

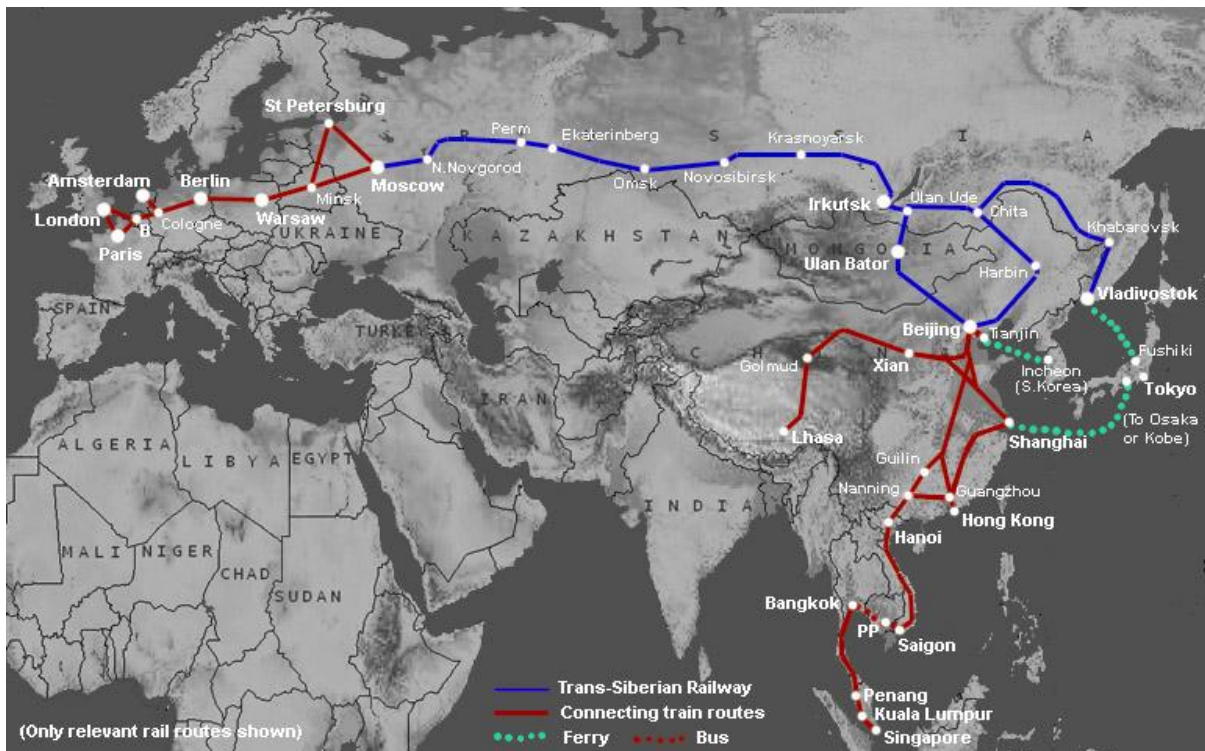
The Trans-Siberian Railway

The journey of a lifetime

I have put this together so that anyone thinking of doing this trip has all the information you should need to make up your mind. While reading you will quickly realise that most of this stuff has been blagged from other websites but ho hum were not all perfect and why reinvent the wheel if someone has already gone to the bother.

Its obviously a lot cheaper to book this all yourself but here are some really good company's that can put a good package together that can extend the trip to 19 to 22 days instead of the 6 or 7 days that the journey would take without stops, so have a read and see what you think, if your up for it let me know on the forum.

Trans-Siberian route map



A brief history of the Trans-Siberian Railway...

In the late 19th century, Japan, Britain and America all managed to gain footholds on the Chinese coast as bases for their trade with China and the Orient. Russia too needed to secure her foothold on the east as well as securing the vast expanses of Siberia, so in 1891 Tsar Alexander III approved a plan for a trans-continental line linking Moscow and St Petersburg

with Vladivostok on the Pacific coast, as this was the only year-round ice-free port on Russian territory.

A railway had been built as far as Ekaterinberg as early as 1878, and this was steadily extended Eastwards. Omsk was reached in 1894, Irkutsk and Lake Baikal in 1898. The Trans-Siberian Railway finally reached Vladivostok in 1901, but for several years passengers had to cross Lake Baikal by ice-breaking ferry to connect with a second train on the other side - only in 1904 was the line around Lake Baikal completed and the whole journey from Moscow to Vladivostok possible on a single train. Until 1916, the eastern end of the journey involved cutting across China, over part of what is now the Trans-Manchurian route - you can see how the Trans-Manchurian line initially heads towards Vladivostok on the route map above. The Russians secured the right to build and maintain this route across China thanks to a treaty signed after they made a generous loan to China to help them pay off their debts to Japan. From 1916, the complete journey could be made from Moscow to Vladivostok within Russia, taking the route followed by today's 'Rossiya' and skirting the Chinese border to the north via Khabarovsk. The Trans-Mongolian line is a relatively recent addition to the Trans-Siberian network - construction started in 1940, it reached Ulan Bator in 1949, and it was completed into China by 1956.

The Trans-Siberian Railway today...

Today, the Trans-Siberian Railway is a key part of the massive Russian railway system. It is not a tourist line - it is a real, working railway, carrying a huge amount of freight and passenger traffic. It is double-track and electrified all the way from Moscow to Vladivostok, and on some parts of the line freight trains rumble past every few minutes. It is not the only line in Russia - on the contrary, if you saw a map of Russian railways you would be hard-pressed to decide which of the many routes Trans-Siberian trains actually take for the first few thousand miles East of Moscow. There is in fact now a second route across Siberia to the north of the Trans-Siberian to Sovetskaya Gavan on the Pacific coast, called the BAM (Baikal-Amur-Maestral railway). Started in the 1930s, it was only completed in 1991. However, this route is of little interest to most Western travellers.

The best resource for further information about the Trans-Siberian Railway is www.transsib.ru/Eng/.

On board the Moscow-Vladivostok 'Rossiya'...

The coaches on the Rossiya were replaced in the early 2000s and the new interiors are shown here, courtesy of traveller Daniel Brewster. Other Russian 'firmeny' quality trains on the Trans-Siberian Railway, such as the Moscow-Irkutsk 'Baikal', are similar.



Above: Each carriage of the Moscow-Vladivostok 'Rossiya' carries a nameboard... *Photo courtesy of Daniel Brewster.*



Above: A 2-berth spalny vagon (1st class) compartment on the Rossiya. *Photo courtesy of Daniel Brewster.*



Above: A meal served in the compartment. *Photo courtesy of Daniel Brewster.*



Above: Restaurant car on the Rossiya - note the Xmas decorations! *Photo courtesy of Daniel Brewster.*



Above: The restaurant car also has a bar area. *Photo courtesy of Daniel Brewster.*



Photo courtesy of Daniel Brewster.

Overview of the 3 Trans-Siberian routes

Moscow - Vladivostok: Every second day, the 'Rossiya' ('Russia', train number 2 eastbound, train 1 westbound) leaves Moscow on its 7-day journey to Vladivostok. This is almost the longest train ride of them all, 9,258 km or 6,152 miles. This train has 2nd class 4-berth compartments called kupé and 1st class 2-berth compartments called spalny wagon or 'SV', plus a restaurant car, ([virtual tour](#)). One-way fares start at around 13,000 rubles (\$450 or £280) in a 4-berth sleeper or 25,000 rubles (\$850 or £530) in a 2-berth sleeper. [See a brief account of the journey](#). From Vladivostok there is a [weekly ferry to Japan](#), taking 36 hours (2 nights).

Moscow - Beijing (China): The main Trans-Siberian line runs from Moscow to Vladivostok, but most western travellers head for China on one of two branches, the Trans-Mongolian line (completed in the 1950s) or the Trans-Manchurian line (built around 1900). There are two direct trains a week between Moscow & Beijing (Peking), train 3/4 via Mongolia using Chinese rolling stock and train 19/20 via Manchuria using Russian rolling stock.

Moscow - Beijing via Mongolia: This is arguably the most interesting Trans-Siberian route to take. The weekly Trans-Mongolian train (train 4 eastbound, train 3 westbound) leaves Moscow for Beijing every Tuesday night. The 7,621 km (4,735 mile) journey takes 6 days. This train crosses Siberia, cuts across Mongolia and the Gobi desert, then enters China. This train uses Chinese rolling stock and has deluxe 2-berth compartments (with shared shower), 1st class 4-berth compartments & 2nd class 4-berth compartments. Fares start at around \$650 or £410 one-way in 2nd class 4-berth or \$910 or £570 in 1st class 2-berth.

If you want to stop off on the way, there are lots of Russian internal trains between Moscow, Ekaterinburg & Irkutsk including the 'Rossiya' & 'Baikal', then there's a daily train (number 263/264) between Irkutsk & Ulan Bator. There's also a second weekly direct train between Moscow & Ulan Bator, train 6 eastbound, train 5 westbound. Then there are 2 or 3 trains a week between Ulan Bator & Beijing.

Moscow - Beijing via Manchuria: The weekly Trans-Manchurian train (the 'Vostok', train 20 eastbound, train 19 westbound, using Russian rolling stock) leaves Moscow on Friday nights for Beijing via Manchuria, taking just over six days to cover the 8,986km (5,623 miles). There are 2-berth 1st class compartments (spalny vagon) and 4-berth 2nd class compartments (kupé). Prices are similar to the Chinese train.

Other Trans-Siberian trains: These aren't the only Trans-Siberian trains. Far from it! Many other trains run over parts of these routes, including the excellent 'Baikal' (train 9/10) every second day from Moscow to Irkutsk, and some slower, lower quality trains. There's even a daily Moscow-Vladivostok slow lower-quality train, train 904, not one you'd like to get on by mistake.

The following pages are taken from the man in seat sixty one website and explain how to plan & book an overland journey from London to China or Japan by Trans-Siberian Railway, cheaply & independently. (plus some advice and travel experiences)



Above: The Trans-Siberian 'Rossiya', on its 7-day 6,152-mile journey from Moscow to Vladivostok. *Photo courtesy of Daniel Brewster*

Don't fly to Moscow!

London to Moscow by train...

Flying to Moscow to pick up the Trans-Siberian Railway is like entering a marathon then accepting a lift in someone's car for the first mile... Don't cheat! If you're going to go overland to the far East, do it properly, starting at London St Pancras and staying firmly on the ground. It's easy to travel from London to Moscow by train, [click here for train times, fares & how to buy tickets](#).

Other European cities to Moscow...

You can also travel to Moscow by direct sleeping-car from Berlin, Vienna, Prague, Helsinki, Amsterdam and many other places. To find train times, use <http://reiseauskunft.bahn.de>.

Connecting ferries to Japan

You travel from London to Tokyo via the Trans-Siberian Railway in about 14 days. You can either travel to Vladivostok and take the weekly ferry to Fushiki or travel to Beijing, take an onward train to Shanghai then one of two weekly ferries to Osaka or Kobe in Japan..

Via Vladivostok: The passenger ship 'Rus' of the Far East Shipping Co. (FESCO) sails from Vladivostok to Fushiki in Japan once a week all year round, taking 36 hours (2 nights, 1 day). Fares start at US\$400 one-way in 4-berth cabin, meals included in the fare. [See the Trans-Siberian timetable page](#) for sailing dates, times & how to buy tickets. You can confirm these at the FESCO website www.bisintour.com.

Via Beijing & Shanghai: [See the China page](#) for sailing dates, approximate fares & how to buy tickets.

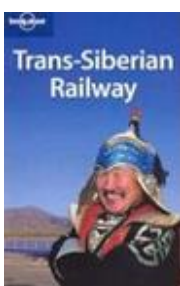
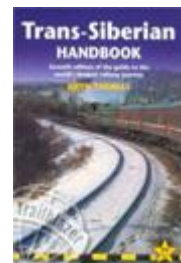


Above: Crossing the sea of Japan from Vladivostok to Fushiki takes 36 hours. The crew are welcoming and helpful. As the only non-Russian aboard, I even qualified for my own announcements after the ones in Russian: "Mr Smit', your meal is now ready in the restaurant. Bon appetit..!". The crossing to Japan was the most enjoyable and relaxing part of the 14-day London to Tokyo journey.

How to plan your trip...

1. Decide on your final destination. Vladivostok? Beijing? Shanghai? Hong Kong? Tokyo? It's even possible to reach Saigon, Bangkok or Singapore overland from London. . Vladivostok is an interesting place for a day or two, but not worth 7 days travelling from Moscow unless you're taking the ferry onwards to Japan. But Beijing is a wonderful destination, with Shanghai or Xian just an overnight train ride away. How about Japan? There are ferries from both [Vladivostok to Japan](#) & [Shanghai to Japan](#). You can even reach Hanoi in Vietnam by twice-weekly train from Beijing (see the [Vietnam page](#)), then travel onwards by train and the occasional bus to Saigon, Bangkok & Singapore (see the [Cambodia](#) & [Thailand](#) pages).

2. Do you want to make the whole trip in one go, or to [stop off](#) on the way? Travelling to Vladivostok in 7 days without stopovers can be tedious, and it is better the break up the journey and see something of Siberia. On the other hand, the more varied scenery and camaraderie on board the direct Moscow-Beijing trains makes non-stop travel on these trains a very enjoyable option and maximises your time in China. If you'd like to stop off, the best stopovers are Irkutsk in Siberia and Ulan Bator in Mongolia. Ekaterinberg & Ulan Ude are also worth a stop.



To help decide if and where to stop off, buy a copy of Bryn Thomas' truly excellent [Trans-Siberian Handbook](#), with journey planning information, town guides, the history of the line, and best of all, a mile-by-mile guide to the sights you can see

from the train, to help you get the most from your trip. The [Lonely Planet guide](#) to the Trans-Siberian Railway is also good.

3. What time of year to go? What class of sleeper to use? What's Trans-Siberian travel like? Is it safe? [See the Trans-Siberian travel tips](#). Then see [Travelling Moscow-Beijing on train 4](#), [Travelling Moscow-Vladivostok on train 2](#) and the [Trans-Siberian picture gallery](#).

4. Plan your Trans-Siberian trains: There is no such train as the 'Trans-Siberian Express' but a whole range of trains across Siberia, including many Russian domestic trains plus a handful of direct international trains to Mongolia and China. Plan your trains using the [Trans-Siberian Timetable page](#) and/or [the Real Russia online timetable & tickets system](#). Within Russia, there are both faster quality trains & slower cheaper trains. Fares are shown in the [fares section](#).

5. Plan your itinerary and budget. How much will a trip like this cost? Do I need a 6 month sabbatical or is 2 weeks off work enough? It all depends on what you want to do. The only way to know is to plan out your trip and work out a budget. [How to plan an itinerary & budget](#).

6. Book your Trans-Siberian train. When you have planned your journey, the first thing to arrange is your Trans-Siberian train ticket. There are several ways to buy tickets, some cheaper but more effort, others easier but more expensive. The [how to book section](#) below explains the options.

7. Book connecting trains, ships & flights. After booking your Trans-Siberian train ticket, book any [onward trains in China](#) or [the ferry to Japan](#). You may also need a [one-way flight](#).

8. Arrange visas. Once you have booked the Trans-Sib train, you need to arrange your visas. See the [visa section](#) below. You can usually only get visas within 3 months of travel.

9. Book your train from London to Moscow. Finally, arrange train travel from London to Moscow to connect with the Trans-Siberian, see the [London to Russia](#) page. Bookings for European trains open 60 days before departure, you cant book until reservations open, so do this bit last.

Virtual tour of the 'Rossiya': [Click here for a virtual tour](#) inside the 'Rossiya' train from Moscow to Vladivostok. The this nifty virtual tour on the Russian Railways website shows the 4-berth & 2-berth sleepers and restaurant car.

Trans-Siberian train times

See the [Trans-Siberian timetable page](#) for:

- a summary timetable of the main trains on the Trans Siberian Railway.
- sailing dates & times for the ferry from Vladivostok to Japan.

See the [online timetable & tickets system](#) further down this page to check train times between any two main stops on the Trans-Siberian Railway and to buy tickets online

- This links directly to the RZD (Russian Railways) database, and gives current train times between main stations anywhere in Russia & the other ex-Soviet States, as well as on the Trans-Siberian Railway.

See the [train travel in Russia page](#) for a step-by-step guide enabling non-Russian speakers to check train times, departure days & prices directly from the Russian Railways website.

See the [China page](#) for:

- times & fares for onward trains from Beijing to Shanghai, Xian, Hong Kong and Hanoi (Vietnam).
- times and fares for the ferries from Shanghai & other Chinese ports to Japan.

See the [Russia page](#) for:

- train times & fares from London to Moscow or St Petersburg.

[Map of Moscow showing the Yaroslavsky station](#)



Above: The 'Baikal' Moscow to Irkutsk
Courtesy of [Sascha & Manuela Dubach](#)



Above: Train 4 from Moscow to Beijing, at Irkutsk

How much does it cost?

The good news is that a Trans-Siberian journey needn't be expensive if you travel independently rather than with an inclusive tour. It's a real railway with regular fares, not an expensive 'tourist experience'. For over 5,000 miles of travel, a bed for 5 to 7 nights and a world-class travel experience, it's a bargain! However, what you pay will **vary enormously**, depending on:

- which class you travel in. Most western travellers go 2nd class 4-berth (kupé). 1st class 2-berth (spalny vagon) is nice if you can afford it, but twice as expensive as kupé so only worth it if the money is not an issue for you. 3rd class (platskartny open-plan bunks) is a bit basic for most western travellers and not available on every train, but some adventurous low-budget travellers enjoy it.
- whether you travel independently (cheaper) or book an all-inclusive tour (more expensive).
- if travelling independently, whether you buy your ticket through a Russian travel agency (cheaper, recommended), a western travel agency (more expensive), or at the ticket office (cheapest, but not always practical, see below).
- if booking through an agency, which agency you use. Demand for the two weekly Moscow-Beijing trains exceeds supply, and Russian Railways sells off tickets to travel agencies before bookings open to the public. These agencies then sell tickets for whatever price they can get for them. So shop around!
- for journeys wholly within Russia, whether you travel on a 'firmeny' fast quality train (recommended) such as train 2 'Rossiya' and train 10 'Baikal', or a slow unnamed lower-quality train such as trains 240, 340 or 904 which have cheaper fares. As a general rule, low train numbers are quality trains, slower low-quality trains have three-digit train numbers. When you contact an agency, make sure you know what train number you're being quoted a fare for!
- Some quality trains within Russia, such as the Baikal & Rossiya allow you to buy tickets 'with services' or 'without services'. 'With services' means that a light breakfast and cooked dinner with beer are served in your compartment (or sometimes in the restaurant car), [such as the meal shown in these photos](#).

If you buy tickets at the ticket office in Moscow...

Typical fares charged at the ticket office are shown below, taken from the Russian Railways website www.rzd.ru (the journey planner is available in Russian only). Russian fares vary by season, higher in summer, lower in winter (the ones below are for February). Higher fares are charged for fast high-quality 'firmeny' trains, lower fares for slower unnamed low-quality trains. Also note that on the best trains you can buy tickets 'without services' (no meals) or 'with services' (meals included, either served in the restaurant or in your compartment). The ones shown here are 'without services'. Expect to pay an extra £38-£68 for a 'with services' ticket on train 2 from Moscow to Vladivostok, for example, not bad value for a 7-day trip! [How to buy tickets yourself at the ticket office in Moscow](#).

One way, per person, in roubles:	Platskartny 3rd class bunks	Kupé 2nd class 4-berth	1st class 4-berth	Spalny vagon 1st class 2-berth
Moscow - Vladivostok (firmeny train 2)	-	13,200 (£281)	-	25,000 (£532)
Moscow - Irkutsk (firmeny train 2 or 10)	3,400 (£72)	9,400 (£200)	-	18,700 (£397)
Moscow - Irkutsk (slow train 640)	2,800 (£60)	6,950 (£146)	-	-
Moscow - Yekaterinburg (firmeny train 10)	1,500 (£32)	3,950 (£84)	-	7,800 (£166)
Yekaterinburg - Irkutsk (firmeny train 10)	2,650 (£56)	6,950 (£148)	-	13,900 (£295)
Irkutsk - Vladivostok (firmeny train 2)	-	9,100 (£193)	-	16,900 (£359)
Irkutsk - Ulan Bator	About \$30	About \$45	-	-
Moscow - Beijing (train 4 or 20) & Moscow - Ulan Bator (train 6)	<p>The fare charged at the ticket office for trains 4, 6 & 20 is virtually irrelevant. Tickets are bought in bulk by Russian travel agencies before booking opens to the public, so the ticket office will usually have you they are all fully booked. You'll almost certainly have to <u>buy through an agency</u> if you want to travel on these trains.</p>			

Where did I get these fares? How can you check current fares & fares for other journeys? [How to check fares & availability using the Russian Railways website.](#)

Buying tickets at the ticket office is a practical option for most Russian domestic journeys, such as Moscow-Irkutsk or Irkutsk-Vladivostok or even Moscow-Vladivostok, assuming that it wouldn't upset your plans to have to take a different train or travel a day later than planned if your first choice of train was fully booked. But if you have limited time and a definite itinerary, pre-booking your trains via an agency is a better option, see the next section.

If you buy tickets from a Russian travel agency...

Unless you have lots of time and can afford to take pot luck when you get to Moscow, you'll probably want to book your trains in advance. You can't book online directly with Russian Railways (certainly not in English), so most westerners buy tickets through a travel agency, either a [local Russian agency](#) (the cheapest way, recommended) or a [specialist western agency](#) (less hassle, perhaps, but usually significantly more expensive). Different agencies charge completely different prices for the same journey, so shop around for the best deal. However, to give you a rough idea, here are the prices charged by Real Russia in January 2009, including their booking fee. 'Shopping around' means emailing each agency for a specific quote, not just looking at their websites, as some agencies don't seem to update their sites when prices rise - and there have been some big fare rises in recent years imposed by the Russian & Chinese railways. When emailing an agency, be specific about which train you want, and remember to ask about their delivery and credit card fees. I've seen websites quote very competitive prices for (say) Moscow-Irkutsk, which turn out to be for a low-quality slow train, the price they charge for a fast 'firmeny' quality train such as the 'Baikal' or 'Rossiya' is higher and less competitive. Some agencies charge a credit card fee of up to 12% on top of their advertised fares (Real Russia charge just 2.5%). [How to buy tickets from Russian travel agencies.](#)

<i>One way, per person, US\$:</i>	<i>Platskartny 3rd class bunks</i>	<i>Kupé 2nd class 4-berth</i>	<i>1st class 4-berth</i>	<i>Spalny vagon 1st class 2-berth</i>
<i>Moscow to Beijing (Trans-Mongolian, train 4)</i>	-	£410 (\$650)	\$600	£570 (\$910)
<i>Moscow to Beijing (Trans-Manchurian, train 20)</i>	-	£440 (\$700)	-	£620 (\$985)
<i>Moscow to Vladivostok (train 2, 'Rossiya')</i>	-	£389 (\$620)	-	£720 (\$1144)
<i>Moscow to Irkutsk (train 10, 'Baikal')</i>	£98 (\$155)	£264 (\$420)	-	£523 (\$830)
<i>Moscow to Ulan Bator (train 4 or 6)</i>	-	£305 (\$485)	-	£410 (\$650)
<i>Irkutsk to Ulan Bator (train 263)</i>	-	£128 (\$200)	-	-
<i>Irkutsk to Beijing (train 4 via Mongolia)</i>	-	£220 (\$350)	-	£300 (\$475)
<i>Irkutsk to Beijing (train 20 via Manchuria)</i>	-	£230 (\$365)	-	£305 (\$485)
<i>Ulan Bator to Beijing (train 4)</i>	-	£115 (\$180)	\$165	£160 (\$255)
<i>Ulan Bator to Beijing (train 24)</i>	-	£110 (\$175)	\$165	£160 (\$255)

If you buy tickets from a western travel agency...

There are various western agencies who specialise in Trans-Siberian travel. They will arrange a tailor-made tour for you, but will sell you just a train ticket if you like. Their prices vary enormously, so shop around. [More information about arranging your trip through a western tour agency.](#)

If you buy tickets in Ulan Bator...

A Ulan Bator to Irkutsk ticket costs about 33,000 togrog (\$30) if bought at the station. [More information about buying tickets in Ulan Bator.](#)

If you buy tickets at the station or through China Travel Service (CITS) in Beijing...

You can buy tickets in person at Beijing main station or via CITS (the Chinese state tourist agency). You can check fares at www.cits.net (click China Train then International Train Fare). [More information about buying tickets in person in Beijing or by email via CITS.](#)

<i>One way, per person:</i>	<i>2nd class 4-berth (hard class)</i>	<i>1st class 4-berth (soft class)</i>	<i>1st class 2-berth (deluxe soft class)</i>
<i>Beijing to Moscow (train 3)</i>	\$494	\$757	\$836
<i>Beijing to Moscow (train 19)</i>	\$575	-	\$887
<i>Beijing to Irkutsk (train 3)</i>	\$255	\$356	\$396
<i>Beijing to Irkutsk (train 19)</i>	\$292	-	\$443
<i>Beijing to Ulan Bator (trains 3 or 23)</i>	\$142	\$178	\$204

Children...

- *In Russia, children under 5 sharing a berth with an adult go free, children 5 to 10 travel at half the adult fare.*
- *On the Trans-Manchurian and Trans-Mongolian international trains (trains 3, 4, 19, 20), children under 4 go free if they share a berth, children 4 to 11 (inclusive) travel at 75% of the adult fare.*
- *For journeys wholly within China, children under 110cm tall travel free, 110-140cm tall travel for half fare, over 140cm tall pay full fare.*

How to buy tickets - eastbound

[How to book - westbound](#)

There are three ways to book a trip on the Trans-Siberian Railway, each with advantages & disadvantages:

- **Option 1:** Buy a ticket yourself at the ticket office at the station - cheapest, but most uncertain and not always practical;
- **Option 2:** Buy tickets in advance through a Russian agency - quite easy, fairly cheap, and usually the best option;
- **Option 3:** Let a specialist western travel agency arrange it all for you - least hassle, but by far the most expensive.

Option 1: Buy tickets at the ticket office...

You can walk up to the ticket office at any Russian station and buy a ticket or tickets for any journey within Russia, including the Trans-Siberian Railway. This is the cheapest way to book because you pay the real Russian Railways price. It is not usually too difficult to get a ticket for **internal Russian journeys** a day or two before departure, for example Moscow-Ekaterinberg, Moscow-Irkutsk or even Moscow-Vladivostok, especially if you can be a bit flexible about your exact departure date or class of travel. The daily Irkutsk-Ulan Bator train is not too difficult to book at the ticket office, either. To avoid language problems, it's a good idea to learn the Russian alphabet so you can write down your requirements to show to the ticket office staff. When writing dates, use roman numerals for the month, or example for '3 June 2008' write '3 VI 2008'. Many big Russian stations now have a 'servis tsentr' (service centre) where you pay a small fee (about 100 rubles) to book your ticket in a relaxed air-conditioned environment. It might well be worth it! Russian railway reservations are computerised, so you can arrange any journey from any station, as long as the journey starts in Russia or one of the ex-Soviet states. For information on buying train tickets at the station in Ulan Bator (Mongolia), [see below](#).

If you know the Russian alphabet, you can check Russian train fares and availability online at the Russian Railways website [using this step-by-step guide for non-Russian speakers](#). So for example, you could see how many tickets are left today for tomorrow's train to Irkutsk. That might give you a good idea of how easy it is to get tickets at short notice. Just remember that summer will be busier than winter, and Fridays busier than mid-week.

However, demand for the weekly direct Moscow-Beijing Trans-Mongolian & Trans-Manchurian trains (trains 4 & 20) and the weekly Moscow-Ulan Bator train (train 6) exceeds supply, especially in the busy May-September peak season. Travel agencies buy up all the tickets for these train before bookings open to the public, so you often find them fully booked even if you go to the ticket office the moment bookings open to the public 45 days before departure. So these particular trains should be booked through an agency, see the next section.

Option 2: Buy tickets from a local Russian agency

Unless you're on a six-month sabbatical with time no object, you'll probably want to arrange your Trans-Siberian tickets in advance before you leave home. The best option is to buy tickets over the internet through a reputable local Russian travel agency. This is far cheaper than booking a tour through a western agency. Naturally, these Russian agencies charge more than you'd pay at the ticket office, but not always that much more. However, prices vary enormously from agency to agency, so shop around. Make sure that any quote you get is inclusive of any credit card fees, and that you know whether it's for a slow low-quality train (3-digit train numbers) or one of the fast quality trains such as the 'Baikal' or 'Rossiya' (one or two-digit train numbers and usually a name).

As far as the popular weekly Moscow-Beijing and Moscow-Ulan Bator trains are concerned, here's how the system works: Russian Railways open up bookings to travel agencies for these and other trains 60 days before departure, before bookings open to the public 45 days before departure. Knowing that demand exceeds supply, the agencies buy up whole blocks of tickets, leaving hardly any left for sale at the ticket office when public bookings open. The agencies then re-sell these tickets for whatever price they can get, which often bears no

relation to the face value of the ticket. Trans-Mongolian Moscow-Beijing train number 4 is particularly popular, and 1st class deluxe 2-berth on this train can sell out very quickly indeed, with more travel agencies trying to fulfil orders from rich privacy-loving westerners for deluxe berths than there are deluxe berths on the train. Travel agencies keep their own waiting lists and will take Trans-Siberian bookings months ahead, well before the 60 day point when they can buy up the actual ticket, so [contact a booking agency](#) as far ahead as you can. If you're booking closer to the departure date, you may find that one travel agency says the train is full, but another agency has bought a block of tickets speculatively and has some left, or knows a rival agency that it can buy tickets from. So shop around!

Reputable Russian agencies to try:

- Real Russia ([see the online booking system below](#))
- Svezhy Veter (www.sv-agency.udm.ru/sv/trains.htm)
- G&R International (www.hostels.ru)
- Way to Russia (www.waytorussia.net/Services/TrainTickets.html)
- All-Russia Travel Service (www.rusrailtravel.ru)
- **Ost West** (www.ostwest.com)

Real Russia, Svezhy Veter, G&R International & Ost-West have all been highly recommended by Seat61 correspondents and are all reputable companies, although further [feedback](#) is always welcome. Tickets can be picked up at their offices in Moscow or sent to you for a courier fee. Some agencies (but not Real Russia) may ask you to fax them a photocopy of your credit card and/or passport, which sounds dodgy, but for some reason seems quite usual when dealing with Russian companies. Be prepared for a 7%-12% credit card fee (Real Russia charge only 2.5%), but using a credit card is still a safer way to buy tickets than using a money transfer. These Russian agencies can also book hotels in Moscow and other Russian cities, and they can arrange a visa support letter for Russia (or use the recommended visa service at www.realrussia.co.uk).

Remember that Russian Railways opens its reservation system to the public 45 days before departure, and to Russian travel agencies 60 days ahead. Whatever they promise you, an agency cannot 101% confirm your train reservation until then. However, travel agencies will still take your booking (and money) several months ahead as they keep their own internal waiting lists for the most popular trains such as the Moscow-Beijing Trans-Mongolian & Trans-Manchurian trains. They will make your reservation with Russian Railways the moment bookings open for agencies, 60 days before departure. 99.9% of the time there's no problem, but very occasionally there are more tourists wanting berths than there are berths, especially for the deluxe 2-berth 1st class on Trans-Mongolian trains 3/4 as this is very popular with rich shower-loving westerners. If you're trying for the deluxe 1st class, tell your agency in advance that you'll accept a 1st or 2nd class 4-berth ticket (or that you're willing to pay for dual occupancy of a 4-berth compartment) if the deluxe 2-berth is sold out.

Most of these Russian agencies can arrange hotels or train bookings in Mongolia or China through their contacts there. Otherwise, you can arrange these separately. A good starting point for Mongolia is the official Mongolia tourist board website, www.mongoliatourism.gov.mn, also try www.discover.mn. You can make onwards train

reservations within China (for example, Beijing to Shanghai, Hong Kong, Xian, or even Hanoi) through www.chinatripadvisor.com, or book yourself at the ticket office when you get to China.

Option 3: Let a specialist western agency arrange your trip

The most hassle-free way of arranging a Trans-Siberian trip, but the most expensive, is to arrange a tailor-made itinerary through one of the western travel agencies who specialise in independent travel to Russia. There are various agencies in the UK, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and so on. They can arrange your Russian visa, your hotel in Moscow, your Trans-Siberian train reservation, stop-overs and tours if you want them in places like Irkutsk or Mongolia, connecting trains in China and even the ship to Japan.

- **Intourist**, www.intouristuk.com, call **0870 112 1232**: A well-established and experienced UK agency, Intourist can arrange tailor-made Trans-Siberian itineraries. They show fares of about £336 per person for a Moscow-Beijing ticket on the Trans-Mongolian train in 2nd class 4-berth, including one night in a hotel in Moscow and all meals on the train for the first four days, but always get a quote as these prices may not have been updated. 1st class deluxe 2-berth is shown as £517, but again, this may not be updated. Intourist can also book westbound Beijing-Moscow trains (which for some reason cost a few pounds more than eastbound), stopover tours along the Trans-Siberian Railway, the Vladivostok-Japan ferry and key trains in China. Getting to Moscow, hotels in China, visas and return trains/flights are extra - you can arrange these yourself or they can do this for you. For Moscow to Vladivostok, Intourist charge about £403 one-way in 2nd class 4-berth or £729 in 1st class 2-berth.
- **The Russia Experience**, www.trans-siberian.co.uk, call **020 8566 8846**: Another reliable and experienced agency, the Russia Experience charges about £840 for a ticket from Moscow to Beijing in 2nd class 4-berth on train 20 including two nights hotel in Moscow. Travelling 1st class in a 2-berth room on this train costs about £1,240. Getting to Moscow, hotels in China, visas and return trains/flights are extra - you can arrange these yourself or they can do this for you. Unfortunately, The Russia Experience no longer book places on the Chinese Trans-Mongolian train (train 4), but they can book you on the Moscow-Ulan Bator and Ulan Bator-Beijing trains with a stop-over in Mongolia.
- **Vodka Train** www.vodkastrain.com: An Australian agency offering budget Trans-Siberian tours.
- **Sundowners**, www.sundownersoverland.com: Sundowners offer all sorts of tours, including trips covering just train travel plus a night or two's hotel at each end. Sundowners offer Moscow-Beijing trips via Mongolia, with many options and stopovers available.
- **Trans-Sputnik**, www.trans-sputnik.nl. This is a Dutch agency, offering one-way Moscow-Beijing fares from 525 euro (£450) 2nd class 4-berth or 825 euro (£710) 1st class 2-berth on train 4 or 20.

How to buy train tickets from London to Moscow...

The Trans-Siberian Railway starts at St Pancras station in London, so don't cheat by flying the first few hundred miles! It's easy to travel from London to Moscow using Eurostar to Brussels, a connecting train to Cologne and the daily Russian sleeping-car direct from Cologne to Moscow, see the [London to Russia page](#). You can only book European trains 2 months in advance or less, so buy your train tickets to Moscow after you have arranged everything else. Decide which service you want using the [London to Russia page](#), then call [Deutsche Bahn's UK office](#) on **08718 80 80 66** (no booking fee) or www.europeanrail.com on **020 7619 1083** (£20 booking fee, but sometimes more expert) to buy tickets.

How to buy train tickets in Ulan Bator, Mongolia...

You can buy tickets at the International Railway Ticketing Office on Zamchyd Gudamj, a couple of roads over from the railway station. The foreigners booking office is in room 212, open 08:00-20:00 Monday-Friday (at weekends use the normal booking window). International trains to Irkutsk, Moscow and Beijing can be booked up to 30 days in advance, except for berths on the Moscow-Beijing and Beijing-Moscow trains 3/4, which only become available the day before departure. To reserve trains starting in Ulan Bator from outside Mongolia, either (a) contact a local hotel, guesthouse or travel agency in Ulan Bator for example, www.discovermongolia.mn), or use [one of the Russian agencies](#) as most have contacts in Mongolia who can arrange tickets starting in Ulan Bator.

How to buy onwards train tickets to Shanghai, Xian, Hong Kong, Vietnam...

If you book through a travel agency (either a western or a Russian one) they may be able to book connecting trains within China for you to Xian, Shanghai, Hong Kong or even Hanoi in Vietnam. Or you can book trains in China yourself at the ticket office when you get there. Alternatively, you can pre-book using www.chinatripadvisor.com. For train times, fares and how to book trains in China, see the [China page](#). Train times and fares for the twice-weekly train from Beijing to Hanoi are shown on the [Vietnam page](#).

How to buy tickets for the ferry to Japan...

If you book through a UK travel agency, they may be able to book the Vladivostok to Japan or Shanghai to Japan ferries for you. However, it's cheapest to book these ferries yourself by e-mailing the shipping company. See the [Trans-Siberian Timetable page](#) for Vladivostok-Japan sailing dates, times, and information on how to book, and see the [China page](#) for Shanghai-Japan sailing times and how to book.

One-way flights: Opodo.com

If you are only going one-way overland and returning by air, it's not difficult to find reasonably priced one-way flights. Try Opodo.com (Beijing or Hong Kong to London one-way from about £320). Seat61 gets a small commission if you buy through this link.

How to buy tickets - westbound

Option 1: Buy tickets in person at Beijing...

The absolute cheapest way to buy westbound Trans-Sib tickets is in person at one of the reservation offices in Beijing. However, the two weekly Beijing-Moscow trains get booked up well in advance, so buy tickets as far in advance as you can. Westbound trains are easier to get berths on than eastbound trains, and winter is easier than finding a place than the peak summer season from May to September. Train 3 to Moscow via Mongolia is often fully booked a couple of weeks in advance especially in summer, although it can be easier to get a berth on train 19 via Manchuria, which occasionally has berths available even a few days before departure (but not always!). The basic message is this: If you positively have to be on a specific train on a specific date, forget booking at the ticket office, you should pre-book via CITS or some other agency and pay their extra fee. But if you're living in Beijing, or plan to be there for some time before leaving, and can be a bit flexible about exactly what date you leave, booking in person can be a good option. You can buy Trans-Siberian train tickets in person in Beijing at:

- the international train booking office on the ground floor of the Beijing International Hotel. This is about five minutes walk north of Beijing main station on Jianguo Men Nei Dajie, open 08:30-12:00 & 13:30-17:00 Monday-Friday, 09:00-11:00 & 14:00-16:00 on weekends and holidays. The staff speak basic English and leaflets are available with international train times in English. See the [section above](#) for fares.
- Beijing main station (metro Beijingzhan), in the ticketing office for foreigners. This is on the north west corner of the 1st floor, accessed via the soft seat waiting room, open 05:30-07:30, 08:00-18:30, 19:00-23:00. **It's now reported (2008) that this office no longer sells international tickets.**
- BTG Travel & Tours, on Fwai Dajie between the New Otani and Gloria Plaza Hotels, open 08:00-20:00. They have a desk for Trans-Siberian tickets, with information in English.

Option 2: Buy tickets by phone or email with China Travel Service (CITS)...

CITS are the official Chinese state tourist agency, and this is probably the cheapest way to buy westbound Trans-Sib tickets starting in Beijing, other than buying in person at the ticket office. You can book trains from Beijing to Moscow, Irkutsk or Ulan Bator by emailing support-en@cits.com.cn (you can check details on the CITS website, www.cits.net) or by calling CITS on + 86 10 6512 0507 or + 86 10 6512 0503). It was reported back in 2005 that CITS had stopped taking email or phone bookings, but they are now taking bookings by email again. Expect to pay by bank transfer rather than credit card. Reports also suggest they can't book Beijing-Irkutsk tickets, only Beijing-Krasnoyarsk and beyond, so by all means ask for Beijing-Irkutsk, but be prepared to accept an offer of a Beijing-Krasnoyarsk ticket and simply get off in Irkutsk (though their website shows Beijing-Irkutsk fares!). They will still be the cheapest way to buy tickets! [Further feedback](#) on the CITS booking situation is very welcome, to help keep this page updated.

Option 3: Buy tickets through an agency in China or Hong Kong...

If you're in China or Japan and want an agency to arrange your westbound Trans-Siberian trip, try one of these two agencies:

- **Monkey Shrine** (www.monkeyshrine.com). Monkey Shrine is an experienced China-based tour agency who can arrange a tailor-made itinerary with stop-overs and hotels along the way, plus help with visas. Monkeyshrine offer a good service, but are naturally more expensive than booking it all yourself via CITS. A key advantage is being able to arrange onward tickets, not just tickets starting in Beijing, and to arrange hotels or tours along the way.
- **Chinatripadvisor** (www.chinatripadvisor.com): If you just want the Trans-Siberian train ticket, a cheaper option is to buy it through www.chinatripadvisor.com. Beijing to Moscow costs \$585 in 2nd class 4-berth or \$939 in 1st class 2-berth on Trans-Mongolian train 3, or \$659 2nd class, \$999 1st class on Trans-Manchurian train 19.

Option 4: Buy Russian train tickets from a Russian agency

If you want a ticket from Vladivostok to Moscow ticket, or intend stopping off within Russia and need some tickets for Trans-Siberian travel wholly within Russia, you can book through several Russian agencies. They can often arrange westbound Beijing to Moscow tickets through their contacts in China, too. These agencies charge more than the ticket office price, but not necessarily that much more. They can also arrange visa support for Russia and hotels in Moscow. Try each agency to see who charges the best prices.

- Real Russia ([see the online system below](#))
- Svezhy Veter (www.sv-agency.udm.ru/sv/trains.htm)
- G&R International (www.hostels.ru)
- Way to Russia (www.waytorussia.net/Services/TrainTickets.html)
- All-Russia Travel Service (www.rusrailtravel.ru)

For travel from Japan to Europe via Vladivostok, you can book the ship from Japan to Vladivostok directly with the shipping company via www.bisintour.com, then book the Vladivostok-Moscow train through one of these Russian agencies.

Option 5: Let a specialist western agency arrange your trip...

The most hassle-free way to book Trans-Siberian travel, but the most expensive, is to arrange a tailor-made itinerary with a western agency specialising in Trans-Siberian trips. They can arrange your whole journey, either eastbound or westbound, with stop-overs and hotels along the way if you want them, plus visa support. [See the section above](#) for agency details, links and sample prices.

How to buy train tickets for onwards travel from Moscow to western Europe...

Don't cheat..! Finish your Trans-Siberian journey by train all the way to London St Pancras. You can book onwards travel by train from Moscow to Berlin, Brussels, Prague, Vienna and many other European cities through a Russian agency such as the four agencies

listed in option 4 above, though the final Eurostar leg to London will need to be booked separately online. See the [London to Russia page](#) for train information from Moscow to London.

How to buy train tickets in Ulan Bator, Mongolia...

You can buy tickets at the International Railway Ticketing Office on Zamchyd Gudamj, a couple of roads over from the railway station. The foreigners booking office is in room 212, open 08:00-20:00 Monday-Friday (at weekends use the normal booking window). International trains to Irkutsk, Moscow and Beijing can be booked up to 30 days in advance, except for berths on the Moscow-Beijing and Beijing-Moscow trains 3/4, which only become available the day before departure.

One-way flights: [Opodo.com](#)

If you're heading out to the Far East by air to return overland by Trans-Siberian, it's not difficult to find reasonably priced one-way flights. Try [Opodo.com](#) (London to Beijing or Hong Kong one-way from about £320). Seat61 gets a small commission if you buy through this link.

Trans-Siberian train times & online tickets

Check train times & buy Trans-Siberian train tickets online...

This system links to [RealRussia.co.uk](#), a joint UK-Russian agency selling Trans-Siberian train tickets. It uses data direct from the RZD (Russian Railways) database so is a good way to check Trans-Siberian train times. It's also a good way to buy Russian or Trans-Siberian train tickets, although it will currently sell only one journey at a time. You can use it several times to buy tickets for a multi-leg trip, though you may prefer to contact Real Russia by email and buy all your tickets together. Real Russia also have a specific Trans-Siberian planner on their website which can be handy.

What tickets can this system sell? This system can sell tickets for any mainline train journey within Russia, Ukraine, Latvia, Estonia, Belarus, Lithuania, Kazakhstan and the other ex-Soviet states, including the Trans-Siberian Railway to Mongolia & China. It will also sell tickets for journeys starting in those countries heading outwards, for example Moscow to Beijing or Irkutsk to Ulan Bator. Reservations officially open 45 days before departure, but Real Russia allow you to request tickets up to 180 days ahead and they will contact you for payment when the price is confirmed.

Can anyone buy tickets using this system? Yes, you can buy tickets online with a credit card whether you live in the UK, USA, Canada, Australia, or wherever.

How are tickets delivered? Tickets are collected free of charge at Real Russia's offices in Moscow or St Petersburg, or an e-ticket can be emailed to you so you can collect the ticket from most main stations in Russia. Tickets can be sent to UK or EU

addresses for a £12-£15 fee, or couriered to any address worldwide, also for an extra charge.

Who runs this service & is it reliable? This service is provided by Real Russia, a reputable joint UK-Russian company which gets good reports from users. Real Russia can also arrange your [visas for Russia, Belarus, Mongolia & China](#).

Booking tips: Look for a train marked '**Firm**' if there is one. 'Firmeniy' trains are the best 'quality' trains, with modern coaches and good on-board service. 'TBC' means the system cannot provide a price for that particular train automatically, but they'll contact you with a cost by phone or email.

Is this the cheapest way to buy tickets? Real Russia charge the regular Russian Railways fare plus a 15-23% mark-up to cover their costs. There's also a 2.5% charge for credit card payments, though you can avoid this by calling their UK office to pay by debit card when your tickets are confirmed. The fares shown include the mark-up, but not the credit card charge. By all means shop around other agencies as prices charged can vary.

Visas

After sorting out your Trans-Siberian tickets, you need to get your visas.

How to arrange a Russian visa...

You will need a Russian visa. Always check the latest visa information, as it changes from time to time. But here's a quick run-down of the arrangements as at 2008:

- **Tourist, transit or business visa?** A tourist visa allows stays of up to 30 days, and is usually what you need. A business visa allows a longer stay, but is more expensive. A transit visa allows up to 10 days in transit, but you aren't allowed to spend time in Moscow, as most Trans-Siberian travellers do, so a tourist visa is usually better.
- **When to apply?** Visas are only issued 3 months or less before your intended date of entry to Russia, so there's no need to apply before then. Ideally, allow a month for the visa processing, but if you have less time than this, don't panic, various agencies offer 'express' services that will help you get a visa much quicker.
- **Letters of invitation & visa support:** A hangover from Soviet times is that to get a visa you need supporting documentation, usually just called 'visa support'. In theory, this is a letter of invitation from your travel agency setting out confirmed travel & accommodation arrangements for your entire stay in Russia or (for independent travellers) an accommodation voucher issued by your hotel(s) showing confirmed accommodation for each and every night you plan to spend in Russia. Having to pre-book all this would be ridiculously restrictive, so here's how it **really** works: You go to an agency such as www.realrussia.co.uk or one of the Russian agencies listed

above and they sell you the necessary visa support for a small fee, which allows you to get a visa without any genuine hotel bookings, so you can travel around freely just as you would in any other country, buying tickets and finding hotels as you go. Behind the scenes, the agency usually has an arrangement with a local hotel, they make a dummy 'reservation' for the period you want to be in Russia so they can legally issue the visa support, though of course you don't pay for the hotel and everyone knows (apart from the Russian government) that you have no intention of ever using that hotel room. Crazy, eh?

- **The easy way to get a Russian visa:** The easiest, quickest & least-hassle way to get a Russian visa is to ask www.realrussia.co.uk to get it for you. Real Russia is a reliable UK agency based in Russia which arranges Russian visas simply and cheaply, with all the necessary visa support included in the price. They have been recommended by several seat61 correspondents. Seat61 gets a small commission if you buy through www.realrussia.co.uk using this link. www.realrussia.co.uk can also arrange visas for Belarus, Mongolia & China, and arrange train tickets too. If you have feedback on their service, please email me.
- **Dates of entry & exit:** Make sure you get these right. It should be obvious, but I've known people date their visa for the date they arrive in Moscow, then get thrown off their sleeper train when it arrives at the Russian frontier the night before, as their visa wasn't valid for entering Russia until the next day. Your date of entry into Russia is **the date you physically enter Russian territory**, in other words the date your train rolls across the frontier, not the date you reach Moscow, which is irrelevant. Similarly, your date of exit is the date you physically leave Russian territory, which on a westbound sleeper train could be the day **after** you leave Moscow. Double-check train times to see when it reaches the frontier, and double-check that the embassy have given you the right dates when you get your passport back with the visa.
- **More information:** The Russian embassy in London website is www.rusemblon.org. www.waytorussia.net has good information on Russian visas.

How to arrange a Belarus transit visa...

- You'll need a Belarus transit visa if you are travelling from London to Moscow on the direct London-Brussels-Berlin-Moscow route, as all the direct trains from Cologne, Berlin or Warsaw pass through Belarus. However, getting a Belarus transit visa is quite straightforward.
- You will need to get your Russian visa before applying for the Belarus one, although you can apply for both together if you go through www.realrussia.co.uk.
- The Belarussians significantly increased visa fees in June 2007. A Belarus transit visa now costs £64 single or £99 return, if arranged through www.realrussia.co.uk. It takes 6 working days, or there's an extra-fee express option which takes 2 days.
- For official visa information see the Belarus embassy website, <http://belembassy.org/uk/> or call **020 7938 3677**. The embassy address in London is 6 Kensington Court, London W8 5DL, visa section open 09:00-12:30 Monday-Friday.

- **The simple way to get a Belarus transit visa:** If you live in the UK, the easiest and quickest way to get a Russian visa is to use www.realrussia.co.uk. Real Russia is a reliable UK agency which arranges Russian visas simply and cheaply, including all necessary visa support included in the price shown on their site. They have already recommended by one seat61 correspondent. Seat61 gets a small commission if you buy through www.realrussia.co.uk using this link. www.realrussia.co.uk can also arrange Chinese and Mongolian visas, and train tickets too. If you have feedback on their service, please email me..!
- **Should you try to avoid Belarus?** Some people get worked up about trying to avoid Belarus, and with the new much higher visa fees since June 2007 you might want to try. Just remember that if you pay the visa fee, you can travel quickly and simply from western Europe to Moscow on the direct trains through Belarus. Avoiding Belarus means an awkward and time-consuming relay race of trains and buses via the Baltic states, taking at least 48 hours longer, with two extra hotel nights. Going via Ukraine (Ukraine no longer requires EU citizens to buy a visa) will take at least an extra 24 hours, changing trains in Kiev. In other words, the detour might be interesting if you have the time and particularly want to see Ukraine or Lithuania/Latvia on the way, but it will take longer and in the end cost more than simply buying the visa and travelling direct.
- **Getting a Belarus transit visa in Moscow:** If you're travelling westbound and want to arrange a Belarus visa in Moscow, this is easy. The Belarus embassy is at **6 Armyanskiy pereulok 101000, Moscow**. You will need a photocopy of your passport and Russian visa, one passport photo, US\$45 for same day visa issue or US\$36 for next day visa issue. The visa office is open 10:00-12:00 Mon-Fri and you pick up your passport and transit visa between 16:00-16:30.

How to arrange a Mongolian visa...

- If you are taking the Trans-Mongolian route and you're a UK/EU citizen, you'll need a Mongolian transit visa (if crossing Mongolia non-stop) or tourist visa (if you intend stopping off).
- See www.embassyofmongolia.co.uk for information on how to obtain a Mongolian visa in the UK. US, Singaporean, Malaysian & some other nationalities do not now need a visa for Mongolia, so check on their website.
- As of October 2008 the Mongolian embassy in London no longer accepts visa applications by post, so either take your passport round to the embassy in person and collect it again some days later, or use a visa service agency such as www.realrussia.co.uk.

How to arrange a Chinese visa...

- You'll need a Chinese visa if you're visiting China.
- Chinese visa requirements were tightened in March 2008, in preparation for the Olympics, so make sure that any advice you get is up to date and don't rely on visa information in guidebooks written even just a year ago! However, in September

2008, it's reported the regulations may have been relaxed again.

- **Under the March 2008 changes, you need a confirmed ticket into & out of China.** The Chinese embassy website says that 'return air tickets must be shown' to qualify for a visa, but it is understood that confirmed train tickets into & out of China will do just as well, or rather (since the actual tickets usually have to be picked up in China or in Moscow or wherever) evidence of purchase through an agency. This is not 101% confirmed, so please double-check with the embassy, and any [feedback](#) would be appreciated! A one-way air ticket from Hong Kong back to Europe would count. In September 2008, it's reported that the requirement for a return ticket may have been removed again.
- **You also now need confirmed hotel bookings** (or, presumably, sleeper train reservations) for every night you plan to spend in China, although in August 2008 it's reported that for journeys after the Olympics the London embassy is accepting proof of accommodation for just the first few days of your trip, and is not requiring all nights to be pre-booked. Agencies like www.realrussia.co.uk may be able to offer advice and help you get a Chinese visa. In September 2008, it's reported this requirement may have been removed again.
- **No Chinese visas in Moscow:** The Chinese embassy in Moscow will now only issue Chinese visas to Russian nationals, so don't plan to get your Chinese visa there.
- **Reduced visa validity period:** Note that the validity window (the period for which a visa is valid when issued) has reduced to just a couple of months, so don't plan on months & months of travelling around before you reach China, as your visa will have expired by then!
- See www.chinese-embassy.org.uk about getting a Chinese visa in the UK.

Trans-Siberian travel tips...

When should you go?

The Trans-Siberian Railway runs all year round, so you can go at any time of year. May to September are the peak months for foreign tourists, with the warmest weather and the longest hours of daylight. This makes booking a specific date more difficult (you need to book well ahead) but you might like the party atmosphere amongst like-minded travellers on Moscow-Beijing trains 4 and 20. On the other hand, Siberia in winter is a sight to see - the trains are well heated, warm and cosy, you'll just need to wrap up well when you get off for a stroll at station stops!



Above: The Moscow-Irkutsk 'Baikal' in November. You can travel the Trans-Sib year-round. *Courtesy of [Sascha & Manuela Dubach](#)*

Should you travel 1st or 2nd class?

On the Russian internal trains there are normally 3 classes: 'spalny vagon' 2-berth compartments, often described as 1st class (and sometimes called 'myagky' or 'lyux'), 'kupé' 4-berth compartments, usually described as 2nd class, and 'platskartny' open-plan dormitory cars, sometimes described as 3rd class. The Russian Trans-Manchurian train (trains 19 & 20) only has spalny vagon 2-berth and kupé 4-berth, there's no platskartny. Kupé is the way most travellers go, and can be considered the normal class of travel. Spalny vagon gives you much more privacy, with 2 people instead of 4 in the same size compartment, but it costs twice as much. The choice is yours. Platskartny is a bit rough for most western travellers, but some budget-minded backpackers enjoy it. The Chinese Trans-Mongolian train (trains 3 & 4) has 1st class deluxe 2-berth, 1st class 4-berth and 2nd class 4-berth. 1st class deluxe 2-berth is expensive but worth the extra if you can afford it as it has two beds, an armchair, and a private washroom with showerhead shared with the next door compartment. It gets booked out very quickly..! However, 1st class 4-berth on train 3/4 is virtually identical to 2nd class 4-berth (see for yourself in the [photo gallery!](#)) and is probably not worth the extra.

What do you do on a train for six or seven days?

This is the question most people ask. Well, you put your feet up and relax. You read, watch the scenery, look out for the sights listed on your Trans-Siberian Handbook, go to meals in the restaurant car, sleep in your own comfortable bed at night, meet people, talk, play chess, drink tea, drink vodka, get off at station stops and take photographs.... The Moscow-Mongolia-Beijing route is arguably the most interesting because of both the people on board and the sights and scenery on the way. You are unlikely to be bored - the time just goes..!

- The [Trans-Siberian Handbook](#) has a kilometre-by-kilometre account of the sights to look out for from the train. Highly recommended, as this helps you get the most from your journey. You can tell where you are from the black and white kilometre posts all along the line, usually on the south side of the tracks.
- Take plenty of reading books - [Tolstoy's War and Peace](#) is the most predictable title, but it's a great read. The funny thing is, you probably won't finish it - there's so much else to do..!

Is not speaking Russian a problem?

№	Станция	Время	Путь
210	ЛАБЫТНАНГИ	19:20	2
318	АРХАНГЕЛЬСК	19:35	3
50	НИЖНИЙ ТАГИЛ	20:05	1
126	ЧЕРЕПОВЕЦ	21:05	4
2	ВЛАДИВОСТОК	21:25	

6	УЛАН-БАТОР	21:35	
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Above: Worried about finding your train if you don't speak Russian? Here's the departure board at Moscow Yaroslavl station. Learn the alphabet and you can read the destinations. You can clearly see that train 318 to Archangel leaving at 19:35 will depart from platform 3. The platforms for train 2 to Vladivostok (the 'Rossiya') departing 21:25 and train 6 to Ulan Bator departing 21:35 are not yet shown as they are not ready for boarding. [Learn the Russian alphabet here](#). Photo courtesy of Daniel Brewster.

No, it isn't. Very few western travellers on the Trans-Siberian Railway can speak Russian or for that matter, Chinese or Mongolian. However, even if you don't speak Russian, it is worth learning the Cyrillic (Russian) alphabet. You will then be able to read place names and understand many Russian words. For example, 'РЕСТОРАН' is pronounced 'restoran' and means (surprise surprise) 'restaurant'. 'АВТОБУС' is pronounced 'avtobus' and means 'bus'. You'll also realise that 'СССР', the old acronym for the Soviet Union, is not 'see see see see pee' but 'SSSR'. [You can learn the Cyrillic \(Russian\) alphabet here](#).

What about food?

All the main Trans-Siberian trains have a restaurant car, a Russian one when in Russia, a Mongolian one in Mongolia and a Chinese one in China. Few people go to Russia for the cuisine, but contrary to what you might have heard, Russian restaurant car food is quite edible and not expensive. Allow about US\$15-\$20 for a 2-course meal with a bottle of beer. Some Moscow-Beijing tickets include meals for the Russian part of the journey, so ask your booking agency if meals are included. Don't expect an extensive menu, typical meals include ham and fried eggs for breakfast, schnitzel and potatoes for lunch or dinner, with soups and salads for starters. The restaurant car also sells beer, Russian champagne and (of course) vodka, chocolate and snacks. The Mongolian diner will probably offer you rice and mutton. The Chinese dining car has a selection of excellent Chinese dishes. You can also buy food from the many vendors on station platforms when the train stops. Top tips:

- Unlimited boiling water is available free of charge from the samovar at the end of each coach, so remember to bring a mug, spoon, coffee and a selection of cuppa soups or even dried pasta.
- My personal favourite: water-based drinking chocolate for a relaxing night-time drink each evening...

What about security? Is it safe for families or women travelling alone?

The Trans-Siberian is a very safe way to travel, even for families and women travelling alone. After all, the train is full of Russian families and women travelling alone, it's how the Russians themselves get around..! Just use common sense as you would anywhere else, lock the compartment door at night and don't leave your wallet or camera lying unattended in your compartment while you go to the toilet or the restaurant car. In addition to the normal lock on the compartment door, Russian 'Spalny Wagon' and 'kupé' compartments have a security latch which stops the door opening more than an inch or two, and which cannot be released from outside even with a staff key. There's also a safe place for your bags at night - if you have a bottom bunk, there is a metal box underneath the bunk which you can only get to by lifting up the bunk. In other words, for anyone to get to your bags, they will have to shift you off your bunk first..! Your carriage attendants may also lock the access doors at each end of the corridor at night to prevent intruders. So don't worry, you'll be safe and snug. Men and women share the same compartments, but on some routes you can now ask for a ladies-only compartment. If you're a woman travelling alone and do happen to find yourself sharing with men who make you uncomfortable, ask the carriage attendants if they can move you to another compartment and they normally will, without too much problem.

Do the trains have electrical outlets?

Suddenly, no westerner can travel anywhere without a whole array of electrical gadgets, cameras, PDAs, iPods and mobile phones that need charging. All Russian, Mongolian & Chinese trains have shaver sockets in the corridor and washrooms which can be used to recharge things with the right adaptor, and the best trains have one or two similar sockets in the corridor that can be used to recharge things if you keep an eye on them. However, you're unlikely to find any specific powerpoints for charging laptops, mobile phones or digital cameras in your compartment. Your carriage attendant may be willing to charge items using the socket in their own compartment, for a small tip. **Top tip:** Take a [Power Monkey universal backup battery](#) with you, this gives up to 96 hours phone stand-by when your phone's battery dies, and can also be used for PDAs, iPods & some cameras. Highly recommended!

Toilets & showers...

Each sleeping-car has at least two western-style toilets and a washroom with sinks. The carriage attendants (provodniks) will keep the toilet clean during the journey. How clean depends on both the provodniks and the passengers in your car(!), but there's normally no problem, especially on high-quality 'firmeny' trains like the 'Rossiya' and 'Baikal', see the photo on the right. There are no showers on Trans-Siberian trains, with two exceptions: On the Trans-Mongolian Moscow-Beijing train (train 3/4), there's a shower hose in the small washroom shared between each adjacent pair of deluxe 1st class 2-berth compartments. On the Moscow-Irkutsk 'Baikal' (train 9/10), there's a shower that you have to pay for in car 7. There may now be a similar shower on the Moscow-Vladivostok 'Rossiya' (train 1/2). Remember that the need to take a shower every single day is a relatively recent western social trend, not a human necessity. Remember that not so many generations ago, Sunday night was bath night, whether you needed it or not..! Just lock yourself into the washroom half way across and make good use of the sink and a cup of water.



Above: Just to reassure you! This is a clean & modern toilet in a 1st class 2-berth car on the 'Baikal' from Moscow to Irkutsk. *Courtesy of [Sascha & Manuela Dubach](#)*



Above: A washroom on the 'Baikal'. *Courtesy of [Sascha & Manuela Dubach](#)*

Smoking...

If you're a rabid anti-smoker, don't worry. There isn't a problem in the compartments, corridor or restaurants. But if you're a smoker, don't worry either. You can grab a smoke in the vestibules between the cars.

Do Trans-Siberian trains run on time?

Within Russia, the trains are remarkably punctual. My train from Moscow arrived in

Vladivostok two minutes ahead of schedule. However, on international trains you should expect an hour or two delay when crossing frontiers. For example, on the Trans-Mongolian route it is not unusual to arrive in Ulan Bator perhaps 1 or 2 hours late and in Beijing 2 to 5 hours late. Allow for this when planning any connections.

Can you stop off on the way?

All Trans-Siberian trains stop at stations every few hours for between 5 and 20 minutes, enough time to get off the train, stretch your legs, take photos and buy something from the vendors on the platform. But not enough time for a tour of the town..!

Many people travel all the way from Moscow to Beijing or Vladivostok all in one go on one of the direct trains. Other people prefer to stop off along the way, breaking up the long journey and seeing something of Siberia or Mongolia. Ekaterinberg, Irkutsk (for Lake Baikal) and Ulan Bator (Mongolia) are the most usual stop-overs.

On the direct Moscow-Beijing trains, the varied scenery and friendly atmosphere on board make travelling straight through without stopovers perfectly bearable and indeed, fun. There are usually lots of westerners on board as well as Russians, Chinese and Mongolians, almost all of them making the whole trip, like yourself. However, on a Moscow-Vladivostok train, you might be the only westerner on board for much of the journey, the whole trip is made within Russia, and relatively few of your fellow-travellers will be making the whole journey to Vladivostok. It may be better to break up this trip with one or two stopovers, perhaps at Ekaterinberg or Irkutsk.

Remember that Trans-Siberian trains are 'reservation obligatory'. Every time you step on board a train you must have a confirmed sleeping-berth reservation for that specific journey on that specific train on that specific date - you **cannot** hop on and off trains spontaneously without a reservation. So if you want to travel from, say, Moscow to Beijing stopping off at Irkutsk you need a ticket/reservation from Moscow to Irkutsk and a second separate ticket/reservation for the train you want to take from Irkutsk to Beijing. Think of these as two separate journeys, not one. You can arrange all the tickets and reservations before you go.

If you are stopping off, remember that the weekly direct international trains 4 and 20 from Moscow to Beijing can only be used by passengers making the complete international journey from Moscow through to Mongolia or China, you cannot use them for domestic trips within Russia, although train 4 does carry passengers between Ulan Bator and Beijing, and allows passengers for Beijing to join at places like Irkutsk. In practice, a typical trip from Moscow to Beijing with stop-overs at Irkutsk and Ulan Bator can be made using the 'Baikal' or 'Rossiya' from Moscow to Irkutsk, the daily hard-class-only train from Irkutsk to Ulan Bator and the weekly Ulan Bator-Beijing train, see the [Trans-Siberian timetable page](#) for train times.

In theory, the Russian railways have a system whereby if you hold a ticket/reservation from A to C, and get off the train at B, you can get the ticket endorsed by the station manager, then make a second reservation and pay a small reservation charge when you want to resume your journey. However, this does not work with international tickets. The Russians themselves don't often use this facility, so Russian railway staff may not be familiar with it. I recommend buying separate tickets/reservations for each leg of your journey before you go, but if you want to try this, you had better practice your Russian language skills..!

Taking your bike, car or motorcycle...

Believe it or not, this gets asked from time to time. Trans-Siberian passenger trains do not carry cars or motorbikes, full stop. However, you can take bicycles with you, zipped up in a bike bag with pedals removed and the handlebars turned, free of charge as hand luggage. Bear in mind that it will take up space in your sleeping compartment, so it may be less anti-social to book a berth in a more spacious 2-berth compartment than to inflict your bike on three fellow travellers in a 4-berth compartment.

Is this the longest train ride in the world? No. Well... Sort of...

You'll sometimes hear Moscow-Vladivostok in 7 days on the 'Rossiya' referred to as the longest train ride of them all. It isn't. Nor is Moscow-Vladivostok in 9 days on the daily lower-quality slow train 904 (not a train normally used by foreigners, or one you want to get on by mistake...). Once a week the Rossiya conveys a through sleeper from Moscow to Pyongyang in North Korea. This is detached at Ussuryisk just an hour or so before Vladivostok, then it heads south all the way into Korea, making this a longer continuous train ride than Moscow-Vladivostok. But this isn't the longest train ride either. There is a through train from Donetsk and Kharkov in Ukraine to Vladivostok, and this appears to be the longest scheduled continuous train ride of them all. Unless you know differently, of course..!

Moscow - Beijing via Mongolia :

Train 4 to Beijing was surprisingly modern, clean and comfortable. There were at least 50 westerners aboard, with a pleasant party atmosphere all the way. There were plenty of Chinese, Russians and Poles to meet, too. For the first 3 days, the train travels across the vastness of Siberia, passing from Europe to Asia 1,777km east of Moscow. On day 4, the train rounds Lake Baikal, the deepest fresh water lake in the world, with excellent views of the lake. In Summer, the countryside appears green and pleasant, though in some parts the permafrost lies only inches below the surface. It can be quite humid, although train 4 is not air-conditioned. On day 5, after passing through Mongolian customs late at night, you wake up to a complete change of scenery: Grassy steppe, covered in dew, giving way South of Ulan Bator (Mongolia's capital) to the open wastes of the Gobi Desert. Look out for camels and 'yurts' - the circular tents used by Mongolian nomads.

Reaching the Chinese frontier at midnight to the sound of triumphant martial music played at full volume over the station loudspeakers, the train is taken away and jacked up to have its bogies changed from Russian 5' gauge to standard (4'8½") gauge. You can remain on board or wander round the station while this is being done. The next and last day, the train crosses the mountains north of Beijing, and at the time I travelled it passed through the Great Wall of China at Qinglongqiao (the train now takes a slightly different route). Arrival at Beijing's main station, due at 15:33 on day 6, was four hours late.

A Russian restaurant car is attached to the train for the first four days, a Mongolian restaurant car is available for day 5, and an excellent Chinese restaurant car is available on day 6.

For more photos of this train, see the [Trans-Siberian picture gallery](#)



Above: Train No. 4, the weekly Chinese train from Moscow to Beijing, heads South across Mongolia.



Above: Train No.4 Moscow-Peking.



Above: A 1st class 4-berth compartment. 2nd class 4-berth is almost identical.

Moscow - Vladivostok on the 'Rossiya'

A journey on the 'Rossiya' was a completely different experience. Travelling to Japan via Vladivostok, my 1st class 2-berth car was comfortable, spotlessly clean and even air-

conditioned (the restaurant was also a/c, but the adjacent 2nd class 4-berth cars weren't). Meals in the restaurant cost around US\$5. I was the only Westerner on the train until Irkutsk, where I was joined by two professors from Alabama. And unlike the Moscow-Peking train, where almost everyone is making the complete journey, the Rossiya is used for all sorts of intermediate journeys, with Russians getting on and off at every station. The carriages were replaced in the early 2000s, [click here for a virtual tour on the Russian Railways website](#).



Above: A cosy 1st class 2-berth (spalny wagon) compartment on the 'Rossiya' (pre-refurbishment). Both beds are on the lower level. 4-berth rooms ('kupe') are almost identical but have upper as well as lower berths. Newer cars were introduced on the Rossiya in the early 2000s, see the photos higher up this page.

The train stops several times a day, usually only for 10-20 minutes, but you can stretch your legs and take photographs.



Above: Almost the longest train ride of them all... The 'Rossiya' from Moscow to Vladivostok (pre-refurbishment).



Above: Approaching Ekaterinberg (known as Sverdlovsk during the Soviet era) at the kilometre post exactly 1,777km from Moscow, the Rossiya passes the obelisk marking the boundary between Europe and Asia.

Arrival in Vladivostok was two minutes ahead of schedule, seven days after leaving Moscow. The ocean terminal is adjacent to the station, but you may need to spend a night in Vladivostok to be sure of a safe connection. Vladivostok is an interesting city, and a day or two spent there will not be wasted.

Overall, the Moscow-Vladivostok route is 7 days of Siberia on a train with few fellow westerners and indeed few Russians making the whole trip. This makes for a much less interesting journey than the Moscow-Beijing train, and one that it would be good to break up with stopovers rather than make in one go.

The Far-East Shipping Company provides a twice-weekly sailing from Vladivostok to Fushiki in Japan, year-round. In the past, ships have occasionally sailed to Niigata which has a Japan Rail Pass exchange office and a Shinkansen 'bullet train' to Tokyo taking just two hours. However, all sailings are now to Fushiki, which can be difficult to find on a map. Fushiki has a branch line rail service to a secondary mainline which reaches Tokyo a long way round. There is no Japan Rail Pass exchange office at Fushiki. So why do FESCO go there? Easy - it's the used car capital of Japan, and FESCO make more money shipping used cars to Russia than they do from carrying passengers..!



Above: The ferry 'Rus' from Vladivostok to Fushiki in Japan. *Photo courtesy of Paul Markham*



Above: A 4-berth cabin aboard the 'Rus'. *Photos courtesy of Paul Markham*

To see more photos of what Trans-Siberian train travel is like, see the [Trans-Siberian picture gallery](#)

Trans-Siberian web resources...

www.transsib.ru/Eng/ - the Trans-Siberian web encyclopaedia.

www.trans-siberia.com - an independent site, based on a traveller's experiences.

<http://members.aol.com/imershein/Page9.html> - excellent advice from Ruth Imershein, an experienced and regular traveller to Russia.

<http://members.aol.com/h2oskineil/travel/page1.htm> - a personal account.

<http://members.aol.com/transsib/index.html> - a personal account.

Across Siberia by luxury charter train...

If money isn't a problem, you can now travel on the Trans-Siberian Railway on a luxury private train. UK-based company [Great Rail Journeys](#) offers 5-star escorted tours, leaving London overland by Eurostar via Brussels, Cologne & Warsaw to Moscow using scheduled trains, then across Siberia on a deluxe charter train to Vladivostok with private en suite sleepers, lounge and restaurant with stops and tours along the way at places like Irkutsk, Lake Baikal, Ulan Ude and even Ulan Bator in Mongolia. Expect it to cost over £6,500, though this does include all transport, accommodation, meals and even wine in the restaurant car. [Great Rail Journeys](#) also offer rail-based holidays to other countries in Europe and worldwide. Check the holiday details online, then call **0845 402 2068** to book or use their [online booking form](#). Seat61 gets some commission to help support the site if you book your holiday through this link and phone number, please mention seat 61 when booking.



The Thomas Cook Timetables...

The **Thomas Cook Overseas Timetable** is probably the most adventurous timetable ever published... It has train, bus and ferry times for every country in Asia, Africa, America and Australasia. It includes a complete timetable of all the trains on the Trans-Siberian Railway and other main lines in non-European Russia, China and Mongolia. It also contains useful climate, currency and visa information. Highly recommended.



The **Thomas Cook European Timetable** has train, bus and ferry times for every country in Europe, including European Russia.

These timetables are essential for any serious traveller, and an inspiration for armchair travellers... Each timetable costs £13.99 from any branch of Thomas Cook, or you can buy online at www.thomascooktimetables.com. Alternatively, you can [buy the twice-yearly Independent Traveller's edition of either of these timetables at Amazon.co.uk](#) also with shipping worldwide.

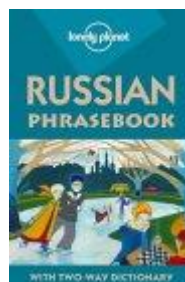
Recommended guidebooks...

Bryn Thomas' excellent Trans-Siberian Handbook has journey planning information, town guides, train information, the history of the line, and most importantly, a mile-by-mile guide to the sights you can see from the train, to help you get the most from your trip. The Lonely Planet guide to the Trans-Siberian Railway is also highly recommended. Buying one or both of these Trans-Siberian guidebooks is well worth it, both for planning your trip and on the go.

Or you can buy the LP guide direct from the [Lonely Planet website](#), with shipping worldwide.

You should also take a good general guidebook for the countries you are visiting, and perhaps a Russian phrasebook, too. I think the Lonely Planets and Rough Guides are about the best ones out there for the serious independent traveller, with plenty of historical and cultural background as well as stacks of practical information on accommodation, places to eat, things to see, visas, transport, dangers and annoyances. You won't regret buying any of these..! If you buy anything at Amazon through these links, Seat61 gets a small commission which helps support the site.

Also consider these guidebooks (click the images to buy online)



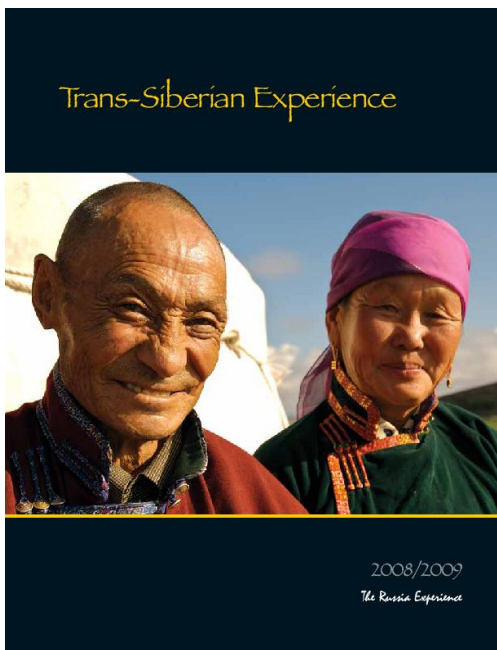
Book a hotel in Moscow, Siberian cities or Beijing...

A guidebook like the Lonely Planet or Rough Guides will point you at some good hotels in each town or city when you get there, or you can pre-book hotels in Moscow, Beijing or almost any Russian or Chinese city through www.hotelscombined.com, just use the search box below. This is a free search tool which checks all the main hotel booking sites (AsiaRooms, Opodo, Expedia, Travelocity, Late Rooms and many others) to find probably the widest range of hotels and the rates on the net. Remember that once you've booked a hotel in China, they may be able to book domestic Chinese trains for you departing from that city, for a modest fee.

So there we have it all the information you should need to make up your mind. As I said before its obviously a lot cheaper to book this all yourself but here are some really good company's that can put a good package together that can extend the trip to 19 to 22 days instead of the 6 or 7 days that the journey would take without stops. I have included a typical brochure below and a sample trip below for everybody to look at.

Let me know whwt you think see you on the forum

Dave P.



Click on the PDF above to open the brochure



Experience Super Trans-Sib

Along the way
Beijing
Ulaanbaatar
Irkutsk
Ekaterinburg
Moscow

Leaving from Beijing to Moscow

As a contrast to some of our trips about the culture, history and traditions of the destinations, this trip is more adventure driven and packed with outdoor activity! It even operates year round, including husky dog sledding in the Urals Mountains. There's hiking at Lake Baikal in summer or snowmobiles in winter. A little shot of vodka afterwards will warm you up!



What's included

FULL ON

Train

- > 4-berth rail for complete Journey (pre-assigned berths)
- > option to upgrade to 2-berth

Beijing

- > 1 night 3★ hotel

Ulaanbaatar

- > all transportation
- > 2 nights Elstel Ger Lodge all meals
- > 1 night 4★ hotel, breakfast
- > City tour of Ulaanbaatar

Irkutsk

Choice of programmes either Siberian Village or Fishermen's Cape of Baikal.

Siberian Village

- > all transportation
- > 2 nights home-stay Listvyanka Village all meals
- > excursion option

Fishermen's Cape of Lake Baikal

- > all transportation
- > 2 nights home-stay Bolshoe Goloustnoe all meals

Ekaterinburg

- > transfer on arrival to your hotel
- > 2 nights 3★ hotel, breakfast
- > walking tour with local expert
- > day trip option
- > transfer to the station on departure

Moscow

- > transfer on arrival to your hotel
- > 2 nights 3★ hotel, breakfast
- > 3 hour personalised walking tour with local expert

NO FRILLS

Train

- > 4-berth rail for complete Journey (pre-assigned berths)
- > option to upgrade to 2-berth

Beijing

- > 1 night 1★ hotel

Ulaanbaatar – (city based stay)

- > transfer on arrival to your hotel
- > 3 nights 1★ hotel, breakfast
- > transfer to the station on departure

Irkutsk (city based stay)

- > transfer on arrival
- > 3 night home-stay Irkutsk City, breakfast
- > transfer to the station on departure

Ekaterinburg

- > transfer on arrival to your hotel
- > 2 nights 1★ hotel, breakfast
- > transfer to the station on departure

Moscow

- > transfer on arrival to your hotel
- > 2 nights 1★ hotel, breakfast