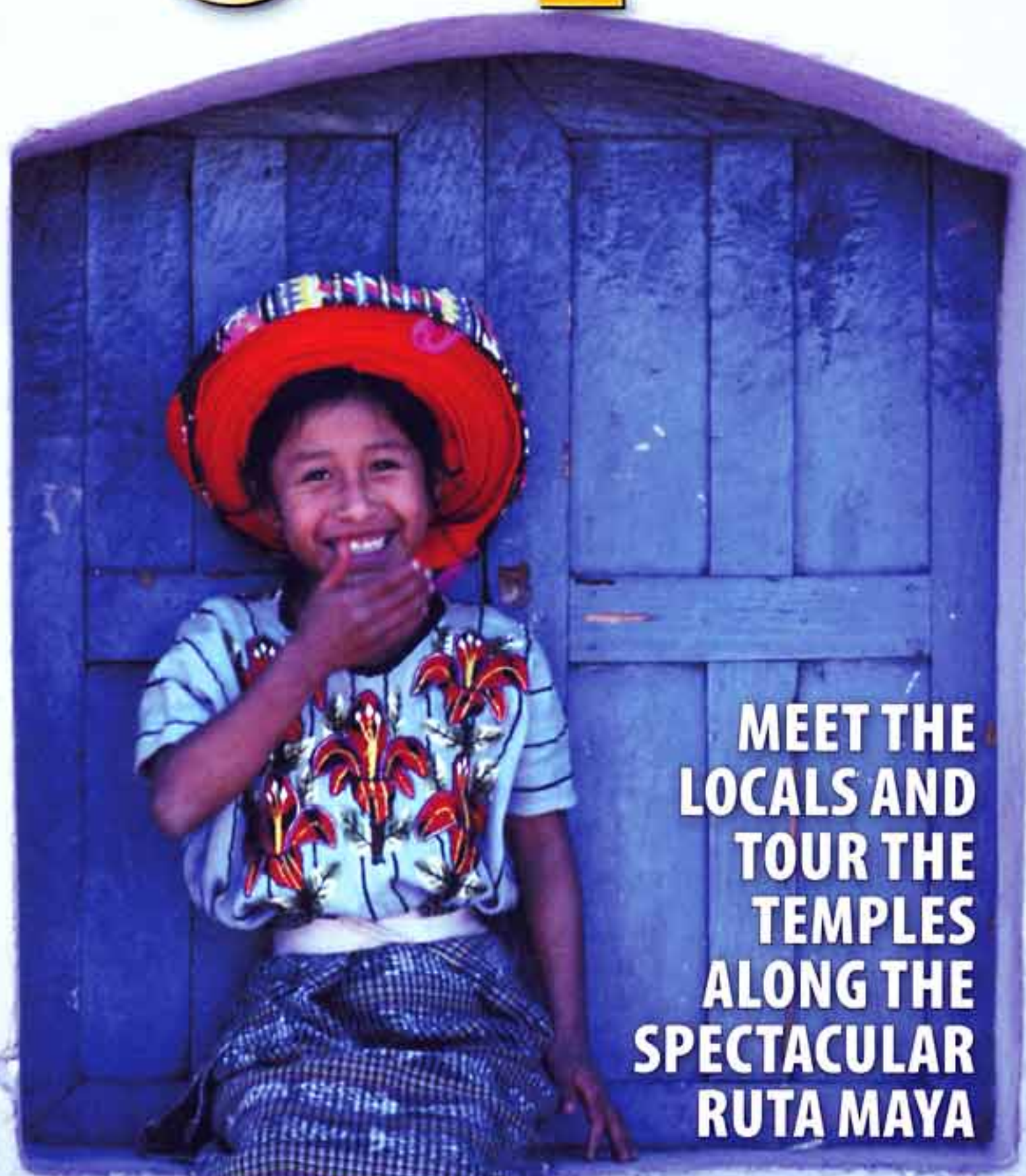


CULTURE • WILDLIFE • ENVIRONMENT • SCIENCE • TRAVEL

# Geographical



MEET THE  
LOCALS AND  
TOUR THE  
TEMPLES  
ALONG THE  
SPECTACULAR  
RUTA MAYA

## LIVING MAYANS

**PLUS** KEEPING LONDON'S TRAFFIC MOVING  
NICK DANZIGER, CYCLING KIT, SIBERIA TREK



THE MAGAZINE OF THE ROYAL GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY



## Getting inside the city

"We have entered the urban millennium." So said UN secretary-general Kofi Annan, speaking in Berlin in July 2000. And there's no arguing with his assessment. More than half the world's population now lives in cities and there are more than 30 metropolises whose populations exceed five million.

When you get large numbers of people congregating in one place, there will inevitably be problems. Not least of these are the difficulties associated with transportation. Those of us who live, work or simply visit London will recognise those problems all too well. A street plan that largely pre-dates motorised transport and a public transport system that is badly in need of an overhaul magnify the difficulties associated with huge numbers of people wanting to get from one part of the capital to another. While those in government grapple with these problems, geography is coming to the rescue. As Louise Murray discovered when she went behind the scenes with London's transport authorities (page 44), Geographic Information Systems, which integrate maps with other data, are integral to their attempts to ensure that traffic and public transport systems don't grind to a halt.

Of course, it's all too easy to focus on the negative aspects of city living and forget about the positives.



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So this month we're also featuring a series of images from a new Lonely Planet publication, *The City Book* (page 20), which celebrates the vibrancy and diversity of the world's cities.



### This month's cover

A young Guatemalan Mayan girl hides a smile as she sits on a window ledge. Following centuries of prosperity, during which it built some of the most impressive monuments in the ancient world, the Maya civilisation suddenly and mysteriously collapsed. However, the people themselves lived on, and despite suffering conquest and persecution, their culture remains strong.

**Photograph: Frans Lemmens/Iconica/Getty Images**

### Who said that?

"I've never been as scared as that in 20 years of extreme exploration"

Find out on page 30

## AMONG THIS MONTH'S CONTRIBUTORS

Swedish explorer and documentary film maker **Mikael Strandberg** has completed several expeditions in the Americas, East Africa and Asia, including a 27,500-kilometre cycle from Chile to Alaska. On **page 28**, Mikael recounts the tale of his epic walk across the Siberian wilderness in the depths of winter with his 20-year-old companion Johan Ivarsson, a feat for which the pair were recently awarded the prestigious Travellers Club Silver Medal.



**Nick Danziger** is an author, documentary filmmaker and photographer. His first book, *Danziger's Travels*, was a bestseller, and he has made more than 40 documentary films for the BBC, Channel 4 and the Discovery Channel. Last year, Nick was commissioned by World Vision to travel to eight of the world's poorest nations and document the lives of children and their families affected by poverty and injustice. A selection of his photos from Niger appear on **page 58**.

Although based in London, natural history photojournalist **Louise Murray** is constantly plotting her next visit to the high north. In the next few months, she'll be visiting the world's most northerly human settlement in Greenland, photographing traditional whale hunting with Inuit people and leading an ice-diving expedition in Nunavut, Canada. On **page 44**, however, she turns her attention to more urban concerns, meeting the people who keep London moving.



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**"M**ike!" Johan whispered anxiously. "Look out!" I turned and saw a large brown bear standing on the beach just 20 metres away, between us and our canoe, intensely sniffing the air and staring at us. It was one of the most beautiful bears I've ever seen, its fur radiant in the sun.

It took a step forward, stopped, and stood up on its hind legs, sniffing even more eagerly. I took a quick look at my young partner, Johan Ivarsson, and recalled the words of my wife, Titti, before we set out on our expedition: "Don't ever forget that when it comes to Johan, you have the same responsibility as a parent. It is better you die if things come to that."

"Maybe you should have a go," I said, handing Johan the rifle as I took a step

down from the steep bank and out of the thick forest. My appearance startled the bear, and it suddenly charged up the steep slope, turned around and came straight at us.

"Whatever you do, don't miss," I said quietly as Johan raised the rifle.

The bear stopped ten metres away and stood up on its hind legs again. Johan fired, and the giant fell backward, rolled down the bank and splashed into the rapidly flowing river. We watched in stunned silence as it was swept away. We had killed for nothing, and I felt more miserable than ever before. And painfully hungry. Our expedition down the Kolyma River in northeastern Siberia was but a month old and we were already on the verge of starvation.

"No meat, no fur and no food," Johan said, dejected, when we returned to the canoe. "And we're not catching anywhere near enough fish. Maybe we're not good enough trappers."

"Don't worry," I replied. "If we keep working hard, things will change."

But I knew that if we didn't get the local hunting gods on our side within a week, we would never make it to our final goal: Ambarchik Bay, ten months and 3,500 kilometres to the north.

Our attempt to determine whether we could survive in the wild Siberian taiga (forest) and tundra by living off the land was one of the less important aims of our expedition. Higher up the list was an attempt to create an accurate record of this poorly known region – not even the

# INTO THE HEART OF darkness

In July 2004, 42-year-old Swedish explorer **Mikael Strandberg** and his 20-year-old companion Johan Ivarsson set out to walk across the Siberian wilderness in the depths of winter. The journey that followed tested both their endurance and their resourcefulness to the limit



Russians have a comprehensive picture of the area along the Kolyma River.

We were also keen to document the lives of the region's indigenous people: the Yakuts, the Even, the Chukchi and especially, the Yukahirs, of whom only 400 have survived the Soviet era. All of them living in one of the coldest inhabited places on Earth.

### Raging river

We were in real trouble. The violent river had tipped the canoe and it was on the verge of capsizing. Instinctively, I leapt into the freezing water, and the canoe quickly stabilised, but the strong current immediately dragged me under it.

With all his strength, Johan pulled the canoe away from me. I went under the

rapids and was quickly pulled away by the current. It tossed me around like a piece of paper and I would have drowned if I hadn't ended up on a sandbank.

"Are you ok?" Johan asked, exhausted as he steered the canoe onto the bank beside me. "Yes," I replied. "But I'm scared stiff every second we spend in the canoe."

We dragged the overloaded canoe up onto the bank and took a short break. Enormous masses of water flowed past us. We were just three days into the expedition and it was pouring with rain. It was the beginning of autumn, so we'd expected a calm river and easy paddling, but a nasty typhoon had caused the river to rise seven metres in a few days, turning it into a wide torrent filled with logs, violent rapids and hidden sandbanks.

"Time to concentrate fully again," I told Johan as we pushed off from the sandbank and straight into another rapid.

Our survival depended on my comrade's ability to steer us through the rapids and away from logs. We didn't speak – that would have meant a dangerous loss of concentration. I just sat in the front of the canoe and waited for his screamed instructions.

After a few hours, we saw a cloud of water spray and heard a thunderous noise ahead. Something even worse awaited us. We spotted a stretch of calm water to our left, and paddled madly towards it. For a brief moment after we reached the shore, it felt like we'd entered a sanctuary of peace. Then the mosquitoes arrived.

We tied the canoe to a tree and, hoping ➡







**Above: setting up camp; Opposite, clockwise from top left: icing up as the temperature dropped to below  $-50^{\circ}\text{C}$ ; the pair each dragged about 150 kilograms behind them; at night, their exhalations froze, showering them in ice; skiing on the frozen river**

to see what lay ahead, we walked over to the edge of the forest. It was our first contact with the wild Siberian taiga and it was a nasty surprise. We are both forest people, but we're used to the cultivated Scandinavian taiga, where one can travel easily. Right now, we couldn't move forward a single step.

"It'll get better once we're inside the forest," I told Johan. It didn't. It was almost impenetrable and it took us an hour to advance 100 metres. We returned to the canoe, none the wiser as to our fate.

Back on the water, our attempt to navigate a path through the rapids quickly turned into an attempt to simply stay afloat as we found ourselves dragged into the maelstrom. We were tossed around by a series of enormous waves, the canoe moaning ominously. Then, just as I was sure we were doomed, we were spat out the other side.



"I've never been as scared as that in 20 years of extreme exploration," I told Johan. "I love it!" he happily replied. "I want more of this!" If the rifle had been beside me, I would have shot him. Thankfully, he didn't say anything else for two hours.

The river took us through one series of rapids after another, and after five hours doing everything we could to avoid capsizing, we were too tired to continue. We stopped at the first high ground we

could find – a muddy opening in the taiga where further squadrons of mosquitoes sat in wait.

It took us two hours to carry our equipment a few hundred metres inland to avoid getting flooded, but as we started pitching the tepee, we realised that sleep was going to evade us. The river was rising rapidly.

Darkness fell at 7pm and we set our alarm clock to ring every 15 minutes to remind us to check the level of the river.





By 11pm it was clear that we were going to be flooded. We were well aware that paddling in the dark would be death a sentence; we would just have to hang on until dawn.

We packed the canoe, attacked by uncountable biting insects, and stood beside it until 3am, when the water was above our knees. Then we tied the canoe to a tree, took our seats, and waited.

When dawn finally broke, we took a deep breath, untied the rope and set off for another day of uncertainty.

### Food, glorious food

We didn't get any sleep for ten days, and the lack of proper rest made it difficult to stay focused. Each day brought several new near-accidents. Most difficult of all, however, was the lack of food. Although we were carrying 350 kilograms of gear, only a small percentage was provisions.

Our inability to hunt and fish effectively due to the flooding meant that by the time we encountered the bear, we were pretty much down to some salt and pasta. Hence the loss of all that meat and fur was devastating.

It did serve to sharpen our instincts dramatically, however, and somehow, it also seemed to change our luck. The flooding subsided, and a few days later, we caught 15 kilograms of fish in our net and shot two massive hares and a pheasant. Over the next two months – September and October – we caught more than 150 kilograms of fish.

Every day, just before dark, we took turns trying to flush out giant Siberian hares. One of us took the role of a barking dog and went off into the dense taiga. The other sat with the rifle, waiting eagerly for the 'dog' to do its work. One bark meant a hare had been spotted, two that it was

heading towards the shooter and three that its appearance was imminent.

Eventually we managed to shoot enough game and catch enough fish not only to survive, but to put on additional body weight. Now we were ready to face one of the world's coldest climates – the Kolyma winter.

### Constant cold

"That's another frostbite," said Johan in despair. "That means I've got one on every finger."

He was having another bout of diarrhoea. It was the third time in an hour he'd had to squat down and pull off his trousers and his three sets of gloves. Each time, he experienced a burning in one of his fingers, followed by numbness: the first stage of a frostbite.

I could barely make him out in the eternal mid-winter darkness. "I think





**Above:** the sun returns in early February;  
**Below, left to right:** the pair's equipment astonished the locals, who thought it was not only useless, but dangerous; Yakut women make an offering to the god of fire; local trappers with their stocks of frozen fish



we'd better move on," I whispered. Exhaling, I coughed and heard a familiar tinkling – the sound of my breath turning into a shower of ice crystals. The locals refer to it as 'the whispers of the stars'. It was  $-57^{\circ}\text{C}$  and it was virtually impossible to form a coherent thought. It was pure survival instinct that kept us going.

We continued into the darkness, pulling our 150-kilogram loads behind us. The iced-over river was covered with a few centimetres of snow, but it felt as if we were dragging the sledges over sand. It didn't help that we were walking, not skiing – our ski bindings had broken when the temperature dropped below  $-50^{\circ}\text{C}$ , as had most of the other metal parts of our equipment.

The heavy loads made us sweat profusely, but we couldn't stop. Every time we did, we picked up more frostbite on fingers or cheeks, and it felt as if the liquid in our elbows and knees froze.

After 16 hours of walking, it only took

us a few minutes to pitch the tent, but it took at least an hour to get the stove going. Some nights it didn't work at all. Poor-quality Russian petrol that froze solid was the problem. Although we carried the fuel bottle under an armpit for the last hour of the day, it still took an hour to get the stove going, as it too froze. When it finally lit, we could momentarily form a thought, but inevitably all we could think about was how cold it was.

Once inside our sleeping bags we knew we had at least six hours of unrelenting pain to cope with. Not due to our frostbite thawing up, but because it took at least three hours to gain control over our bodies. During this terrifying time, we lay on our backs, body arched, just trying to keep the worst shivering away. We hardly slept. Sharing the sleeping bag with the facemask, the PDA, satellite phone, torch, spare batteries, boots, stove and gloves didn't help.

As usual, it was silent outside. Only

rarely was this eerie hush broken – by the haunting howl of a lone wolf or the crack of a tree detonating from the cold.

We didn't completely thaw out that night either.

### The unbearable darkness of being

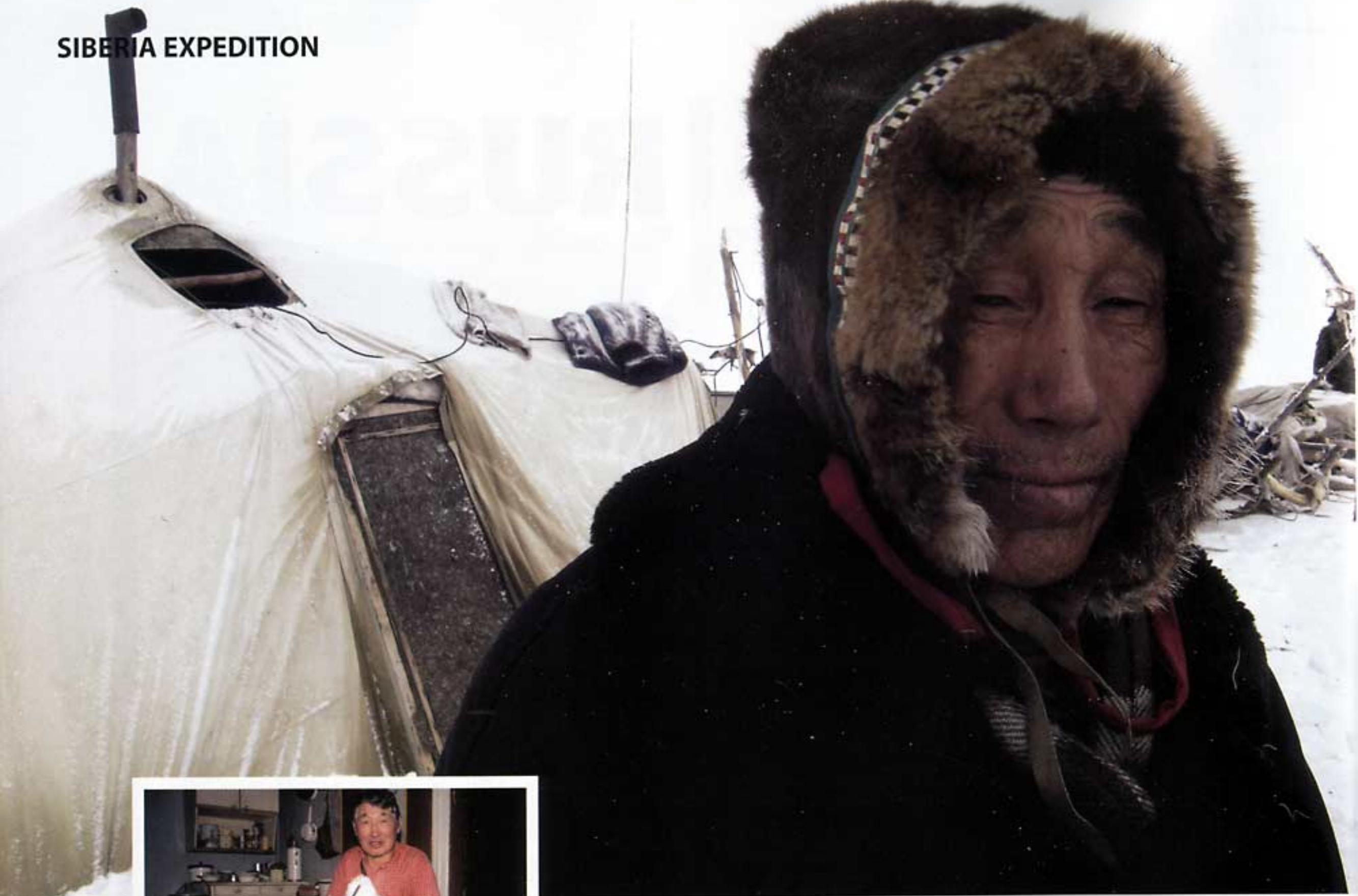
"It's time to get up," I said through the breathing hole in my sleeping bag.

"What time is it?" Johan asked with a groan. "I don't know," I replied. "Does it matter? It's dark all the time anyway."

I switched on the torch and saw that, as usual, our frozen breath was hanging from the tent roof in giant stalagmites. And, as usual, Johan emerged from his sleeping bag first. After putting on his down jacket, facemask and boots, he handed me the stove. I removed a layer of gloves and tried to work the lighter, but it wouldn't ignite, even though I'd kept it in my underpants all night.

"I think we'll have to give breakfast a miss today," I said.





**Above, top to bottom:** the Chukchi are the largest indigenous group on the Asian side of the North Pacific; preparing a hare for dinner; Chukchi herders check how many reindeer they've lost over the winter; a Chukchi woman prepares the spirits for the arrival of the reindeer on the tundra

It took us a few minutes to get the equipment out of the tent, disassemble it and pack everything up in the dark. Then it was time for one of the coldest parts of the day – taking off the down jacket and getting moving. It would be at least three hours before we felt relatively warm again.

In order to save batteries, we travelled in darkness. All day.

Three days later we reached the Yakut settlement of Srednekolymsk.

**Moose muzzle and horse testicles**

We spent January thawing out in Srednekolymsk among some of the most generous people on Earth. We sampled local delicacies such as *stroganina* (frozen raw fish eaten like ice-cream), cooked moose muzzle with pasta and raw frozen horse testicles and managed to put on the weight we would need for the remaining 1,500 kilometres to Ambarchik Bay.

The locals also gave us a healthy perspective regarding extreme cold. Some had lost fingers, arms or legs. Almost all had scarred cheeks and had lost the tip of their nose.

We set out again in February, and even though we encountered temperatures below  $-48^{\circ}\text{C}$  for most of the month, travelling was a holiday in comparison with the dark, mid-winter slog. At noon

every day, the temperature rose to  $-35^{\circ}\text{C}$ : warm enough for us to thaw out. We could even stop for short breaks without getting a frostbite. Our equipment continued to break in the cold, but we came across trappers every three or four days whose log cabins provided a warm place to carry out repairs.

In March, we had plenty of daylight and temperatures rose to  $-40^{\circ}\text{C}$  even in the night and we experienced day temperatures up to  $-18^{\circ}\text{C}$ !

We reached the tundra in April and travelled quickly over the sastrugi. By the end of April we reached Ambarchik Bay.

**Living on the edge**

Six months have now passed since we returned to Sweden and I still miss the Kolyma every day – not the hardships or the extreme cold, but the people. They were among the finest I've come across during 25 years of exploration: generous, funny, intelligent and knowledgeable.

Although we fulfilled all of the goals we set before the expedition and discovered a lot of previously unknown knowledge, I think the most important thing that I've brought home with me is a new appreciation for the warmth and humanity of those who live on the extreme edges of our world.