

Beijing to St Petersburg — By

Richard Phillips

The commencement of a long train journey in a foreign country is a mixture of excitement and trepidation. Particularly so when the train journey is all the way from Beijing through to St Petersburg on the Trans-Mongolian Railway, during the northern winter. This trip, if completed non-stop, would take seven days. Or, if a more leisurely pace is desired, with an organised tour, the same trip can be undertaken in 24 days. This was the option taken by Michael Flynn, Richard Boaden, his wife Marina and yours truly. Joining us were three other people from Australia and our Russian tour guide, Alex.

IT was a feature of this trip that, all the way from Beijing through to St Petersburg, there was snow on the ground although there were not many days when it actually snowed. By and large, each day consisted of blue skies and sun. Sunrise was around 9.30 am and sunset occurred about seven hours later. Most days on the trip, particularly those for essential sightseeing, were clear and crisp. The temperature ranged from +2°C down to -30°C, which is cold!!

Arriving at Beijing airport on a cold evening, 16 December 2004, having confronted the slow bureaucracy at customs and immigration, the full-frontal assault by taxi drivers looking for business, some official and some unofficial, is a shock to the system. Nearly all taxis in Beijing are small Citroën motor cars and three Melbourne lawyers complete with luggage squeezing into one of these vehicles was an effort! Even more of an achievement was getting the taxi driver to understand what hotel we wanted to go to and our actually arriving there without any detours.

Beijing is a city of about 18 million people and has a traffic problem that has to be seen to be believed. I read somewhere that

up to 30,000 motor vehicles are sold each month in Beijing. Given that the motor car has replaced the pushbike on the Beijing streets, the enormous traffic problems become apparent. Despite the volume of traffic and the congestion on the roads, the traffic system seems to work. I do not recall seeing one accident in the time I was in Beijing. Crossing the road, however, is not for the faint hearted!

Tiananmen Square is proclaimed as the world's largest city square and it is an enormous open space, as large as 60 soccer fields. All of the policeman who were on duty in Tiananmen Square carried fire extinguishers, which is their main weapon in stamping out self-immolators.

The cultural sights of Beijing are spectacular. The Forbidden City is a highlight of a visit to Beijing. I for one had no idea as to its size and significance in Chinese history. However, the undoubted highlight of the whole trip, for me, was a visit to the Great Wall of China at Badaling. To see this great structure meandering up and down the hills, some of which are quite steep, and disappearing into the distance is a sight to behold.

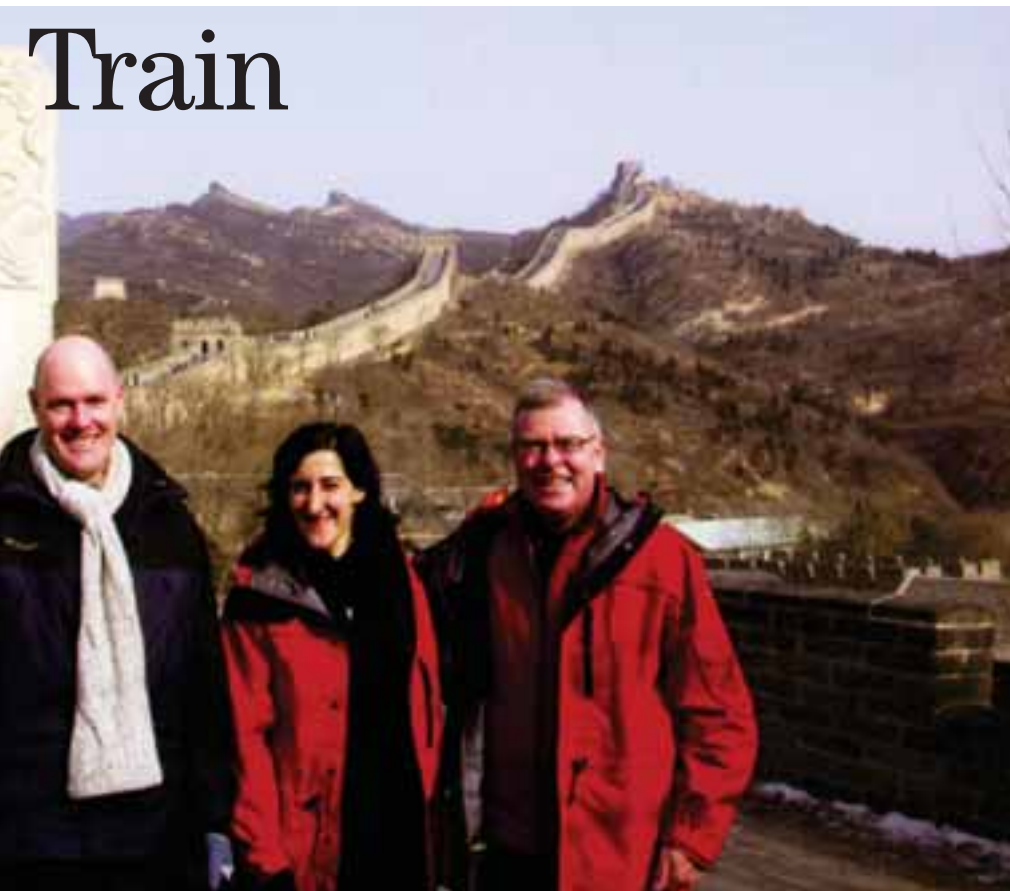
Beijing makes for an interesting eat-



Richard Phillips and Michael Flynn in the grounds of Catherine Palace, Pushkin, St Petersburg.

ing experience. The food is not dissimilar to what we Melburnians are used to from most Chinese restaurants, except the price. Our tour group enjoyed a six-course meal complete with alcohol (local beer and wine) for no more than \$4.00 per head. One night the tour group was adventur-

Train



Richard Phillips, Michael Flynn, Maxine Paleologordia, Richard Boaden at the Great Wall of China.

ous enough to have dinner at a restaurant in the Hutong. The meal, complete with plenty of Chinese beer, came just over \$2.00 a head. A visit to one of the authentic Beijing duck restaurants was a highlight. The duck was succulent.

The weather in Beijing was chilly and ranged between -1° to $+2^{\circ}\text{C}$ during the daytime. On our last morning in Beijing, 22 December 2004, it was snowing. The first leg of the train journey departed from Beijing's central station at 7.30 am and would deliver us, 36 hours later, in Ulaan Baatar, the capital of Mongolia. The scenery from Beijing to the Mongolian border was bland and uninteresting.

Four of us on the tour group shared a sleeping compartment. Squeezing in the luggage and everything else we were carrying took a bit of organisation but we quickly fell into the routine of doing this throughout the trip. The compartment was not spacious and, with the heating system of the train (coal powered), the compartment was rather stifling and oppressive at night. The toilet facilities on the Chinese leg of the train journey left a lot to be desired but, having been

forewarned, we were prepared and armed with the necessities, i.e., toilet paper. For the first couple of hours of the train trip, we endured a Mongolian family having a very loud "domestic" in a nearby compartment. Hardly an auspicious start to the train trip!

The railway changes gauge at the Chinese/Mongolian border. This means that the bogeys on each carriage have to be replaced. This occurs in a large engine shed at Erlan, between 11.00 pm and midnight. We chose to stay in our carriage and watch this interesting process.

After a fairly restless first night's sleep

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on the train, we awoke to the sweeping vistas of the Gobi Desert. The Desert disappeared into the distance although here and there were hills and, the closer we got to Ulaan Bator, signs of civilisation started to appear. Small ger encampments were observed and, as we neared Ulaan Baatar, the landscape became more mountainous.

Ulaan Baatar is a city of about one million people sitting in a fairly wide



Richard Phillips, Hutong, Beijing.

valley surrounded by hills. Two or three large power stations churn out smoke and, given the terrain, an inversion layer of smog hangs over the city. The Soviet influence is still very much to the fore. Despite this, Ulaan Baatar itself was quite a surprise. I had no preconceived notions as to what to expect in Mongolia and the city, whilst exuding Asian influences, had a European feel to it. The country appears to live, at least for the tourist, on its historic past and you are left in little doubt as to the manner in which Mongolians revere Ghenghis Khan. Even the beer is named after him! So was the restaurant where we had dinner (23 December 2004) where the floorshow featured a male singer who sang from his throat!

After a night in a comfortable hotel, us intrepid travellers were taken about 75 kilometres into the Mongolian countryside to spend Christmas Eve and Christmas Day in a ger camp at Terjil. A ger is a round, portable tentlike structure which is reasonably large in that four single beds can be accommodated together with its most essential piece of equipment, the stove. The locals are forever coming into the

tent to keep the stove fully fired, which is essential given that, during the night, the temperature dropped down to -30°C . This created the unusual sensation of having a 60 degree temperature difference between inside the ger and outside the ger. The stove inside the ger was very efficient and maintained a steady temperature, when fully fired, of about 30 degrees centigrade.

The Terjil camp was set in a spectacular location, in the hills which were covered in snow. There was no shortage of entertainment. The undoubted highlight was a ride on a rather docile (and bored looking) yak. We also called into a nearby ger camp to meet a nomadic Mongolian family. The locals are nomadic farmers who come down to the lower altitudes during winter with their cattle. Our hosts provided a warming cup of yoghurt vodka and a cup of tea. The curd biscuits that were offered to us were inedible.

On Christmas Day some of the local population came to the restaurant at the ger camp. A genuine Mongolian barbeque is quite interesting. Essentially, a sheep is cut up and put inside a large urn complete with every possible local available vegetable and a load of hot rocks and it is left to sit on a stove for hours. The net result is huge chunks of lamb and vegetables being served which looked very appetising. Some of the tour group tried this for Christmas dinner and were not disappointed.

On Boxing Day, it was snowing and after a fairly hair-raising drive back to Ulaan Baatar (our driver was excellent) it was back on the train for a two-night journey to Irkutsk, in Russia.

If anyone had told me that eight to nine hours of the train journey would be spent in a railway siding at Suchbaatar on the Mongolian/Russian border, I would have scoffed. However, this is actually what happened. As international tourists, we had our own railway carriage. The train arrived at the border station at 3.40 am.



Richard Phillips, at the Winter Palace, St Petersburg.



Michael Flynn and Richard Phillips, sleigh ride, Siberia.

The train, which was quite long, disappeared save for our carriage. We had been warned that there was no restaurant car on this leg of the journey but we were well supplied with biscuits, Pringles (they have taken over the world!) and packet noodles etc. Most of us whiled away the time at the railway siding by reading but one practical hazard of being stuck in a Mongolian railway siding is that the toilets on the train were locked. The call of nature required a trek back to the railway station in bitterly cold weather (it was around -15°C during the day) to the station toilets which, again, left a lot to be desired. Between 10.00 am and 12.30 pm the customs and immigration formalities were attended to and then our carriage was shunted across the

border to await our time slot on the main, Trans-Siberian line. The Russian border station had a well-stocked shop, well stocked with vodka that is. Unfortunately, Russian service in shops, hotels and banks lived up to its international reputation of being slow, unhelpful and, at times, surly. The little bank at this railway station could only convert American dollars to roubles if someone came in and made a cash deposit, in roubles.

We were eventually under way at about 4.30 pm.

I cannot leave Mongolia without commenting on the thoroughness of the Mongolian customs and immigration officials. They consisted of young, attractive Mongolian women in immaculately pressed green uniforms with enormous peaked caps. My theory was the larger the cap, the higher the rank! At one point, Michael Flynn had his passport taken away for some time by one of these officials. Apparently, he bore no resemblance to his passport photograph unless he smiled! His passport was duly returned.

The next leg of the train journey was an overnight trip to Irkutsk. At about 10.30

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St Basil's Cathedral, Red Square, Moscow.



Russian Orthodox Church, Russia.



Yak, Terjil, Mongolia.



Church of the Spilled Blood, St Petersburg.

pm, the train stopped at Ulan-Ude for half an hour or so. Our tour guide, Alex, heartily recommended the hot dogs on sale at a kiosk on the platform. These hot dogs turned out to be more like a soggy sausage roll, but at least it made change from Pringles! This station was memorable, though, for its atmosphere — right out of a 1930s Hollywood spy film set in Russia, shot in black and white, steam coming from the train (each carriage had a chimney for the coal-fired heating system and the samovar), a platoon of soldiers marching down the platform and no one looking at anybody else.

Irkutsk is a fascinating city, definitely European in its style and feel, although well and truly in the depths of Siberia. What impressed me the most on the trip was the way in which Mongolia and Russia (China to a lesser extent) embraced Christmas. Every Russian city we saw had a large Christmas tree set up in the city square. There were decorations, fairy lights and fireworks displays. Irkutsk was no exception. The city square was ringed with giant ice sculptures and came alive with festivities during the evening. The fireworks display in Irkutsk was impressive.

One of the expected highlights of the trip was a visit to Lake Baikal. The group left Irkutsk on 29 December 2004. On route, through the heavily wooded Siberian countryside, we stopped for a sleigh ride and found an ice slide that provided a great source of amusement and took all of us back to our childhood.

Lake Baikal was very disappointing. The world's largest body of fresh water, some 600 kms long, 80 kms wide and over a mile in depth, was shrouded in mist. This phenomenon is caused by the fact, according to the scientists, that the temperature is so cold and the lake is yet to freeze that it actually gives off this steam like mist. Thus, the sweeping views that are shown on all the tourist books and postcards were denied us.

Our night at Lake Baikal was spent on a home stay in the village of Listvyanka. There is a marine institute in the village and three of us spent the night in an apartment occupied by a lady who worked at the institute and her mother. The apartment was surprisingly spacious and they provided a very nice afternoon tea and breakfast for us the next day. The only difficulty was, of course, that none of us spoke Russian and our hosts did not speak English. Michael Flynn's souvenir of a koala bear wearing a hat with corks dangling from it broke the ice.

Back on the train for another two nights

trip to Ekaterinburg, formerly known as Sverdlovsk. It was two nights on the train from Irkutsk, which meant that New Year's Eve was spent on the train. To celebrate, we pre-ordered our dinner, an expected sumptuous three-course meal with plenty of beer and vodka. Of course, we had not bargained on the Russian approach to service, mentioned elsewhere in this article. At 8.00 pm, the first two courses of our meal arrived at once, and lukewarm. At least the beer and vodka were cold!

Ekaterinburg is where Tsar Nicholas was murdered during the Russian Revolution and is also the birthplace of Boris Yeltsin. Again, it was very cold but from what we saw of this city, it was quite pretty, well laid out with wide streets with tree-lined avenues, large squares and a

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vibrant night life. The town hall was built in the neo-classical Stalinist baroque style!

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Siberia looks big on any map of the world. It is covered in trees, mostly pine or larch, punctuated with small villages. Nearly all the houses are constructed of wood and are not dissimilar to those shown in Dr Zhivago. The cities are large and ringed by many apartment buildings in varying stages of decay. The railway is busy with goods trains. In the larger towns and cities, we saw many factories and other buildings derelict or in ruin. All of the shops were well stocked and I saw none of the shortages of food and goods that were widely reported 10 years ago. Whether the average Russian could afford the products was another question.

The overnight train trip to Moscow was

uneventful. By now it was 4 January 2005. The highlight of our stay in Moscow was our hotel, the Sovietsky. Built in the early 1950s in the grand scale, it had the most fantastic restaurant, the Yar. This was a restaurant/theatre lavishly decorated and appointed, which took one back over 100 years in time. The food was good and the floor show enjoyable.

Moscow would have to be the place where the world's dirtiest cars are located. This is not surprising given the slush on the roads. Our tour was hampered by a very small tour bus which did not allow much to be seen from the windows and the driver's reluctance, probably due to the traffic, to stop to allow photo opportunities. Accordingly, we seemed to spend two days milling around Red Square and the Kremlin. We did insist, however, that we be allowed to photograph the Lubyanka, the KGB Headquarters. This we did without any problem whatsoever.

We joined the queue to see Lenin but, having got near the front at about 1.30 the Russian guards closed the doors and said come back tomorrow.

St Basil's Cathedral is spectacular, from the outside, but I thought disappointing internally as it is a rabbit warren of small, but prettily decorated, chapels, not the cavernous cathedral I was expecting. The Gum Department Store is now a large shopping mall (similar to the Queen Victoria building in Sydney). The usual range of western, expensive shops were there. Again, it was hard to see how the average Russian could afford to buy anything. The so-called "New Russians", i.e. those with plenty of money, drive expensive cars and are impressively dressed. Our tour guide, Alex, was most insistent that there was no such thing as the Russian mafia. Most of us on the tour were sceptical about this statement!

The final leg of the trip was the overnight express train from Moscow to St Petersburg. St Petersburg is a magnificent city of some four million people. It is hard to comprehend the horrors that befell Leningrad, as St Petersburg was then known, over 60 years ago. During the 900-day siege by the Nazis, almost one million people died of starvation within the city.

Nevsky Prospekt is a grand thoroughfare and almost everywhere one turns, there are palaces, grand homes and grand buildings. I thought St Petersburg had a distinct Parisian feel about it.

The Winter Palace is nothing short of extraordinary, or at least so I thought. One morning, our group was taken by tour bus out into the countryside to Tsarskoye

Selo and to the “Catherine Palace”. This was Catherine the Great’s summer palace and, at the expense of over-using superlatives, was simply spectacular. There are many more palaces like this around St Petersburg and the city definitely repays revisiting. Sadly, Peterhof is closed during winter.

The Hermitage, one of the world’s great art collections, was fascinating although, perhaps given the nature of the building it is housed in, the Winter Palace is disjointed and it is difficult to follow specific art themes. The Faberge egg exhibition was open and, whilst these eggs are very well crafted and beautiful to look at, it is hard to see what all of the fuss is about. The lawyers on the trip were very impressed by the study of Tzar Nicholas.

Our hotel in St Petersburg was the Moskva which, in its 30-year career, has seen the end of the Soviet era and the return of capitalism. To say this hotel is large is an understatement. It is the most impersonal hotel that I have stayed in but, having said that, it was comfortable. Its great advantage for those into classical music and literature is that, across the road, in the St Alexander Nevsky Monastery of the Holy Trinity, in the cemetery, are the graves of Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Mussorgsky, Borodin, Glinka and Dostoyevsky.

Of great interest, both in Moscow and

St Petersburg, was the Metro. The underground railway system in both cities is very efficient and cheap. It surprised me how deep the metro system is in both cities. The Moscow Metro is deep because, being built pre-war, it was designed to act as a large bomb shelter. The St Petersburg

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Metro is deep because of the rivers that are crossed. Some of the stations in Moscow are cathedral-like in their construction. A ride on the Metro, any distance, was the equivalent of 50 cents.

One of the most interesting mornings in St Petersburg was spent in the Museum of Political History. This is housed in a building that was once owned by a famous ballerina but was taken over by the Bolsheviks in the Russian Revolution and became their headquarters. The Museum is fairly direct and factual about the Soviet era and made no apologies for the likes of Stalin. The number of people who died under his rule is staggering. Members of his family were not excluded from his terror. The one figure I recall is that in 1937, over 600,000 people were executed for their political beliefs or, more likely, their opposition to Stalin. Throughout the Museum were photographs of people who had been executed (i.e. murdered) during the Stalin years who, since the fall of the Soviet system, have been “repatriated”.

St Petersburg was an expensive city although we enjoyed several fine meals. The Russian beer was quite drinkable although Russian wine left a lot to be desired.

An advantage of being in a tour group are the little events that can be arranged which would not happen if travelling alone. I am thinking of the memorable dinner we had on 6 January 2005 to celebrate Russian Orthodox Christmas. We were invited to have dinner at the home, in St Petersburg, of a Russian ceramic painter (he painted small eggs and plates) named Yuri. He was gentleman of imposing stature, about 60 years of age, whose English was quite passable. His wife, who spoke little English, was an excellent cook. The spread they put on for us was sumptuous and we were well plied with vodka. What made the occasion memorable was that Yuri was a great raconteur in the Peter Ustinov mould and we had the most engaging couple of hours learning about life under the Soviet system and the views of a Russian intellectual on just about anything else as well.

In conclusion, the trip was memorable and thoroughly enjoyable. The company was terrific and we all had a great time. I would recommend that if anyone wanted to do such a trip, they do it as part of an organised tour. The bureaucracy that exists in China, Mongolia and Russia is still quite remarkable and, without local knowledge or a guide, can be a big problem. Russia, for its size, is a place where English is not widely spoken. In Siberia, it is difficult to find anybody who understands English. However, with preparation, and the preparedness to be extremely patient, a trip such as this can be, and was for me, immensely rewarding.



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