

## BLOG: Borders and Frontieraphilia.



This is one of my admittedly strange interests – land border crossings. There’s something exciting about crossing a frontier from one nation to another. Sometimes the armed guards can be a little unnerving, and there’s never any guarantee you’ll be allowed into the next country.

What if immigration officials want to rummage through my bags, strewing the contents over a table top? Land border crossings are a break of the tedium of a long train journey. I find the various uniforms quite entertaining. Each official is on his or her unique power rush, non-smiling, sometimes barking requests.

## EU BORDERS



Many border crossings in Europe are not marked. It takes a sharp eye to notice the subtle differences from one country to the next. Much of the fun may have been taken away from EU border crossings, but it should still be part of the journey. Did you spot that striped wooden pole? Have the road signs changed? Was there a border line across the road? How about car number plates?



In February 2020 I walked to the border between Germany and the Czech Republic from the town of Děčín. I went there because I had never been to the Czech Republic before,

and because Děčín was the nearest station to the border from where I was staying in Germany. The border was marked on the Czech side only, by a colourful post dating back to the days of Czechoslovakia, and the small stream from the adjacent hills was dotted with white border markers.



## NON-EU BORDERS - Now, these are fun!

### Bangladesh to India:

One of the most interesting frontier border crossings I've ever done would definitely be between Bangladesh and India just west of Banepole. I caught a train to the city centre, jumped on a rickshaw to the border in darkness, with colourful festival lights on all shacks and shops, through departure formalities, and a walk across a no-man's border land to the Indian side where I had a Bangladeshi newspaper confiscated. From Petrapol I boarded a train to Calcutta (as it was then). It was brilliant stuff, but also a little unnerving as well.



### Poland to Belarus:

I recently travelled by train from Warsaw to Minsk, Belarus. There was an overnight sleeper train operating six times a week. Naturally the one day I had to travel was the one day of the week the sleeper didn't operate. Plan B was to use a daylight service, changing on the border at Grodna. What

could go wrong?

The train stopped on the Polish side of the border, and the officers came in, offered token smiles, did their business and left. The train then rolled slowly towards the Belarussian border, and things changed gradually, to a darker shade of seriousness. Firstly were the dog kennels, where

unauthorised persons sneaking into the EU would arouse the dogs, causing them to bark and attracting the attention of the guards. The border itself was marked by a fence and a straight swathe cut through the pine forests. On each side of the railway line were high wire fences and narrow parallel roads, used by patrolling vehicles. The roadside had dozens of lamp posts, no doubt housing very bright spotlights, in an attempt to highlight anyone trying to sneak from the EU into Belarus – something which I'm sure most EU citizens have considered doing at some time.

There were Belarus officials on the train, and our immigration man took a great deal of interest in my UK passport. Considering this was a local train used by mainly Belarussians, I stood out like a sore thumb. Speaking of thumbs, he thumbed his way through my passport before calling a colleague over to have a look, who also thumbed his way through my document. The first man, looking menacing in his brown, Soviet style uniform and high-brimmed hat snapped "Insurance documents!" Being 'Mister. Organised', I had all of my important stuff in a folder. I pulled it out of my bag, flicked through the papers and gradually realised my travel insurance papers, and in fact other things like a passport photocopy, were missing. Did I leave them in my hotel room?

"I don't have them. I think I have lost them." I said. The official gestured at my backpack in case I had inadvertently stuffed the paperwork away with my unwashed socks and underwear.

"No, sorry, I've lost my insurance papers" I said, looking as sympathetic as possible.

"You need insurance!" he advised. All eyes from my fellow passengers were glued to my face for any sign of pressure.

"I've got insurance, otherwise the Belarus Embassy wouldn't have issued me a visa." I felt rather smug with myself. The officer returned my passport and walked down the aisle. "Well, that was rather easy, wasn't it?" I thought to myself.



At Grodno station, everyone disembarked. Being locals, they knew the script, so I just tagged along, into the station building, and joined a thin snaking line towards a glass booth with another uniformed man stamping passports. We slowly shuffled along, kicking our bags in front of us, nudging

towards the passport inspector. The uniformed man from the train and an older woman caught my eye. They were standing at the side of the room, looking in my direction. I told myself they were probably just looking at someone standing behind me.

After a few moments the immigration officer came towards me and tapped me on the shoulder. "Please come with me." "Oh shit" I thought, but then remembered to act cool and in control. He left me with the woman and he disappeared from the scene. The woman said something to me in Russian. I

asked her if she spoke English. She didn't but she did speak a little German, and with my A1 level basic German, we were able to communicate. If I didn't have proof of insurance, I had to buy some. At just €5.50, this was actually cheaper than the insurance I had bought at home before departure. With my insurance receipt I rejoined the line (now at the rear) and shuffled my way towards the passport office.

At the cubical, the passport official took my passport and stuck his hand out while barking "Insurance!". I calmly slid over the slip of paper, the passport was stamped, and without a grunt I was just about in Belarus. Just one more hurdle – customs. The green 'Nothing to Declare' option was closed, so it wasn't really an option, so I had to join the end of an even slower line which headed in the direction of a long, metal table, with a uniformed girl in rubber gloves inspecting all luggage. I was conscious I only had one hour connection time between trains, and the insurance fiasco had already eaten up 45 minutes. Eventually I made it to the desk, and the girl gestured I should open my rucksack. This is my only fear with border crossings and airport inspections – no matter how hard I try, everything will not fit back into the bag. "What is in there?" she asked, unsmiling, pointing at a plastic bag with a Tesco logo wedged into the top of the rucksack. I opened it up, revealing a variety of unwashed socks and underpants. "Dirty clothes. Would you like me to pull these out?" I asked, expecting the answer no. "No", she said and waived me through. With minutes to spare I had to scramble across the tracks, and onto my waiting train, and on to Minsk. Needless to say my next train from Belarus to Russia was an anxious journey. I wondered, if formalities getting into Belarus were that tough, what would it be like trying to get into Russia?

#### Belarus to Russia:

I was staying at the Hampton by Hilton in Minsk, and using their business centre, I composed a letter explaining the missing insurance document and could I buy one, like their Belarussian colleagues in Grodna had done. I used Google translator to convert it to Russian, printed it out, and asked the surprised man at the front desk to read it, and tell me if it made sense. It did, and so I was ready for the crossing into Russia. As it turned out, I only realised I had entered the Russian federation when I saw the car number plates change colour. There was no border! I discovered Belarus and Russia have some sort of common border policy, similar to The EU Schengen area. That border crossing was a real disappointment, but leading up to it, the adrenalin was pumping.

#### Russia to Mongolia:

When it comes to bureaucracy you can always rely on the Russians, so the crossing into Mongolia was keenly anticipated. Our train crawled into a dark Naushki station, on the Russian side of the border. We sat in our compartments for a while until a uniformed man marched along the corridor, glancing into each compartment. I've often wondered what they were hoping to see in that split second. I think it's more of a psychological game. I've arrived, I've seen you, I'm in control, don't step out of line. A second man passed, doing the same thing. "Here we go" I thought. "The fun's about to begin." The fun began 20 minutes later, with authoritative voices and commotion at the end of the carriage.

Suddenly it arrived at our compartment as well. "Everybody out. Stand out here" barked an official, looking splendid in his immaculate brown uniform and Soviet peaked hat. I think I smiled, because it was more of a costume than something of authority. The only thing missing were the rows of medals on his chest. The occupants of the compartments all stood in the corridor, while a man, sweating profusely, quickly, but thoroughly, went through the compartment's nooks and crannies looking for unknown items. Maybe tourists on this train were notoriously bad for whipping Faberge Eggs out of the country. Sweaty man then nudged past us so he could move the corridor carpet. There was a hidden compartment which he opened, inspected and then replaced. During this operation, we probably had six or seven uniformed officials also in the train. The scene was borderline chaos, but great entertainment. It seemed every man and his dog was here.

Then things notched up a gear. A man and his dog entered the carriage. The sniffer dog was led into each compartment and it obediently jumped onto each of the lower berths, sniffing everywhere, tail wagging. The dog was then instructed to sniff us, but being unimpressed, she was then led into the next compartment. Was it narcotics or explosives the dog was trying to smell out? Either way, we were leaving Russia, so I thought this would have been a lesser priority compared with entering the country. Perhaps there is an agreement with the Mongolian government to fish out these unwanted items before entering the country, as they would do for trains entering Russia.

For some reason I have the face which attracts people needing directions or volunteers. A short, stocky uniformed woman in her 40's squeezed her way along the compartment and barked at me "Show me your bag!" I couldn't think of a reason why I should reject this kind request, so lifted my lower berth, and pulled my backpack out from its dusty storage area underneath. "Open it up" she insisted, so I opened up the top, revealing a plastic bag containing unwashed socks, pants etc. She wasn't interested in the contents. I'm sure she just wanted to see if there were beads of sweat on my forehead or signs of pressure on my face. "Open these up" she said, pointing at the seat headrests. There's a small storage area behind each one, big enough to hold two Faberge Eggs. I obediently opened up the three above my sleeping berth, revealing nothing but fresh air. "Those ones" she snapped, pointing at the headrests above the opposite berth. Now this was different. I had no idea whether my travelling companions had stashed contraband in these compartments, and it was me that was going to break the news to Russian officials. Fortunately they only contained a bottle of water, a paperback book and a glasses case. She left without a grunt for the next compartment.

The train then rolled slowly towards Sukhe-Bator station on the Mongolian side of the border. The border itself was a high wire, floodlit fence. Compared to the Russian performance, this should be an anti-climax. And it was. A few officers entered the carriage, walking its length. Another came to our compartment and politely asked for our passports. A quick photo-face comparison was done, the visa was checked, and they were handed to the provodnitsa. She stood behind, holding an ever-growing pile of open passports, in the order of the passengers in the carriage. If she dropped these, she would be in trouble. About an hour later, the officer handed them back, and singled me out with a "Welcome to Mongolia" greeting.

## Mongolia to China:

This was a border crossing I was looking forward to. Apart from the formalities, this is where each carriage would be lifted up, and the broad gauge bogies of Mongolia would be changed to standard gauge Chinese bogies. I had read many online reports and viewed Youtube videos, and they all said you could stay onboard the train while the carriages were jacked up for the bogie change.

On the Mongolian side of the border at Dзамын-Удэ we were asked to stop standing in the corridor and sit in our compartments. After our passports were collected, two military officers walked through the train, peering expressionless into each compartment. They were both wearing the full camouflage outfit, but as this didn't match the train's interior décor, I could still see them. Otherwise, the departure was straight-forward, and took 1hr 30min.

The train rolled across the border into China. I saw a white concrete obelisk by the side of the track, but I wasn't totally convinced this was a border marker. It seemed a little too low-key. Eventually we arrived at Erlian, on the Chinese side of the border. Our provodnitsa had already told me we would have to leave the train and we would not be able to experience the bogie change. My bottom lip trembled at this news. That couldn't be right. How could so many internet pages and Youtube videos



be wrong? We were instructed to disembark the train, complete with all luggage. The station was brightly lit, with colourful fairy lights, which was a kinder, more relaxing way to face the Chinese bureaucracy lying ahead. The building was a modern, glass two-storey structure, reminiscent of an airport terminal. We entered the

ground floor area, and joined one of the many lines. Eventually I got to the desk, where I had to leave a biometric fingerprint scan. My passport was stamped, and I took the escalator to the waiting area on the first floor.

From here passengers sat around chatting. Looking out the high windows, and over the platform below, I noticed our train had been hauled away, probably to have the bogies changed without us in attendance. After several hours, we all were herded back onto the train with our luggage, and we entered China proper. Although time consuming, because of the bogie change, the entire operation at Erlian was conducted smoothly and efficiently. So what happened to the on-board bogie change? I think it is directional. Leaving China and entering Mongolia would be more laid back, with maybe a quick baggage check and a check of the passports and visa. Entering China would be much more stricter, and hence us having to leave the train.

The whole process to enter China took 5 hours.

Borders can be fun if you do what you are told, don't cause any problems, and look at the uniforms and officialdom as a bit of a joke. The uniforms are used to intimidate passengers, but otherwise are just part of the show and the excitement of a land border crossing.

There have been many other land borders, but these were the most memorable. I can't wait for my next one.

Scott

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