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Survival Guide to the Trans-Siberian Railroad

The Trans-Siberian Railroad has for whatever reason become a mainstay of bucket lists over the last thirty years, but one must not jump into riding the Russian train without a little training. Here is our guide to successfully riding the train through Siberia.

Trains are the best way to get around Russia because of the *Platzkart*, a word borrowed from German which in the original translates as “moving-hell-dungeon.” The advantage of traveling by *platzkart*, a train car stuffed with berths and without doors or screens, is that there is no privacy so any pretense about being a human being is thrown out the window and you may do as the Buddhist self-help book writer Pema Chodron suggests and “Abandon Hope.”

This may assist you in accepting your inevitable death.

Plus, you do not waste money eating out at the best fancy-schmancy restaurants Siberia has to offer.

But there is a specific procedure you ought to know before boarding a train. Failure to follow protocol may result in getting the bejeezus kicked out of you.

Preparing for the Trip:

You will need to pack slippers, long johns, and a comfortable t-shirt for the ride. Plan to carry: water, tin cups, salt and pepper in old film canisters, and any other food which can be reconstituted in hot water, the one thing provided for free on the *platzkart*. That means: cup-o-noodles, tea, instant coffee, chicory root. Uncut bologna, bread, and cucumbers are standard issue. Do not cut your food, rather, carry a small hunting knife.

At the Train Station:

Stock up on last minute water, beer, and soda. Your car may not have air conditioning or heating. Your car may have too much air conditioning or heating. Sit on your bags with your *provozhayushiye*, the people seeing you off.

Find your track. Approach your car but do not enter. Stand awkwardly

with your *provozhayushiye* sighing and saying “Yeah, well, yup, okay,” as often as humanly possible.

Show your ticket to your *provodnik* (a man in his early thirties who always dreamed of train work) or *provodnitza* (a woman in her early forties who figures it is too late for a career change) and she will ask to see your passport. Show your passport. She will ask to see your ticket. Show her your ticket. She will ask to see your passport again. Show her both. She will say, “Hold on young man! One at a time!”

Waiting for Takeoff:

Enter the train. If your *provozhayushiye* haven’t got the message yet they may enter with you until the *provodnik* kicks them out. Your *provozhayushie* will stand outside the window. Scream, “What? I can’t hear you!” at your *provozhayushiye* as the train tiptoes away.

The First Twenty Minutes:

The first period of the *platzkart* is spent putting off getting changed into your slippers and pajama pants and eating dinner as long as possible. It’s the only thing you have to do for the next ten hours.

Survey your neighbors. If you have a *babushka* (senior citizen), immediately complain it is too hot to ingratiate yourself to your *babushka*. Offer to put your *bubashka*’s things in the up-above area, or in the down-below area under her bed.

- NB: Help the *babushka* as much as you can. She has been through more than you have and has candy.
- NB2: Do not touch your *babushka*! Do not feed your *babushka*! Do not lick your *babushka*!
- NB3: *Do not reconstitute your noodles!*

Scouting:

You should identify your neighbors and prepare for each type before engaging in contact. Besides *babushka*, types of *platzkart* riders include:

Teenagers getting loaded — Avoid at all costs.

Middle aged women with awkward middle-school children who do nothing but complain and use loud toys and say they are too scared to climb up to the top bunk — Do your best to pretend you know a thing or two about raising children and give her some advice about how to handle him which she definitely wants to hear right now.

Girl in the T-Shirt from a Supermarket Chain from the Southern United States — Spend your first two hours building up the courage to say

hello and ask her where she got that shirt, then freak out and cover your head in the sheet just when she turns to talk to you, you pathetic coward.

Foreigners — Most foreigners are Swiss backpackers doing the Trans-Siberian Railroad because it is “different”. We do not know where they read it was “different” to take a train to Krasnoyarsk, but we suspect they all read the same magazine.

Foreigners who know some Russian — Beware foreigners, especially Americans who speak good Russian. They will try to read a hipster fashion magazine, the kind which requires full concentration to machete chop through the cutting-edge slang and transliterated English words.

DO NOT BE FOOLED. They will hide their iPhone behind their hipster fashion magazine where in fact they are typing out notes about you for some culturally insensitive blog.

The Most Beautiful Woman in the World who is apparently a urologist-in-training — Don’t try to understand how she got there or what she’s doing on the *platzkart*, or the fact that the book she is reading is entitled “The Life of the Spermatozoa”, just try not to stare when she changes into her nightie. Offer her a cucumber and some salt from your film canister.

The Muzhik — He will ask you if you respect him, and if you do, you must drink with him. Do not drink with him, or comment on his shirt which says “Real Gentleman” in English, nor his blood-red speedo-style underpants which warn like a museum sign “Please do not touch with hands.”

- NB: Do not feed your *muzhik!* Do not drink with your *muzhik!*
- NB2: Do not laugh at your *muzhik's* jokes! It may be a trap.
- NB3: Always say that you respect your *muzhik*, *especially* if you do not.
- NB3.1: Do not reconstitute *his* noodles.

Getting Changed Into Bed Clothes

You may either go to the bathroom (not recommended), wear stripper pants which rip off to reveal an already ready-for-bed outfit, or have a friend or neighbor hold up a sheet to cover your body as you go from work pants to pajama pants. Offer to turn your back to allow your *babushka* some privacy.

- NB Avoid the bathroom at all costs!!! If you go, wear your slippers. It’s cold, wet, and people miss the target as the train shakes.

Dinnertime

Place down old news or chained carbon copy paper as a place mat. Do

not ask your *babushka* to move so you can reach the table. This is bad form. Rather, stare at your food in discontent to allow time for her to take pity on you. Being presumptions will result in admonition.

Wipe your hands with baby wipes.

Take turns climbing to the end of the corridor to reconstitute your dehydrated noodles.

- NB: Do not reconstitute your noodles.

Point the small hunting knife at your neighbor in a joking fashion before cutting your bologna and politely offering your neighbor the bologna. Then state, “But I am joking, comrade.”

Heartily guffaw.

Fill your tin cup with hot water for tea at the samovar where you did not reconstitute your noodles.

When your *babushka* offers berries, first do not accept the request, then accept the request, which will result in admonition. “You are young,” she will say. “Time to get married,” she will say. To whom? To her?

As though by taking the berries you are engaging in a pact to please your *babushka* with a premature and unfulfilling marriage. Take a couple of minutes to feel like a statistic.

Time for Bed

Unfold one sheet horizontally when you need it vertical. Tuck the sheet under your own bed first before applying the sheet to small children or your *babushka*.

Your pillow is filled with an incredible material manufactured in the years Kirov was alive and kicking. It is denser and heavier than gold.

- NB: Be sure not to drop pillow on your *babushka*.

Now venture to the bathroom, IF YOU DARE, to take off your makeup.

There is one hour of darkness during the summer, and 23 during the winter. Either way, we suggest earplugs and a night mask. People like to have late-night signing or crying sessions on the *platzkart*.

The time has come to eavesdrop. Two *muzhiks* in the next berth are talking. “Once we get some bars on my phone we have got to call this number,” the first *muzhik* says.

“What number?” says the second *muzhik*.

“You have to pay, but this girl on the other end, she talks to you, you know, like she’s interested in you.”

“No way.”

“Way. It’s hot. And then you can, like, you know,” the first *muzhik* says.

“You mean right here in front of everybody?” the second *muzhik* says.

“No,” the first *muzhik* says. “Let’s go to the restaurant car.”

Now lie awake in your berth for the next ten hours wondering when the awful beer hall songs will at last cease.

Cockadoodledoo

If you have slept through the sunrise, your *provodnik* will wake you with a firm kick in the shin. Run immediately to the bathroom to apply your makeup before anyone sees you without your face. Tell the people already in line it is a poo emergency. Suckers.

You must now negotiate changing back into day clothes with your *babushka*, and repeat procedure as seen in §*Dinnertime* but this time with instant coffee from a tin can.

1 day down... 1 hour break

Welcome to Izhevsk! Too bad you’re going to Vladivostok.

Leave the train to stock up on noodles and vodka and crystal-wares at the kiosk near the train and run back before it leaves twelve minutes later.

REPEAT ENTIRE PROCEDURE 7 TIMES!

Welcome to Siberia!

REPEAT ENTIRE PROCEDURE 7 MORE TIMES!

Welcome to the Far East! Had a look around? Time to go back.¹

1 Shortly after publication of this guide, the *platzkart* was phased out of use in Russian trains.