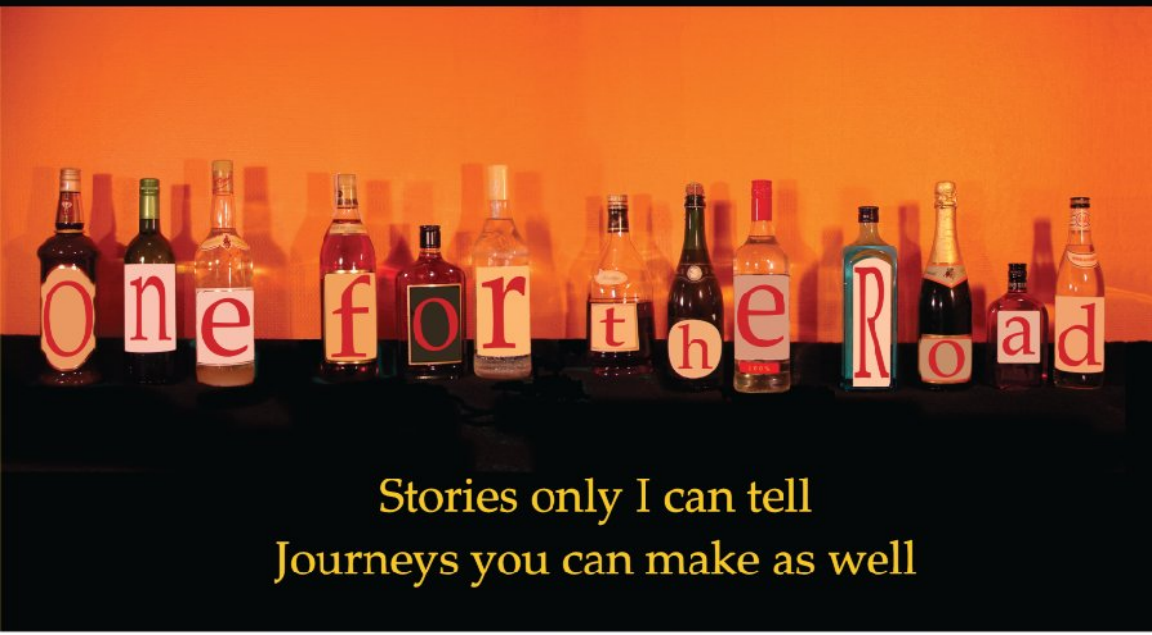
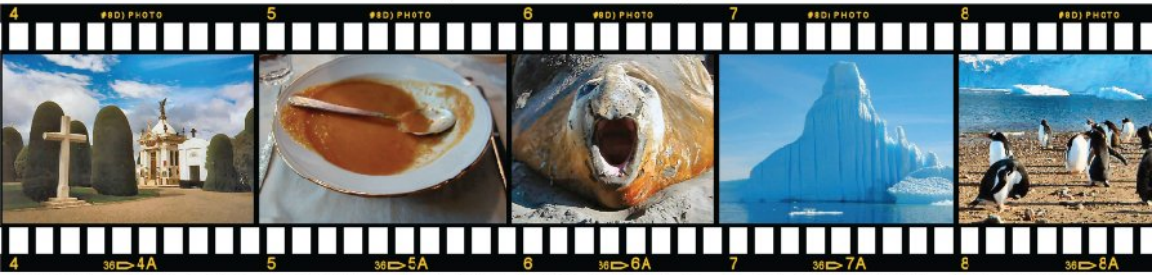
B.C. TØRRISSEN

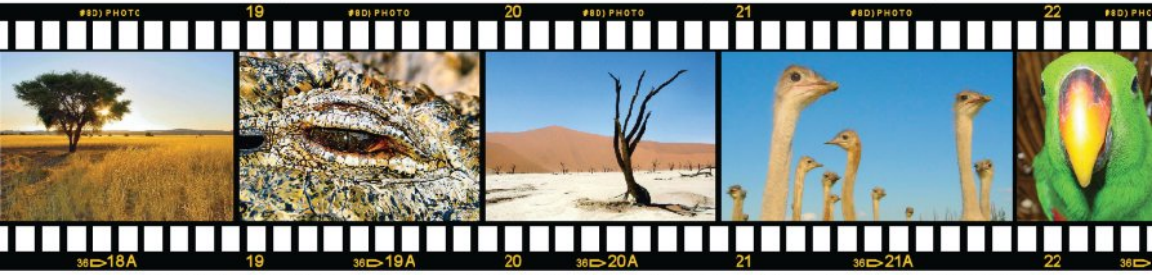


Stories only I can tell
Journeys you can make as well

FIRELAND, PATAGONIA, ANTARCTICA



SOUTH AFRICA, SWAZILAND, VIC FALLS, BOTSWANA, NAMIBIA



RUSSIAN FAR EAST, SIBERIA, URAL, VOLGA, MOSCOW

One for the Road

Stories only I can tell.
Journeys you can make as well.

Bjørn Christian Tørrissen

Translated from Norwegian by a Babel fish

USPN

Ursine Self-Publishing Nomads

Excerpt from the book One for the Road
Please consider getting the full version of the book from bjornfree.com

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Summer in the Pity

Many people say they want to go to Russia in general and to travel on the Trans-Siberian Railway in particular, although they usually know little about both the country and its trains. Often, I guess, they say this with such conviction because they know that the journey will never take place. Others actually believe that they want to go, often because they confuse the Trans-Siberian Railway with the luxurious Orient Express famous from the Agatha Christie murder mystery. They both move on rails and connect east and west, but unfortunately that's all they have in common.

So why did I go? I guess it just seemed like it was time for me to see the eastern parts of Russia. To get an idea of the size of the vast country, I wanted to travel across the whole thing, and properly. This meant two things. First, that I would spend enough time to do it thoroughly, and second, that I would stay on the ground, travelling the full length of the

Trans-Siberian Railway. The classic train journey stays inside Russia all the way, as opposed to the Trans-Mongolian and the Trans-Manchurian services. Those two only pass through half of Siberia before they turn south towards Beijing through Mongolia and China.

My plan was to begin my journey where most people end it, in Vladivostok, the largest city on the Russian east coast. While I didn't know exactly how far away Vladivostok really was, I guessed that it would be easier to time my progress through the country if I started out at the remote end. The entire time I would be moving towards an increasingly civilized Russia, towards the predictable Europe that Moscow at least in my head was part of.

Even before leaving Norway I figured out that Russia was different from most other countries. For one thing, the Russians seemed less than eager to have visitors. Unless I was content with staying just for a weekend and to spend it inside the cities of Moscow or Saint Petersburg, I would have to apply for a visa. I had visited more than fifty countries and never before had to get a visa. Pay for a stamp at the border, yes, I'd done that, but to apply for a visa well in advance? Never. To ensure maximum inconvenience I couldn't even apply for a visa without first having been invited to the country by someone in Russia, as if it was an exclusive club. I didn't know anyone in Russia, so the easiest option for me was to be invited by an expensive hotel. In contrast to the official authorities, *they* were more than happy to have some dollars come visit them.

A return ticket to Moscow was easy to arrange on my own. An invitation to Russia, a visa, a one-way flight to Vladivostok and a flexible train ticket back to Moscow seemed more of a challenge. I decided to let a travel agent help me. I went to see a company that appeared to be Russia's official visitors bureau in Norway.

A tiny babushka that looked stereotypically Russian sat behind a desk. Her hair was grey, but except for that I was certain it had looked the same at least since Yuri Gagarin became the first man in space. Her face was covered with multiple layers of make-up in a wide range of garish colours. She embodied Russia the way I imagined it, so I was convinced these people knew how to get things done in Russia.

Unfortunately my first impression was wrong. It soon became evident that the only thing there that had anything to do with Russia, was that just like in Russia, nothing worked the way it should.

I wanted to leave in the middle of July, so I went to the travel agency in May. “Sure, we can arrange all this, but since you're not leaving anytime soon, it's better if you return in a couple of weeks, and then we'll have a look at it”, she said, letting me understand that my request was simply not worthy of her time yet. “Oh, and don't try to apply for a visa on your own. Unless you get everything right there will just be a lot of trouble with the embassy”, she warned me. I should have realized that she only knew this because she rarely got anything right.

Two weeks later I went back. I brought my passport, a copy of my plane ticket to Moscow and the route and a schedule I wanted train tickets for. I felt good, happy to be almost all set for a new adventure. When I arrived at the office, the woman was yelling into a phone at some unfortunate policeman. She had just found out that an employee had stolen a *lot* of money from the company, and now the scoundrel had disappeared. Fate desperately tried to tell me that this place was nothing but trouble, and that I had better go somewhere else. Arrogantly I ignored the message.

I waited a week before returning. My passport and other papers were lying on the desk exactly where I had left them. This was actually rather impressive, given the disorganized mess of a desk, but it certainly wasn't a good sign. The woman had not even booked my plane ticket to Vladivostok. Now my departure was so close that I couldn't get the least expensive tickets any more. Instead I had to pay the standard fare, and I had to pay in cash. This travel agency didn't meddle with credit cards or any such modern-day foolishness. It began to dawn on me how easily the ex-employee could help himself to the company's money.

Another week passed, and once again little had happened. They *had* put a new man on my case, but all he had accomplished was to make my passport disappear. I joined him in searching for it, and in the end we were able to retrieve it from beneath a coffee cup and an apple in a box for paper to be recycled. My plane ticket had become even more expensive since my previous visit. The original plan had been to fly with KrasAir, but they had lost the phone number to the airline, so they put me on Aeroflot instead. I wasn't too unhappy about the lost number. "KrasAir" didn't sound too good to me. It's pronounced in a way that can't possibly be good for business, although I'm sure they meant well when they named the airline after the city Krasnoyarsk (yes, that's "crash-noyarsk"), in the middle of Siberia.

I refused to leave the travel agency until at least the plane ticket was irrevocably arranged. On the umpteenth ring Aeroflot answered the phone, and a not particularly cheap seat on one of their domestic flights was reserved for me. I still couldn't have the actual ticket, since the travel agency was unable to pay Aeroflot yet. Because of ongoing investigations related to the theft from the company, the bank wouldn't let them transfer money electronically. Instead they had to walk over to the Aeroflot office and pay in cash. And that was not possible right then, as they had spent the money I had given them the week before on something else. They told me not to worry, next week everything would be okay. No, really. Oh, and the hotel reservation and invitation I needed was also almost ready. Or at least they assumed that there had to be a hotel somewhere near the airport, and that it would be willing to receive a paying guest.

Only two weeks before my departure exactly nothing of what I had asked the travel agency to arrange was in order. During the nights I had strange dreams. I will not go into lengthy details, suffice it to say that they included Alsatian dogs with long, pointed teeth dripping with blood, angry men in uniforms and an ugly, red stamp in my passport.

The travel agency had still not found the money to pay for my plane ticket, but they *had* come up with a plan that should get me a visa to Russia a reassuring two days ahead of my flight to Moscow.

As for my train tickets, it seemed that my travel agent was still struggling with finding the Russian word for "train". Their expert in Moscow had not answered the phone for weeks. Their only way to get in touch with him was by fax, and his replies were as open to interpretation as the Bible itself. But they had found a hotel for me! Literally! The price I was quoted indicated that they had reserved the whole hotel just for me. At that price I would expect an invitation with golden letters on it. I turned down the offer. I was staying there for just a few hours overnight. If only I had not needed an invitation to this exclusive party of a country, I probably would have opted for sleeping on a bench at the airport.

All in all, I had pretty much given up on the whole thing. Less than a week before departure I went to see my travel agent again and was just met by a notice on the door saying "Closed due to illness". I couldn't help but laugh at the way this was going, when for the first time in my life I tried to use a travel agency instead of handling everything myself.

When I returned the next day the office was open, but my man wasn't there. Instead the Elephant Man had installed himself at his desk. The strange creature had found a hotel for me, close to the airport, for a hundred dollars per night. Now, that summer a hundred dollars was just half a month's salary for the average Muscovite, so this clearly was a bargain. The reason it was so cheap was that the hotel didn't have hot water, Dumbo guessed.

While I paid up, I asked Elephant Man if he had just started working there, since I had never seen him before. It turned out that he *was* my regular assistant after all. A friend of him had accidentally smashed his head into a wall, resulting in a cut above his right eye and a dramatic

swelling of the head. Quite possibly a direct consequence of him having offered to arrange a vacation for his friend, if I should venture a guess. “And that swelling of yours is *nothing* compared to what *I* will do to you if my tickets aren't ready by Friday!”, I told him, hidden inside a cough.

My visa was also finally ready. Except it was a ten day visa, and I planned to stay in Russia for a month. “No worries”, Tantor said, “I know the people at the embassy. They will change it for me”.

The next day the visa's validity had actually been changed into thirty days. Not for the days when I was going to be there, but at least we were getting closer. So, back to the embassy it went. The good news was that Mister Lumphead had somehow managed to scrape together enough money to get my ticket from Aeroflot. Things were starting to look not exactly good, but definitely better.

All the complications demanding my close attention were almost worth the hassle towards the end, as it allowed me to see how the travel agent's head developed. It was fascinating to observe it growing ever larger. I just hoped my tickets would be in order before the thing burst.

On the last working day at the embassy before my departure, finally just about everything had been sorted out. I had my invitation and my visa, an insanely expensive bed in Moscow and a one-way plane ticket to Vladivostok. My train tickets were still stuck in a parallel universe. “Errm, if you're used to travelling, and you speak Russian, I'm sure you can arrange that on your own. Or do you still want our man in Moscow to handle it for you?”, asked the man whose head now most resembled a potato on steroids. I quickly grabbed my papers, claimed to be fluent in Russian with traces of a Ural dialect, and I ran out of there, never to return.

All I had achieved through a dozen trips to the travel agency was an overpriced hotel room, an expensive plane ticket and "assistance" in driving both the visa department at the Russian embassy and myself to the brink of madness. But at last I was ready to go!

—

Considering the mess my helpers in Oslo had caused at the embassy, I couldn't believe how smoothly I was admitted entrance to Russia. Two middle-aged women in rifle-green tweed uniforms looked uninterested at my passport and at me. We were both stamped, respectively with a date and as a silly person from the West, and then I was in Russia.

The next month was all weirdness and surprises. One by one, a long row of possibilities and obstacles presented themselves. But I got off to a good start. “Thank you for your custom!”, the cash machine at the airport cheerily stated as I pulled my first Russian roubles out of it. Maybe it thought I would use the money to pay customs. It didn't matter. I had a thick wad of money, and with it hidden deep inside my pocket I walked into a realm of surrealism.

Having forced my way through a living wall of taxi drivers who on average estimated the distance to my hotel to be about one hundred kilometres, I saw it. The hotel was located less than two hundred metres away from the airport terminal. Not that there's anything special about the taxi drivers in Moscow. The same astonishing ability to misjudge distances can be found in any place where there are people who think they have too little money and who own or have borrowed a driving licence.

Entering the hotel was like walking into 1974. Dark faked wood panels covered the walls, the tables and the check-in counter. A voice full of nostalgia crackled out of a radio. Two blonde women sat behind the counter, clad in uniforms similar to those worn by the immigration officers. Three moustached, stout men wearing their shirts with the twenty-eight upper buttons unbuttoned sat deep in a sofa, working hard on filling the room with smoke using just cigarettes.

As I entered, they all stopped whatever they were doing and looked at me. They quickly gathered that I wasn't there to collect protection money for the mafia, so they went back to apparently doing nothing.

No one seemed to think I had come there for any particular reason. I looked from one check-in officer to the other. They just ignored me. I had probably missed my chance when I didn't demand a room immediately.

A notice on the wall was the only information there in English:

> ***Dear guests!***
>
> *In connection with prophylaxis works to reduce the infection,*
>
> *hot water in the hotel will be switched off from July 2 to July 30.*
>
> *The administration apologizes for temporary inconveniences.*

So it *was* true. The hotel didn't have hot water, not even for a hundred dollars a night! To reduce the infection sounded like a good idea (to *eliminate* it would be even better), but it would be nice to know exactly what kind of infection we were talking about. Were they trying to stop the Western personal hygiene imperialism? Which illnesses could actually spread through hot water at all? I tried to remember what I had learned about strange diseases before my trip to Africa, but as far as I could remember, none of those should exist in hot water pipes in Russia.

I never found out about the infection. Suddenly one of the blondes came over to me and demanded to have my passport. Since "Passport, please!" was the universal reply to any question I asked her, in the end I gave it to her. Soon thereafter I had a Russian hotel room at my disposal.

The hot water was definitely nonexistent. The cold water, however, was extremely cool and fresh. I forced myself to take a quick shower. It was useful. It made me instantly understand how the Russians must be feeling after all the ordeals they had gone through during the previous eighty years or so.

Staying in a Russian hotel is never an existence void of worries, but at least this hotel came with a list of rules to follow in order to make sure that I wouldn't trouble the hotel. According to the rules, in the original wording, I was *not* allowed:

- To let outside persons stay in the room in the guest's absence or to leave the key with them.

- To leave open running water taps and windows, to leave electric appliances and lighting switched on.
- To keep in a single room more than two pieces of luggage each exceeding 170cm as a sum of three dimensions, as well as to keep fire hazardous liquids and environment-polluting things.
- To keep in the room animals without adequate documents or without the Hotel Administration's permission.
- To use electric heating devices.

On the other hand, they *did* generously offer a number of free services:

- Waking up in the morning
- Calling first aid
- Use of first-aid kit
- Delivery of letters into the room upon their arrival
- Needles
- Threads

Not necessarily in that order, I assume, but it was nevertheless awfully nice of them. Imagine, all this for only a hundred dollars!

Most of the rules made some sort of sense, but as the room stunk intensely of ancient mildew, I took the liberty of opening a window slightly. After having audibly witnessed two jet planes race their engines, I surrendered to the mildew and battened down the hatches again. The guy at the travel agency wasn't kidding when he said that this was the hotel that was closest to the airport.

To avoid going moldy myself, I decided to go for a walk. In the corridor a woman refused to let me leave the floor until she had seen my passport. Just moments ago I had with great effort put it in the safe in my room, meaning behind a loose wall panel under my bed. But like everybody else, I had better do what the woman in the corridor, the dezhurnaya, told me to. I went back to my room to get my passport.

People who visited Russia while it still was part of the Soviet Union, often remember very little from their stay other than that they were continuously offered vodka. Something many *do* remember and will tell you about, is something like this: “And do you know, at the hotel there was a KGB agent posted in the hall to keep track of me at all times!” Since the "agents" are still sitting there years after Russia became a free country, sort of, it's time to put to death the myth about the agent in the hall.

In Russian hotels there is a tradition for having a person on watch on every floor. Usually it's a woman, and her job title is dezhurnaya, the floor manager and absolute ruler of the guests. Stay on her good side, and you will always have access to toilet paper, towels and other necessities. If asked kindly, she will walk in on your neighbour and beat him up if he's noisily drunken or just snores really loud. Often it's a grandmother figure sitting there, but dezhurnayas come in all ages and shapes. They don't have much to do, as the cleaning tasks are left to others. So to me the unfortunate women were ideal guinea pigs for my attempts at speaking Russian. They were usually so bored, that even listening to my nonsense seemed to brighten their day.

Having retrieved and presented my passport I was let out. I even got a “Shilayo ospyeha!”, “Good luck”, from her. She must have understood that I was new in her country, even though I had dressed as grey as possible and did my best to look dejected and depressed, just like the locals.

I craved food. There was a café in the first floor, but it seemed impossible to get any service there. A sign claimed it was open 24 hours a day, except for an hour around noon when there was a "technical break". Maybe the break was there so that the café workers could go for lunch? It wouldn't surprise me. At any rate, in reality they seemed to have an everlasting break, as there were no one there. The absence of cooking may very well have been a result of the mysterious infection lurking in the nooks and crannies of the hotel. I couldn't care less. I was hungry.

A return to the airport terminal became my rescue. For a few roubles I bought a warm Coke and a cold meat pie from a kiosk there. I took a detour on my way back to the hotel to see a bit more of this strange

country. A typical Russian church with bulbous cupolas in the distance lured me towards it.

The only piece of Russian culture I encountered that evening was the mafia. To be precise it was the mud splash mafia, a horde of drivers using their tiny tin cars to systematically transfer water from puddles in the streets onto any innocent pedestrian stupid enough to be outside. Drivers ignoring pedestrians can be bad enough, but these guys were worse. They clearly knew that there were people out there walking, but they were determined on getting rid of us. I was the only person on foot around, so even though I quickly gave up on getting to the church alive and went back, my evening became as wet as it can possibly be in Russia for someone without a drinking habit.

At the hotel the culture shock continued. After a bit of tinkering with the TV (always bring a selection of tools when you go to Russia), I managed to get it to produce both picture and sound simultaneously. The channel I found showed a movie with an incredibly young George Clooney in the leading role.

Contrary to what I expected, the movie was neither subtitled nor dubbed in Russian. Instead it seemed that some guy at the TV station was translating the dialogue on the fly, as if he was covering a live event. Someone in the movie would say something, and a couple of seconds later the guy pitched in and drowned out the original soundtrack with his best effort at repeating in Russian what had been said. The same man did the lines of *all* the characters, which was rather impressive, really. He would even put his voice in a higher pitch when he repeated something a woman said, except when he ignored the women completely, which actually was quite often.

When I left my room in the morning I again had to show the dezhurnaya both my passport and that I had not stolen anything from the room. Only after having succeeded in this would she give me a check-out document. This I was to put in my pocket, and then take out again and give to her, so that she could stamp it and give back to me one more time. “Show reception this!”, she demanded, before we parted with her wishing me good luck again.

The uniformed officer on duty downstairs woke up with a feminine scream, when as gently as possible I slid the dezhurnaya's note into her hands. In return I got an entertaining questionnaire about the hotel. Now, it's not at all unusual to be asked to rate the quality of the stay when you check out from a hotel, but the scale used at this hotel was special. My opinion about the various facilities and aspects of the hotel was to be given as either "Good" or "Worse than expected". Strangely, this actually made it easier than usual to fill in the form.

My plane to Russia had arrived at the Sheremetyevo–2 international airport, while my plane to Vladivostok was to leave from the Sheremetyevo–1 domestic airport. My travel agent had sincerely advised me to take a taxi to the other airport, as otherwise I would probably end up in a random remote corner of the country. That was pretty much where I was going anyway, so I decided to give public transportation a try. I was strengthened in my choice by all the taxi drivers I passed, who quoted prices in the neighbourhood of half a Russian weekly salary paid in used and unmarked US dollars for the ride.

It turned out to be a good choice. The other airport was actually the same airport, except the terminal building was across the runway. I could see it just a kilometre or so away. Being Russia, there was of course no other way to get there than by going all the way *around* the runway. I couldn't find a bus stop, but since I had plenty of time I figured I could just walk. Then I remembered the mud splash mafia, and I decided that with my big backpack on, I would be too easy a target for them.

To my rescue came a "marshrutka", which is exactly what it sounds like if you stop and think about it. Marshrutkas are minibuses that travel along fixed "marching routes" from point A to point B. If you can read the Cyrillic alphabet, a sign in the front tells you the exact route the marshrutka follows. The sign also reveals that the ride costs just a few roubles, no matter where you get on and off.

You find marshrutkas everywhere in Russia. It's how most people get around, since relatively few can afford to buy a car. Even rich foreigners are welcome to use the marshrutkas. So I got in and shared the cramped space with more Russians than there were seats, and soon I was at my

destination. Judging from the smell inside the minibus, my hotel was probably not the only place where the hot water had been switched off lately. Still, if exposure to body odour isn't your thing, I guarantee you that for the dollars you save compared to taking a taxi, you can buy a *lot* of air fresheners and bring them in the marshrutka.

My schedule for the day collapsed completely because of the marshrutka. What could have been hours of walking was replaced by a twenty minute drive. I arrived at the terminal with seven hours to spare before take-off. This gave me some time to mentally prepare for the flight. I was to fly Aeroflot for the first time in my life.

Many people love travelling by plane, while others definitely don't. Some are downright afraid of flying. I'm not. If I stand on a cliff or on top of a roof, I often find myself thinking about jumping into the open air. Not because I'm tired of my life, but because somewhere deep inside I imagine that if I jump, I will be able to glide unhurried towards the horizon and to new adventures. Maybe it's just one of man's ancient dreams, to be able to fly and be as free as the bird. Or maybe it's the vague remnants of an even more ancient nightmare, something to do with falling down from the trees. I don't know, but I *am* glad the aeroplane was invented.

It is truly fantastic to be able to cover long distances just by walking into a metal box somewhere in the world and sit down and eat peanuts and watch a movie or two. When you walk out of the box a few hours later, amazingly you've been transported to a place far, far away. I find this so marvellous that I can easily forgive the fact that in some unfortunate cases the planes have also brought closer together this world and the next.

Even though planes have made the world smaller, you can still not avoid hitting it if the plane stops working. In principle I have nothing against dying. Actually I look forward to my death. I certainly don't want to die too soon, but on the other hand I hope it won't happen too late either. When death strikes, I want to be there to experience it to the fullest, both mentally and physically. It must be an extraordinary feeling to know that life is running out of you, to know that this is the big good-

bye, and perhaps to be able to render some memorable last words. Not "Yes, I promise to call the doctor in the morning", "Whoa! Gotta run, that's my bus!" or "I see you have a big gun, but if you want my money, you'll have to kill me first!" No, I'd rather be remembered for something like Theodore Dreiser's "Shakespeare, here I come!", or "Not at all", as the author Henrik Ibsen said when his nurse one day commented that he seemed to be in better shape that day.

To die in a plane accident would not do at all. Especially not in a plane where no one understood what I said and could appreciate my last words. Even though Aeroflot had a somewhat bad reputation, especially their domestic flights, I knew that statistically I had a very good chance of surviving the flight to Vladivostok. Not wanting to think more about that, I decided to spend the hours before take-off wisely and comfortably.

Outside the airport terminal a dangerously intense summer sun was shining. I hid from it in the shadow of an old propeller plane. It carried the Aeroflot logo, but judging from the faded Soviet flag on its tail, this was probably a retiree, and not the plane I was going on later. It had been parked in the middle of a large, open square, presumably a long time ago.

At first it was a nice and quiet place to relax and do some reading, but as lunch-time approached, I was joined by many Russians, some of them possibly taking a technical break. I don't know whether the others were passengers like me or if they worked at the airport or in the Aeroflot headquarters nearby. I chose to believe that they were passengers, as most of them more drank than ate their lunch, and the beverage in question was beer out of large bottles.

"Ah, but it is only natural to calm your nerves with a bit of alcohol before flying", you may say. That is true, but I soon learned that Russians unfortunately don't need an excuse like that to enjoy a litre of beer or two in the middle of the day. From early morning on, throughout the week, I saw men and women drinking beer in the streets, in the parks and in special beer tents found everywhere. To many Russians, beer is just a thirst quencher. "It's the vodka that is dangerous", they will say. Both are sold in cheap bottles with caps that cannot be put back on once they're opened. If you open a bottle, you'll just have to finish it as well.

The result is inevitable. One of Russia's largest problems, and she has many, is a rapidly declining population. Covering one-eight of the planet's land area, a mere 142 million people try to fill the space. Every year there are three quarters of a million fewer Russians. It may not sound like much if you are Chinese, but that rate would drain Norway of all its citizens in about six years. The reasons for this are many and complicated, but there's no doubt that abuse of alcohol plays a major part. Every year forty thousand Russians die of alcohol poisoning. That's more than the number of people who die from murders or car accidents combined, which are two other causes of death that often are closely related to heavy drinking. A genuine estimate is that every seventh Russian is an alcoholic.

The Russian attitude towards alcohol has a long history, stretching at least back to when my ancestors, the Vikings, went there. In their heyday they sailed from Scandinavia and up the large rivers of Eastern Europe to trade. They toiled and fought their way to become the dominant traders around the Baltic Sea and the rivers flowing into it, including what today is Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. The Vikings conquered many important cities, and they founded several more. Slavic tribes had established a number of independent city states, but it was the Vikings who first formed larger unions of major trading centres.

Towards the end of the tenth century, the world known to the Europeans of that time had come to the point where every nation and people had to choose between the two major religions on the menu, Christianity and Islam.

The leaders of both religions pushed hard to gain access to the population of what today is Russia. In the end, picking sides became the responsibility of a descendant of the Vikings, the leader Vladimir of Kiev. He was a powerful man who is now considered to be the father of the Russian nation. Receiving representatives from both the Caliph and the Pope, he asked them about their take on issues important to him. It didn't take him long to come to a conclusion. “Drinking is the joy of the Russian. We cannot live without it!”, he declared, and with that Islam was out of the competition.

Vladimir's family tree sprang out of Danish roots. In Danish, the word for "inebriation" is "rus". Yet the name of the country, Russia, is not likely to stem from that word. "Rus" was probably just the name of the dominating Viking clan in the Kiev area when the city Novgorod was founded in 862, an event considered to be the first step on the way to a Russian national state.

In the time that has passed since Vladimir's decision, several factors have contributed to developing Russia's modern day drinking problem. A high rate of unemployment, cheap vodka and a certain alcoholic, white-haired president have not helped much. The Russians have a problem, and they know it. They just seem unable to figure out how to cope with it. A good start would be to make it less acceptable to drink large quantities of beer during work hours. But of all the people that enjoyed their lunch under the propeller plane that day, I seemed to be the only one who thought so.

At least none of the beer lunchers wore pilot uniforms. Encouraged by that I eagerly got on my plane late in the afternoon.


AEROFLOT
Russian Airlines 80 years
BOARDING PASS / ПОСАДОЧНЫЙ ТАЛОН
OERISSEN/BJOERN C MR
MOSCOW /SVO
VLADIVOSTOK /VVO
EROFLOT
U 0725 Y 14JUL 18:35
erminal:
12 17:55 33G NO
15 30
8037/SV0

The passengers didn't seem to realize that we were flying through a night. The whole cabin reminded me of a dinner party. People chatted, mingled, ate and drank the whole way. Perhaps they didn't want to think about where we were going. Maybe they preferred Moscow, and if they couldn't be in Moscow, at least they would be on Moscow time. I slept through almost the whole flight, as comfortably as you can in tourist class on an Aeroflot flight. After eight hours I woke up close to the Sea of Japan. I was ten thousand kilometres away from Moscow, even further away from home, and I had just four weeks to get back to where I entered Russia. Right then that was all I knew about the next month of my life.

Two rugged men wearing big hats and taut uniforms checked the papers of every passenger before we were allowed to leave the plane. The conditions at the airport were so basic that there was simply nowhere else this could be done. To my great satisfaction, the two officers thoroughly looked at all the pages in my passport. They discussed at length where the different stamps came from, before finally they let me disembark.

I had to walk several hundred metres on the runway to get to the building where the luggage hopefully would show up. Retrieving the luggage took an unusually, but not surprisingly long time. I started to suspect that the luggage had not travelled on the plane at all, but was slowly on its way there on the same conveyor belt I had seen it disappear on at Sheremetyevo–1.

The reason we had to wait was that the airport had fewer than two functional luggage belts, and it brought luggage from only one plane at a time. While the luggage from a plane was on the belt, only passengers from that plane were allowed inside the building. I couldn't get my luggage until all passengers from all the planes that had landed before us had retrieved their suitcases, pumpkins, colour TVs, ironing boards and all the other more or less conventional things Russians tend to bring when they travel.

Vladivostok doesn't have a busy airport, but the wait was still long. Now it was night in Moscow, and fatigue had finally hit my fellow travellers. Some lay down for a bit of sleep while we waited. I became somewhat impatient, but if this was how Russians minimized the risk of somebody stealing my luggage, I was all for it and happy to wait.

The next problem appeared as soon as I finally received my precious backpack. The airport was fifty kilometres away from Vladivostok itself, and the only obvious way to get to the city was to seek out the assistance of a pack of men with golden teeth, proud owners of scrapped Japanese cars. That is to say, the cars had been scrapped by their previous owners in Japan, and soon thereafter they had become part of the car fleet of the Russian Far East, which is what the Russians call the vast regions east of Siberia.

The taxi drivers at the airport in Moscow may have been a cunning bunch of opportunists, but they could have learned many a trick from their colleagues in Vladivostok. I dismissed their intense sales pitch and sat down to wait for the bus that never came. After an hour or so I gave up the crazy idea that there might be some sort of public transportation between the airport and the city centre. I joined forces with another guy who had better things to spend his money on than financing more golden teeth for the taxi drivers. We split the bill for a ride into town with the most desperate of the chauffeurs. He gave us a ninety percent discount on his initial asking price, but we had to promise not to tell anyone. Promise hereby broken.

Because we paid so little, the driver had to drive dangerously fast. My big eyes and visible nervousness made him tell me to relax. “It's not dangerous!”, he said, “You see, I have radar detector”. Before we reached the city limit I had seen it work at least twice.

I had no idea where I was going, so with my best effort I tried to ask the driver whether he knew of a decent hotel in Vladivostok. He must have understood at least two words of my question. I was dropped off outside a grey colossus of a building with a sign on the roof that said "Hotel Vladivostok". It wasn't exactly cheap, but when the room clerk actually spoke a little bit of English, offered me a "zooper room" and mentioned that the hotel had room service massages around the clock, hot water in the shower *and* a casino with a dubious clientèle in the basement, I just knew I had to stay there.

My room was close enough to heaven at the eleventh floor. When I looked out of the window from my bed, all I saw was the sky and the ocean, and it was impossible to tell them apart. Sailing boats played in the wind out there, and I could have sworn that several of them floated in the air. If I walked closer to the window, I could dimly see the other side of a large bay, where Chinese

No neighbours across the street

and North Korean mountains ended Russia. Until then I had not given much thought to the fact that I wasn't in Europe any more, but instead somewhere east of most of the Far East.

Suddenly to be in Vladivostok made me feel like I had cheated. Normally you only get there by spending a week imprisoned in a train. Throughout that week you're exposed to increasingly denser air, an atmosphere full of your own and other passengers' sweat and tears. There's no proper shower available, so every day the microclimate on the train becomes a little bit more miserable. Yet you may not even notice the bodily scents around you, as they have to fight for your attention with various smells from a number of possible and impossible meals cooked up on the train by the Russian, Chinese and Mongolian passengers.

Outside the train you watch an infinite forest pass by, only interrupted by short glimpses of churches, mosques, lakes, marshes, villages that nobody's heard of and bridges and tunnels with armed guards to look after them. You're supposed to spend hours wondering about what makes someone decide to build such a long railway line through nothing. After all this you will be happy to leave the train at the fairy palace railway station in Vladivostok, satisfied with finally having completed the journey.

But now I was there. The end was the beginning, and everything in-between was still waiting for me. Until then I had not so much as *seen* a train.

There were several reasons for why I chose to start in Vladivostok. Someone had told me that few people do that, so instead of a trip surrounded by travellers on a crusade to tick off the Trans-Siberian Holy Rail from their "Been there, done that" list, I would get to see how Russians travel. This turned out to be exactly what happened, and I got to see more of how Russians travel than I would ever wish upon my worst enemy. The other reason for starting my trip at the eastern end of the line was that I had no schedule or plan for the trip, but my main goal was to get a good look at Siberia. By starting there, if I ran out of time, that would steal quality time from somewhere else than Siberia. Now the time had come to execute my non-plan.

I spent some days in Vladivostok to get used to being somewhere that at first glance looked like a normal city, but which upon further investigation was full of the unexpected. The oddities spanned from the small ones, such as that ice cream in cones was sold by the kilogram instead of by the ball (which made my stomach hurt on several occasions), to the larger and more sinister peculiarities, such as the city suffering from a water shortage so bad that after a rainfall I saw old women gathering fresh water from puddles in the streets.

Vladivostok was an important Soviet navy base during the Cold War. The city had been a no-go area for foreigners between 1948 and 1992. It seemed as if it had been closed for Russians as well during that period, or at least for carpenters, painters and other maintenance workers. Most of the buildings had been built at least fifty years ago, and judging from their façades, they had not been exposed to much maintenance since then. Only one detail on all the buildings was fairly new. The windows on the ground floor, and sometimes on the first floor as well, were protected by robust metal bars. Even though many of them were elaborate pieces of decorative art, the aesthetics they brought were hardly the reason they had been installed.

I particularly noticed all the dilapidated buildings when I was in Vladivostok. I gave them some thought and attention in the next couple of cities I visited. Later I simply didn't see them, even though there's decay in the photographs I took everywhere on my way west towards Moscow. But you can get used to anything, which explains how Russian cities can look the way they do.

If I squinted a little and ignored that trees were growing out of roofs and balconies, there was no doubt that this was a European city, despite its location well east of Iran, India and China. The faces in the streets were also mainly European. Of course, there were many Chinese, Koreans and Japanese as well. Much of the trade from the Far East to both Russia and the West comes in through the port of Vladivostok, where it's loaded onto trains on the railway line that begins in the city. Still, European Russians dominated the streets.

I used the opportunity to try and figure out what Russians look like. Particular traits of the face or other details in the head region can often be traced to a certain nationality. American women have big hair. British people have unusually angled ears and arrange their teeth in imaginative ways. French men look like French men, and that's the way it is. But what a Russian looked like, I didn't know.

Intense research performed by me while eating ice cream in the pedestrian shopping street made me none the wiser. All I developed were two preliminary hypotheses for what you can say about Russian women. Or, to be honest, the first thing was something you *can't* say about them.

You can *not* say that the nose of a woman from Vladivostok is straight or bent. Instead you must say that at the top it is fairly straight, then comes a rather crooked part, which continues until it dramatically ends in something quite resemblant of a ski jump. If her nose isn't like that, she probably doesn't have a nose, but a potato-like growth in the middle of her face. Almost every female nose I observed in Vladivostok could be described as either of those two variants. The only problem with my theory was that I also observed a few noses that could have belonged to supermodels, which leads me to my second hypothesis.

The reason I can say with a degree of certainty that some of the women in Vladivostok could be supermodels, is that they all dressed as if that was what they were. There really were fewer bearded female shot putters around than I had expected.

My main observation was that Russian women dress in unpredictable ways. When they get up in the morning, I don't think they look out of the window to see what the weather is like, or consider what they will be doing that day and dress accordingly. It was impossible to judge from the clothes and the make-up of a Vladivostok woman whether she was on her way to a bakery to buy bread or if she was going to a night club to disco, or possibly even to prowl the bar for morally questionable work. In the city streets a lot of glitter, frills and finery walked about on high heels. My eyes gravitated towards deep cleavages and transparent blouses wherever I turned.

Dressing up like that was probably just what I like to call the Reykjavik Syndrome in action, named after the capital of Iceland. The further away from what they consider to be the centre of the world and civilization people live, the harder they will try to imitate life in that centre. That's why the youth in Reykjavik act, and possibly *are*, cooler and wear more high fashion clothes than people in London or Paris. That's why gangsta rap is played instead of Norwegian folk music at after-ski parties in Norway. And that's why housewives in Vladivostok dress like they're going out with the nouveau riche in Moscow. The principle is universal.

My research made me hungry. The fast food outlet BURGER was the most inviting alternative around. On the first days of a long trip I try to be careful with what I eat, to get a good start on my journey with as little time as possible spent around toilets. An ordinary hamburger with fries and Coke is almost always a safe option, and usually it's also possible to find. Especially in a restaurant called BURGER, one would think.

Hungry and full of hope I got in line. I had not even had time to look up how to pronounce "bacon" in Russian before it was my turn to order. The clerk behind the counter helped me out by saying “Bacon-burr-yarey s-kartoff-el free?” It sounded about right, so I just nodded. That just had to be a bacon burger with fried potatoes. Unfortunately the description of what constitutes a hamburger had not yet reached the Russian Far East. What I got was what you get if you take a hamburger, remove the meat and insert a razor-thin slice of boiled bacon in its place. But hey! It was cheap!

On my first morning in Vladivostok I was thrown out of sleep by a merciless noise from outside. The sound had climbed all the way up to the eleventh floor, which until then had been an oasis of silence in a boisterous city. A marching band stood on a paved square next to the hotel and played one military march after the other. Their uniforms were so plastered with decorations that they all must have been high-ranking officers. Like a siege, their concert was long-lasting and monotonous.

Even though the marching band's uproar was impressive, they met competition from a construction site on the neighbouring lot. A new high-rise building was on its way, pushed upwards by heavy machinery and

loud cursing. I couldn't decide whether I preferred to listen to the construction workers or the musical majors, but it was certainly a good thing that they were all practising. Especially those who worked on the building.

The Soviet Union, whipped onward by Stalin, went from being basically a large farming community to being a superpower in the course of incredibly few years. It's easy to understand how a fast transition like that meant that not everything could be done with the greatest attention to detail. I think that was especially true regarding the often monumental buildings that suddenly had to be built. Because of all the guesswork and hurried carelessness, Russia's cities today are full of relatively new buildings that still are literally falling down on people's heads.

A dilapidated pier in Vladivostok

Along the oceanfront below the hotel I found a bad good example of this. Twenty-five years earlier a large facility for all sorts of sports had been built there. There had been a sea water pool with diving boards, running tracks, tennis courts and much more. All that remained of it were masses of rusty metal skeletons, piles of gravel and some buildings where the windows had fallen out, leaving openings that people apparently mistook for rubbish bins. It was sad to see what must have been a magnificent sports centre now being reduced to a rubbish dump.

While someone in my country may say “Don't use those stairs, they could collapse and kill you!”, a Russian's take on the same stairway is more likely to be “Oh, those stairs have been there for a long time and they have carried many a person. I'm sure they will support you too.” With the decay having reached the proportion it has in Russia, you can't blame them for having developed that attitude. Looking at things that way at least ensures that they don't spend too much money on superficial maintenance. There's no doubt that they have others and even more critical problems that need to be solved first.

Past the scrap heap of a sports facility, a lovely area with a promenade along the sea awaited me. There was a lovely beach where a walkway came down from the city centre. Pale Russian bodies were strewn all over the place, and the water was crowded with laughing, playful children. Some young men had swum out to the middle of the small bay to fondle a metal mermaid on an artificial island. Their friends back at the beach drank beer from magnum bottles and applauded the caressing. I wasn't impressed by their journey out to the mermaid, but there was no doubt that the sculpture offenders were brave men. I would *never* dare to show myself in public in the minimal, tanga-like swim briefs they wore.

Despite the debatable beach fashion, it was delightful for the first time to watch Russians really enjoy themselves. The atmosphere was friendly. Cheap snacks were sold everywhere. The air was filled by music from a street organ, children's laughter and loud, hilarious beach karaoke performances. It was a beautiful, sunny and hot day in a city where people know just all too well what it means to be cold. Even there at the coast, at approximately the same latitude as the French Riviera, midwinter winds from the north can bring the temperature down to minus thirty degrees Celsius. Combine that with the fact that many of the buildings lack central heating and that power failures are part of everyday life there, and you will understand why people go out and enjoy the sun whenever they can.

Close to the beach promenade I found Vladivostok's old fortress. There wasn't much to it, but a military museum inside offered a close look at old missiles, piles of rusty weapons from the war against Japan and a military pit privy. In a city that until recently had been off limits to tourists for

fifty years, you can't really expect too much from its attractions. But this was just about as good as it got in Vladivostok, so most tourists in the city went there, since after all it was better than nothing. Busloads of Asian tourists came there to listen to a Russian guide tell them, in Japanese and Chinese, how their ancestors not that long ago gradually had chased the Russian military forces further and further up the coast, all the way to the cold and unkind land near Vladivostok.

No one seemed to appreciate the irony in that a fortress built to keep the Japanese out of the city now daily attracted large groups of precisely Japanese people. The world moves forward. Or maybe it's just going in circles.

I spent my days walking from morning till late afternoon, amused and confused by all the strange things I saw. In the evenings I relaxed at the hotel, lacking the energy to go out and learn whether or not Russian women changed into something less comfortable after sunset. I had prepared for long evenings in hotels and long days on trains by bringing an archaic edition of Cervantes' "Don Quixote". Often cited as the best literary work ever, sleep was never far away when I opened it. Yet I was treated to enough waiting during my journey through Russia that I actually finished both volumes of the story.

A more inspiring source of entertainment and pastime occurred almost every night, usually around ten o'clock. I would typically lie dead tired in bed without not actually having gone to bed yet, when the phone would ring vigorously. I let it burn off some steam while I polished my spoken Russian and prepared myself mentally for the coming conversation.

When I was ready, I picked up the phone and said “Dohbree vee-etcher” into it, hoping that it would sound at least remotely like a "Good evening" in Russian. A similar greeting would echo from the other end, before the caller set out on a long rant in a language I don't speak very well. We would spend the next few, or not so few, minutes establishing that I didn't speak much Russian, and agree that maybe we should try in English instead. Inevitably the discourse would move towards something like the following, each time increasing a little bit in detail, length and entertainment value for me as I got better at it:

– You want zex lady?

– Who? Me? No thanks, I'm driving.

– Woo-at?

– But thank you for asking!

– Why you not want zex lady? I have many bootifool girlz.

– Oh, well, in that case, do you have any non-smokers?

– Why no zmokerz? I have many bootifool girlz.

– Ok, but do you have one with a big nose?

– Why big noze? Yez, I have. Why big noze?

– Well, you know, I've heard so much about it, now I want to try!

– Woo-at?

– Nasal sex!

– Woo-at?

– You see, where I come from, the girls have very small noses.

– Ok, zo you want big noze girl with no zmoke?

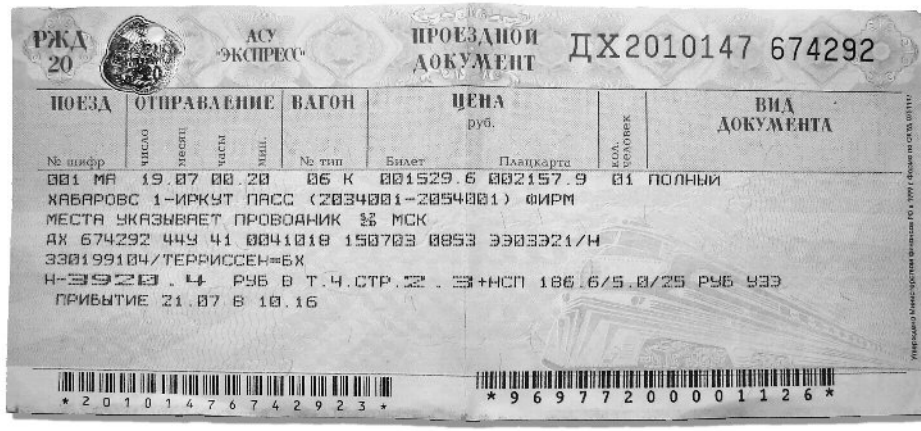
– No, thank you very much. Good night!

And then I hung up on them. It may have been tactless of me to joke around with the mafia like that. All they wanted was to sell me a prostitute, bless them. I really enjoyed falling asleep laughing after a conversation like that. Their thoroughness was impressive. They called me once and only once almost every night.

I was getting ready to leave Vladivostok. The city had been an interesting experience, charmingly ugly and beautiful at the same time. I was tired of the old and attractive, but run-down apartment buildings in the centre. I didn't need to see more of the endless rows of modern, grey concrete blocks of flats in the city's outskirts. Now I wanted to do something else, to travel, and I started out gently with a short stage on the Trans-Siberian; the night train to Khabarovsk, seven hundred kilometres to the north.

But first I had to get a train ticket. Humble I entered the ticket line at a Russian railway station for the first time in my life. After a long wait for my turn, the ticket clerk immediately turned me away when she discovered that I neither spoke nor understood Russian. “TSERVISS TSENTR!”, she barked at me, pointing up a staircase at the other end of the waiting hall.

Of course I obeyed, and at the top of the stairs there really was a service centre for my kind. The only person in Vladivostok speaking decent English worked there. She was of great help and comfort to me. Ten minutes later I was back in line at the ticket counter, now equipped with a piece of paper with Cyrillic letters on it that described exactly what I wanted to buy. I felt like a small boy sent out by my mother to buy milk and bread. Proudly I showed the note to the ticket clerk, and soon I had a ticket in my pocket.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A ticket from Khabarovsk to Irkutsk on train 1, the westbound Trans-Siberian Express

For later ticket purchases I made the shopping list myself. Not every station along the Trans-Siberian Railway had a service centre, so I simply had to. Fortunately it was easy. All I had to do was to write the name of the place I was going, the number of the train I would like to go on, as well as what class I would prefer to travel in. If I also remembered to put on my best smile, most of the time I didn't even have to pay too much.

I can no longer remember exactly what I had expected, but I was slightly disappointed when I discovered that *The* Trans-Siberian Railway was just an ordinary train. No committee or brass band showed up to see us off.

An hour before the scheduled departure the set of coaches was ready on the platform. People walked onto the train and installed themselves comfortably in their home for the coming days. Many were going all the way to Moscow, others were lucky enough to be heading for destinations not so far away.

The homey train corridor

A brusque train host who had done this a million times before welcomed me, checked my ticket and showed me to the right compartment. The corridor outside the compartments was like on most trains, except there was a simple rug on the floor and the windows had proper living room curtains. At the end of the coach there was a large, old samovar, where we always could get boiling hot water for free to prepare tea, noodles or whatever we craved. I travelled in second class. My compartment had four beds, two on each side of a small table. During the day the lower beds converted into seats.

I shared a compartment with Sergey from Khabarovsk. His face was grey and expressionless. His only distinction was his Christian Dior glasses with thick lenses, broken, but mended with duct tape. If we had been in 1967, they would have been the latest thing in fashion. He spoke no English, German or anything else but Russian, yet he still kept asking me questions. After a while he gave up and was quiet for the rest of the journey. Except during the night, when *he* slept. And snored.

The Trans-Siberian Express, the "Rossiya", is painted in Russia's colours

There were no obvious tourists at the station, and I had only seen Asian tourists in the fortress in Vladivostok. So I felt like an outsider as we rolled out of the central station, passing the first kilometre marker. It told me that Moscow was 9,289 kilometres of railway tracks away. It already dawned on me that the journey through Russia could turn into a lonelier and mentally more demanding exercise than I had anticipated. I went to the restaurant carriage, hoping to find someone to talk more than primitive babble with.

The restaurant was empty except for a surly-looking woman behind the counter. I bought a sandwich from her and sat down at a table. The sandwich tasted of mould and cardboard, but I battled it down. As soon as I had finished it, the serving lady took my plate away. I got out my pen and paper and made a few notes regarding food and service on Russian trains. Two minutes later she was back. "Thiiz iiz reztaurant wagon, you muzt eat!", she said. "If this is the restaurant wagon, you should serve something edible here!", I retorted. Luckily, that was too many English words in a row for her to understand.

Back with Sergey I was puzzled when the train made a long stop after only an hour, in the middle of an industrial area. Vladivostok was still the nearest station. The provodnik, the male train host and ruler of my coach, came by to sell tchai, tea, for a few roubles per cup. “Nozzink iz wronk”, he said. They often made stops like this. The long distance trains had schedules that weren't at all difficult to follow. Station managers as well as train conductors got part of their salary as a bonus calculated from how well the trains arrived at and left from the stations in accordance with the timetable. They should not run late and neither should they arrive too early. If they did, it would disturb the finely tuned logistics of the busy railway tracks. And that's why the trains I took in Russia sometimes just stopped for a while in the middle of nowhere, apparently for no reason at all.

It may seem stupid to deliberately "lose time" like that, but the good thing about it was that I could trust the train timetables in Russia. On the whole trip I never experienced more than a two minute deviation from the schedule. For a timetable seven days long that is pretty darn impressive! Especially considering that usually it's the exact same train set that is used on the whole journey between Vladivostok and Moscow. Although the country may be falling apart in every other way, at least the trains run as planned. Go figure!

The train chugged through the night. Most of the passenger trains between Vladivostok and Khabarovsk are night trains. Several places the tracks pass close to the Russian line of defence along the Chinese border. The Russians don't want to make it too easy for the Chinese to find out what they're up against, in case the time comes when China thinks she needs more space. Most Russians take it for granted that this *will* happen eventually.

Recently the tension had largely gone out of the border disputes between Russia and China. The no man's land between the countries was disappearing. This was unfortunate, as the area was the last remaining refuge for the almost extinct Siberian tiger. Even unscrupulous poachers had chosen to stay away while the two mighty communist states balanced on the edge of full-scale war there.

The Siberian tiger is the largest feline on the planet, and there are only a few hundreds left of them in the wild. Their length of about three metres and weight of more than three hundred kilograms was enough to prevent me from even considering camping in the forest. A typical meal for a giant Siberian kitty consists of about 45 kilograms of meat, which made me feel way too much like a perfect-sized snack for them. Still, it was great to sit safely inside the train and look out and know that somewhere in the forest there be tygers, animals of a kind I had always thought only lived in tropical regions. Not only do these tigers live in forests that look quite similar to the ones in Norway, they even live there throughout the year, during both the hot summers and the harsh and snowy Siberian winters.

Seeing a Siberian tiger in the wild is extremely rare. A more usual sight is the one of a half-eaten bear carcass. If you find one of those, you just know there's another large animal around. The tigers would no doubt have ruled the Earth if humans with guns had not been around.

I had trouble finding a place to stay in Khabarovsk. Several hotels and guesthouses declined to have me as their guest. Okay, so it took four or five years for the Russian revolution to reach all the way from Moscow to the Pacific coast, but surely the news about perestroika and glasnost should have reached the Russian Far East by now? But no, foreigners were not allowed to stay there, the room clerks claimed. Or maybe they just thought there would be too much paperwork involved. Or that since I was a Westerner, as soon as I saw the presumably non-luxurious room I would just leave anyway.

On my fourth attempt I finally got a room, at Hotel Turist. A single room cost 656 roubles and 48 kopeks per night, and the cashier was of the thorough type. He refused to round off the amount at all, so when I paid, I was actually given change that included two kopek coins, each worth just under 0.003 US dollars.

Really small change

The room was tiny, and those who had furnished and decorated it must have been very fond of roses and lace. I'm only guessing, but they were probably colour-blind as well. It was my second authentic room from 1974 out of three possible. On the wall there was a good old, Soviet-era turquoise plastic radio.

Russian radios from the communist years distinguish themselves by being extremely easy to operate. They only have one button, the on/off one. The radios came pre-tuned to the only radio channel people could legally listen to. So there was no reason to confuse people with buttons or dials to change frequencies with. All broadcasts to the people began with the concise message "Moscow speaks!", a source of a joke that still lives on in Russia; "Moscow speaks, the rest of us work!" I turned the radio on, but no one spoke. Instead the room was filled by something I recognized as the nostalgic singing from the airport hotel lobby in Moscow.

Also like in Moscow, it seemed that the hotel was working on reducing an infection. The taps offered no hot water. Luckily there was pleasant water in the river that runs through the city, although I had to share it with hundreds of Khabarovites.

The Amur is the sixth longest river in the world. It floats past Khabarovsk three kilometres wide, and the water was the perfect temperature for swimming on that warm day in July. The beach was full of rubbish and the water was turbid, but the atmosphere was pleasant, exactly like on the Vladivostok city beach. The number of people there holding a bottle of beer was roughly equivalent to how many people that on average will hold a mobile phone on the beaches back home. I'm not sure what kills you the quickest, too much beer or stress caused by mobile phones, but between the mouthfuls in Khabarovsk they at least seemed to be in a good mood as they approached death.

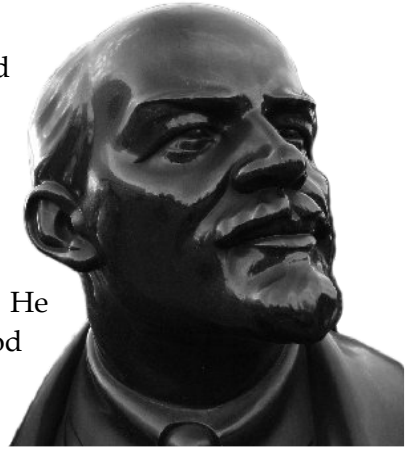
The predominant beach fashion was highly amusing. Tangas and string briefs were by far the preferred garments, but anything went. You just had to make sure you pulled as much of the fabric as possible into your butt crack, so as to maximize the buttock area exposed to the sun and the general public. On the upper body the men should wear a string vest as large-meshed as possible, while women were fine letting it all

hang loose, as long as the nipples were decently covered with pieces of coloured tape. I had never thought this possible from the grey, serious Russians, but this was how they lay on the beach in Khabarovsk, cross my heart.

Running wide eastwards from Central Asia to the Sea of Okhotsk, an extension of the Pacific Ocean, the Amur forms the border between Russia and China for much of its length of more than four thousand kilometres. At Khabarovsk it turns to the north, while the border goes south. If you have your visas arranged, the Chinese city of Fuyuan is easy to visit. China's proximity was evident. The streets were full of Asian faces. They all seemed to be there for business and most definitely not for pleasure.

At the city market I found more proof of Amur being important to life in Khabarovsk. Like at any market, you could buy carrots, potatoes, cabbages and other edibles, but the largest choice of items was available to those who wanted to buy a fishing rod. There were hundreds of stalls selling just fishing rods and *all* kinds of accessories to them. I had never seen anything like it, but if it meant that the river was full of fish, nothing could be better.

I spent the evening in Ploshchad Lenina, a large, open square between venerable, old buildings. A bashful Lenin statue stood hidden in the outskirts of the square, giving it its name. He was seriously outnumbered by rows of large water fountains. They filled the square, stealing all the attention from good old Lenin by shooting water jets backlit in a wide range of colours.



Before I arrived in Russia I had imagined that when the Communist Party lost control of the country, all the Lenin, Stalin, Brezhnev and similar statues were torn down from their plinths nationwide. Not so. Although there was hardly a Stalin left, the Lenins were ubiquitous. He was still considered to have been a good man, fortunate enough to have died before the worst injustices to the Russian

people were committed. It was difficult to blame him for all the bad things that happened after his death, so countless squares, streets and monuments still honoured him.

The summer evening was warm and pleasant. It was a Friday night and people gathered in the Lenin Square after the restaurants, cinemas and theatres closed. Thousands of joyful people walked around, talked, drank and sang. Many had brought guitars, and it didn't matter that they couldn't really play them very well. Everyone seemed to know the lyrics, and the singing drowned out the sound of the guitars. Most people came walking, just a few arrived in cars. I guess that was partially because petrol costs money, but mainly because few people there were able to conduct anything but a slurring conversation. It was great to just sit and watch life unfold around me, but when the first drunken brawls broke out, I discretely retreated to my hotel.

My days in Russia whooshed by. There were still 8,523 kilometres between me and Moscow, so I had to skip many of the smaller settlements along the railway. Aiming for the heart of Siberia; Lake Baikal and the historic city of Irkutsk, I was in for a sixty hour imprisonment on the train. Never before had I travelled for that long continuously, so I really hoped for some interesting travelling companions. If not, my company would be Miguel Cervantes' writings in a yawn-inducing English version.

So, during the next three days I read several hundred pages about the adventures of Don Quixote. The only other tourists on the train were three elderly Japanese men who talked a lot, but only in Japanese. I shared a compartment with two young brothers on their way to Moscow to try their luck as carpenters, and an old, drunken sailor who didn't even know where he was going. None of them spoke anything but Russian. The brothers had brought lots of raw fish, which they gutted as hunger came and went. And hunger often came. To help the fish go down they had brought a large crate of vodka.

I couldn't complain. I had chosen to go on this trip, and besides, my co-passengers were friendly and generous people who were eager to share what they had with me. The fish I handled artfully. I sat in my upper

bunk, and as I was served pieces of fish, I put them away in a plastic bag I kept hidden. When we made stops I emptied the bag at the station. Not that it helped a bit against the smell in the compartment.

The vodka was a more serious threat. For some reason none of my dictionaries were able to suggest a Russian word for "teetotaller" or "total abstainer". And I happen to be one. I tried to explain the concept to my new friends, but they were unable to get even close to understanding that some people actually renounce their human right to enjoy a daily vodka or ten. My rescue was to come up with two simple words that fended off any further pushing of vodka: “Ya alkogolic!” You guessed it. “I'm an alcoholic!” It worked extremely well. Suddenly I got some respect from the men, and from that point on I was allowed to drink just water and soft drinks for the rest of the trip.

Like in the hotel, the radio in the compartment had only one control, the on/off switch. Not surprisingly, what came out of the radio was again mostly that deep, male voice with the nostalgic songs, occasionally interrupted by the Lolita-lesbian pop duo, T.A.T.U., the main cultural export of Russia that year. The DJ responsible for the broadcast was the provodnitsa.

Every coach on the Trans-Siberian has two gods. They are the two train hosts or hostesses, ruling half the time each. Usually they are women, provodnitsas, but there is also a male version, the provodnik. If they feel like it, they can grant you anything you may wish for, unless possibly if your desire is a non-smoking woman with a large nose. Although I seriously suspect they could get you one of those as well.

The provodnitsa knows the timetable by heart. She always has more toilet paper and from her you can borrow a short garden hose that fits the faucet in the restrooms on the train, so that you can have a basic, but nice shower in there. She makes tea, she cooks and she serves everyone under her protection a simple breakfast in the morning and a hot dish for lunch. She vacuums the train at least once a day, she keeps the windows clean and she brings new sheets for your bed when she reckons it's time to change them. Towards the end of stops she runs all over the station and gets absent-minded passengers back on the train before it leaves. She can

easily control a full battalion of soldiers about to get too drunk or too noisy. Provodnitsa is your friend, and when she sleeps, the other provodnitsa will be there to protect both you and the train. Nowhere else have I seen either train or passengers so well looked after.

Even though my provodnitsa knew the timetable well enough, her answers regarding the stops we made needed some adjustment. She, the train and the whole Russian railway system operates on Moscow time, and *not* on the official time where the train actually is located.

When you think about it, it's actually not that stupid. Dealing correctly with the eight time zones as the train passes through them on its way from Vladivostok to Moscow would be even more confusing. So that's the way it's done, and the price you pay is that as the train approaches the Pacific Ocean, the restaurant on board will not serve dinner until around breakfast time the following day. Unless your head thinks it's in Moscow, that is.

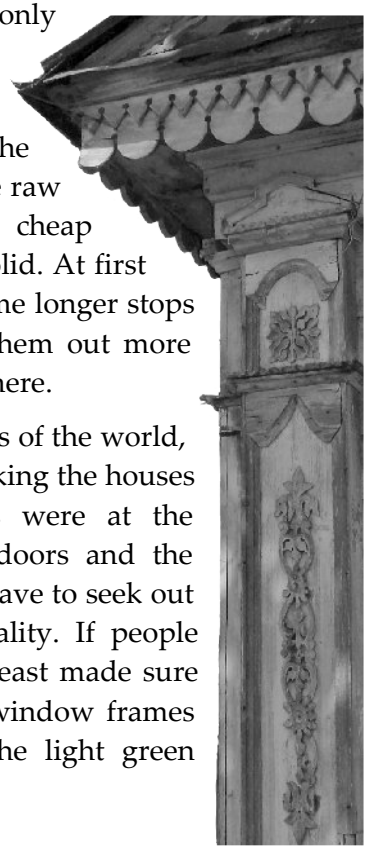
We made several stops before Irkutsk. They were seldom less than an hour apart, and in the most sparsely populated areas there were four or five hours between the stations. Many villages in Siberia exist just because they were set up as supply centres during the construction of the railway. When the construction was completed, the settlements no longer had any reason to exist. Yet some people stayed and continue to live there to this day, although there is little to keep them busy. They survive off what they can find in the forest, by eating it and by selling it to train passengers.

Between the stations more birch forest passed by outside than I could possibly appreciate. There was no end to it. Twenty percent of all trees on this planet grow in Siberia. And they will keep doing so in the foreseeable future. Millions of hectares of good quality wood, as well as other natural resources, are located so far away from civilization that it will take a long time before they profitably can be transported out of there.

The landscape never surprised me. It just lay there, flat and silent like a painting. The lack of any steep terrain is the secret behind Siberia's many enormous, slow-flowing rivers. Which is fine, but it doesn't exactly make for interesting scenery.

Little by little I began to notice other things than the endless forest. Despite the low population density, I often saw power lines cutting through the forest, and the railway line was at least double-tracked absolutely everywhere. We met eastbound train sets all the time, far more often than we passed villages. The railway keeps the small communities in Siberia alive year-round, in the summer complemented by boats sailing on the large rivers.

A motor road with barely a gravel surface tried its best to keep up with the train. Often it would disappear straight into a bog, into a river that had found a new bed for the season or into a forest of grass that had grown tall in the absence of cars. Useful roads disappeared from Siberia when the Gulag camps where shut down and the de facto slaves in them were sent home. The traffic on the roads was mostly old motorcycles, often ridden by more than mature men wearing something that most of all looked like World War I pilot outfits. The only way to sensibly cross Siberia today is inside a train or a plane.



All the houses in the villages hidden in the forest were wooden. No surprise there, as the raw material was around in abundance and no cheap alternatives existed. The handicraft looked solid. At first the houses seemed very basic, but during some longer stops we made, I got off the train and checked them out more closely. I discovered beautiful details everywhere.

The local carpenters, just like in richer parts of the world, seemed to put much effort and pride into making the houses aesthetically pleasing. Meticulous carvings were at the corners, along the eaves and around the doors and the windows, so well done that in Norway you have to seek out museums to find woodwork of similar quality. If people couldn't afford to paint their walls, they at least made sure that as much as possible of the doors, the window frames and the shutters were covered in either the light green colour of hope or a melancholic shade of blue.

Near the villages, tiny fields and open meadows full of purple and yellow flowers appeared. There was no sign of industrial farming. Instead small groups of haymakers and scythemen worked the fields. Despite the scythes they were not particularly scary. In the summer heat they seemed to prefer to work in their comical, tight underwear. They built long hay-drying racks and giant haystacks. I couldn't even remember the last time I had seen a real-life haystack.

It's casual Friday in the fields

As the hours and the days went by, and as the other passengers drank more vodka and gutted more fish, I experienced a growing feeling of déjà-vu. The train started moving, travelled through the forest and stopped at a station that was impossible to tell apart from the previous one, over and over again. All I had to pass the time with was the book I had brought, written in obsolete English. There were no rewarding conversations to be had with anyone on the train. What kept me alive and sane was that I knew that this was the longest leg on my trip through Russia.

The flurry of activities that took place at the stations where we stopped for more than two minutes offered some variety. It was a market and a celebration every time. All the passengers rushed out and threw their money at small stalls strategically set up along the whole length of the train.

The stalls were manned, or rather womanned, by young and old ladies shouting out the offers of the day. Anything you could wish for could be bought from the women, as long as your wishes weren't too complicated.

They had bottles of beer, pure water without the taste of chlorine, fresh fish from the river, home-made ice cream, chocolate, dried meat, berries straight from the forest, fried pastries, sunflower seeds and lots of other items. The women had gathered and prepared everything themselves. The trade blossomed. People bargained, smiled and laughed, valuing the goods on offer highly and properly. Compared to the menu in the restaurant wagon, these were delicacies.


The Trans-Siberian view

If you travel on the Trans-Siberian Railway nonstop, the kerfuffle that surrounds these halts is pretty much all you see of the real Russia. The rest of the time you just wait and you doze off. To me it seems senseless to spend a full week on a train, rushing past trees and accumulations of shacks, hovels and falling-down concrete buildings, the monotony only broken by the opportunity every three hours or so to run out and buy a couple of pancakes and some bottled water. The views on offer from the windows on the Trans-Siberian are eclipsed by shorter train journeys through almost any other country. If you're looking for interesting experiences when you travel on the Trans-Siberian, you will have to get off the train every now and then to find them.

A good place to leave the train to see something else is in Irkutsk, which happened to be the next place I did exactly that. By then I had spent almost seventy hours on trains since leaving Vladivostok, covering 4,104 kilometres of railway tracks. I still had 5,185 kilometres to go to reach Moscow, but it was time to stop for a while. I had reached Lake Baikal.

Since I was about to leave the train, my fellow passengers decided to let me in on a small secret of theirs. Earlier they had asked me if I was a spy, and they asked in a way that made it difficult to interpret it as just a joke. That a man at my advanced age of thirty years wasn't married *and* voluntarily spent my vacation in Siberia, a dismal and strange land thousands of kilometres away from the nearest good beach, it just didn't

make any sense to them. Most of them were on the train just because they had to go to Moscow for some reason, and they couldn't afford the plane ticket.

Okay, so maybe I wasn't a spy, they conceded, but since I so eagerly photographed almost everything we passed, even old, dirty factories and trains parked in oil puddles outside the stations, they had all agreed that I was at least one of them Greenpeace people. And in their opinion I would be more useful if I instead went to America and criticised the situation there rather than nosing around in Siberia. They knew they had a problem with pollution, they just couldn't afford to do anything about it yet.

Fresh milk is always available at the train stations of Siberia

Slightly taken by surprise, I was happy to learn that at least they knew about the concept of protecting the environment. Little of what I had seen in Russia indicated any awareness about it at all. Anyway, the mystery of the concerned looks I received from everyone whenever I lifted my camera had been solved.

Fortunately I had time to show them most of the photos I had taken. With their own eyes they saw that I had generally photographed nice things. I also tried to convince them that sometimes decay can be beautiful as well. We separated with smiles on our faces in Irkutsk. Well, at least I know that *I* was happy to leave the train.

It was easy to understand how the train passengers must have reasoned, and I could see what they were worried about. People can be content with what others may consider to be miserable conditions, as long as they feel that they have everything that they *really* need. But if a visitor from outside starts to ask questions about the lives they lead and compare their home to elsewhere, it's a reminder that things could have been different and better. *That* thought can be unpleasant.

It had begun to dawn on me that exactly this effect must have been the main reason why the Soviet leaders had not wanted visitors to roam freely through their vast social experiment of a country. From what I had seen in Russia that far, absolutely nothing reminded me of a superpower. Many of the sad sights had probably not looked much better during the Cold War. Whenever I stopped and looked around, I first noticed everything that was dirty, falling to pieces, poor, ugly and depressing to see. An underlying feeling of hopelessness and desperation prevailed. Even though the enormous country contained almost endless natural resources, it was also obvious that the country's leadership completely lacked the ability to convert the resources into cash, as well as a strong will to give the people a higher standard of living.

Irkutsk is one of the oldest cities in Siberia. Through its 350 years it has gone through both times of plenty and times of want. A *long* time ago, Alaska was administered from the city. Just in time for the Klondike gold rush, in 1867 the United States of America bought Alaska from Russia, paying a mere seven million dollars for more than one and a half million square kilometres of land. Needless to say, the investment soon paid off. Russia wasn't too bothered about it, as they had their own gold rush near Irkutsk at the same time. Gold was found in and around the river Lena, "only" a few hundred kilometres away, in the forests to the north of the city. The wealth soon flowed from there to Irkutsk.

It wasn't easy to see that the city had experienced good times. I'll be happy to give the local tourist bureau a new slogan for free: “Why go to see the Leaning Tower of Pisa, when you can go to Irkutsk and see a whole leaning city?” At least that was my impression after one day there.

Many wooden houses had clearly been built by artistic carpenters, and once upon a time I'm sure they must have been the pride of the town. Now they just lay there, grey of age and missing paint, so that no one could see how pretty they once had been. Some windows had moved from mid-wall almost down to the ground. I couldn't tell whether it was because the houses were sinking or because the ground was rising. Many homes lacked plumbing and water pipelines. Even in the city centre there were water pumps at the street corners. A steady stream of old women came to them with buckets, filled them up and struggled with carrying the water back home. Imagine that. In the twenty-first century Europe.

In a neighbourhood from where prosperity had long since moved out, a gorgeous, deep red brick church with cobalt blue bulbous domes was under construction. The houses and fences in nearby streets were all falling apart. The church was flanked by a closed down go-cart track and a couple of factories that seemed to produce only soot, dirt and trash. On a gravel road with plenty of holes in it, rain water had assembled to form puddles. The church was beautifully reflected in them, like a poor man's Taj Mahal.

Seeing the city took a long time. Not because Irkutsk is so large, but because it was difficult to see more than just a small part of it at a time. The Siberian forest was on fire. Thick, brownish smoke from millions of disappearing trees filled the air over an enormous area, including Irkutsk. A heat wave with its warm winds had dried the coniferous forests of the taiga. The summer heat brought thunderstorms. There was much thunder and lightning, but almost no rain. Now hundreds of small fires joined forces, and there wasn't much anyone could do about it.

When there's *one* small fire, the government can fight it by dropping massive water bombs from planes and helicopters. They even have a small army of sturdy lumberjacks with parachutes, who can be sent out to cut fire lines in the forest. But when there's a *large* fire and it rages in

remote, uninhabited areas, there's nothing to do but to sit back and wait and hope that the winds will not to blow the fire into a populated area. The snow will arrive in November and put out the fires. The people and the forests of Siberia then get a break until the spring, when new, rainless thunderstorms and Russian campers armed with matches return to the wilderness.

The "Taj Irkutsk"

A sad message from home awaited me at an Internet café in Irkutsk. My grandmother had died. She had been ill for a long time and old for even longer, but it was still a bit of a shock to me. I didn't have to ponder much upon whether or not I should discontinue my trip and go home. She had died just as I had left Vladivostok several days ago, and now it was simply impossible for me to get home in time for the funeral.

I intensely felt that I was in the wrong place. Partially because I was thousands of kilometres away from where I wanted to be, but also because there was absolutely no one around that I could talk sensibly to about anything at all. My travel insurance could have taken me home, but because of the visa situation it couldn't have brought me back to continue the trip later.

This is a risk you run when you travel to far-away places for longer periods. Of course it feels terrible when it happens, but you cannot let the fear of it force you to always stay at home. I didn't panic, but right there and then I felt sad and mournful. I needed some peace before I could go

on. Lake Baikal seemed like the right place to go. Looking at open water always helps me think, and now I had a lot of thoughts and memories to process.

Thirty sweaty minutes in a ticket line at the Irkutsk bus terminal didn't result in much. Apparently the morning bus to Listvyanka, the nearest village by the lake, was full. I could get a ticket to the afternoon bus, but I declined the offer. Instead I walked outside to the reportedly full bus. It was ready to go, but I asked the driver whether the bus really *was* full. My experience from other places where public transportation is ridiculously cheap, is that a bus can never be completely full. Especially not if you get your ticket directly from the driver.

My white arrow into the dark hit its target. Paying half price straight into the driver's wallet allowed me to sit on a box in the back of the bus. I lifted it to see what was under it and found a hole leading straight down to a tired, oily engine. I quickly put the box back in place.

Two Polish backpackers considered it a personal insult and another injustice done to Poles by the Russians, when they heard that I paid a little less than them for the bus ride. They calmed down a bit when in Listvyanka I paid ten times more for my accommodation than they did. I met them again down at the beach in the afternoon. I asked them what they were standing out in the ice-cold water for. It turned out that their cheap lodging offered neither toilets nor showers. That didn't worry them as long as they had an enormous, blue bathroom located right outside their dormitory.

For my roubles I got my own bathroom with hot water, a solid breakfast, a good bed and a window with a lake view. The house I stayed in was at the very end of the cluster of houses that formed the village. A cow patrolled the garden, now and then coming over to peek into my room to check whether I was hiding some good grass from her. When the cow stayed away, I sat in the large window frame and watched and listened to the waves crashing onto the beach. As soon as the last gangs of picnicking young people left, the sound of the waves was all I could hear.

I take that back. The youth on the beaches of Lake Baikal weren't gangs. It's too incriminating a word to describe how adorable they were.

My guess is that when I saw them, I witnessed an established, efficient, local mating ritual. When the boys from Irkutsk has saved enough money for petrol, they fill their cars with carefully chosen girls and bottles of beer and bring them all down to the lake. There the boys display their manliness by undressing to their underwear and throwing themselves into the water, almost without looking like they're freezing to death. A few seconds later they come out of the water, catch their chosen girls and pull them towards the lake. The girls squeal, but they don't put up much resistance. Soon they undress as well, but for some reason only from the waist up. Then they wade back and forth along the beach wearing just bras and trousers, while the boys sit comfortably on the beach with their beer and enjoy both the wonderful effects of alcohol and the nice view of the bathing girls, as if they were watching a Saturday night football match.

When all the bottles are empty, the boys throw themselves at the girls again and bring them back on land. Disappearing into blankets, they all do their best to keep each other warm. Eventually someone will almost freeze to death, and only then will the party hastily pack their stuff, except for the empty bottles and the trash. This they of course leave behind, as is the custom in Russia. In the end they drive back to Irkutsk to enjoy some raw, uninhibited sex. Or at least everything seemed to me to lead in that direction, so we will assume that to be the case. But apart from that last bit, the whole scene was acted out with incredible sweetness and innocence. It was exactly how I imagine young people back home used to behave back in the days when everything was in black and white and the dinosaurs ruled the Earth.

Ambling through Listvyanka was like visiting a fairly well-kept open-air museum of cultural history. Cosy, wooden houses stood scattered on a narrow shelf of land between the lake and some steep hills. Some of the buildings were new, most of them were old, but they all carried the same, elaborate wood carvings. Almost all the houses were in use, and outside them their inhabitants were at work, painting the outhouses, mowing the lawns and picking berries from the bushes in the gardens. It was rather idyllic.

Many homes had signs saying "Rooms for rent". The village made a living from its visitors. Or at least they *tried* to. According to a notice board on a square by the beach, Lake Baikal received only seventy thousand tourists a year, definitely not counting all those who pass by in trains and see just a tiny bit of the lake from behind a window.

On that day I could believe it. In the small square there were more people selling souvenirs and smoked fish than there were buyers. Still, seventy thousand sounds like a low number. When I later told Russians that I had visited Lake Baikal, their eyes glazed over. Every single one of them would tell me they dreamt about visiting the pearl of Siberia some day. Given that there are about a hundred and fifty million Russian dreamers around, you would imagine the square in the tourist town of Listvyanka to be more crowded.

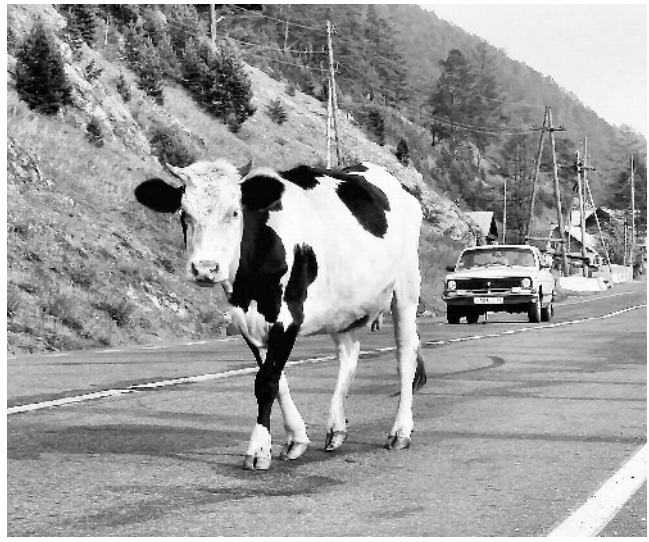
That said, it's not easy to make Lake Baikal and the surrounding areas seem crowded. From outer space it looks like a delicious, blue banana at three quarters the size of Switzerland. It stretches almost six hundred kilometres from north to south, with a coastline of nearly two thousand kilometres to show for itself. The dark blue water of the lake in places reaches a depth of more than fifteen hundred metres. Scientists likely to die long before anyone can prove them wrong, claim that the eastern and western sides of the lake are moving away from each other, so that in a few million years Asia will be split into two new continents. The lake will then become an ocean.

In this giant aquarium about a fifth of all non-frozen fresh water on the planet is gathered, housing hundreds or possibly thousands of species of animals and insects that do not exist anywhere else. Among them you can find the only fresh water seal in the world and the world's largest tapeworm. In addition to living side by side, the two creatures also have in common that they both eat fish.

Oh, and the fish of the Baikal aren't exactly normal either. The pink golomyanka, "the fat fish", doesn't have fish-scales, and unlike most other fish species, it doesn't go through the egg laying and hatching routine. Instead it gives birth to fully developed new fish. If you ever catch a golomyanka on a warm summer day, you'd better eat it right away. If not,

it will disappear, as it simply melts when exposed to sunlight. All that's left after a meltdown are a few bones and a tiny pool of fat.

Don't worry about the fat fish. When you visit Lake Baikal, you're more likely to get an omul fish in your hands than a golomyanka. All over Listvyanka fishermen's wives stood with half a barbecue-style oil barrel full of red-hot coal in front of them and a pile of fresh omuls behind them. They were preparing smoked omul. After walking up and down the main street, I stunk of both fish and open fire. The worst thing about the omul is not the smell it leaves in Listvyanka, but the fact that it screams when it's caught. As if fishing doesn't already make you feel bad enough when you have to put a worm on the hook before you can even begin.



Heavy traffic in Listvyanka

In the village the fauna was less exotic. The streets were full of running chickens, cows and sheep, all tended by shepherds. The reason they ran wasn't that they were in a hurry, but because they spent much of their time on the main road to Irkutsk, ruled by cars and other lethal vehicles. The drivers didn't seem too worried about what a heavy cow could do to their tiny, fragile cars. They zigzagged at breakneck speed between the farm animals, the shepherds and me.

The maniacs in the cars inspired me to move on. I had come to see the lake and to find peace for a while. To achieve that I evidently had to put more distance between myself and civilization. From Listvyanka boats regularly left for other places around the lake. If you *really* wanted to leave the world as we know it, like my Polish friends planned on, a ten hour ride on a hydrofoil boat would take you Severobaikalsk, a city at the

northern end of the lake. The Poles overslept and missed the boat by half an hour. When they learned that the next boat wouldn't leave until the following week, they just grunted and got on the train to Mongolia instead.

My plans were more moderate. I wanted to get on a ferry for the thirty minute crossing to Port Baikal. From there I could walk along old railway tracks towards Slyudyanka. A long time ago, Port Baikal had been a train station on the first railway line between Irkutsk and Slyudyanka. That lasted until the Angara River (the only one flowing *out* of Lake Baikal, more than three hundred rivers and streams flow into it) was dammed. This put large sections of the railway tracks to Port Baikal under water. Tracks were laid straight from Irkutsk to Slyudyanka, away from the lake and the river, making the Port Baikal line an unnecessary branch off the new Trans-Siberian service.

The forest along the lake was full of ticks, carriers of the potentially paralysing and lethal Lyme disease. To avoid them, I walked on the railway tracks. Although only a few trains per week passed by there, it was enough to fight back the grass from which ticks like to hang when they hunt for blood.

Listvyanka and Port Baikal are separated by a sound just a few kilometres wide, but the thick smoke from the forest fires and the local preparation of fish made my destination impossible to see from where we started out. Slowly Port Baikal glided out of the smoke, revealing a run-down, but still pleasant and richly coloured ferry landing from the 1950s.

In the general store at the wharf, the till lady used an abacus to calculate what my change shold be. Apparently I paid for my Coca-Cola with an unusually large note, and it took quite a while before she was satisfied with her calculations. Next to the wharf a half-sunken ship lay in the water, remains of the vessels that used to bring train sets safely over the water before tracks were laid along the lake. At the train station there were large piles of coal, put there to seduce old locomotives into coming there from Slyudyanka every now and again. Port Baikal was dying.

After ten minutes of walking I was already in what felt like wilderness. I was pretty much all alone. Every few kilometres I saw tents pitched by

The abacus is still in use at the general store in Port Baikal

the lake, usually inhabited by a family or a young couple on a cheap vacation. The summer scene was complete. Warm air, green grass and lush bush surrounded the path. Flowers were in full bloom, and the bumblebees buzzed happily from one bowl of nectar to the other. I soon forgot that I was walking next to a natural wonder of a lake. The scenery was familiar to me, an almost exact replica of what you typically see on a walk in Norwegian coastal forests.

The greatest thing about Baikal is no doubt all that you cannot really see; the enormous size of the lake, and the unique forms of life that hide beneath the surface, both on land and in the water. Further north the scenery may be more exciting, but coming from Norway, the southern parts of Lake Baikal did at first sight not seem that special at all. It was more difficult not to be impressed by all the visible works of engineering.

The laying down of railway tracks was a relatively easy task through most of Siberia. Long stretches of tracks could be laid straight down on flat ground, and the work progressed quickly. It was of course difficult enough to work in a wilderness that no one really knew. Some places rivers had to be crossed, and every now and then there was a hill in the way. The hardest challenge was to avoid putting the tracks too close to rivers that were prone to flooding. It was also necessary to stay away from permafrost areas, which at times easily could transform steady ground to unstable marsh and damage the tracks.

When they reached Lake Baikal the situation worsened. A lot. To lay the tracks north of the lake would be a long detour and included a high risk of encountering permafrost. In the south the tracks would come close to Mongolia and China. Russia didn't trust these two neighbours at all, so they didn't want to put the tracks closer to them than absolutely necessary. The terrain along the lake was steep and rocky, and difficult to do any construction work in. At first they tried to solve the problem by having boats carry the train coaches across the lake. During the summer that was fine, but in the winter the ice lay too thick for the boats to propel their way through it. The engineers claimed that building a railway line along the lake would be hopelessly expensive, and at first they dismissed the idea completely.

During the winter of 1904 the Russians became desperate. They were at war with Japan in and around the Sea of Japan, and they just *had* to get supplies through to their military forces. The only way to do this fast enough was by train through Siberia. The emergency plan was to lay railway tracks across the ice on Lake Baikal. Laying down the tracks went fine, but when the first train set out on the journey across the ice, it soon became evident that this was *not* a good idea. The coaches are still deep down at the bottom of the lake.

So that was it. They had no choice; the railway *had* to be built along the southern shore of Lake Baikal. It was completed with thirty-something tunnels, more than a hundred bridges and an unknown number of workers dead and buried next to the tracks. Ironically, today this most impressive and costly section of the whole Trans-Siberian Railway is practically not in use. On the other hand, it has turned into the perfect place to go for a comfortable walk through wilderness and history on a sunny day.

Rambling along the railway tracks was a strenuous, yet relaxing experience, and it cannot be denied that I was a changed man when I returned to civilization. I had changed so much that not even the most vigorous of deodorants could have disguised it. When I returned to my hotel in Irkutsk, the room clerk surprised me by not only immediately noticing and recognizing me, she even gave me a key straight away and

told me to come back and check in later, after I had changed my clothes and taken a long, hot shower. I must have stunk beyond belief.

I stayed in a different room than the one I had left a few days earlier. I discovered this when I quickly undressed to get in the shower. While I still had my head inside my t-shirt, suddenly a large globe belonging to a ceiling lamp was in the way of my roaming arms. It went down. The last time Irkutsk had witnessed a crash of similar proportions must have been when Boris Yeltsin fell over during a visit to a chandelier shop in the city. (I'm just assuming this must have happened.)

The whole floor was now full of tiny, razor-sharp fragments of glass. The large globe on the lamp appeared to have been manufactured with the finest glass available. “Oops!”, I thought out loud, and I stiffened as I anticipated the arrival of the local riot squad. No one came. So I walked out to the corridor to welcome the hunch-backed dezhurnaya who I thought had to be on her toilsome way towards my room by then. But she wasn't. I went back inside my room, brushed up the broken glass and took a shower, all bloody and perplexed.

Guilt-ridden from so recklessly having broken such a treasure, I began to ponder upon how I could resolve this matter. Locals are often used to foreigners doing strange things, sometimes they even expect it, but according to my guidebook the last vandal to visit the town was Genghis Khan. That was some time ago. How would I explain this?

Thinking myself unable to elaborate on my crime in Russian, my solution became to create a photo story. Thanks to the self-timer on my camera, the broken globe and a remaining whole one, I was able to put together a credible reconstruction of what had happened. With my camera in hand and my tail between my legs I walked down to the check-in desk.

It went better than I had feared. First the room clerk thought I was just trying to impress her with my digital camera. She put up a discouraging face, telling me that if I was looking for a woman, I'd better get on the phone with the mafia instead. Then she recognized the hotel room on the small screen on the back of the camera. Suddenly she was very interested in my presentation. She paid close attention to the story, and when she

understood where it all was heading, she simply pulled out a price list from a drawer and said “Slamat lampa, 80 roubly!”. What a marvellous thing to have a list like that handy, just in case a partying rock band on drugs or a silly Norwegian backpacker comes by. Relieved, I paid my indulgence, and then everything was okay.

Russians are pragmatic in matters like that. Done is done and forgotten is forgotten. I guess that's the way it has to be in a country where in the near past so many things went so horribly wrong.

My last night in Irkutsk I did some more walking beyond the old town. I left the city centre and crossed over a bridge to an islet in the Angara, The Island of the Youth. Every town and city I visited in Siberia had a hotspot for evening entertainment, frequented mainly by young adults. The largest cities had parks and organized fairgrounds, while in smaller towns the sensation seekers had seemingly just picked one of their streets at random as the fun place to go. People would come there every night, regardless of the weather, even though in some cases the only thing to do there was to get drunk on beer while you watched others do the same.

In my country, most people can meet up in their own homes, whether they are two people or ten. Russians, however, usually live in cramped apartments until they marry, often sharing the space with parents as well as grandparents. As soon as they get married, children start popping out and drastically dampen any desire to host social gatherings at home. Also, while my friends and I can meet in relatively inexpensive cafés and restaurants, Russian towns offer few such facilities. When Russians go out for a meal, they do it properly, with dinner, wine and vodka. Many Russians cannot afford to do this very often, especially not the young ones. Having an informal meeting place outdoors is therefore an important social factor for them.

The Island of the Youth was such a place, and a well equipped one at that. Near the entrance I found a karaoke scene, an open-air disco, candy floss machines and a small funfair. It offered only basic rides, but everyone enjoyed them with great enthusiasm nevertheless. On the other side of the island there were horses to ride, a street organ, popcorn and a beach full of patches of tall grass, so that blushing couples could

disappear from the public eye when they wanted to. And they wanted to a lot. Those who wanted to, but who couldn't because they had no one to disappear with, worked hard on changing the status quo. Girls walked around in couples, arm-in-arm and all spruced up. They were circled by herds of young men. Bawling drunkenly and waving bottles they did all they could to impress the females. It was quite amusing to watch.

Less pleasant, but definitely more thought-provoking was the late night news broadcast on a local TV station. I'm not claiming that I understood everything that was said, but I did get that it had been a quiet day in the city, except for something that was either a suicide or a murder. While the nature of the death was unclear, the coverage of it was remarkably straightforward. First we were shown an interview with an eyewitness. He had seen someone fall down from a high-rise building, and with big eyes he described exactly what had happened. I understood mainly the part where he said "Ooo-wheeeeeeee, bampsh!" The open-mouthed reporter barely managed to throw a question or two into the dramatic story.

This was followed by pictures showing a river of blood running down a street. The cameraman travelled upstream with great dramaturgy, all the way to the source, a pool of blood surrounding something bulky hidden beneath a blanket. A quick cut later someone had adjusted the blanket ever so slightly, so that we all could see what a smashed face looks like after having been accelerated by gravity from the ninth floor all the way to the hard ground. A policeman came running into the picture, yelled at the cameraman and put the blanket back in place, thus concluding the report. Back in the studio it was time for the weather forecast. More smoke and some light showers.

That night I dreamt splatter dreams.

—

The smell of fish was intense on the train out of Irkutsk. Only a couple of hours earlier the train had stopped in Slyudyanka, where the platform had been full of sellers of fresh fish from Lake Baikal. I closed my nose as much as I could and smiled to the omul gluttons with whom I shared a compartment. The train was still surrounded by an boring, drowsy and

greyish green forest. One night and eleven hundred kilometres closer to Moscow I could take it no more. I left the train in Krasnoyarsk.

If I had been more fish smell tolerant, I would probably have jumped straight onto the next passing train. Krasnoyarsk didn't seem particularly enticing. I knew it was a city with much industry. Up until the 1900s it had been a relatively calm outpost of the Russian empire. Its first inhabitants had been trappers and hunters. Later, during the gold rush, it turned into some sort of a general trading centre. The city changed dramatically when Stalin during World War II decided to move heavy industry there from the European part of Russia, to protect it from Hitler's advancing troops. After the war the factories remained in place, since most of the raw materials they depended on came from Siberia anyway. The growth of the city continued, and by the time I arrived, Krasnoyarsk had become one of the ugliest cities in the world. It was all grey and dull, with more than a million slightly less grey and dull inhabitants.

A poor donkey was the only thing in the city that had received a coating of paint since the fall of communism. Russia has many city parks, and in most of them you can pay to sit on an animal and have your photograph taken while you're being transported a hundred metres or so. Usually the animal is a horse. In the north it can sometimes be a reindeer, while in the south, if you're lucky, there's a camel available. Krasnoyarsk was the only place I visited where the animal on offer was a freshly painted zebra!

To avoid having to see too much of the absolutely ugliest façade in the city, I rented a room inside the building it belonged to. Hotel Krasnoyarsk was in the centre of the city, next to a square surrounded by an opera house, the river bank by the Yenisey and various other banks with façades that were almost, but not entirely as ugly as my hotel's. In the square there were fountains of the kind that the Russians seemed to be awfully fond of, at least ten beer and kebab tents which the Russians obviously were even more fond of, and, which pleased me the most, a huge, inflatable bouncy castle. Everything was grey, except for the brewery logos on the beer tents. I immediately started planning my departure from the city.

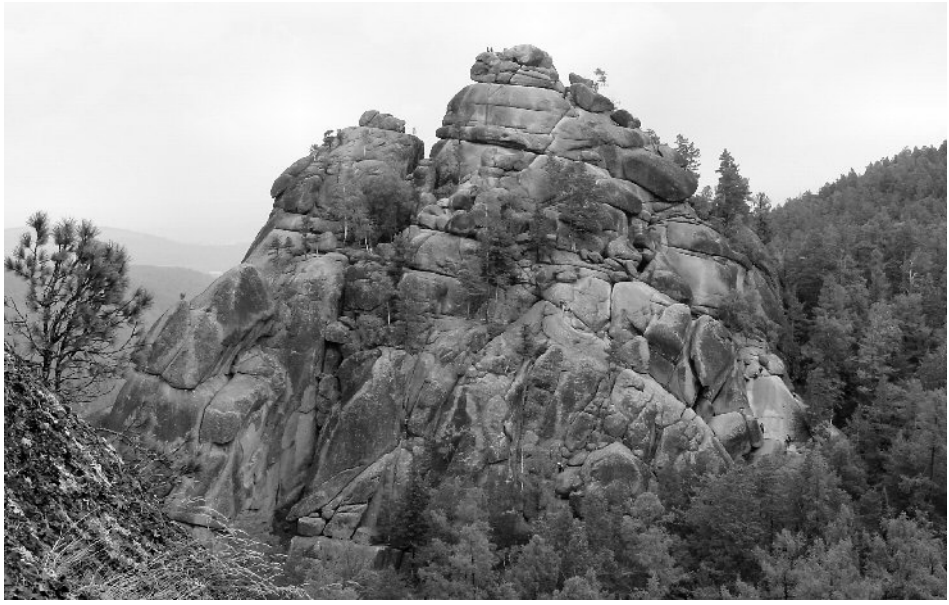
It turned out that Krasnoyarsk *did* have something to offer its visitors. I just had to travel a bit out of the city to find it; the Stolby Park. The park got its name from its main feature, the stolbys. In the middle of the enormous, green carpet of forest just outside Krasnoyarsk, some fascinating, strange peaks break the green monotony.

If you ever built a stack out of rounded stones like the ones you can find at the bottom of a river, you have seen a tiny stolby. From a distance they looked like cairns built to show the way through the wilderness. But these cairns stood several hundred metres tall. The stolbys could easily have been abstract sculptures created by giants in a world populated by elves and hobbits. They looked like contemplating, peaceful, literally petrified trolls, with trees growing on their noses and ears.

Nowhere in the world can a forest enthusiast have a better view than from the top of a stolby. All you can see is trees, trees and more trees all the way to the horizon in every direction. Although I had seen trees outside the train the whole way from Vladivostok, I still wanted to climb a stolby. I took a marshrutka and got off at the park entrance. It was early morn, and I tip-toed past a sleeping forester on duty. An hour and a half later I stood at the base of my first stolby.

Even though the stolby looked like a theatre prop made from papier mâché, upon closer inspection it was rock solid. The climb was extremely steep, but there were many places to put my hands and feet, so it was hard, but not *too* hard to make my way up. Forty-five minutes of climbing, leaping and struggling brought me to the top. It was a cold morning, but I was steaming with sweat.

At first I was alone, but soon I heard shouting from below. One after another, more sweaty bodies joined me on the summit. Boys, girls, women, men, old women and greybeards, it seemed that all sorts of people were conquering "my" stolby that Sunday morning. Soon the atmosphere up there was party-like. An obviously disturbed man had brought a guitar. Unfortunately for us, but good for him, he was a much better at climbing than at playing the guitar. Many rewarded themselves with a bottle of beer or a swig of vodka. Outdoor life in Russia is as varied as life in general.



An entry-level stolby (and seventeen climbers, for those of you with eagle eyes)

I hardly fooled anyone in Siberia into believing that I was Russian, possibly except for a few times when I *really* tried to join the large, grey, marching mass in the streets. Suspicious glances met me wherever I went. If I wore my running shoes, people stared at them. Wearing my tired hiking boots bought me less attention. Walking with my backpack on was a dead giveaway. If I wanted to reduce my alien factor, I could carry my stuff in a grey plastic bag instead. In general, though, I unmistakably looked like a foreigner. On rare occasions people who spoke a little English or German approached me to practice their language skills. Usually just to show their friends how clever they were, and not to hear my replies to their questions.

Up on the stolby I was wearing both a backpack and my running shoes. That, and the fact that I wasn't visibly suffering from a hangover on a Sunday morning, clearly made me a foreigner. A man who had studied English for several years came over and introduced himself. I asked him whether it was normal for people of all ages and levels of fitness to go on neck-breaking climbs like this one. He didn't understand what I meant. This stolby was the easiest to climb in the whole park, of course anyone could get up there.

Other stolbys were much steeper. Climbers sought the absolutely most difficult routes up them. No one seemed to take any safety precautions or use ropes. Some people could have climbed them blindfolded, and there were actually those who sort of did. A special kind of climbing came as a result of World War II. Wounded and blinded men returned from the war. They couldn't work, but they remembered how they had climbed the stolbys before they joined the army. Mastering the climbing gave them a way to prove that they were still not completely useless.

At the base of one of the stolbys there was a chapel. It had been built in memory of the many war heroes and a number of foolhardy teenagers who suddenly one day impressed no one any more. Sad stories are always hiding just around the corner in Russia, even in those places where people actually seem happy.

On my way back I encountered another sad story. Hunchbacked old women with walking sticks were out looking for their pension; flowers and berries to sell for small change in the city later in the day.

Near the stolby park I came upon a zoo. I hesitated before entering, and as soon as I had gone inside I regretted it. In a country where even many people aren't well cared for, it is not to be expected that four-legged and feather-clad creatures are treated with much respect. Krasnoyarsk Zoo was a prime example of this. Most of the animals were psychotic. Except for some visiting sparrows, the animals and the birds wandered restlessly along the walls in their too small cages. They reminded me more of badly designed robots than of animals.

This is what you get when you give animals too little space to live in and you surround them with an audience consisting of mainly unruly children (“Look mum, when I throw stones at the bear, it gets angry!”), and grown-up men who walk around with large bottles of beer in their hands. (“Look bear, when I throw empty bottles at Boris, he gets angry!”)

I took no pleasure at all in watching the animals, but the Russians appeared to enjoy it so much that the zoo made a little bit of extra money from renting out cameras by the hour. This I had never seen before. Perhaps most of the visitors to the zoo weren't exactly well off, unable to afford buying their own cameras. Maybe being in a place where at least

some creatures were below them in the pecking order made them feel good. Could it be that they wanted to take photographs there, so that later they could look at them at home and think "Ha-ha, look at that stupid tiger, desperate for my popcorn"? I quickly left the park, or else I would have started throwing rocks at people, just to make a point.

With more time in Russia I would have left Krasnoyarsk by boat instead of by train. The river Yenisey, just a few bends away from being one of the ten longest rivers in the world, flows by the city on its way to the Arctic Kara Sea, far north of the polar circle. During the barely six months when the river is free of ice, people use the Yenisey to get to and from small settlements between Krasnoyarsk and the coast, two thousand kilometres to the north.

Transportation on the river was carried out by ageing vessels. Most of their passengers were also advanced in years, and of the kind that will bring two thousand cabbages, a large pile of long-playing records, cheap TVs and lots of batteries when they travel. Now they were heading into the wilderness, to places with magical names like Norilsk and Dudinka. There they would sell their treasures to the locals.

By the way, Dudinka is possibly Earth's coldest place with permanent residents, Antarctic research stations excluded. The average temperature *throughout the year* is about ten degrees Celsius *below* freezing. I'm pretty sure that people there pay for their cabbages and batteries with wolf and polar bear skins. This I may never find out for sure, as the trip up the river and back takes at least two weeks. Even though I wanted to go, I just didn't have the time.

Instead I went to the train station to buy a ticket to Yekaterinburg. It wasn't as easy as you would think. The woman who sold tickets refused to sell me one, claiming that no such place existed. My Russian skills were not up to discussing the matter, so I gave up when not even showing her the city on a map was enough to make her change her opinion. Trying my luck at a second counter was just as fruitless. Not having much else to do, I tried another one, and this time I succeeded. The woman behind the counter offered me a ticket not to Yekaterinburg, but to Sverdlovsk. It was just as good, she said.

And it was. As recently as in 1991 Sverdlovsk changed its name back to what it had been before the revolution, Yekaterinburg. Twelve years later the ticketing system and most of the employees at the railway station in Krasnoyarsk had still not received the memo.

My next provodnitsa was a stereotypical grandmother; rounded and amiable, with her hair neatly arranged in a top. Smiling, she showed me to my compartment. I was to share it with three grandmothers like her, presumably as some sort of special service to them.

The grandmothers kept staring at me and commenting on my every move. I amused them without not really knowing how. All it took was to be a stupid foreigner, I think. My new friends invited grandmothers from the whole train to come in and look at me. I tried my best to make conversation with them all, but whatever I said they just laughed at me, in much the same way I had seen people laugh at the animals in the zoo. I longed to be back on the train where everyone had thought I was a spy. On this train I was just a clown.

There was only one way to stop their mockery. I hardly ever do this when I'm around poor people, but I was desperate. I told them that I was 30 years old and unmarried, and I told them how much money I made in Norway. The laughs disappeared, and they all went silent. Then the swing door hit back with double force. I was busy for the rest of the day. Before night fell I had been introduced to, given the address of and/or been shown a photograph of *all* unmarried, female descendants of the whole herd of grandmothers on the train. The situation had improved.

I don't know much about what grandmothers spend their days doing, but after that train journey I knew all too well what they do at night. They snore. With an unfathomable force and a complete lack of rhythm. As long as the train was moving it wasn't a problem. Then I could just put an ear against the wall and all other sounds would be drowned out by the relatively pleasant sounds from the train. But whenever the train stopped at a station, the sound picture was pretty much this:

thumpthump *thump-thump* *thump – thump* *whiiine* *silence*

SNOOOOOORE!

The sudden monster of a sound startled me at every stop that night. It may be far between the train stations in Siberia, but every little heart attack counts towards the end of your life.

I consider myself a defender of all basic human rights. I don't support the use of capital punishment under normal circumstances, but there is one exception. There is *no* mercy to be had for those who choose to sleep in hostel dormitories despite knowing that they are world-class snoring champions. Serious snorers *must* be kept away from innocent and silent sleepers at night. Even when confined to single rooms, they should stick to a sleeping position that minimizes the noise. If it's bad enough, a snore can easily penetrate a wall. Offenders could for instance try sleeping with their heads in water, face-down.

Lacking laws to protect us, luckily there are other ways to handle the problem. Here are some techniques you can use:

1. Always, but *always*, carry ear plugs in a pocket or container you have easy access to. While some snoring can penetrate ear plugs and thus only worsen the situation, ear plugs can in many cases dampen the noise enough to let you sleep. Practice sleeping while wearing ear plugs at home, as you need to get used to sweaty auditory canals and the sound of your own heartbeat.

2. Go to bed before the snoring person and fall asleep as quickly as you can. It helps if you spend the day getting really tired, as it will make your sleep deeper. Sooner or later you *will* wake up from the snoring, but in theory you are then close to rested anyway, so you can consider the nasal blares to be your nasty wake-up call.

3. Keep an arsenal of small objects in or near your bed. The objects must be suitable for being thrown at the offender without injuring him permanently. (Although offenders can be of any gender, men are generally the worst.)

   Suitable items are rolled-up socks, loaves of soft bread, rolls of toilet paper, empty plastic bottles, newspapers and large beetles, preferably dead ones. In the middle of the night it is too much of an effort to get out of bed and walk over to the offender to

physically stop the snoring. Throwing objects at him can often work just as well and may give you some much needed satisfaction at the same time.

4. If you lack hand missiles, you *can* go to the offender's bed, wake him up and ask the offender to sleep on his stomach. This is likely to stop the snoring. If you're sleeping in a bunk bed, though, and the snoring person is above you, you have another option. When the snoring commences, you simply kick upwards into the bottom of the offender's mattress.

   Adjust the force of your kick to the size of the receiver. I once failed to do so, and sent a modest-sized, snoring Singaporean flying onto a concrete floor from an altitude of two metres. Luckily he never understood what had happened. It was not a pleasant situation. For him, I mean. Ideally you should kick just hard enough to make the offender change his position. Keep on kicking until the noise is reduced to an acceptable level.

5. For various reasons you may wish to avoid physical contact with the offender. If so, you can direct a fine sprinkle of flour or sugar into his open mouth. This will invariably lead to the offender licking his lips without waking him up. Maybe he will even close his mouth. Either way, the shape of his respiratory passage will be altered. Continue until the snoring ceases. (And stop before breathing ceases.)

6. I can only recommend this last option when you *know* in advance that someone will snore in the night. Characteristics to look out for are obesity, breathing with an open mouth even when awake and bruises on the forehead from thrown plastic bottles or similar.

   What you do is to put itching powder in the bed or inside the sleeping bag of the suspect. When he goes to bed, he will not fall asleep. Instead he will spend the night itching and scratching himself. Who does not sleep, does not sin by snoring. But *you* will sleep well. (Unless he spends the night swearing loudly. Consider the possibility before you act.)

Not even all these excellent pieces of advice can guarantee you a good night's sleep. I had brought ear plugs, but unfortunately they were out of order. They kept falling out. An unfortunate incident earlier that day, involving the ear plugs and a boiling hot cup of tea, had led to my ear plugs losing most of their ability to adjust to my ears. The tea had not benefited from the event either, as it acquired a slightly waxy taste.

I was unable to make myself kick or throw stuff at the grandmothers, so I just gave up sleeping and instead spent the night reading my book and having a look outside whenever we stopped. I was sad to see the cities of Omsk and Tomsk slip out of my hands. Their names would have looked good on my travel CV. All I know about the two cities is that they seemed very dark at night.

We crossed the border between Siberia and Ural before dawn. There may be an official and visible border somewhere, I don't know. But I do know that the landscape outside changed sometime during the night. Instead of the desolate, infinite forests of the previous evening, the view outside the train windows was now dominated by farmland, large fields and small, rural settlements.

People in Siberia sometimes talk about the European part of Russia as "the mainland", as if Siberia were an isolated island. If it is, I was now approaching the other side of the "ocean".

I had always imagined the Ural Mountains to be a massive wall, put up by the powers that be to make sure that Asia and Europe keeps a proper distance to each other. Now I was in the middle of the Urals, but the terrain was as uneventful as ever. All I could see was open fields and friendly, rounded hills. Fair enough, the Trans-Siberian Railway crosses the Ural Mountains at their lowest, but they are merely modest mountains all over. The whole mountain range stays below two thousand metres. Not that it matters. The most important thing about these mountains isn't their appearance, but the vast quantities of minerals that are hidden inside them.

Yekaterinburg's existence is a result of the wealth inside the mountains. The city was named after two Katarinas. One was the wife of Tsar Peter the Great, and the other is the patron saint of Russian miners.

For hundreds of years the Russians have brought gemstones, metals and minerals out of the mountains and into the factories. Among the products this has resulted in are heavy machinery, petrol, steel, diamonds, jewellery and many other things, depending on what the country has needed the most at different times. The wealth of the mountains has benefited the city in many ways. The best and most recent example is the metro in Yekaterinburg. It is literally a gold mine, although nobody knew it before the digging of metro tunnels suddenly revealed the fact.

My view from the hotel told me that I was certainly not in the old Soviet Union. I looked straight into an enormous factory chimney that just stood there, bored and with nothing to do. In the distance the "Church on the Blood" dominated the view, a cathedral recently erected on the spot where the now canonized tsar family was murdered by the Bolsheviks in 1918. Bathing in the evening sun, the bulbous domes of the church beamed rays of golden light in every direction. It made the old and decaying concrete buildings surrounding it seem even uglier than they could have done on their own.

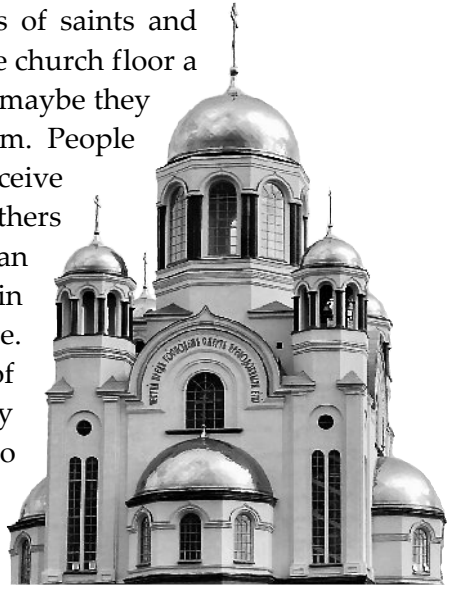
Closer to my hotel, a coffee manufacturer did its best to seduce me into having a cup, by covering the whole side of a fifteen floor apartment building with a giant advertising banner. What the view had been from that same hotel room fifteen years earlier I do not know, but it certainly must have been different.

The golden domes on the cathedral lured me inside. It was my first visit to a Russian church. A seemingly everlasting service was taking place. At least I think it was a service, although it certainly was quite different from the sleepy performance that is offered to Norwegian churchgoers on Sunday mornings.

There were no chairs or benches inside, so everyone had to stand. While that may have been a bit exhausting for some members of the congregation, the priests were the worst off. They ran in and out of doors between the church, the vestry and the sanctum, retrieving and replacing a wide range of items that were used in the service. Fortunately, there was a large team of priests to share the tasks between them. The atmosphere was more chaotic than solemn. About two hundred people

were present. Almost all of them were women, ranging from old ones dressed in black from head to toe, to young girls wearing miniskirts and fashionable pastel shawls.

There was never a dull moment, several things went on at the same time. As the high priest read the text of the day out loud, junior assistants danced in and out of swing doors on the inner wall. People made the sign of the cross and walked up to images of saints and kissed them. Somewhere high above the church floor a choir chanted gloria and hallelujah. Or maybe they were angels, I didn't actually see them. People went to an altar in a corner to receive Communion. New people arrived as others left. Some just popped by to leave an offering and to light a candle bought in the kiosk operating near the entrance. There was no hushing or raising of eyebrows. The old hags who in Norway would have dedicated themselves to this, instead stood in a circle in the middle of the church and loudly exchanged the latest gossip.



I found the whole scene slightly confusing, but there was no doubt that this way to run a church attracted people. Those who where present seemed significantly more sincere about their faith than the church sleepers you typically find on the pews in my country.

When the tsar family had been executed and the city had received its new name, Sverdlovsk, the city became a quiet place until World War II. Like in Krasnoyarsk, the city's population was doubled many times over when important factories for manufacturing military equipment were moved there from areas too close to the war in Europe. Sverdlovsk received the great Lenin medal for its contribution to victory in the war. It can still be seen on a bridge in the city.

Then followed another quiet period, or at least that appeared to be the case. Because the city was full of top secret military installations, news

reports from there rarely slipped out to the world. In 1979 more than two hundred civilians died when by accident anthrax was released into the air from a military laboratory working on chemical weapons. This wasn't officially confirmed until an investigation was conducted in the 1990s.

After the fall of communism, Sverdlovsk again became Yekaterinburg. A certain animated Boris Yeltsin was head of the region for a number of years, acting not much saner than he later would as president of the nation. After he moved on to Moscow, there were still plenty of dubious men left in the city.

With the collapse of the strict communist regime, the mafia quickly rose to power, taking control of many more or less legal businesses in Russia. In Yekaterinburg a violent and extensive battle raged for a long time between different criminal factions. Since then the situation had improved, but the gang wars had left its footprints in the city. The first thing I noticed was that even the green man in the traffic lights appeared to be on his way to robbing a bank. You needed only an inkling of imagination to see that he was holding a gun. The next thing I noticed was that to change money in Yekaterinburg wasn't quite like changing money elsewhere.

I had 250 US dollars I wanted to convert to roubles, so I made my way to a bank. Outside the large building a number of Mercedeses were parked. Most of them had a man sitting inside. As I approached the bank entrance they all followed me with their eyes. When I stopped at the door, they started shouting something about dollars. I chose to ignore them. The door was locked, but next to it there was a button and a surveillance camera. A quick push on the button made the door swing open.

Inside was a corridor full of more men of questionable breed. They asked me whether I was there to change dollars. “Da, da”, I answered honestly. Golden teeth twinkled from joyless faked smiles. Two men kept offering to change the money for me at increasingly better rates. “Nyet, nyet”, I said, still very honestly. Instead I found a bank employee sitting behind a bullet-proof window. He willingly traded my passport for an admission card to the actual bank.

With the card in hand I could continue through another door that suddenly opened in the wall. In the next room my backpack and pockets were thoroughly searched by security guards. Satisfied by my innocence they escorted me to a waiting room. I felt alone there, although I wasn't.

Sitting in large leather sofas, some other men were probably there to change money just like me, but they *could* just as well have been waiting to get in to audition for a part in a mafia movie. They wore ugly suits, had expressionless faces, large bellies, broken noses and copious amounts of gel in their hair. One of them was so cross-eyed that his eyeballs appeared to be flirting with each other. In their hands the men held suitcases and plastic bags full of roubles, presumably soon to be converted into a more useful currency for international trade of certain goods. Or bads. Again I received offers to change money at exceptionally good rates. Once more I politely declined the offers. Their money hardly came from harmless activities, such as selling handpicked violets and berries from the thick of the forest. I didn't want to play a part in their game.

The money exchange went fine, although it was an elaborate process with the filling-in of many forms. When I left, the men outside were no longer interested in me. I let out a sigh of relief. I found a quiet street where I distributed my roubles to various concealed locations on my body and in my backpack. Then I had an ice cream in celebration of my moneychanging skills.

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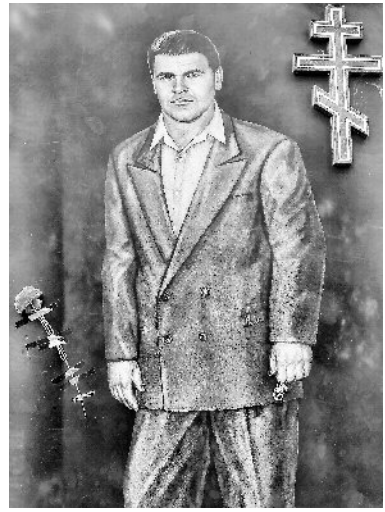
Inspired and fascinated by the open villainy in the bank, I decided to visit a place where I could safely have a closer look at the mafia. I went to the Shirokorechinskaya cemetery. For more than an hour I walked along the main road out of the city, risking my life with every step. It was quite the challenge, but I took comfort in the fact that whether I managed to avoid the swerving cars or not, one way or another I *would* end up at the cemetery.

Instead of the tidy park kind of graveyard I expected, the place was partially hidden inside a pine forest. There was a massive number of graves, but I soon found the ones I had come to see. The gangsters had not been afraid to spend money on services and items from the funeral

parlour. Lost ones were memorialized the way they had lived, hard as rock and surrounded by status symbols.



Not your average tombstone

Right by the entrance to the cemetery the previously most influential mafia members had taken up residence. They had no normal tombstones or simple goodbye messages like "Rest In Peace". A guy who must have been an important player in the war of the villains had been put to rest in a large sarcophagus surrounded by elegant marble jars, still filled with fresh roses and violets almost ten years after the funeral. Behind the monument there was a large granite tombstone. A life-sized portrait of the man himself had been engraved with laser on the polished rock. So now anyone could come and see how stylish he had been, wearing his mafia suit and a lethal look. To dot the i, the artist had put a key ring with a Mercedes logo in one of the dead man's hands.

Further up the gravel path more heroes from the underworld emerged; godfathers, godsons and errand boys. A pretty mistress was also remembered. She was perpetuated in white marble, wearing her favourite outfit, a slitted evening dress with a deep cleavage that must have been *at least* life-sized.

One man appeared to have been a part-time boxing champion with an interest in powerful engines. His tombstone was decorated with engravings of a killing knockout and a ride in a snowmobile across wide expanses. Others had picked more typical macho representations of themselves. The toughest guy may have been the one wearing a leather jacket and holding a lit cigarette. He held his head at a downward angle, daring any passers-bys to look him in the eyes, like a James Dean or something. I found the cemetery slightly ... bizarre. Thousands of men between twenty and forty years of age had recently, in the course of just a few years, died fighting for an influence that shouldn't even exist. But there lay the undeniable proof that it existed nevertheless.

Deep inside the forest the paths through the cemetery were more or less overgrown. The graves there seldom saw visitors, and they certainly didn't receive fresh flowers any more. These were graves from the communist years. Socialist party bosses had been granted fairly impressive memorials, with a marble bust here and a golden hammer and sickle there, but nothing came close to the sumptuous monuments of the mafia.

Hundreds of graves were nearly identical. According to the principles of communism everyone should be given the same, in death as in life. On a foundation of cement stood something that looked like a miniature drilling rig, bright green and almost a metre high. At the very top of the small tower a red star shone. It was as if the old Soviet Union even after the death of its citizens had tried to pump the last bits of soul out of them.

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Back in the city centre I discovered that the same madness took place in Yekaterinburg as in other large cities along the Trans-Siberian Railway. For some reason, construction workers were replacing the concrete pavement with patterns of red and white paving stones. It would have made sense, except for the fact that the pavement was possibly the only thing in the city that *wasn't* badly in need of repair. Surely there were better ways to improve the city.

I'm just guessing here, but what might have happened was that mayors from cities all over Siberia had met for a "seminary" somewhere, most likely on a lovely beach by the Black Sea. The weather had been nice, so the mayors had worked more on their tans than on anything else. On the last day of the gathering they quickly had to come up with something they could all agree on and present back home. Dazed by the sun, they decided that if they just modernized their pavements, all other problems would solve themselves. This desperate notion now caused every pavement in Russia east of Moscow to be beleaguered by men working at a very slow pace, forcing innocent pedestrians out onto the roads. I'm pretty sure some people were run over by cars because of this.

If I were a news reporter in need of a scoop, I'd look for connections between the Russian president and the cobblestone manufacturers.

Yekaterinburg is the largest university city in eastern Russia. Wherever I walked, I discovered faculty buildings, institutes, conservatories and museums. Feeling like widening my horizon I visited all the museums I found. The Museum of Photography was interesting enough, as I could make sense of most of the photographs. The Museum of Geology was also sort of interesting. A nice and shiny rock is exactly that wherever it comes from. But in the rest of the museums I really should have brought an interpreter to tell me what I saw.

The Museum of the Youth sounded promising, but the only thing youthful about it was the girl who sold tickets. There was a lot of radical art, with various photos, installations and abstract sculptures which, I think, were supposed to put war in all its forms in a bad light. I guess they succeeded fairly well, but it was nothing compared to the bad lighting in the large Museum of War History. After having bought my ticket I fumbled my way through the blacked-out museum for about half an hour until I literally stumbled across a sleeping employee of the museum. He was very old and hard to understand, as he had more arms than he had teeth. I think he tried to tell me that there was light upstairs. One of his colleagues was summoned. Armed with a flashlight he helped me find my way to the stairway.

During the rest of my visit I was closely followed by two museum guardians. When their opinion was that I had spent long enough in a room, they would simply turn off the lights and force me on. I was their only visitor, and they were visibly uneasy about having a foreigner walking among their treasures. Maybe the receptionist from the hotel in Irkutsk had called ahead and warned them about me.

Their finest exhibit was some metal nuts and bolts inside a dusty display case. If my interpretation of the Cyrillic text can be trusted, they were the remains of an American U2 spy plane, shot down near Yekaterinburg in 1960. The plane had been on its way to Norway, so I knew the story. According to my memory, the plane had not actually been shot down, but the pilot had been forced to make an emergency landing with a damaged plane. This was good for the Soviets, as they could dismantle the aircraft and examine it. The exhibit was presumably parts they had finished examining, and not really all that was left of the

plane. But my two personal museum guides insisted that yes, this was all you would be left with if you shot down a poorly designed Western aircraft. I just nodded and accepted their explanation.

With that I had seen enough old things for a while. For a taste of modern Russia I decided to go to Kazan, the historical centre for the trade between Russia and Central Asia. This meant I had to follow a more southern route towards Moscow than the official Trans-Siberian Railway does. There were only night trains going that way. I decided to pay for another night at the hotel, even though I would have to leave my room before midnight in order to catch my train. The difference between the price of the hotel room and the cost of using the left-luggage office at the railway station was surprisingly small. Having nothing better to do, I spent the evening exploring the sensationally inexpensive hotel.

My conclusion was that a cheap hotel in Russia probably *can* be a good place to stay, but that there's also a risk that hidden behind the low price, there may be some unpleasant surprises. Let's have the juicy details!

First, the corridor. I got lots of corridor for my money. From the hotel entrance to my room I measured the distance, including the six stairs, to be several hundred metres of dark and gloomy hallways. If you say “Ah, but that's no problem, I have a suitcase with wheels on it so I won't have to carry it!”, I say “So what?” The floor was a strange material that once upon a time possibly did a good job at imitating a parquet floor, but now it just looked like water-damaged strange material. Lots of holes and bumps in it made for an uneven, hilly experience. Good luck with dragging your suitcase across it.

Even though it was a long and demanding walk, I walked it swiftly. The scary sounds escaping from under the doors almost had me running. Many of the cheap single rooms seemed to house more than one person, to put it that way. A couple of times I asked the dezhurnaya to bring her flashlight and take me to my room.

At first sight the room itself was decent enough. One of the three lamps worked, and if the refrigerator wasn't exactly cool inside, it had a powerful noise generator that functioned perfectly. It also had the

charming and entertaining feature that at times it would jump across the floor to the window and take a well-deserved smoking break.

A mosquito flew in from the bathroom. It seemed surprised to see me and quickly buzzed back. I followed it to inspect the facilities. I immediately saw that the mosquito came from a large family. Not only was the bathroom home to hordes of mosquitos, it also functioned as a habitat for multitudes of mould, dry rot and other exciting life forms. Instead of toilet paper on a roll, the hotel offered a pile of torn newspapers, presumably to give their usual guests a feeling of homeyness. I felt extremely environment-friendly when I used it, but the ink made my bottom blacker than I would have preferred.

So, part of the explanation for the cheap room was easy to find. The hotel probably saved substantial amounts of money by not wasting roubles on cleaning and maintenance. I decided to do the potentially scary bed test to confirm my hypothesis. I wasn't going to sleep in that bed again anyway.

Performing the bed test is something you learn out of necessity when you travel on a low budget, particularly when in Asia or Africa. Eager to keep their prices at a competitive level, many hotel proprietors in certain countries and areas do their best to not expose bed sheets and mattresses to unnecessary wear and tear. A common technique is to clean and air the sheets as seldom as possible. Maybe never. So if you find a room that looks surprisingly good considering the asking price, it may be a good idea to take a closer look at the bed.

When you lift the mattress in a cheap room, you stand a chance of witnessing The Bug Race. Many insects have discovered that even on a hot day is it possible to find a nice place to just hang around and digest last night's feast. That place is in your bed, between the bed bottom and the underside of the mattress. Certain bugs happily spend their days there, waiting for a fresh batch of human flesh to arrive in the evening. If the mattress suddenly flies up into the air and the little rascals are exposed to an all too bright daylight, the shock they experience is considerable. Their immediate reaction is to start running around

frantically. That's The Bug Race. The only way to win is by quickly finding somewhere dark to hide again. It's a race for life or death.

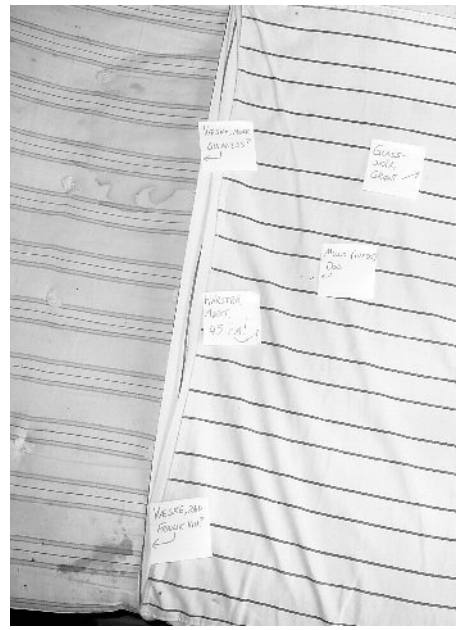
With some experience you can learn to differentiate between insects who are there just for the atmosphere, and those who, given the opportunity, *will* help themselves to some human blood. If you don't see bloodstains anywhere, your health will probably not be influenced by sharing the bed with the bugs.

If you wake up in the morning with visible small, red dots neatly arranged, as if made with a needle and a ruler, then the insects must have been of the bad, bloodthirsty bedbug type after all. In that case it will be good of you to hunt down a couple of the well-fed culprits and crush them against the wall above the bed. By doing so you warn the next seasoned traveller to come by about the situation, so that he can move on and find a better room. This way of "signposting" works remarkably well. If you come to a place where bedbugs have been allowed to establish settlements, there's a good chance that the walls aren't cleaned too often either.

In Yekaterinburg I didn't expect to find much visible life in the bed, but I was still in suspense when I pulled the sheets off the mattress. You just never know what you will see. I searched and I found:

- One fragment of glass, green, about 1x0.5cm. Probably beer bottle.
- Three mosquitos, dead, but well preserved. Unusual location possibly due to difficulties with navigating, for instance caused by heavy smoke in the room.
- Strands of hair, assorted selection. Some dark hairs with a length of about forty-five centimetres. Also a number of blond hairs, roughly twenty centimetres long. Various short, dark hairs, suspiciously curly.
- Stains from reddish liquid. Wine, possibly French, or possibly not wine at all.
- Stains from *a lot* of a seriously dark liquid. Could be Guinness beer, or quite conceivably blood.

- Stains from yellow liquid, located in the central region of the mattress. Hopefully just orange juice.
- Burn marks. Very strange. A sign in the room clearly indicated that smoking in bed was strictly forbidden, and that smoke detectors in the ceiling would trigger the sprinkler system. On the other hand, *if* those smoke detectors actually worked, they would be just about the only electrical appliances in the hotel to do so.



Some of my hotel bed discoveries

All in all the findings in my bed were comprehensive. It was a pleasure to vacate the room and move on.

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By the morning the landscape outside the train had changed again. The grey weather in the hillocks of Ural had disappeared. Instead the sky was a perfect royal blue, the way it only can be above yellow fields like those on the plains surrounding the mighty Volga river. An army of threshing machines slowly glided side by side towards the curved horizon, efficiently harvesting grain for the daily vodka, and maybe some bread too. Although I was still in Russia, I had arrived in a new nation; Tatarstan, a semi-independent republic the size of Ireland.

In Siberia only the window frames had been granted a taste of paint. Here, further west, the whole house got to participate in the colouring, immediately making the buildings more attractive. At first I thought that the rich farming in the area was the source of the region's relative wealth. I soon discovered an even better explanation.

As we approached Kazan, the capital of Tatarstan, I noticed that the landscape contained small hollows full of a black, uninviting substance. Sulking cows stood unhappily in them. It wasn't exactly beautifying mud baths they were surrounded by. They were up to their udders in oil. The ground there was so full of it, that many places oil had just oozed up to the surface and formed pools. Closer to the city large and small oil wells appeared, and in Kazan itself there was no doubt that the Tatars knew how to utilize their gift from Mother Nature.

Just over half the population of Tatarstan are ethnic Tatars, the descendants of a nomadic, Muslim, Turkic people who harried the Russians both there and further north a thousand years ago. In the 13th century, as a result of Genghis Khan's conquest of Tatarstan (and *much* more), the city became the capital of the Kazan Khanate, consisting of Tatarstan itself and her neighbouring regions.

The Mongol warriors probably enjoyed themselves there, although they may have been seriously annoyed by how the horrible, black soil stuck to their horses. The idyll was broken in the 1500s. Russian Tsar Ivan the Terrible arrived with his army and convinced the people, in the only way Terrible Ivans can, that they were now to be good Russians and would pay their tribute to Moscow instead of to Mongolia.

During the next centuries the Tatars kept muttering something about the Russians being just as bad rulers as the Mongols. Talk about independence from Russia turned into loud shouting as the value of the nation's oil became known. When the Soviet Union collapsed, Tatarstan took the opportunity to declare itself an independent republic. It didn't last long. Through five hundred years of influence from Moscow, large numbers of ethnic Russians had moved and *been* moved to the area. So in a referendum in the year 2000, a majority of the population voted to fairly voluntarily return to the Russian Federation.

The streets in the city were clean. People dressed elegantly, neither grey nor gaudy. To me it also seemed that people actually were better-looking in Kazan than elsewhere in Russia. Maybe they were. Wealth always attracts beautiful people from far and near. Another explanation could be that after weeks of seeing nothing but Russians, I was adapting

to them. My experience is that the more time you spend away from home, the more you get used to the faces where you are, and mysteriously this also makes the people there prettier and more sympathetic. I haven't read about or performed any scientific research on the phenomenon, but I am convinced it is just yet another way the human brain copes with change.

Anyway, I may be wrong about the aesthetic excellence of the locals, but the houses in Kazan definitely looked nicer than their colleagues in Siberia. Not only were they painted, they even stood straight up, and seemed able to continue to do so for a long time to come.

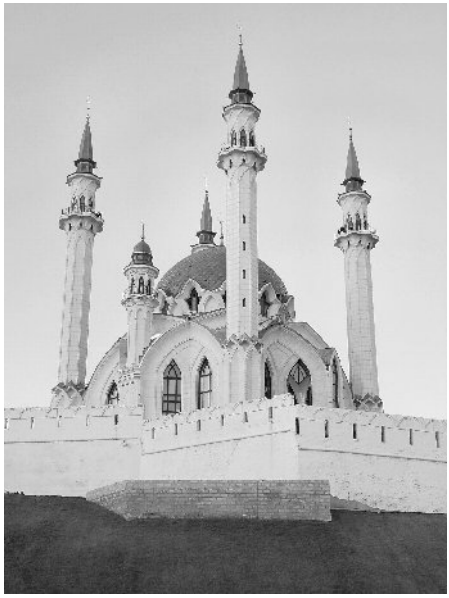
My most unexpected moment in Kazan still came when I saw a tall, black man wearing a Nike cap backwards. He just walked down a pedestrian shopping street as if it was the most natural thing in the world. What surprised me was chiefly that after several weeks in Russia this was the first dark-skinned person I had seen, and secondly that the city had a pedestrian street with no cars in it! This was not the Russia I thought I knew.

The oil wealth of the republic had not been put aside for later. The riches were visible everywhere, for instance in a large number of churches and mosques that either were in good shape, under restoration or being built for the first time. Still, the decidedly most grandiose building in the city was the gigantic new basketball stadium. Which probably explained why they had a black man walking around in their city.

Even though the Tatars a few years earlier had decided to remain in the Russian extended family of republics, oblasts, krais and districts, a bit further south in the federation other regions were less enthusiastic about the large union. For that reason the streets of Kazan were under strict surveillance by the police, who made sure that visitors to the city would do nothing drastically stupid. The Central Asian parts of Russia had seen a lot of trouble lately. All men wearing Arab-style clothes and ditto beards were without any drama or protest routinely stopped, searched and questioned about their doings. I was left alone. Thank gods for the electric shaver.

I left the peaceful waterfront by the Volga to climb up the hill to the Kremlin, the city's medieval fortress. As a result of its location and its

history, the walls of the Kremlin encircled both a magnificent mosque and an elegant cathedral. The mosque was newly erected, a replacement for the one that had been destroyed by Ivan the Terrible when he visited.



The mosque in the Kazan Kremlin

As the mosque was still burning, so to speak, Ivan had a church built right next to it. It was a commissioned work, done by the same architect who later gave Ivan and the world the famous fairy palace church on Moscow's Red Square, the Saint Basil's Cathedral. Now the church and the mosque rest together in Kazan. Side by side they are centres for one religion each, separate yet closely intertwined by history. I hope they both will remain there in peace for all eternity (well, until the Sun explodes, at least), even though Russia still contains much unrest. To see them be there together on the hill was a beautiful and encouraging sight.

Speaking of being together; the lovely summer evening brought a dark red sky. The whole city had a warm glow, and in the pleasant light I explored the narrow cobbled streets inside the whitewashed walls. All I could hear were the echoes of my own steps, an intense cooing of pigeons and ... some strange sounds that could only come from human throats.

It turned out that in the twilight on a warm Friday night like that, the small, green lawns and the quiet, out-of-the-way corners of the Kremlin turned into a haven for Kazan's amorous, young couples. Loving duos with no better option for privacy could take their chances there, and oh boy, did they!

Taken by *much* surprise, I walked straight into several intense scenes involving no textiles at all. In other parts of the world you must join secret clubs and pay good money to enjoy such sights. Couple after couple were at it, performing activities I had never before seen taking place in any of

the other locations that UNESCO has declared to be of significance to the human heritage. The medieval fortress definitely helped preserve both genetic and cultural heritage.

I was surprised that the evening use of the Kremlin had not lead to piles of contraceptives lying around. Actually, I saw no used condoms at all. The reason was hardly that the lovers in Kazan were more considerate or willing to clean up after themselves than others. More likely the explanation was simply that no one used condoms. In Russia the ordinary way to avoid unwanted babies had always been abortion. The last decade the situation had improved slightly. Condoms had become available at an affordable price, but the habit of using them was not yet established.

It has been estimated that Russian hospitals assist in about two abortions for every childbirth. In the 1990s the average Russian woman was statistically likely to have three abortions during her lifetime. Having an abortion has "always" been legal *and* free in Russia. Any woman who wants it can on short notice have an abortion performed by a qualified doctor. As it is a frequent procedure, the doctors and nurses are well-trained for it. Still, there's always the risk of a botched abortion and accidental sterilizations. Inevitably, this way millions of Russian women of reproductive age have lost their ability to have children. So there you have another piece in the large puzzle of explanations for why the population in Russia is declining.

I chose to withdraw from the Kazan Kama Sutra show, rather than risk disturbing the couples, although I could perhaps have improved the country's abortion statistics ever so slightly if I had kept walking around.

If Friday night in the streets and alleys of Kazan had been surprisingly wild and liberated, Saturday morning was correspondingly relaxed. I bought some pastries and sat down on a bench to watch life. There was precious little of it to see. The explanation could be that Kazan is a business city, and business people don't work on weekends. Instead they go to their dachas, tiny cabins in the countryside with small patches of garden to cultivate. There people can drink their vodka and grow their cabbage and potato in peace and quiet, in the meantime leaving the city even quieter.

Neither was much happening back in Norway. I knew this because I had been to the post office and used the Internet to read my e-mail and talk to my friends. In Russia like in any other country where large parts of the population cannot afford to have a telephone and a computer at home, you can find cheap, reliable Internet access at the post office. Unlike most other countries, in Russia, using the Internet is the *only* cheap and reliable service you'll find at the post office.

The main post office in Kazan was a beautiful building with an impressive, venerable interior. My footsteps on the marble floor resounded through the entire premises, for the acoustics were good and there was almost nothing else there that made any noise. Especially striking was the complete absence of the sound of people working. I wasn't sure how the woman at counter number fourteen felt about having me as a customer, but after I had let her register my passport in a thick ledger, she escorted me to counter number two and a computer that was connected to the Internet. She installed herself two counters to my left and started playing Wolfenstein 3D, a violent, gory and noisy computer game from 1992. Now, *that* changed the atmosphere in the hitherto quiet building!

I don't know if it was the sounds of chainsaw massacres and the firing-squads of Castle Wolfenstein that kept the customers away. During the full morning hour I sat there, only a handful of people came by the post office. Most likely that's just the way it is, they don't have many customers these days. Letters in Russia rarely reach their addressees, so few people bother with trying to send each other anything. Most people don't even have a functional letter box at home. Almost all the letter boxes I saw outside houses and in stairways in blocks of flats looked like they regularly were opened with dynamite and axes. Foreign companies and embassies of course have to be able to receive mail. This they do by having their mail sent to Finland, from where it's taken to its destination by special couriers.

For some reason, the few people who actually came by chose to seek out me instead of the gamer to my left. When they asked me whatever they asked me, I looked up from my computer, smiled politely and gave the customer an answer to whatever I figured or guessed he or she was

asking me. The poor customers were of course duly confused by my replies, but they were saved when the Wolfenstein woman discovered what was going on and told them not to listen to me. It was rather entertaining. Fortunately no members of the mafia came by.

Having caught up with the world via the Internet, I spent some time walking the streets of Kazan. The sun was shining and it felt good again to be able to walk past well-kept houses in streets that weren't full of rubbish. Blissful I just walked where my feet led me, with no particular goal. I wasn't done until I realized that I had walked four times past the only statue in Russia showing a clean-shaven Lenin. It stood outside the city's university. Lenin had been a student there, and the statue depicted him with books in his arms, eagerly on his way to attend a lecture.

The plaque on the plinth of the statue didn't mention with a word that Lenin had been expelled from that very university, a punishment for being considered an agitator and for having a bad influence on the other students.

After the random amble I dedicated myself to more practical purposes. I did my laundry in the sink in my hotel room, and afterwards I brought the wet clothes to the beach for some intense drying in the sun.

The beach was nice, with lovely sand and a pleasant temperature both in the air and in the water. When it reaches Kazan, the Volga is nine hundred kilometres old and has spent its entire life efficiently collecting waste from a number of towns and cities. The floating trash didn't keep people from cooling off in the water, wearing just their narrowest of tangas and their broadest of smiles. There were many people there, but every small group of them seemed to live in their own world. Somehow they were able to shut out the existence of everyone else. Some couples were intimate enough that I started to experience a déjà vu from the previous evening in the Kremlin. No one seemed to sense anything of what the others were doing. Not until a certain line apparently was crossed, that is.

Three glue-sniffing street kids staggered onto the beach and had just pulled off their trousers to cool down in the river. That was when people suddenly reacted. Several men and women from different groups ran

over to the unfortunate children. They took the glue bags away from them, and in return gave them a scolding of epic proportions. I did of course not understand much of what was said, but they must *at least* have told the kids to leave the beach at once and instead go home, do their homework and wash behind their ears. The children seemed to protest feebly that they had no home to go to, but that bought them no mercy at all.

I couldn't make up my mind about whether it was good that people at least didn't ignore the boys, or if it was just sad that the poor children weren't allowed to enjoy a swim in the river. Anyway, the boys wandered off without their glue, seemingly ashamed of themselves.

When the sun set my, clothes were dry. Many a Russian throat, however, was quickly becoming anything but dry. As is usual on a Saturday night, the city was full of wedding festivities. A cacophony of music from numerous parties echoed through the streets. Easy listening music and ballads from American and European song divas dominated the playlists. When I followed the music to its source, I was treated to the view of Russians dancing like nobody was watching. Russians are unrivalled in this skill. It must be the same gene they use when they caress each other intimately on crowded, public beaches. No matter how they do it, they were most entertaining to watch. It was all joy and laughter, kept going until the early hours thanks to lots of Russian champagne and vodka.

Again my hotel room was of the inexpensive kind. I only needed a place to sleep. Well, that, and to brush my teeth and to do what one usually does in a lavatory, of course. After some busy days in Yekaterinburg with little eating, my stomach had become stubborn, refusing for a full three days to let go again of what I gave it. But now, after some Turkish cuisine, I sensed that my digestion was about to catch up with me. This I looked forward to. The only problem was that my cheap room only came with a shared bathroom. And what was worse, the people I shared it with was a full floor of idiots who instead of being allowed to use the shared bathrooms should each have been given a patch of land to manure. I don't know why, but there is an astonishing number of people in the world who simply are unable to use a toilet properly.

I am all for introducing a world-wide toilet certificate for travellers, requiring passing both theoretical and practical tests. If you don't have your certificate you'll of course still be allowed to dump your waste products, you'll just have to do it in an already messed up bathroom. To do your business in a hygienic facility with proper conditions, though, you will first have to show your certificate.

The certificate must be renewed every ten years. You see, based on my observations I suspect that ageing and obese men are the main culprits, and they just continue to get worse as the years and the kilograms add to themselves. It makes perfect sense. When you no longer can see neither what you're aiming at nor what you're aiming with, it should come as no surprise that the target will often be missed. So how it can happen is understandable, but it still shouldn't lead to problems or discomfort for innocent people.

I spent more time in Kazan preparing the toilet for safe, hygienic use than I did on actually using it. Nevertheless, afterwards I was a happy man.

Kazan was charming and enjoyable, but not quite what I had hoped for, a Samarkand light, a magical and mystical link between east and west. Soon I wanted to move on. Large ships sailed past on the Volga, westwards to Moscow and southwards to the Caspian Sea. To calmly float off on the tiny waves of the river seemed infinitely more tempting than to return to cramped train compartments reeking of fish and sweat.

At the city's river station there was a large notice board with timetables for the various vessels going up and down the river. Through a serious effort I managed to decipher that a passenger boat would arrive that evening from the south and continue in the direction of Moscow. Perfect!

I joined the line at the ticket office. Three people were already patiently waiting for the woman inside to finish staring into the empty air. It took a while, but eventually her staring actually resulted in her being ready to sell us some tickets. The guy in front wanted a ticket to the same boat as me. To me it seemed obvious, since it was the next boat out of Kazan. To the woman selling tickets, however, this was shocking news. She was so astonished, she almost fell off her chair.

The ticket lady looked at her customer with wide-open eyes. She asked him some questions to verify that he really wanted a ticket for the only boat to leave Kazan that day. When she finally was convinced, she gave a deep and reproachful sigh. Then she picked up the phone and started dialling random numbers, hoping that sooner or later she would reach someone who knew anything at all about boats or about selling tickets.

By an incredible coincidence, after only a dozen or so attempts she actually got through to a booking office. Someone read her a list of available cabins on the boat. She repeated what the other person said and meticulously wrote down the cabin numbers and the rates as they were read to her. In the queue we vaguely caught that there was little space left in the third and fourth class. This triggered some alarm among the people behind me. Two old ladies broke into something I can only describe as intense glossolalia, of which I only understood that everything had certainly been much better when Brezhnev was president.

Number one in line got his ticket and walked triumphantly away. Number two was suddenly a party of twelve who were all travelling together. After a long series of talks, discussions and collecting of travel documents, they finally managed to secure a four berth cabin to share between them. I guess they planned on sleeping in eight hour shifts.

The old woman in front of me wailed and lamented about there being tickets left only in the first and second class, which she couldn't afford. In the end, I think, she threatened to go outside, fill her pockets with stones and jump into the river unless they let her buy a fourth class ticket. I felt bad for her, but since I didn't know how to give her a couple of hundred roubles without hurting anyone's pride or committing other cultural blunders, she just walked away. Then it was my turn!

I had prepared a piece of paper describing exactly the ticket I wanted. It seemed to work well until the woman suddenly insisted that I gave her some more information. At first I didn't understand what more she could possibly want. I tried to just pay her more to get it over with. It didn't work. After some intense listening I picked up the words "parents" and "address". Aha! She wanted to know how they could get in touch with my next of kin, in the hopefully unlikely event of an accident on the boat.

Not feeling up to explaining the concept of Norwegian characters to her, and having had only good experiences with Russian boats on previous trips, I sort of faked a short address for, well, not exactly a relative of mine in Norway. I'm just guessing, but I do believe that it would have caused some confusion if "King Harald, The Castle, 0101 OSLO, NORVEGIA" had ever received the message that his unknown son had died on a river in Russia. But the boat stayed afloat, so this we will never know for sure. I paid less for a first class cabin on the two nights cruise to Nizhny Novgorod, the next large city along the river, than I had paid for my first night in Russia at the horrible airport hotel.

The atmosphere on the boat was peculiar. It was an old boat, much like the ones I had seen leave for the Arctic from Krasnoyarsk. The furniture was decidedly old-fashioned, with dark wood panels and carpets and walls that both looked and smelt like they had been exposed to more than their fair share of cigarette smoke. All the pieces of art on the walls were communist classics, romanticised pictures of white, yellow and black people working and thriving together in bountiful fields. Over their heads conventionalized peace doves hovered, twittering happily. The rather spartan environments didn't keep the excited Russians on vacation from pretending they were on a luxury cruise in the Caribbean.

Chambermaids wearing cute uniforms stood in the corridors. They were all smoking cigarettes and, well, slightly bearded. I didn't mind. It all just reinforced my belief in the cruise brochure, which said that the experienced staff would do *anything* to please their guests. Evergreen muzak streamed softly from the intercom, and I waltzed onto the vessel just as people were changing into a more formal attire to attend dinner. Very classy, except many of them actually changed their clothes in the corridor. Even considering this, when it came to comfort and style, this was vastly superior to the Trans-Siberian experience.

A few details *did* drag down the overall impression of classiness. My cabin had metal walls covered in a psychedelic, bright green, and my sofa was upholstered with sacking so rough it was like sitting on sandpaper. I spent little time in it for fear of burns. Neither did it feel particularly luxurious that all showers had to be taken on the lower deck, next door to the engine room. The shower consisted of an extremely quick scalding in

the cooling water for the engines. But the Russians seemed to have the time of their lives, so I decided to pretend I did, too.

Travelling in style on the Volga

At midnight the common areas were locked up, the muzak faded out and the lights in the corridors were turned off. First I thought I had joined a cruise for retired people who liked to go to bed early. But then I went for a walk on the upper deck and found the youth department sitting in the dark at the very back of the boat. They had not at all gone to bed. Instead they just sat quietly together, drinking beer and looking at the stars. The boldest of them danced and kissed slowly to some barely audible music from an old, portable cassette player. You'll search for a long time to find a more well-behaved and less rebellious youth than the ones who go on a Volga cruise with their families.

I could see in their eyes, even in the dark, that they were through and through happy and grateful for being allowed to leave home for a while to go on this adventure. It was unthinkable for them to do anything that could break the spell and disturb the dream world they were in. Seeing this made me feel all warm and mushy inside. It was a reminder that I must not forget how privileged I am to be able to go on trips like that pretty much whenever I feel like it. I smiled at them. It was the only way I could even begin to tell them what I was thinking. Then I went back to my metallic pistachio cell to sleep and dream peacefully.

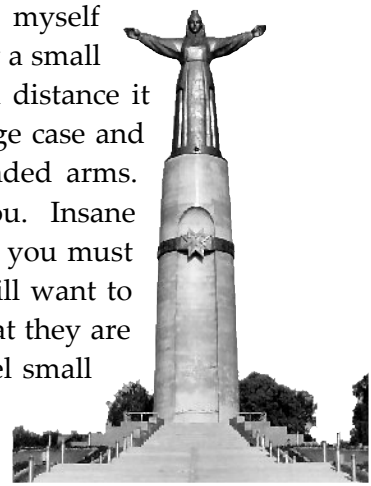
Bliss is to be lulled into sleep by the smooth, sweet murmur of ship engines, after recently having spent too many nights listening to double thumps from trains and drunken drivel and noise from next door. When a short, mysterious message in Russian came over the intercom, in my head I was instantly brought back to the crossing to Antarctica. My last, muddled thought before I fell asleep was that on my next journey to

Antarctica, I would travel on a peaceful river boat rather than on an earthquake of an icebreaker.

My awakening the next morning was just as gentle. Precisely at seven o'clock the little gnome inside the loudspeaker in my room began playing classical violin music. Five minutes later an agreeable female voice wished me a good morning and told me that we had docked in Cheboxary, where shortly a guided walk through the city was on offer.

We were to stay in Cheboxary until lunch, so I set out on an expedition on my own. I found a beer tent by the river, where I had breakfast served by a woman with huge, tattooed upper arms. I ordered everything on the menu, which was two fried pastries and one shish kebab. My stomach wasn't convinced this qualified as a wholesome breakfast, but a good night's sleep and the fresh air on the river had given me the appetite to finish it all.

Nutritionally satisfied, I walked along the river towards the city centre. An abundance of churches lined the road, and a surprisingly large number of people went inside them on their way to work, school or the beer tents. Ungodly miniskirts were welcome there, whereas my tourist shorts were deemed unsuitable for the congregation's eyes, according to a sign outside. They might have let me in if I had done like the practically naked young girls, namely to wrap my head in a handkerchief, but I wasn't really interested enough to give it a try.



Instead I walked on and soon found myself embraced by Mother Russia. On a summit by a small lake, a giant bronze statue towered. From a distance it looked like a hybrid between a huge cartridge case and a woman with enormous breasts and extended arms. Now, *there*'s a Russian speciality for you. Insane monuments. Many of them are so large that you must see them to believe it, and even then you will want to go up to them and touch them to confirm that they are not just gargantuan optical illusions. You feel small and insignificant next to them, a fact that is likely to be intentional. It's rarely a good

feeling. Sometimes it is difficult to understand the logic behind the scale the Russians pick for their monuments. On the other hand, the dimensions of the tragedies they commemorate are also often difficult to grasp.

Slightly less tragic was the beach in Cheboxary. At eight in the morning it was already full of people. Their outfits were extremely summery, even though the rays from the morning sun were fairly weak. A minimalist swimsuit fashion is just one of many sun tanning optimization tricks the Russians have up their, well, unworn sleeves. Other important techniques are 1) never to use any suntan lotion, and 2) working on a tan is not necessarily something you have to lie down to do. If a Russian calculates that the impact of the sun is stronger if he stands rather than lies down, then make no mistake, he *will* stand.

An early morning on Cheboxary beach

In the morning you will naturally catch more rays from the sun in a vertical than in a horizontal position. So when I arrived, most people stood around on the beach, holding books and bottles of beer, rotating at a turtle's pace to get an even tan all over their bodies, much like pigs on a spit. Some were even standing with their arms straight out or up into the air, to direct the tan to exactly where they wanted it. It looked strange to me. Standing upright like statues was weird enough, but when they combined that with the Russian habit of accommodating as much of the

swimsuit as possible into the butt crack, it really made me silently question the sanity of the people surrounding me.

Two girls asked whether I possessed the means to light their cigarettes. They were slightly confused by my response, namely that it was a quarter past ten. I had of course not understood a word of their request, but statistically they should have asked me the time. Apart from that I managed just fine in Cheboxary.

The mood on the boat was delightfully relaxed when we resumed our journey up the river. From the boat there was little to see or think about, just the wide river and its featureless banks. The Volga is 3,690 kilometres long, which is particularly impressive when you consider that it starts out from a mere 225 metres above sea level somewhere between Moscow and Saint Petersburg. Surrounding the river was a countryside as flat as the Volga herself, but the view was pleasant nevertheless. There were green and rich forests, fields and meadows, a river station here, a church and a monastery there.

Every now and then we encountered long chains of rafts, large barges transporting goods up and down the river. The flat, floating storage space was pushed forward by a powerful engine on a vessel in the back. Every raft in the chain seemed to be a one man enterprise, or in some cases a one man-and-his-woman enterprise. In a corner of each raft there was a cottage where that raft's janitor or owner or whatever appeared to live. Some of the small houses even had a picket fence and a tiny garden outside. They were the ugliest house boats I have ever seen, but I was still fascinated by them. The people on them smiled and waved at us as we passed them. In the summer sun on a silent river it looked like the perfect place to live and work.

The gentle flow of the river had a calming effect on the already relaxed passengers. Many just sat around in the sun, turning red faster than lobsters in boiling water. What saves the Russians from dying of skin cancer is chiefly the fact that they manage to die of malnutrition, cirrhosis of the liver or AIDS first.

An old man was on a slow, perpetual walk around the top deck. He was wearing a baseball cap with the words "Nirvana – Kurt Coabin" on it.

I couldn't decide what was coolest; that he had a Nirvana cap, or that it obviously was a fake. The children watched old Disney cartoons in the cinema, an almost defect TV in a library without books. On the shadow side of the boat, old men played chess in silence. Their intellectual wives sat next to them reading Pushkin and Chekhov, while the others sat in the back of the boat and chatted.

One of the topics up for discussion was me. For almost a full day I was a mystery to them, as I silently walked between the different groups on the boat and observed them, often stopping to take notes. I caught more than a few inquisitive looks. Finally they sent a delegation of three determined matrons to settle the matter. They asked me “You're not Russian, are you?”, in Russian.

I immediately confessed and gave them my name and nationality. Suddenly I was the most interesting person on the boat. A little girl, no more than seven years old, said to me “Bjørn Dæhlie!”, the name of a Norwegian skier who had quit competing several years earlier, before she ran away giggling. The man with the Nirvana headwear surprised me by reciting, in a Russian translation, a number of lines from a Norwegian poem and book, "Peer Gynt" by Henrik Ibsen. Of course he may have been just babbling, but at least it seemed to me that all the rhymes were there, so it probably was the real deal. In short, they did everything they could to make me feel at home with them.

Many of the passengers were from Moscow, and the younger ones spoke some English. Most of them were doing the full cruise, having travelled with the boat all the way from Astrakhan by the Caspian Sea. All the passengers who were able to do so in English, told me the story about the foreigner who had travelled with them before I came on board. He was an Englishman, on his way around the world on his bicycle. His Russian vocabulary consisted of only forty words. My new friends could quote them all, for it was they who had taught them to him. I gathered that it wasn't the nicest list of words. He called them in despair the day after he had left the boat. On land he had not found a single person that could speak any English, and his forty Russian words had brought him into more than just a *little* bit of trouble. It was a funny story, especially the first couple of times I heard it.

After having shared this splendid story, the Russians felt they really knew me. Now the time had come to spend hours asking me about how much money I made in Norway, why I wasn't married and why I had no children. They couldn't understand why I voluntarily and all alone had come to Russia. They *did*, however, understand why I was travelling alone. Their theory was that of course none of my friends would want to travel to Russia. I tried as hard as I could to praise the fascinating and charming qualities of Russia and its people, but I couldn't come up with much, really. Fortunately I was literally saved by the bell, as the captain right then loudly signalled that we were making a stop in Comeasyouaresk, or something like to that.

The passengers met the challenge. As they were, they ran on shore, threw off their clothes and established a temporary holiday camp right next to the river station. I had seen enough Russian buttocks to last me decades, so instead of joining them I went for a walk on the narrow gravel roads between the old, wooden houses in the village.

For the last time in Russia I was taken fifty or maybe even a hundred years back in time. Manual water pumps adorned the street corners, well-worn, but still in use. Wood carvings were beautifully detailed on old and new houses alike. A horse pulled a cart with its owner and a bale of straw on top of it towards a barn.

Inside the general shop the customers were on one side of the counter and the shopkeeper and his merchandise on the other. I bought a cornet full of brown sugar, carefully measured out on a manual scale. Exactly how my grandmother had told me things had been done “in the good, old days”. This was a good new day, and particularly good it was to see with my own eyes that this way to live certainly had something to it.

After two colourful days on the Volga, it wasn't a great experience to literally jump ship in the sad and grey Nizhny Novgorod. The morning air felt nice, but looked bad. It was non-transparent in a sickly brownish way. Any sense of colour in the city was dampened by the air. Not that there *was* much colour in the first place. Especially not in the harbour where the boat had docked.

The Volga meets up with another river there, the Oka. A bridge seven hundred metres long spanned the river, and on the other side I found my new home, the mother of all dull buildings, Hotel Tsentralny.

Nizhny Novgorod has been nicknamed "Russia's wallet", while Moscow is considered to be the heart of the country and Saint Petersburg its brain. There are sand banks in the river, but the only banks of significance in the city are the ones in the business district. I could tell at the hotel. The reception hall was full of men in suits carrying executive briefcases. At first they all looked at me and my backpack with disapproval as I got in line for the check-in. Still, I got my room. Anyone with a pocketful of dollars to show for himself is welcome in Nizhny.

Lenin proudly presents Hotel Tsentralny

My room wasn't grey. It was white and sterile, had a refrigerator that worked, clean sheets and the TV even had CNN. A neon sign opposite the hotel showed the temperature to be thirty-nine degrees Celsius. So I was happy to discover that the room also had multi-step air-conditioning. My happiness faded away when I turned it on and the large box on the window wall wasn't air-conditioning after all, but a huge radio with four

channels. An ice cube dispenser in the corridor would have to help me stay cool.

Being a tourist in Nizhny Novgorod wasn't too easy. After having given it a try, my recipe for having a good time in Nizhny is to get the newest edition of Russian Playboy and stay in your hotel room with it until a train can get you out of there. Of course, I didn't know that yet, so instead I went out to discover the city.

My impression of Nizhny may be coloured by the relentless heat there on the day I visited. Moving around on foot was hard work, and nowhere did I see anything to like. The railway station was a colossus. A massive, ugly brass chandelier in the departure hall lit up the faded communist propaganda murals on the walls.

It was not a place for joyful sinning. Smoking was forbidden, carrying a 30 rouble fine. Enjoying alcohol was out of the question, unless you wanted to pay a 50 rouble fine. Playing cards was *strictly* forbidden, as indicated by the 100 rouble fine. If those rules had been practised at train stations in Siberia, that part of Russia would have been completely abandoned, not just almost.

On the bright side, having your hair cut at the train station *was* allowed. While waiting for the morning rush and the long lines at the ticket counters to disappear, I went to see a hairdresser.

I got a good and cheap haircut, but towards the end of my session in the chair, a short and rather embarrassing moment occurred in a very Monty Pythonesque kind of way. When the woman who cut my hair seemed just about done she asked me, “Iz all, or you want blowjob?” She appeared to be looking much forward to my response. I raised an eyebrow and replied with a curt “Hmm?” She repeated her offer. Fortunately she then stopped speaking English, and instead imitated a hair dryer with her hand, pointed it at my head and said “Whoooosh!”, which, I think, is Russian, for “Do you want to have your hair dried through the process of having hot air blown through it?” Alas, her offer had been a perfectly innocent and legitimate one. I politely declined, maybe slightly disappointed, paid for the haircut and bid her goodbye with a smile.

Nizhny Novgorod also had a Kremlin, but it was nowhere near as charming or full of naked people having sex as the one in Kazan. And I really have my doubts about the signs claiming that the Kremlin was hundreds of years old. It looked suspiciously new, built with boring, red bricks. So the walls weren't much to look at, but inside them there was supposed to be an excellent museum, full of treasures of art. Maybe there was, maybe there wasn't. I certainly wasn't allowed to see it. A guard stopped me at the entrance, saying it was closed "for various reasons".

That phrase and "for reasons from above" were explanations I often met in Russia. I had learned that when someone said this, there was no use asking for any further explanation. It just meant that the place was *really* closed, and that nobody knew when it would open again. Often the real reason was painfully obvious. For instance, the building behind the sign saying “Closed for reasons from above” could be burnt down to the ground. The actual reason for the closed museum in Nizhny Novgorod was not clear to me, but I let culture be culture and headed over to an exhibition of military items instead.

After World War II the city became an important centre for military research and development. The first Russian atom bomb was put together nearby, and advanced MiG fighter planes were still made there. Perhaps more surprising is the fact that this city, almost a thousand kilometres away from the nearest ocean and even further away from a harbour that isn't frozen for several months every year, was chosen as the country's centre for research and production of submarines. This says a lot about how paranoid the Russians were about espionage during the Cold War.

Different models of aeroplanes, combat vehicles, machine guns, submarines and more were on display, all built in Nizhny Novgorod during the last fifty years or so. They didn't really satisfy me. Most of all I wanted to go back to the railway station and have another haircut. That had been the indisputable highlight of the day.

Instead I crawled back to the hotel and took a long shower without using any hot water. Afterwards I went to bed to devour ice cubes and wait for a train to take me away. I fumbled some more with the radio, hoping that it somehow could regulate the room temperature after all.

Exhausted I gave up after having listened to Russian music for half an hour.

I probably wasn't the first depressed guest to stay at the hotel. In the central stairway there had once been an open space leading from the twelfth floor all the way down. Not any more. Safety nets had been installed on every floor. I'm convinced they were there because someone successfully had demonstrated the need for them.

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My adventures on the Russian trains had so far taken place in second class compartments. A compromise, it let me travel fairly cheaply while at the same time it offered a certain comfort. If I had travelled in first class I would simply have paid twice as much for twice the space. Apart from having only two beds in each compartment instead of four, the only difference between first and second class was that in first class there was a TV in the compartment, on which you could pay the provodnitsa to screen movies. Oh, and you only had to share the bathroom with half as many people. Paying twice as much just for that didn't seem like a sensible investment to me. True, there probably would have been less gutting of fish around me, but still, thank you, no.

From the second to the third class, on the other hand, the jump could be quite challenging for a delicate foreigner. Where in second class there were lockable compartments with a corridor outside, in third class they had torn down all the walls except the exterior ones and inserted more bunk beds, turning the whole coach into one large dormitory. Suddenly the two small bathrooms were shared by fifty-four people, plus a number of accompanying children sleeping for free in the beds of their parents. You may think that it's safer to have many people around you than to risk sharing a small room with three drunken Russians. To this I say that you have to consider the risk of ending up sharing a coach with fifty-three not quite sober soldiers.

Since I was getting close to Moscow, I decided it was time to try the third class.

Third class is also called "platskartny". I think it means "refugee camp" in Russian. I was prepared for more people and fewer walls, but I quickly learnt that third class also means more string vests, larger families, chubbier grandmothers, louder snoring, children constantly running around, and last but not least, an abundance of silent and expressionless faces willing to stare at foreign tourists for hours nonstop. I concluded that platskartny can be an interesting experience in the daytime, but at night it's a foretaste of hell.

Like in second class, people in third class didn't do much. The composite fragrance from all the different meals prepared and consumed in the couch had possibly more ingredients. People ate, ate and ate. When they weren't eating or yelling at their children, they slept. A few read books, even fewer solved crosswords. Every now and then someone would change clothes, apparently without giving much thought to the fact that other people were present. I felt like a voyeur, it was like being a spy in fifty bedrooms at once. The Russians, on the other hand, acted as if they lived in each their own room, and paid no heed to anyone outside their own party of travellers.

Nowhere in Russia did I feel more like a stranger than in third class on the train. Guess what? There's a fourth class as well.

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North-east of Moscow there's a cluster of the oldest towns in the country. The Russians proudly call them "The Golden Ring", because these places are full of old monasteries, churches, castles and other magnificent buildings of an era when Russian tsars hired the best foreign architects and craftsmen they could find. I now entered that ring. The descriptions my guidebook gave of the different towns made them impossible to tell apart, so I just picked the first one I came to, Vladimir, as my base.

The hotel received me with a hospitality that must have been on par with the one that Genghis Khan's grandchildren got, when eight hundred years ago they had come there to burn down the town. I almost did the

same. When I turned on the black-and-white TV, a strong smell of something on fire immediately filled the room. Fortunately a fuse somewhere blew and cut off the electricity for the whole floor before a fully-fledged fire developed.

I had a thorough look at the many churches and other touted attractions of both Vladimir and the neighbouring village Suzdal. There was no doubt that the area had been visited by many great architects a long time ago. When the Russians fought back the Mongols, the rulers in the Moscow region were in for their heyday. Some of the constructions they ordered built to show off are still there. Fair enough, from many of them trees and bushes grew out of the roofs and windows, and many tall spires had been converted into cell phone antennas. It was still obvious that in past times the area had experienced a golden age.

The only problem was that without detailed knowledge about the history of Moscow and Russia, it simply wasn't that interesting to see the Golden Ring in all its splendour. Okay, there were many churches. Suzdal alone, with only some twelve thousand inhabitants, had thirty great, old churches. If you think that's impressive, try counting the souvenir shops in the same village! Being within striking distance for day trips from central Moscow, the streets were crowded with foreign tourists fumbling with expensive cameras and whining to their guides about wanting to have lunch immediately. Suzdal would have felt more exotic without them.

That's a pony, by the way

Now, don't get me wrong. I don't belong to the group of hard-core travellers who complain about places being too "touristy". Neither am I

among those who say “You should have been here ten years ago, before everything changed. It's a tragedy what has happened to the place lately!”

A place doesn't change because it is visited. Places change because time goes by, because people everywhere watch TV, read newspapers and visit other places, picking up new impulses all the time. New inventions quickly travel around the whole world, even when they have to do it one village at a time. People, wherever they may live, in the poorest or the richest of countries, do everything they can to improve their lives. General stores close down, so that a mall in a nearby city can thrive. Houses that nobody wants to live in and care for fall down. New houses are built with hot tubs, satellite dishes and swimming pools outside. Young people stop wearing the sweaters their grandmothers knit. Instead they buy something neat and cheap from a chain store.

That's the way it is, and it's happening everywhere, all the time. Maybe it happens faster now than it used to, but still, this is the way of progressive human beings.

Nevertheless, after having experienced what I felt was more "real" in Eastern Russia, seeing Vladimir and the Golden Ring was an anticlimax. It was all too easy to see that the whole village was designed to be in accordance with a certain international standard. You know, the one that aims to give as many tourists as possible an experience that is sufficiently good to make them willing to part with as much money as possible in the shortest possible amount of time. And the formula works.

I don't know whether people's dislike of "touristy places" is caused by a desire to keep to ourselves the things we like the most, or if it has something to do with liking to discover things for ourselves rather than having them served on a plate. Never mind, it's not important. What matters is that everyone should be allowed to go out and find their own adventures and favourite places, adapted to their own preferences and abilities. So in all fairness, Suzdal and the Golden Ring *are* nice places to visit. It was probably just that I had become blasé and tired of travelling, a few days before I was returning home. This can easily happen on journeys of some duration.

My feeling of being fed up with everything Russian was stronger in Suzdal than anywhere else on my trip. It made me think about what I really was doing there. I still didn't know, and soon I was going home. In my head I had started out with a very vague idea about what Siberia would be like, and after having been there, that had not changed much. Simple questions had become more difficult questions, but I still had few answers.

Maybe a trip to Russia is best if you have a specific reason to go there. My only goal had been to see the country before it changed and became all too similar to my own country. Before I went I sort of had a feeling that this change was "dangerously" close to taking place all over Russia. After having seen it ... Well, Russia is certainly changing, though not nearly fast enough if you ask me. I wish the best for the Russian people, rather than for the spoilt tourists who have to travel increasingly farther in order to see something different from home.

I surprised myself by being extremely enthusiastic about getting on the train in Vladimir for the short ride to Moscow. My excitement probably had a number of causes.

Travelling on the Trans-Siberian Railway can be quite an ordeal, especially if you don't make any stops to relax and get away from the boredom on the train. However, in theory there is reason to believe that in a biological sense, travelling nonstop may be just the perfect thing to do.

"Everyone" knows (even though it's not useful to anyone) that more than ninety percent of all researchers and scientists who ever lived, are actually alive and among us today. It sounds crazy, but just look at all the strange research that's going in and you will believe it.

One curiosity uncovered recently by researchers is that the human body doesn't seem to prefer twenty-four hour days. Ideally, the researchers claim, we should live on a planet where we only had to get up once every twenty-five hours! This theory was at first of course brushed aside as a bad excuse from a lazy scientist who always turned up at work one hour late. But then some scientists of a higher standing came to the same conclusion, and now we're pretty sure there's something to this. But why? Nobody knows.

People who spend their vacations going to Roswell and the rest of the year looking hopefully towards the sky, like to point to the fact that a day on the planet Mars lasts for just about twenty-five hours. A coincidence? They think not. Still, it's unlikely that the Earthlings used to be Martians. We're not green, and besides, well, we don't think so. A more probable theory is that our twenty-five hour diurnal rhythm is some sort of genetic adjustment some remote ancestor of ours made in its formative megayears. Maybe the Moon once upon a time moved at a different pace relative to Earth, or maybe Earth's rotation has changed a lot through the years due to meteors crashing into it, jumping Chinese or whatever.

Anyway, if we accept that twenty-five hours is the perfect length of a day for us to feel fresh in the morning, travelling from east to west on the Trans-Siberian Railway is perfect. Vladivostok is seven hours ahead of Moscow, and the journey lasts for seven days. So when travelling nonstop with the train, you gain an hour every day. Exactly what your body needs! In theory you should therefore feel better as a traveller on that train than you would if you stayed put in the same spot anywhere else in the world.

My claim is that there's not much indicating that this theory works in real life. Still, when my train entered Kursk railway station in Moscow, I was close to ecstatic about finally having completed the journey. All that was left for me to do before I could go home was to stay alive in Moscow for a few days.

I was mentally exhausted. Travelling for so long without having a single meaningful conversation with anyone was tough. The strain from exploring cities and forests on foot more or less from morning till evening every day was nothing in comparison. Maybe I suffered from a deficiency of vitamins as well. When vegetables can only be bought in the streets from elderly people who sell their three carrots and two radishes as if they were parting with precious heirlooms, it's a lot easier to just buy a bar of chocolate from a kiosk.

Outside the train, the last of about ten thousand kilometre markers appeared, and then suddenly I was in Moscow. First I couldn't tell it apart from other Russian cities. Noise and Russians were everywhere, and I

was used to that. Then I noticed. Everything was bigger. Much bigger. The railway station's departure hall was at least twice the size of what I had seen elsewhere. The lines at the ticket counters were exceptionally long. Booths and stalls selling bad copies of branded goods lined the pavement for as far as I could see. The streets had so many lanes that for anyone but an athletic cheetah it would be futile to attempt crossing them. If I wanted to see more of Moscow than the block I had arrived in, I would have to seek out the underworld.

I left the surface of the Earth and joined the swarm of people navigating the subterranean walkways. Holding tightly on to my backpack I found an M sign, showing the way not to fast food, but to the Metro, Moscow's enormous underground railway system. The sign led me to a ballroom adorned with beautiful paintings and mosaic works. Under my feet the floor was marble, and above me, from the stuccoed ceiling hung long rows of crystal chandeliers. Along each of the two side walls trains came and left. The Russians like to surround themselves with beauty when they travel through their capital.

Metros are basically the same all over the world. With practice from other large cities the Moscow Metro was easy to navigate. Soon I had found my way to Vladykino station far on the other side of the city. My guidebook told me that a street full of cheap hotels was to be found there, and it certainly was.

I had just been offered a single room at 726 roubles per night when the reception clerk realized that I was a foreigner. All of a sudden she spoke English, which made the room cost 1,008 roubles. It is strange how not only words have to be translated between languages, sometimes you have to translate amounts of money as well. I couldn't be bothered to discuss the phenomenon with the woman. With just three nights left in the country I had more cash left than I really needed anyway.

A walk through a countryside also known as the botanical gardens of Moscow took me to the All-Russia Exhibition Centre. It was not as grand as the USSR Economic Achievements Exhibition may have been, although strictly speaking it was the same place. It received its new and less resplendent name in the 1990s, when there no longer was a Soviet

economy to keep it running. Originally it had been constructed as some sort of temporary "socialistic world expo" in 1939. After World War II they built another one, this time with so much success that the Soviet leaders decided to make the attraction permanent.

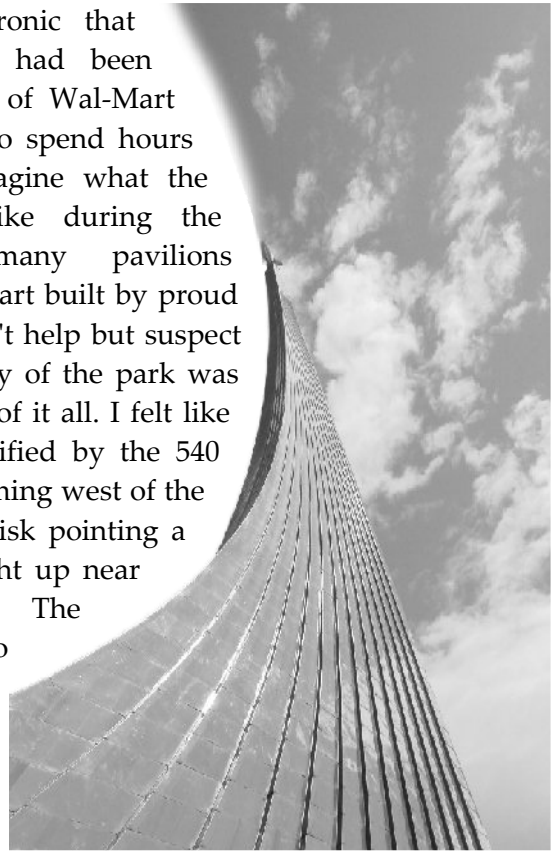
As the Soviet Union grew and developed, new exhibitions were added to encourage a feeling of togetherness among the many different cultures and nations within the union. The purpose was to show visitors what an amazing and wonderful society the Soviets lived in.

Much time had passed since its glory days, but the park was still there. It received me well as I came out of the woods and walked straight onto a monumental, wide avenue with huge fountains, colonnades and flowerbeds. The avenue was two kilometres long, and for its whole length it was surrounded by exhibition pavilions.

Once upon a time hundreds of pavilions had been open to the public, with colourful names tempting people to come inside, admire the show and learn something new. In The Pavilion for Nuclear Power you could enjoy the view of a working nuclear reactor that glowed in the dark. The Meat Pavilion contained a number of good-natured, particularly fleshy farm animals. The Pavilion for Space Exploration was possibly the most prestigious of them all, for a long time displaying the latest news from a field in which the Soviet Union actually were leaders. Maybe the Soviets had been world leading in whatever they showed off in The Pavilion for Mechanical Fattening of Pigs as well. Unfortunately, the whole exhibition had long since been closed and disassembled, so I never found out what they had been doing there. It sounded awfully intriguing, though.

When I visited, some eighty pavilions were in place. Many of them were still standing mainly because they were too large to be removed, others because they had not quite collapsed yet, although they tried to. In recent years a number of pavilions had received some much needed maintenance. The restoration had been sponsored by car dealers, consumer electronics outlets, music shops and other boutiques containing largely foreign goods. In return the sponsors had been allowed to use the buildings to sell their merchandise.

I found it wonderfully ironic that Stalin's own bragging park had been transformed to a bizarre mix of Wal-Mart and Disneyland. It was easy to spend hours just walking around and imagine what the place must have looked like during the communist era. While many pavilions unquestionably were pieces of art built by proud and skilled craftsmen, I couldn't help but suspect that the most important quality of the park was the almost inconceivable scale of it all. I felt like an ant. The feeling was amplified by the 540 metre Ostankino TV tower looming west of the park, and by a titan steel obelisk pointing a hundred vertical metres straight up near the entrance to the park. The monument was supposed to look like a frozen space rocket launch. It succeeded in this extremely well when seen from ground level and up towards a grey sky.



No one seemed to worry about the recent radically changed significance of the park. People still crowded the place with big eyes and broad smiles. In addition to the shops in some of the pavilions, the park also offered a Ferris wheel, popcorn, candy floss and camels and reindeer for people to ride. I'm pretty sure that on Sundays they even had freshly painted zebra-donkeys there.

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The centre of Moscow is the sort of place you don't really experience. Instead you just go there and find everything you have already seen in countless movies and news broadcasts. I saw the Kremlin, the Red Square, Lenin's Mausoleum, the Saint Basil's Cathedral, the Bolshoi Theatre, soldier's marching with goose steps in front of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, Stalin and Lenin impersonators willing to be

photographed for a few roubles, grumpy Russians, happy Russians, grey Russians, Russians wearing Gucci and Nike, wide streets, golden bulbous domes and matryoshka dolls inside dolls in up to twenty-three layers. Which was all well and good, but not much to write a book about. So I walked on, away from the centre.

You don't have to wander far in Moscow to find stranger sights than a red square that isn't the least bit red. On an island in the Moskva River about one kilometre south of the Kremlin, I came upon a monument that was really ugly, but so incredibly large that I almost found it attractive anyway. Okay, so when you design a statue in honour of Tsar Peter the Great, of course you can't make it a tiny statue, but here the artist, or rather architect, had overdone it. Peter was a sworn European. He considered Moscow to be a dirty dump in the outskirts of civilization. So instead of living there, he founded Saint Petersburg in a marsh by the Gulf of Finland and declared it to be the new capital. Considering this, maybe he doesn't really deserve a monument in Moscow at all.

Yet there he stands, in a sweet spot right in the middle of the lovely scents steaming out of the Red October chocolate factory next door. He looks to the west, towards his city and to Europe. This may well be the only fitting detail on the whole monument. Almost a hundred metres tall he poses on the deck of a sailing ship, itself piled upon a number of smaller sailing ships. The metal statue is painted black, making it hard to distinguish any details, but in his hands Peter is holding a golden scroll. What it symbolizes nobody knows. Maybe it is the decree he wrote that made Saint Petersburg the capital, or maybe it is the only law Peter is remembered for, the one that introduced a tax on beards. This was just one of Peter's

Peter and the chocolate factory

many attempts to encourage Russians to shave and behave like proper Europeans of the time.

Evil tongues claim that originally the monument wasn't even intended as a statue of Peter the Great. Instead it was meant to be erected in Havana, Cuba, in honour of the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus' Spanish discovery of America. Fortunately for the Cubans they made a discovery themselves, namely how large, expensive and ugly the statue was going to be. So they cancelled the project. Somehow the Russian sculptor Zurab Tsereteli managed to convince Moscow's megalomaniac mayor, Yuriy Luzhkov, to buy the bronze monster.

Many Muscovites weren't too happy about the metal Peter. Some of them disliked it so much that they actually almost blasted the whole thing away. Charmingly, the dynamite enthusiasts cancelled the detonation in the last minute, reportedly because an infatuated couple, two anglers and a senseless drunkard were standing dangerously close to the statue when the explosion should have happened. Instead they called the police and told them how to find and disarm the seven explosive charges on the statue. The caller made sure to mention that, by the way, it would probably not be a good idea to remove Lenin from his mausoleum, which was a hot issue up for debate in Moscow at the time. Because, he told the police, if that happened, new explosive charges might well find their way to both the statue and several other locations.

So when I approached the monument to make sure that it was real and not just me having a bad dream, it was under the close surveillance of a grumpy, armed guard.

The lovely aroma of fresh chocolate lingered in the air. I really liked the place. I just had to close my eyes first to realize it.

Further south, across the river, I walked into a small park full of sculptures and statues of a more modest size. In every other way they were still superior to the Peter monument. I had found the Park Skulptur.

When the communists under some pressure in 1991 renounced their right to do whatever they liked, it didn't take the people of the Soviet Union long to start refurnishing their streets and squares. One of their

first actions was to tear down and destroy statues put there not principally for their aesthetic value, but to make sure that people didn't forget whose hands held all power. Some smart guys sold their statues to rich collectors in Europe and America, while other statues disappeared into barns and junkyards. Fortunately, some of the retired sculptures were saved from destruction and oblivion by being sent to the sculpture park in Moscow.

"Stalin's victims" in Park Skulptur

Much can be said about the Soviet era politicians, but the work that a large number of mostly unknown artists put into immortalizing them through statues was often of high quality. The propaganda busts of Brezhnev and Stalin could in their retirement enjoy the company of Gandhi, Einstein, football players and peasants. The range of statues there was impressive.

An old Russian joke, which for obvious reasons is still being told, goes like this: "What's the similarity between a politician and a sperm cell? They both have a one in a million chance to become a human being." That

testimonial could also be read from the faces of the stone presidents and KGB directors in the park. Many of them were wounded, lacking a nose or displaying other visible evidence that they had met the people's wrath towards the end of their dead lives in cities all over the Soviet Union. I sincerely hope that Park Skulptur will outlive the joke.

I spent an interesting evening wandering among the sculptures. The country may be turning less red every year, yet the sculptures blushed in the light of an increasingly redder evening sun, until suddenly darkness fell.

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On a city map I discovered a district in the south of Moscow named Sparrow Hills. Something so humble in a city of such ambitions and grandeur was enough to make me go there the next day. It was a nice walk along the river, past the Gorky Park pleasure grounds and the Luzhniki Stadium, centre stage for the widely boycotted 1980 Summer Olympics. Something caught my eye on the river bank vis-à-vis the stadium. A dozen wedding parties were waiting in line to be photographed on a small pier with the Olympic stadium in the background.

If you're a tourist in Russia on a Saturday, you cannot avoid running into a number of brides, bridegrooms and their wedding guests. An important part of modern Russian wedding celebrations is to spend half the day visiting war memorials and other attractions, and to thoroughly photograph the newlywed couple at every site.

The slightly bizarre custom began when the communist government decided that church weddings weren't good for the people. Every city and town got its wedding palace so that people didn't have to go to the churches any more. There people could get their papers to prove that they were officially married. As a special encouragement from the Soviet Union they also received some coupons that allowed them to buy various things newlyweds might need, from special wedding shops that were allowed to stock a selection of merchandise from the West.

It was difficult to build any decent celebration around this, so the Russians were at a loss regarding how to do their weddings. In the years following World War II a new tradition was introduced. Every family had lost at least a son, brother or father in the war. To include the fallen in the ceremony, newlyweds started going straight from the wedding palace to the local memorial for dead soldiers and pay their respect.

As time has passed, many have forgotten the original background for visiting war memorials after the wedding. At the same time, church weddings and all the décor surrounding them have become the fashion again, with beautiful wedding dresses and fairly expensive bridegroom suits, looking the way Russians for inexplicable reasons think they should look. Family and friends gather for the occasion, in many cases visiting from far away, being part wedding guests, part tourists. So today the whole wedding party travels all around the city after the church or wedding palace ceremony, and they visit not only war memorials, but other tourist attractions and viewpoints as well.

Just married and just hanging there

As if it wasn't strange enough to see all the wedding processions mingling with busloads of Japanese tourists walking in the shade of their parasols, the surrealism reached new heights at the foot of the Sparrow

Hills. In the slope up from the river there was a ski jump and a chair lift. After having completed the photo session by the river, the newlyweds took the lift up the hill and down again. I guess it's a way to show that now they are really in it together.

There's a Russian saying; “If you think about joining the army, consider it one more time. If you want to become a sailor, think twice about it. If you want to get married, think it over three times or more.” Many of the couples in the chair lift seemed to be doing some heavy thinking.

At the top of the hill I found chaos. Newlyweds poured out of the chair lift and a long caravan of limousines. I'm not exaggerating when I say that for as long as I was present that Saturday afternoon, there were never fewer than ten wedding parties at the viewpoint on top of the Sparrow Hills. None of them stayed around for long, but new ones arrived all the time. The parking lot was one big party. Between the confetti-clad puddles of rain water, there were souvenir sellers, wedding singers, photographers, balloon sellers, decorated cars and small orchestras that could be hired to play for a few roubles per minute. Toasts of champagne were given, before the glasses were sent crashing onto the pavement. People waltzed and discoed, accordions were played, someone failed at singing like Elvis, couples kissed, mothers and fathers cried of joy and their children cried because they couldn't have a balloon. I just stood there, speechless.

To complete the picture, a 236 metre tall wedding cake had been built on the hill, with thirty-six floors, seven spires, four enormous side wings and a large, red star on top. Or at least that's what it looked like to me at first. When I looked again, I saw that it wasn't a cake after all, but the Moscow State University, one of the largest buildings in the city. She belongs to a family of constructions lovingly dubbed Stalin's Seven Sisters, and she was the tallest building in Europe until 1988.

Despite its nine million citizens, Moscow has never had a city centre that can be described as "where there are skyscrapers". Instead they have a whole city where every block is full of massive buildings of ten to fifteen floors. It makes you feel really small when you walk around in the city,

but when you look at it from a plane, the city looks rather flat, dull and not impressive at all. Stalin realized this in the 1930s after having seen photos of the capital of capitalism, New York City, and he compared it to his own city. Since Moscow was about to celebrate its 800th anniversary, Stalin decided time had come for building a number of monstrous high-rise buildings.

This resulted in seven huge, wedding-cake buildings throughout the city. Today two of them are apartment buildings, two are hotels, one is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, another the Ministry of Heavy Industry, and the last and most massive one is the Moscow State University. Fifty years after their construction they still dominate the cityscape of Moscow. The sisters are all separated, but they literally stand above the rest of the city, so from the top of any of them you can always see at least one of the others. Not only can few buildings in Moscow match the sisters when it comes to size, they are also by far the most awe-inspiring works of architecture in the city.

In addition to being both tall and wide, the shining white façades on the Stalin palaces are filled with communist symbolism. An enormous number of details appear if you look closely at the buildings. Sculptures fill every corner and every ledge. Mosaic works and marble engravings depict themes of idyllic rural life, industrial efficiency and heroic workers and soldiers. Red stars shine down on you, together with hammers and sickles and the letters CCCP in beautifully bright golden letters.

I suspect that Stalin in his old age began to worry about his posthumous reputation. Maybe he decided that he would try to do like the old pharaohs of Egypt, who today are remembered mainly for their large pyramids. If so, I'm seriously worried that eventually he will succeed with his plan.

Something that at least I will remember for a long time is the Moscow airport Sheremetyevo. The mood there was as sombre when I went there to go home as it had been when I arrived the first time. The taxi drivers still guarded the exit and threw themselves full force at all new arrivals. “I'll charge you only three average monthly salaries to take you to the city centre!”, they offered, and some naive, big fish would swallow the

ridiculous bait. I had just come from the centre by using the Metro and a bus. It had cost me less than the price of a bottle of vodka. And the vodka is *dangerously* cheap in Russia.

The walls inside the terminal were still dark and the sandwiches in the cafeteria were still sweaty. The most popular service on offer was the booth where you could pay to have your suitcase "laminated", completely wrapped in thick plastic. That way it would be reasonably well protected against shocks and thefts on its perilous journey through the airport's luggage handling system. I gathered my travel documents, found the queue leading up to an emigration officer who looked vaguely friendly, took two deep breaths and put on my nicest smile.

It worked! I passed through the checkpoint like a breeze. In accordance with the prevailing visa regulations, I had painstakingly registered my passport in every city and every hotel where I had spent more than one night. It had cost me some roubles and some effort. The emigration officer pulled the pile of receipts out of my passport and ... threw them in the rubbish bin, without even looking at them! She then asked me whether I carried more than a thousand dollars, and if I perhaps had filled my luggage with some lovely, Russian delicacies. To which my answers, obviously, were “Nyet” on both accounts.

“Then you are free to go”, she concluded, waving me past her. I wondered whether she had just watched too many American movies, or if she actually considered her country to be some sort of prison. In practice, to many Russians, it *is* a prison. The only difference between today and a couple of decades ago is that now the prisoners are allowed to have visitors.

The question is whether anyone wants to visit them, and how having guests will change the country. I don't know for sure, but my guess is that it will take a great many moons before tourism becomes a major industry in Russia outside the city limits of Moscow and Saint Petersburg. It will take more than nicer pavements and an increasing number of McDonald's restaurants before the tourists of the world will even begin to consider visiting the provincial Russian capitals and the surrounding countryside. Even if the Russians had constructed a Leninisneyland, sold Stalin-style

fake moustaches and learned to cook other dishes than pancakes and soup, I still doubt that blasé Western tourists would find it sufficiently tempting. A potentially huge tourist destination is Stalingrad/Volgograd, where the Russians through an enormous loss of lives turned World War II around. Few people go there, and as the number of breathing war veterans in Europe and in the USA decreases, so does the tourism potential of the place. No one seems willing to work hard to make Russia more attractive to visitors.

To those who prefer to travel independently, Russia can be a most satisfying place to visit. Just make sure you bring someone you can talk to, so you don't have to go half mad and start having conversations with the walls. In general, to enjoy a trip through Russia you need to be slightly more prepared than when you go to most other countries.

I was happy both for having gone to Russia, and for now being on my way home again.

When I returned to Oslo I was met by a quiet Sunday at the airport. I got on a city-bound, air-conditioned bus. Soft, classical music from the radio filled the air. The front page of a newspaper I bought was dedicated to whimpering Norwegians, upset about the price of meat having gone up eight percent during the last two months. In a country where people on average eat sixty-eight kilograms of meat per year each, a price hike like that is a big issue. No one suggested that we could eat "just" 63 kilograms of meat instead. Sure, it would mean smaller steaks, but that way we wouldn't have to spend more money than before. More than a kilogram of meat per week is probably enough anyway.

Many travellers before me have said that the main purpose of travelling is not to go to other countries, but to return to your own country as if it was a foreign land. If this is true, then my trip to Russia was a success.

I'm already looking forward to going back. In fifty years or so. By then at least parts of both Russia and myself will probably have changed a bit. Let's hope it will be for the better for at least one of us.

Blueberry babushkas earning their "pension"

One More Thing...

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