



# No Man's Land

Russia's Far East is a place even the Russians don't go. But that doesn't stop 70-something adventurer Thomas E. Muller who discovers a region built on the bones of Gulag prisoners and a people hardened by history.

Getting into Russia is hard work. First, you need to be invited. It starts with the daunting question, "What is the purpose of your visit to Russia?"

And the response, "Well, you see, Vice-Consul, I'm a writer for an Australian seniors magazine, and the readers might like to know a little bit more about your amazing country," will get you no closer to obtaining a visa. Nothing begins the process until you secure a formal invitation from a sponsoring Russian-based company or individual.

For 18 months, I had been planning my third visit to the world's largest country. It is so vast that you can fit Bangladesh 119 times into Russia's area, and so empty that, when you've counted everybody there, you still won't have the population of tiny Bangladesh. Save for a handful of sprawling cities, Russia's inhabited places are unbelievably far from each other.

And this nation's Far East, my intended destination, was built slowly and painfully, over the bones of Gulag prisoners, post-war labourers, and



brave souls who would never return home. With the forcible relocation of millions of Russians living in the European half of the country, it took more than 100 years to create an infrastructure that would eventually connect the diverse peoples of Siberia and the Russian Far East by road and rail, bridge and tunnel.

I began the necessary visa steps in January and they led me on a voyage through Russia's bureaucratic wonderland.

Since my stay would be more than 30 days, I needed a business visa. The application form itself, took 11 hours to complete. "List every single country you have visited in the past 10 years, and give the dates of those visits," was one inspiring question. By mid-May, with still no word from the Russian Consulate in Sydney, I endured debilitating attacks of no-visaphobia. When, at last, my passport was returned, a tamper-proof Russian visa had been bonded permanently to Page 26 and it specified my entry and exit dates; I had exactly 47 days to get in, and get out.

But getting around Russia's Far East is even harder work. My own trip would begin on Sakhalin Island, taking me ever northward along the coastlines of the Sea of Okhotsk, Kamchatka Peninsula, the Bering Sea and Chukchi, and end in Siberia. So, how to get to Sakhalin Island, where the six-week expedition aboard a Russian research ship, would begin? Piece of Pavlova: Brisbane to Singapore at midnight; Singapore to Tokyo; Tokyo to Vladivostok airport, where you arrive at one o'clock in the morning and sit at a deserted airport. Then, do the final leg, Vladivostok to Yuzhno Sakhalinsk, the only major airport on 938-km-long Sakhalin Island. 38 hours after leaving Brisbane, you've arrived!

Our ship, the ice-strengthened Professor Khromov, with her all-Russian crew, was waiting in the Port of Korsakov. She was permanently under charter to New Zealand-based Heritage Expeditions for voyages



**Remote** This is brown bear territory



**Tradition** Dancers welcome visitors to Okhotsk.

in the Pacific Ocean and to Antarctica. Without a ship in Russia's Far East, you are out of luck. Good roads don't exist; bad roads are few in number and many end up nowhere: this is arctic fox and brown bear and musk ox territory.

Travelling northward, one moves from the coniferous forests known as taiga, to the land of tundra. Here, trees do not exist and spring comes in June, carpeting the landscape with black bearberry, bright-orange lichens, and the tiny purple, pink or white flowers among the mosses. These are the survivors in a harsh land of short summers and long winters, when the temperature can plummet to minus 60°C.

I joined 33 other expeditioners to sail north to Sakhalin's Cape Terpeniya. There, four of the ship's Zodiacs were lowered into the sea and we made a landing on miniscule Tyuleniy Island, a research station studying the Steller sea lion. The beach was blanketed, body next to furry body, in sea lions, with the dominant males, each guarding his own harem of females, aggressively keeping at bay aspiring young males. This beach was easily the scene of more sex and violence than you could catch on late-night television.

Sailing on, we entered the Sea of Okhotsk and docked at the tiny town of Okhotsk (pop. 5,500). Beautiful girls welcomed us

we made a Zodiac landing on miniscule Tyuleniy Island, a research station studying the Steller sea lion

ashore with traditional dance, then led us away to a festival organised by the town's mayor. Some days later, the ship berthed at the city of Magadan. This is the eastern terminus of the infamous Kolyma Highway, better known as The Road of Bones, for

it was built by Gulag prison-camp labourers who froze to death constructing it. From here, 2,200km to the west, at the road's western terminus, lies the Siberian city of Yakutsk.

But I was not taking the four-day, bone-jarring ride along this road to get to Yakutsk – the world's coldest city, and capital of the Sakha Republic in the heart of Siberia. We sailed north through the Bering Sea

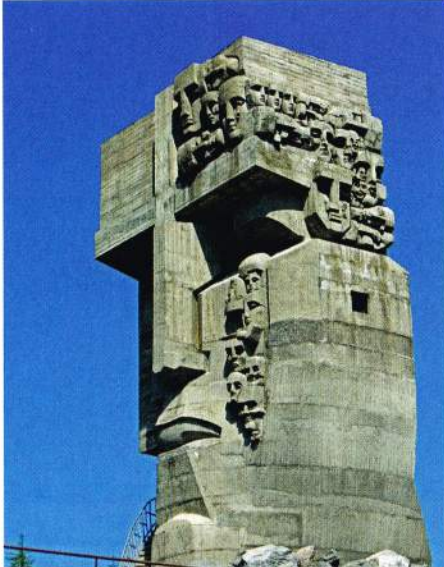
and disembarked in Anadyr, one degree of latitude below the Arctic Circle. I then flew to Yakutsk. With no direct flights connecting Anadyr to Yakutsk, I flew eight hours westward, to Moscow, then turned around and caught a flight going east, straight back to Yakutsk. That's the distance you would cover if you flew from Perth to Darwin, but needed to first fly to Vietnam in order to get to Darwin.

Thanks to the gold and diamond mines in the region, Yakutsk is a thriving city built on permafrost – permanently frozen soil. To prevent the buildings from collapsing on the shifting permafrost, the entire city stands on stilts: government buildings, high-rises, hotels; all raised on stilts.

Lastly, I visited the banks of the mighty Lena River, which begins at Lake Baikal, crosses all of Siberia and, 4,400km later, spills into the Arctic Ocean.

I had exactly 47 days to get in, and get out





**Sorrow** A stone monument overlooks the Road of Bones

The road to the river surely qualifies as the world's worst short road. It starts in Yakutsk as crumbling asphalt then degrades into a gravel road that most forested countries would reserve only for their logging trucks. Remorselessly pitted with cavernous holes, the road becomes an endless porridge of thick, black mud. Every few metres lurked a giant pothole, filled to the brim with muddied rain. At one point, I was flung violently upwards against the car's roof and, upon landing back in my seat, could feel blood flowing down my scalp. It took five hours to cover the 160kms. Eight hours later, it was over the same road, back to Yakutsk in the dark.

I love the Russian people living in this part of their huge country; they are, when you get to know them, the warmest of travelling companions. But they live in a difficult land that has shaped their outlook on life and lowered their expectations – yet left them fiercely proud of their history. What struck me most, though, was the sheer emptiness of the land. There is no tourist traffic in Russia's Far East. Even Russians don't come here. Wherever we landed with the Zodiacs, we were the only humans.

Six weeks on, I was beginning to appreciate what the locals endure through the seasons, year after year. Humourist, Erma Bombeck,



once wrote, "When you look like your passport photo, it's time to go home." I was tired, worn out and starting to feel more like my dog-eared, ink-stained, crumpled passport, itself. The Russia adventure had delivered a banged-up traveller.

Time to go home. ■

# 50something

AUSTRALIA'S WIDEST CIRCULATING OVER-50S MAGAZINE



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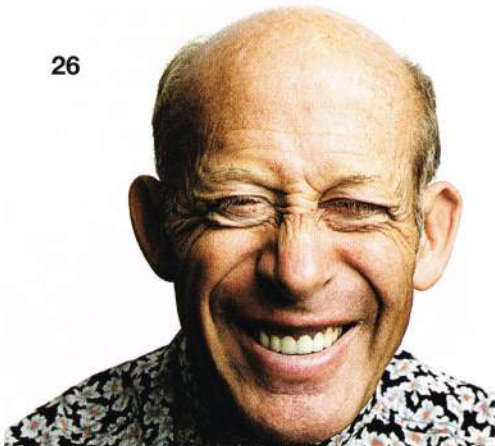
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**Cover** Renée Geyer settles into a groove.







On the Letters page this issue a couple of readers register their dismay over the August/September election survey results which identified the economy and abolishing the carbon tax as top priorities. "What about future generations? Are we really so self-centred?" one reader asks. Another says the group's growing political focus is a turn-off. In our defence, as the once-in-every-three-year election special, the August/September magazine sought to put older Australians on the national agenda at a time when politicians traditionally hand out sweeteners. These letters are the basis for some good debate. How much do you value

National Seniors' lobbying role? An increase in the Commonwealth Seniors Health Card income limits, the first in 11 years (page 16), is a result of that lobbying. Are the over-50s asking for too much? Should our focus be more intergenerational? Should *50 something* be a politics-free zone? We'd love to hear your thoughts. For those of you who'd rather go to Siberia than talk politics, your wish is our command. On page 40, intrepid traveller Tom Muller ventures into the bleak but fascinating Russian Far East. It is a place, he says, that even the Russians won't visit. For something a little more genteel, Bill Granger

shares the charms of Southern Italy and a gorgeous ricotta cheesecake on page 36. Finally, if home is where your heart is, don't despair. On page 46, Shelley Hancox shares her spring racing tips for a long, lazy afternoon in front of the TV. Politics or not, hopefully we've got you covered.

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