

Tayshet to Sovetskaya Gavan via BAM

Don't feel bad if you haven't heard about the remote one-track Baikal-Amur Mainline (Baikalo-Amurskaya Magistral; BAM), an alternate route across almost half of Russia. The BAM departs from the Trans-Siberian at Tayshet, brushes the top of Lake Baikal, cuts past 4300km of taiga and birch, snow-splattered mountains and through 17km tunnels on its way east to Sovetskaya Gavan on the Tatar Strait. Many of the towns built only to serve railroad construction workers – and to justify the project – sport that 1960s and '70s functional communist style. The appeal is more the scenery than the architecture.

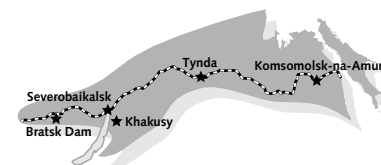
Costing (in today's terms) roughly US\$500 million – about the cost of the old race-the-USA Soviet space programme – this 'Hero Project of the Century' is a world-class engineering feat, sometimes not immediately visible from the window. Below the surface, permafrost and perpetually thawing/freezing land wreak havoc on any construction project (just check the blackened 'drunken trees', lifelessly leaning due to severed roots from the cruel subterranean forces).

Sixty years in the making, the BAM never had its parade. About the time services first rolled in 1991, Gorbachev was blaming it for the 'stagnation' that sprung during Brezhnev's reign, and which ultimately broke the Soviet back. Many of the old-time workers that can be met in your train carriage often gush with pride over their achievement. One lamented, 'Maybe they're right to criticise it, but it saddens us that no one sees the achievement of BAM. It's not something that could ever have been built these days.'

Other than Lake Baikal's lovely northern lip, adventures on the BAM reach some very rarely seen territory. Locals are likely to be surprised to see your wide-eyed face in places like Bratsk, Tynda or Komsomolsk-na-Amure. For more on the BAM's history, see p40.

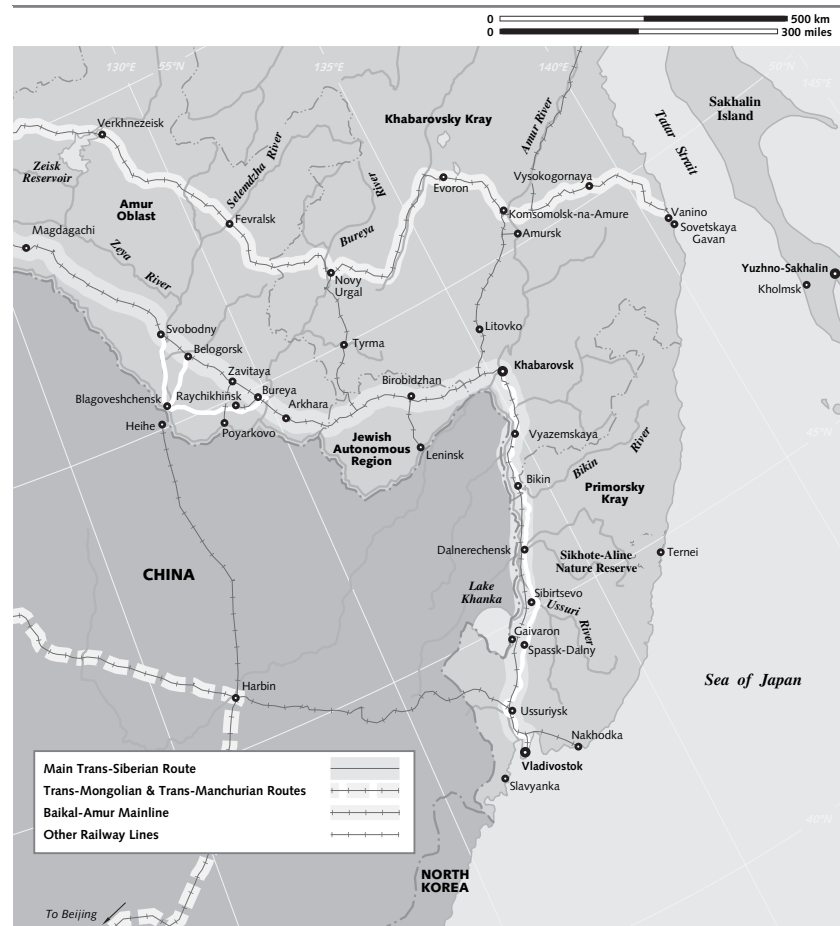
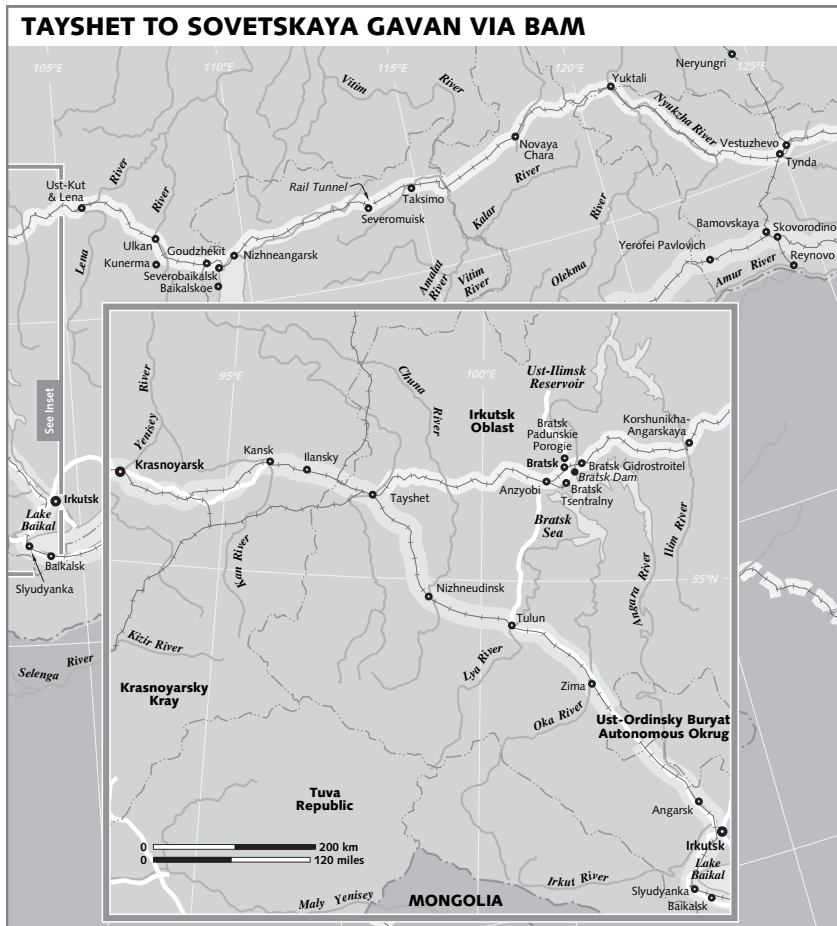
HIGHLIGHTS

- Explore Lake Baikal's beautiful north from **Severobaikalsk** (p244)
- Cross **Bratsk dam** (p248), a masterful achievement
- Lounge in hot springs at **Khakusy** (p249)
- Stroll around **Komsomolsk-na-Amure** (p250), a St Petersburg-styled town on the Amur
- Scrub off at the *banya* in **Tynda** (p249), HQ of the BAM construction force



■ ROUTE DISTANCE: 4308KM

■ DURATION: FOUR DAYS, EIGHT HOURS



THE ROUTE

The BAM's official start is from **Tayshet** (0km on the BAM and 4515km from Moscow), from where it snakes past Lake Baikal in its long journey towards Sovetskaya Gavan on the Tatar Strait. There's little reason to be stopping off at Tayshet itself, the most convenient connection point for the BAM being Krasnoyarsk (for details of that route, see p184).

The first major stops along the BAM are for **Bratsk**, a sprawling city of 280,000 people on the edge of the Bratsk Sea, an artificial lake created in 1955 by the building of the Bratsk Hydroelectric Station. The railway line actually crosses the top of this gigantic 1km-long dam at the 330km mark presenting wide views on both sides. If you get off you must choose between three Bratsk stations: **Anzyobi** (293km) for the crushingly dreary central (Tsentralny) area, **Padunskiye Porogiye** (326km), or **Gidrostroitel** (339km) for the dam.

The taiga closes in on the line as you travel the next 600km towards the jagged mountains hemming in the northern end of Lake Baikal.

At 552km, **Korshunikh-Angarskaya** is the train station for the claustrophobic 1960s iron-ore processing town of **Zheleznogorsk-Ilimsky**. Walk 2km diagonally uphill to your right as you leave the station to reach the town's one modest attraction, the **Yangel Museum** (☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri), celebrating a local astronautic friend of Yuri Gagarin. The town's hotel is halfway, but gets very touchy about visa registrations.

A somewhat more congenial stop is **Lena** (720km), the station for Ust-Kut and for hydrofoil rides up the Lena River to Lensk (and eventually on to Yakutsk, the capital of the Sakha Republic). A few kilometres after Lena the line swings across the Lena River on a single-track bridge with views down on a large timber port to the north. At **Ulkan** halt (931km), a small but eye-catching metallic Lenin relief stands against a bright red 'flag' on the east end of the platform.

The scenery really improves around **Kunerma** (983km), after which the track performs a full 180-degree loop. Hurry for the camera before you disappear into the 6km-long Daban tunnel. Around half an

hour before reaching Lake Baikal, there's a very brief stop at picturesque mini-spa **Goudzhekit** (1029km; p247).

Though architecturally rather dreary, **Severobaikalsk** (1064km) makes probably the best stop on this part of the route and the surrounding area is beautiful. The modernist station is one of the most striking along the line, and outside there's a steam train and a statue commemorating the workers who built the BAM.

From Severobaikalsk to the fishing village of **Nizhneangarsk**, 28km north, the line runs along Lake Baikal, though views are often better from the road (unencumbered by tunnels). After **Nizhneangarsk 2** (1104km) station, near the airport, the next 1300km gives you ample time to appreciate the truly massive engineering achievement of the BAM. Many consider this the most interesting section of the line, as it climbs over densely forested, mountainous terrain along switchbacks and through several tunnels. The longest one of 17km at **Severomuysk tunnel** (1400km) was only finished in 2004 after years of severe technical difficulties with the permafrost.

Tynda (2364km), across the Tynda River from the futuristic station, is *the* BAM town, home of the BAM construction company's headquarters and the best BAM museum. It is from here that the Amuro-Yakutskaya Magistral (Amur-Yakutsk Mainline or AYAM) heads north in the direction of Yakutsk, although there's still over 450km of line to be constructed before it eventually – maybe – reaches there. Passenger services only run as far as **Neryungri** and Aldan.

To rejoin the main Trans-Siberian route from here you'll need to head south 180km along the little BAM, the line linking Tynda with **Bamovskaya** (7273km from Moscow). Alternatively you can stay on the BAM, past some 1970s towns that see few visitors. Hilltop **Novy Urgal** (3315km) is a coal-mining town amid mountains and the white waters of the Akisma River, which locals enjoy rafting. The most appealing BAM city is **Komsomolsk-na-Amure** (3837km), with direct links with Khabarovsk on the Trans-Siberian. The BAM terminates further east, just past the ferry town of **Vanino** (4283km), on the Tatar Strait at **Sovetskaya Gavan** (4309km). From Vanino there are ferries to Sakhalin Island.

BRATSK БРАТСК

☎ 3953 / pop 258,000 / ☎ Moscow + 5hr

A stop in Bratsk neatly breaks a Krasnoyarsk to Severobaikalsk trip into two overnight rides, but a day spent here is plenty. Bratsk's raison d'être is a gigantic 1955 dam (GES), which caused the drowning of the original historic town.

New Bratsk is a confusing necklace of disconnected concrete 'subcities', whose high-rise Tsentralny area is spirit-crushingly dull. It does, however, have two English-speaking tour agencies, **Taiga Tours** (☎ 413 951; taigat@bratsk.net.ru; 2nd fl, Hotel Taiga) and **Lovely Tour** (Lavli Tur; ☎ 433 290; baikal@lovelytour.ru; ul Sovetskaya 3, Tsentralny; ☎ 10am-8pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat). Either can organise permits and guides to visit the dam's turbine rooms given two days' notice. The dam itself is 30km further north in Energetik and the BAM trains go right across it.

Between Energetik and Tsentralny, the impressive **Angara Village** (☎ 412 834; local/foreigner R12/90; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun, longer hr in summer) is an open-air ethnographic museum featuring a rare wooden watchtower and buildings rescued from drowned old Bratsk. A series of shaman sites and Tungus/Evenki *chum* (tepee-shaped conical dwellings) lie in the woods behind. The attractive lakeside site is a lonely 3km walk from Sibirsky Traktir, an isolated highway-café on the main *marshrutka* (fixed route minibus) routes 10 or 50. Taking a taxi makes more sense.

Sleeping

Hotel Turist (☎ 378 743; ul Naymushina 28, Energetik; R350-900, tw R700-1800, ste R2500-3000) Good-value cheaper twins (half-price for single occupancy) are clean if typically Soviet with just-functional bathrooms. 'First class' rooms look better, but new wallpaper and carpet don't justify paying almost triple prices. From here, you can walk to the dam in 15 minutes.

Hotel Lyuks (☎ 363 146; ul Naberezhnaya 62, Padun; s/d/ste R1000/1200/1400) In a quiet, low-rise neighbourhood in woods beside the Bratsk Sea, this six-room wooden mansion was once an exclusive Communist Party retreat. Opt for the large if unstylish suites, with their superb lake views and extensive if somewhat aging bathrooms. Khrushchev, Brezhnev, Yeltsin and even Jacques Chirac have all stayed here. Cheaper rooms are

forgettable and wantonly overpriced. It's an R80 taxi ride from Padunskiye Porogiye train station.

Hotel Taiga (☎ 414 000; ul Mira 35; s/d/tw R1800/1800/2100) Behind a smart new façade, wobbly Soviet-era corridors host very green bedrooms, good singles, but cramped, overly intimate doubles. Some staff speak English, guest visas are registered and rates include breakfast.

Hotel Bratsk (☎ 438 436; ul Deputatskaya 32; s/tw from R350/700; (P)) Upstairs a wide variety of clean but essentially Soviet rooms all have private bathrooms and peeling paint, so unless you want a malfunctioning old TV, take the cheapest available.

Eating

Kalipso (☎ 376 781; ul Naymushina 54; meals R150-400; ☎ noon-7pm & 8pm-3am) The nicest pub-café in Energetik is at bus stop GES. It has a nautical interior, port-hole windows and a beer-garden terrace that almost overlooks the lake. There's another branch in Tsentralny.

Kafe Pitstsa (ul Naymushina 24; meals R90-220; ☎ 9am-8pm & 9pm-2am) Close to Hotel Turist, this mood-lit Russian restaurant offers pizza and various local meals at sensible prices.

Getting There & Around

The three main train stations are an hour's ride apart. Padunskiye Porogiye is closest to Energetik and Padun. Gidrostroitel is several kilometres east of the dam. For Tsentralny, get off at Anzyobi and transfer by bus or *elektrichka* (suburban train).

Eastbound there are afternoon and night trains to Severobaikalsk (R760, 15 hours) via Lena/Ust-Kut (R650, eight hours). On odd days a useful 3pm train runs overnight to Krasnoyarsk (16 hours). For Irkutsk train 87 (R970, 18 hours) loops via Tayshet. Alternatively, buses (R500, 11 hours) run from the **Tsentralny bus station** (ul Yuzhnaya), and during summer hydrofoils (13 hours, three weekly) zip down the Angara River from southeast Tsentralny's *rechnoy vokzal* (river station).

Marshrutky 10 and 50 shuttle regularly between Hotel Turist in Energetik and the bus station in Tsentralny (45 minutes). Bus 8 starts at GES beside the Kalipso café and wiggles around Energetik's Mikro-Rayon 7 estate to a no-man's-land bus stop nearly opposite Padunskiye Porogiye train station. For taxis, call ☎ 368 482 or 377 707.

LENA & UST-KUT ЛЕНА И УСТЬ-КУТ

☎ 39565 / pop 70,000 / ☎ Moscow + 5hr
This 15km-long ribbon of town hugs the Lena River's north bank. Though mostly low-rise, its Soviet influences reach a concrete crescendo around Lena, the main BAM station, which stares across an overgrown square towards the river station ('Osetrovo'). Boats along the Lena River to Lensk and Yakutsk (the capital of the Sakha Republic, 2000km downstream) have been Ust-Kut's raison d'être since it was founded in 1631.

There's not a great deal else to see, but quietly attractive old Ust-Kut, 8km west of Lena station, is worth a stroll if you're stuck here. There are some photogenic wooden cottages dotted about, and the valley has an attractive aspect despite intrusions from derelict Soviet workshops. Towards the sanatorium is the site of one of Siberia's fabled salt mines, which Yerofey Khabarov developed from 1639 to 1650. It was reactivated as a prison camp from the 1860s until WWI.

Near Lena train station, 200m east of the river station, is a **museum** (top fl, ul Rebrova-Denisova 9; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat), with local artworks, historical artefacts and a hemp-weaving loom. Guests are so rare and staff so enthusiastic that escaping within an hour can be tough. Summer sunsets make the nearby riverside stroll pleasant, as long as you face away from the high-rises.

Sleeping & Eating

Lena Hotel (☎ 51 507; ul Kirova 88; s R550-900, d R1100)
Across from Lena train station, this hotel has rooms with shower and toilet.

Sanatorium (☎ 23 292) If the Lena Hotel is full, you could try for a room here. Despite noisy children's groups, the setting is pleasant and peaceful, if not entirely pristine. It's close to the former salt-purifying ponds, 10km west of Lena station; take bus 2.

In summer there are a handful of appealingly positioned if culinarily challenged beer and shashlyk (meat kebab) tents along the river bank beside the river station. Other choices include the **Kafe Ermak** (☎ noon-3pm & 6pm-3am) at the base of the Lena Hotel, plus the minuscule **Bufet Ekspres** (☎ 24hr) on the train station square.

Getting There & Away

Lena (not tiny Ust-Kut halt) is a major BAM station, with useful overnight trains to

Severobaikalsk (7½ hours) via Goudzhekit (seven hours), leaving nightly around midnight. At least two westbound trains stop daily, one continuing to Moscow.

Ust-Kut's small airfield (take infrequent bus 101 from Lena train station) has flights to Irkutsk (six weekly) and weekly flights to Mirny via Lensk. Tickets are sold in the Lena Hotel.

From Osetrovo regular **hydrofoils** (☎ 26 394) run to Lensk, normally with one night's stop en route in Peleduy (14 hours).

SEVEROBAIKALSK**СЕВЕРОБАЙКАЛЬСК**

☎ 30139 / pop 35,000 / ☎ Moscow + 5hr

With friendly, English-speaking help at hand, Severobaikalsk makes a convenient base from which to explore the beautiful yet little-visited North Baikal area. It's a refreshingly uncommercial place and, although the centre is a depressingly typical regiment of prefabricated 1970s apartment blocks, a short walk across the train tracks are some peaceful Baikal viewpoints. Flights from Nizhneangarsk (p248) and (in February and March only) the ice-roads via Ust-Barguzin (p219) make it possible to visit Severobaikalsk instead of Irkutsk (p189) between Krasnoyarsk (p185) and Ulan-Ude (p213).

Information**INTERNET ACCESS**

Internet Klub Mega (Leningradsky pr 6; per hr R20 plus per MB R5; ☎ 9am-9pm) Popular with gamers.

Internet Klub Rikom (per Proletarsky 2; per hr R30 plus per MB R10; ☎ 10am-1am) Fast but pricey connection in a basement entered from the rear (forest side).

Post office Internet room (Leningradsky pr 6; per hr R30; ☎ 10am-2pm & 3-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm & 3-5pm Sat) Located at the post office, entered via separate rear entrance.

INTERNET RESOURCES

North Baikal Tourist Portal (www.sbaikal.ru)
A comprehensive website.

MONEY

Sberbank (☎ 8.30am-5.30pm Mon-Thu, 8.30am-1pm Fri) Can change travellers cheques given 20 minutes and 3% commission.

POST

Post office (Leningradsky pr 6; ☎ 10am-2pm & 3-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm & 3-5pm Sat)

TELEPHONE

Telephone office (per Proletarsky 1; ☎ 24hr)

TRAVEL AGENCIES & HELPERS

All of the following agencies and individuals can help you organise accommodation and Baikal boat trips, but check very carefully what is and is not included in any deal you arrange. For another option, see p248.

Baikal Service (☎ /fax 23 912; www.baikaltur.irk.ru)

This tour agency is a professional outfit, with its own boat, hotel, permit arrangements and tour programme, but staff don't speak English.

Khozyain (☎ /fax 24 512; irina@myBaikal.ru; Apt 43, Leningradsky pr 5; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri) Coordinates accommodation for Goudzhekit (p247) and sells Khakusy (p249) excursions.

Marysov family (☎ 26 491; kolonok2004@yandex.ru; ul Mostovstroitel'ny 12/1) Alyona speaks decent English and her father Yevgeny organises adventure tours through **Tyozhik** (☎ 20 323; davan2001@mail.ru). Their home-stay is 3km out of town in Zarechny.

Rashit Yakhin/BAM Tour (☎ /fax 21 560; www.go.baikal.com; ul Oktyabrya 16/2) This experienced full-time travel fixer, guide and ex-BAM worker is quick to reply to emails and always keen to please. He rents a brilliant, central apartment for a negotiable US\$15 a night. Since an immobilising stroke he remains disabled and his spoken English can be hard to follow.

Vladimir Yatskovich (☎ 20 111; y_v_n@hotmail.com; Apt 112, ul Polygrafistov 5) This proverb-spouting John Cleese lookalike is a local school teacher with great English, and can help organise guides for a range of activities. He offers a family homestay for US\$15, including meals.



Sights & Activities

The friendly little **museum** (☎ 27 644; ul Mira 2; admission R20; ☎ 10am-12.30pm & 1.30-5pm Tue-Sun), 1.5km east of the central square, has limited information on the BAM railway history, exhibits a few Buryat artefacts and has an associated art gallery. Train buffs might prefer the colourfully painted **P36 steam loco** (pr 60 let SSSR) displayed near the Podlemore, or to peep through the railings at the outdoor signalling paraphernalia of the **Railway Training Centre** (Dorozhnoye Tsentri Uchebniya; ul Parkovaya 11A).

There are lovely lake views from a summer shashlyk café at the eastern end of town (*marshrutka* 3 or 103). A steep path leads down from there onto a scenic pebble beach. In winter you can walk the ice from here to the Neptuna area, where unsophisticated but photogenic dacha-terraces incorporate boat-garages into their lower storeys. In winter a short taxi ride across the white 'desert' of ice is a memorable experience – watch offshore fishermen freezing their hands baiting *omul* (cousin of salmon and trout) through little ice holes. In warmer months Severobaikalsk is a great base for relatively high-endurance hiking adventures and for very pleasant boat rides on Lake Baikal when the unpredictable weather obliges. Severobaikalsk's travel agencies (p245) can assist. If you dare brave the chilly waters, the yacht club **Bely Parus** (☎ 23 950; nordsail@mail.ru; Severobaikalsk port) rents *ails parusniye* (windsurfers), *vodnye lyzhi* (water-skis) and wet suits.

While not historic, the town's blue-and-white plank-clad **church** (ul Truda 21) has a loveably dishevelled appearance. Services are held at 6pm Tuesday and Saturday, and 8.30am Sunday.

Sleeping

Homestays can be organised by Severobaikalsk's many travel agencies and often by staff at Podlemore when its rooms are full. Alternatively, consider staying in Nizhneangarsk (p248).

Baikal Resort (Dom u Baikala; ☎ 23 950; Baikalkruiz@rambler.ru; ul Neptuna 3; tw R700) Unusually comfortable for this price range, the 'resort' is really just a house, walking distance from Lake Baikal. Rooms each have a new shower and toilet. Outside summer-only hut-units are much more cramped and have no shower. The owner speaks English.

Podlemore (☎ 23 179; pr 60 let SSSR 21A; s/tw/tr R452/904/975) The obvious if unmarked red-and-yellow tower beside the train station is a sanatorium that rents decent-value 7th-floor rooms with attached hot showers. Views of Lake Baikal are across the railway marshalling yard; light sleepers might tire of the ever-disgruntled train dispatcher and her distorting loudspeaker.

Zolotaya Rybka (☎ 22 231; ul Sibirskaya 14; tw R1100-1700) Thoroughly renovated 'cottages' each contain three rooms that share a modern shower, kitchen, tasteful sitting area and two toilets. The pleasant setting between pine trees offers glimpsed views of Lake Baikal and the Neptuna area below.

Baikal Service Bungalows (☎ /fax 23 912; www.baikaltour.irk.ru; dm/d/tr incl breakfast €15/50/90) Hidden in a lovely peaceful pine grove at the otherwise unpromising northeast end of town, Baikal Service Bungalows has comfortable chalets with well-appointed doubles and less appealing upstairs triples (with sitting room). Cheaper options include summer yurts and camping pitches, and dorm beds in the 'student' house sharing a fridge and good hot shower.

Resting Rooms (Komnaty Otdykh; train station; dm per hr R16-30) Offers clean, cheap dorm beds, with a six-hour minimum. Hot shared showers are available.

Hotel Cherenbas (☎ 23 654; dm R150-250) Springy beds are packed together in a tidy but very basic former youth centre. There is a kitchen for self-catering.

Eating & Drinking

Most café-restaurants double as drinking dens and music can be deafening. To avoid ear damage and cover charges (common after 7pm) eat at one of the cheap but unlovely *poznayas* (eatery serving Central Asian food) beside the market, such as **Goryache Pozhi** (pr Leningradsky 6; ☎ 9am-8pm; ☒), which serves *pozi* (dumplings) for R12.

Gril Bar (pr Leningradsky 6; meals R60-80, cover R30-50; ☎ 8pm-2am Mon-Sat) At this small cellar bar-restaurant you can avoid the cover charge by sitting at the bar stools. Perhaps.

Sportsbar OverTaim (meals R80-120, beers R40; ☎ 8pm-1am) No sports but no cover charge either. This slightly more upmarket pub-restaurant is popular with youths.

Restaurant Rus (☎ 23 914; pr 60 let SSSR 28; mains R40-90, garnish R30, cover R50; ☎ 8pm-1am Mon-Sat)

Lively tavern restaurant serving its own full-bodied home-brewed beer (R25) in wood-and-stone alcoves.

VIST supermarket (pr Leningradsky 5; ☎ 8.30am-9pm) Sells cheap groceries.

Getting There & Away

AIR

An **aerokassa** (☎ 22 746; Tsentralny pl; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-4pm Wed-Fri & Sun-Mon) within the Dom Kultury Zheleznodorozhnikov sells air tickets for flights from Nizhneangarsk, 30km northeast. Beware that planes, like Baikal boats, are prone to days of delays in bad weather. Leave plenty of leeway.

BOAT

From late June to late August a hydrofoil service should run the length of Lake Baikal between Nizhneangarsk, Severobaikalsk and Irkutsk (R1400, 12 hours) via Olkhon Island. Unfortunately, the precise timetable is only announced days before the service begins, making advance planning difficult.

Boat trips are fun and reveal the lake's vastness. Baikal's mountainous backdrop looks most spectacular from about 3km offshore, so going all the way across doesn't add a lot scenically and you'll need permits to land on the almost uninhabited east coast (see p249). It's possible to negotiate cheap charters with fishermen at Severobaikalsk, Nizhneangarsk or Baikalskoe, but think carefully before taking a boat that's small, slow or seems unreliable if you're going far: storms can come from nowhere and getting help in the middle of icy-cold Baikal is virtually impossible. To rent better, long-distance boats usually costs R1000 to R1800 per hour. For a reliable charter, contact the charming Viktor Kuznetsov (see p248).

BUS

From outside the train station, *marshrutka* run to Baikalskoe (six weekly), Goudzhekit (four daily) and half-hourly to Nizhneangarsk airport (No 103, R29, 25 minutes). The latter passes Severobaikalsk hydrofoil port (2km) and follows Lake Baikal's shore.

CAR

In February and March it's possible to hitch a (paid) ride across Lake Baikal to Ust-Barguzin. Ask locals to help you locate a driver.

TRAIN

Westbound trains run daily to Moscow, attaching a carriage to Tomsk (42½ hours) on alternate days. On odd-numbered days train 71 loops round to Irkutsk (33 hours). On even-numbered days train 347 runs to Krasnoyarsk (33 hours). Any of these stop at Lena/Ust-Kut (seven hours) and Bratsk (14 to 16 hours). Goudzhekit (R130, 35 minutes) is vastly cheaper by *elektrichka* (R20, one hour, twice daily). Eastbound trains 76 (odd-numbered days) and 98 (Tuesday and Saturday) go all the way to Tynda.

Getting Around

Marshrutka route 3 connects the new, low-rise Zarechny suburb to Tsentralnaya pl (Tsentralnaya sq) via the museum, then continues to the train station, looping right around to the far side of the tracks, passing the Baikal Resort one way. *Marshrutka* 1 passes the access road for Baikal Service en route to the train station, Tsentralnaya pl and the museum.

AROUND SEVEROBAIKALSK Baikalskoe Байкальское

The timeless fishing village of Baikalskoe, 45km south of Severobaikalsk, has an old bridge and a picturesque lakeside location. From the fishing port, walk past the **wooden church** and continue for 20 minutes up the cliff-side path towards the radio mast for particularly superb **views**. Head to the bay beyond for camping opportunities. With a knowledgeable guide you might even find Baikalskoe's shamanic **petroglyphs** as pictured in the Severobaikalsk museum.

Minibuses leave Severobaikalsk at 8am and 5pm on Tuesday, Friday and Sunday, returning an hour or so later. A taxi for the 45-minute drive costs from R250 each way plus waiting time.

You'll need to charter a boat to reach **Cape Kotelnikovskiy**, from where a difficult trek on overgrown, ill-defined trails leads to lovely **Gitara Lake**, several waterfalls around **Tazik Lake** and eventually to the glaciers that descend from **Mt Cherskogo**, the region's highest peak.

Goudzhekit Гуджекит

Goudzhekit's lonely BAM station is beautifully situated between bald, high peaks that stay snow-dusted until early June.

Five minutes' walk to the right, the only habitation is a low-rise spa and **hotel** (dm R200-350, d R800-1000), where the best bungalows have private toilets and showers. Tour agency Khozyain (p245) in Severobaikalsk handles bookings.

With suitable guides, a 12-day trekking expedition can take you through the lovely if mosquito-plagued mountains behind Goudzhekit into the impressive, very isolated **Tyya Valley**.

Nizhneangarsk Нижнеангарск

Although Nizhneangarsk has its own BAM station, it's generally easier to access by *marshrutka* from Severobaikalsk. Nizhneangarsk forms a quietly attractive low-rise ribbon stretching 5km along the lakeside from the port to the airport. The centre is marked by a red, triangular monument. Opposite, the **tourist office** (room 1, ul Pobedy 55; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri) helps with permits for visiting northeast Baikal. A small **museum** in the high school traces the town's history back to the 17th century. For boat rentals or expeditions, track down super-enthusiastic **Viktor Kuznetsov** (☎ 47 005; frolicha@mail.ru or baikal.nordtour@mail.ru; ul Pobedy 9/7, Nizhneangarsk), who

also has an *aerosani* (propeller-powered sledge), several horses and reindeer to act as pack animals when trekking.

SLEEPING

Gostiny Dom Portal (☎ 47 280; ul Rabochaya 10; tw/ste R720/960) This very appealing, new wooden house-hotel has well-appointed en suite standard rooms, and two suites with big double beds and great views across the mudflats towards Lake Baikal. There's no café.

The town's **hospital** (☎ 47 719) maintains two ultra-basic, saggy-bedded hostels in clinics at **ul Lenina 123** (dm R220) and **ul Lenina 133** (dm R176; ☎ Jun-Sep). There's a communal kitchen and toilet but no showers.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Scenic low-altitude flights cross Lake Baikal to Ulan-Ude (R1810, four weekly) and Irkutsk (R2250, two weekly) when weather allows.

Marshrutka 103 from Severobaikalsk travels every 30 minutes along the coast to the airport via the tourist office, returning via uls Kozlova and Lenina. The last service is at 8pm, or 6pm at weekends.

BAM-MATES Robert Reid

On the BAM, wheels seem to rattle a bit louder and jaws of (most) carriage-mates fall a bit lower. It's great getting off the tracks and seeing how life is lived in such remote areas, but often the highlights are the people you bunk with for a dozen or more hours.

Between Tayshet and Severobaikalsk, a woman looking like Joe Pesci tugged me out of the carriage to see the 1km-long Bratsk dam go by. 'Look at how beautiful this is,' she said. Our other roommate was a former gymnast, who swung onto the top bunk, hands on opposite bunks, as if on parallel bars. He complained about recent Olympians, 'You must have heart to succeed at the bars. They have none.'

East from Severobaikalsk to Tynda, my mates were exactly those I had hoped to avoid all trip: crew-cut drunks with tattooed knuckles. They ignored any offer of 'hello', 'good night' or 'good morning' for 35 quiet hours. One, at last, nodded when they departed shortly before Tynda. I took it as a personal victory.

But on the Tynda-Neryungri overnighter, a respectable elderly couple leapt to their feet when I knocked on the door. The tiny husband lifted the lower bunk and stored my bag underneath, while his wife readied the sheets for my bed ('this is for women to do'). Soon bags and slices of cucumbers and sausages appeared – along with bottles of vodka that those old-timers could knock back. Managed about 1½ hours of sleep before Neryungri came with dawn.

On the next ride, leaving the BAM, I joined two hilariously wild truck drivers heading for a rig in Vladivostok. One hadn't been on a train since he was 11 – I pointed out where to store bags. Both drained vodka and beer till 3am – with occasional eruptions of good-natured finger-pointing laughter (at me), and immediate apologies. They were up at 7am to finish half-drunk bottles. 'You speak Russian badly – like a Slovenian,' the reddest-faced driver said when I left them. My best compliment of the trip.

Akokan Gulag

Some 25km north of Nizhneangarsk, 3km north of the Kholodnaya turning, a forest hike leads to remnants of the small mica-mining **Akokan Gulag** (1931–33). You'll need a good guide, such as Nikolai Sorokin, a hearty taxi driver at Severobaikalsk train station (he only speaks Russian), to find the 'officers' huts', collapsed watchtower and mini-railway, whose tiny bucket wagons lie beside a magical pile of mica remnants near the collapsed mine entrance. Reckon on paying around R800, including transport. Don't forget good tick-protection.

Khakusy & Northeast Baikal

If you want to cross Lake Baikal, you'll need permits (available in Nizhneangarsk) before landing on lovely, shaman-haunted **Ayaya Bay** or trudging a mud-soaked 7km beyond to biologically unique **Lake Frolikha**. An easier trip is to Khakusy, an idyllically isolated hot-spring **turbaza** (holiday camp; dm/tw/tr R400/1100/1450; ☎ mid-Jun-early-Sep). Khakusy also requires permits in summer, but these are waived in February and March when it takes about an hour to drive across the ice from Severobaikalsk (around R1200 return taxi). Bathing (per person R40) is fun in the snow and frozen steam creates curious ice patterns on the otherwise unremarkable wooden spa buildings. Occasionally the resort's summer ferry will take nonguests across for R800 return (or R914, if you book through Khozyain in Severobaikalsk; see p245).

In spring and autumn when the ice is half-melted or half-formed, all these places are totally cut off.

TYNDA ТЫНДА

☎ 41656 / pop 39,000 / ☎ Moscow + 6hr

If BAM gets you giddy, Tynda's your town. Flanked by low-lying, pine-covered hills, modern Tynda is the BAM HQ and a hub for trains between Severobaikalsk (p244) and Komsomolsk-na-Amure (p250); the 'Little BAM' connects with Blagoveshchensk to the south; the AYam (Amuro-Yakutskaya Magistral) heads north, getting as far as Neryungri (p250) – plans to reach Yakutsk remain on hold.

Tynda flares its Soviet roots: it was a shack village before BAM centralised its efforts here in 1974.

Orientation

The train station – the city's most striking landmark – is across the Tynda River. A pedestrian bridge leads 1km north to the central ul Krasnaya Presnaya.

Information

At the time of writing the only ATM (good for Cirrus and Eurocards) was at the train station.

Alexei Podprugin (☎ 29 126; bamland@mail.ru) Contact for kayaking, hiking and cross-country skiing trips.

Nadezhda Nizova (☎ 29 655; td_nadejda@amur.ru; ul Festivalnaya 1; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat) This travel agent may be able to help with tours of the area.

Post office (ul Krasnaya Presnaya 53; per hr R40; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-7pm Mon-Fri, 8am-2pm Sat & Sun) Has a good Internet connection; at the street's east end.

Service Centre (per hr R65; ☎ 8am-7pm) At the train station; provides Internet access.

Sights & Activities

The **BAM Museum** (☎ 41 690; ul Sportivnaya 22; admission R60; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-7pm Sat), a couple of blocks southwest of the red-brick Orthodox cathedral (Svetoi Troitsi Sabor), covers native Evenki culture, local art, WWII artefacts and regional wildlife, but is known for its four rooms of BAM relics and photos (no English labels). Two cover the railroad's early years – and the Gulag prisoners who built it. Look for sci-fi author Ivan Evremev's photo, who secretly wrote while in the Gulag.

Zarya is a native Evenki village nearby. Bus 105 from the train station goes eight times daily (30 minutes).

Clean and well patronised, Tynda's public **banya** (hot bath; ☎ 40 030; ul Amurskaya; admission R60, lyux from R300; ☎ women 2-8.30pm Thu, 10am-8.30pm Sat, men 2-8.30pm Fri, 10am-8.30pm Sun) is the real McCoy when it comes to a hellishly hot steam room and chilly dunks in a pool. Freshly cut birch branches are available. The *lyux banya* is open 9am to 9pm Tuesday to Sunday. It's in a red-brick building 50m south of a dramatic sledge-hammer-wielding **statue** at the eastern end of ul Krasnaya Presnaya.

Sleeping

Hotel Nadezhda (☎ 27 021; 4th fl, ul Festivalnaya 1; r with shared bathroom per person R290-450) With rooms that date from days when the nation

still mourned Brezhnev, the Nadezhda is nevertheless clean and central, and there's a kitchen. The 15 rooms sometimes fill with construction workers. You pay per bed; two or three beds per room. It's in the enigmatic Torgovi Dom Nadezhda, a long white-brick building behind Hotel Yunost.

Komnaty Otdykha (☎ 73 297; train station; beds per 6/12/24hr R150/240/420, luxury beds R198/335/610) Surprisingly comfy and clean 'rest' rooms. Showers cost R55.

Vagon Gostinitsa (beds per 6/12/24hr R101/161/261) A parked *kupe* (*kupeyny*; compartmentalised) carriage on platform one.

Hotel Yunost (☎ 23 534; ul Krasnaya Presnaya 49; r from R500) This crumbling hotel has overpriced rooms, with cold water only.

Eating & Drinking

Tynda is low-key meal-wise.

Midina (ul Krasnaya Presnaya 49; dishes R120-170; ☎ 11am-2am Mon-Sat) Behind Hotel Yunost and above a casino, this is a rather splashy restaurant that serves big, shareable portions of Chinese (and some Russian) dishes. Karaoke at 8pm.

50/50 (ul Krasnaya Presnaya 43; dishes from R30) About 150m west, 50/50 is a beer-snack bar, with surprisingly tasty Russian meals served on its outside porch.

Getting There & Around

Train 75/76 links Tynda with Moscow on odd-numbered days, and 77/78 with Novosibirsk via the western BAM, also on odd-numbered days. These stop in Severobaikalsk (R1335, 26 hours). Train 963/964 connects Tynda with Komsomolsk (R1351, 37 hours, daily), 81/82 with Blagoveshchensk (R1260, 16 hours, daily) and 325/326 with Khabarovsk (R1351, 30 hours, daily). Many of these trains go on to Neryungri (R411, five hours), as do Tynda-Neryungri link trains 958 and 957.

Buy regional air tickets at **Vesta Service Centre** (ul Krasnaya Presnaya 39; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-6pm).

Bus 5 outside the train station goes every 20 or 30 minutes along ul Krasnaya Presnaya (R10). A taxi to the centre is R60.

NERYUNGRI НЕРЮНГРИ

☎ 8247 / pop 70,000 / ☎ Moscow + 6hr

Set on a flat-top hill about 220km north of Tynda, modern Neryungri (*nare-yoon-gri*) loses most views due to its three-decade old

housing blocks. It's worth a visit only for the land link with Yakutsk, 800km north. The banks have no ATMs.

One of the world's largest open-cut **coal mines** (*roz rezo*) is just outside town – where adventurers can fairly freely wander the facilities and see mammoth trucks that transport chunks of coal. Take bus 3 (R7, 25 minutes).

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Arigus (☎ 30 173; arigus@rambler.ru; pr Druzhni Narobov 27; s/d R850/1100) Book ahead for one of its four clean rooms.

Hotel PLINZ (☎ 44 234; ul Yuzhno-Yakutskaya 18/5; bed per person R180-400) Scrappy back-up.

Pizzeria (ul Karla Marksa 23; meals R200-300; ☎ noon-2am) Cosy central spot that focuses more on its Russian dishes.

Getting There & Away

See left for information about train links to Neryungri. Taxi vans leave from the train station, 3km east of the town centre, a couple of times daily to Yakutsk (R1800, 20 to 24 hours), usually following morning train arrivals from Tynda. The trip can be grueling, but actually a little smoother in winter when hardened ice covers the bumpy road. See Lonely Planet's *Russia & Belarus* for coverage of Yakutsk.

KOMSOMOLSK-NA-AMURE КОМСОМОЛЬСК-НА-АМУРЕ

☎ 4217 / pop 305,000 / ☎ Moscow + 7hr

By far the eastern BAM's most appealing town, Komsomolsk-na-Amure (City of Youth; located a whopping 1500km east of Tynda) sports a carefully planned tree-lined, brick-paved centre with long prospects, European-style buildings and rattling trams.

Built in a hey-ho fervour in 1932, Komsomolsk was a Soviet-dream transformation of a swamp into a planned city for the Komsomol (Young Communist League) to help populate the east (and strengthen area defences, with steelworks, an aircraft factory and shipbuilding yards on the Amur River). Activity here has slowed since the glory days.

It's a convenient hub between Tynda, Khabarovsk 290km south, Vanino's ferry service to Sakhalin Island and Nikolaevsk-na-Amure up the river.

Information

Far Eastern Mutual Bank (pr Mira 26; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-6pm Sat & Sun) Has a 24-hour ATM.

Gladiator (2nd fl, Dom Kulturi Stroitolini, pl Lenina; per hr from R25; ☎ 10am-10pm) In pillared building behind Lenin's statue, with King Arthur theme inside.

Nata Tour (☎ 530 332; www.amurnet.ru/natatour/index.html; room 104, Hotel Voskhod, pr Pervostroiteley 31; ☎ 10am-2pm & 3-6pm Mon-Fri) Experienced travel service that books rafting, birding, fishing, skiing, Galag, windsurfing and other trips in the region. Ask about overnight stays in the Nanai village of Nizhni Khlabni upriver (about US\$20).

Post office (pr Mira 27; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 8am-6pm Sat, 8am-3pm Sun)

Telephone office (pr Mira 31; ☎ 8am-11pm)

Sights

Just northwest of the river station, Komsomolsk's landmark sight is the **WWII memorial**, which features stoic faces chipped from stone, with pillars marking the years of WWII nearby.

Worth it even if you can't read Russian, the **Regional Museum** (☎ 592 640; pr Mira 8; admission R25; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-6pm Tue-Fri, 11am-6pm Sat & Sun) features several rooms filled with old, but well-cared for, exhibits (we like the BAM construction hats best) showing how Komsomolsk came to be.

The **Fine Art Museum** (☎ 590 822; pr Mira 16; admission R100; ☎ 10am-5.45pm Tue-Sun) has a couple of floors of changing exhibits.

Look around for **Soviet mosaics** on back streets aside housing blocks. There's a simple **Japanese POW memorial** off pr Mira. If things seem quiet on a sunny day, half of the town's probably at the **beach**, just east of the river station.

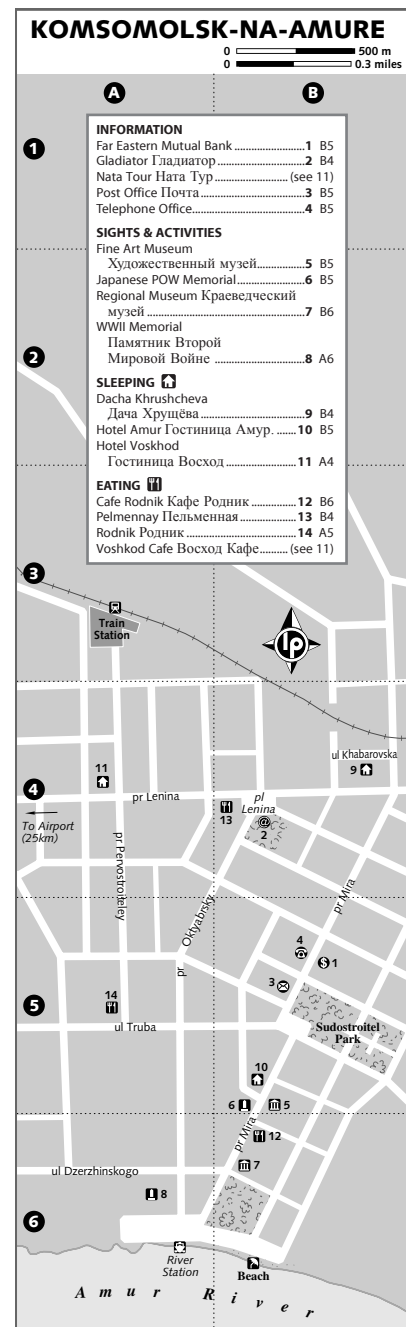
It's a long shot, but you could ask Nata Tour about (rare) visits to the **Yury Gagarin Aircraft Factory** east of the town centre.

Sleeping

There are three good options here. All come with TV and private bath.

Hotel Voskhod (☎ 535 131; pr Pervostroiteley 31; s/d from R560/800) This eight-storey grey hotel has boxy rooms – some renovated, all quite clean. The top-floor café serves good food, and there's bowling and a disco next door.

Dacha Krushcheva (☎ 540 659; ul Khabarovska 47; r R1500-2500) Built for Nikita Khrushchev – and where Gorbachev and Brezhnev have slept – the Dacha is a step back. Nikita's



room is a massive suite with private balcony; gun-toting goons likely took the cheaper rooms downstairs. It's behind a green plank fence.

Hotel Amur (☎ 590 984; ruma@kmscom.ru; pr Mira 15; r R925-1425) The Hotel Amur has 15 renovated rooms in a bright, lovely 1930s-era building.

Eating

Komsomolsk isn't Russian for 'spirited dining scene'.

Rodnik (☎ 531 396; pr Pervostroiteley 15; meals R500-1000; ☎ noon-3pm) Slightly formal two-floor restaurant/bar with private banquet rooms and nightly music – plus its own beer Flora on tap (R50 for a frosted mug; it's a little sweet).

Cafe Rodnik (pr Mira 12; ☎ 8am-11pm) Rodnik's more relaxed and cheaper option.

Voskhod Cafe (pr Pervostroiteley 31; meals R150-300) Hotel Voskhod's 8th-floor café offers good Russian meals in a simple setting.

Pelmennay (pr Lenina 21; meals R150-250; ☎ 10am-8pm Mon-Fri, 11am-7pm Sat) Offers old-school, pick-and-point eating.

Getting There & Around

From the pink **train station** (pr Pervostroiteley), train 67/68 runs daily overnight to/from Khabarovsk (R860, 9½ hours). Heading east, trains 954 and 352 go to Vanino (R660, 18 hours), for ferries to Sakhalin Island. Train 964 runs to Tynda (R1351, 37 hours).

Within the city, tram 2 runs from the train station (R7), past all hotels to the river station.

Bus 102 leads from the infrequently used airport (25km west of town) to the river station; a taxi there costs R250.

Few do it, but the 12-hour boat ride north along the Amur River to rather grim Nikolaevsk-na-Amure is a relaxing trip that gets you a few clicks into a more remote part of the Far East. Hydrofoils leave daily between June and August from Komsomolsk's **river station** (☎ 592 935). See Lonely Planet's *Russia & Belarus* for more coverage.

Buses bound for Khabarovsk (R300, six hours) leave from the river station (including after the boat from Nikolaevsk arrives) and pl Lenina.

VANINO ВАНИНО

☎ 42137 / ☎ Moscow + 7hr

The reason for heading 500km east of Komsomolsk is if you plan to take the (supposedly daily in summer) ferry from Vanino to Kholmsk, on Sakhalin Island (around R780, 16 hours). Weather plagues the sailing schedule at times. If you have to wait, the **Hotel Vanino** (☎ 7473, 512-28; ul Chekova 1; s/d incl breakfast R680/900) is located above the train station (where boat tickets often attract hordes). Call ahead to prebook a seat from the **ferry station** (☎ 57 708). (See Lonely Planet's *Russia & Belarus* for more information on Sakhalin Island.)

Daily trains en route to/from Sovetskaya Gavan (the next, and last, stop east) connect Vanino with Komsomolsk (R660, 18 hours). Train 351/352 connects Vanino with Vladivostok (R1700, 41 hours) via Khabarovsk and Komsomolsk.