

STUDED TYRES
do exist for
20-inch wheels,
fortunately



Feature

A COLD WAR TOUR

AUTHOR **TIM MOORE** RODE 9,000KM ALONG THE ROUTE OF THE OLD IRON CURTAIN ON AN EAST GERMAN 'MIFA' SHOPPING BIKE. HE BEGAN IN FINLAND – BEFORE WINTER HAD ABATED...



Dt was way past six now, and the sun's long goodbye was gilding the alabaster wilderness in a manner that would have doubtless looked wonderful through a heated windscreen. I lowered my glassy gaze to the Garmin screen, and watched the temperature flash down to minus 14.2°C.

A pitiful sniff froze my nostril hairs with a space-dust crinkle. Somewhere inside their six-layer cocoon of rubber, merino wool and polythene my toes died, a farewell klaxon-scream of agony fading into wooden numbness. Far more terrible, though, was the message that soon emerged from within my pogies: the thrice-gloved fingers that had been clawed rigid round the bars all afternoon now felt fluidly, lazily aglow, drawing for release from their four-walled thermal prison.

Frozen sh*tlords! Here they came, the opiate delusions of hypothermia, luring me off to a peaceful, stupid death. The very thought

squeezed my sweat glands like ripe citrus; both armpits prickled and a rivulet wriggled its way down the back of my neck. No! I arched my back to blot this bastard harbinger against an inner layer, and in doing so made a discovery that sent a steamy shriek of terror across the Arctic wastes. My anorak – the whole thing, sleeves, torso, collar and all – had frozen solid from the inside, an exoskeleton of iced sweat that I could have taken off and stood up in the snow beside me...

FIRST RULE OF ARCTIC BIKE CLUB

Withdrawal, confusion, sleepiness, irrationality... My mind riffled desperately through the stages of hypothermic consciousness that preceded 'apparent death' in an online chart I'd found, hoping to recall which one bore the dreaded footnote: 'by this stage you may already be too far gone to recognise the problem'. It didn't help that sleepy, irrational confusion had been my default state for forty-eight hours. Then came

the suspicion that the very act of hosting this inner monologue proved I was already too far gone to recognise the problem.

How much further? With a dying groan I looked down at the Garmin and met a blank screen – the battery had gone. Hysteria welled in my guts. Did I have 5k left? Ten? The celestial dimmer switch was on the twist from dusk to dark, and I hadn't seen a car for at least two hours. When the road now curved uphill I succumbed to full-blown panic, pedalling so hard that my studded rear wheel began to fishtail wildly through the snow and its underlay of polished ice. Sweat fairly sluiced down me, defrosting my eyelashes and stinging the mad red orbs behind them. Calm the f*** down! With a supreme effort I steadied my breathing, slithered to a halt and got off to push. This was better. Slow and steady, easy does it, we're not at home to Mr Apparent Death. Bit slippery in these boots, mind, but... *sweeesh*... just one foot in front of... *sweeeeeeeesh*... the other, and I'll soon be *sweeeeeeeeeesh-thwosh-FLOMP*.



**The Iron
Curtain Trail**
For more details about
the route Tim took, visit
eurovelo13.com

▶ I sat and watched the stricken MIFA slide gently back down the hill, exhaled remnants of body heat wisping out through my crusted fleece-hole. 'The first rule of Arctic Bike Club is: you do not join Arctic Bike Club.' My epitaph dwindled to a croak. 'Rules end.' Then I turned my head and there, winking through the trees and the frosted gloaming, was a cluster of lights.

ALONE IN THE SNOW

So unfolded the longest, hardest days of my entire life. The mornings began with a bleary, fearful peek through many layers of bedroom glass, scanning the sullen sky, the thermometer nailed to the window frame outside, and beneath it the wobbly, last-gasp slalom my wheels had traced through the snow the night before. Twelve hours later



CYCLING JOURNEYMAN
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Revolutions* and *Gironimo!*

I would stumble into a hotel reception, or a log cabin, or a reindeer farm, or a decommissioned bank, and stand there, shuddering and melting, while my refrigerated, under-nourished brain struggled to process thoughts into speech.

Winter duly fought on to the last man, and even as I crawled ever southwards that little red column of alcohol held its ground in the thermometer's horrid depths. By mid-morning my feet would be gripped by a perverse torment that seared their soles like a red-hot ice-axe. The price of a single afternoon on full-defrost in the blazing Arctic sun was a burned and blistered balaclava face-slot, a fast-track to the full Fiennes. It would be weeks before I saw grass, tarmac, or water that wasn't coming out of a tap.

The morning after my brush with exposure, the temperature hit minus 22°C, so extravagantly bracing that a haze of ice hung in the air, and every inhalation punched the back of my throat like a death-eater's fist. 'But our cold is a sort of dry cold,' said one of the woolly-jumpered snowmobiling chums whose weekend holiday hut I had almost died outside.

Nice try, I thought, fumbling a spoonful of their reindeer soup between my chattering teeth. Your cold here is a sort of f***ing cold.

It was bitter; it was lonesome. After that grocery near my Näätamö motel, I endured a barren 170km – two full and terrible days – before the next commercial establishment of any sort asserted itself on the tundra. Overbearing desolation is what northern Finland does best, and I would routinely have entire afternoons to myself, watching the illimitable, primordial scenery fail to evolve and wondering if the regional authorities had introduced human hibernation.

Even the major national route I crept along for two days was a ghost road. So far-flung were the towns that my eyes would dampen as I approached that black-on-yellow skyline sign, and imminent reacquaintance with those wonderful places I dimly recalled, where people lived and did stuff. Ah, a petrol station, a bobble-hatted family in the café inside squirting condiments all over a shoebox of chips, a man filling up his snowmobile with 95 unleaded. The sound of silence at last punctuated by chainsaws and barkings; a roster of smells beyond pine resin or wood smoke...

Between these rare urban oases yawned bleak refrigerations of forest and frozen water. I would gaze at the depthless horizons of spruce-girdled white lakes and think, then say, then bellow: FINLAND, LAND OF CONTRASTS. ▶

“At minus 22°C, every inhalation punched the back of my throat like a death-eater’s fist”

▶ The woods started creeping me out, so dark and primitive, the big-bad-wolf backdrop for a million scary stories since the dawn of time. ‘Few are the forests like Finland’s, with four-point-four hectares per Finn!’ Trilling out self-composed jingles seemed a good way of keeping my spirits up. Instead, they always sounded like someone’s final utterance in a slasher film.

SLOW, SLOW, SLIP, SLIP, SLOW

Crawling onwards I succumbed to an unlikely trio of tribulations: exhaustion, terror, and boredom. The snowed-in wastelands had first emitted the stark and awful majesty of a fairy-tale curse, but their stern beauty palled. And so my gaze inevitably dropped down to the Garmin screen, with its dispiriting record of glacial stasis.

Polar shopper cycling is a cruel mistress, with a taste for drawn-out Tantric sadism. Each day seemed to last a week, a Sisyphean torment of slithering sloth. How I struggled to recalibrate my entire concept of acceptable progress. On the flat, 14km/h was a balls-out, breakneck blast; the tiniest incline dragged me down to low single digits and empathy with Captain Scott’s men, hauling their own sledges up ice-shelves after their ponies froze to death. The Garmin’s odometer clicked up kilometre-tenths with such dismal reluctance that I repeatedly thought it had stopped recording. Some of these 100-metre chapters went on forever, but I stared them out to the bitter end, like Gollum watching Ceefax. I can still remember 267.3. And 324.9, that was another. Maybe you had to be there. Just be very glad you weren’t.

And the snow kept coming, now flicking me painfully in the eyeballs, now drifting atop my pogies and front carrier, now smothering out the whole wide world. It wasn’t going anywhere either. For a reminder that Finland’s snow lay deepest in March all I had to do was take a single step away from the carriageway, and watch the waist-high accumulations come up to meet me. I was thus a prisoner of the road, compelled to conduct all my out-of-saddle business in the lone bus stops



that broadened it every few miles. Warmth was painfully stamped into feet, supermarket burgers fumbled from mitten to mouth, discoloured holes left steaming.

Two or three times a day a demonic cacophony announced the approach of an Arctic Machine – an infernal, implacable snow-plough with that legend writ large across its fearsome blade. I learned the hard way that this was the cue to hurl the bike into the roadside drifts and crouch behind its panniers, face to the forest and arms round head. As the grating roar climaxed, a bow-wave of snow and compacted ice nuggets would crash over me, followed by the gritted tornado that every large vehicle trailed behind them up here. In truth, I rather enjoyed these painful and terrifying cannonades, simply because they gave me something to do that wasn’t pedalling very slowly into a blizzard or p*ssing all over my mittens at a bus stop.

PEOPLE!

The natives I encountered in these difficult days embraced every national stereotype, which is to say both of them. This is a country whose self-referential comedic lexicon is focused on lugubrious alcoholism, with an entire joke genre devoted to the knockabout adventures of two men marooned in a lonely cottage with a case of vodka. In my favourite, Kimi ransacks the tool shed after the last bottle is drained, and comes back with a jerrycan of antifreeze.

‘We could drink this,’ he tells his friend, ‘but we’ll probably go blind.’

Mika looks slowly around the cottage and out of the window, then says, ‘I think we’ve seen enough.’...

Like the winter that defines their homeland,



Above: Author Tim Moore recuperating from the cold in a borrowed Lapp hat and reindeer jacket

Left: The book – complete with unasterisked swear words – is out now

Finns can come across as bleak and chilly. I never heard a raised voice, or a cheer, or a roar of laughter; to borrow from Dorothy Parker, they run the gamut of human emotions from A to B. It would be a mistake, though, to interpret this dour dispassion as heartlessness or disdain...

Finns were a people of few words, understated to the point of bluntness. I would never meet a Finnish bullsh*tter. Dauntless, hard-core journeys were a part of everyday winter life up here, so mine wasn’t about to impress anyone. And it wasn’t as if I needed to do this at all, not at this time of year and on this sort of bike... [It] was a land of harsh sincerity, where spades were spades, and daft little bikes were daft little bikes. Where you got help if you asked for it, but otherwise didn’t. Where bad ideas went to die. ☐

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