ON THE ROAD AGAIN
Where Travel Writing Went Next
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 times 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.
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
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

Hadjihat, 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
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