

# HOLY WATER

The world's oldest lake, so big it can be seen from space, holds a special place in the hearts of Siberia's Buryat people. Daniel Allan braves the winds of Lake Baikal



In temperatures cold enough to fuse the human eyelid shut, the faint orb of a tired sun hangs low over Lake Baikal. With the distant horizon blanketed in rolling mist, tendrils of steam cover this massive body of water like the exhalations of some giant aquatic beast. A thick crust of ice already coats the shoreline and soon the entire lake surface will be locked in winter's frozen grip for over a third of a year.

Despite the harsh conditions, Olga Davidova still attends her flimsy roadside kiosk high above the lakeside village of Kultuk. Ice has rendered the road from Irkutsk treacherous and traffic is light. Still, the smoked *omul* (Baikal salmon) she offers is a local specialty and many of those intrepid drivers who make it through pull over to make a purchase.

'Kultuk is actually the name of a Baikal wind,' says Davidova, taking shelter from a stinging,

snow-charged breeze. It blows through this valley and causes the lake's worst storms, although it can also bring good weather in the summer. In the winter I only stand here for half the day – this view is magnificent, but such cold is not good for my joints.'

Lake Baikal is an immense, crescent-shaped gash in the earth, almost 700 kilometres long and up to 70 kilometres wide. It contains one-fifth of the world's fresh water and is so big it can be seen from space. To the south, beyond the Altai Mountains, the Mongolian steppe unfolds to Central Asia. Close to the southern end lies Irkutsk, gateway to the lake and Siberia's biggest city, with its faded classical facades and quaint wooden architecture of a bygone era.

'Russian people think of Lake Baikal as the pearl of Siberia,' explains Jack Sheremetoff, a local guide who also owns a popular hostel in ➤



Face to faith: Sri Lanka, Sigiriya Lion Rock Fortress at dawn





In the red: Sri Lanka, Ceylon, North Central Province, Polonnaruwa, Travel Destination, Gal Vihara, complex of Buddha's statues part of Parakramabahu monastery



Irkutsk. 'Most lakes are less than 20,000 years old – Baikal is at least 25 million years old. It's a unique ecosystem that contains more than 1,000 animal species found nowhere else on earth. This is one of the principal reasons why Unesco made Baikal a World Heritage site in 1996.'

During the winter Lake Baikal's icy crust is so thick that a temporary railroad was once laid over it, during the 1904-05 Russo-Japanese War.

When the Circum-Baikal Railway, a masterpiece of engineering known as 'the Golden Buckle of Russia's Steel Belt', was completed soon afterwards, it joined lines that ran all the way from Moscow to the Pacific coast.

In 1957, when a new track was opened from the southern end of Baikal to Irkutsk, the bypassed section of the Circum-Baikal Railway was transformed from transport lifeline to tourist attraction. These days, a few trains a week run along the deeply picturesque, 85-kilometre strip of shore between Kultuk and Port Baikal, the numerous tunnels, bridges and embankments paying testament to Russian ingenuity and the triumph of hard labour over daunting natural obstacles.

'We call it the old railroad,' says Olga Davidova wistfully, looking down at the start of the Circum-Baikal. 'In those days the town was a lot more vibrant.

Still, despite the completion of the railway, Russia eventually lost the war with Japan, which then led to the days of revolution in 1905. The rest, as you know, is history.'

The beauty of Baikal may capture the Russian imagination, but for most citizens, unfamiliar with their nation's geography, it remains a picture-postcard dream.

'Most Muscovites couldn't even find this city on a map,' says Anna, an Irkutsk student born in Uzbekistan. Some 5,000 kilometres east of Moscow, Baikal's splendid isolation protected it from the worst excesses of Soviet-era exploitation, but is also a contributing factor in a number of more recent challenges facing the lake.

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'We're a long way from anywhere here,' says Sheremetoff. 'Laws passed in Moscow to protect the lake are sometimes just ignored by local companies and individuals.' Still, there are signs that safeguarding Baikal's environment is slowly moving up the political agenda. In March 2006, 5,000 Irkutsk residents protested against construction of a proposed oil pipeline that would have passed within a hair's breadth of the Baikal shoreline.

Daniel Allen

Vladimir Putin intervened personally and the pipeline was rerouted.

The most famous of Lake Baikal's unique animal species is the nerpa, or Baikal seal. Believed to have descended from the Arctic Ocean over 800,000 years ago, this small, earless variety of seal has come to symbolise Baikal's precious natural heritage. Pollution and poaching have unfortunately taken their toll on the population, and today there are

an estimated 60,000 nerpa living in and around the lake, down from 100,000 just a few years ago.

While the nerpa has no natural predators, for centuries it has been hunted by Buryats, native inhabitants of the Baikal region. (Caucasian explorers from western Russia only arrived on the shores of Baikal in 1643.) Numbering around 350,000, today the Buryats are the largest minority in Russia and ➤



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are mainly concentrated in the republic of Buryatia, which extends southwards from Lake Baikal.

'The ancestors of Buryatia were Mongols who made their home near Lake Baikal way before Genghis Khan rode through Asia in the early 13th century,' says Aslan, a Buryat from Ulan-Ude.

'Buryatia is part of Russia and most of us speak Russian, but there have been attempts to revive use of our own language and our ethnic identity is still very strong. We don't usually inter-marry.'

Originally shamanists, many Buryats gradually adopted the Buddhist faith of their southern Mongolian neighbours. Despite the best efforts of Soviet-era anti-religious purges, many vestiges of shamanism are still evident across Buryatia. Shamanistic sites known as *ovoos* still attract pilgrims, who decorate nearby trees with ribbons and scraps of cloth as prayers and offerings to the spirits.

As a late-rising sun paints the snow-capped Sayan Mountains hues of red and pink, the small Buryat town of Arshan comes to life. Situated close to the edge of Lake Baikal, Arshan is a popular summer resort, complete with sacred hot springs and diminutive Buddhist temple (Badkhirkharma Datsan). The tourist trade drops off in the winter, but a small Buryat market close to the springs still peddles traditional medicine, felt slippers and a curious chewing gum made from larch resin.

Valerya Vasnetsova, a long-time resident of Arshan, lives in a traditional wooden house off the main street, providing homestay accommodation to supplement the income from her small, Buryat-style restaurant. Her steamed meat dumplings, known as *buuza*, bring in diners from miles around. 'Lake Baikal is precious to all Buryats,' explains Valerya over a glass of vodka.

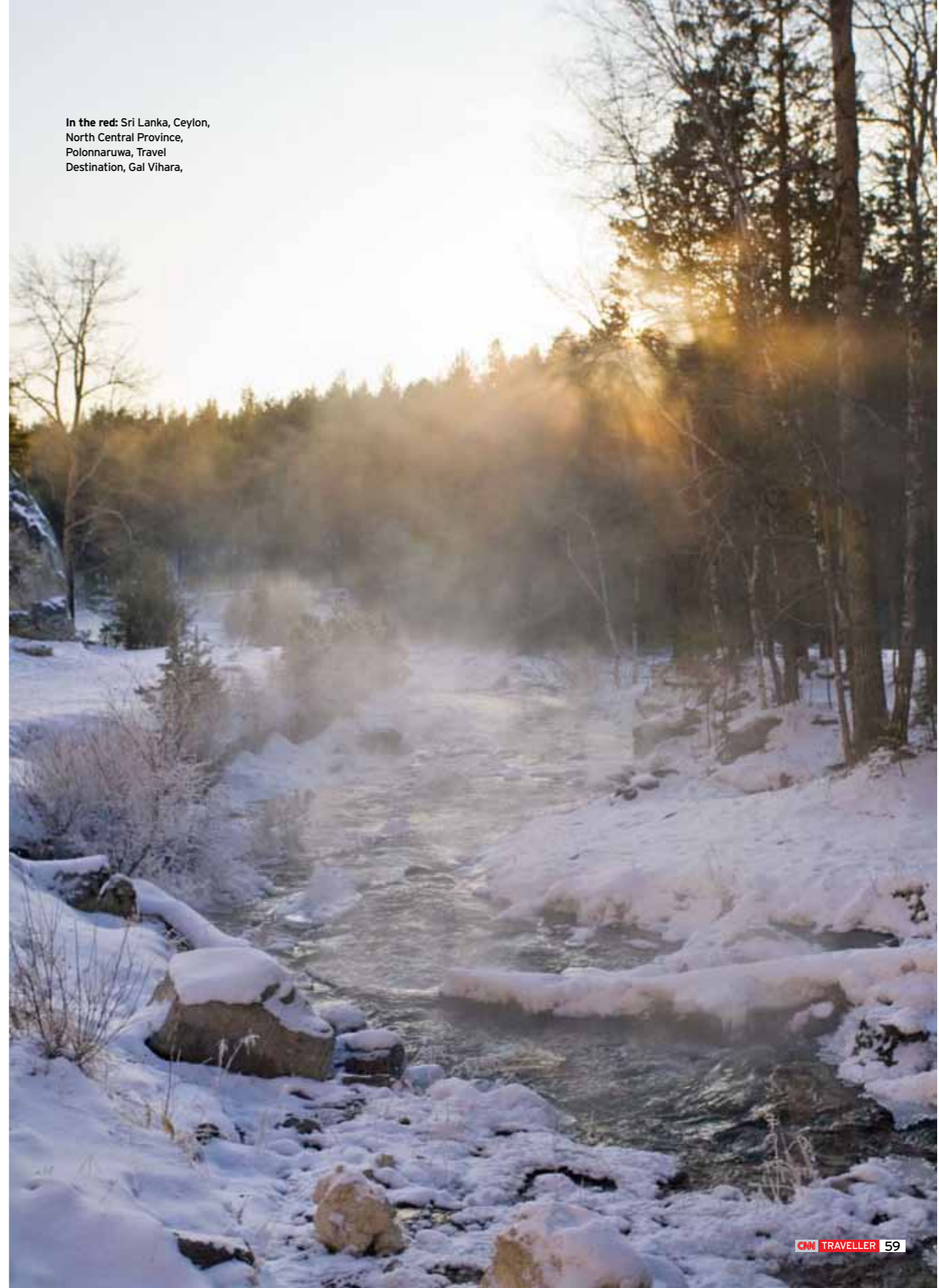
'We call it the Dalai-Nor, or Sacred Sea. According to legend, 13 gods and goddesses chose Baikal as their residence. Buryatia has always been a region rich in resources and our culture teaches us to live in harmony with nature, honouring the gods by respecting the air, the land and the water.'

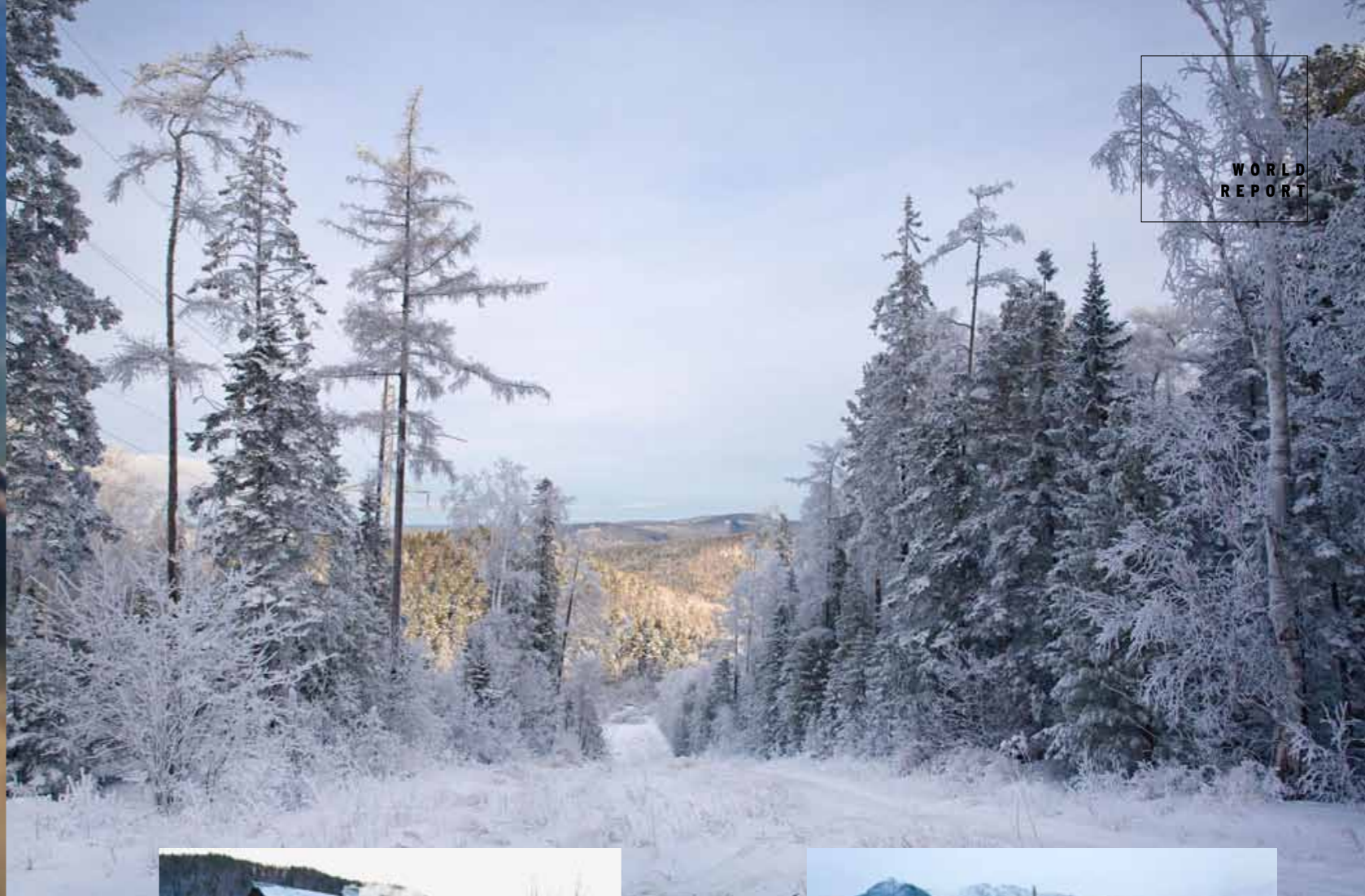
'Buryat hunters do take nerpa from the lake, but not many, and everything from the seal is used – meat, skin, fur. Times are changing and the pressure on the lake is growing. We need to focus harder on keeping everything in balance,' she adds.

Over in the small town of Listvyanka, on the western shore of Baikal, the increasing pressure on the lake is self-evident. An incongruous plastic spaceship houses a nerpa aquarium, up-market hotels dot the lakefront and signs in English proliferate.

Situated at the effluence of the Angara, the only river to drain Lake Baikal, ➤

In the red: Sri Lanka, Ceylon,  
North Central Province,  
Polonnaruwa, Travel  
Destination, Gal Vihara,





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Listvyanka is the main tourist centre of the lake. A proposed multi-billion rouble investment project named 'Baikal City' is aiming to turn the town into a major business and leisure complex over the next 20 years, complete with presidential mansions, supermarkets, an aqua park and casinos.

For now, at least, Listvyanka in winter still has the air of a quiet village. Behind the shoreline, graced with rusting hulks and pounded by steaming waves, serried ranks of brightly coloured wooden houses emit plumes of wood smoke. In the early morning, horses forage the backstreets for food, while babushkas chop wood and grill *omul* on smoking, roadside barbecues.

Some Listvyanka residents welcome the development of the town. Andriy Kaminsky owns a brace of high-powered snowmobiles, which he offers for rent, and guided tours of the beautiful pine forests above the lake.

'These days we're getting more winter visitors to Baikal – both Russian and from other countries. Some people complain about the increase in tourism, but as long as

we're careful not to disturb the environment too much, I think it's a good thing. People round here deserve higher living standards.'

A spectacular wilderness whatever the season, Lake Baikal's massive size belies its fragility. As the Russian economy continues to grow, a Buryatian sense of balance will be essential if Siberia's pearl is to retain its lustre.

As far as the gods of Baikal are concerned, lovers of the sacred sea can only hope that 13 proves to be a lucky number. ■

**GETTING THERE**

**Aeroflot** and **Sibir** have several daily flights between Moscow and Irkutsk. [www.aeroflot.co.uk](http://www.aeroflot.co.uk) [www.s7.ru/en/](http://www.s7.ru/en/)

**The train** from Moscow to Irkutsk takes three days. For more information go to [www.waytorussia.net/Baikal](http://www.waytorussia.net/Baikal)

**WHERE TO STAY**

**The Baikaler Hostel** in Irkutsk offers comfortable accommodation and can arrange tours of the lake and its environs plus various activities such as ice fishing and dog sledding. [www.baikaler.com](http://www.baikaler.com)