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The Tran-Siberian rolls from Moscow to Irkutsk in Siberia.
Photo: Bill Bachmann/Lonely Planet

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On long trips, it pays to be polite, writes Bruce Holmes.

We've avoided pickpockets at Moscow station, hauled our luggage aboard the train and grabbed top bunks. The Trans-Siberian is rolling at last and we venture to the dining car for beer and vodka.

We have only one drink before the large, fierce-eyed matron mutters in Russian and dims the lights. A blonde waif-like waitress disappears into the shadows. We get the picture: "Time gentlemen, please."

On this leg of our small group journey we'll be on board four nights and three days from Moscow to Irkutsk in Siberia. It's Russia, so the next day we figure it must be time for chess - a drama in which, besides The Matron and The Blonde Waif, there will be four key characters.

The Guide, Australian and 26, is a veteran of 10 such trips and speaks very good Russian. The Queenslander, also 26, has the chess set. A good deal older are Yours Truly and The Brit.

It's neither lunchtime nor dinner so we take a table in the dining car and begin to play. The Matron appears and takes our orders for coffee and drinks but when it becomes clear we're not eating she scowls and says we cannot play chess at the table.

As you'd imagine The Guide can be both diplomatic and assertive. But that doesn't seem to work, as The Matron interrupts The Ashes between The Queenslander and The Brit several times.

The Blonde Waif will not make eye contact, no doubt sensing a diplomatic row in the offing. Yours Truly, older and more diplomatic than The Guide, suggests an ordered retreat to a fall-back position - a corner table nobody wants because it has some obstruction under half of it. Yours Truly's eye contact is humble and tone placating with The Matron who seems to acquiesce in this move, for now.

But as people file in for lunch the situation deteriorates. The Matron declares The Ashes tied at one-all and

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we are at last evicted.

A day passes during which Yours Truly visits the dining car alone for a breakfast omelet and smiles at The Matron, which may well provide an advantage later. That evening The Guide has our 15-strong group booked for a communal dinner and places are set. The Blonde Waif sees us and scurries for cover.

But dinner is a jolly affair with Russian borsch, the broth-like beetroot soup, goulash and more.

What the others in the group don't know, however, is that we boys have bet against each other in a secret contest. Will The Brit and Yours Truly be able to elicit more smiles from the thin and ever-serious Blonde Waif or the dominating Matron than The Guide and Queenslander?

After nine smiles from The Blonde Waif and two laughs from The Matron, The Brit and Yours Truly are well in front. When we order cognacs, we're asked if we want 50 millilitres, and The Brit replies with a grin, "100 millilitres". At that The Matron, our erstwhile dragon lady, pats his ample girth, waves her finger in the negative and positively guffaws. "No 100 millilitres cognacs for you, old son," will suffice as a translation. And the bet is sealed.

Source: The Sun-Herald

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