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TRAVELS IN SIBERIA—I

The ultimate road trip.

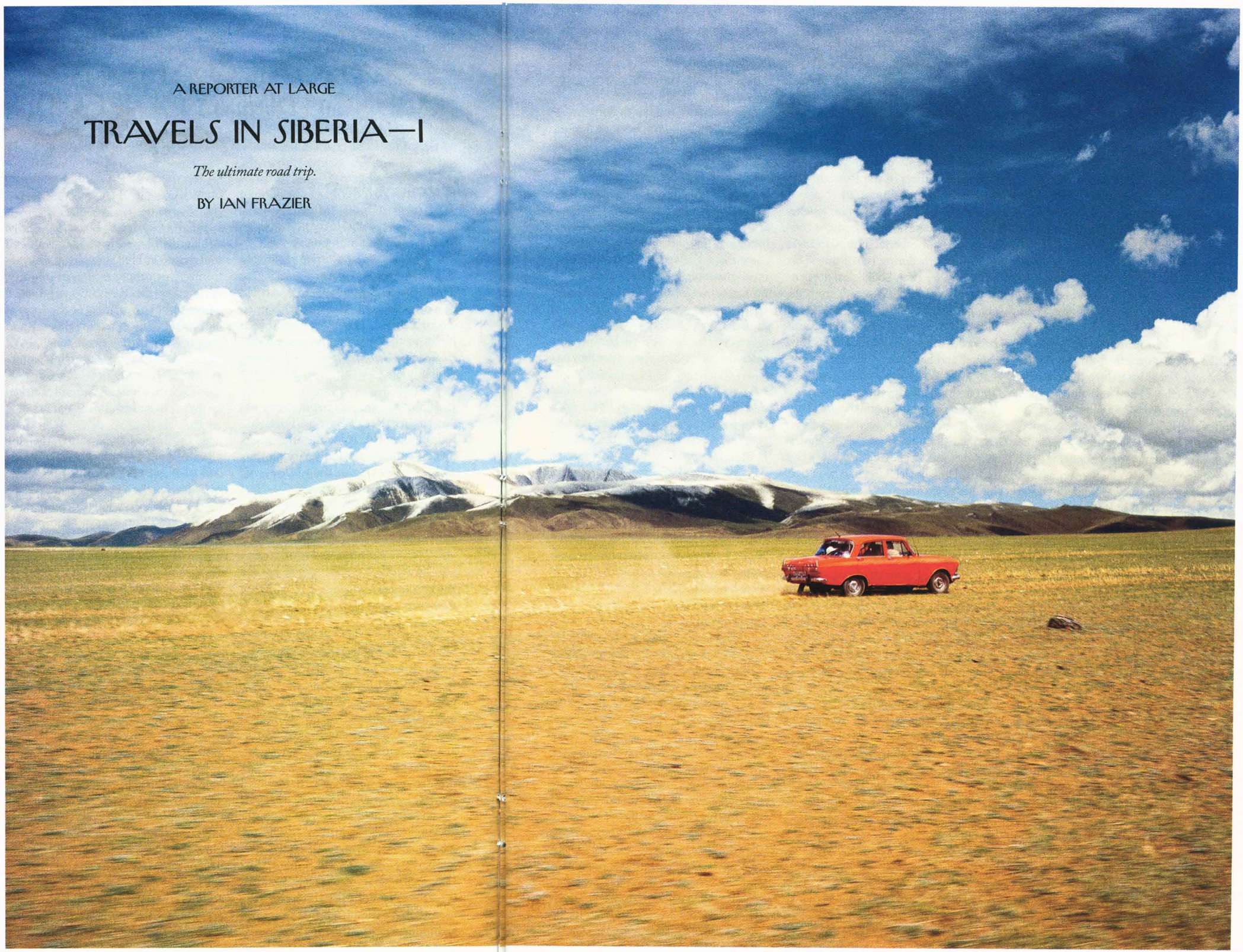
BY IAN FRAZIER

Officially, there is no such place as Siberia. No political or territorial entity has Siberia as its name. In atlases, the word "Siberia" hovers across the northern third of Asia unconnected to any place in particular, as if designating a zone or a condition; it seems to show through like a watermark on the page. During Soviet times, revised maps erased the name entirely, in order to discourage Siberian regionalism. Despite this invisibility, one can assume that Siberia's traditional status as a threat did not improve.

A tiny fraction of the world's population lives in Siberia. About thirty-eight million Russians and native peoples inhabit that northern third of Asia. By contrast, the state of New Jersey, where I live, has nearly a quarter as many people on about .0015 as much land. For most people, Siberia is not the place itself but a figure of speech. In fashionable restaurants in New York and Los Angeles, Siberia is the section of less desirable tables given to customers whom the maître d' does not especially like.

Newspaper gossip columns take the word even more metaphorically. When an author writes a book about a Park Avenue apartment building, and the book offends some of the residents, and a neighbor who happens to be a friend of the author offers to throw him a book party in her apartment, and the people in the Park Avenue building hear about this plan, the party giver is risking "social Siberia," one of them warns.

In this respect (as in many others), Siberia and America are alike. Apart from their actual, physical selves, both exist as constructs, expressions of the mind. Once when I was in western Russia, a bottler of mineral water was showing my two Russian companions and me around his new dacha outside the city of Vologda. The time was late evening; darkness had fallen. The mineral-water bottler led us from room to room, throwing on all the lights and pointing out the amenities. When we got to the kitchen, he flipped the switch but the light did not go on. This seemed to upset him. He fooled with the switch, then hurried off and came back with a stepladder. Mounting it, he removed the glass globe from the overhead light and unscrewed the bulb. He climbed down, put globe and bulb on the counter, took a fresh bulb, and ascended again. He reached up and screwed the new bulb into



Siberia's boundaries encompass about three-quarters of Russia's territory and a twelfth of all land on earth. The continental United States and most of Europe could fit inside. Photographs by Simon Roberts.

strange object encountered inexplicably in a dark forest, spaceship-like.

The Vologda road had become a spill of pavement, untrimmed along its edges, with scalloping where the poured asphalt had flowed. Small villages followed, one after another, at regular intervals, roadside signs announcing their names. Often I looked up the names in my pocket Russian-English dictionary to see what they meant. According to my translations (verified by Sergei), that day we went through villages named Puddle, Jellies, Knee, New Knee, and Smokes.

All along the road, sometimes to heights of ten or twelve feet, grew a plant that Volodya identified as *morkovnik*. This plant resembles a roadside weed in America called Queen Anne's lace—except that *morkovnik* is like our modest, waist-high plant drastically and Asiatically enlarged. Queen Anne's lace and *morkovnik* are in fact related, both belonging to the carrot family (*morkov'* means "carrot"). Along the route we travelled, *morkovnik* grows abundantly from one end of Russia to the other.

In early afternoon, we stopped at an informal rest area like the one at the intersection of the Murmansk and Vologda roads. Here for the first time I encountered big-time Russian roadside trash. Very, very few trash receptacles exist along the roads of Russia. This rest area, and its ad-hoc picnic spots, with their benches of downed tree trunks, featured a ground layer of trash basically everywhere, except in a few places, where there was more. In the all-trash encirclement, trash items had piled themselves together here and there in heaps three and four feet tall, as if making common cause. With a quick kicking and scuffing of nearby fragments, Sergei rendered a place beside a log bench relatively trash free and then laid out our cold-chicken lunch on pieces of cellophane on the ground. I ate hungrily, though I did notice through the cellophane many little pieces of broken eggshell from some previous traveller's meal.

Back on the Vologda road, we continued in the direction of Cherepovets. After not many kilometres, the warning light for the engine generator lit up on the dashboard, making a companion for the oil-pressure light, which had never gone off. I expected that soon every warning light on the dashboard would be glowing. I pointed out the generator light to Sergei, and to humor me he said that we would stop and have the generator looked at in Cherepovets.

If that city consists of buildings, like a conventional city, you couldn't prove it by me, because all I saw of it was complicated highway ramps among a forest of power-line towers. The towers were everywhere, many stories high, sometimes clustering right up next to one another like groves of trees all striving for the daylight. Of daylight itself there was almost none; a tarpaulin of gray clouds overlay the entire scene. Somewhere Sergei spotted a garage in a roadside expanse of mud and gravel and pulled up in front of the garage-bay door. Just at that moment, the garageman came out, yanked a rope, and pulled the bay door down. He informed Sergei that the garage was now closed for the day. Then the garageman hurried to his car and sped away into the power-line forest. Sergei returned to the van, reseated himself behind the steering wheel, and turned the key. From the engine came no noise of any kind.

With this particular non-starting of the van we entered an odd zone—a sort of horse latitudes of confusion and delay caused by the mysterious problems of our vehicle. At low moments, I thought I might bounce around in this zone and stay in western Russia forever. The episode comes back to me in flashes:

Here are Sergei and Volodya and me pushing the van away from the garage-bay door, and then heaving and straining from behind to build up enough speed in order to start the engine by popping the clutch. Finally, at our breaking point, Volodya runs up to the open driver's-side door, leaps in, throws the gear shift into first, and the engine coughs alive.

Here we are in the city of Vologda, a hundred and thirty-five kilometres down the road, where Vyacheslav, the brother of a friend of Sergei's wife, lives. Night has fallen. We are in a parking lot behind some buildings with our weakly idling van. Vyacheslav arrives. He is like a provincial nobleman from a nineteenth-century novel. He is tall and straight, with Tatar eyes, a round head, and Lenin-pattern baldness. He wears a well-tailored shirt of white, finely woven cotton, freshly pressed slacks, and polished brown loafers with silver buttons. His confident and peremptory manner shows not a particle of doubt. In the silvery aura

A woman selling vegetables in Bilibino, a town above the Arctic Circle, in the district of Chukotka, the part of farthest Siberia just across the Bering Strait from Alaska.