

## On Lake Baikal Enchanted In Ice Journey

**Highlights:** great journey on the ice of the Great Baikal by special hovercrafts highlighting introduction into the lake's ecology and its ethnography, Pole of Baikal ceremony with famous Shaman of Baikal fun ice-fishing and Baikal "banya" steam-bath . . .with possible extension to Baikal Ice Marathon

**Duration:** 9 days/ 08 nights, February 19 – March 01, 2019

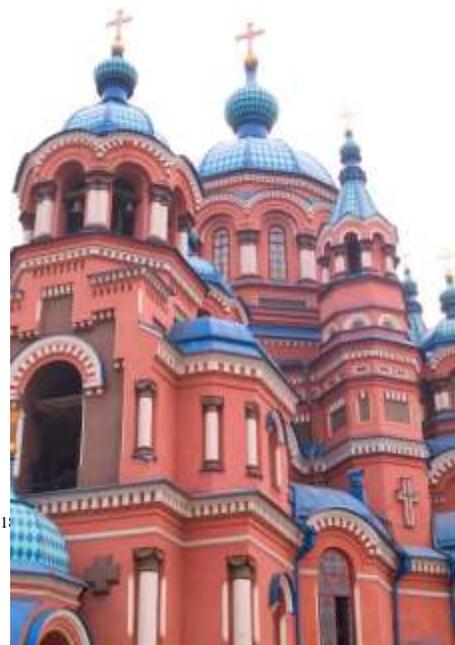


Imagine a glistening, utterly smooth vein of milky quartz 395 miles long and 50 miles wide, set amid dense, mountainous forests: Baikal in winter. “A primordial deep lake of diamantine clarity,” as Peter Matthiessen wrote in *Baikal: Sacred Lake of Siberia*, it is, among other things, the world’s oldest lake and the deepest, at 5750 feet at its lowest, with an additional four miles of sediment above the bedrock. The great Baikal Rift—by far the deepest depression on the planet—is seven times as deep as the Grand Canyon. It is also the most voluminous, holding an astounding 20 percent of the world’s fresh water—if all the world’s rivers were to drain into an empty Baikal, it would take a year to fill. And, to cap off the superlatives, it’s unquestionably the most interesting, with its crystal clear water and 100,000 freshwater seals, called *nerpa*, that inhabit its northern waters, in the middle of a vast continent! Baikal is surely the most hugely beautiful lake in the solar system.

“Baikal,” writes Yevgeny Yevtushenko, “is the blue heart of Siberia, pulsing amidst the green ocean of the taiga.” On this journey we’ll explore the lake in its bracingly cold solitude, visiting tiny wooden hamlets set by the shore, staying in boutique hotels and private homes, ice fishing, troika riding and perhaps even some dog-sledding, and of course walking joyously on the frozen surface of the world’s deepest and perhaps most ardently loved lake. As Baikal’s laureate, Valentin Rasputin, has written, “Baikal itself, alive, majestic . . . not comparable to anything and not repeated anywhere, is aware of its own primordial place and its own life force.”

### Day 1

**IRKUTSK** In the morning arrive in Irkutsk, the capital of Irkutsk Oblast ( Region) and one of the most important cities of Siberia. After breakfast and a morning rest at our hotel, we spend the afternoon touring this halfway point between Moscow and the easternmost point of Siberia. Although the Irkutsk Oblast is but a small segment of Siberia, it is as large as Switzerland, France, Holland, Belgium, Austria, and Denmark combined. Siberia alone boasts six million square miles and fantastically varied topography including mountains, endless steppes, Arctic tundra, great stands of virgin forests, volcanoes, high plateaus, vast rivers, and lakes filled with game fish. Four large rivers—the Lena, Kitoy, Irkut, and Angara—keep most of the Irkutsk Oblast lush with forests and link many villages and cities.



*Founded in 1651, Irkutsk started as a small settlement on the banks of the Angara and Irkut rivers and by the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century it had become the capital of East Siberia. In the early years, Irkutsk was home to a variety of peoples: Cossacks, tradesman, artisans, deportees, Buryats and peasants, all of whom have left a lasting imprint on the flavor of modern-day Irkutsk. Along the famous Tea Road from Kalgan, China to Europe, Irkutsk was a resting stop for the numerous caravans. As commerce grew, Irkutsk bustled from the tea, silk, timber, gold, salt and fur trades. Yet in 1879 a massive three-day fire razed the city, destroying homes, schools, libraries, churches, orphanages and archives. The city was quickly rebuilt and by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century again claimed itself as a hub for the Trans-Siberian Railroad. Today, the Paris of Siberia is a cosmopolitan city and the trading and administrative center of Eastern Siberia.*



Our first excursion is to the old part of town, which still has a collection of tumbledown wooden houses, and to Znamenskaya monastery where many 19<sup>th</sup> century exiles from Moscow and St. Petersburg lie buried in the churchyard. Znamenskaya is also noted for its historical grave of the so-called “Russian Columbus,” Grigory Shelekhov, who was an early Russian explorer of Alaska, and the graves of the Decembrists revolutionaries who were named to Siberia after an ill-fated attempt in 1825 to overthrow the Russian tsar.

After the tour we will have lunch at “Malty Homestead” restaurant featuring tasty entrée of local Siberia cuisine. The restaurant is located in the so-called 130<sup>th</sup> Quarter – historical environs in the city downtown that recently was renovated. After lunch, we will have an opportunity to explore this fascinating part of the city of Irkutsk.

## Day 2

**IRKUTSK TO LISTVYANKA** After breakfast, we check out of the hotel for departure by coach to the Listvyanka settlement, located on Lake Baikal at the mouth of the Angara River (the lake’s only outlet). Our drive takes us along the Irkutsk-Baikal road, which was constructed almost 50 years ago in preparation for President Eisenhower’s visit. The President was invited to visit the lake because of his Siberian gold merchant ancestry. After the shooting of an American U-2 spy plane, however, the President’s visit was canceled.



En route we stop to explore the Museum of Wooden Architecture, located half-way between Listvyanka and Irkutsk. Illustrating the lifestyles of 16<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century Russians, this museum displays various aspects of village life, the interiors of a Russian fort and 15<sup>th</sup> century watchtower, information about the Buryat and Evenk people, and a Shaman yurt.

Our first glimpse of Lake Baikal occurs near Shaman Rock before we reach Listvyanka. We’ll stop here to listen to the legend of “Father Baikal and his disobedient daughter Angara” recounted by our guide before continuing on to the charming little village of Listvyanka, an old-style



Siberian village famous for its trade history. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century its ferry took merchants across the lake on the journey to Mongolia, China, and the Russian Far East.

A cozy Russian hotel awaits us in Listvyanka; after check-in we enjoy the first of many excellently prepared Russian country feasts. Lunch is followed by a visit to the Baikal Limnological Museum, which features one-of-a-kind exhibits on the flora and fauna of Lake Baikal and an aquarium where several Baikal freshwater seals live. Let's also visit the old wooden church of St. Nicholas, where you can burn a candle as a blessing for your safe and successful journey. If time allows, the next stop is the Baikal Solar Station, where we meet local scientists and discuss their conservation efforts.

### Day 3

**LISTVYANKA** Baikal lies along a tectonic break surrounded by mountains and rocky, tree-covered cliffs. Its banks rise to 1600 feet above sea level, and the mountains surrounding it boast over 9000 feet. Lake Baikal's water is crystal clear—a white sheet thrown into it can be clearly seen at a depth of 120 feet. Scientists still disagree on how the omul, a white fish of the salmon family, as well as the sea cows and seals (all typically salt water sea life), reached Baikal from the sea.

The origins of the name Baikal are unknown. Some say the water's living radiance contrasted the immense taiga's trees, giving rise to the name "rich fire," a combination of the Mongolian words Bai and gal. The Buryat *baigal-dalai* means "natural sea." In Yakut, *bai kel* is "Rich lake." To the Chinese Baikal was *pe hai*, "Northern Ocean."

We spend the day enjoying the exceptional natural setting of the region and partaking in some of Russia's traditional outdoor pastimes including dog-sledding and a troika ride. A traditional Russian *banya*, or sauna, serves as the perfect end to this active day, once we've sampled a variety of traditional Siberian cuisine including smoked and salted omul.

### Day 4

**LISTVYANKA TO BUGULDEIKA VIA BOLSHIE KOTY** This morning we board the "Khivus", our air cushioned amphibious vessel (ACV), to begin sightseeing on Baikal. We travel across the thick frozen lake ice to our first stop, Bolshie Koty, and visit the local biological research station of Irkutsk University. A local Baikal specialist named Lyubov Izmestyeva, whose family of scientists has done research on Baikal for three generations, teaches us about life in and around the lake. The data this single family has collected may be the world's most extensive historical record of the area.

From Boshie Koty we carry on to Peschanaya ("Sandy") Bay, oft-referred to as the Siberian Riviera due to its extended periods of sunshine. Upon arrival in Peschanaya Bay we enjoy a guided walk to take in the panoramic views of the taiga forest and one of the lake's natural wonders, the so-called "wandering trees." The



trees' roots are exposed by winds which blow away the sand so that the trees stand high above the beach—in some cases almost 6 feet above. Their position shifts slightly each year as a result of the blowing winds and sandy soil, allowing the nickname Wandering Trees. We will also have lunch on the ice and if weather conditions are optimal we may stop here for some ice fishing lessons.

After lunch we board our Khivus to reach the final stop of the day, the village of Buguldeika, where we overnight in our cozy, rustic riverside “lodge.” Accommodations here are simple, but the fresh, home-cooked Russian meals, spectacular setting, and hot Russian *banya* all make it worthwhile.

### Day 5

**BUGULDEIKA TO OLKHON ISLAND** After breakfast we have a leisurely morning to enjoy our surroundings and the opportunity to ice skate on the river if we wish. After lunch, it's on to the Khuzhir settlement on Olkhon Island, the largest and only permanently inhabited island on the lake. En route we stop to see the famous Tsagan Zaba White Marble Cliffs and observe the petroglyphs that date back more than 2500 years with scenes from the lives of shamanistic believers. The famous Russian anthropologist Okladnikov called these petroglyphs “the Pearls of ancient art.” There's plenty of time for an up-close inspection.



Our next destination is Olkhon Island. Divided lengthways, one half of this narrow island is covered in forest and the other in steppe, a landscape that defines much of Siberia. En route we wind through the “Small Sea”, part of Lake Baikal sandwiched between the mainland shore and the island's eastern shore. Time permitting, we may be able to visit the small island of Ogoy—site of the lake's only Buddhist stupa. At more than 32 feet high, the stupa holds 2.5 tons of Buddhist mantras and 1,543 pounds of holy Buddhist books that were brought from Nepal. The Ogoy stupa recently became a site for Buddhist pilgrimages.



Upon arrival in Khuzhir, we check in to the guesthouse, our home for the next 3 days. After dinner, our local guides—passionate ice-fisherman—introduce some ice-fishing secrets on how to catch Baikal's famed fish: grayling, perch and the endemic omul.

### Day 6

**OLKHON ISLAND** Breakfast is followed by a morning of ice fishing, during which we set up near our “kamchatka”, or traditional omul group fishing area, where tents and huts perch on the ice over long-established fishing spots. We learn about the local methods of attracting fish by the use of shrimp bait called “burmash”. Fishermen drop large amounts of the burmash in order to entice the omul to feed under their ice-holes. Watch—and participate if you choose—in the ice-hole drilling with promises of local rewards for the fastest driller.

After warming up over lunch, our explorations of Olkhon take us to a holy place of Lake Baikal—the Shamanka craig rock, or Shaman rocks, which is reached by an easy walk through Khuzhir village. Afterwards we enjoy a traditional Siberian *banya* (steam sauna).

### Day 7



**OLKHON ISLAND** Today we set out for an excursion around the island, first driving to the northernmost point, the Cape of Khoboy (translation: “fang”). The Cape is located at the widest point of Lake Baikal and offers the best views of the Eastern and Western shores. For the local shamanist believers, the site is a sacred spot.

Afterwards we board our ACVs to go back on the ice, this time in search of the famed freshwater seals of Baikal, the *nerpa*, the only freshwater seals in the world. With luck, we can find them in their natural habitat. How the freshwater seal came to be in Lake Baikal is still a mystery; the lake is hundreds of miles from the nearest ocean.

Now for the day’s highlight: a visit on the ice to the “Baikal Polar Spot” located above the deepest point of the lake (at 5435 feet). Here we are met by Bashiila, the President of the Oriel Shamanistic Fund and a local hereditary shaman. Known locally as “Uncle Vasya”, Bashiila demonstrates a traditional ritualistic ceremony devoted to the deities of Lake Baikal and honoring the health of the earth.

We return to the guesthouse for our farewell to Baikal dinner.

*Nikita Bencharov homestead (B,L,D)*

### Day 8

**OLKHON ISLAND TO IRKUTSK VIA UST-ORDA** This morning we say goodbye to the island and set out for Ust-Ordat. Several sightseeing stops en route include a visit to an “ovoo” (or “obo”), another sacred site of worship for local shamanist believers.

In Ust-Orda, activities include a visit to the Buryat Ethnography Museum followed by a Buryat folklore performance. Buryats are a native Siberian people whose history and culture closely relate to that of their southern Mongolian neighbors. We also explore a Buryat shamanistic center—the traditional wooden yurt home of the shaman—and sample some of the Buryat national cuisine including *salamt*, *arza*, and *tarasun* moonshine. Bashiila will speak to us about the philosophy, religion and culture of the local Buryat people and their traditional conservation practices, describe the shaman practice and altar, and perform a short ritual in honor of travelers and local spirits.

We continue back to Irkutsk to check in to our hotel and enjoy our toast-filled farewell dinner.

### Day 9

**Transfer to Baikal Ice Marathon hotel near the start of the race.**



## A Note on the Trip Grade, Fitness Level & Accommodations

This trip is graded **rigorous touring with limited facilities**. This itinerary takes us to one of the most remote parts of Siberia in Russia. We feel part of the joy of travel in this area is its special quality of seclusion; however, participants should be aware that amenities outside of Moscow are rustic or sparse at best. Please take note of the following limitations:

- Hotels used are the best available and range from 5-star in Moscow to 3-star accommodations in Irkutsk and unrated basic guesthouses on Lake Baikal.
- The air cushioned amphibious vessels (ACVs) traveling on Lake Baikal will accommodate our group but it will be close quarters.
- The Buguldeika Riverside Estate Lodge has a couple of private showers and toilet facilities for the use all guests, to be shared by the entire group for this night.
- Roads may be rough and bumpy at times.
- Hikes are short to moderate in length, ranging in lengths up to 2 hours, at low elevations, occasionally traversing uneven terrain and up steep hillsides. Anyone who is reasonably fit and active should be able to handle these hikes without difficulty.
- Some site visits will require traversing uneven snow- or ice-covered terrain such as gravel or cobblestone streets as well as walking up and down often narrow stairways, or up hillsides.
- . Much of our activities are outdoors in the open elements. Those considering taking this tour should weigh these conditions in light of their own physical fitness before joining this trip.

