

Russian Life

MARCH
APRIL 2011

50 Years in Orbit

remembering Yuri Gagarin

Spring Rites

Maslenitsa and beyond

Raising Shipwrecks

the unlikely birth of EPRON

Across Russia by Bike

of flat tires and headwinds



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Cycling Across Russia



Heading west from Novosibirsk, a giant industrial city in central Siberia, the earth becomes flat as the spine of a drunkard asleep on the floor.

You can turn in any direction and see the same thing: a seemingly endless expanse of prairie without the slightest dip, hill, or rise in the terrain.

FROM THE PORT CITY of Vladivostok, on the Russian Pacific coast, my friend Ellery Althaus and I have traveled 3,800 miles across Russia in our attempt to cycle from the Pacific to the Atlantic. After four months of riding on pothole-ridden Russian roads, our journey has brought us to the steppe: a vast expanse of flat grassland and swamp that encompasses much of the Central Asian part of Russia.

Twenty years ago, Mark Jenkins, an American writer for *National Geographic*, arrived here with a group of cyclists and made the first ever coast-to-coast crossing of the former Soviet Union.¹ Before embarking on our trip, we contacted Jenkins and asked him what problems we might confront. Jenkins replied with an informative e-mail, but ended his electronic epistle with a cautionary tone. “Riding across Russia,” he wrote, “the westerlies, prevailing winds in the northern latitudes, will blow against you on the steppe. We battled strong headwinds that significantly slowed us down. I would seriously consider going the other way.”

Ignoring advice given by one more experienced than yourself seems foolhardy. But in order to follow Jenkins’ recommendation, we would have had to give up our original plan of starting the trip by studying Russian at a language school in Vladivostok, and instead begin our ride by slowly cycling across Europe in the middle of winter, so as to arrive in Russia during spring. After lengthy consideration, Ellery and I decided that neither

of us were willing to attempt the 6,000 mile bicycle journey across Russia without first enhancing our weak Russian language skills.

We decided to ride against the wind.

STARTING OUT

Two weeks before our departure, deep within the brick walls and tight security of the American Consulate in Vladivostok, we were having tea with Tom Armbruster, the Consul General.

This was an exciting moment. Finally, someone was interested in our bike ride. Before leaving the U.S., Nike hadn’t given us the sponsorship we had hoped for, *National Geographic* would not answer my letters, and I practically had to beg my hometown newspaper to do a story on us. Ellery and I had even made business cards displaying our trip’s website under the name, “The Idiots.” We hoped this catchphrase, an obvious reference to Russian novelist Dostoyevsky’s famous novel *The Idiot*, would interest people in visiting our website and following the journey.

In Vladivostok, we continued passing these cards out to locals. The Russian word “idiot” is spelled similarly enough to the English word that Russians got the joke when they read the cards. Word soon got around



Opposite page: Venturing off the main road to take a “shortcut,” the cyclists end up in a mosquito infested swamp.

1. Jenkins made the trip in the late 1980s, but the book containing the full story is still in print: *Off the Map, Bicycling Across Siberia* (Modern Times, \$15.95).

6052 Miles, 162 Days,



September 13: Cyclists arrive in Moscow and take a week off to rest and enjoy the comforts of a city.

September 1: After over four months of riding, the cyclists are dismayed to discover that their road into Kazan isn't fully paved and there is still no indoor plumbing in rural European Russia.



August 24, 2009: Cyclists reach the Urals and the monument marking the boundary between Asia and Europe.

September 25: Cyclists arrive in the city of Kursk, where they are detained by immigration officials for overstaying their visas, thrown in jail, and threatened with deportation.

September 27: After paying a \$100 fine each, the cyclists are released from jail and ride to the border, then successfully cross into Ukraine and on to Portugal.

August 28: Ellery and Levi arrive in Perm. Each buy a pair of new suits to celebrate their arrival in Europe.

August 15: The fierce steppe winds suddenly switch directions outside Omsk. With the wind finally at their backs, the cyclists ride 600 miles in just six days.

August 6: Ellery and Levi enter the steppe. Blustery headwinds sweep across the flat plains. At times they cannot ride faster than 5 mph.

August 20: Cyclists fix their 75th flat tire.



August 15: The fierce steppe winds suddenly switch directions outside Omsk. With the wind finally at their backs, the cyclists ride 600 miles in just six days.

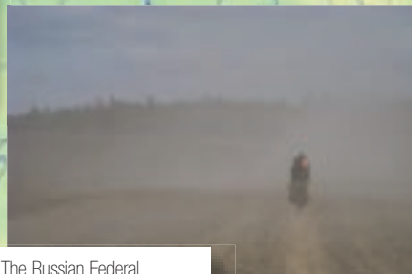
July 31: Cyclists reach Kemerovo at the height of the summer, stopping at midday to avoid sweltering 100-degree heat.



79 Flat Tires, 2 Cyclists



June 15: Time of Troubles: Igor, a roadside *shashlik* salesman, and a young couple named Victoria and Alex who run an auto-repair shop in Chita, help repair the cyclists' bicycles, which have started to deteriorate from the poor Siberian roads.



May 23: The Russian Federal Highway dissipates into little more than a dirt track for the next 500 miles.



April 23: A gregarious man named Stas (center) tries to help Ellery and Levi by offering them vodka, rotten salo, and inviting them into his home. The cyclists escape to a nearby cafe run by kind *babushkas*.

July 17: After descending from the mountains outside of Irkutsk, the cyclists arrive on flatter lands leading towards the Russian steppe. Lengthy off-road sections still frequently intersperse the Russian Federal Highway.

May 5: Ellery comes down with a serious case of food poisoning and the pair rests in Birobidzhan, capital of the Jewish Autonomous Region in Far Eastern Russia.

April 19: A kind *babushka* in the small town of Lyalichi invites the cyclists into her home for the night, feeding them so much food they are afraid that they'll be ill.

June 2: First major bike problem: a bolt connecting Levi's rear rack breaks. Luckily, a passing trucker had a spare in his tool box.

April 27: The cyclists arrive in Khabarovsk, on the mighty Amur River, the first major landmark of the trip. Ice still flows down the Amur.

July 7: Cyclists reach Lake Baikal and are invited to an all-night picnic by a Russian couple traveling across the country.

June 9: After fixing over 50 flat tires and crossing 500 miles of dirt road, the cyclists meet pavement again in Chita.

April 15: Levi Bridges and Ellery Althaus dip the wheels of their bikes in the Sea of Japan at Vladivostok. As journalists crowd around, Levi's Camelbak backpack breaks, soaking him in freezing water on a cold Russian morning.

June 28: Ellery gets food poisoning for the fourth time on the trip. Cyclists take a train back to Chita to see a doctor.



*Top:
Cyclist Levi
Bridges struggles
down a dirt road
outside Kazan.*

*Inset: Ellery (left)
and Levi with
one of the many
babushkas who
would make their
trip possible.*

town about the crazy Americans trying to cycle across Russia. Now the American Consulate wanted a private meeting.

"I'd be interested in riding the first thirty kilometers out of the city with you," Tom told us.

"That would be amazing," we replied in unison.

"You know, we could use a feel good news story about Americans in Russia right now," Tom said. "Would you two be interested in some press?"

Just like that, my cell phone daily began ringing with calls from newspapers and magazines asking for interviews about us and our journey.

We left on a cold and windy morning on April 15, 2009, shivering as we wheeled the bikes out of our dormitory. I'd dreamed of this moment for years, envisioning Ellery and I on a lonely beach, ceremoniously dipping the rear wheels of our bicycles into the Pacific

Ocean to mark the beginning of our long journey to the Atlantic. But when this moment finally came, reality rudely pushed my fantasy aside.

As we rode onto the central beach in Vladivostok, a phalanx of cameramen from local and national Russian television stations appeared on the horizon. They encircled us like predatory cats, yelled questions, and pushed microphones into our faces as we mustered replies with chattering teeth.

Through the milieu, we eased our bicycles to the sea's edge. The wind whipped against my frozen body as the media snapped photos. Ellery and I looked at each other daringly, raised our fists in the air, and screamed as we dipped our rear tires into the Pacific.

Before we left, I looked back at the sea. Despite the mayhem, I thought, this significant moment was still mine to enjoy.

Almost.

"Can you put that tire in the water one more time?" a photographer yelled choking the symbolism from the event, "I want another shot."

Then suddenly, like all future events we anticipate greatly, it floated to a rest forever in the past. We hopped on our bikes and rode, with Tom Armbruster, out of Vladivostok behind a small motorcade. The experience was surreal. A journey I had imagined for years was finally merging with reality.

The motorcade turned around at the city limits and we said goodbye to Tom. We were alone now. In front of us lay a journey of roughly 10,000 miles (16,000 km), across 11 time zones and two continents.

We started riding.

FROM IDIOTS TO HEROS

The Russian Far East, the most eastern part of Russia, is like no place else on earth. Although this far-flung section of Russia is culturally and ethnically Russian, it is geographically sandwiched between North Korea, China, and the Sea of Japan. Thousands of miles from Moscow, the very existence of a distinctly Eastern European part of the earth seems incomprehensible.

And likewise, to the eyes of many local Russians, so was the appearance of two American cyclists.

The night we left Vladivostok, the story of our ride was beamed into television sets from Moscow to Magadan. The press briefly turned us into minor celebrities in the Russian Far East. A constant cacophony of car horns, accompanied by screams of encouragement from passing motorists, bombarded us as we cycled through busy traffic north of Vladivostok during the initial days of our ride.

"Beep! Beep!" the blare of another car horn from behind almost makes me jump out of my bicycle seat.

"Hello, my American friend!" a car full of young Russians yell.

"Hello," I reply, choking through the exhaust.

One guy holds a pen and notebook out the window.

"Can we have your autograph?" he asks.

We stop and shake hands, exchange smiles, and sign autographs. It suddenly strikes me that cycling across Russia must seem so ambitious to many locals that they actually believe we are famous cyclists.

"This must be part of the 2014 Olympic games in Sochi!" exclaims a bright-eyed youth named Ivan.

"No," Ellery replies, "we're just travelers."

"Here then," Ivan says, writing a phone number in his notebook, "Call me if you need help, anything at all."

As soon as the youths leave, a large army truck pulls up behind us. A burly officer jumps out, shakes my hand, and offers a wide smile of gold-plated teeth.

"You're heroes," he says, then asks to take a picture with us.

"We'll never make it to the next town if this keeps up!" Ellery says, laughing, as we hop back on our bikes.

The dizzying amount of daily encouragement Russians offered us was perhaps only matched by the quantity of their gifts. Before Ellery and I left for

Russia, when most Americans heard about our trip, the common reply was, "Russia? They'll rob you of everything over there." But within the first week, we had received so many gifts that we had to send a package home.

Necklaces, knives, pins, icons, woolen hats, gloves, other miscellaneous trinkets, and foodstuffs from fruit and cheese, to meat and beer, the myriad gifts we received from passing motorists ranged from the useful to the outlandish.

"Here's a pack of cigarettes," offered one passerby.

"Sorry, I don't smoke," I replied.

"Just take them anyway," he insisted, smiling.



FROM VLADIVOSTOK, the Russian Federal Highway (a grandiose name for a simple two-lane road) leads northwest towards Siberia. Oftentimes the road skirts the border with China by just a few miles. Yet despite the proximity of Asian nations, the Russian Far East is distinctly Russian: old concrete Soviet apartment buildings sprout up from the center of each town, Baltica is the beer of choice, and the mobile wedding parties Russia is famous for constantly appear along the roadside.

One day, reaching the summit of a tall mountainside, we rode by one such wedding party in a small meadow. As soon as they spotted us, several amiable young men in suits yelled for us to stop. Minutes later, I found myself posing for pictures with the bride and groom, hugging the family *babushka*, and making toasts to the young couple with a glass of champagne.

Just as most characteristics of Russian culture endure in this remote part of Asia, so too do young Russians understand how their country's image relates to the outside world.

"Ha-ha," says one young man, putting his arm around me and raising a glass in the air, "We've entered a new era! Russians and Americans are friends now!"

Yet despite the ease with which Russians welcome travelers to their homeland, these acts of goodwill can sometimes be uncomfortable.

Nearly 500 miles north of Vladivostok, we arrive in the small town of Lermontovka, tired and looking for food and a place to rest. During these moments, when a weary cyclist only wants to rest, a well-intentioned group of Russians can enter your life and forever change

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Posing with military veterans on May 9, in Birobidzhan.



(continued from page 37)

that evening's destiny. As we arrived in Lermontovka, a dented Lada pulled up behind us. A jovial, drunken man named Stas stepped out of the vehicle and asked to take a picture with us.

"I don't have a camera," Stas said, "so please just take a picture of us together with your camera."

We took a picture, then Stas dove back into his car, and produced a piece of salo – salt-cured pork fat, a Russian staple.

The salo was wrapped in an oily newspaper. Pieces of dirt from Stas' car clung to the newspaper like parasites. We could only imagine that the piece of fat had sat in the car for weeks, baking and rotting in the hot sun.

"Thank you very much," we said.

We exchanged good byes, but we hadn't seen the last of Stas. He awaited us in the center of town, standing by his car with a big smile.

"I invite you to my house," he yelled, "come and we'll have something to eat."

Our stomachs grumbled as we imagined Stas offering us more decomposing salo. In this instance, Ellery and I spontaneously hatched a getaway plan: seek refuge in home of local *babushkas*.

"Please, is there a cafe in town?" we pleaded, hoping to get into a public space where kind old women might save us from Russian male debauchery.

Stas led us across town to a small roadside cafe, where we met the owner, Ira, a strong and welcoming *babushka*. Soon Stas' friends began arriving, and his cohorts ordered us food: steaming bowls of *lagman* soup, fried steak and heaping plates of *plov*, *borscht* and bread, greasy *pirozhki* and Russian salads topped with mayonnaise. Vodka flowed like wine, and Ira served us each nearly fifteen different plates of food. Our appetites and the generosity of Stas lasted well into the evening.

As the clock neared midnight, Stas arose from his chair.

"I want to offer you a gift," he said, pointing to me as he removed his camouflage jacket. "It's yours," he said.

Not needing another jacket, I couldn't bring myself to take what must have been one of the kind man's only articles of clothing.

"Thank you, but I have a perfectly good jacket," I said, showing him my warm, down-lined Patagonia jacket.

Stas glanced at my jacket, ripped it from my hands, and threw it on the floor.

"This is little girl's jacket!" he yelled.

Then, commandingly, he lifted up my arms, and forced the camouflage jacket over my back.

"Now you have man's jacket!" he roared, satisfied by my newfound induction into Russian manhood.

As Stas and his friend ordered more drinks, we asked Ira where we might sleep and the kind woman brought us into a room behind the café, where we slept on the floor.

Thus began a long string of nights throughout our journey across Russia in which kind *babushkas* saved us from raucous men.



NOT FAR FROM Lermontovka, the Russian Federal Highway is interspersed with sections of unpaved roadway. Eventually, near the city of Blagoveshchensk,² the Federal Highway dissipates into a simple, rough tract of dirt road leading through 500 miles of mountainous wilderness occasionally interspersed by small towns.

When Mark Jenkins arrived here in 1989, there wasn't even a road. Instead, the adventurous group of cyclists pushed on, riding along hunting trails, pushing their bikes through swamps, and even cycling over the tracks of the Trans-Siberian Railroad until they met up with a real road again outside of the city of Chita.

Not much has changed. As in the rest of rural Russia, many villagers here survive off subsistence farming and don't have access to running water. Outhouses stand alongside every home; we only see indoor plumbing in cities.

As we stand in a small village on the off-road section of the Federal Highway, it is common to see a small boy using a long switch to shepherd a herd of goats along a dirt path, or farmers bent over gardens surrounding their homes. We feel like we are staring at scenes captured in faded daguerreotypes, magically come to life and painted with vibrant colors. It is as if a whole century has washed away.

And then, the sensation can disappear instantaneously. Oftentimes all it takes is a group of teenage boys who rush up to us upon seeing our bicycles.

"Can we take your picture?" they ask, each pulling out cheap cell phones or digital cameras made in nearby China.

In a split second, we're back to the twenty-first century.

Only once on the off-road section did we venture off the Federal Highway and take a shortcut to the next town on a secondary road. The alternative route soon petered out into a hunting trail, and eventually turned into two vague tire tracks leading through a swamp. We swatted mosquitoes and brushed ticks off our legs, then forded a river carrying our bicycles over our shoulders.

Eastern Siberia is a veritable Petri dish for observing how modernity infiltrates sparsely populated and undeveloped areas of the world. After hours of pressing on through the swampy path, we reached a small village of just five brightly-painted houses, whose name didn't even appear on our map. Here, in this small, nameless hamlet, whose residents have perhaps never used a functional toilet, we discovered that the presence of the twenty-first century is still evident.

Entering the village, we made way for a gaggle of geese and pushed our bikes between two small cabins. On the other side, a man mending fences looked up at us.

"Hello," he said, momentarily startled by our appearance, before his eyes widened with recognition. "Hey, didn't I see you on television?" he remarked.

MOUNTAINS BEYOND MOUNTAINS

FROM VLADIVOSTOK, we rode over 2,000 miles through the steep mountains of Eastern Siberia before encountering our first major bicycle problem. On a bicycle

2. The city's name means, literally, "good news." Originally a military outpost called Ust-Zelsky, it received its current name in 1858, presumably because of the good news that the Far Eastern territory was now part of Russia.

trip, one carries their belongings in panniers – waterproof bags secured to a rack over the bicycles' rear tire that screw into small threaded eyelets in the bike frame. Just outside the city of Chita, an eyelet on Ellery's bike broke.

The bike can't be ridden unless the rear rack screws securely into the frame. We had to find a welder.

Back in Chita, we found an expert bicycle mechanic named Alex. He worked on the bike while his wife Victoria, who had studied abroad in the U.S. for a year, interpreted for us. Alex welded the eyelet back on and sanded the metal. The bike was good as new.

"What do I owe you?" Ellery asked.

"Nothing," Alex replied. "Come back if anything else breaks."

Later that evening, we made camp by a roadside cafe just outside Chita. As I was setting up my tent, a dark-skinned man with thick eyebrows bristling under a red baseball cap exited a nearby shack and approached us.

I imagined he was coming to kick us out. Instead, he invited us to dinner.

"My name is Igor," he said in Russian.

Igor is one of many Russian immigrants from the former Soviet republic of Azerbaijan. In Siberia, he runs a roadside stand selling *shashlyk* – grilled meat on a skewer. Igor cooked the meat over a wood fire while his son served us tea from a samovar heated by charcoal. Igor invited us to dinner in a cramped shack with scarcely enough room to sit down.

"*Yest, yest!*" Igor demanded. "Eat, eat!"

With bare hands, we devoured large pieces of meat and raw onions. Soon, Igor revealed a small bottle of vodka and several glasses so filthy they had surely been doubling as ashtrays. He poured us each a drink.

"Do people from Azerbaijan live in the U.S. too?" he asked.

"People from all over the world live in my country," I replied.

A short silence ensued while I formulated a question.

"Did you come to Russia alone?" I asked.

"My brother and I brought our families here eight years ago," he explained, then paused, pointing to one of the

ubiquitous gravestones adorning the sides of Russian roads marking where people have died in automobile accidents.

"My brother died in a drunk driving accident there last year," he said, index finger outstretched toward the roadway.

I stopped eating, both out of respect for his loss and to not appear gluttonous in front of the feast before us.

"*Yest! yest!*" he yelled again.

We ate until the food was gone.



SIBERIANS ARE KNOWN for their hospitality. The inhabitants of this harsh landscape must endure long and bitterly cold winters subsisting off few resources. Perhaps it is the difficulty of life here that inspires people to help passersby.

The following day, we cycled sixty miles and made camp in a field behind a hotel/truck stop.

That evening, I met a jolly man named Nikolai. His face projected a permanently beaming smile and he spoke Russian with lively and passionate inflections, as if he were a native speaker of Italian. He was very excited to meet an American.

"I want to show you where I work," he said compulsively.

Nikolai's job was to keep a giant coal stove burning throughout the night, a stove that heated the hotel's water. He led me into a shed. Inside, chunks of coal and tools covered the floor. A hotplate and broken shard of mirror sat on a table. Inside the shed, Nikolai, opened another door, revealing a smoke-filled room where coal burned in a stove he filled with a shovel. The fire glowed like a dragon's nostrils.

"How do you make money to travel?" Nikolai asked.

"I worked very hard, for a long time," I responded.

"I work hard too, but I have never left the mountains surrounding my village," he said. "I only have extra money for these," he admitted, pointing to a pack of cigarettes on the table.

In Russia, even brand-name cigarettes like Camel and Marlboro rarely cost more than \$1.

The next day, I discovered that my bike had broken in the same place as Ellery's. With no better option, I wheeled it over to a nearby mechanic shop, where a rough-looking man with serpentine tattoos clumsily attempted to re-weld the eyelet back onto my bike.

His work made me nervous. A broken bike during a long trip is like a sick child: nothing but the best medical care will suffice.

"It is hard to watch somebody you love go under the knife, isn't it?" Ellery joked.

The mechanic sloppily welded the eyelet onto the frame and charged us nothing. We gratefully said thanks and, so as not to offend him, rode up the road, and hitchhiked back to Chita to have Alex fix the bike properly.

When we returned, Alex and Victoria not only fixed my bike, but offered to drive us back to the truck stop. On the ride back, the details of the landscape I'd pedaled past a day ago, Igor's red baseball hat bent over the samovar, his brother's grave, meaninglessly zoomed past the car window. Traveling by car in Russia suddenly seemed like wandering through a museum full of famous art without understanding the artists' intentions. The feeling and significance of what you are seeing is lost.

On the way back, Victoria told us about her experiences in the United States.

"I went abroad after the fall of the Soviet Union," she said. "Back then, we had frequent power outages in Russia, so we always kept candles in our house. When I arrived at my host family's home in Texas, I noticed that they had candles too, so I assumed they had the same electricity problems in America. Later, I realized they were decorations."

"You know," she added, "America is very comfortable."

In many ways, her statement was true. As they dropped us off, I wondered if the lack of comforts in Siberia makes people reach out to one another. Here, smiles, compassion for strangers, and friendliness make up for the lack of material comforts.

From Chita we rode over 500 more miles of rough mountain roads. A hawk soaring above or a river cascading through the wilderness became common sites. So I did a double-take one afternoon when I saw a seagull flying above.

Several hours later, on a sweltering summer afternoon, we descended into a wide valley and came to the shores of Lake Baikal, the world's largest freshwater lake.

We stopped for the night in Babushkin. On a hot summer's day, Babushkin resembles a dingy Caribbean port town. We rode by typical Siberian homes painted in vibrant blues, greens, even oranges and yellows. Green-leafed trees rustled in the wind. On dusty dirt roads, little boys – barefoot and shirtless, chests deeply bronzed by the summer sun – scampered towards the blue water toting fishing poles.

While riding to the beach, a car pulled up behind us.

"Are you the Americans riding bicycles across Russia?" the driver asked.

The smiling stranger was Alex, a St. Petersburg who saw us on national television when we started our trip in Vladivostok almost three months ago.

"My wife Tanya and I are taking a summer vacation driving across Russia," he explained. "Today happens to be my birthday," he added. "Come, we want to invite you to a picnic!"

On the shores of Baikal, Tanya laid out an amazing spread of olives, cucumbers, cheeses, meats, even a smoked omul, a delicious fish related to salmon found only in Baikal. We stayed up late picnicking, exchanging stories from the road, laughing, and making toasts to our new friendship under an hours-long sunset. During early summer in the northern hemisphere, there are only a few hours of complete darkness each night. The orange light of dusk glows in the sky until nearly midnight. The beauty and longevity of the setting sun makes Russian summer picnics so special.

Finally, Alex proposes that we go for a dip in the lake. We dive in, but the water is so cold that your extremities instantly go numb. We all jump in and then run out. Tanya stays in the longest.

"I worked as a stewardess when I was a young woman," she says, emerging from the water at last, "and we often flew over

Baikal. I have seen this lake many times, but tonight is my first time actually swimming in it."

Each of us has waited a long time to arrive at this unique spot. I feel so lucky to be here in such good company.

"It was my dream to meet you," Alex tells us before we go to sleep. "This has been my best birthday ever."

I look at the lake's rocky coast from my tent before turning in. Baikal is a very special place, I think, but, on a journey like this, making new friends seems more poignant than any mountain landscape.

STEPPE ON IT

AFTER LAKE BAIKAL, foothills rise and fall for a thousand miles before settling into the interminable flatness of the Russian steppe. Here, the headwinds Jenkins warned us about hindered our progress.

Sometimes the Russian wind blew so hard we could barely cycle above 6 MPH. All creatures on the steppe are victim to the wind's fierce power. Birds flap their wings futilely in the sky. Plants bend toward the earth like slaves bowing before an evil despot.

The hardships of cycling here help me appreciate the difficulties endured by the first settlers who arrived in this part of Siberia. Isolated far from European cities, they braved bitterly cold winters to forge a new life. Traveling in the twenty-first century, we enjoy the luxury of speeding along in cars and stopping at highway gas stations to buy snacks. Each day, the knots in my back from riding against the wind give me an understanding of the extent to which the world we inhabit today was built upon the suffering of others centuries ago.

We spent several days resting in Omsk, in the central steppe, but decided to leave a day early.³

"Look," Ellery exclaimed while scanning an online weather report, "it says the winds are going to shift for several days and blow west. We'll have a tailwind!"

With the winds behind us, we set off again across the Russian plains, each day riding record distances: 104 miles, 121 miles, 139 miles. In just six days, we rode over 600 miles, arriving in Yekaterinburg, at the base of the Ural Mountains that separate Asia and Europe.

A SECOND CONTINENT A SECOND CHANCE

WE ARRIVED IN Moscow during late September. Already the chill of winter was in the air. In six days of hard riding, we cycled southeast to Kursk, a city famous as the site of the epic World War II tank battle fought between German and Soviet forces.⁴

In Kursk, we also fought our final battle cycling across Russia. Months earlier, a hotel clerk had lost part of the immigration papers that allowed us to legally be in Russia. When the receptionist of the Hotel Kursk demanded to see these papers, and we couldn't provide them, she called immigration officials, who arrested us and threw us in jail for 24 hours. We were interrogated and later told we would be deported to America.

"So this is how it ends," I said to Ellery, sitting outside the Kursk courthouse. "We may not have cycled across all of Russia, but at least we made it 6,000 miles."

Just then, our interpreter appeared.

"The judge says that the litigation against you will take too long to process, so they're letting you off with a fine."

The next day we rode the remaining fifty miles to the Ukrainian border. After our adventure in jail, I felt lucky just to have the chance to continue. That morning, I passed by a *babushka* selling potatoes by the roadside and looked at her with a goofy smile and waved. She glanced back with a big, toothless grin.

At the border, I took one last glance back at the windswept Russian hills with a mixed sense of triumph and nostalgia. We had cycled across Russia, the world's largest country, something that, until just the day before, had still seemed impossible.

Suddenly, a border guard handed me my passport, breaking my reverie.

"Welcome to Ukraine," he said. **RL**

Postscript: From the Russian border, Levi Bridges and Ellery Althaus rode another 3,500 miles, battling cold winter weather across Europe. They ended the trip on the Atlantic coast, in Carrasqueira, Spain, on December 27, 2009, 256 days after they had dipped the rear wheels of their bikes in the Pacific at Vladivostok.

VISIT RUSSIA SIX TIMES A YEAR



...through the pages of Russian Life

Russian Life is a bimonthly trip into the heart of Russian reality. It is a colorful, informative trip to the land of tsars and commissars. A balanced, thoughtful look at life as it is being lived in Russia today – the Russia you won't read about in your local or national paper or newsmagazine.



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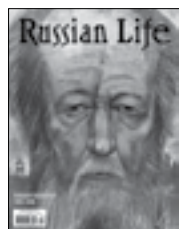
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