



POSTCARD FROM IRKUTSK

The “Paris of Siberia” offers a cosmopolitan experience at the taiga frontier

By Georgina Montgomery Photos by Shelagh Montgomery

Tell me what you know about Irkutsk.

I’ve asked many people that lately — not to rate their knowledge, or embarrass them by their lack of it, but simply to find out what comes to mind when “Irkutsk” is laid before them.

“The word’s never reached my ears before,” claims one friend. I spell it, thinking my pronunciation threw her off. “No,” she says again. “Never heard of it.”

To another friend, I prompt, “It’s a place.” His face tightens slightly with the effort of trolling his brain bank. “In Russia,” I add generously. “Oh, yes,” he nods slowly, but without conviction. If I’d said Chernobyl, he’d have nailed it in a second.

“Risk?” says someone else when I put the question to him in a noisy café. “No, no. IRKUTSK,” I say louder. “Risk!” he repeats, also louder. “The board game. One of the territories was Irkutsk.” Ah. Thanks to global domination as an educational tool, I have contact.

In truth, until I stepped off the Trans-Siberian train last August, my own knowledge of Irkutsk was little better than that of my friends. I did know where it was on the map: a pencil-eraser distance from Lake Baikal and almost two full pencil-lengths from Moscow. I also knew it lay in that vastness known as Siberia: land of Gulags, labour camps and hoary landscapes filled with the spirits of banished criminals, Bolsheviks and a multitude of other exiles who dared cross the ruling power of the day. I’d once read that fortune-telling, illegal tree-chopping and “begging with false distress” could be reason enough in tsarist Russia to win yourself a one-way trip to Siberia.

It was these scraps of knowledge that — even in 2005 — made me expect Irkutsk to be little more than a backwater town, stranded at the taiga frontier.