



The author, bottom left, strikes a pose with fellow volunteers on a trail-building trip with the Great Baikal Trails Association. Volunteers from around the world are pitching in to build a 1,500 trail around Lake Baikal. Photo by Baiba Bertule

Pulaskis and Borscht

A WTA member's excellent adventure in Siberia building trail along Lake Baikal

For many, many years I had longed to go to Lake Baikal in Siberia. I wanted to see what a fellow writer called a “thesaurus of superlatives.” Deepest, at over a mile; most voluminous, with 20 percent of the world’s non-frozen freshwater; oldest, at roughly 27 million years; and most diverse, with nearly 2,000 endemic species. And now, on September 2, 2008, I was there, along with my wife, Marjorie, to spend two weeks building trail along the lake, as part of a volunteer crew working with the Great Baikal Trail Association (GBTA). Their goal is to develop, maintain, and promote a 1,500-mile long trail around the lake as a means to protect and sustain what Siberians called the Sacred Sea.

It had not been easy to reach Lake Baikal. Marjorie and I had flown 10 hours from Seattle to Seoul, South Korea, then continued two more hours on to Vladivostok, the southeastern-most city in Russia. From Vladivostok, we rode the Trans-Siberian Railway for three and a half

days along the China and Mongolia borders to Ulan-Ude, about one hour east of Lake Baikal. The train ride was pleasantly relaxing as we drank tea, slept, read, and ate blinis and piroshki through a landscape of taiga and steppe.

After attending a rally for Lake Baikal, complete with a Miss Baikal beauty contest, native dancers, crooning singers, and motorcycle riders, we met our group in Ulan-Ude’s main square, under the eyes of the world’s largest Lenin head, 25 feet of the Comrade’s bald pate enshrined in metal. Our first step was to load our food (which was packed in dense and heavy boxes) as well as our gear and eleven of us into a 15-passenger minivan. We crammed the back row with packs and supplies, sardined the eleven of us into ten seats, and headed north for five hours of bumps, ruts, epic pot-holes, and occasional pavement to the village of Maksimikha.

Our campsite was 100 yards from a dirt road, on a low bluff next to Lake Baikal. Fortunately,

David Williams

David is a writer and WTA member from Seattle.



Above: A reminder of times gone by, a huge bust of Lenin adorns the central square in Ulan-Ude, the city nearest to Lake Baikal.

Right: Volunteers scout a route for the trail. Sometimes a faint boot path is followed, but usually volunteers simply carve a new trail through the birches, pine and larch.

Photos by David Williams



we stayed only one night as the site was riddled with trash. Trash is a persistent problem at the lake, at least in the southern, most populated sections we visited. Russia has no history of leave-no-trace hiking and camping. Nor do hikers have an easy way to dispose of or recycle aluminum, glass, and plastic—so most people simply toss their garbage. In addition, Russians believe that the lake is self-purifying. On one of our train rides, an announcer told us that if you toss a dead cat in the lake it will disappear in 24 hours. We didn't have a cat to test that statement, but pinhead-sized crustaceans do live in the lake and actively filter the water, providing visibility down 120 feet.

Despite my disappointment with the trash, it besmirches only a tiny ribbon of Baikal, basically within 50 feet of the shoreline. Overall, Baikal has a remarkably clean environment. We saw almost no trash when we hiked in the forests of birch, larch, and pine, which grow down to the water's edge. No clearcuts marred our views of distant peaks rising 7,500 feet above Baikal and most people drink water directly from the lake. The conundrum of Baikal is to reconcile the trash close at hand with the grandiose beauty of a lake so huge it would stretch from Seattle to the California border.

Finally, 11 days into our adventure, we hiked 3 miles along the lake, and reached our base camp, where we would stay for our fortnight of trail work. We set up tents along the shoreline of a large bay across from the 6,100-foot-high Holy Nose Peninsula. Our first task was to deposit our food into a tent, which made a squadron of chipmunks happy and full, and unload our cooking kit of two enamel soup pans, one lid, a ladle, two cutting boards, two spoons, salt and pepper, and a spatula. To get ready for our dinner we collected wood for the fire, our source of heat for cooking. After resting a bit, we ate a dinner of borscht, cabbage-and-carrot salad, cookies, tea, and bread.

We were a diverse group. Misha, our Russian crew leader, had worked with GBTA for five years. Our German-born, English translator Eva lived near the lake with her Russian husband, whom she had met during a GBTA work camp. Tanya and Laarisa were in their late fifties and were geologists from Irkutsk, the largest city near the lake. James came from England, Philippe from Belgium, Baiba from Latvia, Oksana and Julia from Saint Petersburg, and Diana and Angilla from Germany. All are recent college graduates and in their early twenties, the most common age for volunteers on GBTA projects.

After our breakfast of kasha porridge mixed with beef chunks and flavored with condensed milk, Misha introduced our tools. We learned that loppers were good for cutting a branch up to the size of a kielbasa and that the Pulaski, not a Russian tool, worked well for clearing



roots. Misha would use the chain saw; the rest of us could work with a handsaw or axe. He also told us to stick our pant cuffs in our socks to avoid ticks.

The trail we were to work on had been a road since the 1700s, well known for bears and bandits. Replaced decades ago by the “fine road” we had traveled, the route had reverted to a trail last maintained in the 1980s. A GBTA group earlier this summer had cleared the section we had walked in on, which ran straight and mostly level to our camp and 15 minutes beyond. Our group would extend the trail as far as we could.

During a typical day, our two-person cook crew (we all took turns at this task), awoke around 7:00 a.m., started the fire, collected water, and made our hot breakfast. We ate around 8:30, headed out by 9:30, and unloaded our lunch of sausage, bread, cheese, sardines, cookies, and hard candy at a forest opening to eat later. After lunch around 1:00, and an hour-long break, we worked until 5:30 and got back to camp in an hour. Dinner could be a stew, pasta, or, when some fishermen gave us fish, fish soup or broiled fish.

As we built trails, we tried to follow a faint boot path. Misha led the way, cutting down trees, mostly 2- to 6-inch-wide birch, but also downed Siberian pine or larch, some up to 18 inches in diameter. We then tossed aside the downed wood, lopped branches and grubbed with our Pulaskis, also known to some as “Polanskis.” For long sections, however, we lost the boot path and Misha and a couple of us roamed ahead, looking for the best route possible. Once we agreed on the route—made

easier by a lack of any regulations—we marked it, not with flagging, but with 5-inch long, red leaves from an understory plant, *Bergenia crassifolia*. (Siberians also make a tea from this plant, which “helps keep you young.”) With precise splashes of red dotting the green foliage, the markers looked like an Andy Goldsworthy project.

As we cut our way into the forest, we kept discovering the traces of past people. We found 7-foot-long ski poles made from larch limbs, a sable trap that still worked, and ice cleats made from 1-by-4-inch strips of tin can punctured with nail holes. They were stark reminders of the resourcefulness of the locals.

We worked for 8 of our 10 days of camping. Misha figured that we established about 3 miles of trail. It was really more of a route than a trail as we did minimal work on the ground, basically enough to show where to walk. Next summer another group will return and upgrade our route.

Our two-week-long GBTA work camp passed very quickly. Our crew swam in Lake Baikal, sang Beatles songs around the fire, laughed about the many caddis flies we ate when they drowned in our porridge and helped build the first trail of its kind in Russia. We had learned from each other and built connections to each other and to Lake Baikal. Ultimately, that is what this kind of volunteering is about. Whether in the North Cascades or in Siberia, building trail is about building a community of people who are passionate about the environment and who recognize that wielding a Pulaski is a great way to show that passion. ♦

Though threatened with development, trash and neglect, Lake Baikal is still a wonder of the natural world. When the 1,500-mile trail around the lake is complete, volunteers hope it will spur hikers to visit and speak up for its protection.

Photo by David Williams

» More Online

To learn more about the Great Baikal Trail Association, visit:
www.greatbaikaltrail.org