

The Great Siberian Rail Adventure

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The Great Siberian Rail Adventure

Dedication

To my son, James, who took strides toward manhood, living well his part of this adventure. May he continue to grow as a young man of God, continuing in the godly steps of his youth.

* * *

Special thanks to Dick Sleeper who remains a true friend, giving of himself far beyond my best hopes. His support has been a living example of selfless enthusiasm, a gift beyond price.

Also, my deepest thanks to my wife, Robin, who stands by me in all things, sharing the road, side by side.

Introduction

Not many Americans leave their comfy cocoons to make the international leap into rustic Russia. Few of those try to learn the language and culture well enough to brave risky adventures (locally known as “Russian Extreme”) without the safety net of an accompanying national.



Among those few hearty souls willing to solo, dishing themselves a full scoop of Russian spice, fewer still are cheap enough to put themselves through the ordeal we chose.

The Great Siberian Rail Adventure is a story of Russian Extreme. Four Americans uprooted themselves from a settled (if frozen) life in remote

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Siberia to transplant themselves in Saint Petersburg, the home of the tsars one planetary quarter turn away. The route required nine days of travel by minivan, ferry, and two trains. Had we just flown to Saint Petersburg, we could have moved in seven hours. On the other hand, rail riding was six times cheaper than flying.



A week of clack-clacking through six of Russia's nine time zones showed us a bountiful land invisible on any map. Russia is grand and broad, a vast wilderness nearly four times the width of the U.S.A., sprinkled with ramshackle villages. Glimpses of peasants tending their heaped haystacks, endless forests, muddy roads, flowered meadows and ramshackle huts day after day slid serenely past our windows.

What follows is a reliable guide to what awaits those intrepid few with the *right stuff*, who dare follow our gallant, ultra-cheap example. When you're ready to sally forth across this largest of nations--take the train!

1

Fleeing Paradise

Having already lived in Siberia for six years, you might wonder what could chip us out of Yakutia's frozen capital city, Yakutsk. What candle could sun kissed Saint Petersburg, the home of the tsars and cultural capital of Russia hold to frosty Yakutsk? Never mind that the score-card showed Saint



Petersburg leading Yakutsk eleven McDonald's to nothing. Yakutsk was *way* ahead in, well, uh, lack of tourists, for one thing.

Ah scenic Yakutsk, where winter hoar frost

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covers every twig and wire, where each broken water pipe creates its own frozen fantasy.



Yakutsk, the capital of the Republic of Sakha (a.k.a. Yakutia) boasts two hundred fifty thousand souls, less than one percent of whom are evangelical Christians; our ministry and friendships were solidly grounded there.

I'd been busy helping begin a new Russian/Yakut church and learning Russian. My world of teaching and counseling depended on speaking Russian for obvious reasons: Ever tried to counsel somebody about his intimate problems through a blushing translator? In a city where only a fraction of a percent know English, I'd found being unable to understand Russian very much like being profoundly deaf. Language learning was non-optional.

Happily, through lots of agony, after my first year in Russia I'd learned enough to understand five percent of the Russian conversations swirling around me. With diligence, this grew to twenty percent, and then one day I came home from church exulting that I

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understood the *theme* of the sermon. My wife, Robin, was too gracious to pat me on the head and offer a cookie; she was currently at sixty percent comprehension, her language snowball growing ultra fast.

This unfair situation created problems in our marriage for a while, my male ego choking on her vapor trail as she pulled rapidly ahead. It was only when Robin dwindled to a dot on my linguistic horizon that I finally got over comparing our progress. Robin was just plain talented at languages; most Russians I knew openly lavished her with praise for her command of Russian grammar and good accent. On me, they lavished patience.

Eventually, Robin gave up taking lessons; Russian people were consistently fooled that she was one of them. I, meanwhile, continued to plug along as mortals will, trudging through my vocabulary lists, trying to grow in skill through lots of hard work but frustrated by the rate of progress. The fact that my fellow missionary coworkers were as bad or worse was no comfort, this language thing was a serious obstacle to ministry.

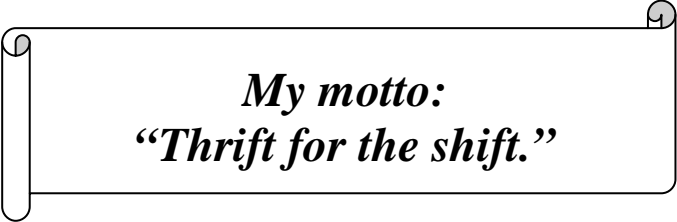
The bright side to grammatical slow torture was that it provided time for me to be mute while building up my understanding of life in Yakutia. Through lots of halting conversations I built both vocabulary and life perspective. I came to see language learning not as the preliminary to ministry. Language learning *was* ministry (in both directions).

Still, until I could get free of a translator my deeper one-on-one ministry couldn't really begin. In the end, I saw that the Russian language was just too complicated for me to learn as an adult without directed guidance, hopefully professional.

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I decided to put myself out of my misery and do nine months of accelerated study in Saint Petersburg. It would be perfect for me, studying Russian and teaching a bit at a large Christian university there. Robin would spend the time completing her Master's degree in Inter-Cultural Studies, and our children, James (then age fourteen) and Katherine (age eleven) would attend a local school for missionary kids. Through connections and some supernatural help we had even managed to line up an excellent piano teacher for Katherine.

Our move from Yakutsk to Saint Petersburg was supposed to be temporary, simple, conservative, reasonable. Nine months worth of bare essentials, living out of boxes, no frills. I figured we'd haul about six boxes of stuff.



***My motto:**
“Thrift for the shift.”*

What messed up my estimate was that I calculated my luggage and then multiplied it by four Harrises. Cluelessly, I announced, "It's just nine months; let's go slim on this. *Bare* essentials, only."

My list:

Three changes of clothes

Two to three books to read on the way

Personal miscellaneous--1/4 box each

Total: Four to six boxes *maximum*.

Their list:

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One box of stuffed animals
Two boxes of clothes *each*
Two boxes of books *each*
Two miscellaneous boxes *each*
Total: Twenty boxes *minimum*.

We compromised at thirteen boxes and (counting crammed carry-on hand bags) took twenty-two assorted containers all together. Stuffing my finger into the luggage dyke, I really put my foot down about the stuffed animals box. “Please kids,” I begged. “You can’t take all your fluffy friends. I’ll allow just one over the shoulder bag.”

“Is there a limit to the number of animals we can bring in that bag?” our little Katherine probed.

“You can take as many as you like, just so long as it zips shut,” I incautiously allowed. Which is how James and Katherine got permission to bring eighteen stuffed toys across Russia.

I suppose it didn't simplify things that we had to pack and store everything in our Yakutsk apartment, a process of slow motion implosion that took three weeks.

Here’s a marriage saving tip for men is when it's time to move: Go fishing. Go hunt a moose. Go see Yellowstone (alone).

2

Patches

Every space shuttle mission has *mission critical* components. These are the items you just don't go without--air, fuel, and toilet paper for instance. Patches was mission critical; Patches was our cat.

It all began the previous year when we got back to Yakutsk after a year of graduate study. James and Katherine had returned with a single-minded plan: Get a kitten. They'd prayed all summer in America about finding one.

Sure enough, on our second day back I found a perfectly awful infant candidate, abandoned in an apartment entryway. "It" was filthy and starving when I found him, huddled against an elevator shaft. As I doubtfully stared at this stray street snack, the earnest friend I'd come to visit bathed him for me. In the end, I phoned home to ask my kids if they even wanted to look him over, then brought him home, a tiny bag of bones thinly covered by the matted wet fur of a drowned rat. His tiny head was topped with hugely oversized bat ears. Of course, my children loved him at once.

The traditional phase of naming passed quickly; based on his mottled sorry hide, he was dubbed "Patches", a name he never learned.

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No pathetic excuse for a cat was ever showered with more love. His tiny voice wouldn't even meow. He would open his mouth and a brief squeak would leak out. For the first months he rarely ate and then only sparingly. He wouldn't play and was too bony to pet. James and Katherine always switched to baby talk when addressing him, crooning and coaxing, but Patches just stared. After six months he was hardly any larger, throwing up regularly the whole time. Friends confided that starved kittens never did grow up to be normal.



Robin took him repeatedly to the vet looking for a solution. She would come home with pills to stuff down his scrawny little throat and elixirs to doctor him. He spit out all of them when he could and bit us when he couldn't. I was growing annoyed. I especially didn't enjoy toe jam late at night from little kitty barfs left around the toilet. I grew very annoyed. Ominously annoyed.

And then one day my persevering better half

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finally hit upon the right medical combination and Patches stopped being sick. He began for the first time to romp. Ludicrously, my son taught Patches how to meow.



As he improved my daughter gradually developed an evil gleam in her eye that said, "Now we can play..." Katherine's idea of playing included the

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transformation of her pets' personalities. Specializing in irresistible chase toys, not even the laziest of pets was safe when Katherine was around.

Patches slept alternative nights with both children--he never developed a preference, he was completely even-handed. Always gentle natured, he was completely unlike our first cat, Tiger.



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Tiger had, shall we say, spiritual problems. He would patiently wait in ambush for the children, strike with lightning claws and fangs, then flit under the bed, glowing with success.

Tiger liked to climb into the bookcase and stare through the glass by the hour at anyone willing to share the living room with him. It gave me the willies to glance up from my studies and meet his soulless gaze.

Mysteriously, Tiger vanished one day for good.

After living with Tiger, even *I* developed a grudging affection for Patches (as long as he didn't try to strop me or barf in my walk path).

Consequently, I should have anticipated their reaction when we announced our plan to move to Saint Petersburg. Both kids became very solemn; Katherine teared-up.

"It's okay Sweetie," I soothed. "Your friend, Nina will still be here next year."

"Can we take Patches?" Katherine whispered.

"Wuh, Patches? Uh, sure. Yeah, okay. Of course!"

"Nice recovery," my wife telepathically nodded. Both kids immediately brightened up.

"Okay then, let's go!" they chorused.

Well, that was just *too* easy. Of course, I'd been all set to leave Patches and just get another generic cat once we got to St. Pete's. Maybe even a non-puker this time. Oh well.

"They're basically identical creatures, but with varying markings," I incautiously opined one morning at breakfast. As children will, they pounced on a minor exception to this obvious truth, contrasting Patches with Tiger.

I patiently explained, "Tiger was possessed by a

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bigger demon than Patches has."¹

When Traveling With Pets

We'd heard that animals in transit were required to have their own passports to document their good health. Somehow Robin dutifully secured one from the local vet she'd come to know so well.

With Patches' reputation for a weak stomach already firmly established we fretted about how he would fare living for a week on a swaying train. I admit to still wanting to leave him behind and incautiously said so in my children's hearing. Well, some good ideas die faster deaths than others; that one died immediately of lead poisoning as the rest of the Harrises emptied their guns into it.

"Okay, the cat goes with us," I temporized. "What about his stomach? That cat will puke four times his own body weight. He'll puke up his own skeleton!"

Not a flicker of reason among them. I tried again.

"What about his toilet? We'll be cooped up in a tiny train compartment with him for a week. He'll want to pee and poop and I swear I won't have his litter box open under the bed."

"We'll take him out when the train stops," they chorused.

"Oh? You think he'll do his duty using a train schedule? I know from personal experience that he'll take one look at his closed cat box and dump one on

¹ Okay, so it's bad theology. No self respecting demon would inhabit a cat.

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the floor--which I'll be the one to discover at four A.M.!"

"What will you be doing up then?" James inquired.

"Besides," chimed Katherine, "those were kitty *barfs*, not poops."

"It's all the same to me!" I rasped.

"Not to Patches," Katherine reasoned (turning to the cat and switching to baby talk) "Isn't that right, you little stinker..."

"Besides, he'd be lonely without us," James injected, doe-eyed.

"Feel lonely!" I spluttered. "What about the feel of gooshing your toes in..."

"Bill, not in front of the children," Robin chided.

"Then there's the cat water bowl sloshing about," I plowed on. "He'll crunch on cat food snacks under the bed at all hours. There'll be incessant yowling and..."

Robin interrupted, "Bill, two words: Mission Critical."

"Robin, two words: Stinky compartment."

"Daddy, I don't think our smell will bother him" Katherine ventured.

"I'll bathe once!" James braved.

"I mean *the cat*. And what about the van?" I challenged.

"I won't bathe in the van," James refused.

"Me neither!" Katherine agreed.

"I mean *the cat*!" I thundered.

"You don't bathe cats," James informed.

"I do," Katherine dimpled.

"That's because you're twisted," James agreed.

"*We're* twisted," she corrected.

"Have it your way."

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"What about *the cat*?" I cried.

"We're taking him!" they chorused.

Which is where I put my foot down, making an Executive Decision. Patches would get no dinner the night before we left. With him.