

Travellers' Club Meeting 3rd May 2009

“The Old Man of Lake Baikal: Beijing to Moscow by Train”

On a clear autumn afternoon our distinguished speaker Dr Bob Solomon attracted an audience of 45, including his long-ago lecturer Jack Devery (who'll be 90 in December), his own student Dr Graeme McIntyre from Newcastle, and another traveller from Bendigo. It was a pleasure to see some new faces and to have a fine presentation – absolutely no glitches – with Bob's humorous touches amid the photos and stats, and the input of his technically superb grandson, Nathanael Clarke.

A relief map showed how this journey differed from the original 9289km trans-Siberian railway route from Vladivostok to Moscow: starting at Beijing, traversing Mongolia to Ulaan Baatar, further north to Irkutsk and Lake Baikal, then three days and 5000km to Moscow. A few days in St Petersburg added interest to the main journey, as did Bob's introductory stay in Shanghai.

We were assured that the trans-Mongolian-Siberian is more an extended local train than a luxury tourist vehicle, with many stops and basic services. As the talk progressed we found this supported by protracted bogie-changing to accommodate Russia's 5'0" gauge after China standard 4'8½", security delays at the Russian border, and early dinner of meat balls and rice in the dining car. That the line from Beijing to Moscow covers almost 8000 km reminded us that Russia occupies 17 mill. sq km spanning 11 time zones, compared with China's 9.6 mill. and Australia's 7.7 mill. and three time zones.

Some of the highlights illustrated by 200 digital photographs included the following. At Shanghai's Pudong, across the Huangpu River from the old city, 20 or more skyscrapers stand where a few years ago there was only one. The just-completed World Financial Centre of 492 metres (1614 feet) and 101 floors has outstripped the adjoining Jinmao tower with its observation 88th floor, but has been left behind by the Burj Dubai tower at 819 metres (2687 feet), twice the height of New York's Empire State building.

Pre-Olympic Beijing was marked by ancient buildings such as the Temple of Heaven (1406-20), very high density apartment complexes to house a population of 20 million, and many people exercising in public spaces like the park adjoining Tiananmen Square. The mat in the lift at the travel group's suburban hotel helpfully marked each day of the week. At about \$2 for 15 minutes' ride, taxis were the way to go.

The nicely wood-panelled carriages from Beijing to Ulaan Baatar were the only ones on the trip to provide showers. Moving west from Beijing into mountain country, we passed a goods train every 10 minutes and a power station every hour or so. Soon, rice paddies and vineyards were replaced by the eroded badlands of China's semi-arid Inner Mongolia. The Mongolian border at Erenhot, eight hours and 840km from Beijing, was where the carriages were jacked up and the bogies changed. Through the night the train traversed the Gobi desert, a high pressure area of strong winds. It is mostly stony-sandy steppe, measuring 1000km N-S and 2400 E-W, and occupying about a quarter of Mongolia.

Mid-afternoon brought the travellers to Ulaan Baatar (formerly Ulan Bator), where about half Mongolia's 2¾ million people reside at an elevation of 3500 feet. Peace Avenue is the main street, the locals relish their independence after long domination by Russia or China, and western dress is common. Large posters indicated a national

election campaign under way. Buddhist temples, the National Museum with many richly robed figures, a cultural show with throat singing, and a Mongolian barbecue on a circular gas oven were highlights of the city. Two nights in 7m-diameter nomad tents (called *gers*, formerly *yurts*) at 5000 feet in a spectacularly fractured sandstone landscape outside UB was a unique experience.

Many stops brought the train to the Russian border at Naushki, where old habits die hard: tedious Customs inspection of bunks, trapdoors and manholes, with sniffer dogs to help, produced no contraband whisky or worse. A kilometre or so of electric fencing heightened the security atmosphere. Joining the main, electrified trans-Siberian line at Ulan Ude, the train was enlarged and the diesel engines replaced by a large diesel-electric. The Beijing-Ulan Ude line dates only from 1956. After another 457 km, passing the southern end of Lake Baikal in the dark, the travellers reached Irkutsk on the Sangara River, the only stream to drain the world's deepest lake.

Irkutsk has a population of 600,000 and ten universities with 150,000 students. It is the coldest sizable city in the world. A statue of Tsar Alexander III pays tribute to the man who initiated the trans-Siberian railway, built from both ends and joined there in 1898. 70 km away, Lake Baikal fills three ancient basins with 20% of the world's fresh water. It is 636 km long, 27-80km wide and 1637m deep. For such a feature to have been skirted by the trans-Siberian railway for more than a century, there is surprisingly little tourist development. Fortified by generous meals at the party's homestay chalet, the speaker decided to brave the icy waters of the lake. His very quick swim in water measuring 3 degrees C gave made him an instant local hero. Later, on the train for Moscow, two young Americans said they had been here and there, and "we saw this old man swimming in the lake" – hence the title of Bob's talk.

The three-day journey from Irkutsk to Moscow was not as boring as expected, the birch forests between major stops broken by arable agriculture, small villages and numerous derelict factories, their products no longer needed or competitive in the post-Soviet era. Large centres like Krasnoyarsk, Novosibirsk and Yekaterinberg drew stops of 20-30 minutes, with platform stalls providing beer, ice cream and snack food. Passengers needed to bring their own food for breakfast, though basic lunch and dinner were available in the dining car. The samovar at the end of each carriage, minded by the attendant or *provodnista*, provided a constant supply of hot water for drinks or noodles. There was no attempt to interest tourists in the passing scene, not even the 5-m obelisk marking the Asia-Europe border in the Urals 1777 km from Moscow. At every kilometre a post marked the distance from Moscow and every station showed Moscow time. Russians' familiarity with the railway is much in evidence.

Moscow is a thriving city, the Kremlin still its dominant feature, Red Square with St Basil's (1555-61) and the GUM shopping arcade dwarfing Sydney's QVB. The Metro (opened 1935) carries **nine million** passengers a day, the 19 roubles fare (less than \$1) and its 140 uniquely decorative stations making travel a pleasure. Low-rise St Petersburg is a very different city, distinguished by fine buildings, not least the former Winter Palace forming part of the impressive Hermitage Museum (1764), and the Peter and Paul fortress built (1703-25) by Peter the Great. His summer palace, Peterhof, half an hour's hydrofoil towards the Neva mouth, carries a breath-taking display of gardens, gold-leafed statuary and fountains.

Sincere thanks to Bob for his enjoyable talk and editing/input to this report.

'Ela Taranto