

# RURAL TOURISM

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# INTRODUCTION

Lake Baikal is 25 million years old. It has seen wars and tsars, as well as the world's most famous train: the Trans-Siberian.

And now, with 2025 in full swing, it will be an impassive observer of what will happen to our characters on this journey to deepest Russia, to a rural tourism destination from which – though the tourists do not realize it – there is no return ticket.

## 01. THE LIST

### Lara

There is a village near Lake Baikal called Irkutsk. It is lovely, clean, and dull.

When Lara thinks back to her childhood, the first thing that comes to mind is the first time she flew on an airplane. Her grandfather went with her, explaining that she would feel butterflies in her stomach when they took off. When it landed in Siberia, she promised herself that she would always fly.

However, she found Irkutsk oppressive. She felt closed in.

She needed to get out of there, and she did. As soon as she turned 18, she set up a travel agency especially for rich people. She called it “The Blue Eye.”

After ten years of hard work, her agency was the busiest in Russia and across Europe. Her plans included becoming the top agent in Asia.

What they did not include was falling in love with Ivan. The best things happen when they are not planned.

It is two o'clock in the morning of the Russian summer and Lara wakes up with a start. Silently, she heads to the computer. The light of the screen shows the list of the new travelers coming in August. She starts to read the list until she hears Ivan's sleepy voice.

“Lara, what are you doing? It's two o'clock in the morning.” Ivan tries to sound commanding so that his partner will listen to him.

“I love your hair when you wake up in the morning.” Lara pokes fun at his coal-black hair sticking up.

That comment gets Ivan out of bed, and he tousles her red hair. Lara had always said that coal and Siberian forests in autumn are a bad combination. They were nothing alike. She craved travel; he fought to stay on solid ground. She was vegan; he was adept at devouring beef stroganoff. Nevertheless, there was something that united them: their sense of humor.

Ivan grabs her computer and takes it over to the bedroom window.

“I'll kill you if you pitch it, Ivan.” Lara tries not to laugh.

“And what do I get if I don't?” Ivan is inching the window open on the starry night sky.

“Beef stroganoff with mushrooms and sour cream?” Lara knows it is Ivan's favorite dish; she already has the ingredients in the fridge.

“Blackmailing me with food?” Ivan walks over to Lara and returns her computer while his slender pianist's fingers gently brush against Lara's white breasts.

For a moment, Lara forgets about the list of travelers and immerses herself in her body's sweet cries with the black and white keys. The notes intensify; their sustained flatted sounds float out the window, lulling the distant seals.

Two hours later, Lara peruses the list of the people who will be her family for 15 days. She had always felt that there should be a family vibe that would build trust among the travelers for the group to work.

Philippe and Kathleen Anderson. A couple from New Zealand.

Allan and Belinda Crother. A couple from Tasmania.

Lee Ki-Woo and Haneul Sang-Ho. Friends from South Korea.

Marguerite Deuras. From Paris. The widow of the previous French president.

Scarlett Dern. A popular actor from New York.

The language understood by all: English.

Known allergies: Kathleen is allergic to penicillin and Scarlett to nuts.

The dawn gradually conceals the stars while Lara savors a honey-sweetened hazelnut. The light from the computer screen flicks off, and a chilling silence causes Lara to tremble. The howling of the wolves marks the beginning of a cold Siberian Monday.

## 02. ALLAN AND BELINDA (Tasmania)

### Belinda

Belinda is doing her PhD in ethology on Tasmania, which is why they've moved from Sydney to Hobart, the capital. Her attraction to the Tasmanian pademelon, Tasmanian devil, tiger quoll, and eastern ground parrot is nothing compared to her conviction that she will find proof demonstrating that the thylacine – or Tasmanian wolf – was not extinct.

At 35, she no longer fears anything; she has lost her entire family to accidents and neurological illnesses. All she had left was Allan, her husband, so now she can take a dip on the banks of the Franklin River without worrying about answering her cell phone every five minutes.

Though 20 years her senior, Allan is – fortunately – in fine health. Their marriage is the envy of friends and strangers.

Belinda is turning all this over in her mind while she heads to Kirk's house; a local, he claims that he has proof of the marsupial.

As she approaches his cabin, her heart begins to pound. Managing to prove that specimens of thylacines still remain in remote places could be crucial to her doctorate.

The door is open and a man smoking a pipe greets her.

"Mr. Kirk, I presume."

"Pleased to meet you, Belinda. Please, have a seat. You're younger and prettier than I imagined."

Belinda's mane of dark hair allows for glimpses of her violet eyes.

"You have no idea how hard it was for me to find you." Belinda removes her jacket, drops her backpack on the floor, and sinks happily into the comfortable armchair facing

Kirk. Although bothered by the smoke from his pipe, she ignores it and starts to look at the photos the elderly man hands her.

"I took them last month when I heard it barking and growling. Just having its picture taken scared it."

"My God, do you know what this proves? Look at that thick tail that's just like a kangaroo's."

"That's right, but it only comes out when there's a full moon."

"Are you kidding?" Belinda thinks that Kirk is trying to pull one over on her. For a millisecond, she thinks that the photos could be faked but dismisses the idea when she wonders what possible interest in lying could this serene man smiling at her have?

"Would you like a soda?" She seems pale and nervous to Kirk. He is not a very friendly man, but the woman amuses him.

After they examined the photos closely, the elderly man invites Belinda to lunch. The conversation flows smoothly. Kirk is crazy about platypuses. She says barely a word as she listens to everything he knows about animal behavior without having once stepped foot in a university.

When it was time for dessert, Belinda feels she can fully trust Kirk and suggests that they meet again.

"By the way, Kirk, I have an idea. I wouldn't want to abuse your hospitality, but what do you think about me coming by next month during the full moon and you taking me over the route where you found the wolf?"

"Deal! But why next month?" Kirk was becoming fond of the girl; she reminded him of his granddaughter.

"My husband's bought a trip to Russia, near Lake Baikal. I'll come back when I return, if I'm not a bother. Of course, I'll pay for any lost time."

"Don't even think about it! At my age, young lady, I've got too much time on my hands. Besides, my granddaughter is coming in August. She'll love to come along."

The smoke from the pipe cloaks the cabin with mystery, while Belinda wonders where Kirk's wife is. A woman's jacket hung on the door makes her think that she has gone out.

All of a sudden, the door opens and a woman of Kirk's age enters.

"Kirk, the doctor told you that you can't smoke. Excuse me, you must be Belinda," the elderly woman says in a velvety voice.

I get up to greet her and then I see the light of my cell phone. I have six missed calls from Allan.

## **Allan**

Allan is a palliative care doctor in Tasmania. He used to work in Sidney, but with his wife's doctorate, they decided to move there.

Allan sets off to Inspire Hospital at a slow pace while recalling how hard it was for Belinda to come to the island after her mother passed away. At 70, Alzheimer's is very fast. The organs fail, and the memory inexorably begins to dim.

Inspire Hospital's architecture is made entirely of glass, so light floods all the rooms, making the stay cozier. However, this is all altogether pointless in Allan's department as his patients are already terminally ill.

Allan walks through long bright white corridors until he reaches the stairs leading to his department.

"You don't take the elevator, Allan?" a blond young man cuts him off with a smile.

"I'm 55, Marc. I need to take care of myself," Allan strokes his heavy beard while he takes the file Marc hands to him.

“These are the latest results of the patient who was admitted yesterday. The transaminases are still really high. We think he may go into liver failure at any time.”

“What did the family say?” Allan continues walking and reading the results. Marc follows him quickly up the stairs.

“They don’t want any palliative care, Allan.”

“Why not? Don’t they understand their mother is suffering?” Allan becomes exasperated as he speaks.

“They belong to a cult.”

“What the hell, Marc! Which goddamn one?” Allan lowers his voice because they are close to the hallway where room 666 is, and they can make out the family members in the bright hallway.

“It’s called The Children of the Frozen Sea,” Marc murmurs.

“You messing with me?”

“No, they’re from northern Finland. They believe that pain is positive for the soul. Medicines are drugs that make it impossible to reach the sea that they believe in, a kind of Nirvana. But that’s not the worst part.”

“Spit it out, Marc. How much worse can it get?”

“The only person who spoke English is his grandson, and he had to leave urgently because of a problem in his company.” Marc drops his voice even further when they reach the family.

“They only speak Finnish. This is a nightmare.” Allan sees Marc motioning him over to introduce him.

Allan greets them and enters the room. Lying in bed is a tiny, fragile old woman staring into space. Allan goes over to her and gives her hand a squeeze. It is nothing but skin and bones, but the old woman tries to manage a smile.

Then he remembers: his wife Belinda knows Finnish. Even if only by phone, she could serve as a translator.

He leaves the room in search of coverage. Marc follows him.

Allan calls his wife six times in a row, but there is no answer. She must be in the middle of the mountains, with the ethologist of the non-existing wolves.

Nothing. “Impossible. We’ll have to wait, Marc. She’s in a cabin with an ethologist. There must be no coverage there.”

“Allan, if you want, I believe there’s a Finnish nurse in Pediatrics.”

“Shit. What took you so long?” Allan sighs in relief.

A few minutes later, Marc arrives with a nurse on his arm. They are whispering, and he appears to be explaining the situation to her.

They come closer, and Allan blanches when he realizes that he knows the young woman.

“Allan, this is Ingrid.” Marc pronounces the letters in “Ingrid” as though it were life itself. He clearly feels attracted to her, which is why he did not notice the change in Allan’s complexion.

“We already know each other, Marc. Hello, Ingrid.”

“I can’t believe it. What are you doing here? I’ve only been substituting for a few days and I don’t know half the staff. Which department are you in, Allan?”

Allan does not answer; he tries to shake her hand, but she declines.

Marc answers for him.

“In Palliative Care, Ingrid...”. Before he finishes the sentence, Marc watches in bewilderment as the nurse leaves, hurling insults.

Marc does not understand what is going on. He watches closely as his boss heads to a cigarette machine, leaving him with the words still in his mouth.

Allan tries to open the pack and heads to the hospital garden.

“Allan... what do I do with the family?” Marc looks desperate when he sees that his boss is leaving without any explanation.

“I don’t know, Marc. As soon as I finish this cigarette, I’m going home. Fill in for me today,” Allan does not look the younger man in the face.

Marc descends the stairs and heads to Pediatrics. After a few minutes, he finds Ingrid. She’s sitting on a chair, crying.

“What’s going on, Ingrid?” Marc puts his hand on her shoulder to calm her down.

“The man you work for is a monster. He killed two old ladies.”

Marc sits down by her side. The light from the hospital begins to disappear. Black clouds threaten a big storm.

### 03. SCARLETT DERN (New York)

#### Scarlett

People think that the life of an actor is fun. They do not think about the six o’clock early morning wake-ups, nor the tons of makeup that does not let your skin breathe. This latter is the reason for the premature aging typical of this profession.

Scarlett’s 25 years still give her no cause for concern, so she starts applying the current *eyeliner trend: orange floating liner* on her eyelids. She brushes her eyebrows and combs the dark roots in her platinum blond hair. Fashion is absurd. Before, she could not have gone outside looking like this. People would have thought she was a slob. Now, looking this way is chic.

She smiles at herself in the mirror while thinking about all this. She puts on a two-piece black *Versace* and goes outside, not before grabbing her pink *Dolce & Gabbana* purse.

Incredibly for this early hour, all the taxis are busy, so she puts on a pair of tennis shoes she always carries and stores her high heels in a small but roomy enough backpack.

When she reaches the set, she is ecstatic to see what top designer Elie Saab had designed in a film studio. A surrealistic house with curtains resembling waterfalls and lamps like marble puzzles. The red and black gives it a touch of mystery.

Scarlett bursts in; she is running late.

“Scarlett, so you finally decide to show up,” yells Marcello, the director.

“Marcello, I’m only two minutes late,” she tries to answer mildly.

After Fellini, Marcello is the most perfectionist of all the Italian directors. He is obsessed with punctuality. He rejects the girl with a glance. He is influenced by the fact that he had made several advances towards her. He came on to her in her camper, he sent her orchids, he even bought her the most expensive perfume in Paris. It did not work.

Scarlette and Marcello begin to argue as usual, so the other actors go over their scripts. The artistic directors tweak the lighting, and the makeup artist slathers lip *gloss* on Scarlett’s lips, oblivious to the yelling.

“What’s your deal? I’m doing everything I can! I don’t sleep; I’m spending hours in the hospital. My grandmother is dying, Marcello.”

Marcello’s expression gentles and he walks over to Scarlett.

“I know, I know; you warned me when I hired you. Excuse me,” Marcello strokes her hair, abandoning his attraction to her and, finally, understanding her.

The sight of the director’s human side elicits silence in the studio.

“Show’s over. Everyone get to work. Either you nail the shot on the first take, or I fire half of the team,” Marcello returns to his usual tone and Scarlett heads to the set.

“Clapperboard 66, *The Non-existent Hill*, action.” A kid makes the sharp clap to begin.

In the movie, Scarlett is lying on her lover’s bed reading letters. The camera moves closer to her face, and the actor’s tears merge with the letters.

Just then, the director’s assistant walks over and whispers to him.

“I’m sorry, Marcello. The hospital just called. Scarlett’s grandmother just died. Should we cut the scene?”

“No way, Greta. Let’s let her finish.”

Marcello watches as Scarlett reaches out to the black dress; just then, a man walks on stage.

Though it may sound strange, the director is not thinking about her sensuality. He continues to film, but his mind is filled with the smell of the oranges he grandmother used to give when he was a child.