

Into the freezer

Rob Liwall cycled into the depths of Siberia's winter on Stalin's 'road of bones'. Temperatures fell to minus 40 degrees centigrade – and he was camping

Moscow was behind us. The Urals passed below in the night as the clunky Davao airlines 'plane headed east. Waking from a few hours of snatched sleep, I peered down through the rising eastern dawn onto the grey, swampy mountain land of Siberia. Empty and foreboding, it brought to mind Tolkien's Mordor, minus the orcs. A few minutes later, we landed at the airport at Magadan, a town once known in Stalin's Russia as the gateway to hell...

I was here on the eastern edge of Siberia because, having quit my job as a geography teacher, it was as far away as I could think of. Over the next three years I planned to ride my bicycle home to London, and I liked the idea of starting a long way from home and gradually heading back rather than starting at home and getting further away. For the first four months I would be riding with

an old friend, Al Humphreys. I was very grateful for the company on this first cold, epic leg of the journey.

SILENT WILDERNESS

You cannot pass through this part of Russia without being haunted by history. Throughout his rule Stalin had used Magadan as his entry port, shipping millions of civilian prisoners out here to dig gold, cut trees and die – of cold, starvation and exhaustion. The Russians used to say: 'if you are sent to Magadan, you will not be coming home again.'

In the days before our departure, I fell silent as I studied our map and began to grasp what exactly we were hoping to do. One haunted and lonely road snaked up from the coast and into the empty spaces of Siberia – a road now commonly called 'the road of bones' due to the number of prisoners who died building it. I began to wonder if this

expedition was seriously out of our depth.

It was September, and we well knew the winter would be coming soon. We had equipped ourselves as best we could with some cold-weather clothing, thick sleeping bags and a new tent. After some last-minute shopping – which included winter boots, sheepskin mittens, and a heroically large axe – we set off on the 3,800 mile ride to Japan.

As soon as the city was behind us, the terrain was bleak, empty, and sinister. We were riding along a gently undulating road, following rivers into the depths of the wilderness, passing through coniferous forests that were already beginning to drop their needles ready for winter. In our first week we began to pass abandoned towns, emptied of people after the Communist regime fell and the

'Below minus 20, plastic was brittle. Toe-clips snapped off, pump nozzles cracked... The tent window simply fell out'

power stations were turned off.

Yet there were settlements. Every couple of days we came across a populated town where we could stock up on supplies. The startled locals would be somewhat unenthusiastic about our plan: 'Going north on the road of bones in late September? Are you mad?! The bears will maul you. The cold will freeze you. The wolves will eat you. The road is closed. You will surely die. Give up now, while you still can.'

I even have a rather surreal memory of being interviewed for a small-town radio station. Rather than 'bigging us up' as we might have expected on radio at home, the DJ tried to persuade us to turn back! We got the message: this was not a sensible thing to do. But with grim British stubbornness and a healthy sense of the absurd we decided to carry on. 'One day at a time' was our motto.

MERCURY FALLING

Within a week of departing the snow had started to arrive. Not in huge quantities, but enough to cover the roads with ice and cause us to skid and flip like a child on an ice rink for the first time. Sometimes as much as once an hour, I would find myself crashing from the bike as it slipped from under me and sprawled down the road. We soon realised our basic mountain bike tyres were simply inadequate for these conditions. With the nearest decent bike shop being in Alaska, we had no choice but to continue as we were. Studded tyres would have to wait.

The temperature dropped steadily throughout October. Once it had dipped below minus 20 we began encountering still more stressful problems. While the metal parts of the bike seemed to be holding up well, synthetic bits were running into trouble. The plastic was becoming brittle. My toe clips snapped off. The nozzles of both our pumps cracked. The plastic window of our tent simply fell out, leaving a gaping hole. Our cigarette lighters no longer produced a flame. Our tent poles would not click together.

We were complete amateurs and we knew it. Thanks largely to Al keeping a clear head we were able to improvise and fix things so that we could at least keep going. We had started to figure out some of the basics of cold weather survival too – most importantly to keep warm by keeping moving – and we were

excited to realise that, if we have to, human beings can get used to just about anything.

Populated settlements became increasingly few and far between, and traffic almost non-existent. All the while the temperature went down, down, and down. One morning the red thermometer strapped to my handlebars finally hit its lowest marking: minus 40 degrees, where in fact centigrade and Fahrenheit converge.

As the numbers of people fell, so the hospitality of those remaining rose. One night as we nervously rode towards the sun as it slipped beneath another icy horizon, we were pleased to spot a small cluster of huts by the road. Dreading another night in the tent, and realising we had nothing to lose, Al bravely went and knocked on the door.

A WARM RECEPTION

A gruff man with a moustache opened the door. We could see half a dozen faces peering at us through the inviting warm haze within. After a couple of seconds' shock about why on earth English cyclists would be paying them a visit that night, the rosy-cheeked coal miners invited us inside.

They proceeded to feed us enthusiastically with massive bowls of fatty soup and cups of deliciously hot tea. We had caught them in the middle of their dinner break. Before going back down to the coal mine for their night shift (what a life!) they stoked up the fire and told us to sleep in the two generously blanketed beds. It seemed there was much truth in the saying that 'the Russians love a man who suffers'.

This first extremely positive experience of Russian hospitality was followed by many, many more. From this point on we were able to find some sort of habitation every couple of days – a weather station, gold mine, road-building camp or night guard's hut. It greatly boosted morale and meant that we could often avoid nights in our disintegrating freezer tent.

Pressing on steadily for several more weeks we eventually reached the Aldan river, now frozen solid with thick ice. It was safe – though scary – to ride across. On the far side of the river we found ourselves in the province of Yakutia, the territory of the Yakut Indian people. The Yakuts are a traditional people who



Snow beard. Rob wore a headband over his nose and cheeks when it was coldest

FACT FILE: SIBERIA

DISTANCE: : 3,800 miles in 3 months, ranging from 30 miles (frozen swamps) to 100 miles (tarmac by the railway) each day.

TERRAIN: Coniferous forest, hilly in places but no huge climbs. Some frozen rivers to cross.

CONDITIONS: September was 5 to 10°C by day, freezing by night. October-December was -20 to -30°C by day down to -40°C by night. Winds were light, though we had blizzards.

ACCOMMODATION: Camping (free, anywhere you like); with local people (free); occasional ex-Soviet hotels (£2 per night).

ROUGH COSTS: Average of £5 per day on food. Flight to Magadan (via Moscow): £500. Russian visa (3 month business visa): £90 including a processing fee to travel agent (we used www.russiadirect.net).

MAPS: You can get far better maps once you're in Siberia. And we asked truck drivers we met to make sketch maps for us for 'the next 100 miles'. **FURTHER INFO:** www.cyclinghomefromsiberia.com (my website); www.roundtheworldbybike.com (Al's website); www.icebike.com (a Canadian/Alaskan website with good information on extreme cold cycling).



settled in Siberia long ago and often still survive by hunting and fishing.

On one night we spent in a Russian weather research station we were somewhat surprised to hear jingling bells outside, followed by the cheerful appearance of a Yakut Indian man popping in for a visit on his reindeer-drawn sled!

HEADING SOUTH AGAIN

As our road turned south, the traffic slowly began to increase. Every 100 kilometres or so we would come across a roadside café where we could buy soup and coffee and chocolate, and where we were often allowed to camp. The temperature was even poking up above minus 15 during the day, so things were beginning to look less ominous again.

However, Siberia still held a few troubles for us. Due to the terrible road conditions early on we had slipped far behind schedule. With less than a month remaining on our visas we were having to ride

hard and long each day – and into the night – in order to try to make up the distances. With two weeks to go we finally reached the epic Trans-Siberian railway, which spans Russia's giant waistline. We eagerly followed the road next to the train tracks eastwards towards the sea, where we hoped to catch a ferry to Japan.

With the railway, so also came bigger towns, and even ATM machines. We were also reminded of the darker side of 'civilisation': one evening some vodka-drinking local youths blocked the road and pulled a gun on us before stealing all the money in the my wallet, though thankfully not harming us at all.

I remember meeting truck drivers along that road who, upon hearing us claim to have cycled from Magadan, would mutter to one another in Russian that this was not possible as there was no road to Magadan!

We pushed east, towards the coast, faster than ever. Much of the

time our road stayed alongside the romantic Trans-Siberian railway, its huge 100-carriage freight trains clattering past us, tooting their whistles merrily. And then finally, suddenly, we were breaching our last barrier – a swirling range of blizzardy coastline mountains. We descended out of them and caught a glimpse of the port from where we could island-hop via Sakhalin Island to Japan...

COMING OUT OF THE COLD

Soon we were wheeling the bikes into Russia's final bureaucratic obstacle: passport control. The passport official scrutinised my photo and face unusually carefully and then let me through with a serious nod. The same treatment followed for Al. It was only later that Al and I chuckled to realise that we had accidentally got our passports mixed up with one another. We had raced our bodies to the limit in order to stay within the strict parameters of our visa, all so that

'Al had the idea of filling our panniers with cheap Russian ice-cream. It never melts and has lots of energy!'



(Left) Sunset comes early in Siberia
(Top) Crossing a frozen river
(Above) And then the tent window fell out...

an official could let us out of the country with the wrong passport!

Since that epic beginning to the journey in the winter of 2004, I have cycled on through 26 more countries, including a winter a Tibet that actually felt relatively warm compared to Russia. I am writing this in Brussels and so am just a stone's throw from home.

People en route often ask what my 'favourite' part of the trip has been. While I am tempted to mention the smiling faces of China, the exotic forests of Papua New Guinea, or the expat intrigues of Kabul, in the end I have to admit that I more often than not say Siberia. At the time it was an experience of heart-thumping fear, feet-numbing cold and mind-haunting bleakness. But as memories, I think the toughest adventures nearly always turn out to be the best.

Next issue, Rob's riding partner Al – who lived off £7,000 for five years – writes about touring on a budget.

COLD COMFORT

Touring in temperatures of minus 20 and lower demands decent equipment. Be advised that: a) this is just the tip of the iceberg; and b) I'm not a polar explorer – this is what I learned from cycling in Siberia and later in Tibet.

THE BIKE

I used a 1997 Specialized Rockhopper steel mountain bike, which carried up to a week's supply of food and fuel in addition to other gear. It went in Karrimor panniers and bar bag, with Ortlieb sacks strapped on top. Total weight was up to 65kg.

As noted, plastic parts became brittle and shattered below minus 20°C. Get a pump with a metal head, and take a spare. Patches seemed to come off punctures sometimes.

Spiked tyres, which I used in Tibet after falling off the bike daily in Siberia on normal MTB tyres, are well worth the money on icy roads.

CLOTHING

During the day, at minus 35°C, I wore:

BODY: 3 thermals and then a Windstopper fleece (if dry) or Gore-Tex jacket (if snowing)

HEAD: balaclava and woolly hat. Ski goggles. I grew a silly beard and if it was really cold put a head band across my nose.

LEGS: Ronhill tracksuit and baggy Gore-Tex over trousers.

Gents – put a spare glove or something down your crotch to prevent frostbite. Seriously!

HANDS: we had 'poggies' for our handlebars – down bags that you put your hands into. We also had thin liner gloves and either Gore-Tex or sheepskin gloves.

FEET: were the biggest problem as so little blood goes to your feet when cycling. We use two layers: traditional Russian felt boots (Valenki) as under-boots and then Neos over-boots on top. I still sometimes had to jump off the bike and run with it to stamp some feeling and blood back into my feet. Neither Al nor I got frostbite but we lost toe nails. For Tibet I used double-layered Baffin boots (£100) which were very snug and comfortable.

CAMPING

At night we wore our daytime gear, plus a warm down jacket, warm socks/slippers, and a Russian fur hat. We slept in thick sleeping bags with a fleece liner on two roll mats.

The tent was a cheap one donated by a sponsor. It fell apart. Get a proper mountain/expedition tent.

A good stove is your lifeline. Make sure you know how to take it apart and fix it and carry a spare. We used two MSR (petrol) stoves, which we had problems with. In Tibet I used a Primus Omnifuel, which worked brilliantly. Note that cigarette lighters often don't work in extreme cold, and matches can be dodgy – so carry lots.

A pee bottle with a wide plastic rim saves you having to leave the tent after dinner!

FOOD & DRINK

Water freezes almost instantly, so besides a good thermos (1 litre) we also had Camelbaks, which we wore under our coats so our body heat kept them mostly non-frozen.

Biscuits and chocolate are good for snacks, and you can keep the occasional pie in your jacket inside pocket to stop it freezing. Al had the ingenious idea of filling our panniers with cheap Russian ice cream – it never melts and has lots of energy!

At night we usually cooked instant noodles and threw in tins of fatty stew for energy.