



Trading off the rails

The lengthy Trans-Siberian train journey may be famed for its stunning scenery, but for Mongolian merchants it is all in a day's work. Stu Lloyd goes along for the ride.

The hardest part of writing any travel story is coming up with a captivating introduction. Fortunately, just five hours into this six-day trans-continental adventure the story began to write itself. We were enjoying some rowdy late-night camaraderie in the dining car when, at the next dinette, a Mongolian trader – severe face sculpted by a blunt chisel – made a grab for a rival clansman. Two Mongolian police, like a Central Asian Laurel and Hardy, who were downing vodka shots with them, pushed them apart. The crop-haired, tattooed trader then stormed off to the kitchen. “He’s got a knife!” I shouted, as he lunged at his wavy-haired adversary with the 25cm blade. Laurel and Hardy crash-tackled him, pinning him to the table.

It was at that point I realised this journey, on Mongolian Train No. 6, was not some Disneyworld Siberian-themed ride. It was the real thing: a living, breathing, workaday trade route on which clattering carriages have replaced the camel caravans of the Silk Route.

At one end is Moscow, Russia, where the Ismailovskiy Park markets are testament to the endurance of early traders who journeyed overland from China. Tea caravans plied their lumbering way north from Beijing, through the Gobi Desert, the Mongolian Steppes, and west across the Siberian plains to Europe.

At Yaroslavskiy Station, the air was thick with smoke from the brown coal used to fire up the samovars (water

urns). Moscow hadn’t seen this much smoke since it was torched during the Napoleonic wars. Harried *provodnitsas* (carriage attendants) in grey skirts and jackets, caps at jaunty angles, shepherded excited passengers into their respective carriages. A mountain of bags, backpacks, suitcases and cardboard boxes was carted on board.

Brusque, unsmiling Mongolian traders busied themselves with juggling and secreting their goods. Ceiling compartments were prised open with screwdrivers, aisle trapdoors rent asunder. Any spare inch of useable storage space was commandeered under the indifferent gaze of the *provodnitsas*. Displaced by baggage, they bunked eight, even 10, to a four-berth cabin.

Three clans have a stronghold on this route, used mainly to supply their market stalls in Ulan Bator (UB). Typically, they travel from Ulan Ude (on the Russian-Mongolian border) to Moscow, collect their prized cargo and go back four times each trip. On the fifth journey they return to UB.

The traders, many in family groups including peach-cheeked munchkins, cared nothing for the autumn scenery, the *dachas* (country cottages) or Lake Baikal. They’d seen it all before. Or perhaps not.

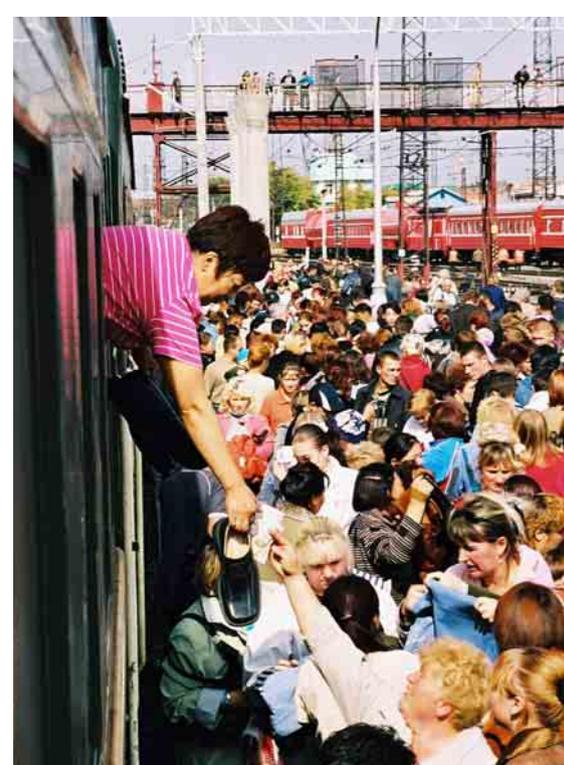
As we pulled into Kirov – our first daytime stop – the traders dismounted and the local townsfolk were there to meet them. They did a brisk trade in blankets, towels and

leather jackets. Peaked-capped Russian police pursued in vain, the traders simply blending into the crowd or re-emerging further down the train, smiling with each escape. Like our ersatz home team, we cheered them on. It was a game of cat and mouse repeated at each station. Some wore three or four leather jackets at a time (so as not to be seen carrying goods), simply slipping off the sample once a customer had paid. As his colleagues were rounding up rogue traders, one young, pink-cheeked policeman sidled on board, bought a jacket, then crept back on his beat.

“It’s not my problem, it’s Russian problem,” said the elfin Zottka, an ex-circus gymnast. “They want to buy, I want to make money.”

Omsk is the second-biggest city in Siberia and the throng on the kilometre-long platform was as sardined and anticipatory as a rock-concert crowd. “Jenski, jenski,” called a trader as sexy young Russian things parted with their cash for jeans. One opportunist did a roaring trade in black leather shoes, simply hanging them out of the window. The train had a habit of pulling out without a whistle or announcement, creating frantic last-minute purchases, retrieval of merchandise and a dash through the hordes for the door. Unsuspecting traders were occasionally left behind.

At Ilanskaya, two European girls were pick-pocketed of



Clockwise from left: the train ploughs through the Siberian landscape; goods stacked high for sale in Ismailovsky Market; one of the hundreds of corridors inside the market with one of Moscow's many factories in the background; before each stop, traders prepare their goods so they can hit the ground running; many sales are made without the traders even leaving the train; Mongolian vendors take on supplies under the watchful eye of a Russian policeman.

US\$400 by shifty-looking men in leather caps among the seething human tide. At Taishet, a leather jacket was sold and being proudly worn by its new owner before the train had fully stopped. Zottka was beaming – he'd sold two pairs of high-heeled shoes in the two-minute stop.

Tea caravans used to pass through Irkutsk, and fur traders peddled their pelts in this military outpost. A gold boom hit in the early 19th century, when a lively brew of prospectors, fur traders, tea merchants, exiles and ex-cons earned it the sobriquet of "the Paris of Siberia".

The raffish frontier continued: a blazing row erupted outside my cabin around four in the morning (cheap vodka has a lot to answer for). Mongolian is a violent karate-chop of a language. Oral blows were traded until Laurel and Hardy arrived to lead one of the protagonists away, handcuffed. The next morning, a forlorn-looking *provodnitsa* was looking for a doctor: she'd had two teeth knocked out by a thump in the jaw from a trader. My *provodnitsa* wasn't entirely innocent in this racket, ferrying stuff to and fro and selling Queen Mother-style hats and backpacks. "Rusacki, rusacki!" I yelled on her behalf at one station. Even Sergeant Laurel, dressed in his civvies, did a nice line in leather jackets: a law unto himself.

Genghis Khan swept through this south-eastern region in 1239. Ulan Ude, a military outpost since 1668, was a key centre for northbound tea caravans, with a local

aristocracy of tea barons and traders. In the 18th and 19th centuries, these now-crumbling godforsaken border towns were the most pivotal trading centres in the world. Here we bade farewell to the band of modern Mongol merchants who'd completed another lap of dishonour.

Shortly after, we hissed to a halt at Naushki, on the Russian border. The mere sight of the austere green uniforms incited a cold-sweated nervousness. What was secreted in, on or around our cabin? I was none too reassured by an ITAR-Tass news agency report that stated that 60 per cent of Russian border guards were too unstable to carry guns safely.

Sniffer dogs snuffled their way through, checking cabins and luggage. Soldiers banged the side of carriages. "All out!" barked an officer. We were ordered out of our cabin, backpacks removed. A soldier in camouflage fatigues checked our ceiling and the aisle floors. Aha – loot! Our Mongolian neighbours, a skinny young woman in black and her stocky pockmarked accomplice, were interrogated. A succession of officers studied the stash of cardboard boxes. Negotiations ensued. A trolley-load of goods disappeared off to one side of the station, followed by smiles of relief from our neighbours. Four frustrating hours later we were given the all-clear. The train inched its way across no man's land, barbed wire and a cigarette-begging soldier my last images of Russia.

The traders now had two kilometres to reset their stash in a manic reshuffle. Goods in improbable quantities rematerialised, some from under the *provodnitsa's* stove. The cabin next to ours bulged with boxed baggage.

The barren formation of the Khentii Mountains, factories, wood-framed houses and fenced-in *ger* tents heralded our arrival in UB, one of the world's oldest capitals. The city is a buzzing hodgepodge centred on the Soviet-styled Sukhbataar Square. The canvas-covered *zakh* (black market) is the final repository for much of what is brought in. All manner of Russian and Chinese goods, *thangkas* (religious paintings), cashmere shawls, cowbells, even camels are haggled for. It is a notorious black-spot for "Ali Babas" (pick pockets), but there's another reason it should be called the Thieves Market. A stall-keeper with a vaguely familiar face wanted 2,200 roubles (\$615) for a sheepskin-lined leather jacket, which I knew I could get for only 1,500 roubles in Ismailovsky Park – just 6,300 kilometres and eight time zones away. But I dared not ask her to slash her price.

Getting there: Dragonair (www.dragonair.com) flies from Hong Kong to Beijing daily. Cathay Pacific (www.cathaypacific.com) and Aeroflot (www.aeroflot.com) fly from Hong Kong to Moscow.