Krasnoyarsk to Lake Baikal

At just over a thousand kilometres, this stretch of the Trans-Siberian is no more than an overnight hop, but at both ends of the route you’ll discover exciting reasons to get off the rails and explore. Krasnoyarsk is one of Siberia’s most forward-looking cities and also the best place to jump aboard trains bound for the BAM (Baikal-Amur Mainline; Baikalo-Amurskaya Magistral), which skirts the north of Lake Baikal and continues to places of breathtaking remoteness. Trains from here also run south to little-visited Khakassia, from where it’s possible to carry on by bus to Tuva for throat singing and encounters with real-life shamans. Cruise ships are carried towards the Arctic Circle by the powerful Yenisey River, though foreigners must disembark at Igarka. The Stolby Nature Reserve, Divnogorsk dam and one of Siberia’s newest ski resorts provide ample entertainment in Krasnoyarsk till it’s time to move on.

If choosing one place to detrain en route from Moscow to Bêijing or Ulaanbaatar, make it Irkutsk, the de facto capital of eastern Siberia and the most engaging city in the region by far. It’s also the best base from which to plot further travels around what is for most the highlight of any Trans-Siberian journey: magnificent Baikal, the world’s deepest lake. Most head straight for touristy Listvyanka, 70km away, but Olkhon Island and several timeless fishing villages along the Great Baikal Trail offer tranquil retreats.

Back on the train, the Trans-Sib tracks pass right along the shore of the lake affording superb views, especially between Slyudyanka and Baikalsk. Lakeside Slyudyanka makes a feasible hop-off point as it’s the terminus for the Circumbaikal Railway, as well as a hub for transport along the Tunka Valley to the Buddhist spa town of Arshan. To visit eastern Baikal, continue to Ulan-Ude.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Dance with the shamans on mysterious Olkhon Island (p223), steeped in myths and legends
- Branch off the Trans-Sib onto the slow but scenic Circumbaikal Railway (p226)
- Take a trek into the weird and wonderful rock formations at Stolby Nature Reserve (p207), near Krasnoyarsk
- Pull on your hiking boots and strike out along the Great Baikal Trail (p224)
- Cross ice-covered Lake Baikal (p219) on two wheels or four, on foot or by dog sled

ROUTE DISTANCE: 1088KM
DURATION: 41½ TO 44 HOURS
THE ROUTE
Krasnoyarsk to Tayshet

Heading east out of Krasnoyarsk (4098km), your fellow travellers will not have even fathomed there’s a foreigner in their midst before the train crosses the 1km-long Yenisey River bridge, whose 1898 original won a gold medal at the 1900 Paris Expo (along with the Eiffel Tower).

The Rossiya makes short stops at Zaozernaya (4265km), from where a line runs north to the off-limits space centre of Krasnoyarsk-45, and at Kansk-Yeniseysky (for Kansk; 4344km). Historic Kansk, founded in 1636, boasts a scattering of century-old buildings, a freshly renovated Trinity Cathedral whose spire can be seen for miles around, an impressive bronze war memorial and an illuminated victory arch. With ample time, this is possibly the only community on this entire stretch worth getting off to see (just).

Ilanskaya (Ilansky; 4377km) has a small museum (h 10am-5pm Mon-Fri) in the 100-year-old, red-brick locomotive depot at the western end of the station, and an old locomotive and water tower behind the wooden station building. The provodnitsa (carriage attendant) allows passengers to roam for 20 minutes here, but will not rescue you from the police if you’re arrested for taking photographs of the station (still considered espionage in Russia).

At 4474km, the train passes into Irkutsk Oblast (region); local time becomes Moscow time plus five hours.

Tayshet to Slyudyanka

If riding straight through from Moscow, you’re now on day three but only halfway to the Pacific. As the railway skirts the foothills of the Sayan Mountains, endless taiga forests and a real sense of wilderness set in. However, at around 4560km the line rises above the taiga and sweeps around bends for many kilometres offering good photo opportunities.

There’s a 12-minute stop at mildly historical Nizhneudinsk (4678km), but as this comes after 10pm on the Rossiya, few are distracted from their vodka and bedtime instant noodles. Cossacks first built a small fortress here in 1649 and for over two centuries the town served as an important centre for gold and fur traders. The St Nicolas Church and the regional museum (ul Lenina 27; h 8am-5pm) entice few off the rails, but an 18km hike along the Uda River to the 20m-high Ukovsky waterfalls could make for an adventurous side trip. Further east the landscape flattens out and the forests have been extensively logged. The next stop is Tulun (4795km), where you’ll have just two minutes to contemplate the merits of the architecturally confident station building. From here a road heads 225km north to Bratsk (p261) on the BAM.

There’s an overgenerous 30-minute break in proceedings at the former exile town of Zima (4934km), which translates ominously as ‘winter’. More translation is required at Polovina (5087km; no stop for the Rossiya), whose name means roughly ‘halfway’ (between Moscow and Vladivostok), which it was in the early 20th century before the line was rerouted in many places. From here the train heads southeast and is joined by the Angara River around Usole-Sibirskoe (5118km), where a shuddering stop may jolt you from your slumber but hopefully not from your bunk altogether. The town supplies much of Russia’s salt and many of its matches. By the time you reach oil-rich Angarsk (5145km), where there’s a clock museum and a couple of good restaurants if you really want to get off, it’s probably time to start collecting your belongings scattered around the compartment if you’re alighting at Irkutsk.

Around the 5171km marker, look north through the trees; 50m beyond the tracks behind two barbed wire fences are neat rows of decommissioned old tanks and rocket-launcher trucks (without rockets) rusting away thinking of their Cold War heyday. The train crosses the Irkut River 3km before Irkutsk (5185km; p211) station. Once nicknamed the ‘Paris of Siberia’, Irkutsk is the most popular Siberian stop for most transcontinental travellers, notably as a launching point to reach Lake Baikal, 70km further southeast.

Moving on from Irkutsk, the line takes a sharp right where the tracks once continued along the Angara River to Port Baikal, a