

# ***Across Siberia with the Christmas Chicken***



***Griff Kane***

## ***St Petersburg***

The only time we had been to St Petersburg before it had taken us a month to get there by train from London, so it came as a bit of a shock to be trundling through the outer suburbs in a packed minibus just seven hours after locking our front door in Newcastle. We'd been planning this experience for eleven years, originally as part of a massive Round the World Trip which we had tearfully abandoned in Russia due to Karen's mother's illness. Seven and a half years later we were back, older, plumper and softer, and with a lot more cash.

St Pete is one of *those* cities - grand, historic and romantic - that you never tire of. The smell of Russia - dusty, gritty and, well, cabbagey - put us right back in the place, but didn't rob the city of its grandeur. Of course with the Cyrillic signs on the shops you couldn't be in any other country (OK you could, but you know what I mean). I used the signs to practice my reading of Russian, although most of the signs were either Oboov (shoes) or Mebel (furniture) which didn't help me refresh my vocab much. The former overtook the latter as we got closer to the centre - in St Petersburg you're never far from a shoe shop.

Meanwhile Karen was being chatted up by Sergei, a middle-aged well-educated Russian guy who lived in Germany. I tuned in and out of the conversation, but one anecdote stuck in my mind. Germany had been sending its delinquents out into remote Siberia to live off the land for a while and knock some sense into them. Even more than ever, I was getting an odd feeling about how wise this trip was.

The Trans-Siberian Railway. One of the world's classic journeys, if not *the* classic journey, then at the very least, *the* classic *rail* journey. The name just has that most fantastic ring to it - a hefty dollop of deprivation, danger, romance and adventure, charging through the most wild of wildernesses, but all without leaving your bed. It is a trip of superlatives: the world's longest train trip, across Russia, the world's largest country, through Mongolia which still holds the record for the biggest empire ever, then finally into the world's most populous country, China.

Strictly speaking, as any purist will tell you, we weren't doing the real Trans-Siberian route from Moscow to Vladivostok, but the more popular Trans-Mongolian route to Beijing. Personally I'd rather eat slugs than listen to

a bloody purist, and this was Trans-Siberian enough for me, and, it was starting in St Petersburg.

Legend has it that the city is built on the bones of the slave labourers and serfs who were roped into action when Peter the Great decided to construct a capital city on the marshes around the Fortress he had built to consolidate a victory over the Swedish Empire. The fact that Sweden had an empire at all is one of those revelations that depresses me as how anglocentric our education system is – I'd never heard of it. After the revolution, far from setting the workers free, Lenin continued the tradition by working thousands more to death to build the legendary Metro. Despite the famous and beautiful art deco chandeliers, sculptures and murals, this was built as a massive nuclear bomb shelter.

Karen got her first taste of brutal Russian bureaucracy in the Metro when we got off the airport bus. Russians are the loveliest people in the world, but as soon as they get behind a desk they suddenly mutate into irritable hobgoblins. We had tried to buy a stash of ten Metro tokens for convenience, but they were limited to four per person as they were being phased out in favour of the magnetic tickets used everywhere else in the world. Our Russian skills weren't good enough to translate the relevant sign, but we got the gist from the indignant gesticulation and harrumphing of the woman in the kiosk.

### **Jobs You Wouldn't Want #1: Russian Escalator Attendant**

You sit in a 2' by 2' booth and watch three escalators. On the control panel, each escalator has a direction switch, a start button and a stop button. You have two telephones: one for emergencies, but God knows what the other one is for. You watch people go up and down the escalators all day. Maybe if there is heavy traffic in one direction you change the direction of the middle escalator. Nothing else happens.

Our hotel was a tidy little boutique affair on Vassiley Island right in the crotch of the Y of the almost completely frozen little and large Nevas and almost right between the grand sites of the Winter Palace (better known as the Hermitage) and the Peter and Paul Fortress. It was brand new, stocked with IKEA furniture and staffed by a never-ending succession of exceedingly attractive young ladies.

The next morning dawned smudgily at about 10 am and we dragged ourselves out of bed with equal vim not long after. We had managed to miss visiting the legendary Hermitage last time, so we went straight there. Incorporating the Tsars' Winter Palace and the small and large Hermitages, it is the world's largest museum with 3 million items, 1057 rooms, and 117 staircases. The opulence is staggering – room after room panelled with exotic marbles, gold leaf and semi-precious stones. One room had a vase the size of a generous Jacuzzi, another had a perfect British Stately Home style study with a mezzanine landing to reach the upper bookcases. The scale of the place was so vast that eventually the glitz started to pale, but the fact that all of this had been packaged up during the War and sent across the Urals to safety, leaving a million people to be shot, blown up and starved to death in the siege of Leningrad, brought on a different kind of awe.

The Museum's artwork is one of the World's greatest, if somewhat unsung, collections. Like all major museums - and I've always thought this is extremely stingy and undemocratic - the exhibits on show only represent a fraction of the total collection. The guidebook hinted that this was rumoured to contain a Caravaggio and much to Karen's delight this had been dug out and put on display. While she marvelled at this rarely seen example of her favourite artist's work, I took my short attention span around the other Italian masters, marvelling at how melodramatically camp they were. St Sebastian looked out of the picture as if he was saying "Oo-oo, someone tied me up and fired arrows into my body" while John the Baptist appeared to be cooing "Don't stick your big sword into me, you brute!" as he knelt in front of his executioner.

### **Jobs You Wouldn't Want #2: Toll Toilet Attendant**

You sit in a 3' by 3' booth between two toilet cubicles. You take money off the punters through a tiny hole and listen to them go about their business on the other side of a very thin wall. Periodically you clean the cubicles. The rest of time you pour yourself a cup of tea from the samovar crammed in your booth and read a crappy gossip mag.

Yunona market sprawls on open land by the docks, well out of town at the end of a long dusty and very windy road, lined with the crumbling pastel megablocks of the typical Soviet suburb. The first area of the market consists

of people selling an incredible assortment of junk off tarpaulins: broken televisions, cracked open radio cassette players, printed circuit boards, power supplies and dusty fragments of car engines. This was an economy of recycling, reusing and making do, far from the glitz of Nevsky Prospekt. People in grey anoraks shuffled along these stalls, picking up the broken items and scrutinising them for the potential of repair or parts.

Further in, the formal corrugated iron stalls were selling legions of bootleg music CDs, software and porn movies. For some reason, none of the latter were translated into Russian, so we could read their awful porn-pun titles (“Blondes Eat More Cum”, anyone?). There were at least two stalls crammed full of remote controls, others full of electronic meters, soldering irons and oscilloscopes – further proof of the mend and make do culture of the ordinary Russian.

We caught a bus back to the Metro. Kaz fell asleep and I watched the world go by through the grime encrusted window. We hit a shallow river valley where the blocks gave way to another unique feature of Russian life – a clutch of dachas – a cross between a summer cabin and an allotment where food is grown to augment what is now plentifully available in the supermarket, but which only a few years ago was rather scarce.

We had eaten well so far (the cliché of Russian food being poor is as rubbish as the one about the women being ugly), but we decided to spoil ourselves even more on the last night in Peter by going to the Old Custom House on Vassily Island. We dressed as smartly as we could in our travel gear given that it was about  $-6^{\circ}\text{C}$  outside, but we immediately felt scruffy as we were ushered to a table well away from the centre of the floor. A card on the table listed previous customers – world leaders, Hollywood celebs and British minor royalty (who to my amusement are always given far more kudos abroad than at home) – started to ring alarm bells. Our waiter, the spit of Mr Kidd the gay hitman from *Diamonds Are Forever*, handed us our menus with an oily flourish. Only mine had the prices and I didn’t understand them. If they were in roubles, they were peanuts. If they were in “units”, a euphemism for dollars used in some restaurants to protect them from inflation, they were exorbitant. In the meantime, Kaz was busy ordering, as it turned out, extremely expensive cocktails.

There was hardly anyone else in the place, and as the night went on they filtered out. A jazz band set up and struck up with some standards. We ordered another bottle of Soviet Champagne. The waiter brought it over and,

opened and served it over Karen's shoulder, then did an elaborate backing-off-bowing-and-scraping thing, but his heel caught a chair and he lost balance, windmilling his arms to keep him on his feet. I was killing myself not to laugh. Kaz, now well oiled, exclaimed "Wot?" loudly and spun round to see what had happened, further embarrassing the man. When he came with the desserts, Karen, instead of saying "Spasebo Bolshoi" - thank you very much - came out with "Skolko Placebo", which roughly translates as "how much is the placebo?". That was the final straw. He snuck off and we never saw him again.

Three very well dressed men came in. Two of them, big and beefy, stood by the door while the third took a table at the front of the stage and ate alone. He smiled avuncularly at us as we, by now even more lubricated, made requests for the band which they did their best to play. When the bill came, the alcohol dulled the shock of the most expensive meal I had ever paid for. The Soviet Champagne at £8 a bottle probably saved us a further £100 on our £150 bill.

The large gentlemen at the door nodded to us as we wrapped ourselves in our in appropriate winter wear and went back out into the cold. Their boss continued to eat, now completely alone in the restaurant except for the band.

We crossed the little and large Nevas and wandered around the labyrinthine battlements of the Peter and Paul Fortress enjoying the nighttime views across the river to the Winter Palace. Young lovers went past hand in hand below - the young men in military outfits, the young ladies demure in duffle coats - their ambles had a lovely romantic innocence as if they just couldn't get enough of each others company before duty called again. In the background, drunks staggered across the frozen Neva and its offshoots, somehow avoiding the thin ice.

We had enjoyed St Petersburg so much, it was a real drag to pack up - hungover - say goodbye to the lovely ladies at the hotel and take a taxi across town to Moskva Vauxhall for our first train east - No 2, the Rossiya, to Moscow.

### ***Train no 2: The Rossiya***

Getting on a Russian Train is not straightforward. The immaculately bleached blond and heavily made up Provodinitsa stood by the carriage steps, checking each ticket carefully against ID cards and, in our case, passport numbers. We settled into our first class compartment and marvelled over the

food kit provided, before the Provodinitsa reappeared to take the requisite section of the ticket and some cash for the bedding, which for some reason is always extra.

The train left just before midnight, so there wasn't much time to do anything but open the bottle of Soviet Champagne I had grabbed at the station, liberally toast the first stage in our journey, and go to bed. I lay awake for a while, getting used to the swaying and jerking of the carriage, feeling my skeleton and organs schlooping up and down inside my skin. I drifted off to sleep, but woke occasionally through the night. Once I snuck a glance out through the curtain – pitch black for a while, then suddenly a tiny village of wooden cottages drenched in snow and lit by an eerie green light, then back to black.

## ***Moscow***

I had one of those Wow! moments when the taxi shot past the famous technicolour onion domes of St Basil's, but apart from that I didn't take to Moscow. Where St Petersburg is refined and beautiful, the capital is brash and vulgar. Maybe it was the former GUM state department store, legendary for its lack of stock during the Soviet era, now crammed full of designer boutiques, while outside the homeless sleep on the Metro ventilation shafts for warmth and babushkas sell pathetic amounts of goods (three rolls of masking tape!) for pennies on the subway steps. Maybe Moscow just has that rudeness that most capital cities, like Paris, New York and London seem to have. Or maybe it was the hotel.

With its 3200 rooms and 6000 beds, the Rossiya used to be the biggest hotel in the world. Each of its sides was about 250m long, giving each floor a kilometre-long murky rectangular track of worn carpet punctuated by regular wooden double fire doors. We can vouch for this estimation as we got our directions wrong and dragged our luggage around the (extremely) long way. There were allegedly dozens of bars, restaurants and cafes scattered around the corners of the thirteen floors, but few of them were open, leading to numerous wild goose chases. An advert in one of the lifts was for a massage service within the hotel, apparently staffed by a pretty blond in a leopard-skin bikini. Our room looked out over the steaming towers of the power station opposite.

The museums of Moscow are well spread out across the city. We started at the Central House of Artists where I was shocked by the abrupt obliteration of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century movements by the revolution. The constructivism of Rodchenko and his peers was replaced overnight by cheesy social realism – rural scenes of muscled young men toiling heroically in the corn filled fields while virtuous young ladies stood by with their simple but wholesome lunch. Many of these were painted in the 30's when Stalin was starving millions of the Ukrainian rural population to death with his agricultural production 'experiments'. Realism indeed.

Outside in the sculpture park, an area had been set aside as a final resting place for all the communist statues that had stood across the city. Some of the more hated communist henchmen were missing noses. In the centre, surrounding a battered Stalin, was a modern addition of barbed wire cages full of stone heads to represent all those killed in the Gulags.

Up the river was the largest and by far the worst sculpture I have seen in my life. A couple of years before, Yuri Luzhkov, the flamboyant mayor of Moscow, decided a tribute to Peter the Great was required, despite the fact that Peter hated Moscow and had built St Petersburg to replace it as a capital. Peter is portrayed as a 95m high gym-bunny, dwarfing the sailing ship upon whose deck he stood, clutching its etiolated wheel in one hand and a parchment in the other. It looked like it had been designed by a particularly gormless Meat Loaf fan.

Back across town, at the Contemporary History Museum's special exhibit of political posters, the mystery of what happened to the cutting edge artists in the 1910s was solved. They stopped producing art for art's sake and became the PR arm of the revolution, their abstract painted shapes being used in block colours as backgrounds for Lenin to speak to the masses or for the blue-overalled workers to march diagonally forwards to a glorious future. For Rodchenko and his contemporaries this must have come in handy in later years when abstract art drifted in and out of favour with the powers that be. None of this was explained in either of the museums.

The main section of the museum had an odd feel about it as it obviously hadn't been overhauled since the fall of communism. Instead, subtle, almost abstract references to the horrors of the Ukrainian famine and the Gulags had been shoehorned into the more blatant portrayal of the harsh life of the working classes pre-revolution and the hell of the war with Nazi Germany. One of the photos of the latter made me freeze. A man sat on the lip of a pit

full of bodies while a SS officer pointed a pistol at the back of his head. His gaze was directed straight into the distant camera, the blank stare of a man who has resigned himself to his death. The coils of barbed wire of the gulag presentation lacked the devastating impact of this portrayal of calm brutality.

Russia, being Russia, high culture is still dirt cheap, even in Moscow, one of the world's most expensive cities. We got good seats in the Tchaikovsky Theatre for next to nothing, maybe because the evening's entertainment was overtly sponsored by a flat pack kitchen company. The performance was by a Georgian orchestra, playing a wide variety of classics, with Tchaikovsky much to the fore, and the occasional folk tune. One of the vocal soloists was a very young lad, ridiculously talented and confident and wearing a pair of remarkably pointy shoes. Another was a middle-aged singer, his authority seemingly designated by even pointier shoes. But my attention was on a youngish cellist in a black dress, her hair up in a severe bun. When playing she sat bolt upright, rigid with concentration, her buttocks perched on the very edge of her chair. When resting, she slumped back languidly, her instrument cradled louchely between her legs. I was hypnotised.

We had tried to avoid hanging around Red Square due to all the Lonely Planet horror stories of getting shaken down by the police, but on the last day we decided we should go and see the world's most famous waxwork. We had to queue for a while at a remote corner of the Kremlin. After a while a ragtag of ancient crones and younger plump women marched up, all carrying red flags and posters of Uncle Joe, and were waved past us mere tourists.

Eventually we were escorted across the fenced off area of Red Square to the famous brown and red granite mausoleum. Inside was a fantastic art-deco dream of curves and columns, like the best cinema ever, but with the little commie lying in his glass box, his wax impregnated face luminescent in the dark. We were ushered briskly and brusquely through ("Hands out of your pockets!") and back outside and around the back of the mausoleum. There the communists were putting red roses on Stalin's grave – the exact orientation of the flowers being dictated by more of the aggressive guards. A long line of graves of communist grandees and other national heroes stretched out either side. Some had flowers and some didn't.

## ***Out of Europe: Moscow to Yekaterinburg***

We took another ‘name-train’, the Ural, from Moscow. This follows a more Southerly route than the ‘true’ Siberian (as I said, I’m definitely no purist). Ludmilla, the chief provodinitsa, came into our compartment, a big tough looking woman with a strange, slightly sickly, motherly manner. She took our tickets and folded one of the copies of each into a purpose built black leather wallet with a pocket for each compartment. Every provodinitsa from St Pete to Beijing had one of these.

Of the trains plying this route, only the Rossiya has first class compartments, so we had booked all four compartment berths in this and each of the subsequent legs of our journey. I felt a bit sheepish about this as it seemed a bit extravagant and cut out one of the joys of travelling by train in Russia – interacting with the other compartment occupants. But we’d done that before when we were younger, the compartments were tight enough for just two, and it meant we didn’t have to worry about being paired with any freakers. The Lonely Planet guide to the railway delighted in recounting cabin sharing horror stories, the most disturbingly amusing was someone being pissed on by a drunk from the bunk above and opposite. Being on our own also meant we had control of the door security – stories of night-time robberies were also popular with LP.

The first station we pulled into was Vekova, arc lights giving the now familiar greenish glow off the snow on the platform. I pecked out the window just as a massive red and gold vase floated past the window. I pulled the curtain back and a set of champagne flutes went the other way. Next came a gigantic brandy glass, then a huge chintzy chandelier. There was shouting down the corridor, so I went along to the end of the carriage where Ludmilla was holding a glassware-toting mob at bay.

“Dyevushka! Dyevuska!” they pleaded, but she waved them back down onto the platform. I ducked back out of the way before I got sold anything.

By coincidence I was reading “Globalisation and Its Discontents” by Joseph Stiglitz, former chief economist at the World Bank. Stiglitz explained that Russia had no history of unemployment benefit, or indeed unemployment, so redundant people were given goods, usually seconds, in lieu of money in return for doing a few jobs around the factory. We were witnessing first hand the results of a communist economy dumped in the deep end of free-market economics. We had seen it before, back in 1997 outside

Murmansk with furs and salmon being sold along the roadsides. Nothing had changed in the eight years since. Stiglitz blamed the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for this, and pretty much everything else.

Just as we pulled out of the station, there was a knock at the door. It was Ludmilla. With a flourish, she presented us a glass chicken. She explained it was a present as it was the festive season, a pretty clear explanation as she was just waving her hands around and wittering in a language we didn't much understand. We thanked her and, after she left, let our jaws drop. It was, and still is, the most minging item I've ever seen. White, with streaks of orange, blue and black, it reminded me of a particularly awful sweater worn by my old college chaplain. Glassware and travel don't go well together, but we were now heading across Siberia with a Christmas Chicken.

### **Jobs You Wouldn't Want #3: Wintertime Provodinitsa**

At each station you get on your winter coat and hat and fight with the door, pulling up the frozen footplate and stomping it into place. You stand in the sub zero temperatures and check the tickets of the new passengers, meticulously matching ID numbers on the cards to the individual involved. Then you take a hatchet and bludgeon the green 'ice' off the toilet outflows.

### ***Yekaterinburg***

Yekaterinburg is renowned for blood and blunder: the death of the Romanovs and the birth of Boris Yeltsin. These two stories overlapped when Yeltsin, then Mayor, ordered the demolition of the house where the Tsar and his family were murdered. Despite these unfortunate associations, it's a lovely little college town.

We ate lunch in the Yellow Submarine - you guessed it - a Beatles theme restaurant. I wanted a particular set menu as it involved my favourite Russian dish, fried shredded potato, but it came with vodka rather than wine or beer. I tried to swap, but the waitress was insistent that no changes were possible - Russians aren't renowned for their flexibility - so I thought I'd give it a go. The meal turned up with a small chemistry-style flask of neat vodka, about four measures worth. I have to say that it was delicious, that I spent the rest of

the day's wandering with a dopey grin on my face, but that I've never tried it since.

The Museum of Youth was a fantastic labyrinth of installations created by arts students, mainly on an anti-war, anti-oppression theme. We wandered through the twists and turns, up ramps and down stairs past piles of weapons, barbed wire, mirrors and adverts in thought provoking arrangements. My admittedly vodka-fogged mind marvelled at the creativity and complete lack of cliché, and found warmth in the disorientating meanders.

We got lost on the way back to the hotel and had great difficulty getting someone to stop and direct us until we happened upon a couple of pissed students whose sense of direction was much better than their sense of balance.

The next morning we were picked up by Seva, our tour guide for the day and an enthusiastic student, and Pavel, introduced as 'the dog man', who also drove. First they took us to the boundary between Europe and Asia where we took some cheesy one-foot-on-one-continent-one-on-the-other photos. Seva then explained that the true border was further along the road, but the powers that be had decided that the tourists wouldn't want to go that far out of town. They had put it right next to the site of a Gulag as well, so us tourists could get our fill of horror as well as novelty. Walls of names, hundreds of names, paid tribute to the victims, but there was no further explanation. On the way back into town, we stopped at a pink and peach complex of flats and picked up Pavel's girlfriend, Alise.

Pavel's yard consisted of a ramshackle of pens and lots of yellow snow. The source of the yellow flung themselves in tight circles within the pens, barking madly as we came in. We went up a rickety steep staircase and into a raised cabin overlooking the yard. Alise dug in the heaps of furs and rugs on the raised sleeping platform at one end of the single room and pulled out felt boots and padded dungarees. We put these on while she made some tea on the dirty bench at the side. Down below we heard sudden outbursts of barking and the odd yelp.

Seva pulled out some photo albums – all the photos were of Pavel and his dogs – crossing the arctic, shooting through forests, and up a mountain. Only one was of Alise, pretty and demure, her short blond hair backlit in hazy summer sunshine. Pavel came in and explained that they were of two expeditions. The first was a trip around Russia's arctic circle to map variations in the earth's magnetic field. Pavel was, it turned out, a geophysicist. The other

was to the top of one of Russia's highest mountain. Seva pulled out a certificate from the Guinness Book of Records showing that Pavel held the record for the highest altitude reached on a dog sled.

"Have you ever travelled outside Russia?" asked Karen.

"No, Russia is big enough." he smiled as he spoke.

We went out and got on the sled. We took off down the street and took a tight turn into some woods by the side of the town, not quite the foothills of the Urals as advertised, but we weren't complaining. The dogs produced a thrilling, pulsing drive, shooting through the trees. One, Sneg (meaning snow), was new and didn't have a clue what he was doing. When we stopped the other dogs looked forward, ears back ready for the order to go, Sneg would turn around and look at us, ears up. When the command came, he would get caught out, tangled up or running on the wrong side of the pack, sometimes somersaulting his way back into the right direction.

Pavel let us take turns at driving each other around a loop in the trees, but the dogs pretty much determined where we went. While we played, Alise had been lighting a professional fire in a clearing while Seva stood by looking a bit redundant. We stopped and ate a lunch hot dogs, bread and cheese, our felt boots remarkably effective at keeping out the cold. Pavel had to get up every so often to separate warring canine factions with a sharp word and some strategic hitching. We hoped we would go further after lunch, but sadly when we got back on the sledge we turned and went back to the yard.

I couldn't get it out of my head that it was odd that a trained geophysicist and world record holder would make his living taking tourists for a spin in the park. I suppose the dogs needed exercising and food and the tourists covered both, but still the feeling nagged. When I got home I tried his name in Google but got nothing.

### ***Trundling Across Siberia***

Dostoevsky said there was nothing between the Urals and the Yeseniny, and he was pretty much on the button. The flat white steppe slid past, with only the stands of birch trees and the occasional village giving any hint of variety, but even they slid into patterns as the miles passed. This was the longest leg of the journey, so we unpacked the Christmas Chicken from its

protective socks and put it in pride of place on the table beside the champagne bottles.

Around the towns and cities, we did get glimpses of industry: nodding donkeys, coal mines and sprawling murky chemical works. Most of the other rail traffic related to this: coal trucks, freight and endless strings of Yukos oil tankers. Yukos was one of the crony-scandals of the Yeltsin years. According to Stiglitz, the IMF demanded privatisation of Russian utilities at any cost, so the Yeltsin regime simply sold off oil production to its pals, without putting in an effective tax system to recoup a share of proceeds for the state. One of the most famous beneficiaries of this largesse was Roman Abramovitch, now bankrolling the superstars of Chelsea FC. Now things were changing, but for the wrong reasons. The oil oligarchs had got too powerful, and Putin had started knocking them down. Mikhail Khodorkovsky, once head of Yukos, was being prosecuted for tax evasion, fraud and misappropriation linked to the purchase of a fertiliser company in the 90s. In each hotel in Russia we endured CNN's tedious coverage of the case, always hinting at the US Government line that the prosecution was purely political.

On the second evening, having got a little tired of bread, salami, cheese and cup-a-soup, we made our way up the train to the restaurant. The ends of each carriage were unheated and frosty, and our breath fogged heavily. The passage between carriages was blocked by two heavy doors, and between the two the unlit flexible linking tube, floored with clanking, overlapping plates with plenty of gaps around the edges. At each one we got ready, counted down from three, then wrenched open the door, lurched through, giggling and squealing, hopping over the join, blasted by sub-zero gouts of air, then slamming the door behind and diving through the next one into the next heated corridor. We did this nine times before we burst into the tranquillity of the restaurant car, grinning and panting from our exploits. There was a pause, then the cook and a wolfish looking man quickly packed up their backgammon board, the former heading off behind the bar to the kitchen. The urbane, middle-aged waiter, languorously got to his feet, adjusted his tuxedo and bowtie and brought us over a menu. Every move was smoothly laboured and deliberate. If he was a character in a film, Kevin Spacey would be eyeing the role for an Oscar nomination at the very least.

The food was plain and good. Two Russians came in and drank vodka quietly. A little while later, a French family arrived and ate. Maman whispered to les enfants, but Papa said nothing. Wolfguy played on his mobile phone, his

jaw pulling from side to side as he dodged and shot the pixels on the screen. The legendary bawdy social scene of the Trans-Sib restaurant car was obviously taking a day off.

## ***Irkutsk***

We arrived in Irkutsk on 25<sup>th</sup> December; just another day in Russia. While every part of the country was covered in pagan Christmas decorations – trees, bells, Santa Clauses and, er, chickens, they are for the New Year rather than Christmas Day. “To the New Year” is the slogan hanging over every door. The Santas wear either ivory and white or pale blue and white suits, but never the Western red and white, which famously originates from an advert for that most capitalist of brands, Coca-Cola.

We wandered around the shops, drank coffee in trendy bars and admired the beautiful ice village in the town park. Armed guards sat in a small car watching over the intricately carved knights, castle, staircases and slides. Down at the Angara River, we found the bust of Irkutsk’s most famous son, Yuri Gagarin, whose grave we had seen behind Lenin’s mausoleum in Moscow. Here we got our first blast of real cold and our hair, eyelashes and my beard got encrusted with tiny spheres of ice. There was a Lenin statue down there as well, a rare sight in classic oratory pose: one hand raised, the other clutching his coat lapel.

We had Christmas dinner at the ‘Fashion Café’ just beside the hotel, mainly because we didn’t have to wear thermal bottoms for the quick dash across the car park. We went downstairs into a sumptuous boudoir full of Irkutsk’s beautiful (and rich) people. The two waitresses were stunning, lithe, almost identical blondes in tight trousers and skimpy corseted tops.

“Blondes come in pairs...” I mused to myself before realising I was starting to sound like Yunona Market porn.

When we wanted service, or an ogle for that matter, we rang a bell and one of the toothsome twosome came to see what we wanted. I mused on ways of implementing this system at home without breaching the Human Rights Act. The food was fantastic, the Soviet Champagne lovely and we lit two Christmas angel candles we’d brought all the way with us to mark our little celebration, thousands of miles from the revels of home. The two Siberian angels got a good tip.

Just after we'd got into bed the telephone rang. I got up and answered in case it was about our lift to Lake Baikal in the morning.

“Allo?” I tried to sound Russian

“Do you speak English?” her voice was flat and impassive.

“Yes.”

“Do you want to spend time with a beautiful gurl?”

“No.”

“OK, gud bye.”

I got back into bed and closed my eyes. I heard the telephone ring in the next room.

### ***Lake Baikal***

Lake Baikal is a seething cauldron of mist, sunshine and choppy waves all swirling together, oscillating between terrifying inferno and stunning beauty. Containing a sixth of the world's freshwater, to us the lake was a sea. The water is also a steady +3°C when the surrounding air was -20°C. When walked along the lakeside from our hotel to the village of Listvyanka, wearing all our clothes at once, frogmen appeared suddenly from the relatively warm waters. In the village, stall keepers poured out of a café to stand by their tables of grilled fish and tourist tat. We disappointed them by stepping past their tables and into the café to get some food. Unlike most Siberian buildings it only had a single set of doors so every time someone came in or out, an icy blast shot into the room. Outside the back, a man scraped the fat off a barbecue grill.

Back along the road in the little local museum we got to see preserved examples of the weird indigenous fish. Due to its sheer size the lake has a unique eco-system about which, it appeared from the explanation from our school-marmy guide, little is understood. Amongst the pickled aquatic life and stuffed wolverines were models of two icebreakers built on Tyneside and shipped over flat-pack style to ferry trains and passengers across the lake to continue on the true Trans-Siberian route. The models weren't just for show, they had been made to demonstrate how to assemble the ships, presumably with more tools than an IKEA allen-key-thingy. The larger of the two, The Baikal, took whole trains, but was currently docked at the bottom of the lake it

was named after. The smaller passenger ship, The Angara, we had seen mothballed just outside Irkutsk.

That night, as we had done several times on this trip, we broke the golden rule of travelling and ate in the hotel – there was nowhere else and it was soooo cold outside. We went downstairs to the restaurant where the two waitresses jumped up red faced from watching the Russian edition of Pop Idol on a humungous TV. We were the only diners in the cavernous room with its expanse of impressively gothic tables and chairs – every place set out perfectly. The waitresses stood patiently against the wall as we ate, their attention still fixed on the now muted reality show.

### ***Over the Borderline: Train No 364***

The No 364 train from Irkutsk to Ulan Baator is a stopping service run by Mongolian State Railways and, my god Toto, we weren't in Russia anymore. We arrived to find people being turfed off the train despite the fact the service started at this station. A fierce Mongolian provodinitisa stamped down the footplate to block the steps and slammed the door. We stood like numpties in the group of evictees until another imposing Mongolian woman shoved her way to the door and hammered on it. The door opened and we opportunistically dived into her wake, dodging the impressive stream of large parcels being passed to her by a human chain of followers, and squeezed between others in her entourage.

We popped into the compartment marked on our ticket, no document checking have taken place. Our relief was tempered by the presence of a coat, boots, and a bag of groceries scattered about our abode. The fierce provodinitisa was swaggering bandy-legged up and down the corridor, occasionally barking a command at a poor passenger.

“Pozhalsta?” I asked her timidly

“Schto?!” she growled back.

I motioned towards the alien gubbins. She marched to the other end of the carriage, plucked a key from the top of her boot like she was drawing a knife and waved us in. We shrugged and started to get unpacked.

Ten minutes later, she reappeared at the door and motioned me down the corridor. She opened another compartment and stated:

“Tam!” There!

I went back to our compartment and told Karen the good news.

“Tell her we’re not moving.” was her response. She had already unpacked all the food.

“You tell her.”

“You’ve been talking to her!”

“She made it very clear that we are moving.”

“I’m not going anywhere. You tell her we’re not moving.”

“I’m not arguing with her.”

Karen tutted and walked down the corridor. Two minutes later she came back, a bit white and shaken. We packed up and moved.

The next morning the landscape had opened up and the reds, yellows, russets and browns of autumn had appeared amongst the snow. We were making our way up a broad river valley, past grazing cows and sheep (the first livestock we had seen) and ramshackle wooden buildings, each with bright blue shutters and a corral of wooden fences held up by an elaborate system of bipods and tripods. We came to a long frozen lake where four-wheel-drives sped across the ice between huddles of fishermen. Suddenly I noticed that the long morning shadow of the train was truncated: we had lost half the carriages in the night.

Whoever coined the cliché ‘all borders are in the mind’ was, of course talking complete bollocks, and had certainly not left Russia by a land border. We sat for hours outside the Russian border control. Every so often we were hit by a hard shunt one way or the other. A shy pretty girl in a green uniform and fashionable boots came and collected our passports.

To me, borders represent everything that’s wrong with the world. They keep the rich rich, the poor poor, the oppressed oppressed and the officious employed. Ridding the world of borders would rid the world of the great lottery of life – your lot being pretty much decided by the geographical location of your entry into the world.

I got bored and went out into the corridor where the other male travellers were standing looking out the window in front of their compartment. I decided to do a bit of male bonding and took up a slouch by ours. I looked left and

right and realised that our carriage was now on its own. The shunting had taken all the others away. This meant that train 364 consisted of just the one carriage piggy-backing on a succession of other services. For some reason this made me feel a bit dislocated. We sat for hours, the only event being a sudden influx of Mongolians stacking bags of foodstuffs in the corridor and cramming into the compartments. I guarded our door jealously and selfishly, but no-one asked to join us.

Out of nothing there was a flurry of activity. The provodinitsas hurried about, fussing quietly, eyes cast down, suddenly displaced from the top of the heap. Uniforms flooded the carriage and started busying themselves in the first compartment. I stood at the door and looked up and down the carriage watching until a tall blond guard marched up to me.

“Probleme?”

“Uh?” sometimes the obvious translations are the hardest to make.

“Is there a problem?” he asked in perfect and very stern English.

“No.”

“Sit down, please.” I sat down. He smiled.

It was dark by the time we moved on, the occasion preluded by an almighty shunt as someone picked us up. I was desperate to see the border itself, so we switched off the lights and watched the moment in flashing green and black monochrome. It didn't disappoint, the train entering a long corridor of barbed wire under gantries and unmanned watch towers, before the border fence itself whipped by, disappearing into the gloom at right angles. A single sentry stood to attention at the gap, his shouldered rifle with bayonet fixed, his breath steaming.

We stopped a couple of miles further up and the Mongolian traders dragged their provisions back off again. It must have taken six hours for them to get this stuff about six miles over the border. There must be some advantage over the nearest road crossing, but for the life of me I couldn't work out what it could be.

I went to the Samovar. The two provodinitsas were sat in our original compartment with the door open. They seemed much happier now we were moving again.

“Zdrasvutye.”

Big Mamma motioned me into the compartment. She patted the seat beside her. I sat down.

“Are you married?” she asked me in Russian.

“Yes” I lied.

“Children?”

They both tutted and looked disappointed.

“No.”

“What age is your wife?”

“30” I lied again, but only because I couldn’t remember how to say “31”.

More tutting and clucking.

“OK” said Big Mamma and motioned towards the door. I got up and left.

## ***Ulan Baator***

At 7am it was  $-35^{\circ}\text{C}$  on the platform at Ulan Baator. I’m really struggling to find a superlative to communicate effectively just how cold that really is. My word processor thesaurus gives me alternatives like chilly, freezing, sub-zero, or at best, arctic but these are flimsy, barely registering on the scale of cold. Think about it. Freezing ( $0^{\circ}\text{C}$ ) is usually regarded as cold, and  $+35^{\circ}\text{C}$  is pretty hot by anyone’s estimation. Now go the same distance that extremely hot is from cold, but in the other direction. Now that’s cold. That’s very cold. But for some reason I didn’t feel it until I inhaled deeply through my nose and my nostril hairs iced up, blocking my ability to breathe.

Cars trundled by in slow-moving bumper-to-bumper mini-convoys of four or five, as if they were clinging to each other for warmth. We trundled along in turn, sliding to a halt at the lights and gently slip-sliding around the corners.

The Hotel Edelweiss was in darkness when we got there. Our driver and travel rep spent 15 minutes banging on the doors until a bedraggled figure came and let us in. By the time we had got our bags into the foyer, he had, simply by running his fingers through his hair and straightening his shirt, miraculously transformed into a slick receptionist.

“They had a party here last night.” grinned the Rep.

Sellotaped to the desk was a letter. It was in English:

*“Dear Esteemed Guest,*

*From 23<sup>rd</sup> Dec to 31<sup>st</sup> Dec there will be parties every night at the Hotel. During this time you may experience big music noise in your room. Thank you for your co-operation.*

*The Management.”*

Walking back to the centre of town, we passed a collection of yurts strung with multicoloured cloth, animal skins and skulls. A large sign in Mongolian and English proclaimed it to be the “Shamanic Centre for Heavenly Sophistication”, which sounded like the title of a particularly pretentious episode of “Sex and the City”.

The Gandantegchinlen Khiid monastery survived communism and is now the most important in the country. The courtyards had square blocks holding lines of prayer wheels. Men walked round each block clockwise, dragging one hand across the bell shaped wheels with the nonchalance of a kid rattling a stick along railings. We went into the temple itself, the coldest building I have ever entered, and were politely relieved of \$1 each by a monk. The interior was completely dominated by a towering Buddha, its face almost lost above us in the steam from our breath and smoke from the fatty candles. All around were shelves and shelves of little Buddha statues wrapped in muslin. Pigeons cowered amongst them for warmth.

We got cold, very cold, and tried to warm up wandering around the slightly moth-eaten exhibits of the natural history museum, but the cute slight mistranslations (“The pine martin feeds pests”) didn’t warm us up much, so we left and went for a hot drink and food in a cool bar with jazz and a funky waiter. Again there was only a single door and we still didn’t warm up past mildly uncomfortable. Heading back to the hotel, we dodged past a very large and extremely drunk young man. He staggered a step or two, fell to his knees and rolled about on the icy pavement. At these temperatures, if he didn’t get home or inside, he’d be dead. The locals passed him by and we could only follow suit.

Back at the Edelweiss, we got our core body temperature back up under the duvet and were reluctant to venture back out into the cold for food. We went down into the foyer, but both restaurants were hosting parties. A waitress told us we could eat in our room and went to get a menu. A young Mongolian

lady was standing by the cloakroom, looking devastating in a shoulderless black dress, bare legs and strappy high heels. I was tempted to go over and ask her if she was part-Geordie. Back upstairs we ate noodle soup to the sound of big music noise – Boney M thundering out RAH-RAH RASputin over and over again, before the night descended into Karaoke hell. Thankfully at 2am, after a really peculiar bout of atonal caterwauling, the sound stopped dead, the big silence buzzing in the room.

### ***The Last Ride***

We were back on an “express” train (none of them moved very fast) and there was a tangible difference. The two provodinitsas were porcelain skinned dolls, polite, beautiful and distant, but they turned up periodically to present us with a flask of hot water from the samovar. A sign on our compartment window said “Do not open, it is in winter warming”. I was in winter warming and didn’t do our normal switch into train clothes, keeping most layers on including my thermals.

We pulled out of Ulan Baator, now able to see its spectacular mountain backdrop, through mixed ger/wooden hut suburbs, and again took big lazy loops along the river valley. A farmer squatted in a field for his morning crap, unperturbed by the train, straightening and belting his trousers as we passed. The train trundled on, leaving the mountains and then hills behind us, then crossed the Gobi desert. Camels and antelopes picked their way through patches of snow. Hawks sat on the telephone wires beside the track and scanned the plains. Eventually, once we had dropped down further, the snow disappeared completely for the first time in the whole trip.

At the Chinese border, the procedure was much more relaxed than at the Russian border, but no more efficient. After the interminable shunting and faffing with passports and visas, we were pulled into a big engine shed to change the bogies. The Russian (and Mongolian) railway system works on a different gauge than the rest of the world. While it would be much much easier and quicker to simply change trains at the border, instead each carriage is hoisted up into the air (with us still inside) on four jacks and an army of workers sweeps one set of bogies away and drags another into position. The workers, all in army-green padded overalls and furry hats with ear flaps and a red star, went about their business with nonchalant loose-limbed ease, tossing tools around without a care.

Overseeing the operation for our carriage was one of our glamorous provodinitsas, now wearing grey overalls, fitting the rubber pads onto the new bogies for the body to sit on and crawling about underneath to make sure the brakes were properly connected. Then the train clanged back together and we were off, overtaking the workers slouching and cycling back home, their breath steaming under the arc lights.

In the morning we got our first good look at China. And it was dramatic. Flat plains abruptly turned into mountain ranges with no foothills – level ground running right up to sheer cliffs. We passed through villages of ramshackle hut each with an identical solar hot water collector on the roof, the same system on every roof from village to village. The train seemed to pick up speed as we entered more and more civilization. We crossed a wide river, then caught our first glimpse of the Wall – a line of smooth yellow rock in the distance across the plain. Then we entered some hills and the ‘classic’ Wall appeared with its crenulated sides flanking a broad roadway. Unlike the ramrod straight course of, say, Hadrian’s Wall, the direction appeared haphazard climbing up sheer cliffs then bending back on itself and zigzagging off into the distance with no obvious rhyme or reason.

We went to the restaurant car, the journey through the carriages now much easier as the temperature had risen considerably. We headed for a table with a clean covering but were brusquely ushered back to a stained tablecloth by the waitresses. While we were waiting, the French family we had last seen back in Siberia appeared and took a table. Their waitress refused to sell them water, despite a bottle sitting in plain view in a glass case, so they got up and left with some subtle, but unappreciated, huffing and puffing. The food was excellent and as we ate it we passed more sections of wall, rising vertiginously up from the trackside, out of our view. A contingent of Chinese men in dark suits arrived and were ushered courteously to the clean tables. The waitresses fawned around them but the men ignored them and bantered loudly amongst themselves.

## ***Beijing***

It was a balmy  $-2^{\circ}\text{C}$  when we pulled in to the sweeping modern curves of Beijing railway station. Beijing was a city being rebuilt. The Olympics were coming and the eyes of the world would soon be on this historic city. Roads were being widened by trimming half a block of hutong (traditional urban

courtyard) from each side and rebuilding the end walls, laying wide pavements of cobble blocks and planting plastic wrapped trees.

Our hotel had originally been a palace built for a eunuch. Despite this history of emasculation, it was a dreamy, romantic place. Slate blue buildings with traditional Chinese roofs were arrayed in courtyards linked by covered walkways. Our room was brilliantly set out in a Chinese-with-a-modern-twist style. A big brass James Bond style control panel for all the electrical functions popped out of one of the bedside tables.

It was New Year's Eve so we headed into the nearest hutong looking for some celebration, winding through the narrow alleys to a backpackers restaurant. I had abandoned my thermals now the cold was more tolerable. The music was excellent, a sparse Chinese-ish take on hip-hop. We ordered western food, but it was bland and mediocre. We munched at it and passed comment on our fellow Westerners.

When I asked where the toilet was, the waiter sent me out into the courtyard. I looked around and couldn't see where it was. A chef came past, so I asked again, he motioned me out onto the street and around the corner to a modern public toilet. The door to the last cubicle was open, but I could see a man's head about knee level. I decided a pee would do and turned my back on him to use the urinal.

"Nnnnyurrrrgh!" bellowed the chap behind me.

"An-nneurrrrgh!" came an answering call from another stall.

My pee didn't finish fast enough. The automatic taps - "stretch your hands" - didn't work, so I waved them ineffectually and went back to the restaurant.

Slowly as the evening went on, the crowd changed. The travellers and expats drifted off and were replaced by polite Chinese couples. The music evolved from the ultra-cool Sino-hip-hop/drum'n'bass to schmaltzy nylon guitar ballads. I started to feel cold. We ate a desert. I got colder and didn't want more booze. This meant something was very wrong. I tried to ignore it and get into the mood, but I started shivering, cold to the core. Kaz was desperate to stay until the New Year, but she saw I was in a bad way. Maybe wearing thermals on the train had knocked my thermostat out of kilter. We paid the bill and marched home, me desperate to get my body temperature up. Back at the hotel I got under the duvet and started to feel better. We got

some drinks from the mini-bar and started our own little private countdown to the (western) New Year. Just as we hit ‘three’, a woman’s voice shouted “Happy New Year” faintly in the distance. We went to bed.

For the next few days we did our tourist thing, wandering through the Forbidden City guided by the suave tones of Roger Moore, being glared at by policemen on Tiananmen Square, and constantly having passers-by shout “ALLO!” at us very loudly then burst out laughing. We got some relief from this by stopping doing what tourists do and doing more what Chinese do: wandering through the manicured parks arm-in-arm, window-shopping in the malls, and propelling ourselves on sledges across frozen lakes with oversized icepicks.

A man walked down the stairs of a subway, swinging a bag.

“Da, dada da da”, he sang cheerfully, “Hyuck fwoh!” a big lump of gob hit the floor.

A beautiful young lady, dressed to kill, strode coolly past the expensive kitchen and car showrooms.

“Yack twoh!” a big lump of gob hit the floor.

After the barrage of ‘ALLO!’s, the spitting was the hardest thing to get used to. Also noticeable was the amount of sheer bling on the high street: Porsche showrooms rubbing shoulders with malls full of designer clothes emporiums and jewellery stores. I remembered that Stiglitz had compared Russia to China; the latter opening up its markets gradually, protecting indigenous industry from predation from the West until it is strong enough to compete head on, thus avoiding the economic meltdown in their erstwhile communist neighbour and turning gradually into the next big economic powerhouse.

Signs on the metro point out what is forbidden, but, for example, instead of a cigarette with a bold red line through it, a cartoon shows a passer-by admonishing the smoking miscreant. I thought this was odd, but in the Forbidden City I saw a Chinese tourist politely ask a US tourist to get down off a wall. There was no confrontation, just a firm, polite instruction to which the latter complied. This can take on a more sinister aspect. Just before I left the UK, a Radio 4 reporter tried to access webpages relating to Tibet or the Dalai Lama from a Beijing internet café. Not only were the pages blocked, but another café user threatened to call the police unless they desisted in discussing

it. In our restaurant at the hotel there were lengthy signs in Chinese illustrated by jovial cartoon like police men – fat Lego men in heroic poses – never of course bundling dissidents into the back of police vans or shooting drug dealers through the back of the head. These signs were not translated. Maybe the following explains why:

*“The plate adopts the old nicture and deep brown color stress sedately disposition and the vicissitudes of life sense perception. The plate not only reappeared the Dong an department store merchant centralize and thriving and prosperous in those days, and draw the outline of the old Beijing people’s life leisure and recreation, even more mix together a culture atmosphere for reminisce the past common people display the peculiarly culture details originate from the Dong-an department store, become a unique humanist sightscene.*

This paragraph of sublime gibberish didn’t appear on a hastily translated piece of A4, or even a short-run leaflet. No, someone had paid for this lengthy tract to be engraved on a 12’ by 3’ sheet of bronze which was then hung by the front door of the huge Dong-an department store on Wangfujing street – the city’s glitzy main shopping drag. This goes past mere mistranslation – and it was the rule rather than the exception. My theory is that there is a shady cartel of Chinese-English translators who take money from innocent businesses and then compete to see who can, through skilful use of a dictionary and thesaurus, come up with a translation that might be correct word for word, but in context is pure hokum.

We had to go to the Wall. We decided to avoid the Tourist Trap of Badaling and booked a trip to a more adventurous section. When our mini-van arrived, the other tourists were a British-Chinese couple and a US-Chinese girl and her white American boyfriend. They had been teaching English and were excited about taking the railway back to Europe. They were a bit disappointed that we had just done it.

We drove up into the hills through tight switchbacks, the walls of the cuttings plastered with slogans which may have been political or may have been adverts for tampons for all we knew. We pulled up in a small village and the driver gave us each an extremely sketchy map. We climbed across the river, paid a man who ran out of a shack with a book of tickets, and climbed up to the Wall proper. It was just as we imagined it, but much, much steeper. Much, much steeper. In some parts the slopes ramped up so harshly I had to literally force myself to walk up it – my brain and legs baulking at the lack of steps.

We pulled ahead of the others, revelling in being out in the open. In one turret a beefy old woman appeared out of nowhere and demanded more cash. Karen dodged past her, but she blocked my way out the tiny door. I started forward but an arm of iron pushed me back. Karen helpfully stood behind her and insisted I “just come on” without paying. I stood for ages prevaricating before deciding not to shove an old woman who could probably kick my ass, and bravely paid up.

We lunched at the highest point, savouring the views of the Wall snaking across the dramatic landscape, then had to clamber down over a ridiculously vertiginous section that had not been restored, creeping down incredibly slowly, clinging to the sides and scratching for footholds amongst loose bricks. Karen edged ahead then disappeared from view ahead of me. I lost my nerve, each movement forwards and downwards became more and more laboured as I gripped the gaps in the side wall for dear life, my legs visibly shaking as I felt for the next step.

At the bottom we hugged, relieved to have got down in one piece and walked back through a series of burial mounds to the village. There we went into in a basic restaurant owned by a jovial fat woman who guffawed at everything we said. Two soldiers huddled together under a blanket in the corner and watched us eat. We resisted the temptation to try the donkey intestine stew, but the food was fantastic. The others turned up, apparently unfazed by the deadly descent, and had to eat quickly before the van left.

### **Three Cliches I Didn't Witness in China**

1. Crowds
2. Spoilt Children
3. Bad toilets

...although the latter may be more down to judgement than luck...

Back in Beijing, we decided to go looking for some more excitement. The guidebook assured us that Salutin (bar street) was the place to be. It did have a lot of bars and they were all pretty much busy. We chose what appeared to be the most happening one and, as usual, half the ‘clientele’ immediately got up

and shuffled into the kitchen. The Italian food, like all the Western food we had, was awful and the music was worse. A young couple did a song in turn. He bashed his acoustic guitar with a stupendous lack of finesse and wailed Nirvana-esque songs of grief, while she revealed a powerful voice doing easy listening classics (The Carpenters! cheered Kaz) over a Karaoke backing tape. While he whinged, she swayed unconvincingly from side to side; while she sang, he looked bored and occasionally tried to join in, chopping at a few random chords, way out of key.

Disappointed, we headed back to the main road, but decided to check out “little Salutin” street opposite before we went. Just inside the end of the street, there was a corner shop packed full of very large black men. We had only seen one black face in the city until then, a student with a Chinese girl. The huge guy nearest the door came out and ambled over to us.

“Hi...” he drawled, a relief from “ALLO!”, but we were a bit nervous.

“Hi”, we chorused in a cool way.

“Watcha dooing?” he had a languid West African accent.

“Looking for a bar.”

“Where are you from?”

“England.”

“Aah.” we wandered on down the street, past more empty bars.

“Where are you from?”

“Nigeria.” he paused. “ANYthing you need, just ask me.”

“No we’re quite alright.”

He kept walking with us and told us he had only been there three weeks and he had been in San Francisco before that. We got to the end of the bars, where some buildings had been demolished. We turned around and there were another two large black guys just behind us, one on either side of the street. Uh. Oh. We walked back with our new friend and the other two pretended they were just hanging about as we passed. Just hanging around. In Beijing, in the snow, at  $-8^{\circ}\text{C}$ . To our relief they just seemed to be watching our friend’s back.

“Anything you need. Just ask me.” he said again as the conversation died.

“Thanks. You need to be careful asking that in this country.” I didn’t know if they shot foreigners.

“No problem, my friend.”

“I need a pee.” announced Karen, so we went into one of the bars. Our friend said goodbye and ambled off. There was still nothing going on, so I hung around while Kaz went upstairs. She came down again and said it was a bit more happening up there, so we went up.

The décor inside was black with lurid swooshes fluorescing under UV. We ordered a beer from the young Chinese waiter in cool T-shirt and jeans. This was the first place we’d been all night where we didn’t feel we were disturbing the staff from their boredom. Another Nigerian, small, lithe and dressed preppily in an expensive looking woollen jumper with a scarf draped louchely over his shoulders came up to us.

“Hi, my friend! How are you?” he flashed a broad smile.

“I’m good, how are you?”

“*Anything* you need, just ask me.”

“I’m happy with a beer.” he was taken aback by this as if I had mistaken him for a barman. He lent forward and whispered theatrically in my ear.

“I’m talking about *wwhhiite*.”

“Oh, I know what you’re talking about, but I’m happy with a beer.”

He laughed out loud and patted me on the back.

“No problem, my friend.”

The music was cool and there was a clientele so we stayed for a couple. On the dance floor three spectacularly unattractive and frumpily dressed white women wrapped themselves around three handsome, funkily dressed black men; the women rubbing up against their crotches and leering. Every time we looked over, the couples had swapped partners and another bout of frottaging had started up.

Suddenly the music changed to cheesy house and soft rock and the Nigerians and their girlfriends left en masse and took the atmosphere with them. We finished our beers and trudged through the snow to the Metro.

In the morning, the China Daily announced that the 1.3 billionth Chinaman had been to a proud mother in a far flung province. At lunch we overdosed on a monosodium glutamate laced aubergine dish and spent the rest of the day, our last, in bed bloated, reading and being flatulent.

### ***The End of the Line***

And then it was over. We wrapped up the Christmas Chicken for the very last time and flew home. Thirty days away from home, 5321 miles, and three of the biggest countries on the planet. Seven days baking gently on the train reading, drinking champagne and eating chocolate. Twenty-three days of sub-sub-zero temperatures, local culture and hat hair. We had waited seven years for this and it was more than worth it. Russia was still lovely, the warmth of the people standing out against the coldness of the climate. Mongolia we only really saw from the train, but the 24 hours in Ulan Baator was one of the most intriguing days of my life. But I still have to make up my mind about China. At the risk of sounding too poetic, for the last week of the trip I had felt we were like ice skaters, gliding easily over a huge frozen lake. Where our skates made contact, the ice melted a little, but apart from this, we were completely insulated from the depths and currents below.

*The trip above took place in December 2004 and early January 2005.*