



epicurean

My Russian friends

Travelling solo through Russia's heartland, Thomas E Muller discovers a gritty, gregarious people willing to share food and vodka with a stranger.

For an astronaut circling the planet and floating past southern Siberia, it would be hard to miss the shimmering, banana-shaped body of blue water down below. This is Lake Baikal, the world's deepest lake. Twenty percent of Earth's entire supply of unfrozen, fresh water fills this crystal-pure lake, fed by 360 rivers and emptied only by one, the Angara River, which eventually spills their waters into the Arctic Ocean.

Down on the ground, this Australian visitor to Siberia timidly prepares to enter Lake Baikal's 13°C water. I'm in the charming holiday village of Listvyanka, 60km from the city of Irkutsk, standing on the lakeshore and the water is perfectly calm. The grey-pebbled beach is littered with broken glass so I wear plastic slip-ons. Steeling myself with fragile bravery, I slowly progress into the water until I am standing waist deep. Then, I start my stopwatch. When I had taken enough I command my numb legs to get me out of the lake. Total elapsed time: a pathetic 55 seconds. I reward myself by sitting on the beach and enjoying freshly-smoked omul, the tasty fish unique to Lake Baikal.

My train journey across Russia started in Vladivostok – Russia's once strategically important naval base and still home of the Russian Pacific Fleet. This is where Russia's Far East begins. Today it is a busy port and marks the eastern terminus of the Trans-Siberian Railway. It had taken me 24 hours

to get here from Brisbane, via Singapore and Seoul, and the following evening, I made my way to the train station for the start of my 20-day journey to Moscow – seven time zones and 10,052 kilometres of rail travel away, using three different rail systems.

This first of many overnight journeys on the Trans-Siberian brought me to Khabarovsk, just 25km from the Chinese border. My home-stay hostess was the energetic 70-year-old Anna Styepanovna. We sat in her kitchen and, in my conversational Russian, I tried to give her a picture of life in Australia. She let me take a short nap to lessen my jetlag then she and her son drove me to a friend's dacha. Every Russian family, it seems, manages to have a dacha – the quintessential summer cottage that offers a weekend escape from the demands of city life and comes with a plot where fruit and vegetables are grown for home consumption.

After Anna's son barbecued the beef and lamb "shashlik," a dozen or so of her friends gathered around the table and we had a laughter-filled lunch, fuelled by home-made wine. That evening, Anna literally took me by the hand and we walked, arm in arm, along the banks of the Amur River, taking in the city's attractions by night.

Next day, at 10 p.m., I switched railway lines and took the 290-km overnight Yunost' Line train ride from Khabarovsk to Komsomolsk-na-Amure.

This city, built from scratch on the orders of Stalin, is a Soviet monument to city planning – grid layout, tree-lined boulevards, steel plant, the Yuri Gagarin aircraft factory, and World War II memorial park guarded by uniformed youth cadets. My home-stay hosts were Mikhail Radokhle and his family. Over two days, Mikhail took me on tours of the town and we visited the Soviet gulag where his grandparents were imprisoned and died.



Sunshine A family picnics at Lake Baikal.

Two days later, Mikhail escorted me to the train station and I boarded the BAM (Baikalo-Amurskaya Magistral) train line for the two-day, 1,500-km ride to Tynda. A two-night stay in a Tynda hotel gave me some much needed rest and then it was off again on the 25-hour train ride to Severobaikalsk, at the northern tip of Lake Baikal, which takes you through Russia's longest (15.3 km) tunnel.

I had already tasted Russian train passenger hospitality and open friendliness ever since I started in Vladivostok. But my lone train compartment companion, Tatiana Kosinskaya, 50, made the long journey to Severobaikalsk especially enjoyable. Her husband, 53-year-old Vladimir Velesovich, had escorted her to the train carriage and helped her settle in her berth. When Vladimir discovered I was from Australia, his face lit up like a Christmas tree on a snowy Siberian night. He asked me my age, whether my teeth were still the originals, and then recited Russian poetry to me.

When he bade us farewell, leaving Tatiana in the carriage with me, he gave me – not his wife – a parting hug. All this, from someone I had known for less than 20 minutes! As the train began pulling out of the station, Tatiana's mobile phone rang. It was Vladimir. Could he speak to Thomas? His booming voice in Russian radiated with friendliness: "Thomas! This is Vladimir. I want to thank you and wish you a very pleasant voyage across Russia. Please enjoy and please come again!"

Around lunchtime, Tatiana wasted no time laying out her lunch ingredients on the tiny compartment table. She invited me to share her food and made me a sandwich of eggplant puree on Russian rye bread, followed by marinated wild forest mushrooms and leek, potato-cabbage salad with carrots, and cookies and green tea. We chatted until night fell – in some language that exists between her fluent Russian and my broken command of that Slavic tongue.

At Severobaikalsk, I was hoping to take the hydrofoil across the length of Lake Baikal to get to Irkutsk more directly, but this high-speed ferry had closed for the season. Instead, I boarded the BAM train, at midnight, for the 2-day, 2-night ride to Irkutsk, at the southern end of Lake Baikal.



Local Fare Raw omul is ready for eating.



Sundays Grilling shashlik on a barbie at a dacha outside Khabarovsk.

Sharing my compartment this time were Valery Shunai, Rinaty Dautov and his wife Lena Dautova, all returning to work in Irkutsk after a weekend at Lake Baikal. At noon the next day, Valery spread out a newspaper on our tiny table top, then reached down into a plastic shopping bag and, to my disbelief, fished out a half-dozen freshly caught omul, plopping the raw fish on the table. With his pocket knife he cut each one open, cleaned out its innards, chopped up the fish into bite-sized pieces and sprinkled salt on the skin. "Let's have fresh, delicious omul," he declared.

Out of politeness I reluctantly accepted his offer but not before dashing down to the dining car to embolden myself with the Spirit of Russia, otherwise known as vodka. I purchased a bottle and brought it back for my companions.

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By this stage in my travels, I was already tutored in the Russian perspective on vodka consumed when men get together to socialize: 0.5 litres, normalnya (normal); 0.75 litres, mnogo (a lot); 1 litre, mala (too little).

Irkutsk is big, busy, and noisy so I was happy to escape for a few days to the quaint and rustic village of Listvyanka, nestled on the shores of Lake Baikal with a picturesque mountain backdrop. This is where Russian families come to picnic and where nouveaux riches Russians build their holiday villas.

Then it was back to Irkutsk, once again boarding the Trans-Siberian for the

final leg of the journey – three days and three nights westward toward Moscow, stopping briefly at 34 stations along the way. "Don't wander too far down the platform," my train carriage's provodnitsa (female conductor) would warn, "Or you'll miss this train." On Day 2, we pass the stone obelisk marking the continental divide between Asia and Europe and next day, we roll into the Central Station of bustling, cosmopolitan, traffic-chaotic Moscow.

I gathered my belongings, thanked my provodnitsa with a parting gift and made my way, past the twelve blue carriages of my train, to the front of the station. I had met Russia on rails and, for twenty days, had been looked after by a Russian generosity of spirit that will be impossible to forget. ■

50something

NATIONAL SENIORS AUSTRALIA



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Cover Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and wife Therese Rein at Kirribilli House, Sydney, 2010 Photo: Vince Long ©



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Welcome to the new look *50 something*: modern, elegant and a bit more grown up, not just in style but also in substance. Blending with old favourites such as relationships, food and Compton's Comment is a new emphasis on opinion and analysis.

For political junkies, we introduce *50 something's* very own "Stig", a former high profile federal Member of Parliament writing under the alias, Cicero. Using first-hand knowledge, Cicero will, each issue, provide insights into the Machiavellian manoeuvrings of our elected officials.

If politics isn't your thing, take shelter in the Time Out section up the back of the magazine. Here you'll find – besides Everal and the puzzle page – Tech Spec, a column on all things electronic, and the opinionated but much-loved sports commentator David Lord.

Otherwise, pause midway at Epicurean for the best of food, wine, travel and the arts. In this issue chef Pete Evans shows us how to shuck an oyster just in time for Valentine's Day, while Krysia Kitch unveils the hidden passions of a visiting Parisian treasure.

50 something is a work in progress, and every year, every issue, it evolves with you. Up in arms or loving it, let us know what you think.

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Thomas Muller was born to travel and, 70 years later, he does exactly that. Tom enjoys exploring the Earth's remote and less-visited places and writing about his travel encounters with people and geographic impressions. A National Seniors life member, his adventures are featured on www.ThePlanetaryPrize.com



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