Mongolia to Moscow by Private Train

By Chet Benson, client
Photos courtesy of Chet Benson

Even for experienced train enthusiasts, it’s the ride of a lifetime. You don’t know what “transcontinental” means until you’ve spent a week or so on the Trans-Siberian Railroad.

Rather than the traditional Trans-Siberian route from Vladivostok to Moscow, try something more exotic, like a private train tour beginning in Ulaan Baatar, Mongolia. We booked through Pam Davis at Willamette International Travel in Portland. The tour operator is the Trans-Siberian Express Co., located in England; its U.S. agent is Seattle-based Mir Corp.

You arrive in Ulaan Baatar in time for the annual Naadam Festival, known as the “nomad olympics.” A better description for Northwesterners might be "Mongolia's Pendelton Round-Up.” Half of Mongolia’s population is rural – the country has the lowest population density in the world – and Mongolian nomads prize many of the same skills as our cowboys.

The festival’s opening ceremony is both fascinating and jarring. Western influence is starting to outweigh the eastern in Mongolia, and it shows in the entertainment. People parade around the arena in traditional costumes – advertising local products. Mongolian folk dance and music are followed by simultaneous ballroom and hip-hop dance performances.

The greatest hero of Mongolian history is Chinggiss Khaan, whom we know as Genghis Khan. You can’t escape his presence in Mongolia: his name appears on hotels and restaurants, in songs and even the name of the country’s top rock band, which also performs at the opening ceremony.

The surprises continue that afternoon with the first big sporting event: horse racing. This is not your typical American race; instead, it’s a nearly 20-mile course across the Gobi Desert on a hot July day. The riders drive their horses hard; sometimes horses die, and sometimes a rider is thrown.

And the riders are all children. Officially no one younger than 7 is allowed in the race, but parents often lie and no one checks too closely. Many riders were as young as 4 or 5.

Other sports in the Naadam Festival include archery and ankle-shooting. This is a kind of Mongolian tiddly-winks, in which players flick bits of a sheep’s ankle bone at a target. It’s more exciting than it sounds, with competitors and spectators...
chanting and cheering.

The other big event is wrestling. More than 500 wrestlers start out all at once, pairing off and fighting until one is thrown to the ground and declared out and the other continues to the next round. The championship bout is shown live on national TV at the end of the three-day festival. The tour guide says the winner gets $1,000, a horse, free beer and free meat for a year.

Ulaan Baatar has much more to offer besides Naadam. There are fine museums of both national and natural history, the latter containing fantastic dinosaur skeletons. The countryside is starkly beautiful, desert covered with thin grass. On the final afternoon there's a bus trip to Terelj National Park, still desert but more mountainous, like parts of eastern and central Oregon.

You board the train at the end of the fourth day. It is very pleasant and well-equipped, standard Russian equipment but upgraded. The “first-class” rooms are a little cramped – you might have to store a suitcase at the end of the car – but satisfactory. Bathrooms are at each end of the car, one with a chemical toilet to use when the train is stopped in a station. (Most Russian train restrooms are the old-fashioned kind.) There are shower cars, two dining cars and a bar car. All meals, soft drinks, beer and wine are included – as is vodka!

Deluxe rooms are also available, more spacious and with private baths, at about twice the cost.

The staff is friendly, the guides all speaking excellent English, the tour’s official language. Each car also has attendants, but they generally speak little or no English. With some effort you can manage, however, and it doesn’t hurt to learn a bit of Russian. It turns out to word for water is voda – and vodka means little water.

Usually in a pinch a guide can be found nearby to translate.

The train reaches the Russian border the next morning. Border formalities take hours, but are not as stringent as they used to be. You still need a visa to enter Russia, but you no longer have to worry about declaring every penny of foreign currency you are carrying.

For much of the day the train remains close to the desert, but gradually the land becomes greener, and when it joins the main Trans-Siberian line that evening, you are well into Siberia. And that’s when you get another surprise. You expect Siberia to look like America’s Great Plains: rolling grass fields, brown in the summer sun. But it actually looks a lot like…Oregon. For the next week you ride through lush, fertile river valleys, separated by low ranges of evergreen-covered hills. It’s like traveling through an endless series of Willamette Valleys.

Russia is a land of extremes, and the Russians never let you forget it. Everything is the first, the biggest, the oldest. Seeing those rich green valleys makes you wonder why Siberia has not been developed more, and why Russia has had so much trouble feeding its people. But remember that along with past government mismanagement, Siberia also suffers much of the year from one of the worst climates on earth. Summer is sunny and warm, but the temperature in winter regularly hits 40 below.
The trip offers some other extremes too. The railroad itself was one of the great engineering feats of 100 years ago. Lake Baikal, where you spend a day, is the world’s largest and deepest lake, containing about 20 percent of the planet’s fresh water. And in Ulan Ude you get to see the world’s largest head of Lenin – a shocking, silly sight, over 20 feet tall, sitting alone without a body in the town center.

Ulan Ude is a memorable tour stop for a visit to an Old Believers village. Their ancestors were exiled from European Russia centuries ago because of disagreements with the Orthodox Church. As remote as their homes now are, they are a happy, friendly people – as indeed is almost everyone you meet. The Russian economy is still having problems converting to capitalism, but throughout the journey you see few signs of extreme poverty, and plenty to suggest that people in general are doing just fine. There are cars on the streets; people are employed and appear well fed.

The Old Believers dress in colorful traditional costumes for tourists, but laughingly admit that they usually wear ordinary clothes, have TVs and other modern conveniences, and even use the Internet.

After Ulan Ude comes Lake Baikal. It is vast and beautiful, surrounded by mountains. It’s large enough to have its own ecosystem, including the only species of freshwater seal, and the area is coming back from decades of pollution under the Communists. It is now becoming a tourist area.

A highlight of the area around Baikal’s southern edge is the Museum of Wooden Architecture. Wood is one of the best building materials for Siberia’s brutal climate, and there’s plenty of raw material there to work with. Siberians are masters at building structures that are both sturdy and ornately carved. The outdoor museum contains dozens of full-size reproductions of noteworthy, historical buildings from all over Siberia.

Other tour highlights include Irkutsk, Novosibirsk, Yekaterinburg and Kazan.

Irkutsk is the gateway to Lake Baikal, and has historical significance as the home of the Decembrists, 19th-century nobles sent into exile for their efforts to bring reform Tsarist Russia. There is a stop at a leading Decembrist’s home, now a museum.

Novosibirsk is Russia’s third-largest city, after Moscow and St. Petersburg. Signs that you’re getting closer to Europe start appearing: more cars, more prosperity, more advertising. Yet there’s still a long way to go. There is a chapel in the middle of the main street marking the exact geographic center, when going east to west, of the Russian empire at its peak. Novosibirsk also has an enormous grand opera house, another example of Russian extremes.

Yekaterinburg is known mostly as the place where Tsar Nicholas II and his family were murdered in 1918. A cathedral stands on the execution site. Like many Russian churches it looks very new and rather ugly. The icons inside, a centerpiece of
Russian Orthodoxy, seem garish. Russia’s surviving older churches have a patina of age that lends them a dignity and beauty missing from the newer ones.

Yekaterinburg’s other highlights are on a highway outside town. A monument marks the “official” dividing line between Europe and Asia. Whether it’s a line of longitude, a watershed or some feature of the Ural Mountains is unclear; it may just be a tourist trap, but it’s still fun. Down the road is a more solemn place: a memorial on the site of a gulag, one of Stalin’s prison camps, where tens of thousands of Russians died between the 1930s and 1950s. The memorial is a simple park, with names of the dead carved into walls. It was a haunting place to visit, a reminder that Russia is facing up to the grim chapters in its past even as it faces a happier future.

Kazan is the last stop before Moscow. It’s a university town, and the leading student there was none other than Lenin. (Communism may be gone from Russia, but Lenin remains a national hero, with statues, streets and buildings still honoring him in most cities.) A statue of a young Lenin stands before the university, one of the few to show the future Soviet leader with a full head of hair. It’s become a local joke for its startling resemblance to Leonardo DiCaprio!

Kazan also has what is said to be the largest mosque in Europe, and the city stands on the banks of the Volga, part of a vast network of rivers and canals across western Russia. You can now travel by boat all the way from St. Petersburg to the Black Sea. We’re thinking about giving it a try.

Finally, eight days after leaving Ulaan Baatar you arrive in Moscow. Here the benefit of traveling with a private tour group really pays off, with a fine hotel adjacent to Red Square and unusual access into St. Basil’s Cathedral and the Armoury Museum at the Kremlin, home of the legendary Faberge Eggs.

The entire trip, from arrival in Mongolia to departure from Moscow, lasts two weeks. Willamette Travel and the Mir agency will help you add extra days in Moscow, and additional visits to places like Beijing or St. Petersburg, as we did. You can also travel in the other direction, arriving in Mongolia in time for the Naadam Festival.

One complaint about the tour is that the food could sometimes be more interesting. It’s billed as authentic local fare, but it sometimes suffers from being prepared for 100 people at once. Like banquet food, it is often bland.

However, this is just a quibble. The overall impression of the Trans-Siberian tour is that it offers a first-rate travel experience, combining excellent amenities with outstanding sightseeing and educational opportunities.