

Lake Baikal to Vladivostok

Lake Baikal feels far from Moscow, but – before you rush south to Mongolia – there’s still a lot of Russia to go. This three-day stretch covers another 4000km – that’s nearly double the Moscow–Irkutsk journey – passing taiga, riverways and mountains (and three train links to the northerly BAM line) as it rolls into Russia’s ‘wild east’, where Cossacks hunted furs (and people) and Soviet-era, Gulag-bound prisoners packed Tsar-built train carriages to Vladivostok.

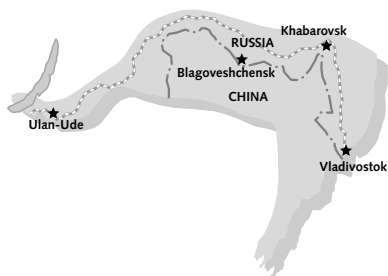
This region of Russia has always lived by its own rules. Travelling this way before the Trans-Siberian was built, writer Anton Chekhov confessed he was ‘in love’ with it; he wrote to Moscow friends in 1890 that it ‘seethes with life in a way that you can have no conception of in Europe’. And that’s still apt. In this part of Russia, the Buryat Mongol group numbers nearly half a million, lending their names to towns such as Ulan-Ude and yurt camp sites in national parks, and contributing delicacies such as lamb testicles to local menus.

Out the window, the stream of Stalin-era housing blocks of passing towns may seem the same as back west, but off the tracks come surprises. Just off the Trans-Siberian line, Blagoveshchensk is a border town of tsar-era buildings, where you can cannonball into the Amur River and hear Chinese locals splash from the opposite shore. Just east you reach the Jewish Autonomous Region at Birobidzhan, Stalin’s failed ‘Zion’ that once received thousands of migrating Jews.

The railway ends at the stunning mountains-meets-ocean setting of Vladivostok, a once-closed navy port that’s no longer a dead end. It looks fully Russian, but is finally embracing its Far Eastern locale, with a flurry of new international connections – flights and boats to Korea and Japan, and train and bus connections with Hãerbin (Harbin), China.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Explore Lake Baikal’s eastern shores from the appealing Buryat town of **Ulan-Ude** (p234), with totems and a locomotive museum
- Sleep in a Buryat yurt at **Alkhanay National Park** (p243), three hours from the Chita station
- Do a self-made cruise through Vladivostok’s Golden Horn Bay by hopping on the cheap **Rusky Island ferry** (p251)
- Give yourself a day off the train in **Khabarovsk** (p245), a lively and confident town with Tsar-era buildings and party cruises on the Amur River
- Listen for Chinese boat calls at the river border town of **Blagoveshchensk** (p243), with swimming spots and century-old homes



■ ROUTE DISTANCE: 4104KM

■ DURATION: THREE DAYS

THE ROUTE

Slyudyanka to Ulan-Ude

From **Slyudyanka** (5311km; p225) the line runs along the southern shore of Lake Baikal for 200km (5300km to 5500km), passing through a series of tunnels blasted into the cliffs along the water's edge. Many passengers press their noses to the grubby windows trying to get a view of the icy blue waters of the world's deepest lake. The best vistas come immediately after **Slyudyanka**, before reaching **Baikalsk** (5352km), where the air is soured by a huge, controversial pulp mill, but where, nonetheless, former President Putin enjoyed a skiing holiday in 2002.

Around 5390km, just before the village of **Vydrino**, the train crosses the river marking the border of Buryatiya (Buryat Republic), one of the Russian Federation's semiautonomous republics. Closely related to the Mongols, the Buryats have been undergoing something of a Buddhist revival but have largely given up their former nomadic herding lifestyles.

The town of **Tankhoi** (5420km) lies in the centre of the Baikal Nature Reserve. Further east along the shore, **Mysovaya** (5477km; for Babushkin) is the port where the Baikal and Angara used to load and discharge their passengers and carriages before the south-bank railway was completed. The obelisk at **Mysovaya zheleznodorozhny vokzal** (train station) marks the spot where in 1906 tsarist forces shot revolutionary Ivan Babushkin, after whom the surrounding town is named.

Directly below the present line you can clearly make out sections of older tracks. These were half-drowned after the construction of the Angara Dam near Irkutsk raised the level of Lake Baikal.

If you are travelling west, keep a lookout for the lake from around 5507km, when the train suddenly pulls out from between the forested hillsides and reveals a glorious view of Baikal's clear blue waters and the cliffs on the other side.

Just before reaching **Selenga station** (for the town of Selenginsk; 5562km), the train line hooks up with the Selenga River, your travelling companion into Mongolia if you are Ulaanbaatar-bound. Between here and Ulan-Ude, the river valley provides ample photo opportunities, such as at 5630km, when the train rattles across the river.

Trains pull in for at least 15 minutes at **Ulan-Ude** (5640km; p234), the capital of Buryatiya. Sadly, that's not long enough to dash to the centre of this relatively exotic city to see the world's biggest Lenin head. The old steam locomotive that sits in front of the depot at the northwestern end of the platform will be the extent of your sightseeing if you're not stopping here.

Ulan-Ude to Chita

Trans-Mongolian trains (p275) say farewell to the main Trans-Sib route at **Zaudinsky** (5655km), virtually a suburb of Ulan-Ude. The mainline then follows the wide Uda Valley. At an unmarked station about half an hour out of Ulan-Ude (before **Onokhoi**), a marshalling yard serves as a steam loco graveyard. The scenery here is pretty as the wide, flood-prone valleys continue, their rolling meadows backed distantly by trees on the north-facing slopes. Quaint log-cabin settlements are scattered with patches of attractive woodland. You enter **Chitinskaya region** (5771km) 20km beyond **Novoilynsky**. Local time becomes Moscow time plus six hours.

The *provodnitsa* (carriage attendant) unbolts the carriage door for up to 15 minutes at **Petrovsky-Zavod** (5784km), the station for the town of Petrovsk-Zabaikalsky. The station name (and the old name of the town) means 'Peter's Factory', so-called for the huge ironworks you may spot from the train. Decembrists (see p217) jailed here from 1830 to 1839 are commemorated in a large, photogenic mural at the station. There's also a good Decembrist Museum in town, though few leave the train to see it.

The tracks now head northeast following the **Khilok Valley**, with the **Yablonovy Mountains** (between 5800km and 6300km) forming blue shadows in the distance. At the small air-base town of **Bada** (5884km), look up from your instant noodles to admire a MiG fighter monument and a cluster of old aircraft on the runway to the north.

Around 5925km, the train slows as it leaves the valley and climbs into the mountains, affording inspiring views of the winding river and fields filled with wildflowers. It may pause briefly in **Khilok** (5934km), where there is a machine shop for repairing train engines. An old locomotive stands at the eastern end of the platform. There is another fairly lengthy stop at **Mogzon** (6054km), a good place to take