

GRANTA

THE MAGAZINE OF NEW WRITING / 94



ON THE ROAD AGAIN

Where Travel Writing Went Next

GRANTA

ACROSS ELEVEN TIME ZONES

Simon Roberts

*Russia cannot be understood with the mind,
Nor can she be measured with the ordinary yardstick.
There is in her a special stature:
You can only believe in Russia.*

Fedor Tiutchev, 1886

In July 2004, I set out on a year's journey across Russia, the largest country in the world. I wanted to travel to some of its most isolated regions and to experience it during every season and in every kind of location. I travelled for over 75,000 kilometres, to the Far East—Sakhalin Island, Magadan and Chukotka—through the Siberian provinces, across to the country's westernmost point, Kaliningrad; then down to the Caucasus, along the Volga River and to the Altai Republic where Russia borders China, Mongolia and Kazakhstan.

The logistics alone guaranteed an unforgettable year. I crossed eleven time zones and travelled on fifty-five buses, thirty-six trains, twenty-two trams, sixteen aeroplanes, nine ferries, eight reindeer, seven trucks, six helicopters, six horses, three jeeps, three speed boats, two cargo planes, two cable cars, one cruise ship, one motorbike and sidecar and in one armed convoy. Along the way, I stayed in fifty-two hotels, twenty-one sleeper trains, ten campsites, nine homes, four B&Bs, two rented apartments, one ship container and one cruise ship cabin.

Being a photographer brought its own problems. Every security official in every obscure airport was at a loss when they saw my camera bag and hundreds of rolls of film. The cameras survived a five-day horse trek in Kamchatka—my companions Pavel and Sasha are pictured in bucolic surroundings (page 140). More miraculously, the same cameras worked in temperatures of minus fifty celsius in a remote village near Yakutsk, where Matryona and her family were my hosts (page 147).

Meeting people like these, and many others, led me to think about what it meant to be Russian. The idea of a Russian identity seemed to be so important to the people that I met. Most of them were patriotic, intensely proud of their homeland's beauty and its size. The concept of the motherland—*rodina* in Russian—wasn't just about the enormity of Russia's landmass or about its future potential. The concept of *rodina* insists that Russia is an exceptionally spiritual place: soulful, mysterious and holy.

The more I photographed, the more I came to believe in the aesthetic viability of Russia. I discovered scenes of unexpected beauty and humanity, often in the midst of great hardship. I wanted my photographs to explore Russia's many conflicts: economic, cultural and social, but continually to insist on its ability to be dignified and spiritual. □

NB PICTURES



The town of Binibino celebrates its 50th anniversary, Chukotka Autonomous District, September 2004



Kupol gold mine,
Chukotka,
September 2004



Magadan, Kolyma Region, September 2004



'Drivers! You are answerable for the lives of the inhabitants of Kolyma,' September 2004



Departure lounge,
Magadan airport,
September 2004



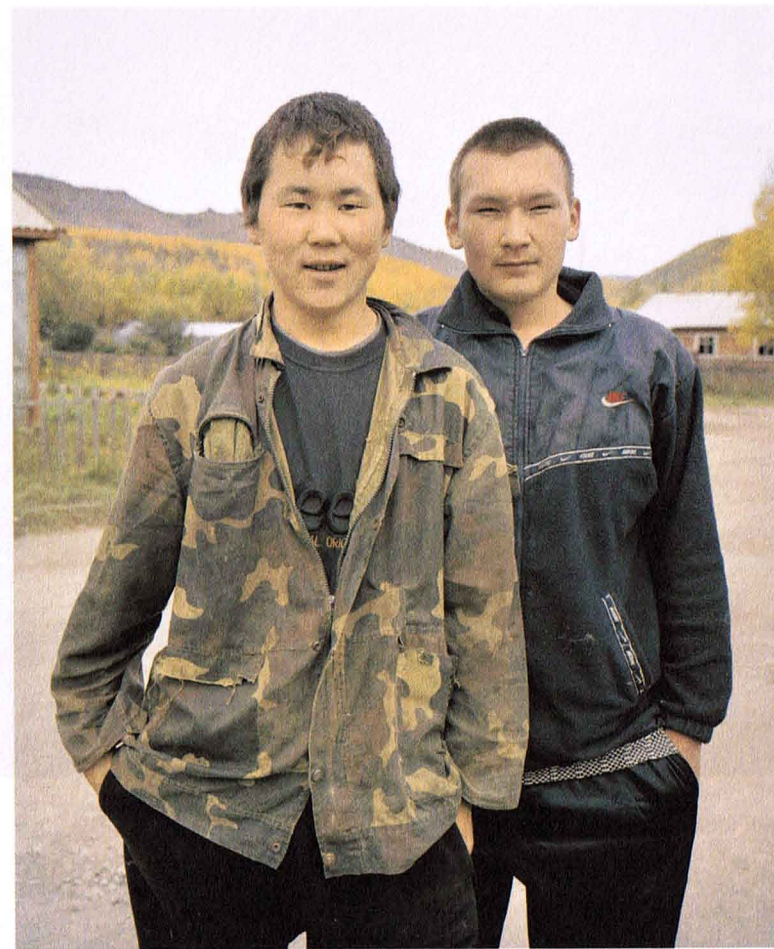
Grocery store overlooking the Nagaev Bay, September 2004



Display of Soviet military equipment, Magadan, September 2004



Tatiana Filatova selling pies at a roadside cafe, Kamchatka, October 2004



Drunk Evenki teenagers, Kamchatka, October 2004



Camping with Sasha and Pavel, Kamchatka, October 2004



Man fixing his car, Kamchatka, October 2004

Rusting trawlers
off the port of
Alexandrovsk,
Sakhalin Island,
October 2004





Kolendo, uninhabited since an earthquake on March 29, 1995, Sakhalin Island, October 2004



Soviet-era apartments, Okha, Sakhalin Island, October 2004



Yakutian village of Magarass, Yakutia Province, November 2004



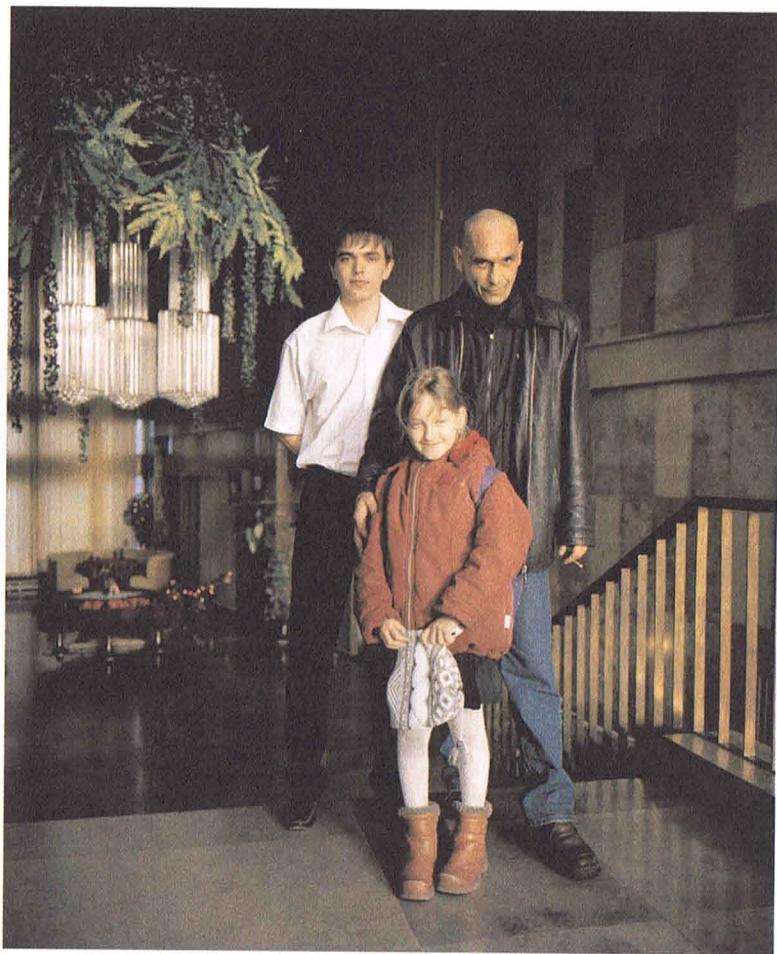
Fedya Danilovs, his wife Matryona and son Valentin, Magarass, November 2004



Murmansk, January 2005



The US warship Daniel Morgan, torpedoed by the Germans in 1942, abandoned in the Barents Sea,
Murmansk, January 2005



Alexei and his children at the Hotel Intourist, Pytiagorsk, Caucasus, March 2005



Slava, Yuri and President Putin, Pytiagorsk, Caucasus, March 2005



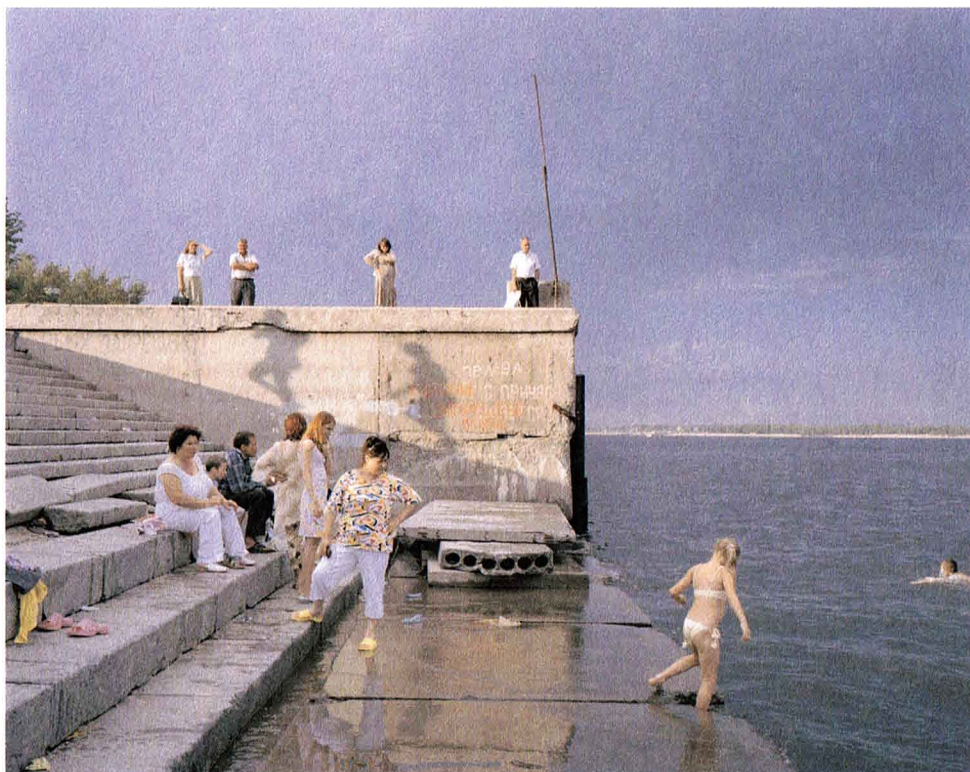
Temporary housing for Chechen refugees, Ingushetia, April 2005



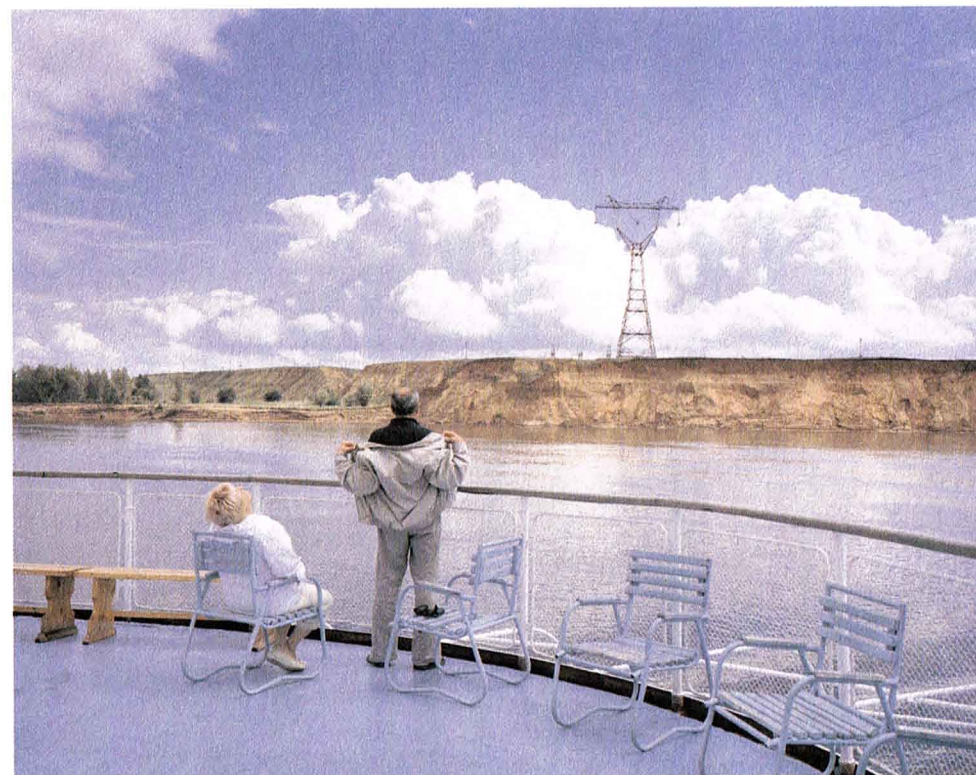
Hadijhat, a Chechen refugee, with her children, outside their temporary housing built inside a derelict factory, Ingushetia, April 2005

Picnickers
celebrate Victory
Day, May 9, when
Russia defeated
Nazi Germany in
the 'Great
Patriotic War',
1945,
Yekaterinburg,
May 2005





Swimming in the River Volga, Volgograd, June 2005

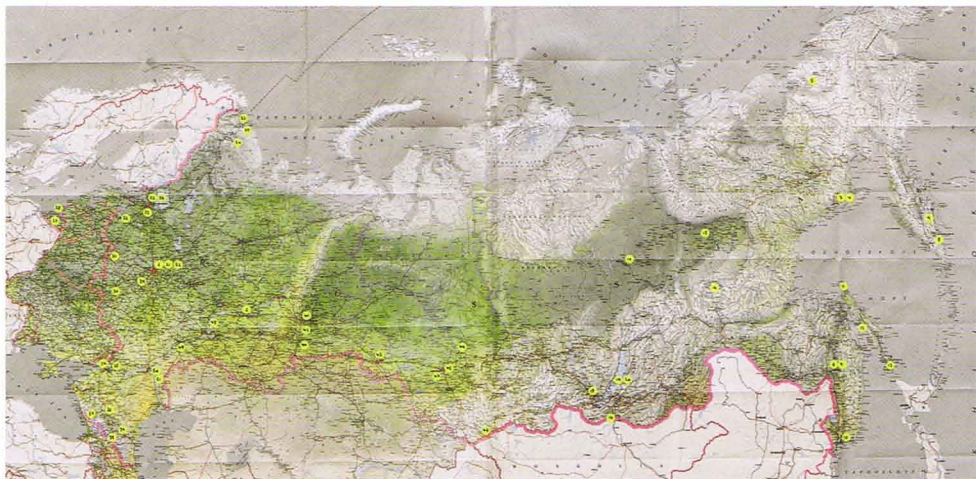


On board a cruise ship travelling from Moscow to Astrakhan, June 2005

A new
development of
luxury apartments,
Moscow 2005



GRANTA 94: ON THE ROAD AGAIN



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