

# voyager



MAY 2007

## THE MAIN DRAW

Animation pioneers come to Edinburgh

## TOOTH AND CLAW

Exotic wildlife of the Caribbean

## REAL RUSSIA

A year in the Motherland

# Julie Christie

RIVAL RACKETS  
WHO'S THE QUEEN OF  
BELGIAN TENNIS?

THE SIXTIES ICON RETURNS TO THE SCREEN

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# Postcards from the edge

Photography: Simon Roberts Words: Marcus Waring

Simon Roberts spent a year travelling around the former Soviet Union with his wife, staying with strangers and sleeping on floors. The result is a stunning series of insider photographs, where the real Russia is revealed

HIS INTERNATIONAL WANDERLUST and love of photography has taken photojournalist Simon Roberts all over the world, working on subjects as diverse as AIDS in Africa to a fireworks convention in the USA. But a couple of years ago, the Brighton-based photographer headed for Russia to work on a long-term, personal project. Fascinated with this vast region since childhood when it dominated the world map in his geography classroom, Roberts wanted to produce work that was a different kind of in-depth, photo essay.

“The photos go straight to the heart of this enigmatic country”

He and his wife, Sarah, travelled a total of 75,000km across Russia from July 2004 to August 2005. The result was *Motherland*, an extraordinary new book that goes to the heart of this enigmatic country, and captures the essence of a changing nation brimming with pride and positivity. Using transport ranging from helicopters to reindeer, they visited no less than 126 cities, towns and villages on their sprawling journey.

Born in London in 1974, Roberts studied Human Geography at the University of Sheffield. His ►

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Russian mothers attending the Order of the Maternal Glory dinner on Olkhon Island, Lake Baikal.



photojournalism has won him a string of awards, including the excitingly named Bright Spark Award bestowed on him by the Magenta Foundation in Toronto, and the prestigious *Sunday Times Magazine* Ian Parry Scholarship. He has gone on to work for a broad spectrum of publications, from *The Guardian* to *Russian Vogue*.

Roberts and his wife planned their journey via a website where travellers can arrange to stay for free with strangers. It was a clever move, overcoming the obstacle of turning up anonymously in a foreign city of a million people, as well as allowing them to get closer to the local community. "The hospitality was incredible," Roberts recalls. "At one point we were staying with a young couple who only had one room, the lounge, which was divided by a sheet."

The photographs are considered and profound, ranging from snowbound drilling rigs at a gold mine in Chukotka to a woman caught in the sunlight reading a book on a bus in Moscow. There are people swimming, a snowboarder, stark landscapes, weddings and sunlight filtering through tall, thin trees. From the concrete of cities to the open spaces of the Steppe, it is all beautifully captured, with text and quotes accompanying many of the images.

Several places the couple visited are far from the beaten path, and, apart from in Moscow and St Petersburg, they only met one other traveller in a year. "She was a young French girl hitching to Lake Baikal. We had been there for six months and were actually quite offended at meeting another foreigner." They just missed actor Ewan McGregor ►

**“Several places the couple visited are far from the beaten path”**



Vans on the frozen Lena River in Yakutsk in the Sakha Republic.

in Magadan, there on his *Long Way Round* tour, which became a book and TV series. "When we bought a copy of the local paper he was splashed across the front cover, saying Magadan was his favourite place in the world," states Roberts. "I didn't like it *that* much, but it was interesting."

The photographs evoke diversity and hope, with young people at the fore of a tide of change that is rapidly altering the face of Russia. "The young are more liberated in their approach to life," he believes. "They use the internet more, and are coming up with great ideas for restaurants and bars." Seeing this

wave of change driven by the economic boom of oil and gas, he wasn't entirely disappointed to find international brands starting to spring up in places like Siberia. "To be honest, it was a bit of a relief after travelling in remote places for a while to find pizza or good coffee. Weirdly, IKEA is growing very fast – but why shouldn't they have access to the things we take for granted here?" ●

✈ bmi flies direct to Moscow Domodedovo from London Heathrow. For more information and to book, visit [flybmi.com](http://flybmi.com)



A child on Olkhon Island, Lake Baikal. This massive lake holds 20% of the world's supply of fresh water.



**“It was a relief sometimes to find pizza or good coffee”**

*Motherland* is out now (£25, Chris Boot). The photographs are on show at Photofusion, 17a Electric Lane, London SW9; +44 (0)20 7738 5774; [www.photofusion.org](http://www.photofusion.org) until 25 May