

## TRAVEL TALES

# One imperfect day in Vladivostok

By Llewellyn and Susan Toulmin  
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Our 2019 circumnavigation of Japan aboard Holland America Line's Westerdam included an odd stop – Vladivostok, Russia.

This port was included for several reasons such as giving passengers some sea days, complying with a Japanese law that foreign cruise ship itineraries must include at least one non-Japanese port and adding some variety and contrast.

Our first site onshore was at the Vladivostok rail station, the eastern terminus of the famous Trans-Siberian Railroad. In the rail yard was what looked like a Soviet-built steam engine from the early 20th century. To our surprise, later research showed that this Soviet World War II monument was actually built in 1944 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania by the Baldwin Company, and supplied to the Soviets to help with the war effort. The slogan on the locomotive's side said, "Dedicated to the military feats of railway workers in the Primorye (far east) region during World War II." The American workers were not mentioned.

I already had a personal interest in the Russian railroads. Just after the Iron Curtain fell in 1989, my consulting firm Booz Allen Hamilton was asked to study the Russian railways, and make recommendations for efficiency improvements. This was not hard since the system was probably the most inefficient in the world. Like most sectors in the country, the railroads used the Soviet "storming" approach. This employed monthly productivity quotas, in this case, ton-kilometers." So the entire Soviet railroad had a monthly ton-kilometer monthly quota that had to be met, otherwise one would be reportedly sent to the gulag.

In the first week of each month, railroad workers and managers drank vodka, took naps and did virtually no work since the monthly deadline was far in the future. In the second week, productivity increased slightly, as some partly full trains were sent out. In the third week, as the "storm" deadline approached, more trains were dispatched. In the fourth week, when it became clear that the quota would not be met, panic set in.

A massive train was assembled, loaded up with all kinds of heavy, useless junk, and sent back and forth across the 6,000-mile Trans-Siberian railroad, as fast as possible. Thus the quota was fulfilled, and the vodka drinking could begin again.

At the main train station, we boarded a train for a 45-minute ride on the Trans-Siberian line. The passenger car interior was clean and fresh, nicer than many older Metro-rail cars back home in Washington,



PHOTO BY LLEWELLYN TOULMIN

**The Vladivostok rail station, the eastern terminus of the Trans-Siberian Railroad, was built in 1891, with the first stone laid by then 23-year-old Nicholas II, who became the last emperor of Russia in 1894.**

D.C. However, outside the railcar, Siberian Russia was not doing so well. Trash and junk were everywhere. Little shacks inhabited by almost-homeless people lined the rails. The apartment architecture was blocky and unattractive. As humorist P.J. O'Rourke once famously said, "Commies love concrete." The whole area had a third world feel and we were glad to get off the train once we reached our stop.

But then the Russian (Soviet?) security system kicked in. The 200-odd Westerdam passengers were blocked by a single Russian railroad security lady who insisted on searching the bags of every disembarking passenger.

Why would she care about disembarking train passenger? Who knows? She held up the scrum for half an hour until finally, the yelling of cruise line staff persuaded her to relent. We thankfully boarded our buses for the next major attraction, the Kozitskiy Museum in the Sadgorod district.

This private museum was created in 2014 and contains over 150 classic Soviet cars and tanks. The star was the black, 26-foot-long ZIL-41047 limousine used by Boris Yeltsin, the first president of Russia. This massive, luxurious limousine and its "001" license plate demonstrated Boris' dedication to the Soviet ideals of egalitarianism and the dictatorship of the proletariat.

The lowlight of the museum was its lunch, included in the tour price of \$110 each. This consisted of a bowl of lukewarm gruel and a shot of homemade vodka. We touched neither.

Driving back to central Vladivostok, our buses stopped on a hill overlooking the Vladivostok harbor. Above us was an impressive statue of Saints Cyril and Methodius, Greek brothers and Christian missionaries who traveled to Russia and created what is now the Cyrillic alphabet in 862. Wires beside the statue were covered with padlocks, which local betrothed couples placed there to symbolize their union.

Below us spread the substantial harbor, the main port in far Eastern Russia, and home of the powerful and rather frightening Russian Pacific Fleet, with its 18 nuclear submarines, 34 non-nuclear subs and 49 surface warships. This regional fleet alone is bigger than the entire British Royal Navy.

The main visual attraction was the elegant Russky Island bridge. At 10,200 feet long, it is the longest cable-stayed suspension bridge in the world. Finished in 2012, it took a French-Russian consortium only 43 months to build.

Our last stop was the usual tourist souvenir shop, with lots of babushka dolls, large Russian military hats and bottles of vodka.

It was rather a relief to get aboard the Westerdam and head back towards Japan, a true first-world country, the home of great food, real democracy, a peace-loving government and world-class management efficiency. While Russia holds a lot of history, it is far away from being a tourist destination but perhaps, it will get there someday.

*This is part three of the Circumnavigating Japan series.*