

TRANS-SIBERIAN RAILWAY: A TRAVEL INTO THE TIME

Auguściuk, Maciej, mgr. inż., emeryt dyrektor Biura Energetyki PKP PLK SA, Polska.

Dudzińska, Elżbieta, mgr. filologii rosyjskiej, Polska.

Głazowska, Cecylia, mgr. ekonomii, Polska.

Marszałek, Stanisław, mgr. inż., emeryt PKP PLK SA, Polska.

ABSTRACT

The Organization for Cooperation between Railways (OSJD) in every possible way promotes the exchange of experience and study tours for representatives of participating countries and affiliated enterprises. Broad international contacts allow developing mutual understanding, strengthening business ties, transferring knowledge, maintaining historical continuity in the field of railway

traffic. At the end of July last year a group of Polish railway workers returned from the Trans-Siberian Railway journey. Judging by the published notes, they had the opportunity to satisfy not only professional interest, but also got acquainted with the history of the Trans-Baikal Territory, the past of the Buryat and Mongolian people. The modern locomotive, unwillingly, became a «time machine» for travelers.

Keywords: Trans-Siberian Railway, TransSib, Trans-Baikal, retrospective, OSJD.

Background. In the framework of OSJD programs, there are especially long-distance routes and, therefore, the most cognitive ones. Undoubtedly, they belong to the one that got to us, like a lucky lottery ticket. From July 12 to July 29, 2017, a group of Polish railwaymen of 26 people made a journey along the Trans-Siberian Railway to Buryatia and Mongolia.

Many members of the expedition already made trips on the Trans-Siberian Railway through Siberia, from which they had the most unforgettable impressions. In 2012, they visited Irkutsk region and Baikal region (the Circum-Baikal railway and the Baikal settlement), and the natural consequence of unsatisfied curiosity after this trip was the desire to learn: «And what is there on the other side of Lake Baikal?». This question became the leitmotif for organizing another trip – to Buryatia (Transbaikalia), and then along the Transmongol mainline to the Mongolian capital Ulaanbaatar.

Objective. The objective of the authors is to provide their impressions about the journey along the Trans-Siberian Railway and to share some historical notes on the past of the visited regions.

Methods. The authors use general descriptive methods.

Results.

- The first stage of the trip (July 12, 2017) was a long journey by train 006 [3Ш] (ZShch) on the route Moscow-Yaroslavskaia-Ulan-Ude (distance 5609 km).
- The second stage (July 20, 2017) – a trip by train 362 [Б] (Y) from Ulan-Ude to Ulaanbaatar.
- The third and final stage of the journey (July 25, 2017) – by train 005 [Б] (V) on the route Ulaanbaatar – Moscow-Yaroslavskaia (6266 km).

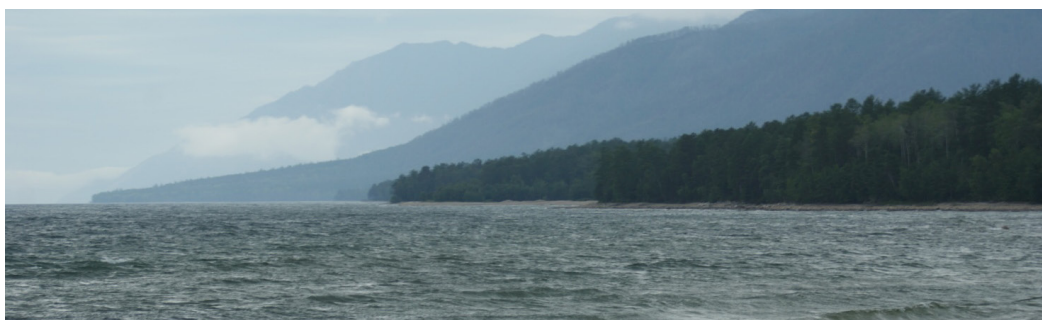
Upon arrival at the Moscow-Yaroslavskaia station and landing in the compartment car of the train, which set off at exactly 23:55, the first stage of our journey began. The staff organized the service of the group at the proper level: tea and souvenirs, bedding and towels were offered. When following the route Moscow-Yaroslavskaia-Ulan-Ude the train made stops in Kazan, Perm, Yekaterinburg, Omsk, Novosibirsk, Krasnoyarsk, Irkutsk, so that the expedition members had the opportunity to see those cities, including the old station complexes.



The old Trans-Siberian railway stations (including Novosibirsk, Krasnoyarsk, Irkutsk).



Ethnic museum in Ulan-Ude.



Periodically, we had to look at our watches, which were fixed according to Moscow time, since the timetable for movement of train No. 006 posted in the corridor of the car was Moscow time. And how without such «iron» landmarks in a multi-day journey? Only on the car wall the time of arrival, departure and the duration of stay at the intermediate stations were indicated. The traffic schedule was observed impeccably during the whole trip. Conductors reminded passengers of the length of stay at each stop.

During the stops we strolled along the platforms, bought products at the kiosks and, if time allowed, visited the nearest neighborhoods of the railway stations, where they noted with satisfaction that the railway terminals of the stations of the famous Trans-Siberian Railway are truly a visiting card of the cities.

The time interval between individual stops varied, sometimes from 3 to 7 hours. We dedicated this time, when we were especially fortunate, to have a look at the scenic landscapes outside the window, including meadows, carpeted with purple and pink flowers, birch groves and colorful wooden houses with carved window frames. But sometimes this picture was violated by long-distance freight trains carrying natural minerals from Siberia to other regions of the country. In addition, we periodically created the impression that we are «floating in a temporary space» – so many different associations side by side, so many forgotten details of epochs, ethno-cultures, peculiarities, not synchronously co-existing technological and social structures.



Members of our group constantly tried to count the number of cars in passing trains and argued about this, as well as other issues related to the railways. At the same time, their travel comments on the Trans-Siberian Railway were reduced to the following:

- passenger and cargo transportation along the Trans-Siberian Railway is carried out in large volumes, which is facilitated by a well-prepared infrastructure;
- safety at single-level crossings is provided by using an interesting technical solution – by blocking the road with raised plates, flush with the road surface, while lowering the barrier;
- railway stations are beautiful architectural objects, containing a full range of modern services for passengers;





Locomotive-monuments in the points of visit.

- at each major station there are neat and well-groomed «monuments» of the past technological epochs of the railway industry, including restored historic locomotives;

- the staff performs their duties properly, and the voice information on arrival and departure of the train through the loudspeaker system at the stations is advertised properly.

After Irkutsk passengers had the honor to admire the legendary and deepest lake in the world – Baikal. The view of this lake accompanied us for quite a long time on the way to the capital of Buryatia – Ulan-Ude, where the train arrived exactly on schedule, at 15:02 (local time) after more than four days of travel. But really our group met with Baikal only at sunset of the day in the tourist town of Maximikha, located on the shore of Barguzinsky Bay. We got there, overcoming the distance of 230 km by bus from Ulan-Ude along the eastern coast of the lake.

The next day we had to go by bus to the peninsula of Svyatoy Nos (the largest island in the area of the lake) and the Trans-Baikal National Park. On a sandy beach (over 20 km long), a festive stay was organized with a walk along the coast, where cedars, pine, spruce and birch grew.

A great event for us was a bonfire, organized by local craftsmen in the vicinity of Lake Baikal, on the

tripod in the cauldron we cooked a delicious Russian fish soup (ukha) with the famous Baikal omul. The fire itself especially attracted the participants of our trip – it was possible to bask and relax beside it on that cool, windy day.

Then we visited the capital city of Ulan-Ude: the ethnographic museum of the Transbaikalian peoples, the Revolution Square, the Arbat, the monument to Lenin. The next day, we visited the Center of Tibetan Buddhism (formerly Lamaism) in the Ivolgian Datsan. Then we were greeted warmly in the village of Tarbagatai, where the Old Believers still live. Centuries ago adherents of the Old Believer faith were sent here, and might be considered a separate branch of the Orthodox Church. The traditions and culture of the Trans-Baikal Old Believers were listed in the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2001. Here, in a musical setting, we were shown a folklore show with dances, in which all the members of our group took part. After that, we said goodbye to hospitable Buryatia.

During the second stage of the trip we had to move by train from Ulan-Ude to Ulaanbaatar. We arrived in the capital of Mongolia on July 21. This day was special for the residents of the country, especially for Ulaanbaatar. On the Sukhbaatar square, the newly elected president of the country, Haltmaagiin





Exhibits of the railway museum (Ulaanbaatar).

Battulga, was sworn in. On this occasion, a military parade and a festive procession with folk songs and dances were held in the central square. The day turned out to be sunny and sparkled with colorful flowers of folk costumes, which family dynasties from different parts of the country, who came to take part in this solemn ceremony, demonstrated.

The next day we visited a monumental statue of Genghis Khan in Tsongzhin-Baldog (this is the biggest equestrian monument in the world, its height is 40 m). Then we visited the Gorkhi-Terelzh National Park (the literal translation of the «rhododendron stream»), which is famous for its beautiful alpine landscapes and amazing rock formations of the Mesozoic era.

During the stay in the local Buddhist temple, a pouring rain suddenly began. Our only reflexive decision was to launch prayer mills around the temple, asking them to stop the precipitation. Prayers were heard, the sun returned.

Early in the morning in the Khustai National Park, we, armed with cameras, «hunted» for the horses of Taha (Przhevalsky's horses). Later they set off to travel through the harsh steppes and sand dunes of Elsen Tasarhai, called the little Gobi Desert. On that day we also visited a museum in Karakorum (the first capital of Mongolia), where the exhibits of the Great Mongol Empire are mostly represented.

During these trips we had a chance to spend two nights in yurts, we quickly settled in them and felt comfortable in the new conditions. On the way back to Ulaanbaatar, we visited a Mongolian family, who lives in the steppe and breeds horses. We were heartily met by the owner (the elder of the family), who in turn was greeted by the oldest of our group. After exchanging greetings and gifts, we went to the ancient Erdeni-Dzu monastery, built in 16th century.

On the last day of our stay in Ulaanbaatar, we visited the Mongolian Museum of Railway Engineering, whose exhibits give a detailed picture of the evolution of the transport sector in the country.

The third and final stage – return to Moscow.

The return trip passed without problems. Through the train window we said goodbye to the Great Baikal. We had the opportunity to admire the beautiful stations in Slyudyanka and Irkutsk, because there were longer stops in the daytime.

When we approached Moscow, the nights became longer – maybe that's why the trip seemed shorter. Although the return journey is always shorter. The change in the space-time lighting was very dynamic, which caused some disturbances in the circadian rhythm. Krasnoyarsk, Novosibirsk, Omsk, Yekaterinburg, Perm, Kazan, Vladimir were behind us. At some point, a border post flashed past the window, indicating the border between Europe and Asia, and finally, after five days of rapid movement, we arrived in Moscow. Final: July 29, 2017.

The trip took place in a calm and pleasant atmosphere, thanks to the kindness and care of the train crew. Conductors did not forget about passengers' comfort, order and cleanliness in the cars. They – at such long distances – controlled so that no one left the train at the stops.

During the trip along the Trans-Siberian Railway and during our stay in Buryatia and Mongolia we with great pleasure and warmly communicated with the inhabitants of these regions, who participated in organization of our meetings, train crews, ordinary citizens, who met during excursions, and just fellow travelers.

Conclusion. *Summing up the results of our trip, we would like to recommend to the lovers of traveling to make a trip along the Trans-Siberian Railway, where you can not only see a large number of historical monuments and picturesque landscapes, but also learn a lot of interesting things about such familiar, seemingly railways, get to know their past and the present. And maybe even, in some ways you can change the views on some of the long-known things.* ●

Information about the authors:

Auguściuk, Maciej, mgr. inż., emeryt dyrektor Biura Energetyki PKP PLK SA, Polska, eaugust2@o2.pl.

Dudzińska, Elżbieta, mgr. filologii rosyjskiej, Polska.

Głazowska, Cecylia, mgr. ekonomii, Polska.

Marszałek, Stanisław, mgr. inż., emeryt PKP PLK SA, Polska.

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