

GET THERE  
RAIL\_TRANS-SIBERIAN

# TRAVEL LIKE A TSAR

Richard Powell TICKS AN ELUSIVE BOX ON HIS TRAVEL BUCKET LIST  
BY TAKING A LUXURY PRIVATE TRAIN ON THE  
TRANS-SIBERIAN RAILWAY FROM MOSCOW TO BEIJING.





BURYAT STATE OPERA & BALLET HOUSE / ULAN-UDE



CONCERT / KAZAN CONSERVATORY



KUL SHARIF MOSQUE / KAZAN

**E**NTERING THE VELVET-UPHOLSTERED 'Nostalgic Comfort' compartment on our super-smart Zarengold private train provided me with an overwhelming sense of relief. Not because this super-plush accommodation for the grandest of great railway journeys was impeccable, with its brass fittings, sofa, armchair, desk, TV and ensuite shower, but because I no longer felt like a fraud for all those years of idle insistence about one day undertaking this trip of a lifetime, spanning seven time zones.

Rolling out of Moscow's Yaroslavsky station as a brass band played us off, I raised a celebratory shot of vodka to toast the beginning of this most-anticipated 16-day journey to China. We had actually begun the experience on the previous night, with an expedition from



our five-star hotel in the upmarket Tverskaya district to the underground metro stations, which double spectacularly as art galleries, lit by ornate chandeliers and lined with Soviet-era statues. Above ground, we wandered through Revolution Square into Red Square, posing for pictures in front of the colourful domes of Saint Basil's Cathedral before visiting the Kremlin.

With Moscow behind us as we raced along the 9,250km 'iron road' to Asia, we looked forward to visiting six more Russian municipalities. The first was Kazan, where we visited the mosque, 'mini-Kremlin' and Conservatory, where some young prodigies put on a world-class classical concert.

At Yekaterinburg, we posed for pictures at the Asia/Europe landmark and paid our respects to the last tsars in the Church On the Blood built to commemorate their deaths.



CHURCH ON THE BLOOD / YEKATERINBURG

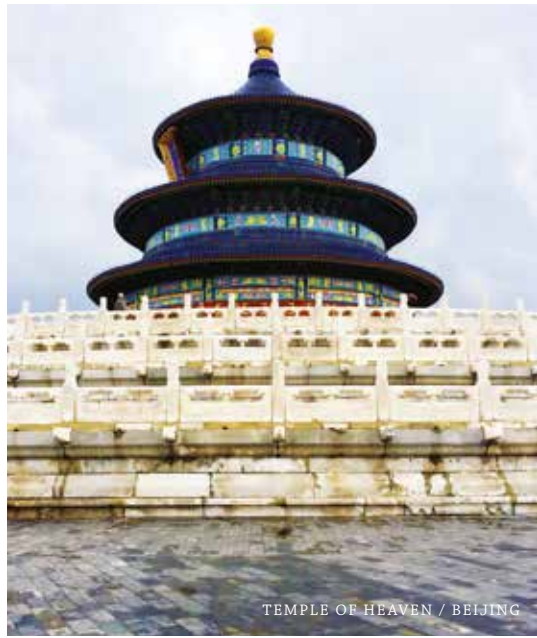


GANDAN MONASTERY / ULAANBAATAR



TRADITIONAL TUVAN WRESTLERS / MONGOLIA

**"As we clinked glasses and said reluctant goodbyes, I felt a satisfaction that I'd completed the world's greatest railway journey, while others would only ever talk about it."**



TEMPLE OF HEAVEN / BEIJING



SCORPIONS / DONGHUAMEN NIGHT MARKET, BEIJING



THE GREAT WALL / BEIJING



FORBIDDEN CITY / BEIJING

In Novosibirsk, we were greeted by Russian folk dancers, who offered us bread and salt. We then toured the Siberian capital's biggest market. At Irkutsk, we met the founder of the Trans-Siberian railway, in the form of a towering statue of Alexander III, before continuing to Lake Baikal. The conductor invited us for an alfresco ride alongside the train's engine as we skirted the ancient lake's vast shoreline before crossing its waters – the deepest on Earth – by ferry. On the other side, we sped to our final Russian stop at Ulan-Ude, where a variety show in the city's Stalinist-era theatre – distinguished by a gigantic stone bust of Lenin's head – marked the end of our time in this great country.

By now, the train had come to feel reassuringly homely. Life aboard was as solitary or social as we wanted, with everyone coming together at mealtimes. Food ran the gamut of Russian cuisine from *kasha* (Russian porridge) to caviar and vodka, sponge cakes and black tea. Some of the train's waiters had actually been poached from the Orient Express. Whenever the plates were cleared, the dining carriages became bars. When shooting the breeze with fellow travellers over drinks, there was never a dull moment.

Outside, a changing landscape from sprawling forest to vast grassy plains signalled our crossover into Mongolia. An overnight stay in the capital, Ulaanbaatar, allowed us to marvel at ancient monasteries nestled amid gleaming skyscrapers: a testament to the country's now-booming mining industry. The Buddhist Gandan Monastery, Lama Temple Museum and the five temples at Chojjin Lama, with their garish statues of gods and demons overlooking the metropolis, were highlights. In the countryside, an artistic and cultural extravaganza on the lush steppes featured wrestlers, archers, falconers and expert horsemen putting on a show – with a wow factor that would probably have impressed Genghis Khan.

Passing through the Gobi Desert overnight to arrive in Northern China, we swapped our beloved private train for a simpler state locomotive, made necessary by the change in railway gauges. Before long, we were in Beijing, attempting to acclimatise to its population of 20 million people after the sparse demographic of Siberia and Mongolia.

Having settled into our final top-shelf hotel, the tour itinerary saw us visit some of China's greatest landmarks including the Temple of



NEW TOUR

**ON THE MAHARAJAS' EXPRESS**

**A**bercrombie & Kent has introduced a new tour through northern India that includes eight days in a Deluxe Cabin on the Maharajas' Express. Highlights of the itinerary include exploring the highlights of Mumbai, a visit to the Taj Mahal, the famed forts and palaces of Rajasthan and a dawn boat ride on the Ganges. When not on the train, accommodation is at the Taj Mahal Palace in Mumbai, The Leela Palace in New Delhi, and Nadesar Palace in Varanasi. The two-week tour is priced from A\$15,930 per person. [abercrombiekent.com.au](http://abercrombiekent.com.au)



TRAVELLING SPA

**HEAVEN IN THE HIGHLANDS**

**I**n April 2016 a new, dedicated spa car will launch aboard Belmond Royal Scotsman as it begins its new season travelling from Edinburgh Waverley. The luxury travel company has partnered with spa brand Bamford to create the spa concept, which will have two treatment rooms offering a range of treatments; from facials and massages, to manicures and pedicures. The Haybarn Spa has been designed by Bamford architect, Spencer Fung, using Scottish sustainable wood and wood from the brand's estate at Daylesford in the Cotswolds. It will be the first spa car aboard a train. Bamford Body products will also be distributed throughout the train's 20 ensuite cabins. [belmond.com](http://belmond.com)

Heaven, the Forbidden City, the Great Wall and Tiananmen Square. With the penultimate night of our grand journey already upon us, our hosts bade us farewell with a dinner for all 200 train guests at a restaurant in the financial district. As we clinked glasses and said reluctant goodbyes, I felt a satisfaction that I'd completed the world's greatest railway journey, while others would only ever talk about it.

**THE TRANS-SIBERIAN TRAIN JOURNEY**

Rates onboard the private Zarengold train – starting in Moscow or Beijing – start from around A\$7,838 per person to around A\$25,064 per person (not including flights). Trips run from May to September in 2016. [transsiberian-travel.com](http://transsiberian-travel.com)



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