

A Different Trans-Siberian Route

by Ronald E.G. Davies, FN '93

No doubt many members of the Explorers Club have crossed Siberia by the famous Railway, and most probably regard the journey as little more unusual than taking Amtrak to New Orleans. As a member of the Aviation Expeditions Foundation, headed by Explorers Club stalwart Shane Lundgren, MI '93, I recently travelled across Siberia in a different way.

Last year, Shane, a pilot with Air Berlin, fell in love with the Antonov An-2, a single-engine, fixed-landing-gear, 12-seat biplane. First off the production lines in 1947, it was produced up until a few years ago. More than 25,000 were built, the highest number for any commercial aircraft. It is a sturdy steed with a reliable engine that "shakes, rattles, and rolls." However, like the trusted old Chevy that can be relied upon when the temperamental Mercedes is in the repair shop, it seems destined to serve in many roles for years to come.

Having decided to combine his ambitions to fly the Antonov with a desire to fly into the Arctic regions, Shane assembled a small team, including a photographer, a cinematographer, and a writer. And, having discovered my book on the history of Aeroflot, in which the beloved An-2 was given generous coverage, he sought my advice and invited

me to go along. After much preparation, with frustrations of many kinds, the trip finally took place last July.

The U.S. team joined up with the Amateur Aviation Foundation of Russia, and the joint expedition assembled partly in Moscow and partly in Gatchina, near St. Petersburg. Yevgeny Otrabenikov led the six-man crew—there were two An-2s available—of first-class pilots and mechanics. The aircraft were prepared, stocked, and fuelled at Gatchina, near the area where the Tsarist Air Force trained before WW I.

Across the Arctic Circle

We headed north on July 12, to Onega, on an arm of the White Sea. Thereafter, flying segments averaging about 250 miles, with a maximum of 500, we flew to the Siberian far east. Soon after leaving Onega, we crossed the Arctic Circle. For most of the trip, we were north of the Circle, a distance of about 3,500 miles, and it was midnight sun most of the way.

Most of the places we stopped at were small villages; the local people were both surprised and pleased to see us. We were held up at Salekhard by high winds and what amounted almost to a sandstorm. At first, the airport controllers would not allow us to take off. However, a little friendly persuasion eventually bent the rules. As we knew, the pilots, Nikolai and Igor, had no trouble in taking off.

There was a big welcome at Dudinka, the port on the mighty Yenesei River and terminus of the world's most northern railroad, connecting the port with the big mining and industrial center of Noril'sk. There we had an excellent meal, the last touch of elegance



Tran-Siberian Expedition Air Route

until Tiksi. The meals were supplemented by raw fish that the Russian team always seemed able to find (and we actually fished some ourselves). At the tiny outpost of Taymylyr, Yevgeny and his crew produced some reindeer stew, which if properly prepared, as this was, is delicious.

Though far from the cares of the world, we managed to watch on television many games of the World Cup soccer tournament; in Nadym, we cheered the Brazilians to victory.

I had to break away from the expedition at Tiksi and caught the local airline flight to Yakutsk. I stayed overnight with old friends, and then went on to Khabarovsk by Tupolev Tu-154 jet just in time to make the connection with Aeroflot's excellent Ilyushin Il-62 service to San Francisco. The rest of the team flew on, but heavy airport charges and fuel bills depleted funds. The international team reached Magadan and plans next year to explore the Chukotsk Peninsula, in Siberia's farthest east.

Remarkable Coincidence

One of my most memorable experiences occurred while I talked to the local people of Salekhard. I brought out a copy of my Aeroflot book and opened it to pages where Salekhard is featured prominently on a small map, and photographs showed an An-2 being used as a school bus. One of the men pointed to the pilot in a photograph and declared, "That's me!" And it was recognizably so. He had been an Aeroflot pilot for 15 years. As Aeroflot must have had 70,000 pilots in its time, I would never have guessed that I would meet a character in my book on the Arctic Circle.

Siberia is full of surprises. When we flew across the shores of the Arctic Ocean, it was never cold. Temperatures averaged about 70 °F during the height of the day. Arctic



**Ron Davies and Shane Lundgren
at Salekhard, on the Arctic Circle**

flowers were abundant, though not as abundant as the mosquitoes. We saw ex-Soviet missile sites and tracking stations, the occasional reindeer herd, and, in western Siberia, endless miles of pipelines and power lines. We observed from the air some of the colonies of the Gulag and inspected the terminus of what was to have been one of the railroads built by the denizens of those terrible prison camps.

Happily, today, transport services are of a different kind. From all ports on the three mighty rivers—the Ob, Yenesei, and Lena (five miles or more wide for about 600 miles of its length)—you can take a cruise ship up the rivers, at least during the summer months. Cruises from Dudinka to Krasnoyarsk (a junction on the Trans-Siberian Railway) and from Tiksi to Yakutsk (air hub of Eastern Siberia) are highly recommended.

["Moscow to Magadan by Biplane" was the featured presentation at an Explorers Club dinner in New York on October 18, 1994.]