

EPIC RAIL ODYSSEY: MOSCOW TO SINGAPORE 2017

OVERVIEW

Tour Date: 9 August 2017 – 11 September 2017

Duration: 34 days

Tour Cost (\$AUD): \$18,950

Single Supplement (\$AUD): \$2,750

Epic Rail Odyssey is the ultimate rail adventure that stretches 12,589km, across the face of the earth. Always designed as more than a rail journey, it passes through vast steppes, deserts, mountain ranges and rich fertile valleys. Spanning a quarter of the earth's land surface, this glorious journey traverses seven diverse countries.

We begin in Moscow where we delve into corners of the great city that are not normally visited by tourists. In particular we go to Star City, a militarily secure area where Yuri Gagarin trained for his first flight into space. We also take a tour of Stalin's bunker, a nuclear stronghold and nerve centre during the Cold War. Leaving Moscow on the first of our wonderful train journeys, we cross the Ural Mountains to the Aral Sea, a remote and little visited place where the hulks of rusting ships lie stranded in what is now a massive salt pan. From here we cross the endless Kazakh Steppes to the beautiful city of Almaty. Lying in the shadows of the formidable Tian Shan Mountains, Almaty is our boarding point for the train that will straddle these ranges and enter remote western China, heartland of the Uighur people. From here we take the newest bullet train in the country which will complete the 1,776km journey to Lanzhou in just 11 hours! We then turn south and head for the wonderful city of Kunming, before entering Vietnam and its capital Hanoi. Another great train journey on the Reunification Express will then take us the complete length of Vietnam's shoreline to Ho Chi Minh City. After an exhilarating three-night stay in the frenetic metropolis we take the first of only two road journeys of the tour – to Phnom Penh – where, after an overnight stay, we continue by road to Siem Reap and the '8th wonder of the world, Angkor Wat. From here we head to Thailand, and, after a stop in Bangkok, complete the final leg of the journey, from north to south along the Malay Peninsula. *Epic Rail Odyssey* is, without doubt, Travel Directors' most thrilling undertaking so far!

Tour Fitness Level: Active

EPIC RAIL ODYSSEY: MOSCOW – SINGAPORE BY RAIL 2017

TOUR ITINERARY

09/08/2017 Australia – Singapore

Depart from your chosen Australian airport on the flight to Singapore.

10/08/2017 Singapore – Moscow (LD)

Depart Singapore SQ 062, 02.30

Arrive Moscow 08.10

On arrival we transfer to our hotel and after lunch we stroll into Red Square. Dating back to 1493, the magnificent square is flanked on one side by the red walls of the Kremlin and on the other by the majestic GUM department store. At one end is the imposing history museum and at the other is one of the world's most famous buildings, the unique St Basil's Cathedral. The square also houses Lenin's mausoleum.

Budapest Hotel

Moscow

11/08/2017 Moscow (BLD)

After breakfast we head out to a highly restricted military facility northeast of Moscow, where cosmonauts have been trained at the Gagarin Cosmonaut Training Centre since the 1960s. The training facility and the nearby town were completely confidential, secure, and isolated from the rest of the world. This is Star City, and today, many Russian cosmonauts live with their families in this charming, rustic Soviet conurbation with their families. The town has its own post office, shops, railway station and a museum of space travel. Today we visit the place where the history of space travel began, where Yuri Gagarin trained for the first space flight in human history. We also have the extraordinary opportunity to don a spacesuit and experience a simulated launch, flight and landing in a Soyuz rocket, complete with Russian- language capsule controls!

12/08/2017 Moscow – Aralskoe (Aral Sea) (BLD)

Today we visit the extraordinary 'Stalin Bunker 42,' a museum dedicated to the cold war and the historical nuclear confrontation between the two superpowers. The bunker which was built as a shelter for the headquarters of long-distance Air Forces, is located 70 metres below ground and occupies an area of 7,000 square metres. In the '60s, the bunker was equipped with life-support systems, supplies of water and enough food to support the officers for a year. By 1995 the bunker was declassified, though even today the complex is contained inside a façade of a 19th century house with blank windows. It is said that the bunker can withstand a direct hit from a nuclear bomb. In the evening we transfer to Kazansky station for the journey to the Aral Sea.

Depart Moscow Train 6, 22.40

13/08/2017 On board train

The train heads south and today we cross into Kazakhstan. We soon reach the border of the world's ninth largest country and then continue across the great Kazakh steppes.

14/08/2017 Arrive Aral Sea

Four decades ago the town of Aralsk was one of the most important fishing ports on the Aral Sea with a population of nearly 100,000 people. Today the number of people living in the town has dropped to less than 35,000.

Arrive Aralsk 21.26

At Aralsk train station, we see a large mosaic that depicts how, in 1921 Aralsk's comrades provided fish for people starving in Russia. Today the town is a stark testament to the environmental and social disaster wrought by the diversion of the waters of the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers for cotton production, and the resultant desiccation of the Aral Sea.

Hotel Aral

Aralsk

15/08/2017 Aral Sea (BLD)

Today we explore the northern part of the Aral Sea where the shoreline has now been pushed back some 60km, yet once, waves lapped at the town walls. We begin with a visit the old port where we see the rusted ships lying in the former harbour. Close by is the old fish-processing plant which continued operations for 20 years after the Aral Sea receded by canning fish from the Baltics and Vladivostok, but eventually went bankrupt in the late 1990s. Perhaps even more interesting is that thanks to a dam, efforts to save the north Aral Sea are succeeding and a small-scale fishing industry has just begun.

16/08/2017 Aral Sea – Almaty (B)

This morning we board our train to Almaty.

Depart Aral Sea, Train 34, 09.00

Leaving Aralsk, the train follows the route of the Arab traders and their caravans along part of the Great Silk Road. Crossing steppes we see nomads and shepherds herding their cattle much as their ancestors did a thousand years before. Now the dining car becomes the hub of the train where westerners and Russians mingle, share a meal and have a drink or two.

17/08/2017 Almaty (D)

Arrive Almaty 15.34

The train rolls on towards Almaty and the landscape begins to change to lush green pastures flanked by snow-capped mountains. After lunch we arrive in Almaty and transfer to our hotel.

Rixos Hotel

Almaty

18/08/2017 Almaty (BLD)

Situated in the shadows of the Tian Shan Mountains, Almaty is the cultural and commercial hub of Kazakhstan. Literally meaning 'rich with apples' the former capital is known as the 'Garden City' for its large areas of fragrant gardens and the majestic firs and spruce of the Tian Shan Mountains that surround it. Today we explore this beautiful city before moving high up to the outskirts to see the magnificent panorama of Almaty before us.

19/08/2017 Almaty – Urumqi (BLD)

Today we continue to explore the city. After dinner we transfer to the train station for the next leg of our journey which takes us towards the remote eastern corner of Kazakhstan and the Drushba/Alatau border.

Depart Almaty Train 67, 23.58

20/08/2017 On board train

After finishing with Kazakh immigration the train moves into China. Arriving at Alatau, on the China side, giant hydraulic lifts raise the train and the wheel bogies are changed to fit the narrower gauge tracks in China. With Chinese border formalities completed, the train makes its way to Urumqi, flanked by the mighty snowy peaks of the Tian Shan Mountains.

21/08/2017 Urumqi (LD)

This morning we reach the capital of Xinjiang province.

Arrive Urumqi 08.58

Historically known as Dihua or Tihwa, the name 'Urumqi' is a Mongolian word that means 'beautiful pasture'. These beautiful pastures have now been replaced by a sprawling metropolis and a hub city on the ancient Silk Road. It is home to numerous cultural relics and historic treasures as well as 13 ethnic minorities: this is the fascinating Muslim heartland of China. On arrival in Urumqi we transfer to our hotel and later enjoy a city tour.

Jinjiang Inn

Urumqi

22/08/2017 Urumqi - Kunming (BLD)

This morning we leave Urumqi and head into the great Tian Shan Mountains. We start to climb until we reach Heavenly Lake. At 2,000 metres above sea level, the lake has a depth of 60 metres. Surrounding the Heavenly Lake are snowy peaks, glacier forests and alpine lakes, making this whole area a stunning pocket of nature. After our visit here we descend to Urumqi station to take our train to Lanzhou and Kunming.

Depart Urumqi Train 54, 17.18

23/08/2017 On board train

The Urumqi-Lanzhou High-Speed Railway is a 1,776-kilometer line that opened in 2015 and connects remote Xinjiang with Beijing, a remarkable rail construction that rivals the Himalayan Express. Skirting the Gobi desert, we pass through 19 stations on our way to Gansu province. This is the Silk Road by bullet train!

24/08/2017 On board train

Changing trains at Lanzhou, we start to head directly south to Kunming.

25/08/2017 Kunming (LD)

Arrive Kunming 10.38

On arrival in Kunming we transfer to our hotel. Known as the 'City of Eternal Spring', Kunming is located in Yunnan province and lies some 1,890m above sea level. It is a fascinating city inhabited by a large number of minority groups. After lunch we explore the city and later enjoy a special evening of local cuisine.

Green Lake Hotel

Kunming

26/08/2017 Kunming (BLD)

After breakfast we drive to the magical Stone Forest. A geological phenomenon, the 'forest' was a vast sea millions of years ago. Later the movement of tectonic plates altered the earth's crust, causing the sea to recede and the limestone floor to appear. Due to the constant seeping of rain through the cracks in the limestone, some of the stone formations dissolved and the fissures broadened, producing a mass of strange rock formations.

27/08/2017 Kunming – Hanoi (BD)

This morning we transfer to Kunming train station for the journey to Vietnam.

Depart Kunming Train 9832, 09.32

After a few hours we reach the Lao Cai border. Once again, the train is uncoupled and hoisted up on hydraulic lifts while the bogies are changed to fit the wider-gauge rails in Vietnam.

Arrive Hanoi 15.51

On arrival in Hanoi we transfer to our hotel.

Sofitel Metropole Legend

Hanoi

28/08/2017 Hanoi (BLD)

In 2010, Hanoi celebrated its 1,000th anniversary as capital of Vietnam – this in spite of several invasions and occupations. It is a fascinating mix of old and new Vietnam, with Chinese and French influences, ancient culture, colonial architecture, broad tree-lined boulevards, and beautiful lakes. Today we explore the city starting in the Old Quarter and the French Quarter before visiting Ho Chi Minh's Mausoleum.

29/08/2017 Hanoi – Ho Chi Minh City (B)

Depart Hanoi 06.00

An early start today as we board the much celebrated 'Reunification Railway', a steel artery running the length of Vietnam. It was completed in 1936 in what was then French Indo-China. However the railway operated for only 18 years, before the French pulled out and the country split into North and South. Only in 1976 did the north-south trains resume, and now this 1,726km railway line provides the vital link between the two cities. Hanoi station is very visibly a French colonial building, although its stark concrete central section, is the result of an American bomb in December 1972.

30/08/2017 Ho Chi Minh City (D)

Crossing the 17th parallel and hugging the coast, we continue south with stops at Nha Trang and Danang, before arriving into Ho Chi Minh City.

Arrive Ho Chi Minh 16.05

Continental Hotel

Ho Chi Minh City

31/08/2017 Ho Chi Minh City (BLD)

Hanoi is a frenetic city of 8.2 million people whose most notable landmark is Saigon Central Post Office, the starting point for our city tour. Designed and built by French architect Gustave Eiffel, this Gothic-style building was completed in 1886 and remains one of the country's most celebrated edifices. We then move to the Reunification Palace, home of the president of South Vietnam during the war. This is where the first North Vietnamese tanks crashed through the gates on the morning of 30 April 1975, resulting in Saigon's official surrender. It is preserved almost exactly as it was that morning. Later we visit the busy Ben Thanh Market which has more than 3,000 stalls.

01/09/2017 Ho Chi Minh City (BLD)

The Cu Chi Tunnels, a short drive from the city, were created by the Viet Cong during the war with the Americans. After breakfast we head out of the city to explore the series of hidden underground tunnels from where the Viet Cong could launch sudden, surprise attacks. Here, in the narrow, extremely claustrophobic tunnels, air, food and water were scarce and the tunnels were infested with rats, poisonous centipedes, scorpions, spiders and rats. For much of the time, the Viet Cong would be in the tunnels by day resting only to emerge after darkness to engage the enemy. This is an astounding insight into the deprivation of guerrilla warfare during the Vietnam War.

02/09/2017 Ho Chi Minh – Phnom Penh (BLD)

This morning we take the first of our road trips as we head for Moc Bai, the Vietnam/Cambodia border. After completing border formalities we continue to Phnom Penh arriving in the early afternoon.

Quay Boutique Hotel
Phnom Penh

03/09/2017 Phnom Penh – Siem Reap (BLD)

Leaving Phnom Penh this morning we board our coach for the five-hour drive to Siem Reap. The road between these two cities offers a glimpse of Cambodian country life, as you travel past rice paddies, traditional wooden houses, and water buffalo lazily grazing on the side of the road. After lunch we continue on to Siem Reap and check in to our hotel.

Victoria Hotel
Siem Reap

04/09/2017 Siem Reap: Angkor Wat (BLD)

After breakfast we explore the incredible complex of Angkor Wat. A 700-year old city, the temples are the architectural zenith of the Khmer Empire. Angkor Watt was the capital of the kingdom that stretched across Southeast Asia, including Laos, Burma, Thailand and Vietnam. Consisting of 1,000 temples with canals, shrines and tombs, it is considered the unofficial 8th wonder of the world.

05/09/2017 Siem Reap – Aranyaprathet – Bangkok (BD)

Today we drive a short distance to the Cambodian border town of Poiphet and after completing formalities, we arrive at the Thai town of Aranyaprathet, where we board our coach to continue on to Bangkok.

Montien Hotel
Bangkok

06/09/2017 Bangkok (BLD)

One of the world's most vibrant and visited cities, Thailand's capital has long been established as a heritage site and exotic playground. This morning we visit the Grand Palace and the Temple of Dawn. Continuing our touring, we explore old Bangkok by way of its canals, before ending our tour in Chinatown and the floating markets.

07/09/2017 Bangkok – Butterworth (BL)

This morning we have some free time before transferring to the railway station and boarding our train to Butterworth in Malaysia.

Depart Bangkok 14.45

08/09/2017 Butterworth – Penang (LD)

Arrive Butterworth 12.55

On arrival in Butterworth, we begin a tour of Penang Island, with its exotic sights and sounds. We stop at the world's fourth longest statue of the Reclining Buddha – Wat Chayamangkalaram. Continuing on from here we visit the first Buddhist Temple to be built in Penang in 1803, an elaborately decorated Burmese Temple. Our tour continues to Khoo Kongsi, a magnificent hall embellished with intricate carvings and woodwork. Following the tour we transfer to our hotel for our overnight stay.

Sunway Hotel
Penang

09/09/2017 Penang – Butterworth – Singapore (B)

This morning we transfer back to the train station to continue our journey south through Kuala Lumpur and on to Singapore.

Depart Butterworth 07.45

Arrive Gemas 14.15

Depart Gemas 15.38

Arrive Johor Bharu 19.50

On arrival we board the coach for the last leg of our journey into Singapore. .
Swisotel Merchant Court
Singapore

10/09/2017 Singapore (BLD)

After breakfast we explore Singapore taking in sights such as Merlion Park, the Civic District, the Padang Cricket Club, Parliament House, Supreme Court, and City Hall. In the evening we enjoy a final party to celebrate the finish of a momentous rail journey.

11/09/2017 Singapore – Australia (B)

Today we transfer to the airport for the direct flight home to your chosen capital city.

EPIC RAIL ODYSSEY

If I travel alone, do I have to pay a single supplement?

If you do not want to share a hotel room with another person in the group, you will have to pay the single supplement. However, if you are willing to share we will team you up with another passenger of the same gender in the hotels. If a match-up is not possible, we will upgrade you at our expense.

What is the suggested luggage?

More than any other Travel Directors' tour, it is essential to pack light for this trip. We recommend a soft case or bag, with wheels, with a total weight when packed, of no more than 15kg. In addition, a small day pack is recommended.

Can I extend my stay either at the beginning or the end of the tour?

This is possible and we encourage you to discuss this with your consultant. You are normally able to use any point that Singapore Airlines flies into but you may be subject to a deviation fee and any extra applicable airport taxes.

What currency do I need to take?

Both Euros and US dollars are easily changed into the local currency in every country en-route.

Do I need any visas for this tour?

Australian passport holders require visas for Russia, China and Vietnam before departure. Kazakhstan and Cambodia also require visas but these are obtained on arrival. All visa costs are included in the tour price.

Do I need vaccinations for this journey?

No vaccinations are mandatory on this route but we would recommend you seek advice from your doctor. Tetanus should certainly be up to date.

Is the water safe to drink en-route and what is the general standard of hygiene?

We err on the side of caution on all of our tours and advise travellers to drink only bottled water. This is easy to obtain everywhere. The general standard of hygiene throughout the itinerary is surprisingly high, and as with all of our tours, we hand pick all of our restaurants for their quality and safety.

Are credit cards acceptable?

Credit cards are widely accepted throughout the journey and ATMs are available along the entire route. However it is not recommended to rely on these as your main source of funds.

Are there internet facilities en-route?

Most of the hotels we use have internet facilities. There are also many internet cafes in the near vicinity of the hotels offering cheaper access.

Do mobile telephones work?

Telstra and Optus mobiles work throughout the entire journey. You will need to ensure you have global roaming. Contact your service provider for further details.

How much should we tip the guides and porters?

There is no need to tip guides or porters as all tips and gratuities are included in the tour cost.