

## **Skiing Across the World's Deepest Lake**

by Joshua K. Hartshorne

1818 words

Lake Baikal in Siberia burrows far enough into the Earth's crust that thermal vents open into it, supporting teeming colonies nearly a mile below the water's surface. The deepest fresh-water lake in the world, though dwarfed by North America's Lake Superior in surface area, it contains far more water than all the Great Lakes combined. It's so deep, that some of its fish, evolved to withstand the incredible pressure at its depths, explode when brought to the surface.

And I am standing on top of it.

By February, the ice on Baikal finally stretches from shore to shore, allowing the braver hikers, skiers and even campers to make their way across one of the world's most unique treks: across Siberia's great lake. However, strong winds and bitter cold keep all but the most adventurous and impatient off the ice until March. It's now March 7<sup>th</sup>, and I am skiing across the southern tip of the lake with six of my Russian friends. I have probably asked Sasha a hundred times if it this is safe, but I ask again. "Relax," he tells me, "we do this all the time."

A week ago one of my American coworkers camped in the middle of the lake. Asked if this was scary at all, she answered, "It's frightening. All night the ice cracks and settles. One time, it was deafening. When we got of the next morning, there was an open 3-foot crack in the ice nearby that stretched as far as we could see either direction."

This did not reassure me. What finally does reassure me is seeing several cars driving down the middle of the lake.

I see these cars from the edge of the lake, where my friends and I had stopped for lunch ... and to find each other.

Today is the Sunday of a three-day weekend (Monday is International Women's Day, one of Russia's major holidays), and we are not the only ones choosing to spend it by skiing across a frozen lake. Several hundred skiers clambered out of the train at *Pereyezd* ("Crossing") to ski the twenty kilometers to the lake's edge.

For most, falling is an inevitable part of cross-country skiing. Since righting yourself is difficult with 7-foot sticks attached to each of your feet, pileups are not uncommon, with skiers behind you falling to avoid running you over (stopping is difficult even for experts). With hundreds of people on a trail only one-skier wide, falling means a great deal of shouting until you haul

yourself off the trail, and then long minutes of waiting for an opportunity to jump back on the track.

Thus, my group was very quickly separated. Since cross-country skiing on a narrow path is an essentially solitary activity, that wasn't so bad. I had the forest for company.

There are few sights as magical as the taiga in winter. I remember clearly the first time I encountered it, entering Russia for by bus from Finland in January of 2001. Ice and snow freezes to the trees, encasing them in an indescribable white, seemingly turning them into creatures of glass and crystal.

As now it is nearly spring and quite warm (in the 20s!), this ice has melted, draining some of the fantasy. Even so, our path through a narrow mountain valley blanketed in snow was breathtaking – when I had a chance to look away from the ski track.

I found Sasha waiting under a bridge of the now-defunct Circum-Baikal Railroad, which marked our exit from the Taiga onto Baikal. After four hours of hard skiing, we are not willing to wait for the others to begin lunch: sandwiches, boiled eggs, and cheese. For desert, we have banana bread and a berry pie. The real treat, though, is the thermosed tea Sasha has brought a long. I mention the crowd on the trail. “From December through February, people go to *Trudnaya* to ski,” Sasha explains, mentioning my favorite ski area near Irkutsk. “Starting in March, everyone goes to Baikal.

“Ten years ago, there weren't so many skiers,” he continues. “Then there was no money or food. Now things are more stable, and people go skiing.”

Our meal is relatively low-key. Other groups still on shore have hatches out to cut firewood for campfires. One man is breaking ice off the lake for heat for water.

The phrase “blanket of white” – cliché though it is – is the only way to describe the landscape. Because we are on a lake, the “land” in front of us is mostly flat (more on that later). The reflection off the snow is so bright that we wear sunglasses like downhill skiers. It takes me some minutes to realize that what I see to the East is not clouds, but blue mountains wrapped in mist. To the south, more prosaic mountains are visible. To the north, there is only white and sky.

Lake Baikal is a narrow wedge in the mountains, growing at the geologically rapid pace of 2 centimeters a year. Some geologists believe it will some day be the world's sixth ocean.

Our friends slowly trickle in. After an hour, Anya is still missing, and there are fewer and fewer skiers emerging from the forest. We decide she has probably stopped for lunch with another group further back. It is getting late, and we still have another 25 kilometers to ski to catch the 7:10 train on the other side, so we pack up our gear and set off.

If traffic jams were common in the woods, here we have all the space we need. A few inches of coarse snow, gleaming snow, resembling crushed glass, covers the frozen water, except in occasional areas where the wind has swept it clean. There, the ice is black, clear and riddled with cracks. I seem to be able to follow cracks in the ice a hundred feet down. I am told that one can often see fish frozen into the ice, but this day I do not see any.

I should not have worried about falling through. The ice on Baikal is so thick, that during the 1904 war with Japan, engineers hurrying to complete the Trans-Siberian railroad laid tracks

directly across the ice. This story is somewhat ruined by the fact that the first train plunged, leaving an 11 mile hole in the ice. The fact that they thought it was possible is, however, telling.

Today it's relatively warm – for winter in Siberia, that is. Here, it often reaches -40 degrees Celcius in the winter. When I left Irkutsk in the morning, my window thermometer read -17. I feel brave wearing only a thin windbreaker and no gloves, but I see men skiing shirtless.

As a scientist – even if a scientist on vacation – I can't help noticing that if schoolchildren were taken skiing across Baikal, the ice itself would serve well as a lesson in plate tectonics. Here and there two plates of ice have been pushed together, raising sharp ridges of ice stretching as far as a kilometer in either direction. The “ice mountains” we see are no more than a foot high, but they can easily reach a couple yards.

Elsewhere, the opposite action has pulled the ice apart a fraction of an inch. Most cracks are hard to spot, as the snow quickly covers them, but many are readily visible. It is impossible to tell how deep they go.

I spend most of the trip learning to skate on skis, which I have never done before. This resembles very much skating on skates, but with skis – if that wasn't obvious already. On flat terrain—such as a frozen lake—one can easily double or triple one's normal speed by skating. It is also incredible fun, if exhausting.

One time, practicing skating, I find myself way out in front of my companions. Exhausted, I decide to lie down for a bit on the ice. It so happens that there are no skiers anywhere nearby, and when I close my eyes, I can hear only my breath. If I stop breathing, I hear nothing.

I am brought back to woken by Vika taking pictures of me. I myself have very few pictures from the trip, as batteries last only a few minutes in the Siberian cold. They can be resuscitated to some degree by warming them in one's hands, but I am too busy skiing to do this much. Vika has special batteries made to resist the cold.

The sun has just set behind the mountains when we reach shore, at a tiny village by the name of Slyudyanka. As exhausted as we are, we have to speed-walk to the station to avoid missing the last train of the night.

There we find Anya. “I thought you were all ahead of me.” She has already been at the station for several hours; she had been hurrying to catch us the whole time. She made the whole trip without food or drink (Sasha had been carrying her lunch contribution in his backpack), and is not in the best mood. On the train, we break out dinner and her usual good spirits return.

A Frenchman by the name of Michel Giles is currently hiking Baikal from South to North, a trip he expected to take 12 days. We skied only the tip. Nonetheless, it is already past noon the next day when I manage to stumble out of bed. It's not so much that my muscles are sore; I just don't feel like moving.

When I decided to move to Irkutsk last fall, the clinching reason was that everyone told me how beautiful Baikal is in the summer. I have yet to see Baikal in summer. But if it overshadows even winter Baikal, I cannot wait. Maybe I'll swim across.

How to get there (optional sidebar).

We took a train from Irkutsk to *Pereyezd*. From there, we skied to Slyudyanka, a village on Baikal's south-western shore. The total cost of bus tickets was negligible (\$1.50), and in fact I never bought a ticket for the return trip, as the conductor neglected to make rounds. I had my own skis, but decent skis can be rented for a song in Irkutsk. Plane tickets direct to Irkutsk is relatively expensive. A more cost-effective and scenic itinerary is to fly to Moscow and take the Trans-Siberian Railroad through the Ural Mountains to Irkutsk (\$100 roundtrip, 3 days each way). Skiing across Baikal is generally possible from mid-February to mid-May, although in recent years the season has been shorter than usual.

More information about visiting Baikal, in summer and winter, can be found at  
[www.baikalex.com](http://www.baikalex.com)  
[www.baikal.eastsib.ru/fgbt](http://www.baikal.eastsib.ru/fgbt)

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