

# Bradt travel guides

**Matt Dawson**

## **One morning in Russia**

We sat in silence. Me in just my boxer shorts, Sergei fully clothed and sipping something that looked like vodka. The two of us were the only inhabitants of a restaurant car at the far end of a sleeper train that was travelling in the opposite direction to my intended destination, Saint Petersburg.

It was seven in the morning and while staring out the window at the crisp, white snow that coated the bleak, flat countryside, I considered whether this was my least favourite start to a day. I had missed my stop. Overslept after a night drinking cheap spirits with a couple of backpackers at Moscow station. To make matters worse, my first half-an-hour of bleary-eyed consciousness left the uneasy feeling that I may have started an international relations crisis - it appeared I was being cast as a British reporter investigating Russian nuclear technology.

Sergei had one eyebrow missing. He drummed three fingers rhythmically in the space where it used to be. When he finally spoke, his voice was almost a whisper. "Please, tell me, Max."

"It's Matt."

"Yes. Max."

"Matt."

"Okay, Max. Tell, Sergei."

"Tell you what?"

Sergei grinned. "You drink?"

Two shot glasses were filled to the brim and one of them nudged across the table. The last thing I wanted was more alcohol, but maybe situations like this demanded diplomacy. We tapped glasses. It wasn't vodka.

"I make," Sergei boomed over the crackle of my coughing fit. "Now, please. Tell me what you want."

"I want to go to Saint Petersburg."

Sergei laughed. "Maybe today, maybe not."

Upon waking to find the train pulling out of Saint Petersburg, I had desperately tried to explain to anyone who was awake what had happened. Unfortunately, I had stuck my head into a room where a hushed but heated discussion was taking place between two Russian men about a very large set of engineering blueprints. These were taped across the window and lit up by the morning sun like a flatscreen TV. The moment they noticed me, stood there in my boxers and holding my notepad containing Russian phrases, it is fair to say they panicked. Paper was stuffed into suitcases, one of them began shouting "Journalist", finally the train guard was called. Somewhere between a barrage of broken English questions and my spectacularly bad Russian responses, I found myself being marched to the restaurant car without my luggage, train ticket or notepad. Sergei appeared to have been chosen as my official translator. He explained that a large proportion of those sharing my carriage were nuclear engineers.

"Journalist?" Sergei asked. When I shuck my head, he slapped the table. "I write for you."

"Write what?"

"What you want."

Sergei ambled to the bar in search of a pen. As he did the train guard crashed into the room. She dropped my backpack next to the table, spun on her heels and departed. I dressed while Sergei scrawled Cyrillic letters across a scrap of paper. They flowed fast; the speed of his hand contrasting with the sudden braking of the train.

"Listen," I said, "I don't need anything."

The train guard bounded back into the carriage. The force of her instructions bounced Sergei from his chair and a minute later the three of us were standing rather forlornly at the main carriage door. The guard stared at me, her face as dark as Lenin's mausoleum. As the train inched to complete halt, she released the door lock.

At first I saw little but for frozen countryside - we appeared to have stopped precisely nowhere. Then I noticed the flashing lights of a police car parked at a crossing in the distance. Looking down, my eyes met those of a female police officer. Tightly wrapped in a thick coat and ushanka-hat, she stood in the five inches of snow that lined the tracks. She motioned for me to step off the train.

"Maybe I should just get off at the next stop?" I suggested, as panic drenched me.

"Many hours," Sergei said, pushing his note into my hand.

The guard shoved me down the steps and my boots crunched into the snow. Without a word, the police officer set off towards her car. I followed only to trip over an iron sleeper. It was then that I noticed a second stationary train, one hidden behind our carriage and packed with delayed commuters all peering through the condensation that blanketed their windows. A few minutes later, I was safely inside one of the carriages and sitting opposite a lady reading an English version of *Pride and Prejudice*. Eventually, I plucked up the courage to ask if she knew what Sergei's note said.

"Give it to the train guard," she replied. "It asks for what you want, one ticket to Saint Petersburg."