TOUR CODE

JHTL

ADVENTURESABROAD

TRANS-MONGOLIAN ADVENTURE

with Jonathan Hodgson

22 days

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Day 1 *Arrival in Beijing, China*

We begin our trans-continental rail journey in Beijing, the capital of the People's Republic of China. While many of its elements are common to other Chinese cities, the sum of this city -- its scope and presence in history -- has no equivalent in China or anywhere else in the world.

Beijing is not only the political and administrative center of the People's Republic of China, it is also China's single greatest repository of monuments and treasures from the imperial era. It is also the second-largest and fastest growing municipality in today's China, the home and workplace of over 12 million people.

On and off again capital of a number of Chinese dynasties, Genghis Khan and his Mongol armies razed the city, then known as Zhongdu (or "Central Capital"). His grandson, Kublai Khan, established his Yuan dynasty next to the ruins as the city was rebuilt as the capital under the name "Dadu". Much later, after the fall of the Yuan dynasty and the Ming were overthrown, Beijing became the capital of the Manchus in the 17th century, remaining so excepting the interregnum period between WWI and WWII.

* Please note that we choose to not include the usual sightseeing in Beijing as it is a location that many of our experienced travellers have already visited. If there are those of you interested in spending time in Beijing before the tour begins, please advise at the time of booking.

Overnight in Beijing.

Day 2 *Beijing - Great Wall at Mutianyu - Datong*

This morning we embark by coach to the Great Wall of China at Mutianyu.

A walk along the enormous undulating towered and turreted wall is spectacular. Rising and falling in concert with the ridges of the northern hills and undulating far off into the distance, the Great Wall consistently exceeds visitors' expectations and remains one of humankind's most remarkable accomplishments.

The wall's construction began during the Warring States Period (403-221 BC), when separate sections were built in scattered strategic areas. Following China's unification under the first Qin Emperor, 300,000 men -- many of them political prisoners whose bodies are buried in the wall -- were put to work connecting the segments into one huge rampart of stone and earth.

Mutianyu is a spectacular section of the Wall that attracts far fewer visitors than the much more popular Badaling section. We will use a cable car to make our way up to the top of the Wall (the more adventurous travellers are welcome to give hiking up to the wall a try – but its difficult!).

Later in the afternoon, we return to Beijing to board our afternoon train to Datong (Inner Mongolia).

We transfer to our Datong hotel upon arrival.

TRAINS: Please refer to the information page for this tour on our website for details pertaining to the nature of the train travel and accommodation on this adventure.

Overnight in Datong.

Day 3 *Datong: City Tour*

Datong is the gateway to Inner Mongolia and has long been the meeting point for the so-called "barbarians" to the north and the Chinese empires to the south, either in trade or in battle. Now home to approximately 3.5 million, the city and its outskirts has several fascinating points of interest, including the UNESCO Yungang Grottoes, dating back to the 5th century, are home to thousands of Buddhist icons in shallow caves, carved out the Turkic Tuoba peoples. Our visit will include a handful of select caves that highlight this illuminating peek into life on the Silk Road.

Another highlight of the region is our visit to the Hanging Monastery at Mt. Hengshan, dating back some 1600 years and featuring a syncretic blend of Buddhist, Daoist and Confucianist elements.
Our afternoon sightseeing will also include a drive south to Yingxian, site of the wooden Fogong Temple Pagoda, a 67-metre (221 feet) high edifice built by the Emperor Daozong of the Liao Dynasty in 1056AD. Here is the world's oldest and tallest wooden pagoda, featuring clay Buddha carvings and an 11-metre high statue of Sakyamuni, the present Buddha.

Overnight in Datong.

Day 4 *Datong, China - Train to Ulaan Baatar, Mongolia*

This morning we transfer to the train station at Datong for our overnight journey to Ulaan Baatar, the capital of Mongolia. We will be clearing Chinese and Mongolian immigration sometime during the night where we will also experience the change of our railway cars from the Chinese (international) gauge of 4' 8.5" wide track to the Russian gauge of 5'. Here, our Chinese train is shunted off to the 'bogie' (wheelset) changing shed for the procedure. You have a choice of staying on the train or getting off to take a closer look at the operation. Once immigration and the gauge procedure is complete, we continue our journey to Ulaan Baatar, passing through the eastern Gobi Desert. Welcome to Mongolia!

Overnight on train.

Day 5 *Arrival in Ulaan Baatar, Mongolia*

Today we arrive in Ulaan Baatar, the capital of Mongolia, home to a population of over one million people. Literally meaning "Red Hero", Ulaan Baatar has been the capital of the modern Mongolian nation since its inception as a Soviet satellite state in 1924. Now a fast-growing city, as more semi-nomadic herders choose to move here for job opportunities and foreigners come on behalf of multi-nationals seeking access to the rich mineral opportunities available in Mongolia, Ulaan Baatar is surprisingly cosmopolitan with new hotels, restaurants, and shops springing up to meet the new affluence that a market economy brings to the nation. Upon arrival we will transfer to our hotel.

Overnight in Ulaan Baatar.

Day 6 *Ulaan Baatar - Ogiy Nuur*

We depart the capital for our drive to Arhangai province. Our drive takes us into the heart of the Mongolian steppes, the traditional "highway" that allowed the Mongols an easy means of crossing vast distances of the Asian continent during their time as powerful conquerors in the 13th and 14th centuries. Our overnight destination is the Ogiy Nuur Ger Camp, located by Ogiy Lake, a peaceful and beautiful nature spot.

We spend our first night in a traditional 'ger'.* Gers are the movable domed structures used by nomads for centuries. Made of a latticed wood structure covered with layers of felt and canvas, each ger is heated by a wood stove and furnished with comfortable wood-framed beds. The traditional ger has a lattice-work frame of narrow birch and willow boards held together by leather strips. Traditionally, the "door" consisted of a felt curtain over the door-frame; this is now replaced with a carved or painted wooden door. The entrance of the ger always faces south for orientation and to act as a sun-dial.

Though basic, gers allow us to visit areas that lack travellers' accommodations, and most visitors find their stays at ger camps to be among the most enjoyable experiences in Mongolia. The camps vary in size with most ger tents set up in a double occupancy style that are fully collapsible, and most have shower and WC blocks. Personal water basins for washing are usually provided and water kept topped up. A stove is placed in the middle of each ger and the staff will attend to it in order to provide warmth on cool nights. Towels are provided. Soft drinks, wine and bottled water are all available for purchase from the camps.

* Single gers ARE available on this tour.

Overnight in Ogiy Nuur Ger Camp.

Day 7 *Ogiy Nuur - Harhorin - Hogno Khan Uul Reserve*

This morning we embark on our full day excursion in this fascinating area. We will drive on the road to Harhorin. We visit Erdenezuu Hiid, a functioning monastery in constant renovation to its former splendour.

This is one of the historically and archeologically richest places in Central Asia. Once, 1000 monks used to inhabit Erdenezuu. Built in 1586, it was constructed from the ruins of the buildings that had once made up the city of Harhorin. The architecture exemplifies the skill of Mongolia's master builders, and is even complete with an ancient freshwater supply system from the nearby Orkhon River. It had some 100 temples within its 400 by 400 meters long walls. The monastery was sacked during the purges of 1937 and only the walls and 3 temples remain. Erdenezuu is still one of the most fascinating sites of Mongolia, and usually we will be able to witness the prayers.

We then continue, enjoying the steppe landscape all the way, and upon reaching the Hogno Khan Uul Nature Reserve we will see Mongol Els sand dunes in the middle of the steppes. They are locally known as "Little Gobi" and next to them there is a very small lake where waders such as herons and ducks may be seen. Transfer from the main road to our ger camp tucked away in a secluded valley at Hogno Khan Mountain.

Overnight in Hogno Khan Ger Camp.

Day 8 *Hogno Khan Uul Reserve*

Today is free for optional activities.

The Hogno Khan Mountain is a giant rock formation in the middle of the steppes. The small Erdene Khombo monastery, which can be reached by bus or on foot, is now being restored. It was destroyed during the purges of the 1930s. This is an interesting area where many nomadic herdsmen and women live. We can do some day walks into these areas, visit some nomadic families, do some horse riding, or vehicle-supported trips nearby.

Overnight in Hogno Khan Ger Camp.

Day 9 *Hogno Khan - Ulaan Baatar*

We drive back to the capital.

Overnight in Ulaan Baatar.

Day 10 *Ulaan Baatar: Ganden Monastery & City Tour - Overnight Train to Russia*

This morning we visit Ganden Monastery, the seat of Buddhism in Mongolia. Most of the temples and monasteries, along with their belongings were destroyed during the Stalinist purges of the late 1930s. Gandantegchinlen Khiid survived because the communists kept it as a showcase to impress foreigners. Roughly meaning 'the great place of complete joy', Gandan is one of Ulanbataar's most amazing sights. Within it are several glorious temples adorned with gold and jewels. The 150 resident monks make the temples lively with plenty of chanting and ceremonies.

After the Monastery we will have a panoramic tour of the capital, including Sukhbaatar Square, the National Museum and the Natural History Museum.

In the late afternoon we may have the opportunity to attend a music performance of Tumen Ekh Folk Song and Dance, that would include a demonstration of traditional Mongolian throat singing.

This evening (after dinner) we depart Ulaan Baatar on the overnight train.

Overnight on Train.

Day 11 *Train to Irkutsk, Russia*

We continue our train trip north toward the Russian border. After completing Mongolian and Russian immigration procedures* we carry on overnight to our destination of Irkutsk, the so-called “Paris of Siberia”. Welcome to Russia!

* Note that the immigration procedures at the Russian border take upwards of 7 hours. However, we are able to rest and relax in our cabins while the officers go about their duties.

Overnight on train.

Day 12 *Train - Arrival at Irkutsk - Listvyanka / Lake Baikal*

Arrival in Irkutsk (timing is subject to the train schedule from the Mongolian border), one of the tourist centers of Russia situated close by to Lake Baikal.

Irkutsk was founded in 1661 by Cossack troops and became the gate to eastern Siberia and the capital of Siberia at that

time. The wonderful historical and architectural monuments in Irkutsk keep the memory of the many events and changes that influenced the economy, culture and politics. Here in Irkutsk, the first Russian revolutionaries, the Decembrists, lived in exile. Nearly all of the centers of the cultural life of the city are situated in ancient buildings of different architectural styles and Irkutsk is often referred to as being a living museum. Very famous here are the ornate old one and two-storied wooden houses, some of which date back to the late 18th century.

We will conduct our sightseeing tour of Irkutsk upon our return to the city after our visit to the Lake Baikal region over the next couple of days. Upon arrival we will transfer by bus to Listvyanka, a community on the shores of Lake Baikal. The small old-style Siberian village, 70km from Irkutsk, is famous for its trade history. This settlement stretches in an arc along the coast at the foot of a high stony ridge. Russian pioneers came to this spot in the middle of the 17th century and a hundred years later there was a stage-post here. The settlement grew along with the development of navigation on Lake Baikal. Listvyanka is now a small settlement but it has shipbuilding and ship-repairing yards of its own.

Overnight in Listvyanka.

Day 13 *Listvyanka / Lake Baikal*

This morning, we begin our sightseeing tour of Listvyanka and the Lake Baikal region. We will visit the wooden orthodox St. Nicholas Church, which possesses some rare icons dating back to the 18th century. During our visit we hope to be able to taste the cold or hot smoked omul and grayfish, usually offered at the fish bazaar near the harbour. Both of these are a delicacy of Baikal and can be smoked just for you.

Nearby is the Limnological Museum (Baikal Lake Museum), which will introduce us to the origin and wildlife of the lake. This museum is the center for exploration and science of Baikal. The unique exhibits tell us about the origin and the history of the lake, its flora and fauna, geological structure, climate and tectonics of Prebaikalye. One can see exhibits found on different scientific expeditions. Our tour of the museum will also include a 20-minute video titled "The Planet’s Well", with unique shots filmed at the lake's deepest point of 1637 m.

A highlight of our day will be to embark on a private boat tour of Lake Baikal near the Angara River outlet and nearby the Old Railway line (approximately 3 hours).

Overnight in Listvyanka.

Day 14 *Listvyanka - Irkutsk*

For the Russian people Lake Baikal is a natural treasure. Today, as in the past, this area remains a crossroads of cultures where native Sayats still herd reindeer and Buryat people maintain many of their old traditions. Located in Siberia near the Mongolian border and surrounded by mountains, forests and wild rivers, Baikal is an immense and breathtaking area of physical beauty. Baikal, the deepest lake in the world, holds twenty percent of the earth's fresh water and harbours more endemic species of plants and animals than any other lake in the world. There are a number of islands in the lake, the largest of which is Olkhon, 72 kilometers (45 miles) long. Over three hundred rivers and streams flow into Lake Baikal, of which the six main ones are: Selenga, Chikoy, Khiloh, Uda, Barguzin, and the Upper Angara. Only the Angara River flows out of the lake. The deepest point in Lake Baikal is 1637 m (5371 ft) and the average depth is 630 m (2067 ft).

We check out of our hotel this morning and on our way to Irkutsk, we will visit the Open-Air Museum of Taltsi (the Wooden Architecture Museum), situated near the Angara River. This museum possesses nearly 40 monuments of architectural heritage and 1000's of exhibits of high cultural value. There are two ethnographic complexes, Russian and Buryat, showing the life and traditions of Siberians from the 16th to the 19th century. The most valuable monuments of

architecture are the Saviour's gate tower of Ilimsk stockaded town (1667) and the Kazan chapel (1679).

Upon our return to Irkutsk we will have a sightseeing tour, including the Decembrists Museum. Irkutsk is recognized as the Decembrists center of Russia, and Museums have opened in the houses where the families of Sergey Trubetskoy and Sergey Volkonsky lived. Here one can find genuine items that belonged to the Decembrists and replicas of those objects that were lost, such as pieces of furniture, musical instruments, embroidery, books, pictures & photographs in the museums.

Overnight in Irkutsk.

Day 15 *Irkutsk - Train to Yekaterinberg: Classic Trans-Siberian Route*

Your morning is free to enjoy independent exploration of Irkutsk. We will transfer to the train station for our train, on the classic Trans-Siberian route, from Irkutsk to Yekaterinberg, a journey of approximately 2 days.

What is the Trans Siberian? The Trans-Siberian railway (usually called TransSib in Russia) is the world's longest and the most famous train route that goes through Russia. It crosses the whole continent, starts in Moscow, passes through the European Russia, crosses the Ural Mountains (which separate Europe and Asia), continues into Siberia's taiga and steppes, and finishes in Vladivostok -- the Russian Far East coast on the Pacific Ocean. The Trans-Siberian Route from Moscow to Vladivostok is the original Trans-Siberian Railway.

The Trans-Siberian is an immense route: along more than 9000 kilometers of its length you see different landscapes, meet many different people and cultures, and just enjoy the trip in the train.

Overnight on Train.

Day 16 *Trans-Siberian Railway: Classic Trans-Siberian Route*

The original Russian name for this railway is "The Great Siberian Way", the name "Trans-Siberian" was given to this route by the West, and soon became very widespread. This railway is the backbone of Russia as it is the only overland route going through the whole country. This unique status makes the railway still quite important for the economy and safety of the country, as it was supposed to be more than 100 years ago, when it was built.

Overnight on Train.

Day 17 *Arrival at Yekaterinberg*

Today we arrive in Yekaterinberg after our latest train journey of approximately 54 hours. Initially established in Peter the Great’s time to take advantage of its proximity to the Ural mountain minerals, it is most (in) famous for being the location of the murder of Tsar Nicholas II and his family during the Russian Revolution in 1918. It is also known as the city Boris Yeltsin, first president of the newly-fledged Russian Federation, hailed from.

*We may be able to conduct sightseeing on arrival or we may transfer our sightseeing to the next day, dependent on our train schedule.

Overnight in Yekaterinberg. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 18 *Yekaterinberg: City Tour - Nevyansk - Yekaterinberg*

Today we take a break from our cross-continental journey here to explore the city of Yekaterinberg. We visit the Church Upon the Blood and memorial to the Romanov family. Our tour also includes the Ural Geology Museum, home to over 500 minerals from the Ural Mountains that include some examples of meteorites. Afterwards, we can wander the charming Literary Quarter of the city, home to many restored traditional wooden houses, some of which double as museums.*

In the afternoon we leave on a half-day trip to Nevyansk, north of Yekaterninberg. Site of the Leaning Tower and the Saviour-Transfiguration Cathedral, this small town's fortunes came about due to the industrialist family of the Demidovs, who financed the whole operation during the time of Peter I. Today, these remarkable constructions would not look out of place in any of Russia's great cities.

We return to Yekaterinberg.

Overnight in Yekaterinberg.

Day 19 *Overnight Train to Moscow*

This morning we transfer to the train station for our journey to Moscow, capital of the Russian Federation.

Overnight on Train.

Day 20 *Moscow: City Tour*

This morning we arrive in Moscow, capital of Russia and the largest metropolis in Europe. Over 9 million people call this home and its population lends itself to the charged atmosphere of vibrant urban life. Once a mere trading post during the time of the Princes of Rus, Moscow rose to prominence in the aftermath of the Mongol invasion in 1236, now referred to as the Golden Horde. Thanks to Prince Ivan Danilovich, Moscow grew under the protection of the invaders as the tax collector for the Horde, until it had pre-eminence over the rest of the Russian cities. Finally, under Ivan III (the Great), the Russians won independence from the Mongols in 1480 without a fight. Since then, Moscow has barely looked back, as capital of both Tsarist Russia and as the capital of the USSR, and now of the Russian Federation in post-Communist Europe.

Upon arrival we will meet our guide and coach and begin our sightseeing tour of the city. Today this will include a visit of the Kremlin -- the famous triangular-walled citadel of the Soviet Government dating from the end of the 15th century with its many cathedrals and their iconostases, the bell tower of Ivan the Great; and the Tsar Bell, which weighing 200 tons, is the largest in the world. Upon leaving the Kremlin, be sure to touch the Kremlin Wall -- an omen foretelling your return to this hospitable city. We also include a visit to the Kremlin Armory.

In the afternoon we tour the famous Red Square, once the centre of Soviet life. Around the square is the History Museum, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, and the Lenin Mausoleum, built in 1929. In the 16th century, Ivan the Terrible ordered the construction of one of Moscow's most famous landmarks--Saint Basil's Cathedral. Originally called Pokrovsky Sobor (the Cathedral of the Veil), each of the nine cupolas cover a chapel named after the saint on whose feast-day the Russian armies won their battles.

Our city tour will also include brief stops at some of the other nearby monuments of Moscow, including the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, across the Moscow River from the Kremlin area.

Your evening is free to enjoy on your own time in this remarkable city. You may be interested in attending a performance at the Bolshoi Theatre or the Russian National Dance Show. Your tour leader can help in planning out your free time activities.

Overnight in Moscow.

Day 21 *Moscow: City Tour*

This morning we will begin with a boat excursion the centre of Moscow. This 90-minute trip gives a great overall sense of Moscow and a great opportunity for photos of this magnificent metropolis.

Our sightseeing today will also include a tour of the Moscow Metro system, in which each station is designed and decorated in a different style, with chandeliers, mosaics, and paintings. Amazingly the underground trains are nearly silent. Some of these stations are so deep that they were used as air raid shelters during WWII.

We will also have an opportunity to explore the pedestrian streets of old Arbat, featuring buskers, painters, and sellers of kitsch Soviet souvenirs. This is a great spot to enjoy a break at a café and pick up any last gifts for friends and family at home. And it’s a great place for people watching!

The rest of the day is free to enjoy Moscow before meeting for our final dinner.

Overnight in Moscow. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 22 *Departure*

Departure from Moscow. Meal plan: Breakfast.