

Trans-Siberian: The World's Longest Train Ride

For those who travel for the pleasure of the journey, those who believe that getting there is as much fun as being there, Russia's Trans-Siberian Railway has long been an almost mythic experience. It is the longest continuous rail line on earth, each run clattering along in an epic journey of almost six thousand miles (or about ten thousand kilometers) over one third of the globe. For most of its history, the Trans-Siberian journey has been an experience of almost continuous movement, seven days or more of unabated train travel through the vast expanse of Russia.



A great part of the pleasure of such a trip is simply sitting back and watching the land go by. However, most travelers on the Trans-Siberian find that interaction with other passengers, both Russians and tourists, is what makes the trip an unforgettable experience. Today, with far fewer travel restrictions, it is possible to use the rail journey as the core of a more varied tour. Travelers can enjoy stopovers in many of the Russian cities and towns along the route, from the historic Volga port of Yaroslavl to Irkutsk and the scenic Lake Baikal region.

Routes and Western Extensions

Travel along the Trans-Siberian Railway is usually undertaken from west to east, though it is quite possible to go in the opposite direction. Moreover, a number of choices of route are available, as are extensions of the journey on either end.

The usual route taken by travellers is the Trans-Siberian line, which runs from Moscow to Vladivostok, passing through Yaroslavl on the Volga, Yekaterinburg in the Urals, Irkutsk near Lake Baikal's southern extremity, and then Khabarovsk. From Vladivostok it is possible to continue by ferry to Niigata on the west coast of Japan.

A second primary route is the Trans-Manchurian line, which coincides with the Trans-Siberian as far as Tarskaya, a few hundred miles east of Baikal. From Tarskaya the Trans-Manchurian heads southeast into China and makes its way down to Beijing.

The third primary route is the Trans-Mongolian line, which coincides with the Trans-Siberian as far as the Buddhist enclave of Ulan Ude on Baikal's eastern shore. From Ulan-Ude the Trans-Mongolian heads south to Ulaan-Baatar before making its way southeast to Beijing.

In 1984, a fourth route running further to the north was finally completed, after more than five decades of sporadic work. Known as the Baikal Amur Mainline, this recent extension departs from the Trans-Siberian line several hundred miles west of Lake Baikal and passes the lake at its northernmost extremity. It reaches the Pacific to the northeast of Khabarovsk, at Imperatorskaya Gavan. While this route provides access to Baikal's stunning northern coast, it also passes through some pretty forbidding terrain.

History of the Railway

Russia's longstanding desire for a Pacific port was realized with the foundation of Vladivostok in 1860. By 1880, Vladivostok had grown into a major port city, and the lack of adequate transportation links between European Russia and its Far Eastern provinces soon became an obvious problem. In 1891, Czar Alexander III drew up plans for the Trans-Siberian Railway and initiated its construction. Upon his death three years later, the work was continued by his son Nicholas. Despite the enormity of the project, a continuous route was completed in 1905, having been rushed to completion by the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War the year before. The present route of the line, including both the difficult stretch around Baikal and a northerly replacement for the dangerously situated Manchurian line, was opened in 1916.

Cities and Towns along the Way

The Trans-Siberian trains stop several times a day, for periods ranging from just a few moments to almost half an hour. Even the longest stops, however, allow for little more than a quick expedition from the station to make some necessary purchases. It is possible, however, to arrange a stopover in many of the major destinations along the route, and what follows is a brief listing of some of the most popular sites.



Yaroslavl

One of Russia's oldest cities, Yaroslavl was founded by Yaroslav the Wise of Kievan Rus' in 1010. Over the next several centuries the city prospered as a trading port on the Volga and a center of textile manufacture, becoming by the 17th century the second largest city in Russia behind Moscow. Its wealthy merchant community became notable patrons of the arts, building hundreds of churches. Fortunately, the great majority of these remain intact today, making the city one of the most beautiful destinations along the railway.

Yekaterinburg

The Trans-Siberian's first major stop in Asian Russia is the major industrial city and transport hub of Yekaterinburg. The town was founded in 1721 by Catherine the Great as a fort and metallurgical factory, its position having been chosen for its strategic proximity to the great mining operations of the Urals and Siberia. Although there are few tourist sites here other than the 18th-century cathedral, the city is nonetheless of great historical interest. It was here, in a house that once stood on Liebknecht ulitsa, that Tsar Nicholas II and his family were executed on the morning of July 17, 1918. Although the house no longer exists, its site is marked by a plain wooden cross. The Imperial family, like most tourists, was brought to Yekaterinburg on the Trans-Siberian. Yekaterinburg is also notable for being the hometown of Boris Yeltsin.

Krasnoyarsk

One of the older towns in Siberia, Krasnoyarsk was founded in 1628 as a trading post along the Yenisei River. It grew rapidly when gold was discovered in the region, and eventually became a major river port and industrial center. Outside the city is the Stolby Reserve, an attractive preserve notable for the odd, columnar cliffs that rise from the river's edge inside its area. After one passes over the Yenesei, another of the Trans-Siberian's most significant border crossings takes place – one leaves the steppe and plunges into the taiga, the great forest that extends over most of Russia. The vast Siberian taiga is the largest remaining forest in the world.



Vladivostok

Vladivostok was founded in 1860 as a military outpost, but its outstanding natural harbor soon brought it prosperity as a trading port. The city's nomination as the headquarters of the Russian Pacific fleet in the 1870s brought further growth, and by the twentieth century it had become a major center of international trade. During the Soviet era, Vladivostok's military role eclipsed its trading function, and the city was closed both to foreigners and to Soviet citizens lacking special entry permission. The city was opened once again to visitors in 1992. It is currently experiencing a rapid recovery of its historic role as a major Pacific commercial port and has also maintained its naval importance as the headquarters of the Russian Pacific Fleet. Today Vladivostok is a lively, attractive city, with a wealth of attractions and, as always, a strikingly impressive harbor.

Photo: Flickr, TR archive

<http://www.geographia.com>

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