

TRANS-SIBERIAN TALES: THE LONG WAY HOME FROM EUROPE

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In 1975-1976, I spent an academic year in Nancy, France, and followed that stay with two months of travel, much of it in Western Europe, with a backpack and tent. The final part of my travels, taking me from Europe back to Australia, had originally been booked as a direct flight on Qantas. I had been considering a more adventurous route, however, terminating near Hong Kong, where there was a Chinese friend to visit and whence I would be able to fly back to Sydney. The map showed railway lines all the way to Hong Kong, with a possible route from Austria through Moscow to Irkutsk, then through Mongolia to Beijing, and finally to Guangzhou and (it would be hoped) an easy land crossing into Hong Kong. Before I left for France, I took advantage of a Science Russian course at the University of Tasmania, just in case it might prove useful to be able to utter a word or two in Russian.

So, I wrote to the Soviet and Chinese embassies in Paris, asking about the possibilities. Both replied positively, but in the end, the Russians would sell me only a railway ticket to Nakhodka, just north of Vladivostok, where I would board a passenger ship to Hong Kong via Japan. That seemed like a sufficient adventure, and that is what I booked through the Paris *Intourist* office. In retrospect, I may have been lucky to avoid the area around Beijing. I found out after arriving in Australia that a serious earthquake had demolished the city of Tangshan, not far southeast of Beijing, the day before I might have arrived. That earthquake is said to have killed over 300,000 people, and Beijing itself must have been pre-occupied with disaster relief.

1. *Entering the USSR*

The adventure was to begin in Vienna at the *Hauptbahnhof*. On the appointed evening late in July, I arrived with my backpack and a bag of Viennese groceries around 8 pm, and found the correct platform, where a train to Bratislava was ready to depart. The last carriage was marked "*Moschau/Moskva*." As I approached the rear door, feeling not a little anxious about the prospect of going out on such a precarious limb, the conductor appeared in the doorway and said to me "*До Москве? (To Moscow?)*" So I began profiting from a very rudimentary knowledge of Russian. We set off into the night. I was very weary after weeks on the road and slept, despite the discomfort of my seat. I don't recall noticing when the carriage must have been attached to a different train in Bratislava, and I woke to morning views of the thinly-inhabited, forested uplands of the Carpathian Mountains of eastern Czechoslovakia. I pulled out my tent to dry, because it had rained the previous day in Vienna. The conductor was unhappy because the tent shed a lot of grass on the floor, but seemed to understand when I explained as well as I could in German that I had to get it dry before it went moldy.

Late in the morning, we reached the border crossing into the USSR. I noted with some consternation that the visa issued by *Intourist* had the following day's date—not the sole error they had made in the arrangements, as was to become clear later. I was to conclude eventually that the Soviets didn't send their most talented staff to work at *Intourist*; anyone with a little initiative might have been reluctant to go home to the USSR after experiencing life in Paris. The train pulled into a no-man's land fenced with coiled barbed wire and provided with a grim watchtower. The tower, in the care of a machine-gun equipped soldier on the top platform, would have looked appropriate in a prison camp. Armed border guards entered the train, making as much fuss and clatter as possible and speaking aggressively to the passengers as they demanded papers. The particular bully who looked at my papers just said "*НельзЯ*"

(no way!) and moved on. In retrospect, I doubt that he looked closely enough at the papers to see the date, or had any idea whether I might understand what “*Нельзя*” meant. The aim of the exercise was intimidation. This was the first lesson on how the Soviet government of the time kept the population under control through fear. It was not to be the last.



Even if the border guard had noticed the date on the visa, I soon realized that it wasn't worth worrying too much about such a thing. What were they going to do—delay the train on my account, or put me out into the no-man's land? Therefore, I just sat and waited for the train to move on, which it duly did, pulling into the ominously-named Ukrainian border town of Chop. There I went into an immigration office where a woman who spoke English looked at my reservations for Moscow and said that there had obviously been an error on the visa, and that I should proceed.

The rail gauge changes at the border, an obstacle to the movement of military trains in either direction. While I was in the immigration office, my railway wagon was pulled 100 m further into Ukraine to have its bogie changed. Outside the office, two friendly young soldiers were trying to tell me where to go to get back on the train. After a while, I realized they were saying “*сто метр гулять*” with gestures in case I understood no Russian—walk 100 metres. The Science Russian course was paying off, however inelegantly on my part. I walked back to the train, climbed on, and off we moved into the USSR.

The railway line leading east of Chop had double tracks, so I could see the configuration of the rails on the opposite side. This caught my attention immediately because there were three rails, not two. One was clearly for Russian bogies, and the other for bogies of the European gauge. Not far outside Chop, the three-rail line curved off into woodland. I concluded that it most likely led to a base from which military trains could quickly travel into Eastern Europe, as had happened at the end of the Prague Spring of 1968. The train continued into Ukraine, through a densely populated agricultural landscape in which I remember noticing plentiful domestic geese. Night fell before we passed (as I assume) through Kiev; I must have been very tired because I remember nothing of stopping there. By mid-day the following day, we had covered the 1300 km from Chop to Moscow. I had been gradually eating from my bag of groceries. I don't remember what food was available on the train, but I probably could not have bought any because I had no rubles.

2. Moscow

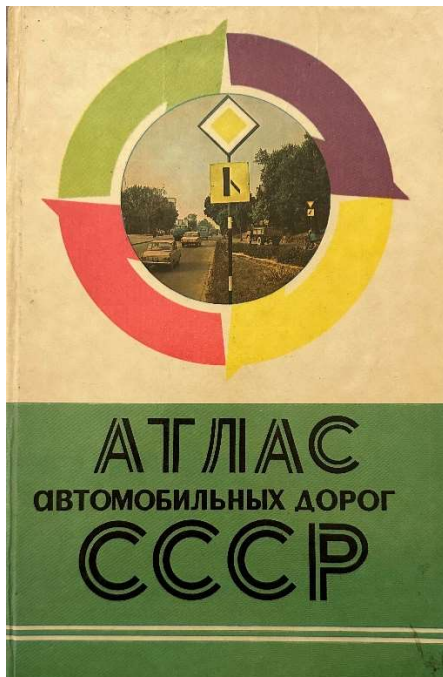
The arrangement I had made with *Intourist* included some nights in Moscow, with accommodation at the Metropol Hotel in the city centre, a car tour with a guide one morning, and taxi rides to and from railway stations. The Metropol was adequate, scarcely luxurious, and presented me with one major problem: no dinner. My room was a few feet away from a large dining room in which a balalaika orchestra performed as the evening meal was underway. The hotel management, however, had evidently decided that they could rake in more money by selling the evening meal and programme to people other than their hotel guests, i.e. more affluent tourists whose Moscow packages included tickets to such events. A search of the surrounding area of the city produced no restaurants or markets, and only one food store, called *Гастроном* (Gastronom). Nobody in *Гастроном* would even look in my direction when I went in. I soon decided that I needed to eat as much as I could at the hotel's buffet breakfast, which offered bread, ham, sausage, eggs and other substantial food. For the rest of the day, I snacked on the remains of my Viennese groceries, and was thankful that I had bought a large supply of them, even though their condition was beginning to deteriorate.

I had two full days in the city, and was easily able to walk to the famous attractions. I wanted to buy some presents for my family, so I went to the two great department stores on the side of Red Square opposite the Kremlin—*Гум* (Gum) and *Детский Мир* (Dyetskyy Mir, Children's World), the former catering to adults and the latter to children. Neither contained merchandise that I considered attractive. The only place I could buy Russian crafts (lacquer, nested dolls) was in the *Берёзка* (Beryozka) shop in which only foreign currency was accepted. That must be where I obtained the calendar and the road atlas of the USSR that I still have as souvenirs. I think I must have been taken there by the guide I'll mention next, but some of my memories have faded as I write this, 48 years later.

My tour "package" provided the services of a guide and a taxi driver for a morning. The guide was a pleasant young man, a student, who spoke English and French and was anticipating a spell of overseas studies in Scotland. He took me to see one of the Orthodox churches outside the city center, too far to walk from the hotel, and I remember stopping outside a factory where *квас* (Kvass), a weak beer-like beverage, was being sold from a truck outside a factory, to workers taking their morning break. I asked him about the Moscow Metro, and he arranged for the driver to drop us at one location and collect us at another, so that I could see two of the famous decorated stations. His burning question for me was whether he would be able to find rock music albums for sale in Scotland. I assured him that that would be no problem. I was able to give him a French novel that I had been reading on the road.

I spent the rest of my time wandering in and around Red Square, viewing Lenin's tomb and St. Basil's Cathedral, walking across the nearby bridge over the Moscow River (from which one could view the giant pyramidal "skyscrapers" on the banks, one housing Moscow University), and visiting the parts of the Kremlin that were accessible to tourists. In the Kremlin, I was able to see white-walled churches crowned with swarms of gilded domes and the green-roofed palace, but from outside only. I entered only the Tretyakov Gallery, where there was more Russian art than my tired brain was capable of taking in. There is one piece I remember vividly: a depiction of the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan. The artist had filled his large canvas with dozens of figures, but the eye was inevitably drawn to the small, central figure of Jesus whose eyes, painted as would be the eyes of an icon, commanded the entire image. I was able to enter St. Basil's cathedral, where constricted curving tunnel-like passages led to a central sanctuary. I badly wanted a photo of myself standing in front of St. Basil's, and asked a Russian woman if she would take one with my camera. Her dismayed refusal—she wanted nothing to do with a foreigner's camera—was my second lesson on the paranoia that pervaded Russia at that time. One of

my clearest memories of Red Square is of the bells that chime on the hour from the large brick tower atop the main gate to the Kremlin. Before the striking of the hour itself on a single deep-toned bell, a descending peal of about eight somewhat tinny, unevenly-spaced tones sounds several times. The sound is so distinctive and characteristic of the capital city that Radio Moscow used to (and possibly still does) broadcast it on the hour.



Top left: St. Basil's Cathedral, Red Square, Moscow. This is the only photo I have left from the trip—other slides were stolen from my house in Tucson.

Top right: 1977 Calendar, showing Lenin addressing a people's meeting.

Left: The cover of my USSR Road Atlas.

3. The Trans-Siberian Railway to Irkutsk

On my last morning in Moscow, I discarded the decaying remains of my Austrian groceries, crammed my Russian souvenirs into my backpack, and was taken by taxi to the Yaroslavsky Station where a minder deposited me on the correct platform. A Russian man approached me—I was an obvious foreigner, and he was curious about what I was doing. My Russian wasn't anywhere near sufficient for a conversation, so he tried German, asking how I came to be travelling, and what my father did for a living. Soon I was on board, and heading northwest out of Moscow in the direction of the ancient city of Yaroslavl.

My Trans-Siberian tourist package included a week of train travel, punctuated with overnight stays in Irkutsk and Khabarovsk. I had paid for three meals a day on the train, a great relief after difficulties over food in Moscow. The meal plan turned out to be a fistful of rubles, handed to me by the minder, to pay for meals in the restaurant car. The train covers about 9,300 km, terminating in Vladivostok, seven hours ahead of Moscow time. The multiple time zones would create considerable confusion if local hours of the day were listed on the rail schedules, so the custom was to quote arrivals and departures in Moscow time. This became clumsier the further the train advanced from Moscow, but was probably the better alternative. Several cities along the way were off-limits to foreigners, for instance Perm and Vladivostok. Foreigners were therefore loaded on to a separate train in Khabarovsk and taken to the small port of Nakhodka on the Sea of Japan just north of Vladivostok. Each train was met by a passenger boat with service to Yokohama and, sometimes, Hong Kong.

I had bought the road atlas in Moscow, anticipating that it might be useful to help me follow where the train was going. So, I was able to identify the Volga River when we crossed it and some major cities during the first afternoon's travel. The train passed through mixed woodland and farmland scattered with villages of unpainted timber houses. My lasting impression of that leg of the journey was of women in headscarves working in the fields. I do not recall seeing a single mechanized farm implement. By nightfall, we were still on the Russian Plain, a flat landscape that would end when we reached the Ural Mountains the next day.

The Ural Mountains are disappointing rolling hills where the railway crosses, via the cities of Perm and Sverdlovsk (now known again by its tsarist name, Yekaterinburg, honoring Catherine the Great). The disappointment for me arose from the image I had of the Urals in the movie *Dr. Zhivago*, which was filmed in the more spectacular scenery of the Rocky Mountains in Canada. Perm and its surroundings had some geological interest for me because it is the type area of the Permian System. Even though Perm was closed to foreigners, I felt I had to get off the train just to set foot on such hallowed ground and to give my legs a badly-needed stretch. So, I jumped off on to the platform while the train stopped, much to the consternation of the samovar lady (our minder) at one end of the foreigner's wagon. While walking on the platform, I encountered a person selling raspberries in small conical sheaves of newspaper, bought one and hopped back on to the train. I was soon forgiven by the samovar lady.

Sverdlovsk brought back a memory from my younger mineral-collecting days. I once tried posting a parcel of Tasmanian specimens to the university there, hoping that someone might send some specimens from the Urals back. Nobody ever responded. My minerals may still have been there somewhere.

The train rolled down the eastern slope of the Urals and on to the West Siberian Plain, a vast, utterly flat expanse of swamp and taiga. The train driver opened the throttle to full and we sped on towards

Novosibirsk. The landscape is empty and the train stopped at few cities, of which I remember only Omsk. Little else remains to be said about the conifer-covered scenery from the Urals to Irkutsk. In Novosibirsk it was permitted to get off the train, and this time I bought a chocolate-coated ice cream.

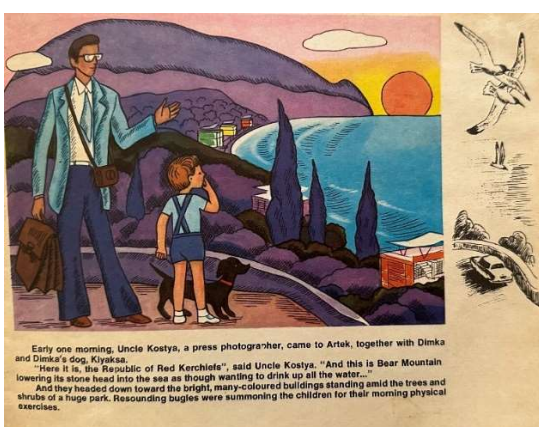
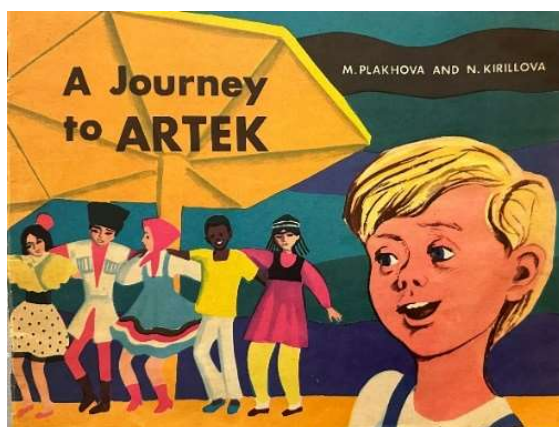
The chief interest of this part of the trip therefore became fellow passengers. I soon fell in with an American, David, and his Japanese girlfriend whose name I no longer remember. We would eat together in the dining car, where my meagre ability at reading the Cyrillic of the menu was appreciated. The fare was ordinary and limited in variety; we ate a lot of chicken and a considerable amount of borsch, but more than one good meal per day was a decided improvement on my experience in Moscow. One dessert was available: *пирожное* (piroznoye) pastries. Wines were available, but cost more than the food allowance, so we abstained. Not so with my compartment mate, an Austrian man whose idea of an exotic vacation was splashing money around at every opportunity. Opportunities were somewhat limited, but champagne from the Caucasus could be obtained in the dining car. I think he and I must have communicated in German. He was also a womanizer, and he succeeded in attracting two young Russian women into our compartment. They were clearly uneasy, because the samovar lady would be watching their interactions with foreigners, and reporting. They explained their discomfort to me in Russian. I can't remember how, but I must have understood enough, and I certainly comprehended their difficult position. I responded by telling them I understood (*Я понимаю*), and they left. The Austrian man was highly disgruntled about my letting them go so easily, as if I were responsible in some way for the social life of our compartment. He had told me he was a journalist for a Vienna newspaper. Others in the car knew that the publication in question was a disreputable scandal rag. Another foreigner travelling with us was a Frenchman who spoke good Russian. His language skills were to help me greatly later in the trip.

The Russian men in the wagon would speak briefly to us, and I began to notice some variety in Russian pronunciation. They did their patriotic duty in discouraging me from taking scenic photos through the train windows. Government-fostered paranoia and xenophobia were surfacing again; they were doing the kind of thing one does because one ought to be seen to do it, without questioning why. It wasn't clear to me what a photo of the Siberian taiga might disclose to a foreign government. No matter; I responded by limiting my photography to views on the south side of the train, through the compartment window where only the Austrian scandal-rag writer would see.



One Russian seemed self-assured enough to communicate openly with foreign passengers. One afternoon, her little girl about 3 years old came out into the passage with a piece of paper on which her mother had written *кто твое имя?* (What's your name?). David, his girlfriend and I sent it back with one of our names, and then followed the little girl back to her compartment. Mother's name was Svyetlana, and she explained that she needed to travel for work. We asked where her husband was, and she responded "*к дом,*" at home, as if that were the most normal thing in the world. As we left, she presented me with one of her daughter's picture books, from which I was to learn the names of animals. It was a precious souvenir to me, as I'm sure Svyetlana understood, and sadly I can no longer locate it.

Our wagon had a small literature rack containing a few publications for people who spoke languages other than Russian. I took a children's book as a souvenir.



- *4. Irkutsk and Lake Baikal*

The train arrived in Irkutsk at about 7 pm local time, and the foreigners who had purchased a tour package including two nights in Irkutsk were taken by bus to a hotel that looked modern—a concrete building several storeys high. The rooms were shoddy, furnished in basic fashion, but the place would do for a couple of nights. My window had had a hole drilled roughly through the wooden frame, and a loop of wire inserted as the fastener. We had a short tour in the city with a guide, plus time to wander freely, and then a bus ride to see Lake Baikal on the last day, when we would re-board the train in the evening. The guided tour included the uninteresting modern civic buildings of the city center, and one memorable stop at an Orthodox church where we were taken inside. A service was in progress, attended mainly by women who wore headscarves and stood chanting their part of the liturgy. The guide was completely unconcerned that we might be disturbing the proceedings, and clearly didn't need to fear being ejected by the clergy.

David, his girlfriend and I went walking in an inner residential section of the city, admiring the intricate woodwork decorating the façades of the old-style free-standing houses. At some stage, we were told that people preferred living in apartment blocks with central heating. In the old houses, residents survived the winter cold by sleeping together on ornate wood-burning stoves. These glazed ceramic works of art were constructed with broad horizontal flues large enough to serve as family beds. We tried walking into the campus of a tertiary-level college, but this caused great panic and consternation. The administration felt it was the safer choice to tell us that we foreigners weren't allowed there, whether that was the case or not. As we walked away, a young man began to pester us in the street, presumably looking for western clothes to barter for. He wouldn't leave us alone, even after being told that we weren't interested, so David said "Watch this!". He pulled out his camera and pointed it at the boy, who was gone in a flash.

The bus ride to the lake proved disappointing. We stopped at a place where we could go down to the water's edge across rounded boulders. There were no birds, no seals, no fauna of any interest. After a lunch that cannot have been sufficiently interesting for me to remember, we boarded the bus for Irkutsk. The guide, who must have been feeling guilty about the uninteresting tour, proposed a late-afternoon meal of omol fish, a Baikal specialty, at a restaurant. Given that we had to leave our hotel and be ready to re-board the Trans-Siberian at 7 pm, it seemed clear that we could easily miss the train if we went for the meal. An elderly English couple were loudly vociferous about refusing the offer, and I agreed with them. We all boarded our train in time.

- *5. By train to Khabarovsk.*

Publicity for the Trans-Siberian railway shows a scenic section of line skirting the hilly southern shore of Lake Baikal. The daily train actually passes by the lake at night; I was aware of many bends in the track from the lurching of the wagon. By morning, the train was passing through rolling hills east of the lake. My compartment companion this time was a Russian who explained to the Russian-speaking Frenchman that he was a television script-writer and was making the journey so as to have the experience for his work. The Austrian journalist was elsewhere, and I didn't feel at all sorry about that. As we travelled east, it became clear to me that the script-writer was actually quite familiar with the route. He told me that we would soon be passing through the town where some of the Decembrists, who revolted against the Tsar in 1825, had been exiled. Therefore, I had my doubts about his true function. He was cordial to me, offering me chocolate and later helping to look after me in time of need.

It was during this leg of the journey that I discovered that the *Intourist* office in Paris had sold me a boat ticket to Hong Kong for a date on which the ship would in fact go only as far as Yokohama. This was serious for me, because I would need to pay for an alternative means of getting to Hong Kong, and did not have a large amount of excess money on hand. David said he would lend me the money if necessary, and trust me to return it after I reached Australia. The Russian agents eventually said that a refund could be arranged but only in rubles. That would not be useful for me, because one could not reconvert rubles into foreign currency unless one had converted a similar sum (or more) to rubles on entering the USSR. I had exchanged very little money because the trip was largely pre-paid. After much discussion among the group of foreigners, we decided that I should ask the Austrian journalist if he would make the currency exchange for me. He had been spending plenty of rubles, and the transaction would be permitted for him. I would have to trust him! He agreed to the plan.

During this time, soon after leaving Irkutsk, I began to feel very ill with an intestinal problem. The group of foreigners, in consultation with the script-writer and the samovar lady in charge of our wagon, managed to arrange for medical professionals to check on me at five different stations between Irkutsk and Khabarovsk. The Russian-speaking Frenchman was very helpful in translating, and it was soon decided that my diagnosis was dysentery. They thought that I shouldn't have eaten the raspberries in Perm, though that was three days earlier and I wondered how long dysentery took to develop. Each doctor or nurse who came to the train left a selection of pills and saline solution at no cost to me, thanks to the generosity of USSR socialized medicine. All of the Russians concerned were truly kind to me, especially the samovar lady who seemed most concerned for my recovery. I soon began to recover, but felt weak. As we arrived in Khabarovsk and I was packing my possessions to move to a hotel for a night, the script-writer pulled one bottle of pills from the pile of medications that had accumulated on our compartment table, and said sternly to me: "*два утро, два вечер.*" At that stage, it seemed well worth having studied Science Russian because I knew that he was telling me to take two in the morning and two in the evening. I assured him that I understood, said thank you, and we parted.

6. Khabarovsk and the train ride to Nakhodka.

The next morning, I dragged myself from my hotel bed and braved an organized bus tour of the city. I remember wooden houses, the Amur River, a heroic revolutionary statue or two, and little else because I was struggling to keep going. My images of this area of the USSR come mainly from Kurosawa's film *Дерсу Узала* (Dersu Uzala) in which every frame was a stunningly beautiful image: the wooden houses of Khabarovsk of 70 years prior, glorious deciduous forest in autumn, a tiger and a blizzard on Lake Khanka. By evening, we were back at the railway station ready to board the train for the last day of our journey.

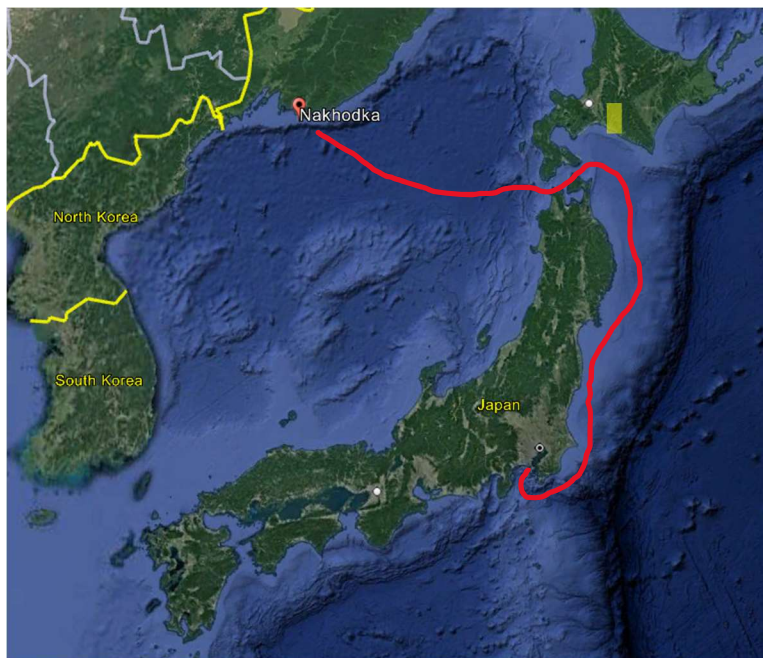
The station was busy, full of Russians waiting to board the Trans-Siberian that would deliver them where we foreigners were not allowed, to the military port city of Vladivostok. Instead, we were to board a special train to the small port of Nakhodka, a short distance north of Vladivostok. We were all on one platform, but Soviet citizens and foreigners were forcibly kept apart by a rope barrier and a line of armed soldiers. Such forced separation had not been necessary during the long journey from Moscow, so I could only conclude that someone was putting on a show to reinforce the officially-encouraged paranoia and xenophobia for the benefit of the Soviet citizens.

The accommodations in the train were very beautiful, and a great change from the plainness of the Trans-Siberian trains. The wagons were old, possibly pre-Communist, and beautifully maintained. The compartments had leather upholstery—on the walls as well as the seats—and polished brass trim. I slept soundly, still being tired from my illness, and remember little else. The following morning, we arrived at the docks in Nakhodka. All the foreigners passed through a security check-point. I went through with no fuss, but two Americans who had made friends with the two Russians sharing their four-berth compartment were searched. Their notebooks, in which they had written the names and addresses given as a token of friendship by the Russians, were seized by the security officers. They copied the information. I felt angry, because on the one hand the Americans might have been more prudent, and on the other because of the betrayal of an act of good will.

On the dock, as we prepared to board, I sought out the Austrian journalist and he returned my ticket refund converted into Japanese yen.

7. By passenger ship to Yokohama.

Night fell as the ship was crossing the mirror-smooth Sea of Japan. From the upper deck, it was possible to see for miles over a sea-surface lit by dozens of very bright lights belonging to squid fishermen. I was beginning to feel in the mood for some cautious eating, and found myself tempted by the Japanese fare offered by the ship kitchen. After dinner, the small dining room became a dance floor, and I felt strong enough to join in for a while, before needing to adjourn for a long, sound sleep, uninterrupted by the tiniest ripple. Dawn found us close to the strait between Honshu and Hokkaido, and choppy water that became progressively rougher as we approached the open Pacific Ocean. The rest of the voyage was southward along the east coast of Honshu. My innards were still in a tender state and I soon felt seasick, but not too seriously. The ship food became unattractive, except for one item I intuitively knew would sit well in my stomach: a crunchy, green Japanese seaweed.



8. Yokohama to Hong Kong

The brief cruise over, I found myself standing alone on the dock in Yokohama. What next? I was now quite on my own with no arrangements – no clear idea of how I would get to Hong Kong, and no hotel reservation for the night. This was the most daunting place of my whole journey home. In the USSR, I had had train and hotel reservations and just needed to follow instructions. There, I could at least make something of Cyrillic script, and could even comprehend a little speech, but in Yokohama I couldn't read or understand a thing. I decided to go exploring, and eventually found a building labeled YMCA—something I understood! I asked if anyone could speak English—one person managed a little—and if they had rooms, which they did not. The man who spoke a little English kindly took me to a small hotel near the waterfront, where I was able to find a traditional Japanese room for not too much money. He also explained what he could of my situation to the owners, in particular that I needed to work out how to get to Hong Kong, and the owners very kindly took me under their care. They proposed that I should go to Tokyo airport early in the morning, and ordered a taxi. I was very pleased and relieved to accept their kindness. The traditional room had a thin mattress on the floor and a bathroom consisting of a tiled depression in one corner with a tap and a wooden bucket for bathing. This is not to say that the room was unattractive; quite the contrary. It was beautifully laid out according to Japanese aesthetics. I don't remember eating that night, but I must have had some breakfast at the hotel before leaving in the taxi.

Within ten minutes of entering the airport, I had a ticket for Hong Kong and was very soon in the air. The flight afforded me a view of Mt. Fuji, and of the tower of grey and white cloud that made up the typhoon we skirted between Japan and China. I was in Hong Kong by the middle of the day.

9. Finding my friend in Hong Kong.

Before I left France, I had written to Leung Yuet Keung, an old high school friend, and had arranged to visit him in his home city, Hong Kong. He knew approximately when I should arrive, but I had been unable to give him precise details because of the upsets in my original plan, and the unexpectedly rapid trip from Tokyo. I had the address I had used for writing to him: 16 Ching Ping Street in Kowloon. In the airport, I changed some currency and asked at an information booth where Ching Ping Street was. They gave me a simple map of Kowloon and showed me where a Ching Ping Street was on the waterfront, but cautioned me that there might be other Ching Ping streets. Armed with this information, I found the bus stop for a route that would get me into town and set off. I had assumed that I could use English freely in Hong Kong, but when I tried speaking to some Chinese people at the bus stop, they just looked at me blankly. English seemed to be only for people who didn't need to use the buses.

Using the map, I followed the bus route into central Kowloon, and got off when it seemed that the bus would pass no closer to the Ching Ping Street I knew about. I walked a few blocks to the waterfront along streets crammed with colourful overhead signs in Chinese, and with street-names written in Roman characters as well as Chinese. That alone left me feeling much less lost than I had in Yokohama. I duly arrived at the waterfront, and was disappointed, to put it mildly, at the sight of a row of run-down warehouses on the left, and floating sampans used by people with no other housing to the right. Was I in the right place? All I could do was go looking for number 16, which was one of the least appealing buildings, painted off-white and encrusted with dirt. I knocked at the door.

An elderly Chinese man opened the door a little. I told him I was looking for Leung Yuet Keung, but he didn't understand, though he did speak some English. It was my attempt at pronouncing Cantonese that was lacking! So I wrote out Leung Yuet Keung on a piece of paper. The man's eyes lit up and he said: "That my boss!" I had found the right place. Relief was an understatement for how I felt. It turned out that 16 Ching Ping Street was a registered address for my friend's marine engineering company, but that the real address off the company was elsewhere. The man and his wife were caretakers. He invited me in and rang the main office. They told him that my friend, whom I knew as Ken, was at work out on the harbor, and that he would return to shore in about three hours, around 6 pm.

The elderly caretaker and his wife proceeded to make me as comfortable as they could in the dingy building. They arranged for a sandwich and a bottle of beer, which my tender stomach fortunately accepted with little fuss, and showed me the premises. In the back, where there seemed to be numerous resident rodents of rat size, they had a small shrine. Mostly I rested and was glad of the opportunity. As dusk drew on, a man laid out a thin mat on the pavement outside the front door. "He velly bad man," my host told me. It seemed that the man was homeless because he couldn't fit in in some way, alcoholism being the most likely reason, because I have a vague memory of a drink sitting on the ground beside him. Eventually there was a knock at the door, and Ken appeared. I made sure that Ken understood how kind the old couple had been to me and asked him to thank them.

10. Getting to know Hong Kong

Ken and his wife lived in an apartment in a high-rise building in the center of Kowloon. I wasn't the only visitor for the five days until my flight to Australia. A student Ken had met during his university studies in England was also there for a brief visit. For me, the contrast between the austerities of communist USSR and the exuberance of capitalist Hong Kong was almost overwhelming.

Ken and his extended family looked after me very kindly. We explored the city, including a ferry ride across the harbour to Hong Kong proper; we went for a drive into the New Territories where the family had a second house, something not easy to arrange in a place as crowded as the colony; we went to the movies; we went shopping to spend the money my parents had thoughtfully sent for my birthday (I bought a slide projector); we visited a brightly painted temple; we drove past an ancient grey-brick walled village, the like of which I have seen nowhere else in China since; we ate the most wonderful Chinese food. Many of the details of the stay have fled my memory by this stage, perhaps as a response to the relief I felt about arriving at the end of such a long and seemingly perilous journey.

The food memories are the clearest. An open-air fish market in the New Territories smelled strongly of dried seafood of huge variety, an association I still recall when I breathe the less pungent air of the local Chinese supermarket in Tucson.

The first meal I had with Ken's extended family was at his Auntie Wong's apartment, where the maid emerged from the kitchen to see how well I could use chopsticks (fortunately, I had had lessons in New Guinea two years prior). Another day, the whole family drove to Sha Tin Bay, then a shantytown (but now a satellite city of Kowloon built on the reclaimed bay) for a meal in a most unpromising restaurant, a ramshackle tin-shed structure from the outside, but serving a lavish meal of innumerable delicious courses. The family assured me they knew the place well, and that one could dine there for a fraction of the cost of a similar meal in Kowloon. At that meal, I discovered an aspect of Chinese hospitality that was extended to one whose technique with chopsticks was slow; they thought I was falling behind. As

soon as my plate was empty, one of the relatives would place a new morsel on it before I realized what had happened. I wasn't going to lose any weight during my stay.

Finally, we went one day to the Mayflower restaurant that served dim sum on an industrial scale. The building was painted brilliant red outside, and was as vast as a large supermarket within. Rows of glass chandeliers adorned the ceilings, and swarming carts of delicacies plied the aisles between dozens or perhaps hundreds of tables. The process of selecting and paying was streamlined. We took what looked good from the passing carts, and paid according to the number of empty dishes we accumulated.

11. Home at last.

The five days passed quickly, and soon I found myself on a Qantas flight to Sydney, with a stop in Manila and an unfortunate seating assignment next to two fellow Australians, a married couple whose desire for cheap cigarettes had got the better of them. They knew they had bought more than they would be allowed to take into the country, so they did their best to smoke as much as possible of the excess before arriving. An International Geological Congress awaited me in Sydney, and a professional presentation that may well have changed my life.