

# TRAVELS IN SIBERIA

*IAN FRAZIER*



**ALSO BY IAN FRAZIER**

*DATING YOUR MOM*

*NOBODY BETTER, BETTER THAN NOBODY*

*GREAT PLAINS*

*FAMILY*

*COYOTE V. ACME*

*IT HAPPENED LIKE THIS (TRANSLATOR)*

*ON THE REZ*

*THE FISH'S EYE*

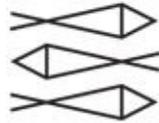
*GONE TO NEW YORK*

*LAMENTATIONS OF THE FATHER*

# **TRAVELS IN SIBERIA**

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IAN FRAZIER



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Farrar, Straus and Giroux  
18 West 18th Street, New York 10011

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Printed in the United States of America  
First edition, 2010

Portions of this book originally appeared, in somewhat different form, in *The New Yorker*.

Grateful acknowledgment is made to Katya Arnold for permission to print the sketch on Chapter 3. All other illustrations are by the author.

Designed by Jonathan D. Lippincott

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The author has omitted some names and identifying characteristics.

eISBN 9781429964319

*To Jay, again, with love*

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# PART I



## Chapter 1

Officially, there is no such place as Siberia. No political or territorial entity has Siberia as its name. In atlases, the word “Siberia” hovers across the northern third of Asia unconnected to any place in particular, as if designating a zone or a condition; it seems to show through like a watermark on the page. During Soviet times, revised maps erased the name entirely, in order to discourage Siberian regionalism. Despite this invisibility, one can assume that Siberia’s traditional status as a threat did not improve.

A tiny fraction of the world’s population lives in Siberia. About thirty-nine million Russians and native peoples inhabit that northern third of Asia. By contrast, the state of New Jersey, where I live, has about a fifth as many people on about .0015 as much land. For most people, Siberia is not the place itself but a figure of speech. In fashionable restaurants in New York and Los Angeles, Siberia is the section of less-desirable tables given to customers whom the maître d’ does not especially like. In one of the most important places to be seen having lunch in midtown Manhattan, Siberia is the tables next to the ketchup room, where the condiments are stored.

Newspaper gossip columns take the word even more metaphorically. When an author writes a book about a Park Avenue apartment building, and the book offends some of the residents, and a neighbor who happens to be a friend of the author offers to throw him a book party in her apartment, and the people in the Park Avenue building hear about this plan, the party giver is risking “social Siberia,” one of them warns.

In this respect (as in many others) Siberia and America are alike. Apart from their actual, physical selves, both exist as constructs, expressions of the mind. Once when I was in western Russia, a bottler of mineral water was showing my two Russian companions and me around his new dacha outside the city of Vologda. The time was late evening; darkness had fallen. The mineral-water bottler led us from room to room, throwing on all the lights and pointing out the amenities. When we got to the kitchen, he flipped the switch but the light did not go on. This seemed to upset him. He fooled with the switch, then hurried off and came back with a stepladder. Mounting it, he removed the glass globe from the overhead light and unscrewed the bulb. He climbed down, put globe and bulb on the counter, took a fresh bulb, and ascended again. He reached up and screwed the new bulb into the socket. After a few twists, the light came on. He turned to us and spread his arms wide, indicating the beams brightly filling the room. “*Ahhh*,” he said triumphantly, “*Amerika!*”

Nobody has ever formally laid out the boundaries of the actual, physical Siberia. Rather, they were established by custom and accepted by general agreement. Siberia is, of course, huge. Three-fourths of Russia today is Siberia. Siberia takes up one-twelfth of all the land on earth. The United States from Maine to California stretches across four time zones; in Siberia there are eight. The contiguous United States plus most of Europe could fit inside it. Across the middle of Siberia, latitudinally for thirty-

six hundred miles, runs the Russian taiga, the largest forest in the world.

The Ural Mountains, which cross Russia from the Arctic Ocean to Kazakhstan, are the western edge of Siberia. The Urals also separate Europe from Asia. As a mountain range with the big job of dividing two continents, the Urals aren't much. It is possible to drive over them, as I have done, and not know. In central Russia, the summits of the Urals average between one thousand and two thousand feet. But after you cross the Urals, the land opens out, the villages are farther apart, the concrete bus shelters along the highway become fewer, and suddenly you realize you're in Siberia.

To the east, about three thousand miles beyond the Urals, Siberia ends at the Pacific Ocean, in the form of the Sea of Japan, the Sea of Okhotsk, and the Bering Sea. Since Soviet times, Russians have called this part of Siberia the Russian Far East.

The Arctic Ocean borders Siberia on the north. West to east, its seas are the Kara Sea, the Laptev Sea, and the East Siberian Sea. For most of the year (though less consistently than before) this line is obscured under ice. The land here for as much as 250 miles in from the sea is tundra—a treeless, mossy bog for a couple of months of summer, a white near-wasteland otherwise.

In the south, Siberia technically ends at the border between Russia and Kazakhstan, Mongolia, and China, although Siberian watersheds and landforms continue on into them. This region is mostly steppe. The steppes of Siberia are part of the great Eurasian steppe, which extends from almost the Pacific westward as far as the Danube. For more than two thousand years, the Eurasian steppe produced nomadic barbarians who descended upon and destroyed cultivated places beyond the steppe's margins. The steppes were why China built the Great Wall. Out of the steppes in the thirteenth century came Genghis Khan and the Mongol hordes, civilization's then worst nightmare, the wicked stepfathers of the Russian state and of its tsars and commissars.

Sakhalin Island, which almost touches the Russian coast north of Japan, is considered part of Siberia. The island was a prison colony during tsarist times. Six hundred miles northeast of Sakhalin, the peninsula of Kamchatka descends from the Siberian mainland, dividing the Sea of Okhotsk from the Bering Sea. Kamchatka lies within the Pacific Rim's Ring of Fire and has active volcanoes. Kamchatka's Klyuchevskaya volcano, at 15,580 feet, is the highest point in Siberia. Among Russians, Kamchatka has served as a shorthand term for remoteness. Boris Pasternak's memoir, *Safe Conduct*, says that for Russian schoolchildren the far back of the class where the worst students sat was called Kamchatka. When the teacher had not yet heard the correct answer, he would cry to the back bench, as a last resort, "To the rescue, Kamchatka!"

Coincidentally, Kamchatka was the first geographic fact that many people my age in America knew about Siberia. I am of the baby-boom generation, who grew up during the Cold War. In our childhood, a new board game came out called Risk, which was played on a map representing the world. The object of Risk was to multiply your own armies, move them from one global region to the next while eliminating the armies of your opponents, and eventually take over the world. This required luck, ruthlessness, and intercontinental strategizing, Cold War-style. The armies were little plastic counters colored red, blue, yellow, brown, black, and green. Of the major global powers, you basically understood which color was supposed to stand for whom. The

Kamchatka Peninsula controlled the only crossing of the game board's narrow sea between Asia and North America, so gaining Kamchatka was key.

Risk didn't openly mention the world politics of the day—the Soviet Union's name wasn't even on the board, just regions called Yakutsk, Ural, Ukraine, etc.—so the struggle with the dark forces was only implied. But that mysteriousness was very James Bond-like and thrilling, too. Among my friends in my hometown of Hudson, Ohio, Risk had a period of great popularity, completely eclipsing the previous favorite, Monopoly, and its old capitalist-against-capitalist theme.

Some of our Risk games went on for days. A favorite story among us was of an all-day game one September just before school started for the year. One of the players had not reenrolled in college for the fall and thus had become eligible for the military draft. A few weeks before, he had received his draft notice, and in fact he was supposed to show up for his induction physical that very day. Our friend played along with the rest of us, conquering countries and drinking beer without a care. In those years, being drafted meant you were going to Vietnam, almost for sure, and not showing up for your induction physical, it went without saying, was a crime. We kept suggesting to our friend that maybe he should get busy—call the draft board, at least, do something about the situation. Late in the afternoon a call came from his father, a prominent lawyer in Akron, with the news that our friend's draft deferment had been approved. To cheering and amazement he hung up the phone, opened another beer, and returned to the game.

On the Risk game board, the lines between regions and around continents were angular and schematic, after the manner of familiar Cold War maps having to do with nuclear war. On the walls at think-tank strategy sessions and as illustrations for sobering magazine articles, these maps showed the arcs of nuclear missiles spanning the globe—theirs heading for us, ours heading for them. Almost all the missile arcs went over Siberia. In the Cold War, Siberia provided the “cold”; Siberia was the blankness in between, the space through which apocalypse flew.

In the best and funniest of all Cold War movies, *Doctor Strangelove*, the arc of the nuclear bomber sent to attack Russia by the deranged General Jack D. Ripper crosses the war map at the Pentagon slowly, inch by inch, while frantic officials argue what to do. Then we see the plane's pilot, Slim Pickens, in a cowboy hat, and his brave crew. Then there's an exterior shot of the B-52 flying low to elude the Russian radar. Below the plane, practically at its wing tips, rise the tops of skinny pine trees. Then clearings open up, all covered with snow. Then more pines. This can only be Siberia. Suspensefully, the sound track plays “When Johnny Comes Marching Home.” As a kid I knew the scenery was probably just stock footage, not really Siberia. Still, it seemed romantic to me—so far away and white and pure. I watched the scenery more closely than the plane.

Cold War movies with happy endings showed the bomber or missile flight paths on the Big Board making U-turns and heading back home or out to sea. Doom had been averted, as the generals threw their caps in the air and shouted for joy. In a sense, that ending actually did occur. The United States and Russia are no longer aiming so many missiles at each other, and you almost never see those maps with dozens of missile arcs on them anymore. The apocalyptic tracks in the sky over Siberia have gone from being hypothetical to being practically nonexistent. Today, Siberia is an old battlefield

in which the battle it is known for never took place; the big worries have moved elsewhere.

As a landmass, Siberia got some bad breaks geographically. The main rivers of Siberia are (west to east) the Ob, the Yenisei, the Lena, and the Amur. I have seen each of these, and though the Mississippi may be mighty, they can make it look small. The fact that these rivers' tributary systems interlock allowed adventurers in the seventeenth century to go by river from the Ural Mountains to the Pacific Ocean with only five portages. Seeking furs, these men had crossed all Siberia in less than a hundred years, and built fortresses and founded cities along the way. In western Siberia, there are cities more than four hundred years old. Siberia's rivers still serve as important north-south avenues for barge traffic, and in the winter as ice highways for trucks.

The problem with Siberia's big rivers is the direction they flow. Most of Siberia's rivers go north or join others that do, and their waters end up in the Arctic Ocean. Even the Amur, whose general inclination is to the northeast and whose destination is the Pacific, empties into the stormy Sea of Okhotsk. In the spring, north-flowing rivers thaw upstream while they're still frozen at their mouths. This causes them to back up. This creates swamps. Western Siberia has the largest swamps in the world. In much of Siberia, the land doesn't do much of anything besides gradually sag northward to the Arctic. The rivers of western Siberia flow so slowly that they hardly seem to move at all. There, the rivers run muddy; in eastern Siberia, with its real mountains and sharper drop to the Pacific, many of the rivers run clear.

In general, then, much of Siberia drains poorly and is quite swampy. Of the mosquitoes, flies, and invisible biting insects I will say more later. They are a whole other story.

Another bad geographic break is Siberia's continentality. The land simply stretches on and on; eventually you feel you're in the farthest, extra, out-of-sight section of the parking lot, where no one in the history of civilization has ever bothered to go. Only on the sea can you travel as far and still be in apparently the same place. The deeper into Siberia, the farther from the mitigating effect of temperate oceans, the harsher the climate's extremes become. Summers in the middle of Siberia are hot, sometimes dry and dusty, sometimes hazy with smoke from taiga fires. In the winters, temperatures drop to the lowest on the planet outside Antarctica. In the city of Verkhoyansk, in northeast-central Siberia, the cold reaches about  $-90^{\circ}$ . When I mentioned this frequently noted Siberian fact to my friends and guides in St. Petersburg, they scoffed, as Russians tend to do. Then they said they knew of someplace in Siberia even colder.

Because of the cold, a lot of central Siberia and most of the east lie under permafrost—ground permanently frozen, sometimes to more than three thousand feet down. Permafrost also covers all the tundra region. Agriculture on any large scale is impossible in the permafrost zone, though in more forgiving parts of it people have kitchen gardens, and greenhouse farming occasionally succeeds. Much of Siberia's taiga rests on permafrost, implying a shaky future for the forest if the permafrost melts, and a shakier one, scientists say, for the earth's atmospheric chemistry. Huge amounts of climate-changing methane would be released into the air.

Cities and villages in the permafrost zone must have basic necessities brought in.

Fuel comes in steel barrels that are about three feet high and hold fifty-three gallons. Around settled places these empty barrels are everywhere, sometimes littering the bare tundra surreally as far as you can see. In 1997, the *Los Angeles Times* estimated that in Chukotka, the part of farthest Siberia just across from Alaska, the Soviets had left behind about two million barrels, or about sixteen barrels for each person living there. Fewer people, and probably more barrels, are in Chukotka today.

What, then, is good about Siberia?

Its natural resources, though hard to get at, are amazing. Its coal reserves, centered in the Kuznetsk Basin mining region in south-central Siberia, are some of the largest in the world. The Kuznetsk Basin is also rich in iron ore, a combination that made this region Russia's armory. Siberia has minerals like cobalt, zinc, copper, lead, tin, and mercury in great abundance; in Norilsk, the second-largest city in the world above the Arctic Circle, the Soviets dug the world's largest nickel mine. The diamond mines at Mirny, near the Vilyui River, are second only to South Africa's. Siberia has supplied the Russian treasury with silver and gold since tsarist times; during the 1930s, the Kolyma region of eastern Siberia produced, by means of the cruelest mines in history, about half the gold then being mined in the world. Russia has some of the world's largest reserves of petroleum and natural gas. A lot of those reserves are in Siberia.

Along the route of the Trans-Siberian Railway, trains of oil tank cars extend across the landscape for miles. Each tank car, black and tarry-looking, with faded white markings, resembles the one that follows it; slowly rolling past a grade crossing of the Trans-Siberian Railway, a trainload of these cars defines monotony. The Trans-Siberian Railway covers 9,288 kilometers between Moscow and the Pacific port of Vladivostok, or 5,771 miles. In other words, if it were twenty-one miles longer, it would be exactly twice as long as Interstate 80 from New Jersey to California. Lying awake near the tracks in some remote spot, you hear trains going by all through the night with scarcely a pause. Sitting beside the tracks and observing the point in the distance where they and the cables above them merge—the Trans-Siberian Railway is all-electric, with overhead cables like a streetcar line—you find that the tracks are empty of traffic only for five or ten minutes at a time.

Besides oil, the railway carries coal, machinery parts, giant tires, scrap iron, and endless containers saying HANJIN OR SEA-LAND OR MAERSK on their sides, just like the containers stacked five stories high around the Port of Newark, New Jersey, and probably every other port in the world. Now and then a passenger train goes by, and if the time is summer and the weather, as usual, hot, many shirtless passengers are hanging from the open windows with the curtains flapping beside them. Not even the most luxurious car on the Trans-Siberian Railway offers air-conditioning. Then more freight comes along, sometimes timber by the trainload. Siberian timber can be three or four feet in diameter, a size only rarely seen on logging trucks in America today. Some of these trees are called *korabel'nie sosni*—literally, “caravel pines,” trees from which ships' masts were made.

American companies have tried to put together deals to harvest Siberian timber, but as a rule the deals go wrong. Executives of these companies eventually give up in disgust at Russian business practices, particularly the corruption and bribery. In one

story—hearsay, only—a major timber company of the American Northwest withdrew from negotiations after its representative in Siberia was taken up in a helicopter, ostensibly to look at some trees, and then was dangled from the door until he agreed to a contract disadvantageous to his company. He agreed, landed safely, and advised his company to get out of Siberia. Some environmentalists say that Russian corruption is the Siberian forests' true preserver and best friend.

Geologists have always liked Siberia, especially its eastern part, where a lot is going on with the earth. Well into eastern Siberia—to a north–south range of mountains roughly paralleling the Lena River Valley—you are still in North America, tectonically speaking. The North American Plate, sliding westward, meets the Eurasian Plate there, while to the south, the Amursky and the Okhotsky plates complicate the collision by inserting themselves from that direction. All this plate motion causes seismic activity and an influx of seismologists. Eastern Siberia is among the most important places for seismic studies in the world. Farther west, Siberia offers other remarkable geology, in a formation called the Siberian Traps. These are outpourings of volcanic rock that covered a huge portion of present central Siberia 245 million years ago, in an event that is believed to have caused the massive die-off of predinosaur species known as the Permian extinction.

Paleontologists come to Siberia not for dinosaur fossils, which are not found nearly as often as in the Mongolian steppes to the south, but for more recent fossils of prehistoric bison, mammoths, rhinos, and other species that lived ten thousand to fifteen thousand years ago. The Siberian mammoth finds alone have been a bonanza, some of them not fossils but the actual creatures themselves, still frozen and almost intact, or mummified in frozen sediments. A museum in Yakutsk displays the fossilized contents of a fossilized mammoth stomach, in cross section, beside a whole preserved mammoth leg with its long, druidical hair still hanging down. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, discoveries of mammoth remains were so common that for a while mammoth ivory became a major export of Siberia.

To astronomers, Siberia provides the advantage of skies largely untroubled by light pollution and, in some places, cloud-free for more than two hundred days a year. Looking up at the clarity of the night in Siberia, you feel that you are in the sky yourself. Never in my life have I seen so many satellites and shooting stars. Because of the big target Siberia presents to space, it gets hit by a lot of objects from there. In the early morning of June 30, 1908, something came out of the heavens and struck the taiga near the Stony Tunguska River in south-central Siberia, a region traveled only by reindeer herders. The impact created a blast that felled trees outward from it in a radial pattern covering an area about twenty-eight miles across.

Even today scientists aren't completely sure what the thing was. Speculation has included plasma from the sun, an antimatter explosion, a black hole (probably not, because a black hole would have made a corresponding exit explosion on the other side of the earth, in the North Atlantic), a meteorite, an asteroid, or a comet. Today the comet theory has the most support. The relative lack of mineral residue points to a comet, because meteorites and asteroids are made of iron or silicates, while comets are mostly dirt and ice. Whatever caused the explosion, the impact on the planet was the biggest that humans know about in historic times.

Travelers who crossed Siberia in the early eighteenth century noted the remarkable

animals they saw—elk “of monstrous size,” fierce aurochs, wild boars, wild horses and asses, flying squirrels in great numbers, foxes, hares, beavers, bears. Of the swans, cranes, pelicans, geese, ducks, bitterns, and other birds, one traveler wrote, “After sundown these manifold armies of winged creatures made such a terrific clamour that we could not even hear our own words.” Philipp Johann von Strahlenberg, a Swede captured by Peter the Great’s army at the Battle of Poltava in 1709 and sent with other Swedish prisoners to Siberia, wrote that the region had six species of deer, including the roe deer, the musk deer, the reindeer, and the great stag. He also noted a special kind of bird whose nests were so soft that they were used for socks. About 290 years later in Siberia I saw few or none of these marvels, except in museums, where some of the specimens are facing a second extinction from moths and general disintegration.

The main four-legged animal I encountered in Siberia was the cow. Little herds appear all the time, especially in western Siberia, grazing along the road or moving at twilight from the woods or the swamp into a glade. Siberian cows are skinnier than the ones in America, and longer legged, often with muddy shins, and ribs showing. Some wear bells. Herders, usually not on horseback, follow them unhurriedly. The boys have motormen’s caps and sweaters with holes; the women, usually older, wear rubber boots, long trousers under their skirts, and scarves around their heads against the insects. Beef in Siberian stores is gristly, tough, and expensive. Siberian dairy products, however, are cheap and good. The butter and ice cream of Siberia are the best I’ve tasted anywhere.

At times Siberia has supplied a lot of western Russia’s butter, and some of England’s and Western Europe’s, too. Just before the First World War, 16 percent of the world’s exports of butter came from Siberia. N. S. Korzhanskii, a revolutionary who knew the father of the Russian Revolution, V. I. Lenin, when Lenin was living in England in 1903, recalled a meal in Lenin’s London apartment at which “I was amazed at the wonderful, beautiful-smelling creamy butter, and was just about to burst out with some remark about the wealth of the British, when Vladimir Ilyich said, ‘Yes. That must be ours. From Siberia.’” Lenin spoke to his landlady, and then informed his guests that the butter had come from the Barabinsk Steppe. “I passed through it twice,” Lenin added. “On my way into exile and back again. A marvellous place. With a great future. The Englishwoman told me that they all know Barabinsk butter and Chulym cheese.”

Lenin went to Siberia on two separate occasions. The exile he was referring to followed his arrest for revolutionary activities in St. Petersburg in December 1895. Lenin was twenty-five then, and still using his original name, Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov. Sentenced to three years’ exile, Lenin was sent to Shushenskoye, a village on the Yenisei River in central Siberia. Exile under the tsars could be a rather mild proposition, especially compared to what the Soviets would later devise; during his exile Lenin received a government stipend of twelve rubles a month, which covered room and board as well as extras like books. He was able to get a lot of reading done. On the way to Shushenskoye, he stopped for a couple of months in Krasnoyarsk and read in the library of a rich distiller named Iudin. The research he did there later helped in the writing of his *Development of Capitalism in Russia*. In Shushenskoye, he translated a book by the English Socialists Beatrice and Sidney Webb, hunted, skated on the Yenisei, and entertained his girlfriend, Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya,

who came to Shushenskoye to visit. They later married and honeymooned there. All in all, Siberia seems to have agreed with Lenin splendidly and seasoned him as a political thinker. His revolutionary name, which he assumed in 1901, may have been inspired by the great Siberian river, the Lena (the name of his native river, the Volga, having already been taken by the father of Russian socialism, Georgi Plekhanov, known as Volgin).

The second time Lenin was sent to Siberia he had been dead for seventeen years. After the 1917 revolution, which succeeded in no small measure because of his vision and practicality, Lenin guided the Bolshevik putsch through civil war and consolidation of national power. Then in 1923 he suffered a series of strokes; a convalescence did not restore his health, and he died of another stroke in January 1924. Because of Lenin's importance to the revolution and the saintlike status the Communists gave him, the Soviet government decided to have his body preserved. Embalmers and other technicians did such a skillful job that when they were done he looked better than he had in the months before he died. To house him, the government built a temporary and then a permanent tomb on Red Square in Moscow, where his body went on display for the crowds who filed reverently by.

In 1941, with the Germans approaching, an icon as important as Lenin could not be left at risk of destruction or capture, so the body was packed into a railroad car and shipped to the western Siberian city of Tyumen for safekeeping. There, far from the front, it waited out the war. In 1945, after the Allied victory, Lenin again returned from Siberia and went back to his Red Square tomb. Russians who had seen him both before and after his stay in Tyumen reported that when he went on display again he looked "much the worse for wear," his second Siberian sojourn having had a less salutary effect, apparently, than his first. The experts in charge of such details soon got him back into shape again.

Like Lenin, many of the objects in museums and churches in the Kremlin and elsewhere in western Russia have spent some time in Siberia. During the Second World War, state treasures and works of art and historic archives were put in crates and shipped east. A lot of western Russia's heavy industry also moved to temporary factories beyond the Urals. The instinct to withdraw, to disappear far into the interior, figures often in Russian history. During invasions from the West, Russia's strategic option of nearly unlimited retreat made it, in a sense, unkillable. After Napoleon began his invasion of Russia in 1812, an adviser told Tsar Alexander I, "I am not afraid of military reverses . . . Your empire has two powerful defenders in its vastness and its climate. The emperor of Russia will always be formidable in Moscow, terrible in Kazan, and invincible in Tobolsk." Tobolsk, at the junction of the Irtysh and Tobol rivers, was at the time the administrative capital and ecclesiastical seat of western Siberia.

On the question of whether Russia's vast size has benefited or hurt it overall, historians and others disagree. Those who take the negative side say that Russia has been too big and spread out ever to function properly, that it has been "crippled by its expanse," that much of its land is not worth the trouble, and that Siberia is a road leading nowhere. A few years ago, two public-policy experts at a Washington think tank wrote a book advising Russia to close down its remote and hard-to-supply Siberian cities and villages and concentrate the population in locations more practical