

Trans-Mongolian Express: The Naadam Festival

https://www.irtociety.com/?post_type=journeys&p=6070



Overview

The Highlights

- Guided tours in Moscow, Kazan, Yekaterinburg, Novosibirsk, Irkutsk, Lake Baikal, Ulan Ude and Ulaan Baatar (capital of Mongolia)
- Moscow's Red Square, the Kremlin and Kremlin museum, with its Imperial jewels and Fabergé eggs
- Yekaterinburg, infamous execution site of Tsar Nicholas II, his wife Alexandra, their son, daughters, and servants, by the Bolsheviks in 1918

- Irkutsk, elegant home of the upper-class “Decembrist” revolutionaries exiled by Tsar Nicholas I in 1825
- Dinner, concert, and dancing provided by the Old Believers, breakaway Eastern Orthodox sect living outside Ulan Ude
- Afternoon barbecue on Lake Baikal shore, largest freshwater lake in the world
- Grand Finale: the Naadam Festival, “the world’s second-oldest Olympics,” an 800-year-old celebration of Mongol skills – archery, wrestling and horse riding – a sight witnessed by few Westerners

The Tour

The Naadam Festival is **the** big event in Mongolia—a lively national celebration, held every year. Naadam means “three manly games.” Known as the world’s second-oldest Olympics, it celebrates what defined civilization in the Steppes eight centuries ago—archery, wrestling, and horse riding.

The competitors in the riding events are all children aged between 5 and 12, many of whom have been in the saddle since the age of one. It is claimed that such equestrian skills won Genghis Khan an empire that stretched from the Sea of Japan all the way to Europe.

Itinerary

Day 1: Moscow

Arrive at Moscow airport, where you are met and transferred to the luxurious five-star Ritz-Carlton hotel (or similar), located in the heart of this vibrant city for a one-night stay.

Superbly located in Moscow city center and within easy walking distance of Red Square, the Kremlin, and the Bolshoi Theatre, this historic hotel offers spacious and luxurious accommodation. The O2 Lounge, a stylish rooftop terrace, features panoramic views over the Red Square and the Kremlin. The spacious ESPA spa center includes a hot tub, indoor pool, and 14 treatment rooms. Crystal lighting, candles, and beautiful facilities create the perfect atmosphere and a wide variety of spa treatments, including the sauna, are available. There is also a fitness center and a beauty salon.

Enjoy a welcome reception dinner at the hotel while you meet your fellow travelers on this epic 13-day voyage.

Why not extend your stay in Moscow with additional nights to explore more of the city at your

leisure, or have time to take in a performance at the world-renowned Bolshoi Theatre? Tickets need to be pre-booked and are subject to schedule and availability.

Day 2: Moscow

Our touring program of Moscow principally takes us to the grandeur of the Kremlin – the spiritual, historical, and political heart of Moscow – and to see the treasures of the Tsars in the Armoury Chamber. We also visit Red Square, an iconic symbol of Russia's former military and political might, with its eclectic mix of fascinating architecture, such as the magnificent onion-domed spires of St Basil's Cathedral, the beautiful facade of the world-famous GUM department store, constructed in Tsarist times, and the somber and evocative site of Lenin's tomb.

If you have been to Moscow before, we offer included Freedom of Choice touring, which features other sights of Moscow such as the famous State Tretyakov Gallery (National Museum of Fine Art) or the Space Museum (subject to train schedule).

Upon arrival at Moscow Kazansky Station, you will be greeted in the magnificent Imperial Waiting Room with a cold glass of Russian Champagne and canapes as you mix with the other guests and are welcomed by the train staff. The excitement in the waiting room audibly mounts and, 30 minutes before departure, your car attendants will escort you to Platform 1 where the Golden Eagle awaits.

Day 3: Kazan

Arrive at the picturesque and historic city of Kazan by mid-morning. Situated on the River Volga, Kazan is the capital of Tatarstan. One of the highlights of this city tour is your exploration of the Kremlin Fortress, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Within the walls of this ancient citadel are a stunning mosque and onion-domed cathedral. As Kazan is the birthplace of one of Russia's most famous opera singers, Feodor Chaliapin (1873-1938), we honor his memory with a private concert of his music. You will also have time to wander through the main pedestrian area of Kazan and immerse yourself in the atmosphere of the city.

Day 4: Yekaterinburg

Cross the Europe/Asia divide before arriving in the historic city of Yekaterinburg. Founded in 1723 by Peter the Great, the third-largest Russian city is also the capital of the Urals. The cultural and architectural influences of European and Asian civilizations converge in this fascinating and cosmopolitan landscape. The city tour visits the poignant site where the Romanov Tsar Nicholas II of Russia was executed with his family and servants by the Bolsheviks in 1918. Now a church dedicated to their memory, this site provides a powerful insight into the turmoil of the Russian Revolution.

Our Freedom of Choice program features a visit to the recently-opened Museum of Military Machinery. The museum houses an amazing collection of different types of military hardware including tanks, aircraft, boats, and even armored trains. You will also see a wide range of civilian vehicles (particularly Russian models). The museum is a real treat for anyone with an interest in

the Soviet past, unparalleled by anything else along the route.

Day 5: Novosibirsk

A modern 'Soviet' city, we experience the life and character of Novosibirsk's rich culture where the arts and science predominate. The city is located in the heart of Russia and is situated on both banks of the River Ob. Our city tour takes us to Lenin Square where the imposing Opera House is located. An architectural marvel, it houses two permanent ballet and opera companies and is one of the largest opera houses in the world. In front of the Opera House, we visit an impressive statue of Lenin – a marvelous opportunity to have your photograph taken with this iconic political leader.

Alternatively, south of the city you could visit Novosibirsk's excellent Railway Museum on our Freedom of Choice tour. The museum displays locomotives and rolling stock from the late 1800s, including carriages of the Tsars, through to the Soviet era. Or choose to go to the Mineralogical Centre with its fine display of Siberian minerals.

Day 6: On board

A day to unwind and reflect on the many sights and sounds we have experienced on our journey so far. Chat to your fellow passengers, perhaps learn a few words of Russian, or simply enjoy the ever changing landscape outside your window as it unfolds.

Day 7: Irkutsk

Our visit to Irkutsk, the 'Paris of Siberia,' takes in the most significant sites and museums in this fascinating city, including an exploration of the classic wooden architecture with its intricately carved lace-like decorations that has given many of this region's buildings such a distinct and unique appearance.

We also visit the Volkonsky House Museum, which is dedicated to the memory of the aristocrats who were exiled to this remote outpost after the failed Decembrists uprising of 1825, and we recreate the atmosphere of that time with a champagne reception and private concert.

You could learn to cook some traditional Russian dishes with a local chef and prepare your own lunch with our Freedom of Choice option. Or you might also wish to visit a traditional Russian Dacha (summer house) or an urban apartment to get an insight into the everyday life of an average Russian family.

Please note: Freedom of Choice touring options may be subject to variations depending on the train schedule and local weather conditions.

Day 8: Lake Baikal

Few natural sights can surpass the beauty and grandeur of Lake Baikal and is a major highlight on our Trans-Mongolian journey. Lake Baikal is the deepest lake in the world and holds 20 percent of the world's freshwater. Also known as the 'Pearl of Siberia,' it is home to a unique breed of

freshwater seal and over 50 species of fish, including omul. For five hours, we wind our way through tunnels along cliff-hugging tracks above the lake with a vista of snow-capped peaks along the far shore forming a picture-perfect backdrop.

To add to the grandeur of the day our Golden Eagle train will be hauled by a Soviet era steam locomotive on this beautiful section of the line. There will be plenty of opportunities to take photographs as the train winds its way along the lake's edge. This will be an unforgettable part of the journey.

Weather permitting, we stop in an extremely picturesque location by the lake for photographic opportunities and for the brave-hearted there is time for a refreshing swim in the crystal clear and ice-cold waters of Baikal. Traveling onward to the end of the Baikal branch line, we leave the train and travel by boat on the lake to Listvyanka, a small Baikal settlement nestled at the base of the surrounding hills, and visit the Lake Baikal Museum and Aquarium where you can learn about the flora and fauna of the lake.

We will enjoy a delicious barbecue, including freshly smoked omul fish, prepared by our own chefs on the shore of Lake Baikal to complete a memorable day. As part of our Freedom of Choice excursion program, you can choose a hiking opportunity up Chersky Mount that offers some spectacular and panoramic hillside views of the lake below.

Day 9: Ulan Ude

The ethnic and cultural diversity of Ulan Ude, the capital of the Buryat Republic, offers a unique insight into its heritage. As we tour the area you will notice the different faces of these welcoming Buryat people. During our exploration of the Old Believers' Village, we have the opportunity to learn about the culture and history of these religious people as we are treated to a concert featuring local traditions and folk singing.

Day 10: Ulaan Baatar

Our Trans-Mongolian adventure takes us into Mongolia and a 3-night stay in its capital, Ulaan Baatar. Mongolia, once the very center of an enormous empire led by Genghis Khan, is a country of beautiful landscapes and nomadic people, rich in culture and history. Mongolia is famous for its endless green Steppes, grazing livestock, and white, nomadic Gers (Yurts) dotted all across the countryside.

We conduct a short tour of Ulaan Baatar visiting the Gandan Monastery, one of the most important Buddhist Monasteries in Mongolia, housing a community of over 500 monks. The full name, Gandantegchinlen, translates as the great place of complete joy. At Chinggis Square (formerly Sukhbaatar Square), we can see the central monument to Genghis Khan, undoubtedly the most feared and revered Mongol.

Day 11: Naadam Festival

On the first day of the Naadam Festival, we observe the elaborate opening ceremony, which

consists of local dancers, athletes, horse riders, and musicians, before traveling outside Ulaan Baatar to watch the national horse race. The competitors in the riding events are all children between five and twelve, many of whom have been in the saddle since the age of one. As they race along the plains for 20 kilometers, thousands of spectators line the remote track to watch up to 1,000 horses with children sitting confidently astride their small but sturdy Mongolian steeds. It is claimed such equestrian skills won Genghis Khan an empire that stretched from the Sea of Japan all the way to Europe.

In the evening we will enjoy a performance of traditional Mongolian throat singing and contortionists.

Day 12: Naadam Festival

This is a unique opportunity to be among the few non-Mongolians to experience the spectacular, but little known, Naadam Festival and soak up the exciting atmosphere of this national holiday. Once a religious ceremony, the festival now formally commemorates the 1921 revolution when Mongolia declared itself a free country. In recent times, women have been allowed to enter and they now compete in two of the three events: horse racing and archery.

Today is the day for all the main competitions and will feature archery, wrestling, and ankle-bone shooting events.

Day 13: Tour ends

Breakfast is served in the hotel and transfers are provided to the airport for departing flights.

Due to the popularity of the period around the Naadam Festival, we reserve accommodation for our guests at a number of the best hotels in Ulaan Baatar, including the Kempinski and Ramada. Please note, we cannot guarantee your preferred choice of hotel.

(Note: the reverse itinerary, from Ulaan Bataar to Moscow, is also available.)

Reverse itinerary

Day 1: Ulaan Baatar, Mongolia

Our Trans-Mongolian adventure begins in Mongolia and an extended stay in its capital, Ulaan Baatar. Mongolia, once the very center of an enormous empire led by Genghis Khan, is a country of beautiful landscapes and nomadic people, rich in culture and history. Mongolia is famous for its endless green steppes, grazing livestock and white, nomadic Gers (Yurts) dotted all across the countryside.

Upon arrive at Ulaan Baatar Airport, you will be met and transferred to your centrally located hotel for a three night stay. Meet your fellow travelers at a welcome reception dinner at our hotel.

Due to the popularity of the period around Naadam Festival we reserve accommodation for our

guests at a number of the best hotels in Ulaan Baatar including the Kempinski and Ramada. Please note, we cannot guarantee your preferred choice of hotel.

Day 2: Naadam Festival

Today we have a unique opportunity to be among the few non-Mongolians to experience the spectacular, but little known, Naadam Festival. Soak up the exciting atmosphere of this national holiday. Once a religious ceremony, the festival now formally commemorates the 1921 revolution when Mongolia declared itself a free country. In recent times, women have been allowed to enter and they now compete in two of the three events—horse racing and archery.

On the first day of the festival, we observe the elaborate opening ceremony which consists of local dancers, athletes, horse riders and musicians, before travelling outside Ulaan Baatar to watch the national horse race. The competitors in the riding events are all children between five and twelve, many of whom have been in the saddle since the age of one. As they race along the plains for 20 kilometers (12.4 miles), thousands of spectators line the remote track to watch up to 1,000 horses with children sitting confidently astride their small but sturdy Mongolian steed. It is claimed such equestrian skills won Genghis Khan an empire that stretched from the Sea of Japan all the way to Europe.

Day 3: Naadam Festival

Enjoy another full day at the exciting Naadam Festival. Today we will attend the archery, wrestling and ankle-bone shooting events.

Day 4: Ulaan Baatar, Mongolia

This morning we start our tour of Ulaan Baatar at Gandan Monastery, one of Mongolia's most important Buddhist Monasteries housing a community of over 500 monks. The full name, Gandantegchinlen, translates as "the great place of complete joy." At Chinggis Square (formerly Sukhbaatar Square) we can see the central monument to Genghis Khan; undoubtedly the most feared and revered Mongol.

Alternatively, there is an option to drive out of the city to the Gorkhi-Terelj National Park and enjoy the beautiful scenery of wild Mongolia as part of our Freedom of Choice tour. Visit a traditional Ger, meet a nomadic family or try your hand at horse-riding, an intrinsic part of Mongolian life.

Board the Golden Eagle and settle into your comfortable private cabin as the train travels north to Russia.

Day 5: Ulan Ude, Russia

Explore Ulan Ude today. The ethnic and cultural diversity of Ulan Ude, the capital of the Buryat Republic, offers a unique insight into its heritage. During our exploration of the Old Believers' Village, learn about the culture and history of these religious people as we are treated to a

concert featuring local traditions and folk singing.

Day 6: Lake Baikal

Few natural sights can surpass the beauty and grandeur of Lake Baikal, and it is a major highlight on our Trans-Mongolian journey. Lake Baikal is the deepest lake in the world and holds 20 percent of the world's freshwater. Also known as the 'Pearl of Siberia', it is home to a unique breed of freshwater seal and over 50 species of fish including omul. For five hours we wind our way through tunnels along cliff-hugging tracks above the lake with a vista of snow-capped peaks along the far shore, forming a picture-perfect backdrop.

To add to the grandeur of the day, our Golden Eagle train will be hauled by a Soviet era steam locomotive on this beautiful section of the line. There will be plenty of opportunities to take photographs as the train winds its way along the lake's edge. This will be an unforgettable part of the journey.

Weather permitting, we stop in an extremely picturesque location by the lake for photographic opportunities. For the brave hearted there is time for a refreshing swim in the crystal clear and ice-cold waters of Baikal. Travelling onwards to the end of the Baikal branch line, we leave the train and travel by boat on the lake to Listvyanka, a small Baikal settlement nestling at the base of the surrounding hills. Here we visit the Lake Baikal Museum and Aquarium to learn about the flora and fauna of the lake.

We will enjoy a delicious barbecue, including freshly smoked omul fish, prepared by our own chefs on the shore of Lake Baikal to complete a memorable day. As part of our Freedom of Choice excursion program, you can choose a hiking opportunity that offers some spectacular and panoramic hillside views of the lake below.

Day 7: Irkutsk, Russia

Our visit to Irkutsk, the "Paris of Siberia," takes in the most significant sites and museums in this fascinating city. Explore the classic wooden architecture, with its intricately carved lace-like decorations, distinct to this region.

We also visit the Volkonsky House Museum, which is dedicated to the memory of the aristocrats who were exiled to this remote outpost after the failed Decembrists uprising of 1825, and we recreate the atmosphere of that time with a champagne reception and private concert.

You may wish to learn how to cook some traditional Russian dishes with a local chef and prepare your own lunch with our Freedom of Choice option. Or you might wish to visit a traditional Russian Dacha (summer house) or an urban apartment to get an insight into the everyday life of an average local family.

Please note: Freedom of Choice touring options may be subject to variations dependent on finalised train timings and local weather conditions.

Day 8: On board Golden Eagle

Today is at leisure on board the train. Sit back and watch the scenery roll by; chat to your fellow passengers in the bar car, or perhaps learn a few words of Russian during an on-board lecture.

Day 9: Novosibirsk, Russia

A modern 'Soviet' city, we experience the life and character of Novosibirsk's rich culture where the arts and science predominate. The city is located in the heart of Russia and is situated on both banks of the River Ob. Our city tour takes us to Lenin Square, where the imposing Opera House is located. An architectural marvel, it houses two permanent ballet and opera companies, and is one of the largest opera houses in the world. In front of the Opera House is an impressive statue of Lenin – a marvelous opportunity to have your photograph taken with this iconic political leader.

Alternatively, you may opt to visit Novosibirsk's excellent Railway Museum south of the city on our Freedom of Choice tour. The museum displays locomotives and rolling stock from the late 1800s, including carriages of the Tsars, through to the Soviet era. Or choose to go to the Mineralogical Centre with its fine display of Siberian minerals.

Day 10: Yekaterinburg

Founded in 1723 by Peter the Great, Yekaterinburg is the capital of the Urals. Known as the Great Divide, the Ural Mountains create the natural border between Europe and Asia so that the cultural and architectural influences of European and Asian civilizations come together in this fascinating and cosmopolitan landscape. Our city tour takes us to the poignant site where the Romanov, Tsar Nicholas II of Russia, was executed with his family by the Bolsheviks in 1918 following 78 days of imprisonment. Now a church dedicated to their memory, this site provides us with a powerful insight into the turmoil of the Russian Revolution.

Our Freedom of Choice program features a visit to the recently opened Museum of Military Machinery. The museum houses an amazing collection of different types of military hardware including tanks, aircraft, boats and even armored trains. You will also see a wide range of civilian vehicles (particularly Russian models). The museum is a real treat for anyone with an interest in the Soviet past.

Day 11: Kazan

Situated on the River Volga, the picturesque and historic city of Kazan is the capital of Tatarstan. Here we have the opportunity to see for ourselves its rich tapestry of history and culture. One of the highlights of this city tour is our exploration of the Kremlin Fortress, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Within the walls of this ancient citadel we will explore its stunning mosque and picture-perfect onion-domed cathedral.

Kazan is the birthplace of one of Russia's most famous opera singers, Feodor Chaliapin (1873-1938); we honor his memory with a private concert of his music. You will also have time to

wander through the main pedestrian area of Kazan and immerse yourself in the atmosphere of the city.

Day 12: Moscow

After travelling nearly 4,000 miles (6,400 kms) along this iconic railway, today we reach Moscow, our final destination.

Our touring program of Moscow first takes us to the Kremlin – the spiritual, historical and political heart of Moscow – to see the treasures of the Tsars in the Armoury Chamber. We also visit Red Square, an iconic symbol of Russia’s former military and political might, with its eclectic mix of fascinating architecture, such as the ornate St Basil’s Cathedral’s magnificent onion-domed spires, the beautiful facade of the world-famous GUM department store, constructed in Tsarist times, and the somber and evocative site of Lenin’s tomb.

If you have been to Moscow before we offer Freedom of Choice to visit some of Moscow’s other sights, such as the famous State Tretyakov Gallery (National Museum of Fine Art) or the Space Museum (subject to train/museum schedule). This evening we will enjoy a farewell dinner.

We overnight at the luxurious five-star Ritz-Carlton, superbly located in Moscow city center, and within easy walking distance of Red Square, the Kremlin and the Bolshoi Theatre.

Day 13: Moscow

Following breakfast, you will be transferred to Moscow Airport to begin your journey home.

Dates & Prices

More

The *Golden Eagle* includes five Imperial Suites on all departures. These compartments are the most spacious – 120 square feet – offered on the train and feature a fixed king-sized bed, a dedicated dressing table and lounge area, and more. View [details](#) about this and other upgrades.

Russian visa required for this journey.