

20 Books

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A book of Soviet bus stops? It's just what I've always wanted

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HOBSON

'DEAR RESIDENTS, due to the onset of summer, the hot-water supply in your building will be turned off from May through to October. We apologise in advance. Utilities Service of the Building Management. PS: Sunlight washing-up liquid will help you solve some of your problems! Its unique grease-cutting formula is effective even in cold water.'

This steely piece of salesmanship from an apartment building in Rostov-on-Don is one of myriad notices – high-handed and bureaucratic on the one hand, lowly and handwritten on the other – that Russian folklorist Alexei Plutser-Sarno has been quixotically collecting since the late Eighties. Published in a remarkably beautiful book, **Notes From Russia** (Fuel £12.95; fuel-design.com), they

hold up an idiosyncratic, occasionally baffling mirror to Russia's past two decades, thereby neatly complementing the luminous photojournalism of **Motherland** by Simon Roberts (Chris Boot £25). Photographing some parts of Russia that have only recently been opened to civilians, Roberts's work captures not only the country's amazing variety and extent, but also an intense sense of individual Russian lives. The buoyant and lopsided harbour master of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky; the twin sisters in their stylish macs in Magadan, transhipment point for the gulags – there is something irresistible about his wonderfully perceptive portraits.

In a similar vein, **Soviet Bus Stops** by Christopher Herwig (£8.27, <http://stores.lulu.com/chris1042>) concentrates on one of the few occasions on which Soviet architecture shed its functionality, plumping instead for

a jaunty riot of domes, columns and towers, Islamic detailing and abstract fantasy. Bus stops as yurts, hats, doves – even, in one case, what looks like the office from *Being John Malkovich*. Perhaps it will catch on here.

Architectures of Waiting by Ursula Schulz-Dornburg (Walther Konig £9) poignantly fills out these stage sets with gently humorous portraits of people waiting at bus stops in a remote part of Armenia, alongside shots of the Hejaz railway between Damascus and Medina that has been slowly sinking back into the desert since the Bedouins and TE Lawrence destroyed it in 1917. Finnish film-maker Aki Kaurismaki is an obvious reference, but there's something of 'Ozymandias', too, in these photos' still, quiet poetry.

Meanwhile, back in the metropolis, in a fit of inspiration, **Ancient Rome on Five Denarii a Day** by Philip Matyszak (Thames and Hudson £12.95) uses the travel guide form – 'Getting There', 'Entertainment', 'Law and Order' etc – to bring ancient history to life. From the moment you see the miles of aqueducts racing towards the world's largest city, the smoke rising from its millions of hearths and forges, the tombs lining the Appian Way, AD200 Rome has you spellbound. The scams people used to get citizenship, Roman attitudes to the countryside, the ingredients of



Okha, Sakhalin Island, from **Motherland** by Simon Roberts.

Roberts's work captures an intense sense of individual Russian lives

'Trojan pig' – Matyszak imparts so much information so imaginatively that it would be a great thing if his success inspires an entire Thames and Hudson series on similar lines.

The Redstone City Diary 2008 (Redstone, £14.95) stylishly sashays

through the 20th century, combining images and quotes such as this from Frank O'Hara: 'One need never leave the confines of New York to get all the greenery one wishes – I can't enjoy a blade of grass unless I know there's a subway handy or a record store or some other sign that people do not totally regret life.' (It's enough to make you nostalgic.)

Elsewhere, **With/Without**, edited by Shumon Basar, Antonia Carver and Markus Miessen (Bidoun and Moutamarat £12.99), approaches the 21st century from a Middle Eastern perspective. Its articles and photo-essays are refreshingly wide-ranging

[ALTERNATIVE STOCKING FILLERS]

– illuminating pieces about al-Azhar, Cairo's first public park, the rebuilding of Martyrs' Square in Beirut, the unlabelled treasures in Syria's National Museum and the Iraqi National Library, whose director's incredible blog can be read at www.bl.uk/iraqdiary.html – but overall the book is dominated by Dubai.

The world's tallest skyscraper, largest shopping mall, biggest theme park comprising all the world's major theme parks – Dubai's fusion of Las Vegas and China's special economic zones continues to boom at a spectacular rate. Rem Koolhaas, the book's eminence grise, is clearly right in saying that, as a model for other high-tech cities, Dubai has to be taken seriously.

After this, **XS Green: Big Ideas, Small Buildings**, by Phyllis Richardson (Thames and Hudson £14.95), like a good indie film, is a tonic. 'Rucksack houses' – extensions that clip on to the backs of houses – tree houses, buildings made from fridges or barbed wire and sandbags, inflatable abodes you can carry in your pocket – *XS Green* testifies to a ferment of creativity among architects who are trying to work out how to build in a 'humane, sustainable, efficient' way and who share an infectious delight in experimenting and being able to make mistakes while learning.

'Small but optimistic' characterises **A Year in the Life of an English**

Meadow by Andy Garnett and Polly Devlin (Frances Lincoln, £20). Having chanced to buy a meadow in Somerset untreated by fertiliser or pesticide, the authors immediately realised what to do. It is now a site of special scientific interest and home to a Manhattan of butterflies, moths and insects. This beautiful, action-packed account of its yearly progress makes one understand, as Devlin says, 'that the great tapestries of the Middle Ages are not an artist's dazzling inspiration of the celestial fields, but an accurate representation of what people saw around them'.

The business of restoring land to this state takes generations, but somehow seeing these orchids, enchanter's nightshades, meadowsweets, sedges, vetches, Yorkshire fogs and corky-fruited water dropworts creates a sense of possibility. Like Raymond Depardon's memorable autobiography of growing up on a farm in the Saône Valley and becoming a Magnum photographer, **Our Farm** (Actes Sud, £19.95), there are photos here of the countryside in May that would make anyone happy wherever they are.

And finally, don't miss **Best of British** by Jon Henderson (Random House £9.99), an eccentric history of the nation's greatest 100 sporting heroes, from Henry VIII to Roy of the Rovers and Torvill and Dean.