

Chita to Beijing via Harbin

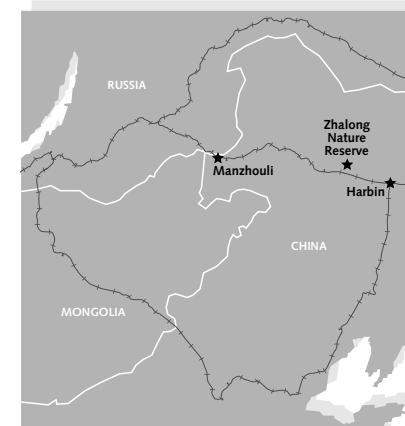
Once a week, the 19/20 *Vostok* train chugs in each direction over the Trans-Manchurian route, taking just over a week to travel between Moscow and Beijing. The train branches off the main Trans-Siberian line shortly after Chita, crossing the border at Zabaikalsk/Manzhouli and passing through several major cities en route to the Chinese capital. The most interesting of these is Harbin, whose history is inextricably bound up with the development of the Trans-Siberian Railway – indeed it was once on the direct line to Vladivostok. For die-hard rail fanatics, it's still possible to travel this route on a twice-weekly and excruciatingly slow international train connection.

Another nonstandard Trans-Manchurian route is to hop across the Amur River from the Russian city of Blagoveshchensk to Heihe, which also has regular rail connections with Harbin. Whichever way you get there, Harbin is a fascinating place where elements of precommunist Russia still poke through the surface of a thoroughly modern Chinese city. The prime time to visit is midwinter when Harbin hosts the spectacular Ice Lantern Festival. Nature lovers will also want to make time to see the many Siberian tigers at Harbin's Siberian Tiger Park or the thousands of birds, including rare cranes, at Zhalong Nature Reserve.

Other possible stops en route include Shenyang, which hides some well-preserved relics of the Manchu era amid its traffic-clogged heart, and the major coastal city of Tianjin, which like Harbin harbours great examples of concession-era architecture: for full details of both these cities refer to Lonely Planet's *China*. In Russia you could also use Chita as a base for visiting some lesser-known Buddhist temples in the beautiful Siberian countryside.

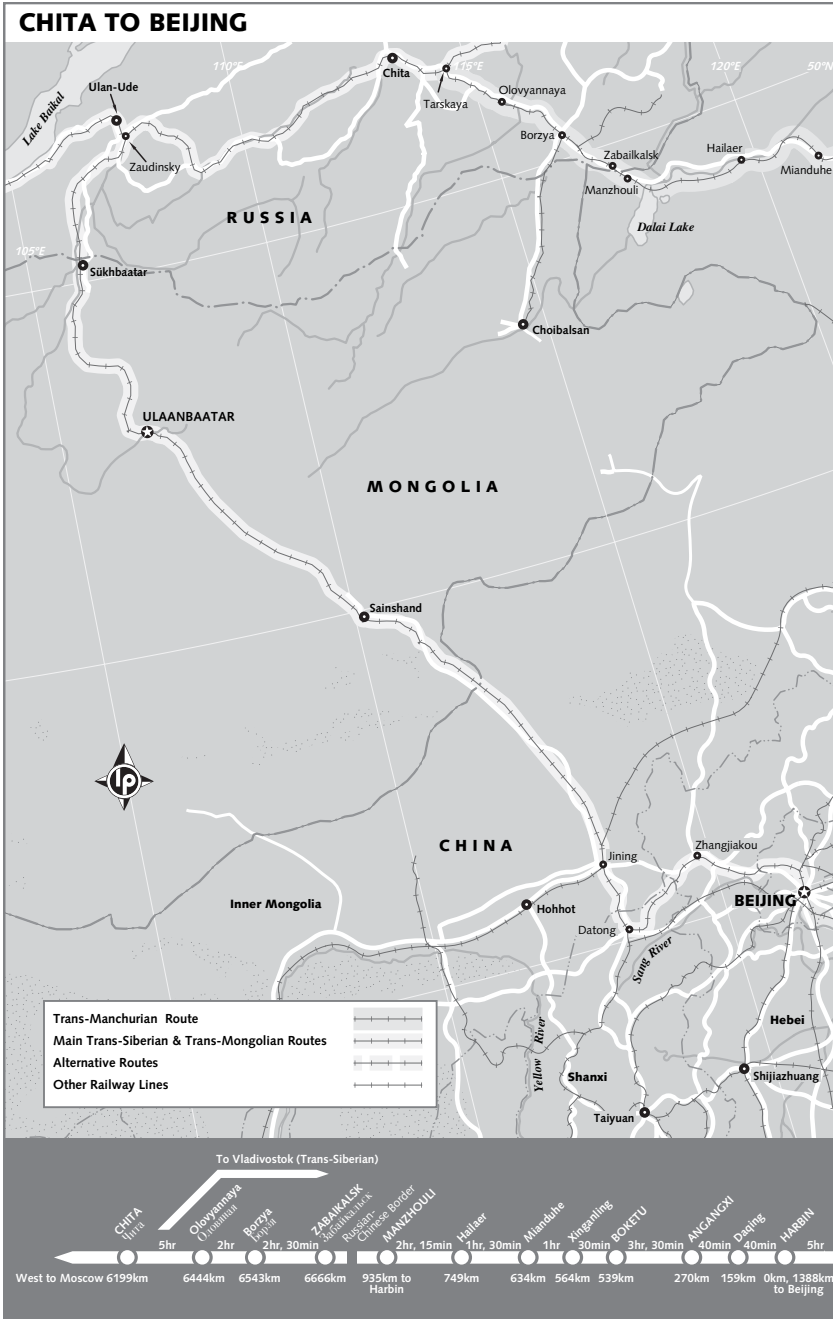
HIGHLIGHTS

- Chill out at Harbin's spectacular **Ice Lantern Festival** (p276)
- Discover remnants of the Russian past in Harbin's evocative **Daoliqiu district** (p275)
- Eyeball majestic felines at the **Siberian Tiger Park** (p275)
- Go bird-watching in the peaceful wetlands of **Zhalong Nature Reserve** (p278)
- Gaze out at the verdant grasslands of Inner Mongolia in **Manzhouli** (p271)



■ ROUTE DISTANCE: 2790KM

■ DURATION: TWO DAYS, EIGHT HOURS



The northernmost major town in Inner Mongolia and another base for visiting the grasslands is **Hailaer** (749km), where the train stops for about 10 minutes. Around 650km, the train enters the Greater Hinggan mountains. It may make stops at towns such as **Mianduhe** (634km), **Yilick Ede** (574km) and **Xinganling** (564km). From here the train descends on the eastern side of the range.

Shortly after the 15-minute halt at **Boketu** (539km), the train leaves Inner Mongolia and enters the province of Heilongjiang, meaning Black Dragon River. Known in Russian as the Amur River, Heilongjiang's namesake river marks the border with Russia in northeastern China.

The train makes another 15-minute stop at **Angangxi** (270km), then heads eastward through an area of wetlands, part of which has been designated as the Zhalong Nature Reserve (p278). The train makes a brief stop in **Daqing** (159km) at the centre of a large oilfield; look out for the rigs pumping crude oil out of the ground.

Harbin (1388km from Beijing), the capital of Heilongjiang province, is a 15-minute stop; see opposite for more about the city. If you're not stopping, the view of the skyline on the eastern side of the tracks as you leave Harbin gives a sense of the city's size.

Harbin to Beijing

South of Harbin, the train enters Jilin province, also part of the historic territory of the Manchus. The Japanese industrialised this region when they shaped it into the puppet state of Manchukuo (1931–45). The capital of Manchukuo, and today's provincial capital, is **Changchun** (1146km), where the train stops for 10 minutes. Home to China's first car-manufacturing plant (as well as 2.3 million people), it's also where the Japanese installed the last emperor Henry Puyi: his former palace is the city's attraction.

From here, the train heads southward towards **Shenyang** (841km). This industrial city of 3.5 million people was a Mongol trading centre from the 11th century, becoming the capital of the Manchu empire in the 17th century. The founder of the Qing dynasty, Huang Taiji, is buried here in an impressive tomb. The train stops here for 15 minutes.

After a brief stop in **Jinzhou** (599km), the line roughly follows the coast. You'll get a view of the Great Wall as the train passes through the wall just north of **Shanhaiguan** (415km). About 4km from Shanhaiguan's centre, the Great Wall meets the sea.

The last stop before Beijing is **Tianjin** (133km), a sprawling metropolis of 9.6 million people. During the 19th century this

port city attracted the interest of almost every European nation with a ship to put to sea. The evidence is that Tianjin is a living museum of early-20th-century European architecture. You will have 10 minutes to stroll around its modern train station.

Ninety minutes later, the train pulls into **Beijing** (0km); for further information see p279.

HARBIN 哈尔滨

☎ 0451 / pop 3.37 million / Moscow + 5hr

There's a relaxed, vacation feel to Harbin's tree-lined streets and riverfront promenade. One of the largest cities in north-eastern China, Harbin is influenced by its relationship with nearby Russia; it's dotted with architectural gems handed down from the Russian era. Plenty of first-rate snack shops and restaurants will sustain you as you explore sights ranging from a Russian Orthodox church to a Siberian tiger sanctuary and the grim remains of a WWII germ-warfare base. Glitzy modern buildings are muscling out Harbin's historic neighbourhoods, threatening the city's unique allure. Enjoy its charm while it lasts.

History

At the end of the 19th century, Harbin was a quiet village on the Songhua River. However, when the Russians negotiated the contract to construct the East Chinese Railway line through Manchuria, Harbin's role was changed forever. Although the Japanese gained control of the new railway because of the Russian defeat in the Russo-Japanese War, Russian refugees flocked to Harbin in 1917, fleeing the Bolsheviks. The Russians would continue to influence the town's development until the end of WWII, when the region was finally handed over to the Kuomintang (China's Nationalist Party).

Orientation

The main train station is in the centre of Harbin, surrounded by a cluster of hotels. The Daoliqu area, which also contains a few hotels and many of the city's attractions, is about 2km northwest of the train station. At the northern end of Daoliqu's main thoroughfare, Zhongyang Dajie, Stalin Park is on the shores of the wide Songhua River. Across the river lies Sun Island Park and the Siberian Tiger Park.

TRANS-MANCHURIAN CHEMICAL SPILL

In late November 2005, the authorities in Harbin were forced to cut off the water supply to the city's population for several days following a chemical plant explosion that killed five people and dumped 100 tons of highly toxic benzene into the Songhua River. Those who could afford it raided supermarkets for bottled water, but Harbin's poor were forced to take their chances with the polluted water flowing in the river. By mid-December, when the benzene slick had entered the Amur River, the people of Khabarovsk were facing a similar situation, compounded by the fact that pure water was also needed to keep the city's central heating system ticking over smoothly. Environmentalists were also concerned about the affect the pollution would have on the region's wildlife, including the rare Siberian tiger, which could become sick and die through eating fish poisoned by the chemical spill.

Information

Most large hotels will change US dollars. There are also many banks and ATMs along Zhongyang Dajie in the Daoliqu district. There's also a telephone office and a convenient Internet bar (Y3 per hr) on the 2nd floor of the main train station.

China Telecom (Guogeli Dajie) Northwest of the main post office.

CITS Modern Hotel (☎ 8469 2168); Tielu Jie (☎ 5366 1159; fax 5362 1088; 11th fl, Hushi Bldg) The extremely helpful international department of the Tielu Jie branch (across the street from the train station) assists with train and airline tickets. The branch on the 2nd floor of the Modern Hotel can also arrange all sorts of tours and activities.

Post office Daoliqu (111 Zhongyang Dajie; ☎ 8.30am–7pm); Dongdazhi Jie (328 Dongdazhi Jie; ☎ 8am–7pm Mon–Fri, 8am–6.30pm Sat); train station (Tielu Jie; ☎ 8.30am–5.30pm Mon–Fri, to 5pm Sat) The main post office is on Dongdazhi Jie, a shopping district in the city centre. The Daoliqu branch is between Xi Wu Jie and Xi Liu Jie. The train station branch is to the right as you exit the station.

Sights

CHURCH OF ST SOPHIA 索菲亚教堂

Most of Harbin's Orthodox churches were ransacked during the Cultural Revolution and have since fallen into disrepair. But,

CROSSING THE RUSSIA–CHINA BORDER

Expect to spend at least half a day crossing from Zabaikalsk to Manzhouli and vice versa, with time eaten up by thorough customs procedures on the Russian side, and the need to change the bogies on the train to match the narrower gauge used in China.

If you're not on the *Vostok* or the Manzhouli–Chita train (Friday and Saturday from Manzhouli, Thursday and Saturday from Chita), crossing this border involves taking one of the regular bus services that connect Manzhouli and Zabaikalsk.

There are daily overnight trains connecting Zabaikalsk and Chita (*kupe* R750, 12 hours); if these are full you can also take a train to Borzya and connect with a slower train to Zabaikalsk from there. Harbin and Manzhouli are also connected by a good overnight train (Y216 hard sleeper, 17 hours).

Regular buses for the border leave throughout the day from outside Zabaikalsk station (R150) or from the Manzhouli bus station (Y50), a Y10 taxi ride from the train station. If you're heading into Russia from China, there are also Russian buses leaving from behind the **Friendship Hotel** (Youyi Binyuan; ☎ 0470-622 3977; 26 Yidao Jie); this tends to be faster getting through customs because mainly Russians take these buses and they proceed more quickly through Russian customs.

At the Chinese border post you'll have to pay Y10 departure tax: do this at the door left of the entrance and then give the receipt to the immigration officials as they stamp you out of the country. Luggage and passport inspection by Russian customs and immigration is rigorous but you'll see that for the Chinese, who flood daily into Russia as illegal workers and traders, they're much worse. There's an exchange office in the Russian customs hall where your immigration card will be registered.

OTHER PARKS

Stalin Park (Sīdālín Gōngyuán) is a pleasant tree-lined promenade, dotted with statues, playgrounds and a café in a brightly painted historic **Russian wooden chalet**, strung along the 42km embankment built to curb unruly Songhua River. At the end of Zhongyang Dajie, the **Flood Control Monument**, built in 1958, commemorates the thousands who died in the floods up to that time.

A resort feel holds sway in summer, with ice-cream stands, photo booths and boating trips (Y30) along the river and across to **Sun Island Park** (Tàiyāngdǎo Gōngyuán), which features landscaped gardens, forested areas and water parks. Buy ferry tickets for Y5 from the dock directly north of the Flood Control Monument. You can also take a cable car (one-way/return Y20/30) from the foot of Tongjiang Jie, one block west.

Just southeast of the centre, the **Children's Park** (Értóng Gōngyuán; cnr Guogeli Dajie & Hegou Jie; adult/child Y2/1; ☎ 4.30am-10pm May-Sep, 6.30am-8pm Oct-Apr) has the very cute **Children's Railway** (Y5). Its 2km of track are plied by a miniature diesel pulling seven cars. Engineers, ticket collectors and rail guards are all kids. Take bus 8 from the southern end of Zhongyang Dajie or bus 109 from the train station.

GERM WARFARE BASE

侵华日军第731部队遗址

The extreme horrors of war are on display at the **Japanese Germ Warfare Experimental Base – 731 Division** (Qīnhuá Rìjūn Dì 731 Bùduì Yízhì; ☎ 8680 1556; Xinjiang Dajie; admission Y20; ☎ 9am-5pm, last entry at 4pm), 20km south of the city.

During 1939 the Japanese army set up this top-secret research centre, where Japanese medical experts experimented on prisoners of war. More than 4000 people were infected with bubonic plague, injected with syphilis or roasted alive in furnaces. When the Soviets took Harbin in 1945, the Japanese blew the place up, but a tenacious Japanese journalist dug up the story in the 1980s. The exhibition consists of only two small rooms plus a nearby vestige of the original base. The display captions are in Chinese only. The base is a 45-minute trip on bus 343 from the train station.

Activities

The Songhua River comes alive in winter with ice-skating, ice hockey, tobogganing

and even ice-sailing (where vessels sail on the ice surface, assisted by wind power, and reach speeds of 30km/h). Equipment for each of these sports can be hired from vendors who set up shop along the river bank. Slightly madder folk astound on-lookers by swimming in gaps in the ice. To round out the winter-sports fest, head 200km southeast of Harbin to China's premier ski resort, Yabuli on Daguokui Mountain, with 11 runs and nine lifts. **Windmill Village** (☎ 5345 5088; www.yabuliski.com; d Y380-780), the resort village, hosted the 1996 Asian Winter Games. Weather permitting, the ski season lasts from late November until early April. CITS (p273) offers packages that include transport, ski passes, equipment hire and accommodation. One-day trips start at around Y380.

Festivals & Events

Harbin's peak tourist season is during the **Ice Lantern Festival** (Bīngdēng Jié; ☎ 8625 0068; ☎ 8am-10pm), held in Zhaolin Park and along the Songhua River, where fanciful and elaborate ice sculptures sparkle in the frigid air. Past sculptures have included a miniature Great Wall of China and a scaled-down Forbidden City. At night the sculptures are illuminated from the inside with coloured lights, turning the area into a fantasy world. Figure-skating shows, hockey tournaments and other winter events round out the calendar. Officially, the festival runs from 5 January to 15 February, although it frequently starts a week earlier and glistens into March.

Sleeping

During the Ice Lantern Festival, prices are at least 20% higher than those listed here.

BUDGET

Follow the train station touts if you're looking for a cheap dive.

Zhōngdà Dàjiǔdiàn (☎ 8463 8888; fax 8465 2888; 32-40 Zhongyang Dajie; d Y200; ☎) Good value in pricey Daoliq, this decent, if slightly run-down place has spacious rooms, some overlooking Zhongyang Dajie.

Tiānzhú Bǐnguǎn (☎ 8647 2109; fax 5364 3720; 6 Songhuajiang Jie; s Y238, d Y238-298, tr Y290) This tower is about two blocks south of the train station; bear right as you exit. Rooms are decent and clean, if old.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Kunlun Hotel (☎ 5361 6688; www.hljkunlun.com in Chinese; 8 Tielu Jie; s/d from Y338/640; ☎ ☎ ☎) To your right as you exit the station, this first-class hotel is an oasis of calm with an indoor pool, sauna and six restaurants. Expect a 15% service charge added to all rates.

Modern Hotel (☎ 8488 4000; www.modern.com.cn in Chinese; 89 Zhongyang Dajie; r from Y300; ☎ ☎ ☎) This hotel defies its name, as it is housed in a historic Daoliq building dating from 1906. Rooms are comfortable, rates include a buffet breakfast and the location is unbeatable. There's also a decent-sized pool in the adjacent building (Y38).

Songhuajiang Gloria Inn (☎ 8463 8855; www.gjharbin.com; 257 Zhongyang Dajie; r from Y300; ☎) Half a block from Stalin Park, this inn offers plush rooms in a prime location.

Harbin Shangri-La Hotel (☎ 8485 8888; www.shangri-la.com; 555 Youyi Lu; r US\$175/195 plus 15% service charge; ☎ ☎ ☎) Not the most convenient location, but with great views of the Ice Lantern Festival, this is Harbin's most luxurious choice.

Eating

The lanterns hanging above restaurant entrances in Harbin are actually a rating system – the more lanterns, the higher the standard and price. Red mean Chinese food, while blue denote pork-free cuisine from the Muslim Hui minority (mainly lamb dishes).

Harbin's culinary trademark is sausage, lengths of which hang in shop windows up and down Zhongyang Dajie. The street is also lined with bakeries, cafés and kiosks. For a cheap meal try the food court on the top floor of the department store **Ceralia** (87 Zhongyang Dajie; ☎ 9.30am-8.30pm).

Russia Tea House (☎ 8456 3207; 57 Xi Toudao Jie; mains from Y20; ☎ 11am-10pm) Housed in a historic building dating from 1914, this quaint restaurant serves faux-Russian food and drink.

Dōngfāng Jiǎozǐ Wáng (Kingdom of Eastern Dumplings; ☎ 8465 3920; 39 Zhongyang Dajie; dumplings Y4-8; ☎ 11am-10pm) Serves royal helpings of *jiǎozǐ* (dumplings) with a large choice of fillings; try the pork with coriander or the veggie with egg. Look for the large walking dumpling out front.

Portman (☎ 8468 6888; 63 Xi 6 Dao Jie; mains from Y30; ☎ 11am-2am) This restaurant has a com-

RARE CRANES FIND SANCTUARY

Of the world's 15 species of cranes, six can be seen at the Zhalong Nature Reserve. Four of the species that migrate here are on the endangered list: the red-crowned crane, the white-naped crane, the Siberian crane and the hooded crane. Both the red-crowned and white-naped cranes breed at Zhalong (as do the common and demoiselle cranes), while hooded and Siberian cranes use Zhalong as a stopover.

The red-crowned crane is a particularly fragile creature whose numbers worldwide are estimated at only about 1900. Around 220 of the birds visit Zhalong each year, although their migration was disrupted in 2005 by fires that consumed around 10% of the wetlands in 2005. The near-extinct bird is, ironically, the ancient symbol of immortality and has long been a symbol of longevity and good luck in the Chinese, Korean and Japanese cultures.

fortable, pub atmosphere and serves tasty Western food.

Wal Mart Supercentre (187 Youyi Lu; ☎ 7am-10pm) This giant supermarket on several floors is the place to stock up on supplies for the train.

Getting There & Away

If you have problems getting train tickets try the international department of CITS (p273).

The *Vostok* passes once a week, on Thursday heading to Beijing and on Sunday to Moscow. The best connection with Beijing is the very comfortable Z15/16 sleeper service (soft/1st-class Y411/800).

If you want to go to Vladivostok (p230), take the train to Suifenhe, cross the border and then take a bus – it's much faster than the train. For Blagoveshchensk (p223) take a Heihe-bound train.

The following table presents the costs for trains out of Harbin:

Destination	Frequency (daily)	Cost hard/soft sleeper (Y)	Duration (hr)
Beijing	3	289/429	12
Heihe	1	153/-	12
Manzhouli	1	216/325	14½
Suifenhe	2	173/215	9

Getting Around

The easiest way to get around Harbin is by taxi. The minimum fare is Y8. Buses 101 and 103 (Y1) regularly travel between Stalin Park and the train station.

NORTH TO HEIHE

An alternative route into Russia is to take a train to Heihe on the banks of the Amur River across from Blagoveshchensk (p223). Along the way you could pause at Qiqihaer, 250km northwest of Harbin and three to four hours (Y50) by train, to visit the Zhalong Nature Reserve.

Zhalong Nature Reserve 自然保护区

Twitchers will be thrilled by this **nature reserve** (Zhālóng Zīrán Bǎohùqū; admission Y20; ☎ 7am-5pm), 210,000 hectares of wetlands that are

home to some 260 species of bird, including the rare red-crowned crane (see p277).

Thousands of birds arrive from April to May, rear their young from June to August and depart from September to October. Even if you're not a bird fan, a trip into this peaceful countryside is bliss. During the summer, you can hire a boat to explore the freshwater marshes. Be warned: in summer giant mosquitoes are out in force – take repellent!

The reserve is 30km from Qiqihaer. **CITS** (☎ 0452-240 7538) offers day tours of the reserve (approximately Y100 per person, plus Y150 to Y200 for transportation), though it's easy enough to explore on your own on a half-day trip. Either take one of the erratic buses from Qiqihaer or a taxi (around Y150).