NATAS HOLIDAYS 2018

sweet CONTENT

Journey into the SLEEPING LAND

Cosy Siberian cottages nestled in a serene Baikal valley.

PHOTOS: JOHN S. HAMALIAN

Life slows down on the Trans-Siberian Railway, John S. Hamalian discovers

SIBERIA. The mere utterance conjures up adventure, mystery and wonder. I imagine boundless hinterlands, wide open and serene.

This Sleeping Land, as the indigenous people called it, is one of the last great wildernesses on Earth.

The best way to experience the region is on the Trans-Siberian Railway. The over 100-year-old line covers 9,289km across Russia and spans eight time zones. The full Moscow-Vladivostok route takes around seven days to complete with no stopovers.

Our trip began in Vladivostok. We would be travelling 4,104km westward to Irkutsk.

Old-world charm

The minute we boarded the train, I felt teleported into a world of movies featuring vintage trains: the Harry Potter series, Murder On The Orient Express, or the James Bond feature From Russia With Love.

The carriages are newer, but the style is classic and quaint, with chrome accents, dainty curtains and an antique feel.

Our first-class compartment had two beds and a small table in between.

The steadfastly dependable provodnitsa (part conductor, part server and part housekeeper) assists with any needs you may have. These stalwarts of the train act as "security", tidy up, provide hot light meals such as pirozhki (local stuffed buns) and even prepare tea upon request.

The dining car is modest and charming – with bright trim, red adornments and simple cushions, it looks and feels like an old 1950s diner. After exploring the whole train, we tucked into our modest bunks, slowly lulled to sleep by the rhythmic clinking of wheels against track. With one final "toot" of the old-fashioned horn, we were fast asleep.

Pleasant sojourn on the Amur

We woke up anxious to explore Khabarovsk, a city 766km from Vladivostok with well over half a million people.

"Welcome to Siberia!" our guide Igor bellowed out to us in a raspy voice when we met him at the classically designed Khabarovsk Train Station.

First up was a scrumptious Russian-style breakfast at a local eatery of kasha, or traditional rice milk porridge, and blini, crêpe-like wheat pancakes topped with sour cream or curd cheese.

Afterwards, we took a pleasant boat trip up the picturesque Amur River to Khabarovsk Bridge, an impressive double-decker design.

On a gentle bank overlooking the Amur, we beheld the brilliance of spring sunlight reflecting off the five massive golden onion domes capping the Transfiguration Cathedral, the third-largest Eastern Orthodox church in the world.

No visit to Khabarovsk would be complete without a relaxing stroll around Lenin Square, the second biggest plaza in Russia after Moscow's Red Square.

Igor treated us to some kvass, a traditional fermented beverage made from rye bread, then said farewell with an old Soviet coin gift and a big Russian bear hug.

Life on board

In our carriage, the atmosphere was neighbourly, each cabin a gateway to folks from all walks of life. There was a Canadian lady, a retired assistant warden of a prison, who was travelling with her friend. We also met a Korean professor of Internet security, who was fulfilling a lifelong dream to ride the railway.

Around dinnertime, the otherwise quiet dining car transformed into a bustle of communal fun, and we were soon joined by a peppy soldier with non-European features on his smiling, tough-weathered face.

"Gombojab!" he exclaimed, pointing to his broad chest, covered in rumpled olive green fatigues. "Buryat!" he continued, but we understood nothing.

Finally, Gombojab drew us a map on a napkin. We figured out he was from Russia's Buryatia Republic, whose people have their own culture and speak a Mongolic language; some still practise shamanism.

Although we could not comprehend one word between us, we still connected. Before he left, Gombojab pointed to his heart, then to mine, and grasped my hands with both of his, nodding at me sincerely. He was tough yet warm — a hardy, proud person who values trust and relationships. I would come to realise that these are common traits among Russians.

Slowing down

Later, the car lay quiet again, and we had time to just sit and gaze. The glass between you and the vast wilderness outside is like a window into the mysteries of nature.

Here, the sun streams down, brilliantly reflecting off rivers, as brooks wind their way through forests, trees dance across the countryside, birds glide freely, and cloud puffs hover silently overhead, floating gently above the lush woodlands below.

In the settled areas, quaint towns emerge from the desolate terrain. Traditional Siberian wooden homes dot the countryside, skirted by brown wooden picket fences neatly arranged to form living yards of hay and feed.

Cows quietly graze in green pastures as horses water at sparkling streams. The houses are charming and cottage-like, right out of a child's storybook of dreams, with soft plumes of smoke gently rising from their little red-brick chimneys.

Vladivostok Station, one end of the Trans-Siberian Railway.

The Trans-Siberian Railway is in no particular hurry, content with a slow, easy pace.

Distances between stations can be as much as 300km. During the longer stops, the train comes to a halt but life somehow gets re-energised. The stairs come down, workers do maintenance, staff have a smoke, lovers embrace and families reunite.

Babushkas (old ladies) sell street food outside: homemade dumplings, giant meat patties and pirozhki. Kiosks sell chak-chak — deep-fried dough balls drenched with hot honey — out of small holes in their plexiglass windows.

Time pauses, just for a few moments, then suddenly the odyssey continues once again.

Enchanting lake

After three more nights on board, we left the train at Irkutsk and headed to Lake Baikal, one of the highlights of Siberia.

Baikal is the deepest and oldest lake on Earth, holding 20 per cent of the planet's fresh water. We took a boat ride along its placid waters, passing by the famous Shaman Mountain, which looks like a small rock but is actually the tip of a gigantic underground mountain below.

Such was the allure of Baikal, we decided to stay overnight. Our hotel in Listvyanka was a resort-style wooden dwelling set in a quiet dale overlooking the lake. Facing us was a wondrous scene out of a fairy tale.

Puffs of smoke performed a waltz in the gentle wind, as they seeped out of chimneys set atop cottages, while pine trees blanketed gentle slopes of the hills surrounding the valley. The air is clean and crisp, cool but not cold.

With invigorating air, silent tranquillity and the alpine waters of Lake Baikal, coming here is like resetting your metabolism, refreshing your outlook, restarting your life.

On our balcony, sitting in very comfortable armchairs, we rested peacefully amid the sweet, simple bliss of nature.

A historical Siberian wooden building at Taltsy Museum of Architecture near Irkutsk.

GUIDELINES

- We flew on Singapore Airlines (SIA) to Seoul, then Siberian Air to Vladivostok. On the way back, we flew from Irkutsk to Bangkok on Siberian Air, then to Singapore on SIA.
- The Trans-Siberian Railway takes seven days in its entirety, with no stopovers. There are three classes of travel: First has two beds per cabin, Second has four beds per cabin, and Third offers bunks in an open carriage.
- Visas are required in advance for Singaporeans. It is best to go through a tour agent to arrange for the Visa Support Letter required to obtain the visa, but this can also be provided by a licensed hotel.
- It is advisable to buy your roubles prior to entry into Russia.
- Pack a few small carry-ons rather than one large suitcase for easier transiting on and off the train.
- Learn some basic Cyrillic, the Russian alphabet, to be able to read signage.
- Safe, boiled water is plentiful via the train's samovar (bring a ceramic cup or thermos and your favourite drink mix) but bring plenty of snacks for the ride.

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Sale Period: (GMT+8) 1000hr 16 Aug 2018 (Thu) – 2359hr 19 Aug 2018 (Sun) I Travel Period: 01 Aug – 30 Aug 2018, 10 Oct – 15 Nov 2018

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SYDNEY Destination NSW

NATAS HOLIDAYS 2018

COMBO 3
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* Terms & conditions apply * While stock lasts

CS Travel

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EUROPE (DISCOUNTED PRICE. NO GIMMICK.)

10D Discover Europe (EU10D) • Gelboorn "Venice Of The North" • De Haar Castle • Seine River Cruise • Amsterdam Canal Cruise • Eiffel Tower (Level 2) • Mont St Michel Dep: Mar 18/2019	10D Treasures Eastern Europe (EU10D/13JA/KZ) Prague, Vienna, Salzburg, Budapest, Bratislava, Plzeo Hrandy Castle • St Vitus Cathedral, Charles Bridge • Fisherman's Bastion, Buda's Castle • Schonbrunn Palace • Heroes Square Dep: Sep'18- Mar'19	10/12D Italy + Cinque Terre (EU10D/13JA/KZ) • Colosseum, Trevi Fountain, Leaning Tower of Pisa, St Mark's Square • Doges Palace, Bridge of Sighs • Premium Outlet Shopping, Vatican City Dep: Sep 18- Mar 19	11D Amazing Balkans/ Twin National Park (EU11A/KZ) • Dubrovnik City Walls (Entrance) • Sarajevo Wall Tunnel • Plitvice National Park • Postojna Cave (Train Ride Included) • Lake Bled Cruise Dep: Sep'18- Mar'19	12/14 Charming Europe (EU14A/KZ/EU10/FR) • Mount Titlis Cable Car + Lake Titisee Cruise • Eiffel Tower 2nd Level + Seine River • Amsterdam Canal Cruise Dep: Sep'18- Mar'19	12D Spain & Portugal (HA/KZ/EP) • UNESCO Site: Sagrada Familia • Alhambra Palace, Belem Tower • Mezquita Cathedral, Casa Mila • Shopping Chic Outlet Village Dep: Sep'18- Mar'19	11D Switzerland/Germany Austria & Dubai (EU11SG) • Neuschwanstein Castle (Entrance) • Schonbrunn Palace, Mozart's Birthplace, Swarovski Crystal Outlet Special Dep: 13 Sep	10D Winter Santa Claus Lapland (RV/HR/L) • SKM Husky Ride • Reindeer Sleigh Ride • Personalize Crossing Arctic Circle Certificate • Ranua Arctic Zoo Dep: 20 Nov'18- Mar'19	10D Norway & Finland Arctic Adventures (RV/HR/F) • Norwegian Fjord Landscape • King Crab Hunting with Lunch • Eat all you can King Crab/Reindeer Ride • Santa Claus Village • SKM Husky Ride Dep: 20 Nov'18- Mar'19	10D Iceland & Aurora Hunting (EA/KZ/HR) • Blue Lagoon • Thingvellir National Park • Black Sand Beach • Skogafoss • Jopkulsarlon Glacier Dep: Nov'18- Apr'19
fr$2199	fr$1299	fr$1299	fr$1699	fr$1699	fr$1899	fr$3399	fr$3888	fr$3888

AUSTRALIA

7D Discover Gold Coast (AO07L/R) • Dreamworld + Sea World + Helicopter Flight • Warner Bros Movie World • Glow Worm Cave • Wine Tasting • Farm Activities Dep: Dec 2,3	6D Perth & Farmstay (AP09R) • Caversham Wildlife Park + Fruit Orchard • Fremantle Weekend Market • Waterfown Brand Outlet Shopping Dep: Sep'18- Mar'19	7D Gold Coast 3 World + Farm (AO07L/R) • MovieWorld • SeaWorld • Brisbane City Tour • DreamWorld • Skypoint • Paradise Country Farm • Aussie BBQ Lunch Dep: Dec 4	7D Sydney + Melbourne (AM07J) • Blue Mountain & Philip Island Penguin Parade • Warrock Farm & Sydney Tower • Sydney Zoo/Aquarium • Dolphin Cruise Dep: Oct'18 – Mar'19	8D Hokkaido Winter Wonderland (JA08JW) • Hakodate, Noboribetsu, Lake Toya, Otaru, Asahikawa, Sounkyo, Sapporo • Mount Hakodate / Tengu Cablecar • Kitanomori Ice Pavilion • Asahiyama Zoo + Penguin March • Ice Museum + Trick Eye • Snow Activities Dep: Dec 4,7
fr$1899	fr$1499	fr$1699	fr$1999	fr$2399

EXOTIC

6D Discover Dubai (EX06DB) • Burj Khalifa Level 125 Observation • Skyrank & Dubai Frame • Miracle Garden & Flowers • Dubai Desert Safari • Abu Dhabi • 100% Meals • Louvre Museum + Grand Mosque Dep: Nov 14,15	10/12D Best Of Turkey (EST10/12) • UNESCO Site: Hagia Sophia, Cotton Castle & Goreme • Blue Mosque, Topkapi Palace, Belly Dance Dep: Oct'18- Mar'19	13D Amazing Egypt + Red Sea (EX13J) • Stay 5★ Le Meridien Pyramid Hilton Hurghada • 4N 5★ Nile Cruising • Camel Ride to Pyramids • Domestic Flight Dep: Sep 28	11D Best of USA West Coast (US09DF) • All 4★/5★ Hotels: Bogota, Cotton Castle & Goreme • Disneyland + California Adventure • Grand Canyon + Hoover Dam Dep: Nov'18- Mar'19	13/14D Eastern USA & Canada (US13J/X) • New York City, Times Square, Wall Street • Manhattan Sightseeing Cruise • Maid of Mist Sightseeing Cruise Dep: Sep- Oct'18/Mar'19
fr$1499	fr$899	fr$1999	fr$2899	fr$3299

USA

17D Alaska & Canadian Rockies (ASPCRN) Juneau, Skagway, Katchikan, Glacier National Park, Tracy Arm Fjord, Seattle, Vancouver • Richmond Premium Outlet • Columbia Ice Field • Glacier Sky Walk Dep: May 6, 20 Jun 10				
fr$4888				

JAPAN

7/8D Hokkaido + Hakodate Tour (JA06/7/8) • Mount Hakodate/Mount Tengu Cable Car • Noborobetsu Marine Park + Bear Ranch • Lake Toya, Lake Mashu, Lake Akan Dep: Sep'18- Mar'19	7D Central Japan (JP7C/JT/JO5SAT/JO5SUN) • Mount Fuji + Shirakawago Gassho Houses • Kiyomizu Temple + Todaiji + Nara Deer Park + Disneyland • Universal Studios Dep: Sep 18-24 Mar 19/25 Mar- 7 Apr 19 (Sakura)	7D Best of Hokkaido + Ice Breaking Cruise (JE7/8/9) Sounkyo, Abashiri, Lake Mashu, Mount Tento, Lake Akan Mount Io, Lake Akan, Sapporo, Otaru • Hokkaido Crab Dinner, JR Hotspring Resort, YK Ski Resort Dep: Jan 24,26 Feb 11,18,25 Mar 4,11	8D Hokkaido Winter Wonderland (JA08JW) Hakodate, Noboribetsu, Lake Toya, Otaru, Asahikawa, Sounkyo, Sapporo • Mount Hakodate / Tengu Cablecar • Kitanomori Ice Pavilion • Asahiyama Zoo + Penguin March • Ice Museum + Trick Eye • Snow Activities Dep: Dec 4,7	
fr$1999	fr$2099	fr$2299	fr$2399	

KOREA

8D Discover Korea (KK07L/R) • Ancient Mount Daedun on Cablecar ameed to Mount Daedun + Cablecar • Teddy Museum • Nanta Show + Fruit Picking • Ice Museum + Trick Eye • Tangerine Farm Dep: Oct 19	8D Dreaming of Korea + Jeju Island (KD08DKR) • All 5★ Hotel • Bibap Show • Nami Island • Everland • Trick Eye • Hello Kitty Land • Aqua World • Ice Gallery • DIY Experience Dep: Sep 18-15 Nov 18 7 Nov	8D Winter Of Korea + Jeju Island (KD08WSF) • 5★ Hotels + YK Ski • Bibap Show + DIY Experience • Teddy Bear Museum + Everland + Snow Fun • Ice Fishing , Sheep Farm & DIY Ice Cream Dep: Nov'18 - Mar'19		
fr$1399	fr$899	fr$1199		

TAIWAN

8D Discover Taiwan (TW08J/L) • Fly on EVA Air Hello Kitty Flight • DIY activities at Flying Cow Farm • Sun Moon Lake Sightseeing Cruise • 99% Meals Dep: Dec 7	7D Heart With Taiwan (TW7W8T) • Make Wish & Release Heavenly Lantern • Cingjing Farm + Activities + Night Markets • UNESCO Site: Taroko Gorge Dep: Aug'18- Mar'19	8D Taiwan + Alishan (TW8L/R) • East Coast Scenic Rail • Sun Moon Lake Sightseeing Cruise • Cingjing Farm + DIY Activities • Make Wish & Release Heavenly Lantern Dep: Sep 18- 30 Jan 19		
fr$1099	fr$599	fr$799		

CHINA

5/6/7/8D Guangzhou + Macao/ Zhuhai/Shenzhen/Zhongshan/ Kaiping/Xiamen/Fujian/ Mt. Wuyi/Jinmen (CN06F/KG/MG/KG/ZK/CZ/ CN06N/KG/MG/KG/ZK/CZ/ CN06N/KG/MG/KG/ZK/CZ/ CN06N