't a nunnery by any stretch of the imagination, in fact it seems that what really makes it the "women's datsan of Ulan Ude" is that all the people who work here are women. Zorigma is the manageress, Olga runs the shop and Svedlama seems to do the fortune telling - at least I think that's what she was doing with an elderly Buryat gentleman when I arrived. Svedlama is a confusing mix of elegant, long flowing hair and stilettos, but with a monastic maroon gown as if she were in a kind of nun. Perhaps stilletoes and robes go together in Buryat culture. Certainly almost all the women that I've seen in Siberia dress attractively, sometimes even provocatively in skimpy curve accentuating garments. The women at Zungond Darshay datsan were always smartly done out, unlike the nuns I'd stayed with in Nepal's Nagi Gompa.

Living in the datsan was basic. On one side of the temple there was a small room with a desk and an appallingly hard wooden bench - which became my bed. On the other side was a kitchen and a toilet. Unfortunately there was no shower so on my first day there Zorigma deposited me at the nearest municipla banya. Here I joined the men of Ulan Ude in their ritual steamings and thrashings, which was a bit strange as the outside temperature was about 28°C. The banya was about a 20 minute journey by public transport so that rather dampened my aspirations for regular personal hygiene. In the end I resorted to locking myself into the tiny toilet and doing my best to have a bucket bath without completely soaking the floor.

The datsan was however a very friendly place to stay. Olga and Albertin - the security man - always greeted me warmly and although we had no common language we managed to have many "conversations" about practical matters as well as the weather! Every morning there is a puja from 9.30-11am. The chant is in Tibetan with much ringing of bells and beating of drums, it felt very much like the Tibetan temples I'd visited in Nepal

Buryat Peregrinations

Svedlama is a short round woman, with an absolute bundle of energy, a deep love of Buryatia and a desire to show its delights to others. What more could one want from a tour guide? If I'd met her twenty years ago I don't think I'd have been up to matching her pace, as it was the first day we spent together nearly wiped me out. When, at the end of it she propped that we start an hour earlier the following morning, and with an even more ambitious itinerary I couldn't help but accept. Probably fifteen years her junior, and certainly with greater physical fitness, it seemed like a challenge not to be missed. What kind of traveller was I if I couldn't keep up with Svedlana? Answer: definitely not the sort of traveller I wanted to be!

Slava is an excellent driver, in fact he is so good that he drives every kilometre of Buryat road as if he were in a Trans-Siberian motor rally. On the unmade sand and gravel roads, with frequent dips and potholes, he "only" averages about 80km/hour, whilst on the single carriageway metalled roads, also with frequent dips and potholes, he averages about 110km/hour. I would probably only get close to that speed on an empty European motorway! So the experience of being driven by Slava is like

having one's organs and ligaments gradually prized apart inside a small vibrating box.

The amazing thing about my two day tour of the Buryat Buddhist sites with Svedlana and Slava was that I was actually paying them in excess of €125/day to be driven to exhaustion and shaken to pieces. I wouldn't have missed for anything!

On our first day we headed for the famous datsans of east Buryatia. With glorious blue skies I felt a leap of joy as we left the contained sprawl of Ulan Ude and hit the wide open spaces of the Uda valley steppe. Our first venue was a ridge top cafe, where we stopped for a timely breakfast - or perhaps one should call it brunch. There were looks of dismay as it emerged that I don't eat meat, chicken or fish (somehow chicken seemed to get classed as a flesh in its own category). How could one stay warm in the Siberian winter without eating meat? Svedlana wanted to know, I declined to answer with the obvious "use central heating and eat lots of carbohydrates" However Svedlana



interrogated the waitress, as only a native speaker of her energy could do, and proceeded to order everything on the menu that didn't contain meat or fish. A seeming assumption of many Buryats who learnt I was vegetarian was that I needed to eat vast volumes of food compared to meat eaters. So I breakfasted on borscht (beetroot soup which had some suspiciously meaty flecks in it), cabbage piroshki (dumplings), coleslaw salad and sweet pancakes. Not the most obvious selection of flavours and textures, but wholesome enough.

As we left the café, heartily full, Slava wound down his window and chucked some money out. An action he repeated each time we crossed a pass between two valleys. I never quite decided whether this local custom was utterly profligate or wonderfully unattached. The coins tossed away were usually 10 kopeks which in any case is an almost worthless denomination.

The Astagat datsan is famed for its once great library. Like almost all the datsans (temples) of Buryatia it was destroyed during the purges of the 1930s, but the library was preserved and sent to for safe-keeping to the museum in Ulan Ude. The head Lama here is a sturdy Buryat, married with a family, and with a firm gaze in which he fixed me. We spoke, with Svedlana's translation, for 20 minutes before he took us to the small museum dedicated to Lama Agvan Dorzhiev, most famous of all Buryatia's lamas. He became well-known to Tsar Nicholas II and was responsible for building western Russia's first Buddhist temple in St. Petersburg, which amazingly survives to this day. He lived at the Astagat datsan for many years before his death after WWII.

Svedlana prides herself on never forgetting how to get to a place once visited, no matter how long ago. Our visits to the remote datsans of Buryatia were to test her to the limits. But she always got us there in the end. The Aninski datsan is one of the most remote, and wonderfully so! Slava took us off the metalled road into the wide open steppe. We followed furrowed tracks through the vast grasslands or even just drove "wild" across them. Even GPS navigation would have been no use since we'd left the roads behind. Aninski was built by a well-known Irkutsk architect in the 19th century and has the honour of being the first brick datsan ever built. It was styled on a church design and in it's prime must have been very impressive. Now however it was a ruin, destroyed during Stalin's repression in the 1930's.



**Rijumati and
Lama Leksok**

As we approached we saw two cars also driving across the grass in the opposite direction, both full of monks. One of the cars stopped and out got the portly and beaming young Lama Leksok, head of the datsan. He happily joined our car and took us on a tour of his datsan, explaining the history and detailing the plans they have for rebuilding the datsan. Across the plain we could see some wooden buildings, the current monastery, to which I was invited to do a retreat when I had time - I wish I could have stayed with them, it would make an ideal setting for meditation and study! Lama Leksok has plans to build 108 stupas all around the vast valley, each one paid for by a different local family, and already about a dozen dotted the horizon. These stupas gave the prairie a rather magical feeling, as if the local spirits were gathering – you can see a photo of them on the next page.

Buryatia's most holy Buddha statue is the *Sangden-Jo* or Sandalwood Buddha. The faithful believe it to be 2500 years old, having been carved when the Buddha was still alive, but it is clearly of Tibetan or Mongolian origin, perhaps several hundred years old. In any case the age is rather unimportant since it is indeed a beautiful wood carved standing Buddha with a serene face and uplifted gaze. I felt inspired in its presence, as no doubt many thousands of Buddhists have been before me. So in this new purpose built shrine room at the Evinski datsan I made an incense offering and chanted some sacred verses. This seemed to cause a bit of a stir since several people including two young monks gathered to listen. The new shrine hall was still being finished for the forthcoming grand opening and we were amazingly fortunate to actually see the *Sangden-Jo* because he had only been brought here the previous day!



Our last Buddhist site in the south of Buryatia was a visit to the remote and unassumingly beautiful Sartaktey valley, only 30 km from the Mongolian border. Here rolling forested hills clasp a narrow valley with a lovely river and flowering meadows. From time to time a rocky outcrop bursts through the forest to shatter to flowing contours and add a sense of the dramatic to the this picturesque valley.

As we progressed further and further up the valley the unmade road became a dirt track and then the dirt track became two muddied furrows, until finally we were just driving across the grasses in open fields. Our car was pursued by swarms of vicious looking horseflies up to 3cm long and with fearsome proboscis that would easily extract a small chunk of flesh. I was immensely thankful for the protection of an automobile, out in the open one would be sorely plagued, as were the poor herds of cows and horses that we passed from time to time.

Finally Slava literally drove us up a hillside as far as we were able, and suddenly we discovered a stupa surrounded by flags amidst the pines. Three Buddhas were represented in bas-relief, blue, red and yellow. 200m away was a tiny wooden cabin with some Buddhist images and the start of a wooden staircase that climbed steeply up the hillside. Slava counted 246 steps as we ascended to a tiny clearing in the slanting forest where, decorated all around by flags, was a small hole in the ground, about 70cm square, topped with a grassy covering. Climbing inside I found myself in a space about 2m square and 1m high, lined with untreated timbers and furnished with just a small brick stove. There was only enough room to sit up in one corner.

The site commemorates the life of Hambo Lama Darmaev. The Hambo Lamas are the head lamas of Buryat Buddhism, equivalent to the Dalai Lama for Tibetans. During the Stalinist purges of the 1930s all the Buryat lamas were either killed or imprisoned. Lama Darmaev was sent to the gulags, but at

some point he was either lost from his transport or managed to escape. The guards left him for dead, but he was found, barely alive, by local Buryat people and they built this tiny hole in ground to shelter him from the secret police. Here he lived for 3 years, facing the bitter Siberian winters and the vicious summer bloodsuckers in his little "cave". It is hard to imagine how, but he survived and in 1947 he became the Hambo Lama, later founding one of the most important new datsans of Buryatia, the study centre at Volga which has trained a whole new generation of monks.

Cramped but comfortable I lit a candle and serendipitously found some dry incense with which to make an offering. I chanted ancient Buddhist verses to celebrate this amazing feat of survival and the life that Lama Darmaev lived for the Dharma. Just contemplating his struggles and his successes I find deeply moving.

Siberia is staggeringly large. Though Ulan Ude is already more than halfway across from west to east, it still takes two days by train to cross to the border with the Russian Far East, the Pacific territory dominated by the cities of Vladivostok and Khabarovsk. And of course from north to south it is even bigger, reaching from the mountain borders with Mongolia and China to the Arctic ocean and such exotic destinations as Europe's largest island, Novaya Zemlya.

The only way to really get a sense of this vast landscape is to journey through it tree by tree, river by river, valley by valley, mile after mile, day after day. Sometimes the Trans-Siberian railway is enveloped in a sheath of trees - an endless procession of pine, birch, larch and cedar. After hours of the taiga forest one begins to long for a clearing or view of the far horizon. Sometimes one emerges into a vast grassland of gently rolling hills, the huge steppe skies looming above, the green meadows speckled with flowers and vanishing in the far distance. Here one is touched by the sense of sublime emptiness. The third mood of Siberia is the river valley, of which there are very many in this mighty territory. From time to time the train weaves its path by the side of a fast moving tract of water as it dodges the hills. Built in an era of vastly slower trains and crossing such varied terrain very little of the Trans-Siberian railway is actually straight.

Lastly there are the hamlets, towns and cities, lonely outposts in an immense wilderness. With the forest such a huge natural resource the hamlets are invariably all comprised of traditional style wooden cabins and houses. The only concession to modern building materials is the corrugated iron roof. The first signs of an approaching habitation is a thinning of the trees, tidy little potato patches eked out from the forest and the emergence of a mobile phone signal! For the greater part of Siberia you can forget about anything other than satellite communications. And then come the dwellings, lonesome at first, just a single blackened log house surrounded by a grey weathered wood fence. But then the houses gather in little clusters until finally one reaches something resembling a town. The concrete cities are so far apart - usually at least 600km - that they feel like rare visitors to a vast nature reserve.

Long distance train life revolves around station stops, sleeping and the ubiquitous "lapsha" or noodles. When it comes to sleeping and noodles we all seem to make our own routines, some sleep during the day, and eat late in the evening. I prefer to try and keep my body clock adjusted to local time zones, which usually change an hour a day. But the station stops are of necessity a collective exodus. As our provodnitsa opens the door and wipes the handles, we queue to be first out, down the four steep steps and onto the rough concrete which serves as a platform. The first out is the first to get to the station "magazin" or shop and thus the first to buy whatever is going. The other urgent reason to exit from the train is the call of the cigarette, a habit that is alive and well in Russia, though thankfully all the train carriages are non-smoking. Usually there are some elderly babushkas walking with slow effort along the platform, selling their home produce, which is invariably better than the shop produce. The babushkas might sell anything from hard boiled eggs to meat filled dumplings, and often there is the feeling that one should buy their wares regardless of whether one wants it. Supporting babushkas is something of a national pastime, especially since the collapse of the Soviet system has left so many of them with little security in their old age.

How can one fully express the importance of the instant noodle on Russian trains. From dawn to dusk a steady stream of people, clasping their pots and bowls, make their way to the samovar. Here the noodles are doused in boiling water - at least 90°C - and with a hallowed reverence, slowly transported back to the appropriate berth. I find the collective awe of the noodle amazing, people move carefully out of the way, children are shooshed to the side, as if a holy ikon were about to pass.

Or is it just that carrying boiling water on a jolting train is liable to create scalding accidents. Either way, the noodle is a central feature of train life and the closest thing to a collective ritual.

Of course there are noodles and there are noodles. Some come in large polystyrene trays replete with flavourings, assorted and indistinguishable freeze-dried bits, vineagrette "sauce" and even their own plastic fork. These are the instant noodle kings. Others are just plain in a little plastic covering, the gourmet required to provide his own bowl and fork. And then there are the personal additions that each person makes to his or her noodle feast. Mayonnaise is very common, and also chunks of tinned meat - though in my vegetarian eyes most of it bears close resemblance to dog food. Here one can see the personal creativity of the Russian traveler taken to new heights - what can one do to make these noodles more exciting? Usually I could only find chicken flavour - though I was confident that the powdered flavouring contained nothing extracted from a real chicken. When I got lucky there was the option of mushroom flavour, though in truth the difference between mushroom and chicken was hardly worth the effort of the search.

And so one grows to love the daily cycle of instant noodles, somehow marking the long miles of forest and grassland with tasty E-numbers.

Making Friends

Arriving on Train 054 from Kiev to Vladivostok, I was billeted with two sturdy Russian men, Vlada and Sasha. They gave the barest acknowledgement of my "zdrastvyute" but I recognised this as a typical Russian beginning of acquaintance. My Russian-American friend Anatoly once gave me some very helpful advice about Russians: "At first they seem really cold and unfriendly, but once they know you, you'll be accepted as one of their own." And so it was that Vlada, Sasha and I became warm friends during the two days that we lived together in the intense intimacy of plaskart life. Here there is nowhere to stash your pretensions, you see each other in all modes and moods. In fact most Russians seem to see a plaskart journey as a way to let their hair down in public. The men are often bare to the waist (only in summer of course), exposing their vast dumplinged bellies unabashed. The women dress in pyjamas or skimpy shorts, as if they were pottering about the house prior to a visit to the beach. Yet though there are certainly some attractive "malchiks & devushkas" all this bare flesh isn't in the least bit erotic. It just represents a kind of shared family life in a safe public space. So the station stop exodus can be quite a remarkable spectacle. Suddenly 100s of semi-naked beings erupt onto the platform and mix in complete unselfconsciousness with correctly presented railway staff and formally attired new travellers who haven't yet "gone native." No one seems to be in the slightest bit aware of the incongruity of these two modes mingling, it is a just a natural part of Russian railway life.

With Vlada and Sasha I bided my time, it's best not to try and make friends too fast, that doesn't work. Soon Vlada, a solid hulk of a man at 56, got interested and started to ply me with questions in Russian. We managed with some effort to get through the essentials. He and Sasha were going to Vladivostok to buy Japanese cars which they would transport to Novosibirsk for resale. Judging by their familiarity with all aspects of the journey it was one they had made many times. Vlada seemed to take a paternal interest, plying me with tea, biscuits, wanting to know why I wasn't married, offering to find me a wife! Though in reality only 13 years my senior I had acquired a temporary new father. Sasha, probably in his mid-30s, was more reserved, perhaps as the dominant alpha male in our berth of 5 men and 1 woman, it was up to Vlada to take the lead. When on occasion I joined in with a 4-way game of cards, without really understanding the rules, Vlada kept a close eye, giving me winning advice at key moments and trying to stop the others from sneaking a glimpse of my hand. Fortunately there was no vodka drinking so I didn't have to decline insistent offers. Vlada was the main drinker, downing about 2 or 3 bottles of bear as the evening wore on.

Khabarovsk

Khabarovsk is a strikingly beautiful city. Set on hills above the eastern bank of the vast Amur river - which is perhaps 2 km wide - its smart new buildings and tidy streets mark it out as one of the gems of the Russian Far East. It was established as a military outpost in 1858, when the Russians and the Manchus were fighting over rights to the Amur. Its proximity to China has led to a flourishing trade, hence the the wealthy appearance.

A wonderful way to get a sense of the city is an evening riverside promenade. One passes by the cathedral, grand tsarist buildings and a memorial to the Bolshevik Far East victory in 1922. But most of all one sees the citizens of Khabarovsk in all their guises: smartly dressed children shouting and

playing, flirting young couples in their trendy best, young families with new prams, deep furrowed faces of drinking companions, wealthy middle-aged men and women strolling confidently and elderly dedushkas and babushkas walking with slowly. In short the promenade displays the seven ages of man, and the confidence of the city radiates out.

Sailing to Sakhalin

Arriving at Port Vanina to take the ferry to Sakhalin island when one has a reservation is an appalling experience. Arriving without a reservation is downright hellish. Since neither my guide book nor the travel agent with whom I enquired gave me any reasonable hope of being able to make a reservation I was destined for 20 hours of hell - the time it took to acquire a ticket and be "herded" on board.

My Caucasian friend Oleg (who is literally from the Caucasus) and I effectively spent 16 hours of that time queuing for a ticket, and up until the very last minute I had no idea whether we would actually embark or not. The details of the appallingly brutal ticketing system are tedious in the extreme. Suffice to say that hours of queuing in a dingy station hall were followed by hours of awaiting the cashier's return, and all the time one was uncertain what was going on or whether and when tickets would become available. From our trains arrival at 8am until midnight, just one hour before the scheduled departure, we queued with intermittent breaks. Just to put this in perspective, the SANES (Sakhalin ferry line) ticketing process is by far the worst experience of public transport that I've ever been through. Even the worst that India and Nepal can throw at you pales in comparison. The sheer callousness of the mechanism is staggering: virtually no information is forthcoming, there is just one cash desk, a grindingly slow process for each person, a stony faced cashier, no idea of one's chances of procuring a ticket, or even when or how to try.

And this isn't just because I'm a crazy english tourist way off the beaten track and lost in the Russian bureaucracy. They savvy Russians who knew the system and could pronounce with confidence the magic word "brony" (reservation), also had an awful time of it. By 2pm the cashier was issuing tickets to the "privileged" brony holders, but the scene was not a pretty one! A semi-circular scrum had formed around the cash window, with shouting and physical presence being used to their utmost to get to the pole position. It was every man for himself, or perhaps I should say every woman for herself, since it was the formidable middle-aged *zhenas* who seemed dominant. The pack had a visceral feel, and as one person got their prized little white slip there was a sudden surge to take their place, leading to one hefty zhenas almost punching her way out with her ticket in hand. Predictably those who were most unpleasant seemed to fare better, the more generous spirits, of which Oleg and I were but two, finding themselves always at the back.

Watching the people one could see frustration, anger, despair and finally relief or triumph when the moment came that they received the magic paper. Some had a selfish look "I'm getting my ticket so get out of my way!" others had a sort of sympathetic "this is really awful isn't it!" As the hours passed, and I was constantly aware that my Russian visa was expiring soon so that there was little margin for error with my voyage to Japan, I found myself passing through an ebb and flow hope and hopelessness. Someone would say that unreserved tickets would go on sale at 4pm: hope! By 6pm we were no nearer getting at ticket: hopelessness! The darkest hour was just after 6pm, hopelessness reached a peak and Oleg decided to give our passports to a complete stranger who would keep our place in the queue. I was understandably very jumpy about this, protesting and continuing to queue to make sure that he didn't disappear with our precious documents. Oleg tried to convince with "this is Russia, it's okay." In the end I bowed to his greater knowledge, there seemed little hope of any other strategy other than just giving up and trying to get a train to Vladivostok instead - which is 40 hours away. There followed a buttock clenching couple of hours when the stranger did in fact disappear with our passports and I contemplated the Russian police, British consular services and trying to explain why I'd given up my passport to a total stranger. Oleg was utterly unconcerned and somewhat amused at my regular "when do we get our passports back?" He was of course right. Faced with a legacy of appalling queues the Russian people have developed the concept of the queue "person on duty." One person, usually a total stranger, will look out for the places of a number of others who are then free to go and do other things with their time. A very humane and communally spirited response to the bureaucracy!

Another response that I noticed in my mind was looking for someone to blame for our collective suffering. I couldn't really blame the aggressive men and women for their selfishness since under these conditions such behaviour was bound to come out. I couldn't really blame the cashier since

though slow and stony she was just working within a brutal system. For a short while I tried to pin the blame onto Oleg "why doesn't he push harder and get to pole position?" Of course if he was that kind of guy we wouldn't have become friends, and I myself wasn't prepared to act like that, so my blame was absurd. I confess that my least charitable thoughts were for the management of SANES ferry line. I had them all sent to a gulag where they perpetually queued for the basic necessities of life without ever knowing if they would receive them. But they were probably just running a company that had had no investment for a decade. Finally I blamed myself "why did you come here?" But self-blame isn't my forte so in the end there was no one to blame; just the awareness that we'd all ended up here because we wanted something - a journey to Sakhalin - and the process of obtaining that was virtually guaranteed to bring out the worst in people.

Towards midnight the hope and hopelessness oscillated increasingly rapidly. Our man on duty is at the front of the queue but he's given the passports back to Oleg; Oleg is now at the front of the queue but a late person with a reservation has arrived and takes priority; Oleg is giving the cashier our money but she's querying my British passport... The oscillations were so rapid that I almost lived the emotions in frozen moments of time: "this is ridiculous, it's just a goddam boat ticket!" Finally Oleg emerged with our tickets, I felt some relief but I was also sad at the collective frustration we'd all been through and aware that many people still didn't have a ticket.

The story doesn't end there. Two hours after the scheduled 1am departure there was still no information about when our ferry would be ready. Some bright spark realised that the transit bus was outside, so like a flock of sheep we all marched out to spend a freezing 30 minutes in a midnight carpark; the bus was parked up with no driver. Eventually people drifted back into the warmth of the waiting room until around 5am we got the announcement that the bus was ready to go. It was clearly too small to take everyone and there was the same animal frenzy to get in that I'd seen at the cash window - 'crazy Russia' was Oleg's comment! By this time, tired and cold I just joined the melee and pushed my way on. In fact the frenzy was totally pointless since at the other end we waited 20 minutes on a freezing foggy quay for the second bus load to arrive before the crew let us on board. Here was another small act of carelessness, why couldn't the crew be prepared to welcome us straight away? This time I imagined having the whole SANES management shot! At last the hells began to recede. Some relief came as we found our bunks in the smelly bowels of the ship, were given linen and collapsed into sleep after 20 hours doing battle with the ferry company systems.

The epilogue is that the 22 hour crossing was in itself rather pleasant - calm seas, a sedate rate of knots, alternate fog and brilliant sunlit seas, passable canteen food and a friendly young provodnitsa. We were woken up at 3am with every expectation of disembarking at 4am but the fog around Kholmsk was viscously thick. In the dark and fog our ferry stopped engines and drifted off shore, waiting for an opportunity. Occasionally there was a distant blast of a foghorn from Kholmsk harbour, perhaps 1 or 2 km away. As I stood on the freezing deck, the damp air chilling to the bones, the sea was deathly still. Somewhere 'out there' was an intermittent snorting, my mind raced with possibilities from dolphins or whales to mythological giants ready to pull us down to Davy Jones' locker. Finally I caught a glimpse of a beautiful sleek seal. In the end the fog delayed us about 10 hours, drifting to and fro. A journey that I thought would take about 20 hours in fact had in fact taken us 56 hours. As Oleg said 'eta zhivu!' - 'that's life!' Lucky I had a few days in hand!

Sakhalin island, nearly 1000km long, fought over by Russia and Japan, now dripping in oil money, is a very beautiful place. A powerful ridge of hills runs like a long spine from the northern tip in the Sea of Okhotsk to the southern tip just 100km from Japan. Here the range break into two spurs so that the capital, Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk is caught in a pincer between them on a large plain. This makes for a dramatic cityscape where as one gazes along the long straight boulevards east and west the view terminates in steep forested vistas. Crossing the hills by bus one weaves through the valleys following the path carved by the fast flowing rivers. And Sakhalin in summer is indescribably green and fecund. Everywhere in these rain drenched hills plants are growing profusely, trying to get as much out of the growing season before the winter snows arrive.

At Korsakov immigration I had prepared myself for a fight. Tales abound of foreigners being stung for \$50 or more when leaving Russia for not having enough registration stamps from their stay. Here are the remains of an obsolete system, suspicious of what you've been doing in Mother Russia. These days it seems to be more about making money than security. One is obliged to get a stamp from every place one stays for more than 3 days, but of course in practice it is impossibly unworkable to

get a stamp from everywhere and for my 4 weeks in Russia I had only managed two! So "where have you been for the rest of your stay?" is the obvious ruse of an immigration officer wanting to make a bit of extra money out of an exiting tourist. As the only english speaker in this far flung part of the Russian Far East I would be an obvious catch. In anticipation I had kept every train, boat ticket, hotel receipts and even a left luggage slip. I had the evidence to account for my whereabouts of everyday of my stay. But there is always the nagging doubt that a scrupulous official will find some obscure reason to relieve me of my cash. So I purposefully was only carrying a small remaining amount of roubles, my stash of "emergency euros" hidden in the deepest recesses of my luggage.

In the event the immigration was a mere 3 minute formality, the officer even met my "zdrastvyute" greeting with a slightly warm acknowledgement. His buddy eyed me closely from the barrier as we went through the admin, I looked at him directly once as if to say "I've got nothing to hide" and then avoided his gaze. I was even a little disappointed that there was no call to produce my impressive collection of train and boat tickets, some of them won with great effort. An elderly Japanese woman seemed to have a tougher time of it - perhaps she looked like a smuggler! And that was how I left Russia, something of an anticlimax after all the efforts traveling through this vast, interesting and difficult (for the western budget traveler) country.

The difference between the quality of service in Russia and Japan is graphically demonstrated by the difference between the SANES ferry to Sakhalin and the Heartland ferry to Wakkanai, Japan . Buying my ticket for Wakkanai took little more than 5 minutes in a comfortable downtown office in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk and the agent even phoned around to book me a cheap taxi to Korsakov port next morning. After Russian immigration we boarded a smart new coach in an orderly fashion, an elderly Japanese lady thanked me profusely for "letting" her sit next to me, and at the quay most of the Japanese crew were standing by to welcome us personally on board, bowing gracefully as we passed. Wow, after weeks of battling travel adventures in Russia this was a bit of a shock! Inside the ferry was spotless, modern and full of light. Economy class consisted of shoes-off seatless bays where one could sit or lie down. We left within 10 minutes of schedule. The 5 hour crossing cost 6 times more than the 22 hour (scheduled time) crossing from Port Vanina!



The sea was glassy still as the little Japanese ferry "Eins Soya" (was it perhaps made of a single piece of tofu?) made a dash for it through the fog. The boundary between sea and sky was lost, giving a horizonless sense of the infinite "out there." There were just two shades blurring imperceptibly into each other: white-grey meets green-black, like a huge natural Rothko abstract. There was something truly awesome about the stillness and the invisibility. Occasionally in the thinner patches of fog a tight flock of seabirds (possibly petrels) could be seen drifting effortlessly. One or two would chase the ferry as if to relieve the monotony. Or an air blow would break the calm waters as one saw the disappearing

head of large seal. Amazingly this freezing watery wilderness is teeming with life, especially as testified by the large clumps of seaweed that sporadically drift by.

I arrived in a grey, rainy Wakkanai. A crazy adventurer with no language, no guide book and no real destination in Japan's most northern town. Fortunately this **is** Japan and there was a tourist information with a young woman who really wanted to help. It wasn't all plain sailing though, there was a conference on and almost every room was booked out, the banks all close at 3pm giving me just 20 minutes to find an ATM, in the youth hostel the manager physically ejected me from his front reception desk for not taking my shoes off, and in my quest for a vegetarian meal at one fish restaurant they just laughed me out the door. Who says that life is dull!