

# Siberian Intercultural Bridges, Inc.

Formerly Musical Bridges, Inc.

Access, opportunity and good neighbors  
through cultural exchange

A non-profit organization dedicated to bringing access and opportunity to isolated communities in Siberia and Russia's Far East  
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## It's Has Been an Incredible Decade!

Hello, friends! Siberian Bridges\*, now in its 10th year, is still vital and active despite the difficulties of the current funding climate and a markedly transformed global situation. We continue to help our friends and neighbors in Chita, Chita Region and elsewhere in southeastern Siberia, become full and active

members of the global community. (\*NOTE: Musical Bridges was renamed "Siberian Intercultural Bridges" last year to better reflect our direction, but among us we found it to be something of a mouthful, and we began to refer to ourselves as "Siberian Bridges", a more tongue-friendly variant!)

Despite troubling world events, we live in a most encouraging time where the great human wish to be connected is supported by technologies in development only a few years ago—satellite telephone, personal computers, the Internet among others. With these, this dream is now possible for a place as remote as Chita.

I remember my first visit to Chita only 14 years ago and the feeling a little like landing on Mars. I arrived after a long 36 hour train ride from Harbin in northeast China, spending the night in the tiny border hamlet of Manzhouli (now a thriving trading center of over 100,000) having been taken under the wing of 5 trade representatives from Kazakhstan, returning home from their own first trip across this formerly long-closed border. On arrival in Chita, my hosts were happy, but incredulous: why would you bother to come here [unspoken: to this remote nothing of a place]? And this incredulity persisted for my next several visits as pianist and teacher. But with the steady stream of our teachers going to Chita Region since 1995, and a steady stream of scholars and interns coming to the US, which we encouraged along with a myriad of other contacts and projects large and small, we became

recognized as a significant influence. No longer are our teachers asked, "Why are you here?" No longer is the thought of academic travel a pipe dream, nor is cooperation with people on the other side of the globe. Just a few weeks ago, a birthday greeting from teachers in Chita was sent to Jean Dickinson, our Secretary-Treasurer who traveled and lectured in Chita in 2000. It said, "We have always been taught to think globally; you have taught us how to ACT LOCALLY. Thank you so much!" There it is in a nutshell, that energy, that Can Do spirit. Acting like neighbors, we become neighbors. Our actions reverberate far and long—influencing, informing, inspiring.

Along with our successes, however, is the constant struggle to keep our heads above water financially. We have always operated on a shoestring, our efforts until now underwritten in large part by one generous donor. We are working hard to broaden that support. Last year our teacher program became "self-funding" (the teachers underwrite their expenses while we make all the arrangements) and our new travel program on its personal, yet very affordable, scale will begin to bring in new funds. But we still rely

**Acting like neighbors, we become neighbors.**

primarily on individuals who recognize the need for such community-building in the world as that to which Siberian Bridges is committed. We know Chita and the rest of southeastern Siberia is far, far away and we seem to have problems enough of our own, but our greatness as a people has been that we reach out beyond our problems. We are a "Yes!" people, we are a "How can I help?" people. Please give generously! Talk us up! Or better yet, give generously, talk us up, AND come to Chita with us!! Read more about going to Russia with Siberian Bridges in our Executive Director Tatyana's message following.

We are, indeed, all in this together!  
Tom Dickinson  
Chairman and Founder

## A Beautiful Friendship

**“We now offer regular exchange visits to Siberia for anyone in the US who wants to join” .**



For many years, Siberian Bridges have been placing volunteer teachers from the US in schools throughout the Chita region. We also have been sending books and supplies, and disseminating information about the region in the US. But we have always believed that to follow our mission, which in essence, is to help South-Eastern Siberia overcome its isolation resulting from its geography and complex history, we had to follow our heart and facilitate as many face-to-face meetings between the East and the West as possible.

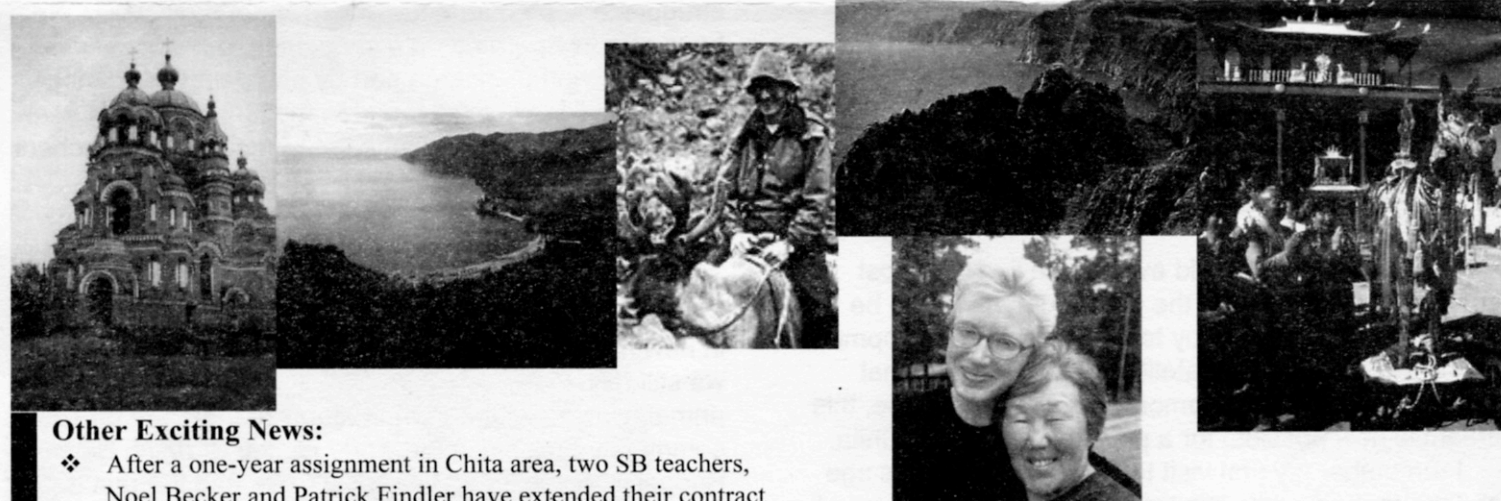
It is finally happening. Starting in July 2003, we plan to offer regular educational visits to Siberia for anyone in the US who wants to join. The trips are designed to give both Russians and Americans a chance to experience each other's culture—and each other—intimately. They will be a unique learning opportunity for both sides.

Our first group departs the US on July 10 and will stay in Russia through July 23. The first trip participants are community college instructors and students from Michigan and Wisconsin who represent a variety of disciplines and interests. The group will sightsee in Moscow for three days and will then fly to Siberia where the Americans will meet with local educators, visit Russian and Buryat (S-E Siberia indigenous people) village homes, boat on Lake Baikal, the world's deepest fresh water lake, raft, fish, hike, tour ancient and modern Buddhist temples and sacred sites and attend ethnic festivals and performances. (To see the full itinerary, visit **Programs** at [www.siberianbridges.org](http://www.siberianbridges.org)).

We hope that this experience will not only be an eye-opener, but will lead to new contacts and hopefully, new relationships.

We also hope to send the second American group in August and we invite you to join. You can be of any profession, age and fitness level. Bring your interest and we'll do the rest for a memorable visit to this remote, beautiful, and virtually untouched place on the other side of the world where there are a lot more bears than people, shamanism co-exists with modernism and the culture is a unique brew of indigenous Buryat, Russian and Buddhist ingredients. It stole our hearts and we are sure it will steal yours!

To join the August 2003 or later trips, please, contact Tatyana Puchkova at [puchkovt@kirtland.edu](mailto:puchkovt@kirtland.edu)



### Other Exciting News:

- ❖ After a one-year assignment in Chita area, two SB teachers, Noel Becker and Patrick Findler have extended their contract for another year in Siberia.
- ❖ An article about her Siberian experience by Jessica Jacobson, a SB 2001-02 volunteer teacher in Chita region, “Cold Days, Good Grammar in Siberia” has been published in the May 2003 issue of Student Traveler magazine. You can read the article at [www.siberianbridges.org](http://www.siberianbridges.org) under the “Teacher fellowship program” or at [www.studenttraveler.com](http://www.studenttraveler.com).
- ❖ An article written in English by a young Buryat student of Jessica Jacobson has been published in the winter 2003 issue of the US-based New Moon girl's magazine and can be viewed on-line at [www.siberianbridges.org](http://www.siberianbridges.org).
- ❖ Siberian Bridges has partnered with Peace Troupe International to bring new programs in the area of peace and conflict resolution to South-East Siberia.  
To learn more about Peace Troupe, visit [www.culturalanimator.org](http://www.culturalanimator.org)
- ❖ You can still join the August 2003 educational visit to Russia with Siberian Bridges. The trip includes travel to Moscow and Lake Baikal. Details are available at [www.siberianbridges.org](http://www.siberianbridges.org), under “Programs”. To sign up, e-mail Tatyana Puchkova at [puchkovt@kirtland.edu](mailto:puchkovt@kirtland.edu).



It's not easy to collapse the experiences of an ordinary year into a page, and it's that much harder for a year as full of experiences as mine was, spent half a world away from home, in an alien environment. I don't have the space here to tell the stories I'd like to tell, but I'll try to give you an idea of what I've learned and experienced, and how I've grown.

The Aginsk-Buryat Autonomous Region is an interesting area on any estimation. It is one of a few areas of the Russian Federation set aside for the native populations existing before Russian expansion. The dominant religions, along with Christianity, are Buddhism and Shamanism, and Buryat, the language of the ethnically Mongolian people residing in the area, is spoken nearly as much as Russian.

I've gotten used to living close to what was so strange to me nine months ago. People regularly consult with shamans or lamas, or both, before any major step and at each new year. An acquaintance of mine was (temporarily) cured of alcoholism by a local shaman, and I have an appointment when I return to Aginsk with a local expert in Tibetan medicine, to see what he can do about my hypoglycemia. The sister of one of my closest friends recently became a shaman. More shamans channeled the ancestor spirits belonging to the family in a night ceremony, fed them their favorite foods, and consulted with them on the future of the shaman-to-be. I've begun to understand why anthropologists insist so strongly on the value of field work, time spent observing another people and living with them - it's not only to disorient you from your own environment, and render you more open and observant, less dismissive; it's so you can see the odd practices of others as part of a human way of life that could easily have been yours, but for the accident of your birth. How what is strange becomes familiar while remaining strange is itself a bizarre process, and has taught me tolerance, and interest.

Aginsk is a rural area, and many families live on what animals they can keep and what vegetables they can grow in their yards. After an uncertain period after my arrival, I settled in with the family of a fifth-grade student, where we have a cow and a few chickens, plus a few head of cattle on a nearby beef farm, and we are growing potatoes, carrots, beets, and cabbage. Nearly the whole of every meal I ate was the product of those few square meters I lived on. I've even learned how to do much of this work myself: how to slaughter a sheep, feed and milk a cow, plant potatoes, care for them and dig them up, dig a toilet, chop wood and heat a house with a stove.

One of the most important things I've learned, living on less, closer to my needs, is how simple those needs are. Running water, central heating, indoor toilets, fancy restaurants, none of those are indispensable to me, it seems, and after a while I didn't even notice them being gone. It strikes me especially now, having returned home, how much of what surrounds me is pure luxury, and how well-sealed I am from food production and waste disposal, two processes vital to the life of any human being in any time and place.

**"I'm returning to Siberia... because there is no place like Aginsk on earth..., because coming there was one of the best decisions I've ever made.")**

I've gained a lot, and I have memories from this year that will last me my entire lifetime, but I think I'm giving as well as taking. Most people from Aginsk have little hope of ever travelling to other countries, apart from northern China, where most of the merchandise for sale in Aginsk is obtained. My students are full of curiosity about America, which I try to satisfy as best I can, and I, by my presence, can help them to give a face to what they constantly see on the news and in dubbed sitcoms and movies. Every person I meet wants to know about salaries in the US, about Iraq and George Bush, my opinion of Russia, Russian women and Russian vodka, about my home, and why I've left, and come to such an out-of-the-way place, and why I'd return after I've gotten to know it.

I'm returning to Siberia because my life there is more peaceful and simpler, without the stress of a big city and the numbing effect our more civilized life has had on me; because I, with no qualifications and without any extraordinary qualities, am able to give what no one else there can; because there is no place like Aginsk on earth, where information age post-communist capitalism meets living pagan and Buddhist traditions; because I've found close friends and had experiences which will remain with me for the rest of my life; because coming there was one of the best decisions I've ever made. And without the support of Siberian Bridges, it would never have been possible.

*Patrick Findler has just completed his one year of teaching in Aginsk and will be returning there in September for another year.*



By Michael Shipley

## A Chita Look

*Michael Shipley is SB in-country staff in Chita. Originally from California, Michael has been living in Chita for the last eight years.*

Chita is one of the lesser-known Siberian cities along the Trans-Siberian railroad. Whereas most everybody has heard of Novosibirsk, and most know of Vladivostock, it is a rare conversation indeed in which mention of Chita pops up. This is true even throughout most of Russia.

Why the obscurity? First, Chita is a long way from just about any major landmark or major Russian city. It is so far east of world-famous Lake Baikal as to enjoy few of the benefits such as tourism or the presence of international NGOs that Baikal attracts. It is so far west of Russia's Pacific coast that few people in that region ever visit Chita. Under the Tsars, Chita was used as a place of exile owing to its isolation and severe winter climate. Under Communism, it was a closed city, barred to foreigners in order to protect the secrecy of the large military establishment here. Under capitalism, (meaning, in the years since 'perestroika'), Chita has been regularly overlooked by international corporations—with only a few exceptions—as being too economically insignificant to warrant investment.

Though this may hardly be the stuff glowing travel brochures are made of, people who have visited or stayed for any length of time in Chita almost universally like it. At first blush this may seem surprising. There is no Red Square, no famous cathedrals nor Tsarist winter retreats. There is simply a small city full of people trying to make a life amidst the chaotic and unpredictable change which has become a constant of Russian life. And, of course, there is friendship and hospitality. And this, perhaps more than any other factor, is what seems to prompt otherwise ordinary Americans to return—and in a few cases—to stay in Chita.

But what does one see in Chita? What is daily life like?

Chita is a city of about 350,000 in which most people live in large gray concrete apartment buildings of five to 10 stories in height. This means that a population, which in a typical US city would be distributed over a fairly large territory blanketed with private homes, occupies a densely-populated area of only about 20 square miles. On the western side of town open steppe stretches on for miles. To the east, low hills are covered by forests that continue unchecked across terrain dotted with occasional lakes and rivers. Government-supported nature reserves attempt to preserve the best of the region's flora and fauna, and to date very few foreigners have ventured into these huge tracts of untouched natural beauty. Many Chita residents take special pride and pleasure in "their nature", as they like to call it. And if a visitor to Southern California must see Disneyland to say that he has properly appreciated the place, a visitor to Chita must go to one of the pristine lakes in the region. There he will enjoy the rustic diversions that typify a Siberian summer—smoked fish, swimming, socializing, the banya (sauna) and "shashlik", or Russian

**"Chita could be likened to a cousin one might have, who is neither rich nor famous, but whose company you nevertheless enjoy more than most"**



**Siberian Bridges extends gratitude to the following members for their support:**

Mr. & Mrs. Walter Small, Jim Sinclair,  
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Ginger Jones, Dietrick Snell, Carolyn Nickles,  
Joelle Perz, Dan and Kathryn Kuehn,  
Charles Pfund, Doris Cotton



**Shipley continued . . . . .**

shishkabob.

Life in Chita has in some ways changed markedly over the last 10 years. Whereas in 1991 one could find no private businesses, and fewer imported automobiles, in 2003 both are now so prevalent as to already seem excessive. But along with the new wealth, have come new problems. The gap between rich and poor, which previously wasn't even an issue, has continued to grow so much, that it is not uncommon for the woman selling you a pound of meat to be earning fully 100 to 1000 times less per month than the owner of the store in which she works. Drugs have taken hold here as well. Discarded hypodermic needles litter the ground on otherwise scenic wooded paths, and impoverished schoolchildren in increasing numbers turn to sniffing glue for diversion. And there is a creeping erosion of identity, of national pride, that has come with the influx of western culture. The MTV mentality and material pursuits are threatening to supplant the virtues of family and community which have for generations held society together.

Chita suffers from all of these ills, but it also shows signs of growing in ways that give hope for the future. Youth groups have formed to promote positive values. Numerous non-profit organizations attempt to address the social problems resulting from the recent changes. The youth in the universities maintain optimism about the future. One English student recently remarked, "I don't think Russia will change completely in the next five years, but it *will* change, and we have to contribute to that process."

Perhaps Chita, and the towns in the Chita region, remind visiting westerners of the basic human qualities which we all value most. And the ability of the people here to hold onto those qualities in the face of numerous hardships and uncertainties engenders a certain respect for the people as a whole. Chita could be likened to a cousin one might have, who is neither rich nor famous, but whose company you nevertheless enjoy more than most.

You can donate to Siberian Bridges online by going to [www.siberianbridges.org](http://www.siberianbridges.org) and clicking "donate"

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