

AN UNEXPECTED JOURNEY ON THE LOVE TRAIN *Ed Greig*

In 2004 somewhere between Běijīng and Moscow, a small paragraph in my Lonely Planet caught my eye. It revealed that while the Trans-Mongolian, my temporary home, was undoubtedly a long train journey, the longest of them all stretched from Portugal to Vietnam, covering a total of 17,852km. The idea of adding 10,000km either side of my current odyssey seemed ridiculous, and I laughed heartily at the thought that there would be anyone out there foolish enough to attempt it.

Four years later I was standing on the platform of a small station in the town of Villa Real de Santa Antonio, in southern Portugal. My goal, after crossing 13 countries, was Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam, which I explained to the station master, using expansive gestures and my phrasebook Portuguese. He let out a familiar hearty laugh. To add to the complications of three months of train travel, I planned to interview as many of my fellow passengers as possible, to chart my journey from some other perspectives. On the first train, which I was certain would be empty, I was lucky enough to find Elders Nelson and Croshaw, Mormon missionaries spreading the word of the Prophet to the Algarve. With one interview safely on tape I continued up through Europe, spending one or two nights in each city until I reached Warsaw.

From Poland I took a detour to St Petersburg, through Vilnius, avoiding Belarus. Up to this point I had recorded my journey in a professional and objective manner, but then the love train pulled, unscheduled, into life's station, in the form of the lovely Natasha. She came with me as far as Moscow but we vowed to stay in touch. On through Russia, stopping this time at all those places that I'd only glimpsed on the previous trip, finally getting to take a dip in the icy waters of Baikal. Then wild horses, a Bird's Nest, an Oriental Pearl, a Dragon's Bay and the stories of many passengers carried me finally to the platform at Ho Chi Minh City Station.

As I hadn't taken the most direct route, my total distance covered was 21,477km) over a period of three months on 42 different trains for around UK£500 in train tickets, half of which was for a 22-day Eurail pass. Such a journey might not be for everyone and requires a fair amount of planning. However, if you are tempted to follow in my tracks, my best advice is don't rush from sight to sight: leave room for the unexpected because, as I found in St Petersburg, this might well be the best bit.

For European rail timetables check www.railfaneurope.net, which provides a central link to all of Europe's national railways. Also see www.seat61.com/Russia.htm, an excellent resource for planning a Europe to Russia train journey, as well as **Way To Russia** (www.waytorussia.net/Transport/International/Bus.html), which includes ideas on using the inter-Europe bus routes of **Eurolines** (www.eurolines.com).

ASIA

Ferries from Japan and Korea to Vladivostok (see p250) make an overland journey from the Russian Far East to Europe a sinch (albeit a lengthy sinch). Likewise there are several regular ferry connections between Japan or Korea with various ports in China, including Shànghǎi and Tiānjīn, from where you can make the fastest intercity rail journey in the world to Běijīng, the start or terminus of the Trans-Manchurian and Trans-Mongolian routes.

Běijīng is connected with Hong Kong every second day and with Hanoi, Vietnam by two weekly trains. From Hanoi there are many trains onwards to Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon). A rail journey from London to Saigon will take you around two weeks; again, for details, of how to do it, consult the **Man in Seat 61** (www.seat61.com/Vietnam.htm).

Alternative overland approaches to and from Russia and China through Asia are numerous since the continent is threaded with rail networks. Where these peter out, there's almost always bus connections – the route

The emissions that would be generated by taking a (nonexistent) bus from London to Vladivostok (1.104 tonnes) are actually more polluting than a flight – take note, Trans-Siberian drivers!