

Russian odyssey

Simon Roberts goes in search of the Motherland

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Mother Russia

Simon Roberts took a gamble when he and his wife rented out their house and set off across Russia for a year. But the risk paid dividends, finds Diane Smyth

'Russia cannot be grasped with the mind, or measured in feet and inches, for she has a special character: in Russia one can only believe'.

Fyodor Tyutchev wrote these lines in 1866, but as Simon Roberts' photobook *Motherland* proves, it's a sentiment just as pertinent today. His photographs show the bewildering variety of people and places that this vast country encompasses, from familiar blue-eyed sailors photographed in the Urals to the Mongolian physiognomies of the Even reindeer herders in the far Eastern province of Kamchatka.

But underlying the country and, he hopes, his book, is Russia's sense of spiritual unity.

'Russians carry with them an innate sense of the history of the motherland and, through it, feel inextricably connected to each other,' Roberts writes in his afterword. 'This nebulous spirituality – defining it is impossible! – this Russianness, is elusive yet all pervasive.'

'It's a huge country but it's very much seen as one place,' he tells *BJP*. 'The national pride is something much more powerful than I've ever experienced before, it's much more powerful

than Rule Britannia. It's somehow less arrogant, much more sorrowful and spiritual – I don't know why I keep coming back to that word but I do. It's like it's almost painful, like a yearning of the heart.'

East to West

Roberts and his wife, Sarah, travelled around Russia for a whole year to complete the project, covering 75,000km and crossing 11 time zones. They also researched the trip for 18 months before they even got there, and their thoroughness is evident in the sheer variety of places they

visited, from power stations to army bases. The depth of the couples' knowledge can also be seen in the picture captions that pepper the book, drawing on facts and quotes taken from the country's long history and culture. But although the couple's extensive research underpinned the project, Roberts says that its success is also down to its spontaneity.

'I really wanted to show another side to Russia so it was really important that some of the trip was unplanned,' he says. 'When you're trying to document a place you really need to get

Above: Twins Elena and Vera, Magadan, August 2004.
All photographs © Simon Roberts.



Above: Outdoor market, Grozny, Chechnya. April 2005.

Left: Nikita Kruktunov and Rufina Muhanova, Omsk.

May 2005: 'Nikita and Rufina compete in the junior category (for children aged 10 to 13) of the All Russia Ballroom Dance Championships. In Soviet times, ballroom was not permitted: it was regarded as bourgeois and associated with the negative influence of rock music, and even of hooliganism.'

over your misconceptions, but that's very difficult to do, and it's especially hard if you're pre-planning the journey. So we deliberately left at least half of the itinerary spontaneous. We could turn up in a place that we really wanted to go to, but we didn't have a criteria for how long we would stay there. If someone suggested, "Why don't you go to Magadan?" or "Come here with us" we could just do it. It was aimless but in a good way, in that we weren't just going to the places we'd read about.

'Everyone knows about St Petersburg, everyone knows about the Trans-Siberian Express. I wanted to move away from those places. In places like Chechnya, for example, you find both Babushkas working in bombed out shells and glamorous women in the reconstructed part of town. Most people who think about Chechnya don't think about the reconstruction, so it was important to show both

sides. I didn't want to gloss over the problems, and I suppose politically you can say that Russia isn't in a very good place. But this project was very much about a more spiritual concept of Russia, about the idea of the Motherland.'

Everyday people

The couple stayed in peoples' houses, rather than hotels, and found that doing so helped them find people and places that they would never have otherwise come across, all of which helped them illuminate the enigma of the Motherland. One family invited the couple to the All Russia Ballroom Dance competition, for example, a competition that was outlawed as bourgeois under Soviet rule. Through an American woman living in Kamchatka they hooked up with Pavel Lipatov, a Russian who camps in the wilderness for a month every summer to reconnect with his sense of affinity with the landscape.

'It's linked to the whole idea of the fertile black earth, and the land where he came from,' says Roberts, and this is an idea that Rosamund Bartlett explores further in her illuminating introduction to the book. 'The deepest source of patriotism in Russia...lies not in pride in national achievements or military glory, but in love for the motherland, whose most visible expression is the extraordinary, almost physical attachment which Russians have for their landscape,' she writes. 'An attachment which they are often at a loss to fathom.'

Wide shots

This affinity with the land informed Roberts' approach to his work. Using a Mamiya 67, he shot landscape photographs with a 65mm lens, and portraits in the street where he found people, trying to capture as much detail about them and their homeland as possible. 'The

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Top left: Yevgeny Chavkin, Ulyanovsk, June 2005: 'Yevgeny holds a book on the Great Patriotic War along with his certificate, at his school graduation ceremony. The ceremony is in honour of the region's students who had achieved top grades in their final exams'.

Above left: Meat market, Pyatigorsk, March 2005.

Main picture: Bus, Moscow, July 2005.

Top far right: Pavel Lipatov, Esso, Kamchatka, October 2004.

Below far right: Zifa Tsirikhova, Beslan, North Ossetia. April 2005: 'In September 2004 Chechen separatists from Ingushetia attacked School Number One in Beslan where they took more than 100 hostages. Zifa Tsirikhova's eight-year-old son Alexander died in her arms as a result of shrapnel wounds from one of the explosions. Her second son survived the attack.'



portraits are almost anthropological,' he explains. 'I was almost cataloguing the people I met, so you're kind of reading what they're wearing, what's in their faces and appearance, and the environment they're in.'

'The landscapes I wanted to be mostly quite wide, to provide a sort of context in which to read the portraiture. I tried not to crop and when I looked at scenes, I tried to show as much as possible. A 65mm lens is quite wide for a landscape but I wanted to include everything, so that the viewer could come in and read it and work out what it's all about, rather than me trying to force an idea on them.'

Roberts also builds a sense of underlying unity through his colour palette, and he managed to find soft, pastel colours no matter where, or at what time of year he shot. But although this helped to visually enforce the idea of the Motherland, it also helped Roberts create a coherent body of work – and he always envisaged the project as a book. In fact, he says, it was such a financial risk to take that he would never have embarked on the work without having ambitious plans for it.

'It's so liberating, if you really believe in something, to just go off and try to shoot it,' he says. 'You suddenly realise what you've been missing, stuck in your flat

in south London, doing the same jobs. I would highly recommend it to any photographer that feels like they're kind of stuck.'

Risk taker

'It was a risk. I gave up my work, and we rented out the house and put everything on credit cards, and I could have come back and not got a book deal, and not got representation at the Photographers' Gallery, and not got an exhibition at Photofusion. It would still have been a wonderful year travelling with my wife, but that result would have been very depressing. But I would do it again. It was a chance to work on a longer project and explore

my own photography, and this project has proved it works.'

Roberts has carved out a successful career shooting for magazines over the years, but says he had become frustrated with this kind of work because of the limitations now imposed on it. The magazines' budgets are pinched, he says, or they only have limited space for photo stories, or 'expect you to be able to come back with some definitive story on AIDS in Zimbabwe in three days, which is ridiculous'.

But these practicalities aside, he says that the best thing about working on his own project was the creative freedom it afforded. 'If you're just shooting images

designed to sell a product or person, or whatever, you're just illustrating what someone else has to say,' he explains. 'It's just a job. But I didn't become a photographer just to earn money, I became a photographer because I felt I had something to say. If I wanted to earn money, I'd do something else.'

The success of *Motherland* has persuaded Roberts to do another project, and he and Sarah are currently organising a visit to the US, because 'it's interesting to move from Russia to America'. It's not a rerun of the last trip though – this time the couple will have their first child, Jemima, conceived during the journey

across Russia, in tow, and Roberts hopes to avoid the financial gamble he took before by getting funding in advance. And this time they are also jettisoning the extensive pre-trip research.

'We think it will be interesting just to go and be almost more flippant, more sporadic, and let the places we go be quite random,' he says.

'It's the idea of looking at a place, a nation, and almost go with a blank sheet. America is one of the most photographed places in the world and yet I think there are misconceptions and misrepresentations of it. I'd like to go there and challenge them in my own way.' **BJP**

'The portraits are almost anthropological.'

On show & in print

Motherland, by Simon Roberts, is published by Chris Boot (ISBN: 078-1-905712-03-8), priced £25. For more information, visit www.chrisboot.com.

Motherland will be on show at Photofusion from 13 April – 25 May. For more information, visit www.photofusion.org.

Simon Roberts is represented by The Photographers' Gallery Print Room. For more information visit www.photonet.org.uk.