



Alix and mum Anne (and below), during their trip on the Trans-Siberian Railway, far left



Alix attempting some ballet moves outside Moscow's Bolshoi Theatre



FROM MOSCOW with MUM

Photographs: Alix O'Neill, Getty Images



St Petersburg

Three weeks aboard the Trans-Siberian Railway helped Alix O'Neill forge a new closeness with her mother



I'm rediscovering the joys of wearing pants.' I rolled my eyes at my mum, thankful we were the only Westerners at breakfast. 'Your father felt going commando would be inappropriate in a cabin full of strangers.'

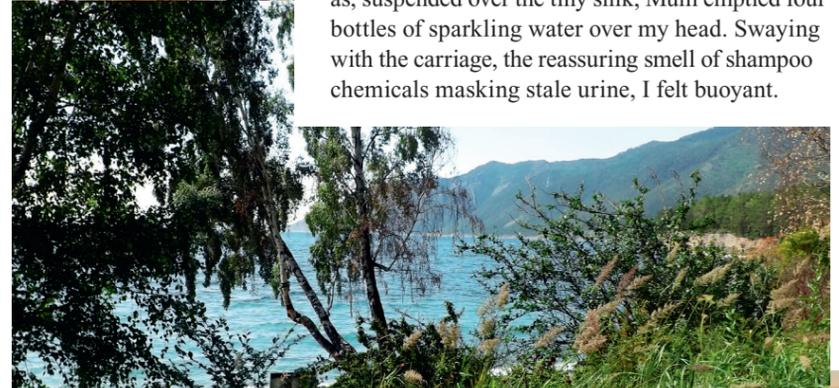
We had only just arrived in Moscow, yet already I was questioning my decision to accompany this outspoken (almost) pensioner on a three-week trek across the world's largest country. Mum had talked about doing the Trans-Siberian Railway for years, but we doubted it would ever happen. Then, two of her friends passed away suddenly, and with her 60th birthday looming, she was filled with a new resolve.

I was flattered she asked me to be her companion, but had reservations about spending so much time together in such close quarters. When I was young, I had little say in where I went to school or what subjects I studied, and as an adult, I rarely made a decision without consulting my parents first. Ever the late bloomer, my teenage-rebellion phase struck in my thirties and I'd started to push Mum away, as I attempted to figure out my way in the world.

But Mum needed this, and for all her fearless rhetoric, I knew she'd prefer not to do it alone. So, last August, backpacks stuffed with Cup a Soup, suitably pretentious Russian literature and (mercifully) pants, we set off for St Petersburg.

The first few days were spent in an orgy of clean sheets and hot meals – basic comforts we'd come to regard as luxuries. We soaked up the Tolstoy-esque romance of Russia's cultural capital, before heading to Moscow. Sitting on the rooftop of The Ritz-Carlton, overlooking Red Square and the Kremlin, we allowed ourselves an absurdly expensive glass of Pinot Grigio – one final extravagance until we reached Vladivostok, the end of the line.

You don't have to rough it to traverse the 6,152 miles of track that make up the world's longest passenger railway. There are trains with sumptuous decor, underfloor heating and free-flowing Dom Pérignon. Mum, however, opted for a more serf than tsar approach to accommodation, confident the hardship would 'enhance the experience'. Forgoing a shower for a few days didn't faze me. A lack of running water, on the other hand, was a game-changer. There was a loo at either end of each carriage, but toilet paper was rarely provided and hands were 'washed' with baby wipes.



None of that mattered the day we boarded the train, though. We were in high spirits as we handed our tickets to the provonistas, their perfectly pressed uniforms mirroring stern expressions. In our cabin we unpacked a feast of bread, cheese, tomatoes, Cup a Soup, apples and biscuits brought from home. The train began to pull out of the station and we toasted our departure with cheap wine in tin mugs.

Of course, it's easy to be sanguine at the start of any backpacking trip. But the novelty of uncooked meals began to wane as supplies dwindled. The menu choices in the dining car were dubious, not to mention pricey, so our daily diet consisted of stock cubes dissolved in boiling water and crackers, with some boiled sweets as pudding. Then there was the constant odour of unwashed body parts and smoked fish, the latter picked up by one of our bunk buddies at a station en route. Sleep was snatched during the day, the beds too hard and our neighbours' snores too loud to get any real rest at night.

Yet Mum was in her element, undeterred by the stench and the stock cubes. To her, it was all part of the adventure. She was right (as always): each day brought new faces and unfamiliar sights. It's hard not to get sucked into the otherness of Russia. You could spend hours staring out the window at the ever-changing landscape – deserted Stalinist-era factories on the outskirts of extensive conurbations, giving way to vast steppes and pretty forests. Both isolated and sprawling, austere and beautiful, Russia is full of aesthetic contradictions.

But beauty alone can't replace the thrill of a freshly washed fringe and, three days in, I stropped off to the dining car for a beer and some headspace. When I returned, Mum offered to wash my hair. It was the simplest yet kindest of gestures. We giggled as, suspended over the tiny sink, Mum emptied four bottles of sparkling water over my head. Swaying with the carriage, the reassuring smell of shampoo chemicals masking stale urine, I felt buoyant.

Afterwards, I sat between Mum's knees and she combed my hair, like she did when I was little. In that moment, I resolved to go with the flow, to give in to the journey like Mum had, and to savour its simple pleasures. And when we reached our halfway point in deepest, darkest Siberia, I found I missed the uncomplicated nature of life on board.

We spent two days in a remote village on Lake Baikal, where Mum gamely donned her hiking boots for a 12-mile woodland trek. In the evening, after a home-cooked meal of dumplings and goulash, we sat on the porch of our guesthouse and, over whisky given to us by some locals we'd met that day, talked frankly about so many things. I told her I was unsure about having children and that if I did, there are some things I'd do differently to her. She didn't offer any advice and I didn't seek it. We were like two old friends shooting the breeze, no judgement or expectations. There wasn't a sound except wild geese roaming outside and, sitting beside my mum, wrapped in blankets, I felt a genuine, profound sense of happiness.

Gloriously refreshed after a banya (Russian steam bath), we were ready for the final leg of our journey. It was surprisingly easy to settle back into the Trans-Sib's ways. Despite the lack of diversions, we never felt bored. After a breakfast of black coffee and berries, bought from the babushkas who lined the platforms at interval stations, I meditated, read or wrote in my diary, while Mum was content to contemplate life in the remote settlements dotted among the majestic taiga of Russia's Far East. Lunch and dinner was still soup and crackers, but salty boiled potatoes made a revelatory addition. I started to feel emotionally lighter as the physical weight fell off. Every meal was eagerly anticipated, every bite relished and, most importantly, I appreciated every single moment with Mum. More than that, I came to admire her. For having the balls to go backpacking at 60, for refusing to be niggled by its occasional hardships, and for her courage in admitting that, with me, she didn't always get it right. For the first time, it felt like we were equals.

At 9pm the next evening, we rolled into Vladivostok, seven time zones away from Moscow. The city isn't much to write home about, but we both knew it was never about the destination. We hit the town in style that night, giddy on hot food and Cosmopolitans, and when glasses were raised to the end of our great adventure, this time, they were by a pair of old friends. >>



FROM TOP: Alix getting ready for her first banya experience; with Anne at Lake Baikal



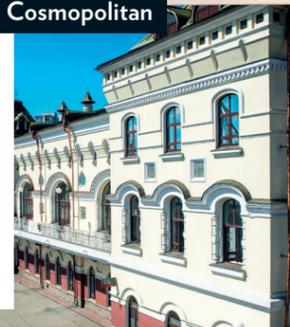
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Anne toasting the end of the trip with a Cosmopolitan



Anne with one of the Trans-Sib provonistas at the start of their journey



Vladivostok

Lake Baikal