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A WICKED WINTER IN SIBERIA

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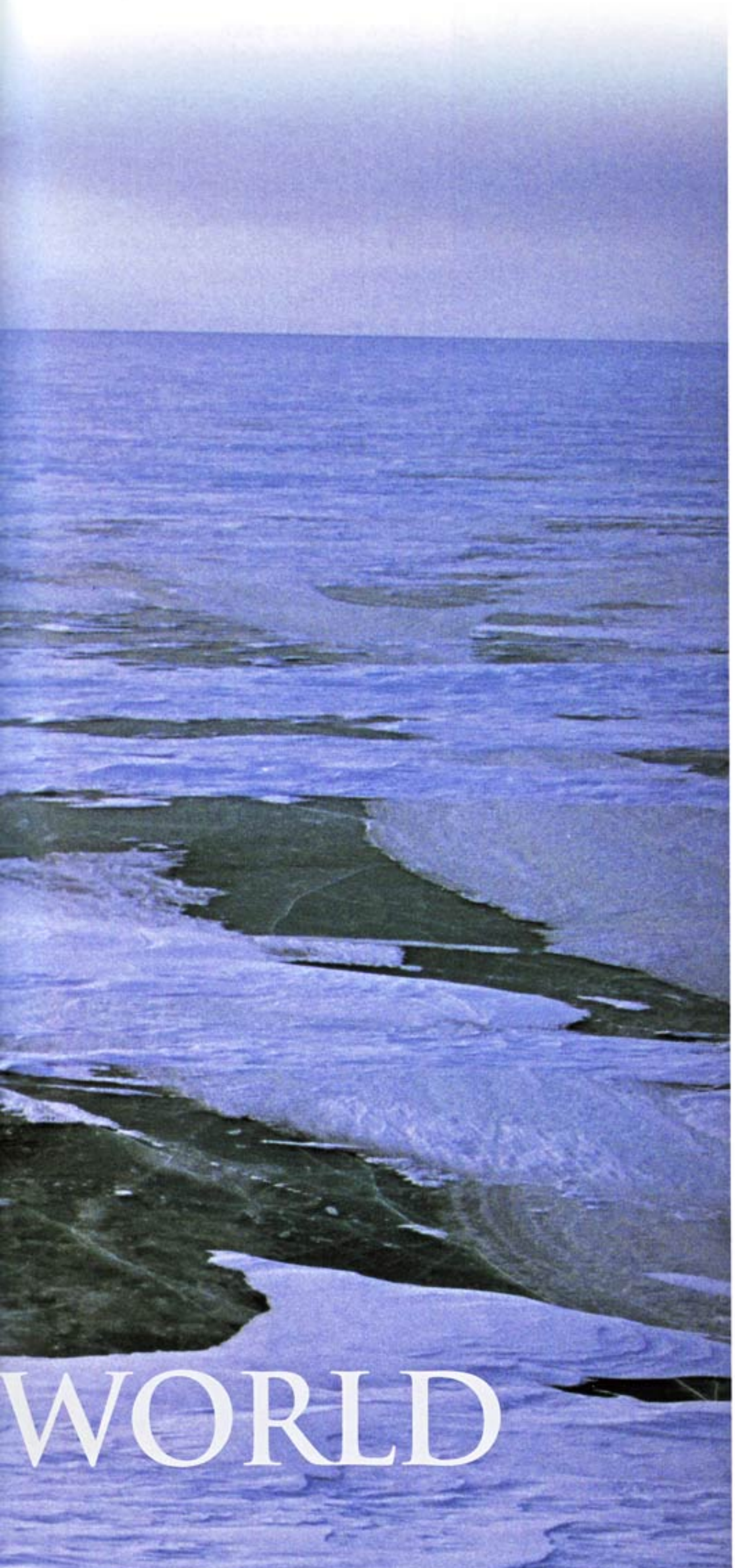


A WINTER TREK ACROSS SIBERIA

BY MIKAEL STRANDBERG

It was only the third day on our expedition, and already our lives were in a constant struggle for survival. We pulled the overloaded canoe up on the riverbank and took a short break to clear our heads. Torrents of water rushed by on both sides. Incessant rain had made the water level of the river rise 25 feet in two days. It was the beginning of autumn, and we had been expecting a fairly calm river, with easy paddling, where we could camp on the banks and spend the evenings fishing and hunting. Instead, the river had become a maelstrom of crushing logs, violent rapids, and unpredictable sand banks that were difficult to spot while steering through high waves.

Previous page: Johan strikes out across the frozen landscape of the Ambartki Gulag. Left: A map plots out the course for the 1,900-mi (3,000-km) hike. Below right: We pitch camp beside the Kolyma near the start of our journey.

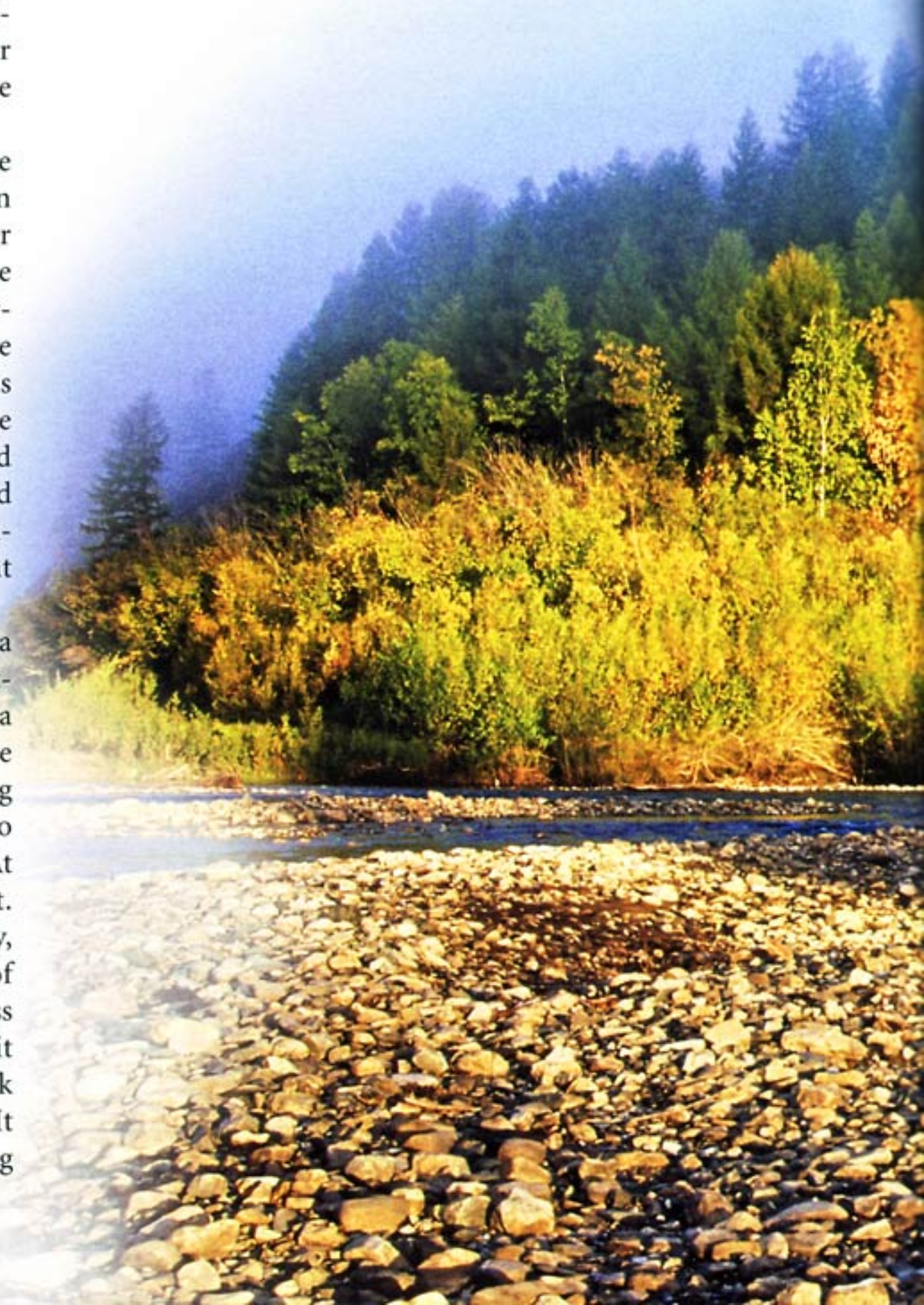
For a short moment it felt like we'd entered a sanctuary of peace—until scores of mosquitoes engulfed us again and caused havoc. We tied the canoe to a tree and entered the dense coniferous tracts of the Far North—the taiga. It was our first contact with the wild Siberian forest, and it was a nasty surprise. We are true forest people, but we were used to the ordered cultivation of Scandinavia, where one can travel easily. This taiga was nearly impenetrable, and it took us an hour to advance 100 yards and the same time to return back to the canoe. We never did see what lay ahead of us.

We tried to traverse the river once again, figuring we had a better choice of routes from the opposite side. But when we made it to the middle, the current was too strong. Whether we liked it or not, we ended up in the worst possible route through the rapids. Before I had a chance to shout out in terror, we crashed into a series of high waves, which were above us one second and below us the next. The waves tossed us around like driftwood, and the canoe moaned from the thrashing it was taking. Suddenly, just as I was sure we'd had it, we were through to the other side. Trembling, I turned around to see my young partner, Johan, smiling with exhilaration from the ride. If I had been holding my rifle at that moment, I would have shot him.

We stopped at the first high ground we could find—a muddy opening in the taiga with clouds of mosquitoes waiting for us. It took us two hours to carry all our equipment a few hundred yards inland to avoid getting flooded. But once we started to pitch the tent, we realized the river was rising quickly. At 7 p.m. it got dark, and we set our alarm clock to go off every 15 minutes so that we could check the water level. At 11 p.m. we knew that we would be flooded during the night. Well aware that paddling in the dark would kill us instantly, our only option was to hang on somehow until the break of dawn. We packed the canoe in the dark, harassed by countless mosquitoes, gnats, and flies. We stood in the dark next to it until water reached above our knees four hours later. We took our seats in the canoe, tied it to a sturdy tree, and waited. It was a demanding wait, as we were freezing cold from being soaked to the bone. When dawn arrived, we took a deep breath, untied the rope, and set off for another day of uncertainty.

FIGHTING STARVATION

One of the minor aims of the expedition was to investigate whether our ability to hunt and fish would be sufficient enough to survive the wild



taiga and tundra along the Kolyma River. The native people—the Yakuts, Even, Chukchi, and, especially, Yukaghirs, of whom only 400 individuals had survived the Soviet Era—all live in one of the coldest inhabited places on Earth. We wanted to learn whether the native people along the Kolyma were genetically different from Western Europeans when it came to their ability to cope with this extreme cold. We believed that people like ourselves—born, bred, and still living in the North Scandinavian outback—were much more physically tolerant when it came to handling the cold and hardships of the polar areas. For this reason, we embraced the old lumberjack tradition of putting on enormous amounts of extra weight in the form of fat before the arrival of winter. When we set off downriver at the beginning of August, we had put on an extra 40 pounds each. However, it was all gone by the time we encountered the bear, after only a month of paddling.

Standing on the beach only 20 yards away was one of the most beautiful bears I'd ever seen. His fur was radiant in the sun, his rams were grey from age, and he seemed startled by our presence. At that moment I had no idea whether it was the same bear I had shot at from the canoe ten minutes earlier. That bear had fallen over, having been hit at least three times in the area below his left shoulder. Before I had time to reload, he crawled slowly into the thick taiga. This one, however, took a step forward, stopped again, and stood up on his hind legs, sniffing even more eagerly. I took a quick look at Johan and suddenly realized that he was unarmed. The Russian authorities had allowed us to bring only one firearm.

"Whatever you do, don't miss," I said quietly, handing him the rifle.

The bear suddenly stopped ten yards away from us and stood up on his hind legs again. Johan shot him in the stomach, throwing the giant backward, and he rolled down the bank and straight into the fast current of the river. Stunned, we watched the bear being swept away. We had killed for nothing and felt more miserable and painfully hungry than ever before. Our expedition was only one month old. It was the end of August, and we were already on the verge of starvation.

We hardly got any sleep for the next ten days, and the lack of proper rest made it incredibly difficult to stay focused. We had many near accidents every day. Most difficult of all, however, was the lack of food. Even though we carried 770 pounds of equipment, only a small percentage was provisions: rice, pasta, cooking oil, wheat flour, lots of salt, sugar, 30 portions of freeze-dried food, coffee, tea bags, stock cubes, and oats. Our original idea was to fish and hunt both for survival and to collect enough meat and fish to dry as stores for the upcoming winter. The flooding, of course, made this impossible. The wild animals went up to the mountains, and the fish hid in pockets of calm water. When we encountered the brown bear, after four weeks of exhausting paddling, it was pure survival instinct that made us shoot. We had essentially run out of all supplies, except salt and pasta. Thankfully, the flooding stopped just a few days after we lost the bear, and we caught 30 pounds of trout and local fish in our nets and shot two massive hares and a pheasant. During September and October we caught more than 330 pounds of fish in our nets without using Western lures or flies.

The giant Siberian hares became our primary source of red meat. Every day, a couple of hours before dark, we took turns acting as hunting dogs to flush these hares out of their hiding. Once we discovered a likely hunting area, one of us scrambled into the dense taiga, barking like a dog. The one with the rifle took position, waiting eagerly for his dinner to emerge. When the human dog barked once, it meant a hare had been spotted. Two barks meant the hare was coming straight at the shooter's position. Three barks in a row meant the hare would appear from the taiga any moment! We managed to hunt enough game and catch an adequate amount of fish not only to survive, but also to put on additional body weight to face one of the coldest climates on Earth—the Kolyma winter.

ONCE INSIDE OUR SLEEPING BAGS, WE KNEW WE WOULD HAVE AT LEAST SIX HOURS OF **UNRELENTING PAIN** TO COPE WITH. **THE FROSTBITE** THAW WOULD COME, BUT FIRST IT WOULD TAKE AT LEAST **THREE HOURS** TO GAIN CONTROL OVER OUR **SHAKING.**

had experienced that burning feeling followed by numbness in one of his fingers—the first stage of frostbite. I could barely make him out in the eternal darkness of midwinter, and I shivered violently, the same way I had every day since we left the settlement of Zyryanka four weeks earlier, in the middle of November.

I exhaled, coughed, and heard the familiar tinkling sound that occurs when someone's breath turns into a shower of ice crystals, locally referred to as "the whispers of the stars." It was -70°F and it was impossible even to daydream. It didn't help that both of us had to walk instead of ski,

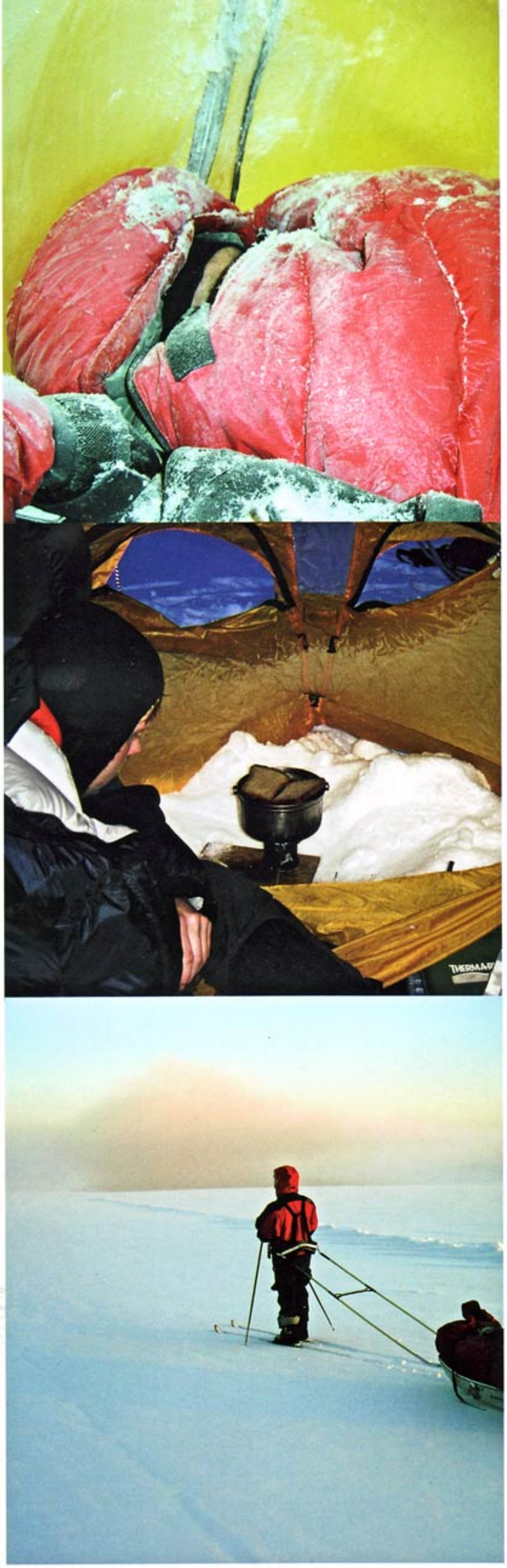
UNIMAGINABLE COLD

Johan was having another bout of diarrhea. It was the third time in an hour he had to pull his trousers off, along with three sets of gloves, and squat down. On every occasion he

as our ski bindings had broken when the temperature dropped below -58°F, along with most metal parts of our equipment. The heavy load made us sweat profusely the whole time, but we just couldn't stop and have a break. Every time we did, we seemed to pick up more frostbite on fingers or cheeks, and it felt like the liquid in our elbows and knees had frozen. We began to shiver uncontrollably.

We knew we had to keep moving to survive, so we continued with great effort in the darkness, pulling our 330 pounds each behind us. Even though the river was covered with only a couple of inches of snow, it still felt like we were

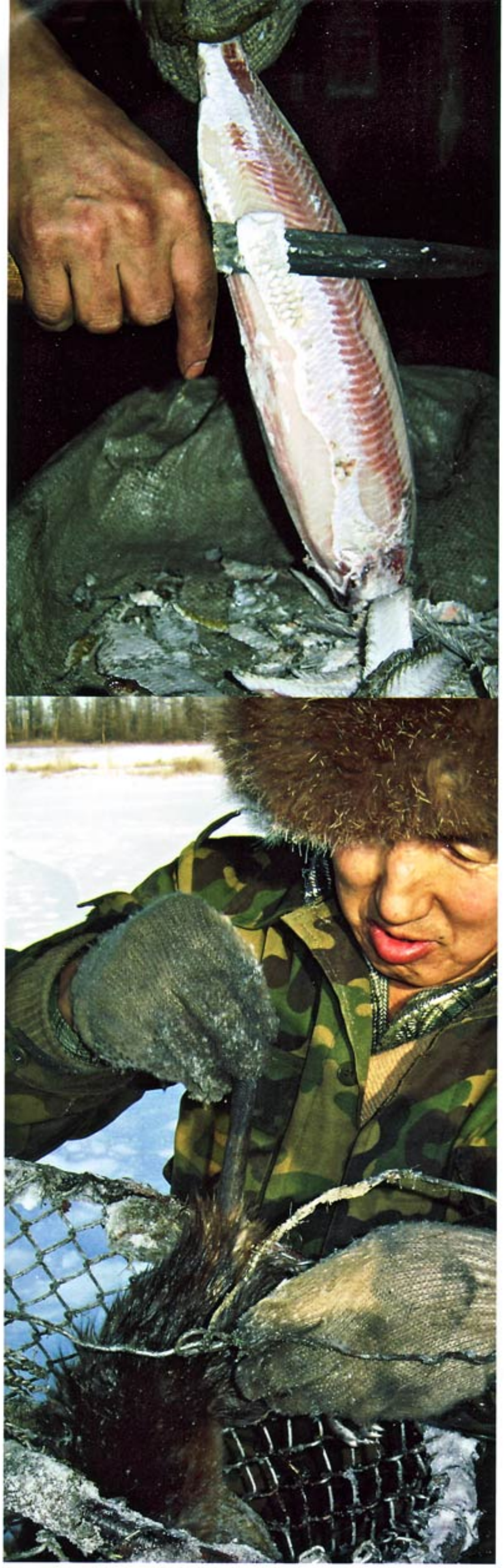
Top: We hardly slept at all when temperatures dropped below -70°F. Center: Cooking in the tent was possible only when temperatures rose above -50°F and the petrol melted. Bottom: We knew we had to keep moving to survive. Stopping almost made the liquid in our knees freeze. Below: Setting up the tent often meant six hours of unrelenting pain.



Left: Straganina was our staple diet during the extreme cold. Eaten raw and frozen, it's quite like ice cream with a fishy taste. Bottom: The Yakut muskrat hunters are true survivors. Right: Gulag crosses dot the landscape along the Kolyma.

pulling the sledges over sand. Hour after hour, we steadily put one foot in front of the other. The darkness didn't matter as our eyebrows were always iced up, making it hard to see anything. However, as long as we kept moving, at least it made us aware that we were still alive. At least until that dreadful moment when it was time to stop for the night.

Though it took us only a few minutes to pitch the tent, it took at least an hour to get the stove going. Some nights it didn't work at all. Poor quality Russian petrol was the problem. It froze solid. As a result, we carried the petrol bottle under our armpit the last hour of the day to keep it warm. We always knew when it was usable because the bottle would start to leak. We couldn't carry the stove under our armpits, so it



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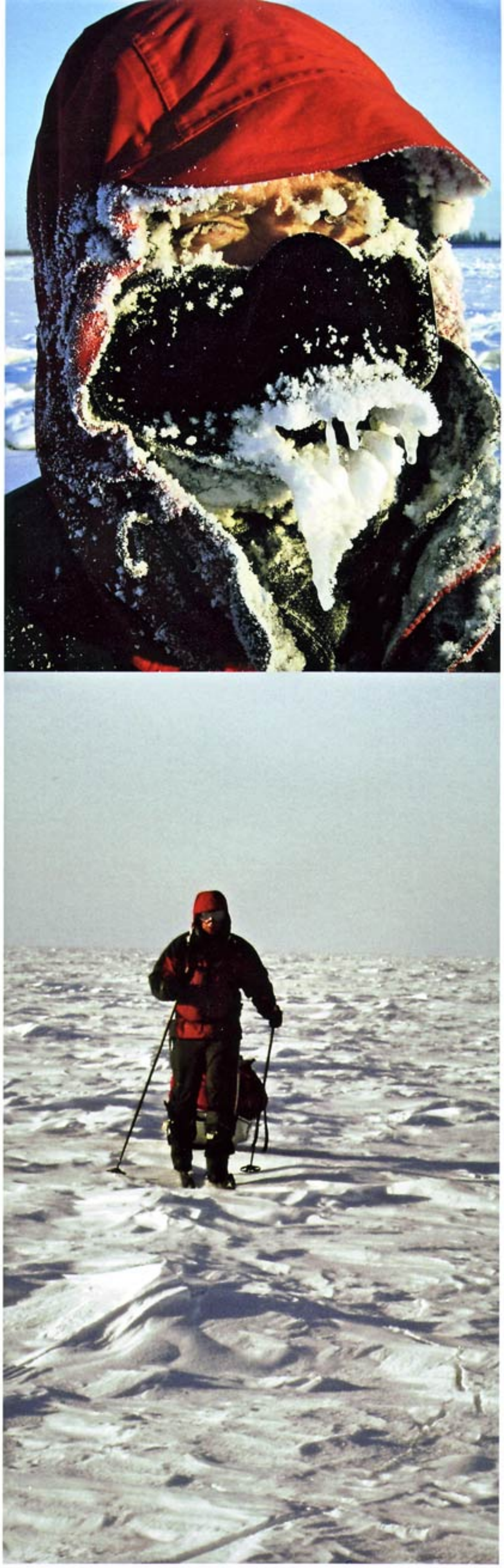
was always completely frozen. We had to pour petrol in a cup and light it to defrost it. It was important to stay busy during these attempts to keep the dangerous apathy at bay. The cold made us tremble, sometimes almost hysterically. When the stove finally worked, we could momentarily form a thought, but unfortunately this relief only made us more aware of how cold it was. Once inside our sleeping bags, we knew we would have at least six hours of unrelenting pain to cope with. The frostbite thaw would come, but first it would take at least three hours to gain control over our shaking. During this terrifying time we would lie on our backs, bodies arched, just trying to keep the worst of the shivering away. We hardly slept at all. Sharing the sleeping bag with the facemask, the PDA, satellite phone, flashlight, batteries, boots, stove, and spare gloves didn't help. As usual, it was dead silent outside, except for a lone wolf howling in the distance or the odd explosion when a tree detonated from the sap freezing cold.

One morning, I heard Johan moving around and realized I had to try to get out of the sleeping bag for the day. It felt almost impossible. My body was still stiff; every muscle ached; my cheeks, nose, and hands were burning, I had no energy at all, and I could not concentrate. The moment I shifted in my bag, cold snow fell into my face—just to remind

me of the hell I was in. It was pitch-black, and it took some time to find the flashlight. I'd slept on it most of the night. The moment I switched it on, I noticed that our breath had formed stalactites of snow hanging down from the tent roof. We didn't waste any time getting out of the tent. It took us just a few minutes to get all the equipment out, disassemble it, and pack everything together in the dark. This routine was followed by one of the coldest moments of the day, when it was time to take the down jacket off and start moving. It took at least three hours of work to feel relatively warm, and the ice covering our faces, nostrils, and eyes made breathing difficult and prompted persistent coughing. To save batteries we traveled in darkness. All day. Three days later we reached the Yakut settlement of Srednekolymsk.

THE BRINK OF CIVILIZATION

Most Russians and the Siberians do not have a comprehensive picture of the area along the Kolyma River—one of the coldest inhabited places in the world. We know that 3.5 million people lost their lives in Stalin's concentration camps—*gulags*—along the river. We wanted to ascertain how the area had been affected by the enormous changes in society as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union. We spent January thawing out in Srednekolymsk. Temperatures were constantly below -60°F. Amongst some of the nicest and most generous people on Earth, we put on a lot of weight needed for the remaining 930 miles to reach Ambarchik Bay before the end of April. We sampled their



Top: Johan's face often froze over. During the coldest time, we never really defrosted. Bottom: The skiing was only a joy at the end of the trip. When it was below -50°F, the snow felt like sand. Below: The Siberians all along the Kolyma are among the nicest people I've ever met.

local delicacies like *stroganina* (frozen raw fish eaten like ice-cream), *maxa* (frozen raw liver eaten the same way), cooked moose nostrils, stewed moose heart, fried liver from wild caribou, cooked moose muzzle with pasta, and raw frozen horse testicles. The local people gave us a healthy perspective regarding extreme cold. Some of them had amputated fingers, arms, and legs. Almost all had scarred cheeks and had lost the tips of their noses. However, as they were quick to tell us, it could have been much worse. We could have been unfortunate prisoners in one of Stalin's gulags whose remains dotted the Kolyma.

Even though we encountered temperatures below -55°F throughout most of February, traveling was a holiday in comparison with the dark midwinter travel. It was still extremely cold, but the temperatures rose to -30°F by noon every day. That was enough to thaw up a bit, and we could even stop for a short break without getting frostbite. It was also far easier to pull the heavy sledges in those temperatures. Equipment continued to break in the cold, but we came across trappers almost every three or four days, and their log cabins gave us enough warmth to do decent repairs. In March we had plenty of daylight, and temperatures rose to 0°F during the day! We finally reached the tundra and made it to our goal in Ambarchik Bay by the end of April.

Six months have passed since we returned back home to Sweden. Coming back has not been easy for me. I miss Kolyma every day. Not the hardships, the suffering, or the extreme cold, but the people—generous, funny, intelligent, knowledgeable, open-minded, humane, and extremely warm. They were the most welcoming I've come across during 25 years of exploration. Even though all the goals we set before the expedition were fulfilled many times over, I think the most important thing I brought with me back home is an understanding of why we humans have been blessed with the ability to communicate. Proper communication is not e-mailing, faxing, or shouting into a mobile phone. People are meant to socialize for hours on end together in a group. I have spent 44 years trying to understand the meaning of life, and I have never been as happy as when I was sitting with a bunch of reindeer herders in a *yurangi* (a cot made of reindeer skins) talking about pretty much everything. ■

For more information regarding the expedition, visit www.siberia.nu.

MIKAEL STRANDBERG *is an explorer, lecturer, and writer who has bicycled almost 6,000 miles through 75 countries over the past 8 years. Using only a manual compass, it took him three months to push his bicycle through the Sahara. Mikael has written six books and numerous articles, while Swedish Television SVT and National Geographic have made a documentary about his life. He is a fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, The Explorers Club, the Travellers Club, and the Long Riders' Guild.*