



## DINNER ON THE DINER: THE TRANS-SIBERIAN EXPRESS

by Sharon Hudgins

NOTE: Sharon Hudgins has returned to the United States after working as the Resident Expert for National Geographic Expeditions on an 18-day tour across Russia and Mongolia—6,000 miles on the Trans-Siberian Railroad, from Vladivostok to Ulaan Bataar to Moscow. The tour visited many of the places she described in her award-winning book, *The Other Side of Russia: A Slice of Life in Siberia and the Russian Far East*.

After working for eight days in Russia on a food article I was writing for *Saveur* magazine, I boarded a chartered Trans-Siberian train in Vladivostok, in Russia's Far East, along with 70 other passengers from the United States and 35 Russian crew members. We were embarking on the longest continuous railroad journey in the world, across the largest country on the planet, on the iron road that was the greatest engineering achievement of its time—the Trans-Siberian Railroad, built between 1891 and 1916.



For the next 15 days we ate most of our meals on the train, in two dining cars that each seated 36 people at tables covered with white linens and set with stemmed wine glasses and vases of fresh flowers. In both dining cars a staff of one chef, two sous-chefs, and a dishwasher (a person, not a machine) worked together in a galley smaller than my bathroom at home to prepare excellent multi-course meals accompanied by very good imported wines, Russian vodka, and dry champagne. All the meals were served by two friendly waiters adroit at balancing plates of food and pouring drinks while the train swayed back and forth along rough stretches of track.

The table d'hôte menu included red and black caviar, buckwheat bliny, smoked salmon, an enticing array of cold salads, freshly baked breads, a variety of traditional Russian soups, and main dishes such as beef Stroganov and Siberian pelmeni (meat-filled pasta, like tortelloni). Before and after dinner, many of us gathered in the comfortable lounge car for mixed drinks, glasses of wine, or mugs of cold Russian beer, on tap, as we listened to piano and



guitar concerts by two Russian musicians who rode the rails with us. The food on the train was so good that many of the passengers asked for the dining-car recipes at the end of the trip.



My job for National Geographic Expeditions was to give lectures on the train as we traveled through the Russian countryside, from the Pacific coast in the Russian Far East, across Siberia, into Mongolia, back to Siberia, over the Ural Mountains, and onward to Moscow. Since this was a shared tour with Smithsonian Travel, their group's lecturer was on board, too—a professor of Russian history from the University of North Carolina/Chapel Hill. Both of us presented our lectures in the dining cars when they weren't being used for meals.



I gave lectures on the History of the Trans-Siberian Railroad, the Settlement of Siberia, the Buriat-Mongolians (history, foods, customs), Contemporary Urban Life in Russia, and Russian Holidays and Festivals. We had no blackboards, easels, projected slides, PowerPoint, or other visual aids. But I thought it was really cool to be lecturing about the Buriat-Mongolians as the train was rolling through the Buriat Republic, or to be talking about urban life in Russia as we passed through cities and towns. (The cities are changing rapidly, with economic development very evident, although the log houses in rural villages

look just like those in 19th-century paintings, except for the big satellite dishes in their yards.) Instead of using standard visual aids, I could just point out the train windows and tell the tour group to look at the scenes going by. Those were the most fun "illustrated lectures" I've ever given. What an exotic venue for a classroom! (However, the challenge was to speak coherently, for an hour at a time, while standing in the aisle of a dining car and maintaining my balance as the train swerved around curves, lurched over bumpy stretches of track, and blacked out the "classroom" as it passed through long tunnels. I quickly learned to carry a flashlight so I could read my notes.)

We also had a full schedule of activities at stops along the railroad route. I treasure my memories of the guided city tours in Irkutsk, Yekaterinburg, Kazan, and Moscow; the visits to historical and ethnographic museums; a communal dinner at an Old Believer village south of Ulan-Ude; several folk music performances (including two "throat-singing" groups in Mongolia and Siberia's Sayan Mountains); boat trips on the Golden Horn Bay at Vladivostok, on legendary Lake Baikal, and on the Volga River at Kazan; a private classical music concert and champagne reception (by candlelight) at a historic house-museum in Irkutsk; a barbecue on the shore of Lake Baikal; the meals we ate at several very good regional restaurants; and a private vodka-and-caviar reception at St. Basil's Cathedral on Red Square. (Red



Square was closed that evening, for security reasons, but we got special permission to be there, because of our event at St. Basil's. It was amazing—and a bit eerie—to have Red Square all to ourselves!)

The excursion to Mongolia was fascinating, too. Ulaan Baatar is an interesting and vibrant city, with an excellent historical museum and a colorful Buddhist temple complex. We also traveled to a national park and visited a nomadic Mongolian family in their yurt (where we tasted some of the homemade milk products that I wrote about in my book). In Mongolia I bought several hand-carved wooden ceremonial milk spoons, decorated with the images of the animals that produce the milk, which are used for making offerings and performing other rituals. The perfect souvenirs for someone interested in Mongolian foods!

After the tour ended, my husband and I stayed in Moscow for another week to visit the museums and scope out the food markets. We also discovered the Red October chocolate factory outlet store and another large shop that sells 100 different kinds of honey from all over the Russian Federation. Jars of honey and bags of chocolate confections added even more weight to our luggage already filled with pine-nut products (vodka, liqueur, chocolates, edible oil) that I'd carried all the way across the country by train from the Russian Far East.

National Geographic Expeditions Trans-Siberian Rail Journey - <http://www.nationalgeographicexpeditions.com/499.html> - Click on the Experts tab for more information about Sharon Hudgins.

Interview with Sharon Hudgins about her Trans-Siberian Railroad experiences, on KCRW, National Public Radio in Santa Monica, CA - [http://www.kcrw.com/etc/programs/gf/gf061111trans-siberian\\_railr](http://www.kcrw.com/etc/programs/gf/gf061111trans-siberian_railr)

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**Sharon Hudgins** is a food and travel writer with more than 600 articles published in magazines and newspapers across the globe. She has lived in 10 countries on three continents and traveled in 45 countries around the world. She is the author of two award-winning books—a cookbook about the regional cuisines of Spain and a travel memoir (*The Other Side of Russia*) about her life in Siberia during the early period after the collapse of the Soviet Union.