



RON'S DIARY

BY RON MOON



Our crew with the friendly locals



From top left: sunset Lake Baikal; River and Autumn colours; colourful windows brighten drab villages; camp at Lake Baikal; village beach at Lake Baikal; buskers playing along Vladivostok beachfront

Siberia and the Russian Far East

It's a bloody long way across Russia! Here we were back in this long sojourn across the country (and two continents) and still we had nearly 5000km to go before Vladivostok and a flight home.

After crossing the border from Mongolia we headed for Lake Baikal in the heart of pine-clad Siberia. This mammoth lake holds nearly 20 percent of the world's un-frozen fresh water; it's larger than the five Great Lakes of the US/Canada combined and in parts it's more than a mile deep; it's the deepest lake in the world.

And the Russians haven't stuffed it up, so it is still pretty pure – so far! About two thirds of the shoreline is protected in some form of reserve or another but, like most of Russia, wherever people go there is bloody rubbish everywhere.

Along its southern and eastern sides reasonable roads stretch the complete length of the lake but the north-western side is much more a wilderness with just a few logging tracks penetrating the mountain vastness. A vehicle circumnavigation of the lake would be a great adventure.

The lake freezes over in winter and you can drive on, or even across it, in places. There's also

ice diving and fishing during the winter season – done through a hole in the ice or as the villagers do, with thin nets strung beneath the ice to catch the delicacy of omul, a relative to the salmon.

Along with the 50 varieties of fish the lake also supports its very own seal – the beautiful nerpa. Not surprisingly, the lake generates its own weather patterns and is considered by many as the 'climatic kitchen' of Siberia. For more info go to: bww.irk.ru.

From Baikal we headed east along the Trans Russian Highway. Finally opened in 2004 the road was supposed to be all bitumen by the end of 2008. Don't worry, the drive will still be a bit of an adventure for a few years yet.

Heading west is a near continuous line of cars, small trucks, big trucks and more. Most though are small shopping trolleys – small, second-hand Japanese imports that are landed at Vladivostok and then driven pell-mell across Russia to Moscow or St Petersburg for sale.

We spoke to one young Russian and the 9000km journey takes him seven days; he then sells the car, catches a train back to Vladivostok and repeats the process.

Any thought of us doing something too exciting and off the beaten track were put on the

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back-burner when both the F250s suffered broken rear springs. With no hope of getting new ones, or even getting a few leaves for the leaf springs, in this region of Russia we carried out a bush repair and pushed on slowly.

As far as the scenery was concerned, though, we had timed our crossing perfectly. It was Siberia's short-lived Autumn and the forests and marshy bogs were a blaze of yellow, gold, rich reds and browns with, of course, the deep green of the pines amongst it all.

There were a surprising number of villages along much of the way – all clung to the railway line as their only visible means of support although a few bigger places had coal mines nearby.

Amazar was typical of these isolated places. Situated just off the main road east we dropped into this railway town to pick up some supplies. It was crowded with side lines, shunting yards, old platforms, drooping overhead power lines for the electric trains (the whole Trans Siberian rail network is electrified) and the discarded paraphernalia of a working rail terminus.

Like many places we'd visited, the village had a very run down feel about it, made even more so by the abandoned factory buildings on its outskirts. The houses, partially hidden by lop-sided wooden fences

and under attack from gravity and the harsh climate, were nearly all made of timber, unpainted and on the verge of collapse.

It was in another village further east where we met Natasha and 'Mamma'. This was one of those delightful experiences you have when travelling independently; while they didn't speak a word of English, and our Russian was limited to just a few words, we conversed for more than an hour. Natasha had somehow heard we couldn't find bread and the local store had none so she brought us two loaves and refused payment.

When we asked where we could buy vegetables she led us to her mother's house where we were loaded up with eggs, pumpkins, potatoes, carrots and tomatoes.

Mamma took us proudly around her small four-square home; Natasha's husband took us to his garden where the last of the vegetables were being dug up and harvested before winter set in, while Natasha brought water from their well for heating over the large wood stove. This was pure local life and we were privileged and humbled by the experience.

Later we stopped in the major city of Khabarovsk on the mighty Amur River not far from the Chinese border. It was a pleasant enough city with delightful parks

and picturesque buildings but we hadn't been 'registered' – one of the bureaucratic process you are supposed to do every three days in this quasi police state – and now, in the words of the hotel receptionist, 'We were to be punished'.

As it turned out we were neither beaten with sticks, sent to a gulag or even fined, but it was the same again when we got to Vladivostok.

On our way south to Vladivostok we visited a tiger sanctuary which is more grandiosely known as the Russian Academy Of Science Biological Research Reserve.

Home to three rare Amur tigers the place must once have seen better days, you might say. Still the tigers must be happy enough as they have produced some 19 progeny who now grace zoos around the world.

As we rolled into Vladivostok, home of the Russian Navy's Pacific Fleet since 1862 and only open to the outside world since 1992, we were met with gridlocks, police check points, one-way streets, milling pedestrian traffic and the stench of diesel.

One thing we had learnt on our sojourns across the world was that cities, no matter where they are, are always the same!

Regards,
Ron And Viv



From top: camp in haystack dotted field; villages are poor and cling to Trans Siberia railway; Vladivostok's beachfront

