

On a Different Track

By Jonathon Reynolds

Cruising into Russia via Estonia on the Tallinna Ekspress



It's midnight in the middle of a Russian winter and as I lie in my top bunk on a Tallinn to Moscow train I think I might be suffering from heatstroke. There is no chance of air flow from the window. It was minus 28 Celsius when we left Tallinn and it's now even colder in the dark Russian night.

Arriving in Russia by train from Tallinn is not only cheaper than flying to Moscow it also gives a sense of scale to the country and has the added bonus of allowing me to explore Estonia. The Tallinna Ekspress has two classes of carriage – two bunks to a room first class 'Spalny Wagon' and second class four-berth 'kupe'. In the kupe, my companions are an elderly Estonian couple on the lower bunks and, Alysia, a poetry scholar on the other upper.

From the bunk below me emanate the loudest snores in the entire carriage – I know this because I walked down the corridor and I could hear him from beside the samovar at the other end of the wagon. Across from him his wife, a delightful babushka, chimes in with a higher pitched snore. I'm sure it's the result of too much food and drink – they have been feeding me constantly since we crossed into Russia.

On their way to visit a daughter in Moscow, they grew up in the Soviet era when travel between countries was not as easy and Russians – especially ones in uniform – were feared. They showed pictures of their daughter and grandchildren, then settled back to wait for the border. We crossed into Russia at the town of Narva – an easy procedure with the border guards doing a cursory inspection of the kupe, flicking through my passport, then stamping my visa and handing it back. They spent the most time with Alysia, not giving her trouble over her documents rather flirting with her. They didn't even ask the older couple any questions just stamped their visas and moved on.



Once past Customs, the couple relaxed and pulled out a huge feast of food – beer, chicken, soups, breads, a sort of meat pie, juice, apples and chocolate. I'm not sure where they kept all this

and I couldn't figure out who they thought would eat it all. They expected Alysia and me to help them – in fact they were very insistent, tugging my sleeve to make me sit and with elaborate pantomime showing that I should eat and drink. Alysia speaks perfect English and acted as a translator. She is a specialist in Russian and English poetry – specifically Christopher Marlow and Russian women's poetry and had quotes on the tip of her tongue throughout the entire two-hour meal. Four times throughout the meal she left the kupe and returned with four glasses of tea in metal holders. These tea glasses are unique to each train in Russia. The glass holders are elaborately cast metal and hold a plain glass. The glasses are available from the Provodnica – the train woman who is in charge of the entire carriage. The Provodnica ensures sure that everyone is in the right compartment, that no one gets unruly, hands out sheets and blankets for the bunks and keeps the samovar full of hot water at all times. Every carriage has its own samovar – generally wood fired – and when the train stops at a station you can smell the

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wood smoke through cracks in the windows.

Finally we struggled into our bunks and the couple instantly fell asleep, their snores keeping time with the sway of the train as we rush through tiny villages lit up by just a few windows throwing yellow light across the snow.

"Do you know any Russian poetry?" Alysia's voice whispers across the hot air.

I admit my ignorance of Russian poets and their work other than the name Pushkin. Alysia starts to recite a poem in Russian, the rich guttural sounds acting as a counterpoint to the chatter of the wheels on the rails. The couple below us slowly stop snoring as if to hear the words better in their sleep. One poem follows another and then another. Pushkin follows Blok and Mayakovsky follows Yevtushenko. From Russian she moves to Armenian poets and English poets. Then Alysia switches to women poets, Tsvetaeva and Ahmatova. Between poetry we talk of the future of Russia and the changes since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

As I finally drift off to sleep I think that this type of sharing of cultures is not possible in an aeroplane. Travelling by train into Russia is a civilised way to ease into a country so rich in culture.

Early in the morning I wake to the train slowing down and the sound of the couple below bustling around and packing. We are soon at the station in Moscow and a few minutes later the crowd swallows up my train companions, the Estonian couple to the arms of their daughter and grandchildren and Alysia with a few words of Russian poetry disappears in a swirl of people heading for the Metro. I look around at the huge station, the local trains disgorging masses of people from the outer villages and following them I find my way onto the Metro and into the heart of Moscow.

Tallinn to Moscow Train: if you go

Flights – Airlines connecting London to Tallinn include Easyjet, KLM, Lufthansa, SAS, Estonian Air and many more. Flights cost around £55 return on Easyjet, are occasionally cheaper on Baltic or Estonian Air and average out between £70 and £100 return.

Visas – For travel to Russia a visa is needed; it costs £45 plus cost of visa invitation for a 30-day tourist visa. This can be arranged through visa services in London or done online through agencies like www.visahouse.com. It takes a week for processing unless you pay extra for same day service.

Train tickets – Tickets can be bought at the station in Tallinn or Moscow. To book in advance from outside Estonia, email direct to GoRail at reisid@gorail.ee, and pick up the tickets (and pay for them) at the station in Tallinn. In Moscow, try www.sv-agency.udm.ru, www.hostels.ru or www.waytorussia.net

Journey time – 15 hours 10 min and very punctual.

Cost – Tallinn-Moscow £42 one-way in a 2nd class kupe, or £86 1st class. For an interesting return take the train from Moscow to Helsinki via St. Petersburg. Then take the ferry from Helsinki to Tallinn and catch your return flight back to London. This lets you visit Moscow, St. Petersburg and Helsinki as well as Tallinn and you'll see some awesome country and meet some great people.

Top Five Russian Train Trips

Trans-Siberian: Everybody's heard of this epic journey across two continents. Everything from European Moscow to the vastness of Siberia and the exoticness of Asia on one week-long train trip. You can continue either through Mongolia to China or onwards through Russia to Vladivostok. There will be lots of world travellers on this train.

www.justgorussia.co.uk or www.trans-siberian.co.uk

Moscow to St. Petersburg: The Red Arrow. There are actually two great train trips here. One is the very fast express – the Red Arrow dashing between the two most famous and visited cities in Russia. The other is the night train which allows you to sleep on the train and arrives in St. Petersburg as the sun is coming up. Not only is it cheaper but it saves the cost of a night's accommodation! www.realrussia.co.uk or www.waytorussia.net

Moscow to Sochi: This train is one of the nicest I have ever been on – modern carriages and some great scenery en route. The best part though is the destination. Sochi is an undiscovered (in the west) resort town on the shores of the Black Sea. With great spa treatments, coastal living and fantastic mountains rising up behind, Sochi is the seaside destination in Russia – even Putin has his own place on the shores here. www.sochiclub.ru

Moscow to Murmansk: It takes you above the Arctic Circle to a city where no city should be – huge blocks of apartments strung along the coast with no trees and bitterly cold winters. This place illustrates the endurance of Russians. On the way the landscape ranges from river valleys to open farmland and eventually to almost treeless plains. Overwhelming in its immensity almost as much as Siberia. www.cinderellatravel.com

The Trans Siberian BAM: Not to be confused with its much more famous sister to the south, the BAM – the Baikal-Amur Mainline – rattles along through the true vastness of Siberia skirting the north of Lake Baikal and passing through mountains and endless forests. Stopping at small villages and large cities, a trip on the BAM is unlike any other train trip in the world. www.sv-agency.udm.ru or www.baikalcomplex.com

