

TRANSIBERIAN honeymoon 5,626 miles from Moscow to Beijing by train (with three girls)

This was written in a notebook perched in between two teaspoons, one dessert spoon, a bottle of Russian mineral water, a packet of towelettes and three used teabags Lyuba refuses to clear up. I should really be more specific here, because there are two Lyubas. The one who won't clear away teabags is Big Lyuba. As she proceeds down the corridor, her mighty hips wipe the carriage windows on one side and the compartment doors on the other at the same time. The smaller one is little Lyuba, who smokes Marlboros and smiles at any male under the age of thirty.

What you are about to read is more of a confession than an article - how a young husband took his bride on a 5,626 mile (the distance from Moscow to Beijing) rail journey on their honeymoon, travelling second class with two complete strangers in the compartment. The only things I can say in mitigation are that the Russians are responsible for the second class and that the allure of the Transiberian Railway is very hard to resist. The line crosses almost one hundred degrees of longitude and six time zones and the journey takes six days, one hour and forty one minutes. The train leaves Moscow at 11.50 pm on Friday evening and arrives in Beijing on the following Friday at 6.31 in the morning. The food is appalling, personal hygiene is of necessity perfunctory, the longest stop is fifteen minutes and the Russians do all they can to convince you that you could have spent your holiday somewhere else. But the journey is marvellous and if your wife is still smiling at Beijing station then she, too, is marvellous and you might just have done the right thing by marrying her.

Trains to Siberia leave from Yaroslavl station in Moscow but the faces of the people waiting give you cause to doubt you are in that city. Sitting on the biggest suitcases I have ever seen, a crowd of Tartars, Buryats, Koreans, Mongols, Kirghiz, Uzbeks and perhaps the odd genuine Russian is waiting impassively under the neon lighting. They do not look as if they are expecting an imminent departure. They look as if they are just waiting.

THE IMMENSE SOVIET FOREST

Our train is waiting at platform five. It is green, just like any ordinary Milan-Naples train. It is train number 20 and has "Moscow-Beijing" written on the side. An Englishman weighed down with cameras is telling a travelling companion that the Transiberian Railway is the only land link between Western Europe and the Pacific Ocean. The Russians are building a road but it has not yet been completed and even when it is, it will be less reliable than the railway. It is easier to get the snow off two rails than off one road surface. I would have liked to hear more but my wife, who is already on the train, has stuck her head out of the window to inform me with a smile that

"there are four of us, the toilet is microscopic and there's a radio blaring away in Russian". All true, of course.

First Day

There are two English girls who never stop talking in the compartment with us. The radio makes even more noise than they do and nobody knows how to turn it off. As the train pulls out of the station, leaving behind the impassive Tartars, Buryats, Mongols and Uzbeks under the neon lights, we begin to explore the train. We cannot get into the carriages the Russians are travelling in at the front of the train. Big Lyuba, one of the guards, explains this to us as she blocks our way, teaching us in the process a phrase of fundamental importance for a full understanding of the Soviet universe: *niet razreshayetsya*, "not permitted". Going to the other end of the train, we pass through first class, then the dining car and finally the carriages occupied by the athletes of the North Korean national team, who are on their way home from the "Goodwill Games" in Moscow.

In first class, there are a dozen Swedes bursting with good health, two in each compartment despite the fact that none of them are on honeymoon. A certain Boris is sitting in the dining car with a tie that has stewed in many different gravies. He informs us when breakfast will be served in the morning. Our compartment is reasonably clean and the two upper couchettes can be pushed upright against the wall during the day. It is not difficult to open the window, provided that two of you hang onto the handle and heave. The little table folds down, just like little tables on trains everywhere, only to collapse almost immediately onto the floor taking a cup of boiling hot tea with it. There are two toilets, one at each end of the carriage but there is only a washbasin the size of a half melon to wash in. There is no plug. A little rubber ball is needed to keep the water in. We have one, as we were warned beforehand.

The lady guards are in charge of cleaning. One of their tasks is to lock the doors of the toilets ten minutes before the train arrives at a station and to unlock them ten minutes after leaving again. I will have the opportunity during the journey to note that Lyuba and Lyuba carry out this particular task with what is tantamount to sadism. No plea is moving enough, no physical contortion in front of the locked door sufficiently dramatic.

While we are investigating the mysteries of the toilets and struggling to silence the radio, the train is racing through the darkness to Zagorsk, past the dachas of the Muscovites, and arrives at Yaroslavl at three o'clock in the morning. The fact that the city is on the Volga and was the railway terminus around 1860 when the Transiberian Railway was conceived persuades no one to get out of their couchettes. The next morning, having found out that salame and little else is served for breakfast, I concentrate on the countryside, which is flat and green. There is not a single animal in sight, despite the assurances of the "Atlas of the Soviet Union" that this is a "land of livestock and dairy produce". At Danilov, I make the acquaintance of some well-built representatives of the veritable army of Soviet railway workers (three million five hundred thousand people) who are at this

moment replenishing the train's water supply. They are in fact elderly ladies who in Italy would be spending the winter months on the Riviera. Here, they are full of energy, leaping from one rail to another.

As the endless forest of the Soviet Union - one quarter of the world's trees, the larches stretching as far as the eye can see - marches past the carriage windows, on a shelf in the corridor I happen upon a collection of booklets aimed at furthering the political education of rail travellers. The most gripping of these turn out to be "Contemporary Trotskyism against the Peace of Detente" and "True and False Interests in Human Rights". These keep me amused until Kirov, where we arrive at 1.50 pm. Until 1934, Kirov was called Vyatka but Stalin renamed it after his friend Sergei Mironovitch Kirov, perhaps to make up for having had him killed.

Towards evening, after we have crossed the river Kama, we pull into Perm, 900 miles from Moscow. From 1940 to 1957, the city was called Molotov but because place names in the Soviet Union are always a matter of opinion, Krushchev changed its name in 1957. We stop for 15 minutes, which is not long but it is long enough for the North Koreans to ransack the station buffet. They all charge off together with their Kim Il Sung lapel badges and come back staggering under the weight of mineralnaya voda (mineral water) and moss-coloured sandwiches.

Second Day

While we were asleep, the train has taken a number of interesting initiatives. It has crossed the Ural watershed and in the course of the 1,107th mile from Moscow, it passed the boundary stone with "Europe" inscribed on one side and "Asia" on the other. It has entered a different time zone from that of the capital and, finally, it has stopped at Sverdlovsk. From now on, we are in Siberia and we are following the trakt, the trail which took the Czar's messengers from St.Petersburg to Irkutsk, on the banks of Lake Baikal.

We pass through depressing villages with streets of beaten earth on which very few vehicles indeed can be seen - just the odd motorcycle and sidecar. We meet the Rossiya, the red train from Vladivostok, and an endless series of freight trains - one every two minutes on average - transporting timber and minerals to Moscow. Their diesel engines fill our carriage with filthy smoke. It is thanks to them (but not just to them) that the compartments gradually begin to look like miniature pigsties. Even though we change every morning and wash with the aid of the rubber ball, our personal hygiene is somewhat hit and miss. Thanks to Lyuba and Lyuba, the two toilets are reasonably clean although with every passing hour, the stench of the powerful Russian disinfectant becomes more and more nauseating.

At 11 in the morning, the train stops at Ischim, where it is drizzling, and leaves, as usual, with no warning, forcing a disorderly horde of breathless passengers to run after it. The countryside is beginning to get interesting. As Lyuba and Lyuba confirm with a military nod, this is indeed the steppe, and serious Siberia.

It is Russians, for the most part, who live here but there are pockets of Kazakhs, Estonians, Ukrainians, Tartars and Germans. The Germans are Red Army soldiers Stalin decided to bring here from the Volga region, where their ancestors had settled at the invitation of Catherine the Great. Chekov passed through in 1890 on a horse-drawn tarantass. He was struck by the "black earth" and the "special Russian smell". We, too, can see the black earth and as for the special Russian smell, that is supplied courtesy of Boris's dining car, whither it is our lot to repair twice daily and where a waiter who looks like a Polish count pretends to understand our order and then brings salame and gherkins.

At last, we see animals grazing on the Ischim steppe, mainly cattle which have presumably learnt how to survive the climate hereabouts. Snow lies on the ground for 150 days a year, the average winter temperature is minus twenty degrees Centigrade and there are frosts every month of the year except July and August. We are crossing the Barabinskaya steppe, a vast expanse of territory which stretches from the 53rd to the 57th parallel and at 11.25 pm Moscow time, we draw into Novosibirsk. In the "Chicago of Siberia", the time is really 2.25 in the morning and Siberian stations have little in the way of entertainment to offer at this time of day.

THE PLACES CHEKOV SAW

On trying to take a photograph of the engine, I am politely invited to desist by Big Lyuba. Trains, stations and bridges are "niet razreshayetsya". We leave. Somebody somewhere in the darkness swears he has seen the river Ob.

Third Day

It is a beautiful sunny morning and the train is climbing into the mountains. We are at last able to appreciate the full length of the train along the curving railway track. It is almost warm and the little Russian girls, each with the standard-issue bow in her hair, are waiting at the stations in an orderly fashion; at Bogotol, where we pull in at 7 in the morning; and at Atschinsk, where the train stops for three minutes, just long enough to admire the building, which resembles an armoured motorway service station. The ritual is the same every time. Little men in uniform check the wheels of the train, the passengers get off to stretch their legs and run up and down like inebriated ants and the odd person tries to purchase raspberries at one rouble the punnet, running the risk of missing the train.

After Krasnoyarsk, a town said to be much prettier than its station, the train crosses the Yenisey river, which is enormous and full of barges, and heads off into the taiga, the Siberian forest. At this time of year, it is infested with insects, including the clesh, which causes sleeping sickness and against whose sting the locals are vaccinated.

In the afternoon, we arrive at Taishet, where the BAM (Baikal-Amur-Magistral) leaves from. The BAM is the railway Stalin wanted which goes straight to the Pacific. Half a million unfortunate souls built it.

Once again today, regrettably, the sad ritual of the evening meal is repeated. Boris, our catering manager, keeps bringing the hour of the meal forward, maintaining that the stomach follows the sun, and the sun does not follow the Moscow time shown on the station clocks. It is with infinite melancholy that, at four o'clock in the afternoon, we make our weary way in sombre procession towards the dining car where the same old soup with yoghurt awaits, followed by the same old salame and gherkins, and an egg with peas. The peas made their appearance at lunch and will be with us at every meal from now on. To drink, there is over-sweet apple juice and salty mineral water. There is no beer, despite various attempts at bribing the waiter, and no vodka. Vodka was apparently banned on the Transiberian Railway after one or two unpleasant incidents some time ago (did someone try to seduce Big Lyuba ? The mind boggles)

Fourth Day

At 6 o'clock in the morning, we pull into Irkutsk, capital of Eastern Siberia. It is a cultivated and tolerant city, 3,245 miles from Moscow and 2,382 miles from Beijing. A lot of Russians get off, dragging their parcels and children with them and one of the passengers who get on is an extremely blond, robust Soviet schoolteacher, heavily made up and teetering on high heels.

Notwithstanding the hour, she is desirous of English conversation and even if nobody has thought to ask her, she informs us that she has to report to the school at Ulan Ude on the other side of Lake Baikal. The lake comes into view when our lady friend has finally shut up two tunnels later. These are the first tunnels since Moscow and are guarded by soldiers.

The train makes a steep descent to follow the lakeside for a few hours and then heads east again. We arrive at Ulan Ude at 2.42pm Moscow time but darkness is almost total as the local time is 8.42 pm. Having spent the day experimenting with the time zones - I followed Moscow time until Irkutsk and then jumped to local time - I am vaguely disorientated. However, before going to bed, I am forced to suffer Lyuba and Lyuba's latest blow below the belt. After several dozen people have been using the toilets for four days, the Lyubas have drastically increased their dose of Russian disinfectant. It is a murderous cocktail. Unwashed, I am in my couchette by 3.30 pm Moscow time as the train races through the Transbaikalian night.

Fifth Day

Everything changes after Lake Baikal. The mountains turn into hills and the faces in the stations take on an oriental aspect. This is the land of the Buryats, who speak a Mongolian dialect.

Ulan Bator is not far away. Only the slogans on the roofs and walls are still the same, and even more moving than they were in Moscow. Not long after Cita, we branch off the real Transiberian Railway, which continues towards Vladivostok and the Pacific. Our train heads down to Manchuria, following what was once the "Chinese Eastern Railway". Although five days on a train has proved too much for many, there are still some individuals who continue to stand looking resolutely out of the windows. The Buryats ride past on their horses over the rolling plains. The tin-roofed houses have their piles of wood ready for winter, which must be a serious business round these parts.

We arrive at Olovyannaya at 6.25 am Moscow time, 12.25 pm local time, with our legs huddled up on the seats. Lyuba and Lyuba are cleaning out the compartment and refuse to pass the vacuum cleaner around passengers' feet. Near here, on the banks of the river Onon, Ghenghis Khan, son of Bulantsar, a Mongol chieftain, was born in 1162. Eight hundred years on, the Soviets have managed to wreak havoc on the very same spot. I thought I had already seen the ugliest station on the Transiberian Railway but Dauriya, where packs of wild dogs chase carts along unmetalled streets, is worse and Zabaykalsk is worse than Dauriya.

Zabaykalsk is the border station and it is here that the Soviets give full vent to their own special art of getting on people's nerves. Everything grinds to a halt for three hours, there is a check of all the luggage and a "political control" of my books. When I ask why they make a political check on one's leaving the country instead of checking, more logically, on entry, I receive a bored look in reply. When we try to lower the window, a young soldier shouts at us to raise it at once. When we point out that it is hot, he says it makes no difference. After the rubles nobody anywhere else in the world wants have been changed along with the wheels of the train - Chinese railways have a narrower gauge - we set off again. The North Koreans, who feel they are almost home and are therefore understandably depressed, have been sitting for three hours in a hall that is so horrendous as to enter the realms of fantasy. It is stuccoed, with windows right up near the ceiling, flower-upholstered armchairs, a smell of mould, the usual aquarium green Soviet television set and a black and white display of regional economic achievements. Physiucally, Moscow is 4,167 miles away but it is right here in spirit.

The Chinese are waiting for us at Manzhouli and all seem to have agreed to smile. Customs formalities would be brief were it not for two young Americans who do not have a Chinese visa. The Russians do not want them back. The Chinese think about what to do for a couple of hours and then, the smile still firmly on their lips, inform the pair that they must purchase two visas on the spot, at over 350 pounds each. The Americans protest vocally but pay up and we are off once more.

Sixth Day

The Chinese do not like stops so we cross the northern part of Inner Mongolia without a break. We cross the 48th parallel and head down towards Harbin across the recently flooded Jilin region. Big Lyuba sits majestically at her post by the toilet, to which the concentration of

disinfectant now makes possible only the briefest of visits, provided one holds one's breath. Little Lyuba looks dreamily out of the window and thinks about the Soviet border guard she got dressed up for.

We reach Beijing at 8.30 in the morning. The most attractive thing on the station is the group of twelve French tourists with rucksacks who are looking forward excitedly to leaving for Moscow. Boris, the scourge of the dining car, who still has peas left, is waiting for them.