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Discovering the frozen gems of Siberia

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KHABAROVSK, (Russian Federation): Khabarovsk or Buryatia are not names or places that most Malaysians can easily identify with. Many may not even have heard of them before. But these are some of the places on the itinerary of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Even places such as the Amur River, Lake Baikal, Irkutsk and Ulan Ude are names which most may only vaguely recall from their early geography lessons. These are places which exist on every map but they are certainly not high on the list of holiday destinations for most people.

The fact that these places are off the beaten track and are in Siberia makes them even less desirable as places to visit or as favourite holiday destinations.

The mere mention of Siberia generally evokes images of deep freeze, mile after mile of frozen tundra, prison camps and banishment. The region, spread over more than 12,488,400 sq km is well known for its political exiles, of which the Decemberists were the most famous. In 1903, even Joseph Stalin was said to have spent some time in exile in Irkutsk, 50 miles up the Angara River on Lake Baikal.

The name Siberia is said to have come from "Sibir", a Mongolian word which means "sleeping land". In the early 1700s, Siberia became a place of exile and continued to be "the last stop" for criminals and political extremists right up to this century. However, in more recent times, Siberian ancestry can be traced back to the many Russians who settled along the main transportation line, the Trans-Siberian Railway. They, among others, contributed to the growth of industry in cities such as Irkutsk, Chita and Ulan Ude.

But there is much more to Siberia than it is usually given credit for. It is not as unfriendly and uninviting as it has been made out to be. The once "lost region" is rapidly changing even as efforts are being made to improve its links with the rest of the world. It can be traversed by the famous Trans-Siberian Railway - the longest railway in the world.

Undoubtedly, Siberia has had a tough time in finding ways of linking its vast reaches with the rest of the world - it stretches from the Ural Mountains to the west right across to the Pacific Ocean; from Kazakhstan and Mongolia through China and right up to the Arctic Ocean in the frozen north. With the fall of the USSR, Siberia is also seeking to build new relations and contacts with many of the former USSR territories which today are sovereign states.

The region is said to have hidden "gems" of natural beauty and resources and a mixture of fascinating cultures. Lake Baikal, the world's largest and deepest lake, is just one of the many attractions. It is estimated that the lake contains some 20 per cent of the world's fresh water supply and holds more water than all the Great Lakes of Canada and the US combined. If all the fresh water streams and rivers in the world flowed into Lake Baikal, it would take one entire year to fill the lake which is nearly one mile deep.

For centuries, Siberia, which remains in deep freeze - with temperatures in winter dipping to minus 71 degrees centigrade in some places - for a large part of the year, has been isolated from the rest of the world for decades. Nevertheless, the Trans-Siberian Railway offers the traveller a view into the interior of this frozen land, its natural beauty and economic potential.

Economic activity includes the production of agricultural and commercial products including wheat, vegetables, potatoes, leather and textiles. Fishing, hunting, fur farming, mining, stock raising and food processing also provide a great deal of employment. The region also has substantial aviation and shipbuilding industries.

Trade also plays an important role in Siberia as a mid way link between the main east-west trade route. The Boston Tea Party is well known around the world but little is known of the Tea Road that wound its way from China in the east through the deserts of Central Asia and the dense forests of Siberia on to Europe and the annual Irbit Trade Fair.

The Prime Minister's visit to a number of places in Siberia will certainly change the way in which Malaysians have always viewed this region. Malaysians may discover that Siberia is not as forbidding as it has always been made out to be. Despite its harsh conditions, productivity in the region surpasses that of Russia. According to 1995 statistics, productivity in Siberia was, on an average, 58 per cent higher than that of Russia, and in some Siberian territories such as Irkutsk it was even 94 per cent higher.

Khabarovsk, the first stop on Dr Mahathir's Siberian journey, with a population of nearly 700,000, is close to the border with China and is the last major stop on the Siberian railroad before Vladivostock.

The city, the second only in size to Vladivostock in the Russian Far East also has three major transport links - on air, sea and land. The most famous of these links is undoubtedly the Trans-Siberian railway.

Ulan Ude, the last stop for the Prime Minister in Siberia, was founded in 1666 as a Cossak settlement. The capital city of Buryatia, it is home to a mix of Russian and Mongolian cultures. The region also boasts of an excellent aviation industry.

The visit by Malaysians to Siberia, led by Dr Mahathir, may yet open up new opportunities for economic, cultural and social contacts.

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