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Jon Letman

Despite being situated east of Beijing, Seoul and Pyong yang, the regional capital of Khabarovsk has a distinctly European feel to its streets.

High on the Amur

Party-Style in the Russian Far East

By Jon Letman

In the far corner of Asia, east of Siberia and across from Manchuria, there is a party going on along the river. On balmy mosquito-ridden summer nights in Khabarovsk while the casinos swarm with gangsters and Chinese businessmen from Harbin, a small group of Japanese tourists dig into their *borscht* and *pelmeni* (boiled dumplings) at the Sapporo Hotel. Meanwhile the discos and kiosks lining the east bank of the Amur River buzz with life.

Squat ferries chug and wheeze back to shore from small islands in the Amur. Returning from their *dacha* (garden plots) on the islands, *babushkas* and their grandchildren plod across wooden planks laden with buckets, tools and bundles of dahlias and sunflowers.

At the river bank, a lone bather braves the chilly waters beneath a ribbon of tie-dye pink and blue sky as the sun slips across the confluence of the Amur and Ussuri Rivers, where northeastern China juts into southeastern Russia.

More than a dozen years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia has yet to become a major tourist destination, which is precisely what makes Khabarovsk a fascinating and satisfying place to travel.

I had come to this industrial city of 700,000 during a three-week journey through Russian Far East and had paused (or rather was delayed) at Khabarovsk International Airport en route from Sakhalin Island to the Kamchatka Peninsula. With no explanation offered, my noon flight has been postponed, and I'm told to return to airport at 3 p.m.

Later that afternoon, back at Khabarovsk International (connections to Singapore, Tashkent, Seoul and Seattle), a Chinese girl named Victoria interprets for me. "There is a problem with the plane. No flight today. Maybe tomorrow. Call again tonight at seven."

Resigned to a night in Khabarovsk, I take the bus back to the city and check into a US\$ 8 room at the "Hotel Turist" on *Ulitsa* (Street) Karl Marx.

At 7 p.m., I head for the hotel lobby, where I ask the manager if I can make a call

- Ecuador (2)** from the hotel. She replies, “International only.”
- Egypt (2)**
- England (19)** Local calls are impossible? From behind her shield of thick glass she tells me I must go to a public phone, but I know that will involve not only a search for a phone that works, but also a place that sells phone tokens. It could take an hour. I repeat my appeal: “Just one call?”
- Estonia (1)**
- Finland (2)**
- France (9)**
- Germany (5)** She gives in: “Possible, yes, one call.”
- Greece (4)**
- Guatemala (2)** I pick up the orange plastic phone and dial the number I was given at the airport. A faint voice on the other end says, “Yes, flight is three this morning.”
- Honduras (1)**
- Hungary (2)**
- Iceland (5)** “3 a.m.? You mean eight hours from now?” I ask.
- India (6)**
- Indonesia (1)** “*Da!* Yes! Come at two,” the voice grumbles, and then the line is cut.
- Iraq (1)**
- Ireland (5)** With a long night before me, I decide to stay awake and see what is happening down by the river. From my hotel it is a long walk, but the night is warm and my spirits high. Tomorrow I will be in Kamchatka, and so tonight I will enjoy this curious Far Eastern city.
- Israel (3)**
- Italy (18)**
- Jamaica (2)**
- Japan (5)** At the end of the café-lined
- Jordan (2)** Ulitsa Muravyov-Amursky, a
- Kenya (2)** set of steep, high stairs leads
- Korea (2)** down to the bank of the Amur,
- Macau (1)** a river which has the width and
- Malaysia (4)** gravity of a broad flowing
- Mauritania (1)** inland sea. Along the bank,
- Mexico (20)** couples amble hand in hand
- Micronesia (1)** and dog walkers stroll the
- Moldova (1)** promenade, while shirtless
- Mongolia (1)** young toughs swill bottles of
- Morocco (2)** Baltika beer outside kiosks run
- Mozambique (1)** by Azerbaijani.
- Netherlands (4)** Two girls in skirts, one orange,
- New Zealand (7)** the other green, walk with
- Nicaragua (1)** locked arms, laughing as a
- Norway (2)** Russian pop song drifts in the
- Panama (1)** warm night air. Teenagers
- Peru (4)** looking for action are lured down to the riverside where kiosks sell food and drink and discos pulsate with pirated cassettes of last year’s Eurobeat.
- Philippines (1)**
- Poland (1)** The kids who are too young to enter the makeshift discos sit outside bumming
- Portugal (2)** smokes. There is a feeling of anticipation; maybe there will be a fight, or perhaps
- Romania (1)** someone is going to get lucky...
- Russia (6)**
- Scotland (3)** Below the lighthouse on a high bluff overlooking the Amur there is an outdoor disco
- Seychelles (1)** enclosed behind a high, chain-link fence. No one has arrived yet, but a wall of TV
- Singapore (2)** screens flashes a jerky video with pulsating techno pop. A kiosk beside the disco sells
- Slovenia (1)** Baltika, Pepsi, Marlboro and grilled *shashlik* (Azerbaijani kebabs). The thick smoke
- South Africa (2)** pouring off the grill drives away the swarms of merciless mosquitoes temporarily.
- Spain (4)** I order a Baltika #1 in halting Russian. As the girl working the kiosk opens my beer
- Sri Lanka (1)** my eyes burn into my neck. Looking to the left, I find I am being stared at by
- Sweden (3)** a shirtless man, rather short but with rippling muscles and a wide grin.
- Switzerland (2)** Announcing that he is from Uzbekistan, this half naked man looks frightening but
- Tanzania (2)** greets me warmly, “*Dobre vecher*” (Good evening).
- Thailand (9)**
- Tunisia (2)** My Russian is sufficient to exchange pleasantries and answer his questions – what
- United Arab Emirates (1)** is your name? Where are you from?
- United States (126)**



The author (middle) enjoys hot tea with two friendly Azerbaijani traders at a Khabarovsk market.

Jon Letman

- Uruguay (1)
- Vietnam (3)
- Wales (1)
- Yemen (1)
- Zambia (1)
- Zimbabwe (1)

“We have come by train from Rostav-na-Donu to deliver packages,” explains Serg #1. Rostav-na-Donu, I recall, is near the Sea of Azov to the south of Moscow, across the continent.

I wonder what they are delivering. The Sergeis are very hospitable and fill my cup with vodka repeatedly, encouraging me to drink- “*davai!*” (“let’s go!”). Sergei #2 (the bald one) wants to inspect my passport, Sergei #3 is pouring me more vodka, and the Uzbek, now in an excited state, challenges me to arm wrestle.

I can imagine the result and decline the offer, but he persists. Shots of vodka are taken, elbows aligned on the table and my arm is quickly leveled. The Uzbek is mildly hysterical, elated at having beaten the American. We all empty our cups.

Beside us the tables are filling with teenage girls who laugh and scream. There are more offers of vodka, but I take my leave, explaining that I have to be at the airport at 2 a.m.

A little further along the riverbank is another disco, which is really just an open concrete shelter housing a kiosk, a stereo and an open space for dancing. In front of the nameless club a few kids, maybe 14 or 15 years old, sit on a table smoking cigarettes. I take a seat on a low wall and swat the mosquitoes, which are everywhere. One girl approaches, and I take the opportunity to ask her how to say ‘mosquito’ in Russian.

“*Kamar,*” she answers.

After I write this in my note pad, the girl takes my pen and in English she writes:

*You me very like, becose (sic) you very good boys.
My name is Natasha. I live in town Khabarovsk.
I love you*

She laughs, takes a drag off her cigarette and disappears into the disco. Feeling a bite, I slap my neck as a bottle breaks against concrete in the distance. It is now nearly midnight, and I must return to my hotel, check out and somehow find a way to the airport.

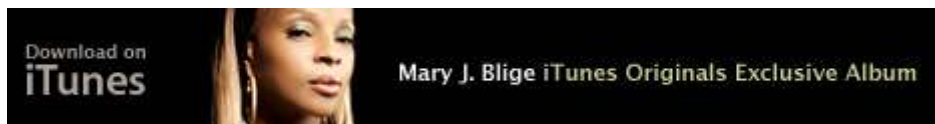
Climbing the steep embankment back up to Ulitsa Muravyov-Amursky, I flag down a passing car and negotiate a price. This is public transportation in Khabarovsk.

When I first visited three years earlier, the summer party scene on the Amur was nearly identical. The songs have changed slightly, but the mood is the same.

The 19-year-old with the bandaged head who opens his bottle with a knife, the skater, the Russian girls, Oksana, Sneizhana and Tanya dancing with Yosef from Azerbaijan, the smell of *shashlik* and beer, and the tension of youths looking for something to fill the night; they’re all still there.

Here, the prospect of love coupled with the threat of violence hangs heavily over the banks of the Amur. Yet, for all the fights, the broken bottles and bruised hearts, these are the good old days for the youth of Khabarovsk.

Life lessons are hard, and Russian kids grow up fast. And when the sun starts to set across the Amur a little earlier, a stinging wind will blow in from Siberia. Soon the river will be frozen and the party will be over.



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