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## Striking splendour of Siberia

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SIBERIA's unspoilt, pristine environment offers visitors clean air, crystal-clear waters and natural beauty in all its splendour. It is certainly worth a visit. Contrary to the commonly-held perception, it was not cold and frozen, at least not in August.

Temperatures in the mid 20s were something that Malaysians could relate to except that the dry heat called for a higher demand for drinking water. But this was not a problem as there were more than sufficient supply of fresh, cool, clean drinking bottled water from Lake Baikal and the more than 300 rivers that flow into it.

There is little development in Siberia. Much of the region is still under its original vegetation. Mother Nature splashes its colours in all its glory.

The first stop on Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's working visit was Khabarovsk. A city of more than 600,000 people, it is the second largest city after Vladivostock in the Russian Far East. It is home to heavy industries for the Russian Federation, including the aviation and maritime industries.

Khabarovsk city was a pleasant surprise. The people were friendly, the city modern, clean and with a lot of activity. The wide streets and the summer sun brought out the street musicians and budding artists.

The Amur River, the 11th longest in the world and sixth longest in Asia, provided for stunning sunsets. Its banks were a hive of activity and attracted many youth who danced to very loud music in the open-air discos into the early morning hours.

Each restaurant in the Intourist Hotel in Khabarovsk had live music. The locals stopped their meal to dance before continuing with their dinner. English is not widely spoken and Malaysians found that sign language and their art lessons in school were useful in ordering food, drinks and basically getting by.

But the lack of knowledge of the Russian language skills did not stop Malaysians from venturing out to the city on their own. The interpreters helped when they could. The Malaysians discovered the sights, sounds, shopping and bargains at the bazaar, the Central and Lenin Square.

The main railway station in the city, which is also the last major stop on the Trans-Siberian Railway before Vladivostock, is a hive of activity. The main communication link also attracted people, including gypsies, from other regions including Central Asia.

With the Prime Minister on the second leg of his journey in Beijing, China, the Malaysian Ambassador to Moscow, Datuk Yahya Baba; the Under Secretary for Europe, Datuk Dennis Ignatius; and several Russian officials and journalists made their way to Ulan Ude to meet up with Dr Mahathir.

A number of Airod technicians also found out that their trip would be like no other they have undertaken before.

The first part of the journey from Ulan Ude to Irkutsk was relatively uneventful. The three-hour flight on TU 154 was delayed for over an hour but the passengers were told about it while still in the departure lounge.

The next part of the journey, 700km journey by road, was an adventure. the other option was by train and that would also take some eight hours travelling overnight and arriving in Ulan Ude the next morning.

Road was a better option as it meant that no time would be wasted waiting in Irkutsk and we would arrive in Ulan Ude in the evening. It also

meant that we would be able to see the countryside in broad daylight. The convoy of two cars and a bus weaved its way through the rugged Siberian countryside.

First stop was lunch at a restaurant near the Irkutsk airport. Then it was on to Ulan Ude, the capital of Buryatia. Unlike the highways and expressways in Malaysia, the road from Irkutsk to Ulan Ude was not the "North South Highway" but was much better than some had expected.

There is hardly any development along the route. There are no public amenities on the bus nor along the way. There are no restaurants or "pectopahs" for tea or coffee break along the way. In keeping with local rituals and beliefs, there are some stops along the way.

The traveller pays tribute to some sacred places on a long journey. In the Buryat language, it is called "Obo" or "Barisa". During the stop, the traveller gives thanks and prays for a safe onward journey. This provided the Malaysians an opportunity to stretch their legs and to use the "natural public toilets".

The scenery along the way was breathtaking and made the 10-hour journey enjoyable. The road hugs Lake Baikal as does the Trans Siberian railway.

Lake Baikal, known to the locals as the "Sacred Sea", is two-thirds the size of Peninsula. It contains 20 per cent of the world's fresh water. It is fed by more than 300 rivers with only one river, the Anggara, flowing out of it.

In addition to fresh water, Baikal is home to numerous marine life and a variety of fish that are found nowhere else. The omul, sturgeon and world famous cavier are found in this lake.

The lake is huge and casts its influence on the surrounding areas. According to the locals, it behaves more like an ocean than a lake. Its shoreline, which stretches some two thousand kilometres, "presents a landscape of striking and inimitable beauty".

However, on arrival at Ulan Ude at 10pm, almost 12 hours since we had left the hotel in Khabarovsk, hungry and tired, the best was to take a shower, have dinner and sleep.

The Intourist hotel in Ulan Ude, said to be the best in the city, certainly is not five-star category, but is clean and comfortable.

Not all rooms had hot water and telephones. Thus the hotel receptionist was inundated with requests to change rooms, and she could not understand why.

But the efficiency of the laundry surprised many and one Malaysian was overheard as saying that "this is the best service".

The clothes, washed and ironed, were returned to the rightful owners by lunchtime - and that was normal service - Welcome to Siberia!

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