

## Traveler's notebook

# Siberia!

Beautiful, bleak,  
full of uncertainty



**RAIL-SIDE TREATS:** An elderly woman sells home-made wares at a village rail station in Petrovsky Zavod, along the Trans-Siberian Railway. For travelers who cannot afford to dine in the rail car, the rail-side sellers are a source of refreshment. Several villages of a few hundred people dot the railway's route. Most are poor and undeveloped.

Courtesy  
Holmes Rolston



**"**f the train starts moving, run and get on any car you can. If you get left, it might take a week for us to find you. And don't get locked in the toilets when the train is approaching a station."

The Russian guide was urgent. We were boarding the "Rossia" ("Russia"), as the train is named, for 2½ days and 2,000 miles on the famous Trans-Siberian railway.

The "Rossia" had come from Vladivostok, and we were boarding during its brief stop at Khabarovsk. It was headed for Moscow — the world's longest train journey, 6,000 miles across the world's largest wilderness, the taiga of the Russian Far East and Siberia. The vastness is difficult to comprehend. The length of the track is about one-fourth of the distance around the Earth. It crosses eight time zones.

One could put the United States into Siberia without touching its boundaries; and fit in Europe — except for Russia — after that, with room to spare. There are 53,000 rivers, a million lakes and the world's largest forest.

Standing in Khabarovsk, after an Aeroflot flight across the Bering Strait and down the Russian Pacific coast, we were still closer to San Francisco than to Moscow!

My trip was with an American Association for the Advancement of Science expedition across Siberia to Lake Baikal. Our journey, only a third of the total yet across the wildest parts, was followed by a week's boat adventure exploring the world's most unusual lake.

Two Russian scientists were on the train with us, including our expedition leader, Victor Kuzevanov, director of the Botanical Gardens at Irkutsk State University. Five others would join us at



Courtesy Holmes Rolston

**COMMON SIGHT:** Cottages are visible throughout the railway trip across the vast Siberian countryside. Most are unpainted, except for

their shutters, which are blue to symbolize hope. Fort Collins' Holmes Rolston traveled on the railway to Lake Baikal.

Lake Baikal — a geologist, a botanist, an ichthyologist (fishes), a mammalogist and a sedimentologist. Our goal was to explore Baikal's ecology, conservation biology and environmental issues.

I located my compartment, about 5 by 6 feet, with two bunk seats, home for two of us. Most of the 15 cars had upper and lower berths, crowding four into the

same space — but the 20 Americans received first-class treatment. There was a toilet at one end of the car, with a small cold-water wash basin, difficult to operate. Watching the waste flush onto the tracks below, I understood now why the toilets are locked in the stations.

The Americans had meals in the dining car, also ours for lectures and discus-

sions. The Russian passengers, along with a few Mongolians and Chinese, were unable to afford the dining car and bought food at the occasional stops at the villages en route. There, women sold smoked fish, sausages, bread, eggs, vegetables and some fruit, often set out on





## About the author

Holmes Rolston, 64, teaches philosophy at Colorado State University. He has lived in Fort Collins for 27 years. He took his trip to Siberia as part of an expedition with the American Association for the Advancement of Science.



Courtesy Holmes Rolston

**COMING ASHORE:** A group of researchers disembarks at Lake Baikal to begin their study of the world's oldest lake.



## Ticket to ride

The *Coloradoan* invite travelers who want to write about their experiences to submit their stories and pictures to the *Coloradoan*. Publication won't propel writers to world fame, but it will explain how Fort Collins residents travel and may give your neighbors some ideas for trips. We want unusual stories to unusual places, as well as the usual haunts.

Stories should be no more than 1,000 words in length. Writing should be as precise and focused as possible. All stories are subject to editing; not all stories will be published.

So come on, take us for a ride!

If you're interested, send your stories to Lifestyles Editor Michelle Kubik, 1212 Riverside Ave., Fort Collins, CO 80524.



# Siberia

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an old baby carriage.

There were about 20 stops — usually five minutes, sometimes 20 — when the car water tanks were filled or engines were switched. It was never too clear when the train might start. Fortunately, it started slowly and those yet on the platform (including some of our Americans) hustled to climb on.

The landscape flowed by the window, all day long and through the short nights, the taiga and the steppe, birch and larch forests, Siberian pines; also fields of marvelous wildflowers, wetlands, bogs, rivers and permafrost terrain. Now and again there were villages of a few hundred people, with cottages of unpainted wood, except for shutters painted blue, symbolizing hope.

There are no paved roads on most of this landscape, often no roads at all. In two days, I never saw an automobile. If one saw a vehicle at all, it was an old truck looking something like a cross between a military truck and a chicken coop — or an ancient motorcycle with a side car. In larger towns, there might be more or less defunct industries, the ugly relics of failed development.

My overall impression was of the wild, the picturesque, and the bleak. Siberia, the "sleeping land," is the legacy of exiles, sent there first by the tsars and later by the Communists. In forced labor

camps, they extracted timber, coal and ore. The survivors, released, sometimes preferred to stay rather than to return, finding themselves freer in Siberia than in totalitarian European Russia.

"We have a saying," said Kuzevanov solemnly on the evening ending our ride, "that there lies a body under every railroad tie."

Departing at Irkutsk (still more than 3,000 miles from Moscow), we reached Lake Baikal with excitement. "The sacred sea of Siberia" figures in the Russian psyche like the Grand Canyon does for Americans.

The oldest and deepest lake on Earth by far — 25 million years old — it formed in a slowly widening rift valley, over a mile deep, with 6 miles of sediment below that. Baikal contains one-fifth of the fresh water on Earth, as much as in all the American Great Lakes, which are only about 10,000-15,000 years old.

On board the ship, the "Zaisan," there were four in my cabin, which was smaller than the train compartment. I took an upper berth, difficult to squeeze into. We set sail, towing a smaller landing boat, and spent the week exploring the fauna and flora. Isolated in the center of a vast continent, Baikal is drained only by the Angara River flowing to the Arctic, and frozen six months a year. More than 1,500 endemic species, found nowhere else on Earth, have evolved in the lake — 75



Courtesy Holmes Rolston

**TRAVEL COMPANION:** Holmes Rolston stands beside the engine of a train on the Trans-Siberian Railway.

percent of its species.

These include the omul, a fish that we regularly ate, and the

deep-water golomyanka, an almost transparent fish rather like a swimming ball of fat and bear-

ing live young. There are unusual freshwater sponges. We spent a day stalking the only freshwater seals, stealthily crossing an island and crawling on our bellies to an overlook, where they were sunning on rocks 50 feet below. Six thousand are shot each year, mostly pups for the fur fashion market.

Only 1 percent of Siberia is protected, and there is a mad rush to cash in on Siberia's resources by foreign firms, to which exploitation the Russians are quite vulnerable. The transnational firms seek to export raw logs, ores, gold and furs — as cheaply as possible — which represents only a fraction of the value of the finished products that their industry will produce from them.

Lake Baikal is an environmental battleground. The first demonstrations in Russia over an environmental issue were over a controversial cellulose plant, clean by some standards, but still like a pulp mill in Yosemite. Today, the shores are protected — but not yet the underwater fauna and flora — including the fishery. Upstream, 50 factories use the Selenga River, the largest of its tributaries, as a drain.

The future is as haunting as the past. What should Siberia be? Forever wild? Developed? Certainly, not further exploited and impoverished.

I left, uneasy that the unpainted, ramshackle houses with the blue shutters are strangely symbolic.