

Russian Life

NOVEMBER
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Putin's Return

Kremlin switcheroo

Crossing Kolyma

By sled and canoe

End of the USSR

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Women B'ballers

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Crossing

The background image is a wide-angle photograph of a desolate, icy landscape. The foreground and middle ground are filled with a vast expanse of ice, characterized by numerous cracks, ridges, and patches of varying shades of blue, white, and grey. The ice appears to be melting or breaking apart, creating a textured and somewhat chaotic surface. In the far distance, a flat horizon line separates the icy terrain from a pale, overcast sky. The overall mood is one of isolation and vastness.

Story and photos by Mikael Strandberg

Kolyma



“Mike!” Johan whispered anxiously, “Look out!”

As I turned around, I saw a large brown bear standing on the beach only 20 meters away – between us and our canoe – sniffing intensely and staring back at us. It 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.


I had no idea whether this was the same bear I had shot at from the canoe ten minutes earlier, or whether it was a different one. The first bear had fallen over, hit at least three times below his left shoulder. Before I had time to reload, he crawled slowly into the thick taiga. This bear took a step forward, stopped again and stood up on his hind legs, sniffing even more eagerly. I took a quick look at my young partner Johan and suddenly realized that he was unarmed. The Russian authorities had allowed us to bring along only one rifle.

At that moment I remembered what my wife Titti had said to me before we had set out on our expedition: “Don’t ever forget that you have the same responsibility as any parent regarding Johan. It is better if you die, if things come to that.”

“Maybe you should have a go,” I calmly said to Johan, handing him the rifle as I took a step down from the steep bank and out of the thick forest.

My appearance initially startled the bear, but then the giant beast suddenly bolted up a nearby steep slope, turned to face us, then charged at us with determination.

“Whatever you do, don’t miss,” I told Johan quietly as he raised the rifle.



The bear suddenly stopped 10 meters away from us and stood up on his hind legs. Johan shot the bear in the stomach; the giant fell backward, rolled down the bank and straight into the fast flowing river. Stunned, we watched the bear get swept away by the swift current. We had killed for nothing and I felt more miserable than I ever had. And painfully hungry. We were just one month into our expedition down Siberia's Kolyma River; it was the end of August and already we were on the verge of starvation.

"We better stay sharp and focused," I advised Johan as he reloaded, my voice betraying my exhaustion. "We still don't know if there's another bear around. If it is, it's badly injured and therefore very dangerous."

It was useless advice. Johan, only 21 years old and on his first expedition, was surging with adrenalin. He trembled from excitement, concentration and nervous tension. I grabbed an axe from the canoe, in the hope of using it as some sort of defensive weapon if need be, and together we cautiously entered the dense taiga. We spent an hour doing a thorough examination of the area and concluded that this had been the same bear I had shot from the boat, and that his odd behavior had to do with him being badly hurt. A Swedish authority on bears, when I gave him the measurements of the giant's paws, estimated that it was a male bear weighing around 400-450 kilograms.

Johan Ivarsson, the author's co-expeditioner, in a quieter moment of paddling.

"No meat, no fur and no food," Johan said, dejected, as we returned to the canoe, ready to continue downriver. "And we don't seem to catch enough fish. Maybe we're not good enough trappers?"

"Don't worry," I reassured him, "if we keep working hard, sooner or later things will change."

In reality, however, I knew that if we couldn't bring the local hunting and fishing gods around to our side within a week, we would never make it to our final goal: Ambarchik Bay, which lay 10 months and 3500 km to the north.



One of the less important aims of our expedition was to investigate whether we could live off the land – fishing and hunting – as we travelled through the wild Siberian taiga and tundra along the Kolyma River.* More important, however, was to make a full record of this unknown corner of our world. This was a vital task, since in the course of our extensive research work we found that neither the Russians nor the Siberians themselves had a comprehensive picture of this territory. The obvious obstacles were cold, distance, the vast size of the region and its utter isolation. The area was untouched, remote and unknown. And one of the



* The course of Strandberg and Ivarsson's 2004 expedition covered some 3500 km, beginning in Magadan and ending at Ambarchik Bay.



*Fall turns to
winter along the
Kohyma.*

coldest inhabited places on earth. Our main aim was thus to build a bridge between our cultures, to widen the western world's knowledge about the Russian and Siberian way. We wanted to discover the Russian and Siberian temperaments. We believed this could provide a perspective on the way of life in the future.

We also wanted to ascertain how the area had been affected by the enormous changes in society since the collapse of the Soviet Union. We knew 3.5 million people had lost their lives in Stalin's concentration camps – gulags – along the river. But this was also the land of the Yakuts, the Even, the Chukchi and, especially, the Yukahirs – of whom only 400 individuals had survived the Soviet era. All were living in one of the coldest inhabited places on earth.

During our research work we realized that polar travel, throughout its short history, a record full of frostbites and death, had been dominated by people raised and resident in cities. We postulated that people like us – born, bred and still living in the North Scandinavian outback – were physically more tolerant to the cold and hardships of the polar region. For this reason, for example, we used the old lumberjack tradition of putting on enormous amounts of extra body fat before the onset of winter. So it was that, in the beginning of August, when we first put our canoe in the river, we were each carrying an extra 20 kilos.

Yet, a month of paddling later, by the time we had our incident with the bear, it was all gone.

Since the first day we had put our oars in the water, we had been pushed to our limits, both physically and mentally.



"Johan!" I shouted in panic, "I'm stuck under the canoe!"

Just as Johan, using all his strength, managed to pull the canoe off of me, I was sucked under the rapids and quickly pulled off by the strong current. It tossed me around like a piece of paper and I would have drowned, had I not gotten lucky and been tossed up on the very sandbar we had been avoiding – jumping out of the canoe to try to change its direction, only to get sucked under.

"Are you ok?" Johan asked, exhausted.

"Yes," I answered, terrified, "but I am scared stiff every second we spend in that canoe. If the canoe flips, we're dead."

"We'd better not flip, then," Johan quietly replied, which made us laugh and relax if only for a moment.

We pulled the overloaded canoe up onto the bank and took a short break, giving us some time to sharpen

our concentration, while enormous volumes of water rushed past on both sides of our sandbar. Rain was pelted down. It was just the third day of our expedition and already our lives were a constant struggle for survival. A nasty typhoon had hit this unpopulated, untouched and very wild mountainous region, and the water level had risen seven meters in a couple of days. We had expected a fairly calm river, with relatively easy paddling, since it was the beginning of autumn. We had planned to make camp on the banks of the river and spend the evenings fishing and hunting. Instead, the typhoon had turned the river into a wide torrent full of fast moving logs, violent rapids and unpredictable sandbars that were rather hard to spot while one was steering their path through the high waves.

"Time to concentrate fully again," I told Johan as we pushed the canoe away from the sandbar and into the rapids.

Every second that I sat in the front of that canoe I was terrified. Our survival depended a lot on my young comrade's knowledge and his ability to steer us through the rapids, avoiding fast moving logs or getting pinned by a log-jam. We didn't talk. That would have meant a dangerous loss of concentration. I just sat in the front and waited for his screamed instructions when we hit a stretch of high waves: "Paddle harder!"

Then I would paddle for my life. After a couple of hours of paddling, we saw a cloud of water spray up ahead and heard a thunderous noise. We realized that something even worse awaited. Amazingly, we spotted a stretch of calm water to our left and I yelled in a slightly panicked voice, "We have to get out of the canoe and check that stretch out now!"

Johan yelled back, "Watch out! I'll turn the canoe around and when I scream 'paddle,' we need all your strength to make it!"

To my amazement, he managed to turn the canoe through a nasty rapid and we ended up with our nose into the current. We crossed the river that way, paddling like mad for what seemed like ages. Eventually, we made it to the side of the river. It was the first calm water we'd met since we began paddling. For a short moment it felt like we'd entered a sanctuary of peace. At least until the clouds of mosquitoes arrived. We tied the canoe to a tree and entered the taiga. It was our first contact with this wild Siberian forest and it was a nasty surprise. We were forest people, but we were used to the easy, cultivated Scandinavian taiga, where one can move about easily. We couldn't move forward a single step.

"It'll get better once we've made it inside the forest," I said, trying to reassure Johan. "It's the same in jungles all over the world."

It didn't get any better. The forest was virtually impenetrable. It took us an hour to advance 100 meters, and the same time to return to the canoe. We were

unable to forge ahead and see what was thundering ahead, out of sight.

"We just have to give it a try and hope for the best," I said. "And if we keep our concentration, we'll get through."

We tried to traverse the river once again, since we figured we had a better choice of routes from that side. But once we made it to the middle, the current and the rapids were 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 yell out my feelings of terror, we went into a series of high waves, which one second were above us and the next moment below us. The swells tossed us around uncontrollably, and the canoe moaned from the beating it was taking. Suddenly, just as I was sure we were goners, we were through to the other side.

"I have never been so scared in all my 20 years of extreme exploration," I yelled out to Johan in terror and relief.

"I love it!" Johan yelled in reply, "I want more of this!"

If I had had my rifle next to me at that moment, I might have shot him. Luckily, Johan didn't say anything else for the next two hours. We just ran one series of rapids after another, and after five hours of struggling to keep the canoe upright, we were too knackered to continue. 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 meters inland, so that it would not get flooded. Yet once we started pitching the tepee, we realized we wouldn't get any sleep that night. The level of the river was continuing to rise rapidly. At 7 P.M. it got dark and we set our alarm clock to ring every 15 minutes, to wake us so we could check the level of the river. At 11 P.M. we knew the flood was upon us. But we also knew we couldn't paddle in the dark. We would be killed instantly. We had to hang on somehow until dawn broke.

We packed up the canoe in pitch darkness, while being attacked by swarms of mosquitoes, gnats and flies, and we stood next to it until, at 3 A.M., the water rose above our knees. Then we took our seats in the canoe, tied it to a sturdy tree and waited. It was a difficult wait, since we were freezing cold from being constantly wet and soaked to the bone. As soon as the sun came up, we took a deep breath, untied the rope and, concentrating fully, set off for another day of uncertainty.



We didn't get any sleep for ten days. The lack of proper rest made it extremely hard to stay focused. Every day we had several near-misses. Most difficult of

all, however, was the lack of food. Yes, we were carrying some 350 kilograms of supplies, but that was mostly equipment. Only a small percentage of what we had were provisions like rice, pasta, cooking oil, wheat flour, salt, sugar, 30 portions of freeze-dried food, coffee, tea bags, bouillon cubes and oats. Our original idea was that we would fish and hunt not only to survive, but also to collect enough meat and fish to dry as stores for the upcoming winter. The flooding, of course, made this impossible.

So when we encountered the brown bear, after four weeks of troublesome and demanding paddling, it was pure survival instincts that made us shoot. We had pretty much run out of all our supplies, except for salt and pasta. Even though we tragically took a life, and lost a huge amount of meat and fur, the event dramatically sharpened our instincts.

And then, for some reason, the gods of Nature came around to our side.

The flooding stopped, and just a couple of days later we caught 15 kilograms of trout and local fish in our net, shot two massive hares and a pheasant. During the two months that followed, September and October, we caught over 150 kilos of fish in our nets (and very few with western lures or flies). Every day, a couple of hours before darkness, we took turns playing the part of hunting dog, flushing giant Siberian hares out of hiding.

It was dead easy. We simply established where they were hiding, then one of us set off into the dense taiga, barking. The one remaining behind with the rifle took his position and waited for the “dog” to do its work. It was some of the most interesting hunting I’ve ever done. One bark meant a hare had been spotted, two barks that he was heading toward the shooter and three barks meant he would arrive any second. During this period, we caught enough game and fish not only to survive, but also to add additional body weight to face the coming Kolyma winter.



“That’s more frostbite,” Johan despaired through his facemask, “That means I’ve got it on every finger.”

He was having another bout of diarrhea. It was the third time in an hour he’d had to squat and drop his trousers. And his three sets of gloves. On every occasion he 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 way I had every day since we’d left the settlement of Zyryanka four weeks before, in the middle of November.

“I think we’d better move on,” I whispered.

I exhaled, coughed and heard the familiar tinkling sound of my breath turning into a shower of ice crystals.

In Kolyma they call it “the whispers of the stars.” It was -70° F and it was impossible to form a decent thought or even to daydream. Or to feel any worries. By pure survival instinct, we knew we had to keep moving and never stop. So we continued on with great effort in the darkness, pulling our 330 pounds each behind us.



Ice-crusted expeditioner.

Even though the frozen river was covered with just a couple of inches of snow, it still felt like pulling the sledges through sand. It didn’t help that we were both walking, not skiing, since our ski bindings had broken when the temperature dropped below -58° F, as did most of the metal parts on our equipment. The heavy load made us sweat constantly and profusely, but we couldn’t just stop and take a break. Every time we did, we seemed to accumulate more frostbite’s on our fingers or cheeks. It felt like the liquid in our elbows and knees was freezing and we started to shiver uncontrollably. Consequently, even in complete darkness, we kept moving. Hour after hour. Steadily putting one foot in front of the other.

Actually, the darkness didn’t matter. We couldn’t see anything since our eyebrows were always iced up. But, as long as we kept moving, at least we were aware that we were still alive. At least until that awful moment when it was time to get inside the tent.



After 16 hours of skiing, it only took us a few minutes to pitch our 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 was the problem. It froze solid. As a result, we carried the petrol bottle under our armpit the last hour of the day in order to warm it up. We always knew when the fuel was usable, since the bottle would start to leak. Yet it still took an hour to get the stove going, since it was completely frozen. We had to pour petrol in a cup, light that and use it to defrost the stove.

During these interludes, we both had to keep ourselves busy, in order to keep dangerous apathy at bay. The cold still made us tremble, sometimes almost hysterically. When the stove finally worked, we could momentarily form a thought, but unfortunately this just made us more aware how cold it was.

Once inside our sleeping bags, we knew we had at least six hours of unrelenting pain ahead of us. Not due to the thawing of our frostbite, but because it took at least three hours to gain control over your body. During this terrifying time, we lay on our backs, our spines arched, trying to keep the worst shivering at bay, trying to rest as much as possible. We hardly slept. Sharing the sleeping bag with the facemask, the PDA, satellite phone, flashlight, spare batteries, boots, stove and gloves didn't help. As usual, it was dead silent outside, except for those times when we heard a lone howling wolf in the distance or the odd explosion of a tree detonating from the cold. Come morning we still weren't completely thawed out.



"It is time to get up", I said through my breathing hole in the sleeping bag; "Four days to go before we reach Srednekolymsk."

"What time is it?" Johan groaned and my answer was simple, "I don't know. Does it matter? It's dark all the time anyway."

As soon as I moved, cold snow fell into my face. Just to make me aware of the hell I was in. It was pitch black and it always took some time to find the flashlight. I'd

slept on it most of the night. When I switched it on, still inside my sleeping bag, I noticed that, as usual, our breath had condensed to form giant snow stalagmites hanging down from the tent roof. And when I heard Johan moving, I realized I had to try to get out of the sleeping bag. It felt almost impossible. My body was still stiff; every muscle ached, my cheeks, nose and hands were burning, I felt no energy at all, and I found it hard to concentrate. Johan, as usual, was first out of his bag and immediately put on his down jacket, followed by his facemask. Then he started the struggle to put his boots on. Days of diarrhea had made him very weak, yet still he labored on heroically, doing everything out of pure instinct. He handed me the stove. To work it, I had to remove a layer of gloves and I had problems getting the lighter to work, even though I'd kept it in my underpants all night. My hands were too stiff. And the stove was frozen solid. Johan gave it a try with no luck.

"I think we have to give breakfast a miss today," I told Johan. "We forgot to put the petrol bottle and stove into our sleeping bags last night."

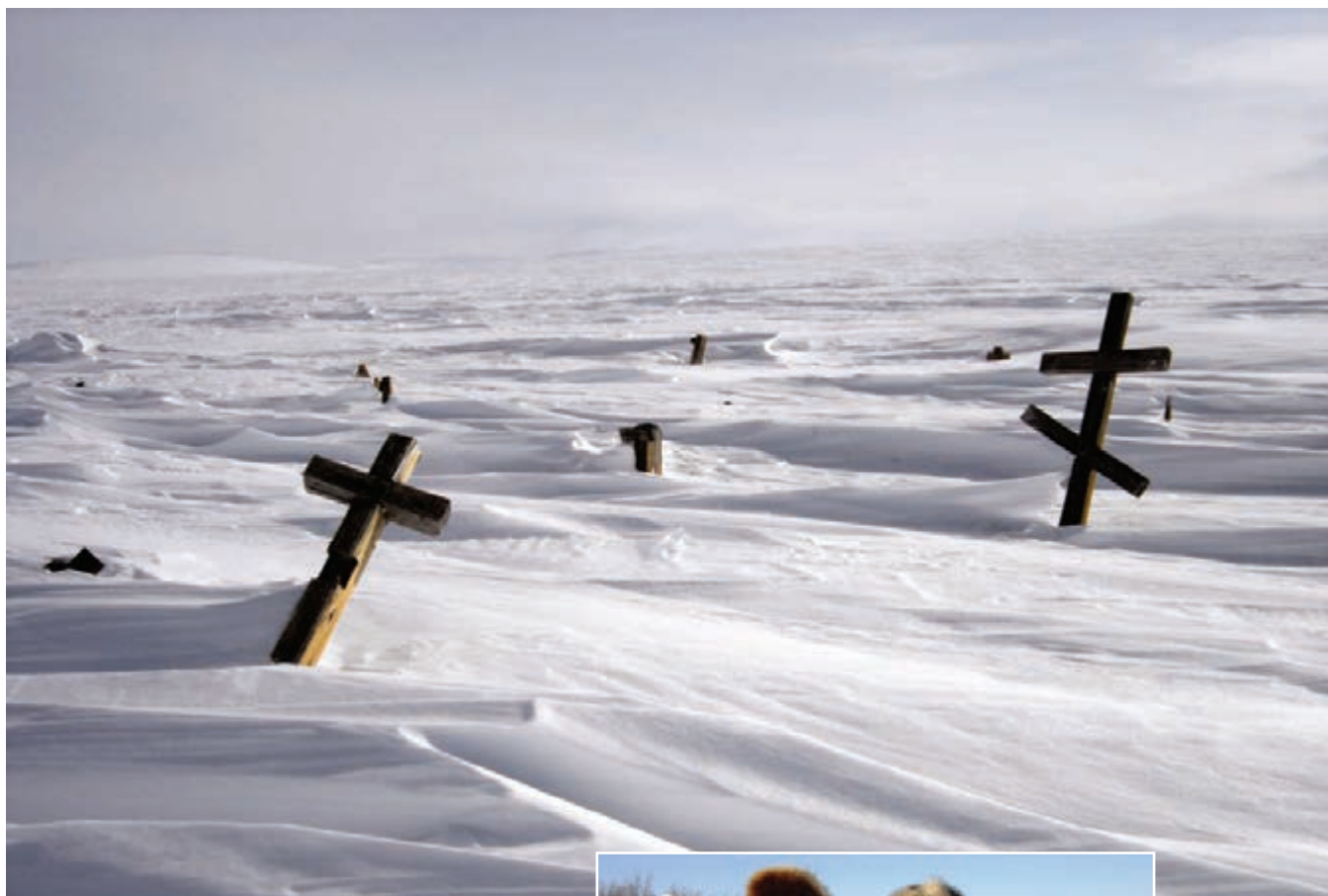
The only positive aspect with not being able to cook was that we didn't have to suffer through the condensation, which iced everything up. We didn't waste time exiting the tent. It took us just a few minutes to get all the equipment out, disassemble it and pack everything up in the dark. This routine was followed by one of the coldest moments of the day, when it was time to take our down jackets off and start moving. It would be at least three hours before we would feel relatively warm again. During this time, the face, nostrils and eyes were again covered by ice, making breathing difficult. We coughed pretty much continuously. And to save batteries we travelled in darkness. All day. Three days later, we reached the Yakut settlement of Srednekolymsk.



We spent January thawing out in Srednekolymsk. Temperatures were constantly below -60° F. And there, living among some of the nicest and most generous people on earth, we put on the weight we needed to cover the remaining 1500 kilometers to Ambarchik Bay before the end of April. We sampled their 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, raw frozen horse testicles and much more. And the locals 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. And, as they told us, it could have been worse. We could have been unfortunate prisoners in one of Stalin's

On the coldest nights, Mikael and Johan could not warm up, even in their sleeping bags.





gulags – the remains of which dotted the Kolyma landscape. Many of those prisoners made it all the way to Kolyma only to freeze to death within two weeks.



Even though we encountered temperatures below -55° F most of February, travelling was a holiday compared with the dark, midwinter travel. We froze horribly throughout the month, but at noon every day the temperatures rose to -30° F and that was enough to thaw out. We could even stop for a short break without getting frostbite. We pulled the sledges from early morning until a couple of hours before darkness (even able to form thoughts during the daylight hours), then pitched our tent and spent a couple of hours trying to get the stove working. Eventually it did. Equipment continued to break in the cold, but we came across trappers 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 -40° F even at night, and we experienced daytime temperatures as high as 0° F. We finally reached the tundra in April and travelled quickly over the *zastrugi** to reach our goal in Ambarchik Bay by the end of April.



Above, a Kolyma Gulag graveyard.

Left, locals display their efficient means of winter food storage.



I miss Kolyma every day.

Not the hardships, the suffering or the extreme cold, but the people.

In 25 years exploring every corner of the planet, the people of Kolyma are the best people I've come across. They are generous, funny, intelligent, knowledgeable, open-minded and extremely warm. Even though all the goals we had for the expedition were fulfilled, the most important thing I've brought back is an understanding of the major difference between humans and other species: our ability to communicate. **RL**

* Sharp irregular grooves or ridges formed on a snow surface by wind erosion and deposition, and found in polar and temperate snow regions.

VISIT RUSSIA SIX TIMES A YEAR



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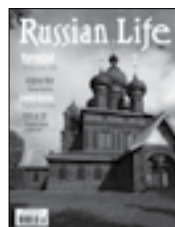
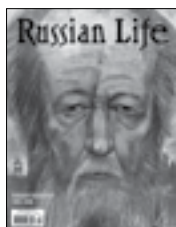
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