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LUXURY, FASHION
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RUSSELL CROWE

On acting up, settling down
...and buying a rugby club

TIME MACHINES: WATCH FOCUS

Previewing future horological
models, trends and wizardry

ALL HANDS ON DECK

The cost of competing
in the America's Cup

PLUS the classiest tequila;
sailing round Tanzania's
Spice Islands; the ultimate
luxe limos; sharpest suits

THE MOTHER LAND

30-33

Travelling some 75,000 kilometres across Russia, photographer **Simon Roberts** spent a year capturing the spirit of a country undergoing monumental change





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> 01 Kolendo, Sakhalin Island; October 2004. This town, awaiting bulldozers, has been uninhabited since an earthquake in 1995.

> 02 Vitaly Kiselyev and Katerina Oscarova, Samara, Volga region; June 2005 This young couple had just made up after an argument.

> 03 Police road safety sign, Magadan, Far East Russia; August 2004 A road safety sign featuring a police officer pointing at a demolished car reads: 'Drivers! You answer for the lives of

Kolymchane!' (people from Kolyma).

> 04 Meat market, Pyatigorsk, Northern Caucasus; April 2005 Pyatigorsk sits at the foot of Mount Mashuk. The city was made famous by Mikhail Lermontov who, in an echo of the plot from his novel *A Hero of Our Time*, was killed here in a duel in 1841.

> 05 Russian naval officer, Chelyabinsk, Urals; May 2005 All Russian men have to serve a year's national service. This naval officer had just returned home to visit his family.

IN JULY 2004, award-winning photographer Simon Roberts set off on an ambitious journey across Russia. Over the course of a year, he would travel 75,000 kilometres and visit 126 cities, towns and villages. He travelled by bus, train, plane, by reindeer, horse and armed convoy. Accompanied by his wife, who had studied Russian at university, 33-year-old Roberts had a mission: to capture the spirit of the country 15 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. He didn't want to make a political statement but rather explore a country undergoing monumental change.

Starting in the Russian Far East and travelling through the Siberian provinces, up the Kola peninsula and across to Kaliningrad before making his way down to the Northern Caucasus, the Altai mountains and along the Volga river, Roberts crossed eleven time zones and took some 5,000 photographs. On his return to England, he edited them down to 150 for *Motherland*, a stunning photographic book that, at times, seems to look into the very heart of Russia.

The book features simple portraits and stark images of the landscape; Roberts was curious about both and felt that one reflected the other. "Patriotism in Russia is so much richer than in Europe. Russians believe their native land to be an exceptional place. They convey an optimism that I soon came to share." He talks of how Russians see their home, their *rodina* – the place where one is born, a place evocative of the nation's soul. "They carry with them an innate sense of the history of the motherland; it's what connects them to each other. It's really hard to define... it's not about national achievements or military glory but love for the motherland."

Roberts had been fascinated by Russia since his school days – it was remote, exotic – and had learned about it while studying geography at Sheffield University. Yet he admits to feelings of anxiety before setting off. "I was going into regions where there might be a Communist idea that I was something to be afraid of. I was pleasantly surprised; most people were very open to what I was doing and happy to be photographed. They certainly didn't seem scared of what I might be trying to say."

After travelling around sub-Saharan Africa, Israel and Palestine for publications including *The Guardian*, the *Sunday Times*, *Esquire* and *Le Monde*, he maintains that Russia is one of the easiest and safest countries in which he has worked: the post-Communist infrastructure ensures the trains still arrive on time and his only brush with 'danger' was a pick pocket. "I have to say that I've had more trouble in America."

Growing up with stark images of Communism, Roberts's great adventure forced him to re-evaluate his notion of Russia. "It struck me how well developed some of the Siberian cities are. They are growing extremely fast: you can find sushi restaurants, bars and clubs. Even in the smallest towns there are internet cafés full of kids accessing websites from across the world." He also saw proof of an emerging middle class – and one that is looking increasingly west. "People used to have money stashed under their beds. Now they are investing in property. There is a still a huge divide between the rich and poor but it's not as bad as it was. Ikea, for example, is growing at a huge rate."

Roberts hopes that *Motherland* has captured something of Russia, the people and their *rodina*. "Ultimately these images are a celebration of a great country; I hope they deepen our understanding of a place and its people that were once remote and mysterious." **AMY RAPHAEL**
Motherland is published by Chris Boot Ltd (£25) and images are on show at Photofusion gallery (17a Electric Lane, London SW9 8LA) until 25 May. For more information visit www.motherlandbook.com