

Based on July 2008 research.

Kodar (Кодар)

Duration	6-7 days
Distance	70 km
Difficulty	hard
Start	Chara
Finish	Sakukan train station
Transport	all-terrain truck
Time zone	+9 GMT
Summary	A strenuous trek through taiga ascends the wild Middle Sakukan valley to a former Gulag camp, then through spectacular alpine scenery, crosses the Baltic Pass at 2600 m, to finally return to BAM railway line.

The Stanovoy Mountains east of Baikal rise up to 3,000 metres, and soaring Kodar (*The Rock* in Evenk language) is its highest range. From distance, especially in rainy weather, it justly reminds one of Tolkien's Mordor. Remote location and rough terrain present significant challenges for a trekker, so exploring this part of taiga can be very rewarding. Even in the peak season there are very few tourists.

NATURAL HISTORY

Kodar and the Stanovoy Mountains as a whole, lie on the watershed between the Arctic and Pacific Ocean. Main forest formation in Kodar is taiga, which reaches 1.500 metres and above this the terrain consist either of rocks or tundra. There are only 18,8 km² glaciers in Kodar. However, in spite of global warming, they are not melting as rapidly as elsewhere in the world. If a glacier is sufficiently cold and the surface melts a little, this water will freeze again. This new ice is called "superimposed" by glaciologists and is astonishingly clear. In Kodar, glaciers can be found at 1,800 metres and above and it has been proved their mass is sustained not by snow accumulation, rather by creation of superimposed ice. Even when you walk through lower parts of the valleys, you will encounter frozen masses of clear ice along the river banks.

PLANNING

It is recommended to do the trek in the direction described, as the Baltic Pass is easier to climb from the north. Moreover, it's more convenient to finish the trek on the BAM railway (Sakukan station) than in the middle of the swamps if you wanted to do the trek in reverse.

In the mountains you will be entirely on your own. Under no circumstances attempt the trek alone. Travelling in a group, will allow you to share the cost truck transport into and away from the mountains.

The nearest well-equipped shop, is in Severobaikalsk (1000 km away) so its essential to bring all the food and medical supplies you need.

The trek ends at Sakukan station. However, it's important to double-check the times of trains stopping at there if you wish to hitch a lift. Otherwise, you will need to have arranged transportation from there to Novaya Chara in advance. If you don't, you'll have to walk 30 kms along the swamps with no fresh water available.

Warning

The ice-cold rivers of Kodar can be very strong and dangerous to cross. According to the tourist department in Chara, every year a couple of trekkers die in accidents. **Always use a rope to secure yourself.**

After heavy rainfall, fords on Middle and Higher Sakukan described in this chapter, may be difficult or impossible to negotiate forcing you to extend the walk.

When to trek

In June there can still be snow in the upper parts of mountains. Summer (July to mid-August), provides the warmest weather but also hordes of mosquitoes and blackflies. By Autumn (mid-August to mid-September) most of the insects die but temperatures drop and fresh snow may fall.

What to bring

A rope is an absolute necessity on the trek, not only for river crossing but also for roping yourself together in the event of bad conditions on the pass. Taiga also provides a lot of firewood – bring an axe. When camping above 1,500 m in tundra you need a cooking stove. The description of this trek includes GPS

coordinates of some useful landmarks – while carrying a GPS is useful it's not necessary.

In summer, the valley of Chara and the lower parts of Kodar are full of swarms of mosquitoes – carry lots of repellent with high *deet* concentration (best ones are Russian-made, at least 25%) – anti-insect coils and of course a good mosquito net.

Maps

The only ones available are Soviet military 1:100.000 from the 80s. They are generally accurate, though the roads on the swaps around Chara can be little out-of-date. The only place to find the maps is the Internet. The trail described can be found on sheets O-50-116 (Sallikit - Саллики́т) and O-50-117 (Chara – Цара) at: <http://mapo50.narod.ru/map1/io50116.html> and <http://mapo50.narod.ru/map1/io50117.html>.

Guides

There are no professional ones as such but the tourist department in Chara should be able to recommend someone reliable who speaks basic English.

ACCESS TOWNS

Chara & Novaya Chara are 16 km apart and before starting the trek you will have to visit both. Completing the formalities with the police, administration and arranging a truck can take a whole day.

Novaya Chara (Новая Чара)

The town is a major BAM station, build mostly for the builders of the railway. After the completion of the works, half of the population left, turning the 4,700 town into a desolate place. Among the empty, shabby Soviet blocks, you can still find a huge concrete framework which was meant to become the biggest department store in Siberia (for 5,000 customers).

In the last few years it huge mineral resources have been discovered in the close vicinity of Novaya Chara, which could provide the town with a chance to develop once again. Udokan is said to be Russia's largest untapped copper field. Nearby Chineyskoye, contains huge deposits of titanium and the largest deposit in the world of the rare element - vanadium. A railway line is currently being built from the latter to Novaya Chara.

Natural History Museum (8 am – 4 pm; ☎ 23643) near the station provides more explanation in Russian. It has a small exhibition about BAM and the Gulag workcamp in Kodar “the Marble Gorge”.

Hotel Kodar (per person RUR 300) in front of the station is the only hotel in town. Rooms are reminiscence of the times of Brezhnev and usually there is no water. Eat in the restaurant on the ground floor only at your own risk.

According to Russian law, before leaving for the mountains you need to **register at the police station**.

Getting There & Away

All long-distance trains in Russia come and go on Moscow time (GMT +3). However, local trains (electricikas) depart on local time. Because ‘local trains’ service journeys to up to 2000-km (!) this may lead to some confusion – always double-check the departure time of your connection.

Travelling east from Chara: the direct train 076E from Moscow to Tinda departs every odd day of the month at 9.47 pm Moscow time (4.47 am local time, 13 hours, 631/1471 RUR 2nd/1st class). On Sundays there is a train at 4.25 am MT (11.25 am LT). You can also use train 097C from Kislovodsk in the Caucasus to Tinda.

Travelling west on BAM, catch the daily 1.15 pm 655I to Severobaikalsk (15 hours, 615/1439 RUR 2nd/1st) or every even day 075E to Moscow at 8.45 pm (3.45 am local time, 105 hrs, 3710/8972 RUR 2nd/1st). Train 097E to Kislovodsk departs on Mondays at 2.26 pm MT (9.26 pm LT, 133 hrs, 8817 RUR 1st class only).

A couple of times a day short-distance trains to Hani and Kuanda run on BAM.

Minibuses ply the route between both Charas (20 minutes, RUR 40) every 40 minutes. The stop is in front of the railway station.

Chara (Чара)

This village on the picturesque Chara river is smaller than Novaya Chara but the headquarters of the administrative district is based there. It consists of typical Siberian architecture, wide muddy streets, a couple of shops, a post office and loads of mosquitoes. It's also possible to spot some amphibians near the houses.

Tourist department (8 am – 4 pm, ☎ 21517, 8 *Pionyearskiy Str*) in the administration office registers all trekkers and rafters heading for Kodar (free of charge). You need to provide your names, emergency contacts, route and planned date of completing the trek. In return, you get a fairly useful but schematical map of Kodar. When you safely come back from the trek, you must inform the office, otherwise a rescue might be launched. A helpful director can be reached at home (☎ 21199, 14 *Udonkanskaya Str*).

Friendly foresters in their **camp** just outside the village can provide basic shelter in a Siberian hut (RUR 100 per person). While there you can chop wood and prepare a fire for the best sauna of your life (free of charge). To reach the camp, turn right just before the bridge, continue 50 metres along the sandy road and look for a gate on the right.

Otherwise, it's possible and safe to camp anywhere in Chara.

Getting There & Away

It's easiest to catch a minibus to Novaya Chara from the bridge on the outskirts of village. Just waive it down.

Around Chara

Charskiye Pyaski (Чарские Пески) five kilometres away from Chara are spectacular sand dunes called "the Siberian desert". The dunes cover an area of 35 km² rising 40 metres above the river and provide a great view of the Kodar range in sunny weather. Some tourist report that in the rain the view is disappointing. Getting to the dunes requires crossing the deep Chara river on a truck (if the water level permits). RUR 1500 return is a reasonable price.

GETTING TO/FROM THE TREK

Chara lies only 20 km from the gateway of the Middle Sakukan valley but the road leads through the mosquito-infested wetlands and includes fording some deep streams. It takes at least a day to cover the distance on foot and is especially tiring after rain, so most trekking groups rent a 6WD truck to skip this section. A ride itself, is one of the highlights of the trip, as the monstrous 6-ton machine tears through the swamps immersed in two metres of water smashing anything in its way like a tank. A ride lasts 3-4 hours and costs RUR 6000

(regardless how many people squeeze into the cargo hold) but it is worth every single ruble. In Chara ask around for a man named Danilov, who arranges transports for tourists. It takes a couple of hours to prepare a truck for the journey, so it's wise to arrange it in advance through the tourist department. Otherwise, assume you'll have to spend a night in Chara. If you decide to walk, it's easiest to stick to the northern bank of Middle Sakukan river.

THE TREK

Day 1: Along the valley of Middle Sakukan.

7 hours, 15 km, 500 m ascent

This will be a long and tiring day in the taiga but the prize is worth it: much fewer mosquitoes at the campsite because of higher elevation!

Depending on the conditions, the truck will drop you somewhere around a place with elevation 981,7 (as marked on the map; 56°54,495'N, 117°53,158'E). You should be able to see the first ice blocks on the banks of river Sakukan. From there, follow the valley along a clearly visible foot path. Soon you will pass **a couple of crumbling remnants of wooden buildings**, which probably used to serve as administration offices and guardhouses for the Marble Gorge workcamp. The route ascents gradually through the forest, every hour or so crossing the side streams. Some of them may look scarier than they really are. When required let one person fix a rope before you wade through.

After 4-5 hours you should reach **remnants of a bridge** (which is still marked on the maps). On the other side of the valley, you can see the entrance to the Marble Gorge towering high above you. It's easy to lose the trail here. Don't be fooled into continuing along the river bank. Look for the path that leaves the river and continues in the forest a couple of hundred metres away.

Another two long hours trek brings you to a place where the river and valley fork (*map: 1502,0*). Cross the waist-deep ford here. Take care, it is the widest and the most dangerous on the whole trail.

On the other bank there is an old wooden hut here when you can shelter from the insects for the night.

Day 2: Side trip to Marble Gorge workcamp

6 hours, 12 km, 500 m ascent/descent

Staying on the hut-side of the river, head 4 kms back down the river to the remnants of the bridge (1.5 hrs). On the way you'll have to cross a small stream which is quite easy to tackle.

From the bridge, which used to be part of the workcamp infrastructure, the trail is unclear and hard to find. Climb for 15 minutes straight up the slope to find an old road traversing the mountain. Continue left uphill along it for 20 minutes, until you come upon a crossroads. You should take a path to the right (the road straight becomes a dead end, after it crosses a stream). The trail among the trees becomes very steep but after half an hour (1 km) you reach the treeless entrance to the valley. From there, it's another 45 minutes along the rocky stream bed to the buildings of the camp.

Marble Gorge workcamp

Marble Gorge (Мраморное Ущелье) is only a name and in fact, the workcamp lies at the end of the valley. From three sides, jagged stone walls rise up to 2,500 m, from the fourth, it is guarded by a narrow gate, making it a perfect natural prison. In September 1948, in the heat of nuclear arms race, the Soviets discovered huge uranium deposits here. According to reports, "*mushrooms in the area were glimmering*". Elated Stalin ordered production to start and a camp п/я 81 was declared a very high priority. Houses were built at 1,900 m, with several mining galleries at 2,300 m. A thousand political prisoners mixed with criminals were rushed to the site. Many died on the way. They were told that what they extracted was crude lead – and picked uranium with bare hands. Barbaric conditions and a 9-month winter, led to hundreds of deaths. Eighty prisoners tried to escape, all were hanged or shot dead. However, Soviet geologists had made a mistake. The deposit was minute and depleted as early as 1952. 1,200 kg uranium was not even enough for starting one nuclear power plant.

Among the ramshackle houses, which accommodated shifts of 500 prisoners at a time, you can still find original rusty tools. Barbed wire and guard towers remain around the place

and the gallows haunts to the east. Climb uphill to the former mining cars, leading to collapsed entrances to the mining galleries. Remember to respect those who died by leaving the place and equipment untouched.

Walking down should be much easier. You don't need to go back to the bridge, just continue as far as possible along the path traversing the slope, which will eventually bring you to the river and in total of 2.5 hours from the workcamp back to the hut (this path is hard to find when walking from the hut).

Optional side trip: Azarov Glacier

8 hours, 12 km, 500 m ascent/descent

For a closer view of the Kodar glaciers in mountainous scenery, head to the valley south-west from the hut. Ascend steadily on the left bank of the creek, which starts to turn to the west. When you reach a small tarn, you should be able to see above you the Myedvezhyj Pass (Медвежий, 2,300 m, easy from the eastern side - graded 1A). It's possible to climb it but it takes at least 2 hours each way. Continue through the valley to the glacier. It is possible, but technically demanding and time-consuming to climb the Tryeh Zhandharmov Pass (Трех жандармов, 2380 m, hard - 2A), from where you will have a great and unobstructed view to the highest mountain in the whole State Mountains, BAM Peak (3072 m).

Day 3: Through the Baltic Pass

8 hours, 7 km, 1100 m ascent

It's the most difficult day on the trek, so start early. The last part of trail before the pass is better to be avoided in rainy weather or with bad visibility.

Baltic Pass (Балтийский Перевал, 2,600 m, average difficulty - 1B) is hidden at the end of the valley which is clearly visible just to the south-east from the hut. As always in Kodar, the **entrance to the valley** is perched high above the Sakukan river. To reach the entrance, walk towards the remnants of the bridge down Sakukan river for 15 minutes, until the valley is exactly south of you and look for small paths turning uphill.

Even if you cannot find clear paths don't worry. They all eventually disappear. Walk straight uphill keeping on the right side of the stream which comes from the valley. Slowly make your way through the grassy hillside with some bushes. It's a tiring 1 hour walk

(especially in the bushes), and it can be slippery after rain. Yet the views over Middle Sakukan valley are amazing.

After you tackle the ascent and enter the proper valley at 1900 m, the path reappears, becomes more level, the landscape changes into gentle **alpine meadows** which make for a good camping spot. If the weather is bad, you can spend the night there.

It takes a pleasant two hours and one stream crossing (to the eastern bank) to reach the first **moraines** at 2100 m. The path enters rocky terrain and disappears for good, so for the next two hours you have to choose the way on your own.

The whole difficulty in climbing the Baltic Pass lies not in its steepness but in a field of wobbling boulders which you have to traverse at the end of the ascent. Stick to the very bottom of the valley until you are able to easily see a huge saddle to the south. Only at this point should you start the proper ascent. Walk past a group of rocky cliffs leaving them on your left, and later turn left straight to the pass. Then it takes 30 long minutes to tackle the wobbling boulders, but it's a stone's throw to the wide **Baltic Pass** (56°52,4989' N, 117°38,9986' E).

In good weather BAM Peak rises clear over the ridge behind you. Close on the other side, you can see small tarns at 2,300 m (the camping spot!). The **descent** looks steep and scary, however is very easy. Sliding down on gravel feels like walking on a fluffy carpet and bears no avalanche risk. Reach the tarns in a quick 30 minutes and camp overnight with great alpine views.

Day 4: Down the Birokan valley

8 hours, 9 km, 1050 m descent

Soon after you leave the tarns you encounter a long stony descent with – surprise – wobbly stones. Try to lose altitude by picking your way through the stones down the quickest route – trying to traverse the slope is not a good idea as walking down from elsewhere is even harder.

Keep to the stream bed and after a demanding 2.5 hours (1 km, 400 m down) you reach the **bottom of the Birokan valley**. There is some brilliant alpine scenery at 1900 m, with meadows, lakes and majestic peaks towering above – making a nice picnic spot! It is possible to make a side trip and explore upper parts of the valley from here.

Trek down the valley through the pastures on the left bank on the stream. The path appears and disappears constantly but slowly getting clearer. After 1 hour Birokan breaks into a **canyon** with cascading waterfalls. The path goes up and down, bypassing numerous screes. This section, in the second part of the day, is particularly exhausting. Soon after the screes end, the path enters back into taiga and the mosquito-zone, continuing for 2 hours.

At 1250 m **Birokan joins Higher Sakukan** river. At one hundred metres before the river, the path forks for the first time: the left follows the Sakukan valley, the right leads to a small camping spot with a fireplace near the river.

Day 5: Along Higher Sakukan

12 km, 7 hours, 300 m descent

For the whole day, the way leads through dense taiga without major landmarks other than numerous creeks that you need to cross. Stick to the north bank of Higher Sakukan.

Start the day by backtracking to the fork and take the other path. This path leads far away from river and changes into a network of confusing paths, so better stick to your compass (east). You should walk past a small hill with a view at 1227 m (marked on the map).

Later on, the trail joins the bank of Higher Sakukan. For a couple of kilometres, the path changes into a wider trail and passes through an empty **Evenk settlement** consisting of two cottages. Scattered around, you will probably see some naturally arched wooden sledges, which are characteristic for this ethnic group.

Continuing on the path until you reach at least the longitude of 117°49'E, north of the mountain marked on the maps as a peak with height of 1741,7 m. This is a **natural gate to upper Sakukan Valley** and marks the beginning of Chara Valley.

Day 6: Through Chara Valley to BAM

14 km, 6 hours

Start the day by finding a place to **cross the Higher Sakukan river**. The river here is deep, wide, with a strong current. However, around 56°46,550'N 117°51,442'E the river splits into four beds, each of them should be knee- or waist-deep even after heavy rains. Although this is the most popular ford among trekkers, in case of drought it might be possible to find a better one.

Your next goal is to reach a **dirt road** which is parallel to the river and 300-800 m south of it through the taiga. In order to reach it, trek from the four beds along the river for next 4 km (around 2 hrs in this rough terrain) and then turn straight south, keeping to a compass bearing. The ideal place to walk through the taiga has a longitude of 117°54,701'E and is only 330 m away from the road.

Warning

If you plan to spend the night at Sakukan train station, refill your fresh water supplies here. There is no clean water near the station!

This road will bring you in 2 hrs to **BAM railway at its 1699 km** (56°45,443'N, 118°00,120'E) In case of any crossroads, always choose the ones with bearing E-ESE (at 56°45,558'N 117°56,666'E the one leading straight east).

The last stage of the trek involves locating the **Sakukan station** at 1701 km of BAM in the middle of the swamps (56°44,500'N 117°58,220'E). The station is fully automated, with announcements about trains passing through, but not stopping, breaking the silence from time to time. There is no fresh water around the station. For Severobaikalsk there is only one train daily, No. 949 Olongdo – Lena (Олонгдо - Лена; 11 hours) at 8.50 AM local time. For Novaya Chara there are two: No. 956/656 at 11.41 AM and No. 950 10.21 PM (heading to Olongdo).

All the way along BAM there is also a dirt road for servicing the track. You can find it 100 m direction SE from the station. If you're very lucky (it's 30 km to the next settlement) it might be possible to catch a ride from there. There have also been reports about trekkers hitching on trains or engines which might occasionally pass through the station.