Unless the prospect of subzero temperatures is appealing, Siberia is best experienced during the summer. For travelers with a few weeks to spare, taking the Trans-Siberian Railway is the ideal way to experience the richness of the region. For the full impact, embark from Moscow, then ride the train all the way to the end of the line in Vladivostok. Totaling more than 5,500 miles (about 8,850 kilometers), the Trans-Siberian trek covers more than twice the distance of the continental United States.

While the list of possible stops on the main train line numbers in the dozens, here is a handful you won’t want to miss.

**YEKATERINBURG**

About 1,000 miles (1,700 kilometers) into your journey, plan to spend a day or two in Yekaterinburg, known as the gateway to Siberia. Russia’s fourth-largest city by population is the unofficial capital of the Ural mountains, which divide Europe and Asia. The city is rich in history, from its founding in 1723 under Peter the Great to the post-Soviet era, initiated by Russian President Boris Yeltsin, a Yekaterinburg local. Lakes, fountains and wide promenades make the city center especially welcoming to pedestrians.

Your first stop should be the memorial complex erected in the early 2000s on the execution site of the Romanovs, the last Russian royal family. In July 1918, Nicholas II, his wife and his five children were lured to the basement of the home that once sat...
LOST IN TRANSLATION?

Throughout much of Russia, it can be tricky to get around without any knowledge of the Russian language. Street signs and many museum exhibits are usually in Russian Cyrillic. With that said, many non-Russian speakers do travel through Siberia. Persistence and a smile will go a long way in successful navigation. Moreover, many Russians welcome the chance to practice their English.

Clockwise: The Circum-Baikal Railway Tunnel, an historical railway that runs along Lake Baikal; a panoramic view of Yekaterinburg at night; Church on the Blood; a sign with Russian Cyrillic.
on the site to be executed by Bolshevik revolutionaries. With the death of the last tsar of Russia, the once-mighty Russian Empire fell into the dustbin of history, to be replaced by years of civil war between “red” and “white” revolutionaries.

The majestic Church on the Blood honors the royal family, where masters of the Orthodox icon form have depicted the family’s haloed figures on the walls of the church’s candlelit crypt. Additional chapels and churches are situated nearby this Byzantine masterpiece. A solemn morning spent exploring the church stands as a perfect introduction to the ancient and living faith of Russian Orthodoxy.

For a more upbeat afternoon, visit Yekaterinburg’s pleasant Museum of Fine Arts, which is just a 20-minute walk from the Church on the Blood. Western European (Flemish and Italian canvases in particular) and Russian art are both on display here.

Travelers looking for a drink and a lively pub atmosphere would do well to stop by Kollbasoff: The beer mugs are large, while the prices are reasonable. American visitors to Siberia will be pleasantly surprised by the favorable U.S. dollar-to-Russian ruble exchange rate. Travelers on a budget can eat their fill in Siberia for $15 to $20 a day.

Don’t leave Yekaterinburg before visiting the obelisk marker dividing Europe and Asia. To get there, hail a taxi, travel a bit outside the center of town and take a photo on the spot straddling the two continents.

**IRKUTSK AND LAKE BAIKAL**

More than 1,700 miles (3,400 kilometers) separate Yekaterinburg and Irkutsk, a lovely city known as “the Paris of Siberia.” Founded in 1666, Irkutsk proudly asserts its status as one of the oldest cities in the region.

A stroll down Yuri Gagarin Boulevard provides a view of the beautiful Angara River. While it’s possible to spend an enjoyable day or two visiting the city’s numerous monasteries, churches and regional history museums, many tourists primarily view Irkutsk as a comfortable base from which to explore the region’s principal attraction: Lake Baikal.

Lake Baikal and its environs are Russia’s answer to U.S. national parks like Yellowstone and Yosemite. Considered Siberia’s pearl, the region features the deepest lake on Earth—which contains almost 20 percent of the entire world’s freshwater supply—and the surrounding coastlines offer countless hiking trails, camping sites and other outdoor recreational activities. Plan to stay a few days at one of the waterfront towns that ring the perimeter of the gargantuan lake (Listvyanka and Bolshie Koty are popular), where you can indulge in hot thermal springs and fresh seafood.

Most visitors take at least one dip in the pure blue waters of Baikal during their stay. Those who don’t are regarded as “blasphemers” by many Russians. But be prepared: Even in July, water...
HOW TO DESCRIBE THE RHYTHM OF LIFE ON A RUSSIAN TRANS-SIBERIAN TRAIN?

Much depends on the type of ticket. Three exist: Platzkart, a third-class option that throws you into a wagon with dozens of fellow travelers; Coupe, second class, with four beds to a closed compartment; and SV, the VIP first-class offering. Prices vary considerably depending on the length of your trip but are very reasonable. Coupe tickets for the 3,300-kilometer journey from Yekaterinburg to Irkutsk, for example, cost only about $95 (5,750 rubles).

Slurping copious amounts of sugary black tea cuts across class lines. So does staring out the window at the pristine Siberian countryside. And for the longer legs, vodka or homebrewed concoctions (“Samogon”) liven up conversation. Each train has a dining wagon that serves up standard Russian fare for moderate prices. All three classes provide beds for passengers. (Throughout Siberia, Western hotel chains or local inns provide alternatives to spending nights in the train bunks.)

Russian passengers can often be counted on to invite Western travelers into conversation, card playing and supper, especially in the Platzkart class. Be forewarned: A shower, much less a bath, cannot be found in Platzkart or Coupe class, so make sure to clean up in the hotel/hostel prior to your leg of train travel.
temperatures rarely rise above 20 degrees Celsius (68 degrees Fahrenheit).

For the true Baikal experience, a trip to Olkhon Island is a must. Buses and ferries depart daily from Irkutsk to Olkhon’s quaint village of Khuzhir, an especially popular destination during the summer, when gorgeous sunsets bathe the cliffs in hues of smoky red and orange. Olkhon is also an important religious site for the local Buryat people, who originally hailed from Mongolia and practice shamanism. Daylong bus excursions around sites of interest offer fascinating detail about the history and beliefs associated with the Buryats’ shamanism. These tours will also take you to impressive vista points, where the tour guides prepare sumptuous fish soup made from the local catch, omul.

Vladivostok
The economic and cultural hub of Russia’s Far East, Vladivostok marks the end of the train line. When you disembark, don’t miss the fitting monument to the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railroad in the Vladivostok train station. (A trans-Siberian train route has existed in Russia since the end of the 19th century.)

After 100-plus hours of tea drinking and card playing on the train (see sidebar page 27), most Trans-Siberian travelers consider the sloping hills of cosmopolitan Vladivostok to be a refreshing change of pace. The city has drawn comparisons to San Francisco—not only for its hills, the way it hugs the Pacific Ocean, and its Golden Horn and Russky bridges (constructed in 2012), but also for its economic prosperity and

A GRIM HISTORY
Throughout most of the 20th century, the Soviet regime viciously repressed its own people. Millions in the Soviet sphere—ethnic minorities, religious believers, landowners, nonconforming artists—were exiled to the labor camps of Siberia and the Far East via the Trans-Siberian Railroad. Many never returned home.

Under Vladimir Lenin, a system of coerced labor was established in 1919. In 1930, Josef Stalin dramatically expanded this system, which took on the infamous name “Gulag” (a transliterated Russian abbreviation for “Chief Administration of Corrective Labor Camps”).

Many prisoners were forced to work 12-plus hours each day, toiling away at dangerous tasks such as mining, construction or timber removal. Food was scarce and conditions were far from comfortable: Prisoners in Siberian Gulags had to contend with subzero temperatures in the winter and swarms of mosquitoes in the summer.

Many never returned home. Conservative estimates say that 10 million people were sent to the Gulag in the 1934–1937 period alone. Western historians put the number of Gulag-associated deaths at 15 to 30 million for the 1918–1956 period. In short, the Gulag was an exploitative system that led to mass murder on a gigantic scale.

Travelers interested in learning more about this grisly chapter in Soviet history can visit memorials throughout their trans-Siberian journey, including:
- A sizable memorial ground, which sits a bus ride away from the center of Irkutsk. In the quiet suburb of Pivovarikha, hike a mile or so off the main road and into the hills to find a site with numerous tombs, crosses and photographs. Friends and family of the repressed make an annual pilgrimage on Oct. 30 to lay fresh flowers at the gravesites.
- On Olkhon in Lake Baikal, a memorial cross north of Khuzhir reminds tourists of the former Gulag camp on the island. A humble chapel in Khuzir depicts in artistic detail the Bolshevik slaughter of the Orthodox clergy (a prime target for the atheistic Soviets) in the 1920s.
thrive tech industry. Investment from Moscow and partnerships with Asian firms invigorate economic life in this coastal city.

Be sure to take a ride on Vladivostok’s funicular, an inclined cliff railway, praised by Lonely Planet as “the smoothest-running operation in the Far East.” From the top, you’ll be rewarded with an expansive view of the bay and ocean below. Once you’ve descended, plan to stop by the S-56 Submarine Museum—a furbished sub with fascinating exhibits that provide a flavor of (cramped) nautical life during World War II.

When it comes to cuisine, Vladivostok offers a welcome antidote to those who’ve grown tired of Russia’s meat and potatoes fare: a taste of the Orient. With Korea, Japan and China counting among the city’s closest neighbors, visitors can choose from a wide variety of Asian-inspired eateries—including Dumpling Republic and Korea House, located a short distance from Vladivostok’s coastal boardwalk.

While a weekslong trek across Siberia may not be luxurious, for adventurous travelers, Russia’s eastern expanse offers innumerable one-of-a-kind attractions at a very low price. You may end your trip feeling exhausted, but you’ll undoubtedly emerge feeling richer for having experienced Russia’s history, culture and natural beauty.

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Passenger cars line up along the siding at the Trans Siberian Express terminus in Vladivostok.