



Witches, wolves and an underwhelming obelisk

Very few Trans-Siberian train passengers disembark in the Urals. Richard Asher did, and he was going camping.

It was only an obelisk. A tapering concrete pillar on a plinth, basically. *Lonely Planet* said it would be an exciting landmark to spot from the moving train, something to break the monotony of the forest. But *Lonely Planet* certainly didn't suggest spending the night at this dubious hulk of Russian masonry.

No, that was our idea.

The trouble started before the trip, when we decided to take a tent. Was a tent really necessary for our Trans-Siberian Railway journey? No. Would it be great to say we'd camped in Siberia? Now you're talking!

The tent accompanied us from London to Moscow on a charming Russian airline called

Aeroflot, but we wimped out in the capital and stayed in a hotel. Now we really had to justify bringing it as far as the Ural Mountains...

First, let me clear up some misconceptions about the Urals. They're not really mountains. They're not even hills. In fact, they're every bit as flat as The Land West of the Urals and The Land East of the Urals. Calling any of this a mountain range is like marching into the Kalahari and declaring it to be the Drakensberg.

We didn't know this, and we sat on the train with our noses to the glass, straining for a glimpse of a snowy peak beyond the trees. But not so much as a hillock emerged.

The Urals were not living up to their

billing. But there was forest, plenty of forest. And this was the place where, for no obvious reason, European Russia met Asian Russia. Hence the obelisk.

If you take a tent somewhere, you must use it to stay in places that don't have hotels – like a forest in the Urals near an obelisk.

We stepped off the train at Pervouralsk. It was grey and chilly. Nearly all the Russians stayed on the train. Was there something we didn't know?

Pervouralsk translates as “the first place in the Urals”. Or something like that. Not especially impressive, especially considering how unimpressive the Urals are. If this town

had any claim to fame, it was the site of the foulest toilet in all of Russia.

The public facility was built in the shipping-container style of the Soviets. After a stomach-turning peek around the door, we agreed that Stalin need not have built the Gulag to put up his enemies. Eastern Siberia would have been a picnic compared to a week or two in the bathroom at Pervouralsk Station.

Thankfully we didn't need to explore the rest of Pervouralsk. It was late in the day and our obelisk was a few kilometres east along the tracks. We needed to get there before dark and find a secluded campsite.

It was a week since we'd arrived in the country and finally we were in storybook Russia. Moscow was overpoweringly foreign and full of surprises – including sunshine and temperatures in the 30s.

However, we had hardly pulled out of Yaroslavl Station when autumn began to stalk us. As Moscow's last factory receded, the trees sprang up all around us. The country sky defaulted to September grey. Everyone seemed old and weathered. Nobody was tall or blonde.

Leaving Pervouralsk, we marched parallel to the tracks but far enough from the trains for silence to prevail. You wouldn't send a postcard from here, but you might write a book. Something with a Hansel and Gretel theme.

It wasn't long before we saw a stooped figure in the distance: an old woman in black, gathering berries or mushrooms. Our minds already high on imaginings, this was too much. We weren't in the mood to become gingerbread men. We cut back towards the railway line. She pretended not to see us, but we weren't fooled. The menfolk would be after us in a matter of minutes, brandishing pitchforks.

And then we saw the wolf. Nothing seemed more proper and correct in the murky twilight of this strange, solemn world than a meeting with a wolf. We spotted the lupine shape in the distance and did the only thing we could: gave it a wide berth.

The wolf followed us, feigning disinterest, as if tracking the porky scent of some little pig, but most definitely coming our way.

With the stooped old lady in black barely out of our minds, this stalking was all we needed. The wolf and the witch were in league, no doubt. Suddenly that toilet didn't seem so bad any more.

As the menacing canine drew

closer – we didn't want to encourage it by running – it dawned on us that this was not a wolf. It was a dog. It had wolf-like features, make no mistake, but all Siberian dogs have a wolfish look about them. The scariest thing about them is that they don't bark.

Just when we thought we'd seen the last of witches and wolves, we came upon a vegetable patch. There aren't many things scarier than a vegetable patch when you're looking for a safe campsite in the Russian woods and you haven't seen anyone for an hour.

The smallholding was surrounded by a high fence. Was there a farmhouse? Were there “dogs” that huff and puff and blow things down? Would the old woman appear silently in the night? We shuddered at the possibilities, but it was nearly dark and we could go no further.

We pitched our tent between the fence of the smallholding and the railway embankment. We hoped this would ensure that no one came wandering past in the night, but we

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risked a pitchforking by an irate farmer. And if a train were to derail – it happens – our tent would provide little cushioning against a few tons of Russian Railway rolling stock.

It was a tumultuous night, punctuated by endless trains. Russia does nothing in short measures – their trains can take a long time to rumble past. If 10 minutes went by without a train thundering towards Vladivostok, it was a rare treat. When I did nod off, it was to dream of mobs of angry peasants, surly police officers and vast locomotives running over my head.

Things always seem better in daylight. It was raining and freezing, but we'd made it: We'd camped in Siberia! Bad things would not be able to get us until it was dark again, by which time, all being well, we'd be in Yekaterinburg... where they murdered Tsar Nicholas II and his family.

But that was far from our minds; we had an obelisk to visit. Surely it wasn't very much further? We walked cock-a-hoop next to the railway line, full of the joys of autumn. Only a few kilometres of Europe remained. Whole trainloads of people silly enough not to get off in Pervouralsk went hurtling past as we sauntered on our superior way.

Then we saw it. On a scale of underwhelmingness, the scene scored a perfect 10. There it was, the great continental divider, towering at a height of less than 3 m. And badly in need of paint. *Evropa* on one side; *Azea* on the other.

Why this place even merited a name – Vershino – was beyond us. Strictly speaking it was a station stop, if only for the odd local train. There wasn't even a platform. The only sign of life was a wooden hovel next to a long-abandoned station building, home to another bent old hag and a couple of pigs in a pen. The drizzle grew heavier. We donned our ponchos and took some underwhelming photos.

A man came lurching out of the trees. He was a drunk, barely able to walk at 8 am – not unusual in the land of vodka. He made a confused Slavic slur in our general direction.

All we could offer in reply was a limp, “*Nyet Rooski.*” We weren't Russian.

He stared at us, yellow-eyed and incomprehending. “*Nyet Rooski?*”

He was probably thinking: Why on earth, then, are these two fools standing in the rain in Vershino?

We looked at each other and laughed. The drunk may have had a point, but we wouldn't have traded our adventure in the Urals for anything. ■