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## From Little Black Dress to Down Parka

By Elena Agarkova

### East and North

**L**AKE BAIKAL, Russia—On the evening of August 18th I boarded the plane to Irkutsk. I wore a black summer dress and flip-flops. It was hot and humid in Moscow for the past few days, and I started wishing that the apartment where I was staying had an air-conditioner.

The plane, a new Boeing (a welcome change from the rambling Soviet relics I flew a few times in the past, but still not the safest of travel choices), was in the air for five hours. At 5 a.m. I stepped off into the cool (10 degrees Celsius, or 50 degrees Fahrenheit) Irkutsk air. The airport is under construction (and has been for at least three years); for now being a tiny, dilapidated building serves as a passing-through point for arriving passengers.

It was almost 6 a.m. by the time I got my bags but the sky was still dark. I got lucky with the weather because two hours later the fog rolled in, just like my friends warned me it has been doing lately, and Moscow planes would be detoured to Bratsk or Ulan-Ude, the two closest airports, until the weather cleared up. I've visited Bratsk once like that. The old Soviet airport, made of cement and wood, sits in the middle of taiga, coniferous Siberian forest that stretches for thousands of kilometers in all directions. There is nothing to do but sit outside, watch people smoke, and wait patiently.

One of my favorite childhood books was called "Kesha, the First Inhabitant of Bratsk." The hero was a 10-year-old boy whose parents,



*Construction crews from all over the USSR built different BAM stations. The Severobaikalsk train station's resemblance to a ship is an homage to construction workers from St. Petersburg, who built Severobaikalsk in 1976. Peter the Great created and housed Russia's first real fleet in St. Petersburg.*

Soviet engineers, moved to Baikal in the late seventies to build the Baikal-Amur Mainline (BAM), a massive, 3,000-plus-kilometer long railroad meant to "revitalize" the Eastern Siberian wilderness. Thousands of young people answered the state's call, coming from all corners of the Soviet Union to take their part in the "Great Construction Project." For several years they lived in tent towns and rickety trailers, worked in the rain, sleet, and snow, blowing up rocks for new bridges and tunnels, fell in love and had children in hospitals they built themselves. They were the first ones to conquer and name these mountain peaks, put trails through vast forests surrounding them, and discover glaciers in the middle of taiga. A lot of these men and women stayed in the new towns. Kesha's Bratsk is a BAM town, built in the middle of nowhere to serve the railroad. The name Bratsk comes from the Russian word for brother, "brat".

There is another, less idealistic side to BAM, one that doesn't get covered in much detail by the

official history. As my friends' parents explained to me, a lot of people who came to build the railroad were there because of the financial and other incentives the state offered, in exchange for hard physical labor in the rough conditions. The salaries on BAM — and in other Siberian regions — were higher than average. This "Northern bonus" system existed until just two or three years ago. BAM construction crews were full of men who left their families for several years to make some money in Siberia.

Another incentive was the option of buying a car. Automobiles were hard to get in the Soviet Union even if you had the cash, and the waiting lists were incredibly long. This is one of the many Soviet paradoxes — I often hear people remember the '70s as the time when they had money, but no goods to buy. But after three years of work on BAM, one received a special check for an automobile that allowed you to go to a factory and receive a car almost immediately.

Yet another BAM story is that of prisoners who had no choice but to lay down rails and cut through the taiga. The Soviet Union relied on prison labor to dig canals, log forests and to build the Moscow Metro. I hope to write about this story separately.

In any case, that book about Bratsk must have been the reason why the words Baikal, Angara (the only river that flows out of Baikal), taiga, and kedr (Siberian pine) always had a magical ring of adventure and mystery for me. But I completely forgot about "Kesha, the First Inhabitant of Bratsk," until I was in Moscow a couple of years ago and found it on one of my old bookshelves. I'm sure it is partially

responsible for my current predicament.

Irkutsk lies on the southwestern side of Baikal, on the banks of the Angara. I planned to spend a day in the city and fly out the next morning, to visit my friends Anyuta and Alyona Maryasovy. They are sisters who live in Severobaikalsk, the only town at the northern shore of the Lake ("sever" means north in Russian). But the plane was sold out. My next fastest option was to spend ten hours on a high-speed boat called Kometa, which goes from a port nearby Irkutsk to Severobaikalsk. The boat goes along Baikal's western shore, presenting passengers with spectacular views of mountain ranges and ever-changing water and sky landscapes.

I wasn't sure if the boat was leaving at 7 or 8 a.m., so a friend of mine who picked me up at the airport took me home, quickly fed me some cheese, bread and kielbasa, and drove me to the port. We got there 20 minutes before Kometa's departure, and I lucked out again — there were tickets for today's boat.

I'd already traded my dress and flip-flops for hiking clothes before my plane landed in Irkutsk; when Kometa got to the middle of Baikal and the shore disappeared in the fog, I put on my short down parka. Outside on the back deck it was chilly, windy and beautiful.

My ticket was for a seat in the front of the boat, which has the best view. Sadly, the captain refused to open it because there were only three other people with front tickets, citing some boat policy about equal distribution of weight,







*The view of Olkhon Island from Kometa, obscured by the fog.*

and we could not convince him otherwise. The middle and the back are separated by a small open galley where people smoke and take pictures. I went to the back, hoping to catch a nap on some of the empty seats. Behind a little window two women offered a severely restricted food menu: tea, “MacCoffee” (a mix of instant coffee, fake milk powder, and a lot of sugar), ramen noodles, and hotdogs with mashed potatoes (my choice for lunch).

Sitting next to me were two men heading to New Ulun, a small station along the BAM. They were on an assignment to fix a broken boiler in a local heating station. Both had a few metal teeth sprinkled in their mouths. They didn’t talk to each other much. Later on they joined me on the open back deck, where I was getting some fresh air and enjoying occasional sprays of cold Baikal water. The older one told me a bunch of jokes. The younger one later mentioned (I cannot recall why) that he was in prison for four years. As he touched my arm lightly, he immediately followed up this revelation with a comforting “But don’t be scared!” For the next hour I learned what Russian prisoners get for lunch (watery soup with a quarter of a cabbage), and about the prison hierarchy (a complicated system that reminded me of Hindu castes — at the top are the “thieves,” who effectively run the prison, at the very bottom are the untouchables, the gay prisoners). He told me how a couple of years ago a train with juvenile prisoners caught on fire and the prison director forbade his men to open the car doors. Soon afterward the “thieves” got together and meted out a punishment. Someone set fire to the director’s house; his wife and children died but he survived. Upon his transfer to

another prison he began treating prisoners even worse than before.

I don’t know if this story was the reason, but I started to feel a little bit nauseous, and excused myself from the conversation. Because of the fog, we were running an hour late. But at least we made it. Last year the intoxicated captain moored the boat on one of the small islands nearby Severobaikalsk. On another occasion the engine broke in the middle of the trip and passengers waited several hours for rescue boats to arrive.

When we finally got to the port, I saw Klavdia Maryasova, my friends’ mom. She threw me into their old Zhiguli (a popular Soviet car), and drove me to a children’s camp an hour south of town. There, her daughters were in the middle of running an educational Great Baikal Trail<sup>1</sup> camp for several families with young kids. As we drove up to the site of the camp, we saw their beach fire. I was exhausted but I haven’t seen Anyuta and Alyona for almost a year. I got an exuberant welcome. They were not sure when I would actually get there, so my late-night arrival was a surprise. After eating more meat and potatoes, drinking tea, and going to the tiny banya, I finally went to sleep. It was around 2 a.m. local time.

### **Some Background**

I met Anyuta and Alyona four years ago, when I came to Lake Baikal for the first time. That summer of 2004 I was taking a break between two jobs. In May I left the big Wall

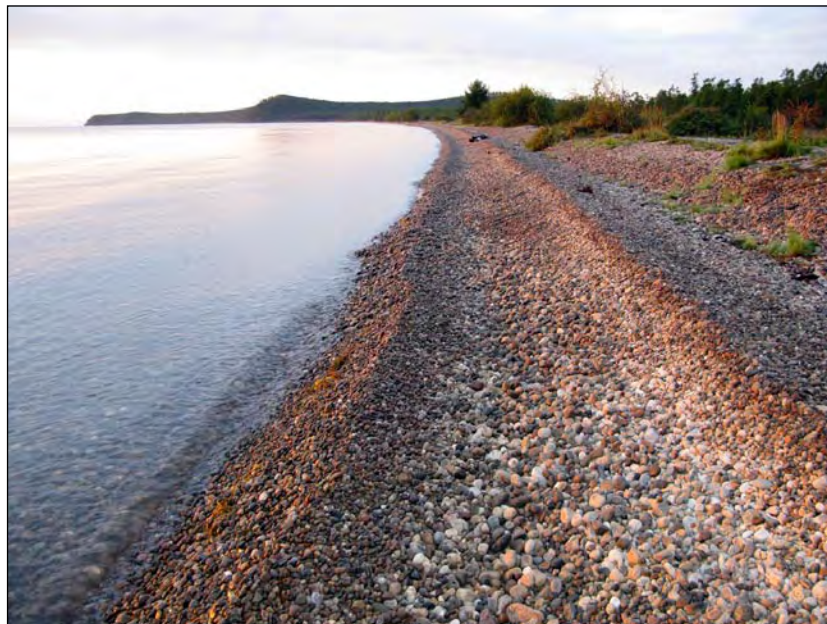
1 The Great Baikal Trail is a local non-profit that strives to provide an alternative to industrial development of the Baikal region, by promoting eco-tourism, environmental education for adults and children, and educational exchanges.

Street law firm where I practiced litigation for three years, and in September I was going to start clerking for a federal judge in Philadelphia. I decided to use the summer months to visit my relatives in Moscow and travel beyond my usual range.

I'd always wanted to see Lake Baikal, a giant blue crescent carved into Siberia, a place that holds a mythical place in Russian culture and which Russians reverently call the Sacred Sea. I didn't travel much during my Soviet childhood. I'd been to the Black Sea a couple of times as a kid, and much later, during one of my short visits to Moscow, I went to St. Petersburg for three days. I'd never seen the rest of Russia, and felt it was time to fill in some gaps.

Contrary to a popular impression outside of Russia, Siberia is not a permanently frozen desert. This vast land has an astonishing variety of landscapes and climates. The Baikal region itself is a great example of the geographic diversity: impassible mountain ranges with peaks reaching 8,000 feet; flat, dry steppes that get very hot in the summer; and lush valleys where the Soviets created prosperous — really! — collective farms. On Lake Baikal, some of the wettest and sunniest places on earth co-exist within a few hours of driving of each other.

Early in the summer of 2004 I looked at eco-tours of Lake Baikal, but even though the places they described sounded amazing, the idea of being on a guided tour didn't appeal to me. As I was researching, I came across the website of Tahoe-Baikal Institute, an American non-profit that runs educational exchanges for young people from Russia and the United States on the two lakes. Despite Tahoe being much smaller than Baikal, the lakes have a lot in common, including exceptional clarity. The TBI website mentioned



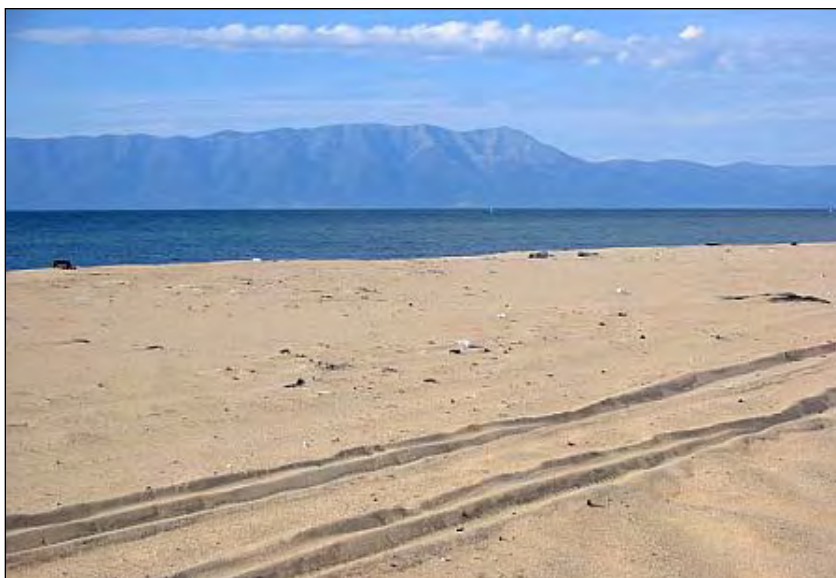
*The beach by the GBT children's camp in the early morning.*

their Russian partner, a Siberian non-profit called the Great Baikal Trail, which set out to build a hiking trail around the entire Lake, more than 2,000 kilometers in circumference, and in the process help out the local economy by attracting eco-tourists. The GBT was building the trail with volunteer help — anyone in good physical shape could join a two-week-long summer camp on the shores of Baikal.

The idea of spending two weeks in a tent on a sandy beach in a Russian national park with a bunch of adventurous travelers from all over the world, working side-by-side with local Siberians, sounded much more intriguing than a standard eco-tour. My outdoor experience was limited to a few hours of camping on a friend's farm in Pennsylvania — in the middle of the night I went into the cabin to use the restroom and decided the bed looked much more comfortable than the stony ground under the tent — and a two-day hike/climb in New Mexico mountains for which we were so unprepared that I consider myself lucky for having survived. But there was something about Baikal that beckoned me. Even though the GBT website said all the camps were full, I emailed the organizers to offer my services as a translator.

A week later I was in a New York sports store, asking the guy selling camping equipment for a sleeping bag recommendation. When he asked me where I was going, a friend who accompanied me to the store jumped in, "To SIBERIA! For a month!" The store clerk looked me over suspiciously. My fashionable summer outfit and high-heeled sandals did nothing to assuage his doubts.

I had absolutely no idea what I was getting myself into. The GBT folks decided to send me to a camp on Chivyrkuy, a huge bay



*Ust'-Barguzin beaches, covered with pines and firs, overlook the majestic Holy Nose peninsula.*





*Jean-Paul, a GBT volunteer from France, spent his free time in the camp teaching Russian kids to juggle and play reggae.*

on the Holy Nose peninsula located on the east shore of Baikal. "It's the most beautiful place on the Lake," they said. "You'll love it."

I couldn't find any good descriptions of the bay on English-language travel websites. Some of the Russian ones mentioned the seven-hour drive from Ulan-Ude, the capital of Buryatia. (You can get to Baikal from Moscow by taking a four-day trip on the Trans-Siberian railroad, or by flying for five hours to Irkutsk or Ulan-Ude.) The websites did not mention that seven hours of driving only get you to Ust'-Barguzin, an 8,000-person settlement at the edge of one of the national parks on Baikal. There are three, plus three nature reserves, accounting for much of the still-undevel-

oped wilderness of the Lake's shores.

Since the GBT camp itself was on national park land, in the middle of Chivyrkuy Bay, to get there we had to take an ancient ferry across the Barguzin river, spend two hours driving — holding on for dear life is a better way to describe the experience — down a sandy road that looked like a three-dimensional replica of Swiss cheese, and then take a boat that dropped us off on a wild beach where we pitched our tents for the next two weeks.

This was the first of the many complicated trips around Baikal I would undertake in the next four years. What I didn't know at the time was that after two weeks of waking up to dew on my tent, morning baths in cold Baikal waters, dinners of pasta and canned meat made in a bucket over the fire, endless cups of tea under star-covered skies, and days filled with digging, chopping, and fighting off voracious mosquitoes, I would return to Moscow to tell my friends that I had no desire to continue my vacation by going around Sicily on a yacht with them, as we planned earlier.

Instead, after two days of deliberations and explanations, I bought a ticket back to Baikal, despite everyone telling me they were glad I enjoyed "roughing it" but that I should hold on to the memories and get on with my life.

I left Moscow the next day. After a quick phone call to my new Siberian friends, I decided to go back for a month — the amount of free time I had before my clerkship began. The GBT folks needed a translator up north, in a trail-building camp nearby a town called Taksimo. I couldn't find Taksimo on any maps of the Baikal region, but you could buy a train ticket there. I agreed to go. I knew that Taksimo

*Anyuta's backyard and their little sauna, or banya in Russian. In the early 1990s, when food shortages were especially dire, the Maryasov family exchanged their apartment in the center of Severobaikalsk for a small house with a little bit of land. They survived those years by growing their own vegetables — potatoes, squash, carrots, cucumbers and tomatoes. Even now a lot of people on Baikal rely on their gardens for the majority of fruits and vegetables they consume, and gather wild mushrooms and berries for pickling and preserving. August and September are busy harvest months.*







*(right) A drab Soviet-style square in the center of Severobaikalsk. (above) One of the wooden houses in the surrounding village.*



is a stop on the Baikal-Amur Main railroad, that our camp would be in the mountains, and we would be building an educational trail for local kids.

This brings us to how I visited Severobaikalsk for the first time. Together with a GBT volunteer from Germany I took the Kometa from Irkutsk to Severobaikalsk. A young woman of about 25 picked us up at the port. She was supposed to take us to the hostel at the local school of youth tourism and environmental education, run by her dad. After taking a quick look at me and the other volunteer, Anyuta invited us to stay at their house. We quickly agreed.

As we waited for the rest of the group to arrive, we spent the next three days sitting in her kitchen, making and enjoying wonderful, simple meals made with ingredients

from their small garden, going for walks in the fog along Baikal, and teaching each other Russian and German words. In the evenings we sat around the kitchen table chatting and drinking tea with homegrown mint and red currant leaves. Anyuta brought out her guitar and sang; one night her dad brought out an accordion, and treated us to tango.

This family has a talent for making you feel completely at ease in their little house. I couldn't remember the last time I found myself surrounded by such warm, natural hospitality. I certainly have never been moved to dance tango in a kitchen before. We left for Taksimo wishing we could take some of that spirit with us.

A pleasant surprise happened a week later, when Anyuta came up to our camp and stayed until the end. On



*(left) Anyuta and Misha gathering crabapples in their garden. (right) A samovar serves as a flower pot in Anyuta's backyard.*



the way back to Irkutsk, our entire group of GBT volunteers crashed at her house for two days. Me, I stayed for a week. Ever since that summer, I visit Severobaikalsk whenever I come back to Baikal.

### The GBT “Baby Trail”

Several things have changed in the Maryasovy household since the summer of 2004. Most important, Anyuta now has a 2-year-old son named Misha. This summer she bridged several of her passions — education, nature and Misha — and organized a GBT camp for parents and their kids. The original idea was to get international GBT alumni with young children to come to Severobaikalsk for ten days of environmental education, games, and trail building together with local Siberians. But even though the first response was wildly enthusiastic, the foreign families bailed at the end and the camp became an all-Russian affair.

There were three mothers from Severobaikalsk and four families from Irkutsk. The youngest kid in the group was one and a half, and the oldest was 14. They stayed in a house on the grounds of a children’s camp located on two small,



*At the end of the camp the participants filled out a short questionnaire. In response to a question, “What did you like best?” one of the 7-year-old girls wrote, “Maksim” (the name of one of the boys).*



*(above & top right) Each child got to plant their own tree during the project. Parents explained to them why they were replanting the saplings instead of throwing them away. Even the toddlers seemed to care for their trees as the camp went on. (bottom right) This camp still needed a translator even though all participants were Russian.*





*A lesson in nature.*

warm lakes within a 10-minute walking distance from Baikal. I arrived during the second week of the camp, so I saw the results of their work — a nicely groomed section of a hiking trail along the Baikal shore, several trail signs the kids made themselves from wood, and a row of saplings rescued during trail clearing, which parents and kids replanted together.

The most amazing aspect of this camp (aside from the sight of young kids brandishing hammers and loppers, without any harm to themselves or others) was the sense of responsibility and pride that these children obviously felt about their work. Anyuta's 2-year-old son even took us on a guided tour of the trail, explaining with gestures and sounds what they've done in different sections of the path.

It was clear that the kids felt at home in this Siberian forest, often plopping down on the moss to play, picking ripe berries and mushrooms (and in the process displaying impressive memory skills for edible plants), and easily finding their way on the different trails around the camp. As for adults, they were happy to spend time with other parents, share child-raising tips, and, if another parent was looking after their child, to finally relax.

Once the camp was over, I stayed behind for my own share of relaxation — more berry-picking, pie-making, and hot-springs-soaking. The north of Baikal is a dramatic, wild place; the shore opposite from Severobaikalsk is a chain of rugged mountain peaks that often stay covered with snow throughout summer months. I missed those mountains. □

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